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MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc II - Part 2

Published on fictionpress.com and royalroad.com

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MYRIAD CLASHING MOTIVES

The start of the newest loop differed little from the previous one – he got on the train to Cyoria with Kirielle in tow, entertained her with feats of magic as well as disguised (and more than a little embellished) accounts of his own adventures to stave off boredom, and even talked with Ibery for a bit. Just for a bit, though – she wasn't terribly interested in him this time, since he'd finished telling stories to Kirielle by the time they stopped at Korsa, and didn't demonstrate any amazing spellcasting skills while she was in the compartment.

"Here we are," said Zorian, stepping off the train and helping Kirielle finagle her luggage through the train wagon door. It was kind of cute how she insisted she would carry her luggage on her own, but he knew from previous restarts that this resolution wouldn't last very long. Well, whatever, he'd let her live in denial for now. "Welcome to Cyoria, dearest sister."

"I'm your only sister," she shot back, curious eyes looking around the massive train station she found herself in.

"You know I'm telling the truth, then," Zorian said blandly.

Kirielle ignored him in favor of studying the colorful storefronts, the huge clock hanging from the train station ceiling, and the flowing masses of people milling around the place. Truth be

told, she handled the sight a lot better than Zorian had when he disembarked in Cyoria for the first time ever.

"Big," she concluded eventually.

"Cyoria is a big city and an important transport hub," said Zorian simply. "They get lots of traffic."

"Do you mind if we look around for a bit?" Kirielle asked.

"You mean browse some stores for interesting trinkets?" Zorian guessed. She pouted at him. "Sure, we can do that. I'm only buying you one souvenir, though, and nothing too ridiculous."

"What qualifies as 'too ridiculous'?" she asked, eyeing the storefronts speculatively.

"Use your common sense," Zorian deadpanned. Like hell was he getting into a definition game with her.

"And if I'm not sure about something?" she prompted.

"Ask," he immediately fired back.

He could probably buy anything she set her eyes on, especially considering he was about to get a massive cash infusion in a few days, but he didn't think it a good idea to encourage her excesses like that. Kirielle had never been very keen on restraint to begin with and he shuddered to think what would happen if he decided to pander to her whims too much.

For the next hour and a half, Zorian simply followed Kirielle around as she flitted from one store to another like a drunken butterfly, following no pattern he could discern. Then again, he didn't really invest much thought into figuring it out – he mostly spent his time practicing his mind sense, trying to process the information he was getting about the crowds around them. Large, closely-packed crowds like the ones at Cyoria's main train station still tended to ruin his mind sense, reducing the feedback into an incomprehensible, blurry blob of emotions and strange signals. He was getting better at picking specific minds out of that background fog, though. He practiced the procedure by constantly keeping

track of Kirielle's mind, turning her into a sort of a telepathic anchor, and then trying to pick out the minds of random people from the crowd to get a better feel for them. It was slow, annoying work, but he was getting sick of having his empathy and mind sense effectively shut down every time he encountered a crowd.

She picked a snow globe in the end. Admittedly, it was a very nice snow globe – the little house and the trees inside it were incredibly detailed and well done, almost as if someone had literally shrunk a house and its immediate environs and placed them in a glass sphere. Clearly some fairly sophisticated magic had been used to produce the thing, even if the end product was completely non-magical to his senses, and the globe was priced accordingly... but it was better than Zorian had feared so he bought it without complaint. Idly, he wondered if his alteration skills were good enough to produce a globe like that...

With Kirielle's trinket-hunting done, they set off towards the main plaza and its fountain, just like they had in the previous restart. Unlike the previous restart, Zorian took them through the park right from the start – there was really no need for them to meet the cranium rat swarm. Quite the contrary, it was an unnecessary and unacceptable risk, as Kirielle's mind was completely unshielded and there was always a possibility that the rats could figure something important or attention-grabbing from Kirielle's stray thoughts.

As it turned out, that had been a pretty important change. Having never seen the cranium rats, Kirielle obviously couldn't tell Rea about them, so the topic simply never came up. And apparently he greatly underestimated how much he'd disturbed Rea in their previous first meeting, because keeping quiet about the terrifying mind-reading powers of the rats made Rea a lot less on guard around him this time around... as well as much more insistent about them staying for a while. Hmph.

He let Rea and Kirielle 'convince him' to delay their departure. As far as he could tell, this was the best moment to find something out from Rea's mind, before she had time to grow suspicious of him, and he had every intention of using it to the hilt.

"A student of Cyoria's Royal Academy? Pretty prestigious place to study at for a boy hailing from a small rural town, if you don't mind me saying," Rea remarked. "Not that there is anything wrong with being from a small rural town – we're from one ourselves, after all – but doesn't Cyoria's Royal Academy accept only the, ah..."

"Only the very talented or the very well-connected?" guessed Zorian. It was what most people who weren't personally involved with the institution thought, after all. Seeing Rea nod in agreement, he continued. "Not really. The admission process is a combination of how well you do on the entrance exams, whether you receive a recommendation from a member of the academy staff or someone else suitably famous, and whether denying you admission would offend someone particularly powerful and influential. Basically, so long as you can pay the admission fee and do well enough in the entrance exams, you are guaranteed to get in."

"Is that how you got in?" Rea asked curiously.

"I was in the top 50 based on exam results," said Zorian proudly. He was 48, but he wasn't going to mention *that*.

"Brother is plenty talented," Kirielle said suddenly. "But, um, they probably also accepted him because of our brother Daimen. At least that's what mother said happened."

"What?" asked Zorian flatly.

"Umm..." Kirielle stammered. "Please don't be mad because mother told me not to tell you this because you would get mad at me but mother said you and Fortov were only accepted so easily because Daimen got so big and successful..."

"Daimen had *nothing* to do with it," Zorian said, grinding his

teeth in annoyance. "I achieved good enough results that my admission had never been in question! Mother is, like usual, ascribing everything good in the world to Daimen and lumping me with that lout Fortov in order to—"

"I believe you, mister Kazinski," Rea interrupted him. "Calm down. There is no reason to jump down your little sister's throat like that."

"Right, sorry," Zorian said, with a little bit more bitterness than he intended.

There was a short, awkward silence for a few seconds. Great. Real smooth there, Zorian.

Damn it, why did he let this get under his skin like that?

"So, I'm assuming your brother is *that* Daimen Kazinski?" Rea asked finally. "The famous one?"

"Yes," Zorian sighed. "The famous one."

"Wait, your other brother is famous?" Nochka asked Kirielle innocently. "What for?"

"Things," Kirielle shrugged uncomfortably, saying nothing else on the topic. Probably trying not to upset him further by continuing the discussion.

"Daimen is an 'adventuring archeologist'," Zorian said, doing his best to suppress his annoyance with the whole thing. "He leads expeditions to dangerous areas in search of lost artifacts and ruins. Or even rare plants and magical creatures, even though that should technically be outside the purview of archeology. He has been very successful in this, so he gets a lot of attention from people."

There. It was an incomplete explanation, yes, but not really misleading or anything. Hopefully it would suffice.

"I haven't heard anything about him for more than a year now," Rea remarked.

"He's in Koth," Zorian said. "Apparently he found something very important in the jungle, but he's been very secretive about it."

I'm sure you'll hear all about it when he finally deigns to unveil it to the world."

Thankfully, the topic of conversation shifted away from Daimen at that point. Zorian decided to take advantage of the somewhat personal nature of Rea's questions to ask about *their* personal details. Her story was functionally identical to what she told him in the previous restart, but her surface thoughts were far easier to read this time, what with her not being primed to defend her secrets from a swarm of thought-sharing, mind-reading rats.

Her surface thoughts told him an interesting story. For one thing, Sauh was not a cat shifter. Only Rea and Nochka were. Rea had *been* a criminal, but then she met Sauh and decided to leave that life behind to be with him. How... romantic. Except that neither Rea's former associates nor the rest of the townsfolk were willing to let Rea forget what her past was, so the family packed up their things and left to somewhere where nobody knew who they were and where they could start anew. Where Nochka could grow up without her mother's past sabotaging her at every turn.

Damn, he was really starting to get mad about what the Cult of Dragon Below had in store for them... he didn't think he could just coldly watch as Nochka's parents are murdered and she herself kidnapped. Though, thinking about it now, it wasn't such a problem in this particular restart – his memory reading was nowhere near good enough yet to get much out of high-ranking cultists, even if he could track them down by following Nochka's movements. And who said he was even capable of preventing her kidnapping in the first place? It wasn't like he had a fool-proof plan to stop it, after all – if the kidnapping proceeded under some different schedule than the one in the previous restart, he'd basically have to monitor the Sashal family day and night to intercept it.

He decided to put his original plan on hold for now and see how things developed. Who knows, maybe the last restart was

a fluke and kidnapping Nochka wasn't something the cultists routinely did in every loop. He would have to put some kind of tracker on her just in case, though...

By the time they were done talking, the rain had already started falling outside. Rea tried to argue that they should wait for a while until it lessened, but Zorian knew that wasn't happening for quite a while and refused. He enveloped himself and Kirielle in a weather shield to block the rain and bid the Sashal family goodbye.

He considered it a proof of his growing skill and mana reserves that his shield held strong for the entire length of their journey, letting them arrive at Imaya's place completely dry and unwinded.



The next few days were fairly routine – he went to Knyazov Dveri to get himself plenty of crystalized mana, sold said crystals in various stores in Cyoria for large amounts of cash, accepted Taiven's offer of joining her team in running monster-killing missions and tested whether his stored notebooks had survived the restart (they had).

With the start of classes on Monday, however, Zorian decided to go out of his comfort zone a little and initiate contact with one of his classmates. Specifically, Raynie. He was currently investigating shifters, after all, and she was supposed to be a wolf shifter herself. Maybe she knew some crucial information? It didn't hurt to ask.

There was one big, obvious problem with his idea, however – Raynie got a lot of love confessions and date invitations from her many love-stricken fans, and would probably assume his attempt to talk to her was just more of the same. And she was not interested in love and dating, she made that very clear over the years. How could he ensure his attempt to talk to her wouldn't be misunderstood?

He agonized for an entire day over which method of approach he should use, before deciding he was being stupid. So what if she got the wrong idea when he asked to talk to her? Though she categorically rejected every man who tried to court her, her rejections had always been polite and non-violent to his knowledge... except for that one time she punched a guy in the face, but everyone who was there agreed that guy got a little grabbier than was proper. Bottom line was, he could just approach her directly before class and ask for a talk, and the worst that could happen was that she could tell him to get lost without hearing him out. Hardly the end of the world, and with the time loop in place he would have a chance to try again in the next restart with a different approach.

The worst didn't happen, though. When Zorian asked to talk to her after class, Raynie simply gave a little sigh and spared a lingering glance at the ceiling, as if asking the gods what she had done to deserve this, before agreeing to his request.

The class came and went, and the classroom gradually emptied of people until only Zorian, Raynie and Kiana were left. Why was Kiana there? Hell if Zorian knew, but her presence was clearly not unintended by Raynie so he opted not to say anything. Did Kiana know about her friend being a shifter? If not, then broaching the topic in front of her was probably not something Raynie would appreciate.

How annoying.

"Sorry about this," Raynie said. "I know you probably wanted this to be private, but Kiana insisted on staying behind too, and, well..."

She shrugged helplessly. She sounded honestly apologetic about it, and if he were incapable of sensing people's emotions, he would have probably believed her too. He gave Kiana a glance, and she quickly straightened her posture and fixed a small scowl on her face. Probably trying to look intimidating or something.

Her real emotions were a mix of boredom and impatience, though – she probably considered the entire thing a massive chore.

Zorian almost cracked a smile at the whole setup. The funny thing was that if he was going to ask anyone out, it would probably be Kiana, not Raynie. He'd kind of had his eyes on her before he'd gotten stuck in this whole time loop business, in an idle, day-dreaming sort of way. If he remembered correctly, Zach caught him staring at her once, in that fateful first restart. A part of him wanted to ask Kiana out right now, just to see how the two of them would react to such a development.

But no, that would only be amusing for a short while and he would have to live with all the created drama for the rest of the month. Besides, his reasons for liking Kiana were extremely shallow and based entirely around her looks – he felt she was just as beautiful as Raynie, and preferred her black hair to Raynie's red. That was it, really. For all he knew, her personality could be absolutely atrocious.

"If you're okay with her presence, then so am I," Zorian said. "That said, do you mind if I erect a privacy bubble around us? Nelu and company are hanging by the door, trying to eavesdrop, and I think we'd all be happier if they did not hear this."

"Ugh," Raynie grunted, rising from her seat and marching off towards the door. "There is no need for that. I'll be back in a moment."

Through his mind sense, Zorian could feel the four mental signatures of their eavesdroppers flee before Raynie's approach. They were already halfway down the corridor by the time she opened the door, and in less than a minute Raynie was back in her seat.

"Well then," she began, "now that the spy brigade is gone, we can finally get this over with. What did you want to talk to me about, Mister Kazinski?"

"Does Kiana know about shifters?" Zorian asked.

Evidently she did, if her shocked reaction was any indication.

"What?" Raynie stammered. "How do you know about that?"

"I asked a scholar named Vani to tell me about shifters and—"

"Vani from Knyazov Dveri?" Raynie asked, interrupting him. "Aren't you supposed to be from Cirin?"

"I am," Zorian confirmed. "That doesn't mean I am forbidden from visiting Knyazov Dveri on occasion. I have friends there."

"Of course you have," Raynie sighed. "Look... Zorian. I kept this a secret for a reason."

Zorian nodded in agreement. "That's why I asked whether Kiana knows."

"I know," Kiana piped in, crossing her arms in front of her. "And I'll be charitable and assume you'll keep it a secret, just as I have, despite being friends with that blabbermouth Benisek. So what exactly do you want from Raynie anyway?"

"I made acquaintances with a couple of cat shifters, and I wanted to hear an opinion of another shifter about some things related to that," said Zorian. "I figured I'd ask Raynie first and see if she was willing to answer some questions."

There was a brief silence as both girls digested this.

"I... uh... this is way too heavy of a topic for a free period," Raynie decided. "Our next class is about to start soon."

"Well, yes," agreed Zorian. "It doesn't have to be *now*. I just want to know if you're even willing to help me out."

"I might as well," Raynie said dismissively. "My main concern about shifter-talk had always been about not wanting people to know I was one to begin with, and the cat is apparently already out of the bag. Besides, if you're hanging out with the likes of cat shifters, you're going to need some advice. No offense to your new acquaintances, but cat shifters tend to be unsavory characters."

"I did hear some rumors about that," Zorian admitted. "So how is this going to work, then?"

"I don't know," Raynie admitted. "I'm going to have to think about it. You've ambushed me out of nowhere with this. I'll get back to you when I figure out a time and place."

"Don't contact us, we'll contact you," Kiana summarized.

And then they were out of time and ended the meeting in favor of rushing to the next class. Over all, Zorian was pleased with the outcome... even if the looks and whispers of his classmates signified they had noticed the interaction and that the resulting fallout had yet to be determined.



Raynie didn't seem to be in a hurry to organize a meeting with him after their talk, but Zorian didn't hold it against her. It was nothing urgent, and he had plenty of things to busy himself with in the meantime.

Currently, that meant combing the aranea settlement for any hints regarding where they kept their treasury. He wasn't having much luck yet, but then again he didn't expect to be lucky so soon – it would be a pretty terrible secret treasury if all it took was a single day of dedicated searching to track it down.

Zorian wandered the tunnels of the settlement, his mind sense straining in an attempt to detect some surviving aranea hiding somewhere. He didn't find any. The aranean settlement was a silent tomb, unmoving corpses of giant spiders scattered throughout its expanse and undisturbed by scavengers due to the wards the aranea had placed on it. Occasionally his mind sense detected a mental signature, but it inevitably turned out to be some dungeon denizen trying to sneak past the wards of the settlement or one of the few surviving male aranea.

Not that the latter were wholly useless – though sub-sapient, they were still representative of what the aranea were like, and

didn't have the mental defenses that female aranea did. Zorian made sure to capture each one he encountered so he could read their minds for information about the location of the treasury – more out of desire to practice his memory reading on something related to aranea than out of any real hope that they knew something.

Though he had to say the males were a lot smarter than Zorian had thought they would be, considering what he'd been told by the female aranea – they were actually closer to animals such as ravens and pigs than something dumb like a horse or a dog. Three of them even worked together in order to ambush him, and Zorian only narrowly avoided getting bitten by the one of them.

The aranea were only weakly venomous, according to what he'd been told by them, but he would still rather not tempt fate like that.

"Damn," Zorian swore. Nothing, not even a clue as to where he should look next. "That's it, I'm done with this for today. Kael, you done with your examination yet?"

Kael shifted his attention from the curled, motionless corpse of some unfortunate aranea towards him, his mind slowly switching gears from his focused work state into something capable of holding a conversation.

"Hmm? Oh, that," Kael mumbled. "Yes, I checked them over for soul magic ages ago. I can find no traces of any soul magic being performed on them. None whatsoever, and it's honestly freaking me out. If you hadn't told me what really happened, I'd have assumed these bodies to be very sophisticated meat puppets devoid of souls to begin with, not sapient creatures whose souls have somehow been removed. I've just finished a more comprehensive medical scan, however, and there is no way these bodies are meat puppets. I'm baffled. This doesn't look like the aftermath of any soul spell I know of."

Damn. He had really been hoping Kael would be able to find something.

"You really can't tell me anything else?" Zorian urged. "Anything?"

"No. Well, maybe," Kael said, hesitating. Zorian urged him to continue. "While my medical scans show these spiders indeed died on the first day of the restart, they died somewhere after two in the morning."

"Ah, I see where you're going with that," Zorian said after a brief pause. "That implies that the time loop starts almost six hours before I wake up."

"Yes," Kael agreed. "I'm not sure how useful that is to you, but it's interesting."

"Very," Zorian agreed. "Especially if I can somehow force myself to wake up at the start of the time loop as opposed to when I usually do."

Kael nodded and before suddenly checking on his pocket watch. "Ah, I didn't even realize so much time has passed. I promised Kana I would take her to the park today, do you think we could-"

"Yes," Zorian preemptively agreed. "That's why I interrupted you in the first place. I've had enough of this place for one day. Just gather your things and I'll recall us back to the basement."

Five minutes later Kael and Zorian were teleported back to Imaya's basement – or rather, the large stone that served as an anchor for Zorian's recall spell. The recall spell was quickly becoming one of Zorian's favorites, due to its ability to cut through many forms of magical interference and anti-teleportation wards. It would be even better if maintaining a recall link with each anchor stone didn't incur a running mana cost, but you can't have everything, he supposed. He bid goodbye to Kael, who had his own duties to attend to, and went out to seek out Kirielle.

He found her in the kitchen, telling stories to Imaya and playing with the miniature golem he'd made for her. Amusingly, no one in the house seemed to realize just how much money and skill it took to create that thing – it was just a fancy magical doll to them, and they barely gave it a second's thought. To Zorian, though, that little golem was very special for one simple reason: he had created the blueprint for it in the previous restart.

Although Zorian had spent a lot of time in the restarts messing with spell formula and magic item creation, the truth was that he had been somewhat reluctant to truly sink a lot of his time into the field because he had to effectively recreate his designs purely from memory with every restart. While that was good in a sense, as it forced him to re-evaluate and refine his designs each time instead of relying on tried-and-true designs, the fact of the matter was that it slowed things down to a crawl whenever he was forced to recreate everything from scratch over and over again. He had effectively been limited to fairly simple projects, but now that he could actually transfer notebooks across restarts, he was freed of these limitations and could truly start advancing in the field.

He greeted Imaya, announcing his return, and then turned to his little sister.

"Hello, Kiri," he greeted. "Are you ready for your magic lesson?"

"Yes!" she agreed enthusiastically.

"So does that mean you read the first three chapters of that book I gave you?" Zorian asked.

"Err, yeah," she agreed, much less enthusiastically than before. "I, uh, may have skipped a few parts."

Zorian gave her a knowing look. He had a feeling that if he quizzed her on what she read, he would find she skipped far more than 'a few parts'.

"Alright," he said, putting a small black cube on the table in

front of them. "This here is the mana absorption cube. Its function is very simple – it will absorb any mana you let out, after which the carved lines you see on its surface will begin to glow. It sounds useless, but beginner mages like yourself have trouble sensing their own mana flow, and thus cannot really determine whether their efforts are achieving any results. This will help keep you on target. Later, when you start extruding mana out of your body reliably, we can move onto purposely feeding mana into the cube in order to build greater control..."

Kirielle took the cube carefully into her hands, as if afraid it was going to bite her, and started tracing the lines carved into its surface with her fingers.

"Did you also learn using one of those things?" she asked. "I thought that was done using those one of those glass balls you brought home after your second year?"

"I did, but I discovered those things aren't really the best tool for the job," Zorian said. "They're mass produced, with an eye for price instead of maximum effectiveness. That cube you're holding in your hand is a bit better than that."

"Oh," she said, giving him a surprised look. "Was it... expensive?"

Well, technically Zorian had produced that cube on his own, but the materials he used weren't exactly cheap...

"Yes, but don't worry about it," he said dismissively. "I don't mind spending money on this, so long as you actually take your lessons seriously. And Kirielle?"

"Yeah?" she asked curiously.

"You really need to actually read those three chapters for our next lesson, and I'd appreciate if you didn't lie to me like that in the future," he said.

At least she had the decency to blush in response.



The first week of the restart was a pretty big success in Zorian's eyes. True, he never did manage to find the aranean treasury, but everything else was going along nicely.

Red Robe had once again neglected to give any information to the invaders, so they were stumbling around just as badly as they had in the previous restart. This was the second time in a row that he had done that, and that was taking into account just the restarts that Zorian knew about – it had probably started way earlier than this. Did Red Robe completely give up on supporting the invasion after their confrontation? That was more than a little strange, considering how dedicated he'd been about helping them out before. Maybe he supported the invasion primarily as a way to keep Zach busy with something and mask the aftershocks of his own actions? If so, the fact that he revealed himself to Zach would kind of make such trickery pointless...

Regardless of the reason, Red Robe's absence made things very convenient for Zorian. The moment he realized Red Robe was once again ignoring the invaders, he immediately launched a series of raids on the known invaders and their cultist allies. He found nothing new yet, but every memory dive he did made him one step closer to opening the matriarch's memory packet so he considered himself successful there regardless. He also scouted a couple of the emergency resource caches that he'd found in the last restart, and even looted a particularly badly defended one. That particular cache held nothing except a large quantity of unlabeled potion bottles, which was slightly disappointing. He handed them off to Kael to see if he could figure out what they were and find a use for them. He'd feel bad about taking advantage of the morlock boy so much, except that Kael actually seemed enthusiastic about all the work Zorian was sending his way, so Zorian figured it was okay.

His monster hunts with Taiven were more successful this time around as well, since he had knowledge of where the monster nests and main migration routes were from his previous restarts. Taiven was ecstatic at their results, though Zorian had noticed her giving him some strange looks when she thought he wasn't paying attention. Did she somehow realize how improbable his claim of divining the locations of the monsters was? Well, no matter – since she never actually confronted him about it, he decided to continue using his foreknowledge to improve results of the hunts and deal with the fallout when (and if) it came.

His quest for getting himself a better library pass was also going along nicely, even though it was still in the beginning stages. The method he chose was extremely simple: he hung around the library entrance during its busiest hours and covertly scanned the minds of everyone who entered and left, looking for people with higher passes who weren't regular visitors of the library. After all, while the academy was stingy about giving higher authorizations to its *students*, actual holders of higher authorizations weren't exactly rare. Plenty of mages had them, and few of them were using them with any degree of regularity. If he chose his target correctly, they would never even realize their library pass had gone missing. And hopefully, the library would also never realize the holder of the card was not the same person whose name was printed on it.

The crowning achievement of this week, however, was the session with Xvim he was currently attending. Xvim was usually extremely punctual about their sessions, ending them at exactly their mandated time – no more, no less. Today, however, Zorian had been so good about meeting his ridiculous demands that Xvim decided to quietly extend their session beyond their allotted time. Zorian said nothing, simply continuing his endless repetition of the tasks Xvim gave him, but internally he was smiling. Even if Xvim retained his stony facade, the fact he decided to break off

from his usual routine told Zorian that he was definitely making progress in unnerving his annoying mentor.

Unfortunately, as much as he'd like to see how long Xvim intended to keep him here if he did not complain, Zorian had other obligations to fulfill today.

"A training session with someone else, you say," Xvim asked curiously. "And what, pray tell, is this training session about, to trump the meeting with your mentor in importance?"

"It's something Professor Zileti arranged for me," Zorian said, invoking the authority of another teacher. "I'm meeting another student so we can practice our mind magic together."

Xvim stared at him for a second. If Zorian had expected some kind of shock at his admission, or a request at confirmation that, yes, he indeed meant 'mind magic'... he was disappointed. Xvim just stared at him for a bit, tapped his finger on the table once, and then reached some kind of decision.

"Why have you not notified me of this sooner?" he asked.

"I meant no offense, sir," Zorian assured him smoothly. "It's just that this was our first meeting, and you immediately had me start with shaping exercises when I entered the room. I felt it would be imprudent to interrupt your lesson for such an ultimately irrelevant detail."

"Hmph. And you say you're practicing with another student? The blind teaching the blind..." Xvim said, shaking his head in disapproval. He then made a dismissive gesture with his hand, shooing him away. "Well, then. Go. I'm not going to keep you from your duties."

"Thank you, sir," Zorian said, rising from his seat. "I am to see you on next Friday, then?"

"No, come see me on Monday after classes," Xvim said. "I need to see this mind magic of yours in action before I can plan for our next session."

Huh. Now this he did not expect. Was Xvim implying he could help him develop his mind magic somehow? He did have a very good mental shield, admittedly, but Zorian was still skeptical that the man could help him in that regard. And he was also more than a little baffled that Xvim was even willing to help with that, even if it did turn out that he was some kind of mind magic expert... he thought the man was all about the shaping exercises and other basics?

Deciding he was going to have to wait till Monday to see what Xvim had in mind, Zorian left the man's office and went off to meet Tinami for their mind magic practice.

Well, he technically did not know he was meeting Tinami in particular, but considering that the setup was largely the same as it was the last time around (he told Ilsa about his mind magic and requested a practice partner), he didn't think the identity of the other student was that much of a mystery. And indeed, when he arrived at the assigned classroom, he found Tinami already there, waiting for him.

"You are the other mind mage?" Tinami asked incredulously.

[Yes,] he answered telepathically, causing her to flinch in shock. She narrowed her eyes at him in response.

"You're late," she complained.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Xvim unexpectedly decided to extend our tutoring session beyond bounds. I only managed to get out of it a few minutes ago."

"You chose Xvim as your mentor?" Tinami asked. "Why?"

"I live in Cirin," Zorian explained. "That's pretty far from Cyoria. By the time Ilsa managed to get to me, all the other mentors had filled their quotas and Xvim was the only one left."

"Is he as bad as they say?" she asked.

"He had me do shaping exercises for two hours straight today."

"Ouch. Okay, I guess that justifies being a few minutes late," she admitted. "We should probably reschedule our future meetings, just in case this keeps happening."

"Probably," Zorian agreed. Not even he knew what Xvim would choose to do next, and he had lived through this month many, many times by now. "Anything important I should know before we start?"

Just like the last time they did this, Tinami was largely interested in practicing her telepathy and ability to read surface thoughts. She was rather bad at it by Zorian's standards, but she improved rapidly under his direction. As for himself, he mostly practiced tapping into other people's senses with her. He could access the senses of other humans quite easily at this point, but trying to actually function while getting two sets of sensory inputs was a massive challenge. Especially if he and Tinami were looking in completely different directions and such.

Truthfully, there was very little that practicing with Tinami could offer him that he could not also do with Kirielle, Kael or some random stranger... but this way he got to talk to one of his classmates, which was one of his resolutions for this restart. It didn't hurt that cooperating with Tinami could be potentially quite useful, considering who her family was. Also quite dangerous, since they were known to dabble in mind magic and necromancy, but he was willing to take that chance. It was too bad he was essentially starting from scratch with her, though – the last time he'd done this with Tinami, he had introduced her to the aranea and they'd overshadowed him in her eyes by quite a margin. Because of that, they'd interacted very little outside their practice sessions. Then again, considering he had simply viewed her as a mind magic practice dummy back then and never even tried to get to know her, he had no right to complain. Now, though, there was no convenient nearby aranea to introduce her to, even if he wanted to... he

would have to catch her attention in some other way.

"Okay, I've just got to ask – where on earth did you learn how to perform mind magic so well?" Tinami asked. "I've been learning these things for years, under some very good tutors, and you're just effortlessly one-upping me in every application of it I can think of. How come?"

"It's a secret," Zorian said bluntly. "Ask me later when we get to know each other better."

She quirked her eyebrow at him. "When, huh?"

"When, if, whatever suits your fancy. The point is that we don't know each other well enough for me to reveal something that personal to you."

"That's fair enough," she sighed, leaning back in her chair. "It's really annoying, though. I know I'm not exactly a genius in the field but—"

There was a knock on the door. Zorian and Tinami both looked at each other and shrugged, mystified about who could be knocking on an empty classroom door at this time of day.

"I'll go check," Zorian said, rising from his seat. Chances were that it was someone looking for one of them, and knowing his luck that meant they were looking for him.

He opened the door, only to find Kiana standing behind it.

"Um, hi?" Zorian said uncertainly.

"Hi," Kiana said, sticking her head inside the classroom quickly in order to see if they were alone. She did a double-take when she saw Tinami and gave him an incredulous look.

"It's private," Zorian said crankily, preempting any sort of question. He stepped out of the classroom and closed the door behind him so they could have some semblance of privacy while they talked.

"I didn't say anything," she said, raising her hands in front of her defensively. "I just came to tell you that Raynie has finally

decided to meet with you again. It's at ten in the morning tomorrow, at this address." She pushed a folded piece of paper into his hands. "I shouldn't have to tell you this, but don't spread this around, okay?"

"Like I'd feed the rumor mill like that," Zorian scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Will you be there too, standing guard again?"

"No, but the owner of that restaurant is a friend of Raynie so don't get any funny ideas," she said. "Oh, that reminds me – Raynie wants you to know that this is *definitely* not a date. Even though it's a private meeting in a restaurant between two teenagers..."

She smiled mischievously at him.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be on your friend's side?" he complained.

"I was just joking," she sighed. "Gods, you're just as humorless as she is. Heavens help us if you two really do end up getting together in the end... see you around, Zorian."

And then she just turned and left without even waiting for his response. She... wasn't really how he'd imagined her to be. Shaking his head, he stuffed the paper with the address in his pocket and went back to the classroom.

"Sorry for the interruption," he told Tinami. "It was a small personal matter I had to- why are you looking at me like that?"

"No way," she mumbled. "I heard you were going after Raynie, but to think you got her to agree to it... how ever did you do *that*? I thought that was impossible!"

"I don't have a date with Raynie, Tinami," Zorian calmly assured her. "You are jumping to conclusions."

"Unless... of course!" she exclaimed. "Of course a mind reader could figure out her weak spot!"

"Hey!" he protested. "Now that's just insulting. I would never violate the privacy of her thoughts like that!"

"Why not?" Tinami asked curiously. "I would, in your place."

"Are... are you sure you want to admit so readily to something like that?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"Please. I don't believe for one second you are being perfectly moral and responsible with your mind magic," Tinami accused. "You're far too good at it to have developed your powers the legal way."

"This topic is over as far as I'm concerned," Zorian stated. "Why don't we go back to practicing mind magic? You know, the thing we're *supposed* to be doing?"

"I have to ask though, what is it that you people see in that girl?" Tinami asked, completely ignoring him. "What does she have that I don't? Is it the red hair? It's the red hair, isn't it?"

Zorian let his face fall into his hands. And it had been shaping up to be such a nice day, too.

SUM OF ITS PARTS

Not far from the restaurant where he was supposed to meet Raynie, Zorian sat on a bench and waited. There was no sign of her yet, but that was in no way unusual – he had misjudged the amount of time it would take him to find the place, and was thus a little early. He didn't let it bother him, choosing instead to pass the time by experimenting with his mind sense on the passing crowds, tapping into the eyes of pigeons flying overhead and practicing his shaping skills on the handful of pebbles he had taken to carrying around on his person at all times.

Honestly, shaping exercises were kind of relaxing when he didn't have Xvim breathing down his neck and being a jerk. He should try finding one that was actually challenging – really challenging, but not Xvim's patented you-haven't-*really*-mastered-this bullshit – and setting aside some time to... hm?

He drew the pebbles currently floating in front of him back to his palm and pocketed them, before leaning over a nearby ornamental bush where his mind senses had detected an extremely faint mental signature. Despite knowing exactly where to look, it took him two whole seconds to spot the mantis camouflaged against the leaves. He stared at the bug for a while, before an idea occurred to him...

He pointed his palm towards the insect and concentrated, trying to telekinetically draw it towards him without crushing it like a... well, bug. Something that was greatly complicated by the mantis holding on for dear life to the twig it was standing on. He had hoped to surprise it with this sudden maneuver, but its reactions were surprisingly fast for something that had been moving so slowly and ponderously just a second ago. Nonetheless, Zorian wasn't so easily deterred. Five minutes later, he had finally managed to detach the mantis from the twig without hurting it and was levitating it in front of him. The mantis twisted and flailed around in the air, clearly unhappy with its predicament, but Zorian had established too firm a hold on it for his telekinetic control to lapse just from that.

At least until the mantis decided it was finished with this annoyance, then suddenly unfurled its wings and flew off. Oh, right – mantises can fly if they need to... He totally forgot about that. Shrugging, he focused on his mind sense for a moment, checking if Raynie had arrived yet.

She had. She was still hidden by the nearby building from where he was standing, but her mental signature was unmistakable. He set off in the direction of the restaurant, and was soon back at the entrance, trying not to stare at the street corner he knew she was going to emerge from. When she did finally round the corner, however, she stopped in her tracks and just sort of stared at him in apprehension instead of coming over to meet him. Honestly, what was up with that? He already agreed with her that it wasn't a date, so what was she apprehensive about? He 'accidentally' turned in her direction, pretended he'd just noticed her and gave her a little wave.

She stopped stalling and came over to greet him properly.

"Sorry if I'm cutting it a little close," she said. "With most people I know, it's a miracle if they're only ten minutes late, so I've

learned not to be too early to this sort of stuff. You didn't wait long, did you?"

"It was a bit of a wait," admitted Zorian. "But to be fair, I *was* rather early. Don't worry about it, I found things to amuse myself with."

"Oh?" she asked. "And what would that be, if you're willing to share?"

"Nothing too interesting. I was just doing some shaping exercises," said Zorian, retrieving the pebbles from his pocket and making them float in a rotating ring above his palm. "Silly, I know, but it passes the time."

Raynie stared at the rotating ring of pebbles for a second before shaking her head, mumbling something unintelligible and motioning for him to follow her into the restaurant. He returned the pebbles to his pocket and hurried after her.

The moment he stepped inside the dining hall of the restaurant, he understood the reason behind the restaurant's somewhat unusual name – 'Fearsome Catfish' indeed. Hanging from the ceiling of the dining room was a preserved body of a massive catfish, big enough to swallow a grown man whole. An... *interesting* choice of ornamentation for a restaurant. Raynie seemed both amused and pleased that the taxidermically preserved trophy gave him pause for a moment, although he only knew that because of his empathy – she neither reacted nor said anything to him as she led him to a nearby table where they took their seats.

He half-expected Raynie to order a plate full of meat, what with her being a wolf shifter and all... but she actually ordered a grilled trout and a plate of vegetables. Huh. He supposed he shouldn't be so quick to assume... though speaking of assuming things, was he expected to pay for them both? His cynical side was saying yes, since her choice of meal was on the pricier side of things... but then again she *was* the daughter of a tribal chief.

Maybe she had plenty of money and this was perfectly normal for her. Maybe she'd be offended that he's trying to pay for her share of the food and think he's trying to court her after all...

"It will take some time for the chefs to prepare the food," Raynie said. "Why don't you tell me about these cat shifters of yours while we wait?"

Zorian scanned the other tables in the dining hall for any eavesdroppers. They were by no means the only people in the restaurant, and Zorian kind of thought this was way too public of a location to be having this sort of conversation... but it was mostly Raynie's secrets that were at stake here, so if she felt this was fine, then it was. None of the other diners were paying any attention to them, so at least there was that.

He told her as much as he could without bringing up the invasion or information about Rea's background that he obviously shouldn't know about. Even so, he sincerely hoped that Raynie wouldn't want to speak with Rea after their talk, because he would almost certainly find himself in a bit of a hairy situation if that were to happen – he could scarcely explain how he came by some of his information without admitting he had spied upon the Sashal family in *some* fashion.

"I don't think they intend to harm you in any way," Raynie said once he was done. "They wouldn't be willing to leave you alone with their daughter like that if they did, nor would they let her get attached to your little sister if they meant to make you into a target. Most cat shifters are dishonorable, but they don't target their own neighbors, friends, contacts and the like. They never make trouble in their own territory."

Well. Zorian had already known that the various shifter groups are by no means united, but it seemed they weren't even on particularly good terms either. Or at least Raynie's group didn't seem to like cat shifters much.

"I'm guessing the cat and wolf shifters don't get along, then?" surmised Zorian.

"We hardly ever interact with each other. Our relations are not bad because they're mostly non-existent," said Raynie. "I personally think they give the rest of the shifters a bad name, and I know I'm not the only one in my tribe with that opinion. You should watch yourself around your new friends. I know I just said earlier that they are not plotting against you, but that doesn't mean they're not dangerous. Cat shifters are rarely *just* cat shifters – they are the shifter group that has embraced Ikosian magical traditions the most. They especially like to dabble in illusionism, mind magic, scrying and... other shady disciplines. I wouldn't put it past them to spy on you in some fashion."

"I'll keep that in mind," Zorian nodded. "I'm curious, though – is that a general thing? Do different shifter groups usually avoid each other?"

"No, not at all," Raynie said, shaking her head. "We try to maintain contact with other shifter groups, it's just that cat shifters are... well, it's a long story, and I can smell our meals coming. We'll talk more after we've eaten."

She was right – the food was indeed brought over to their table not long after that. And Raynie was either very hungry or an extremely fast eater, because she scarfed down her meal in half an hour flat and then kept giving Zorian impatient looks while he ate his own food at a much more sedate pace. Rude. He refused to hurry up just because of her.

"Alright," said Zorian eventually, setting his plate aside to signal that he was done eating. "We were talking about shifter relations."

"Yeah," Raynie agreed. "Well, the first thing you need to keep in mind is that the current image of shifters as some sort of weird mages living on the fringes of normal society is something very...

modern. Before the flood of Ikosian refugees came to the continent and conquered everything, shifters didn't live on the fringes of anything – partly because the rest of the natives hated us and would have never allowed us to live near them, but also because we didn't have to. We had our own tribes and territories to live in."

"The other natives hated you so much?" Zorian asked.

"Oh yes," Raynie confirmed. "Even today, the scattered remains of the original tribes that lived in the region – the people you collectively call Khusky – can't stand the sight of us. Thankfully for us, they have managed to thoroughly marginalize themselves over the years and no longer have any say in how shifters are treated. That's the good thing that came with the Ikosian conquest - the Ikosians didn't find shifters nearly as threatening or inhuman as the Altazian natives did. As far as they were concerned, we were just your typical group of overspecialized native mages that they hoped to absorb into their society."

"But?" Zorian prompted.

"But their attempts to absorb us never quite succeeded properly," Raynie shrugged. "We speak Ikosian and follow the laws of the land, but most shifter groups have stubbornly clung onto every shred of autonomy and independence that we could. Wolf shifters were the most vocal and successful in that regard."

"Ah, I see," said Zorian, understanding. "And since the cat shifters decided to discard their autonomy in favor of assimilating more closely into the rest of the population, you don't get along with each other."

"Yes," she sighed. "We're not enemies, but they have completely rejected our politics and went their own separate ways. Both sides agree that they've got nothing to say to each other and avoid contact."

Zorian hummed noncommittally. Somehow he doubted that

the wolf shifters really didn't consider cat shifters enemies. He'd buy the idea that the cat shifters really *were* apathetic over the issue, but the wolf shifters must be pretty bitter over the other side breaking ranks like that. They were just powerless to do anything about it.

"So how successful are cat shifters, then?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Very successful," Raynie admitted. "Eldemar's government loves to point them out to shifter tribes worried about what would happen to them if they gave up on their traditional rights. It's why they are so reluctant to seriously crack down on them, despite their shady behavior. If the biggest success story of the shifter integration program comes under fire, it would likely cause all those other shifter tribes considering going down that path to back off and dig in harder."

Right, totally not enemies.

"So if cat shifters were so very successful, doesn't it make sense to copy them to some degree?" Zorian asked. "I mean, I can understand not wanting to be criminals, but what stops you getting yourself some classical mages among your ranks? I'd be willing to bet their decision to acquire Ikosian-style spellcasting had a *lot* to do with their success."

"What do you think I'm here for?" Raynie asked him with a smile.

"Ah, well..." Zorian fumbled. "While you're clearly training to be a classical mage, you are a rare exception from what I'm hearing, not the rule. Why is your tribe only sending someone to learn this now? Why not earlier?"

"There is a reason why the shifter group most successful in adopting Ikosian-style magic is also the group that cares the least for our traditional rights," she said. "While the idea sounds simple in principle, in practice it amounts to opening a backdoor for the

central government to influence the tribe. Members trained as mages have a tendency to make power-plays and bring the mage guild, and through them the central government into internal tribal disputes when they don't get their way."

"Ah," nodded Zorian in understanding. "And the central government is all about abolishing autonomous groups like yours when given a chance."

"Yes," she agreed. "Plus, the tribal elders are very traditional and often react badly if the new mage shows too many outside influences upon return. Many times the mage simply walked out of the tribe in disgust after a few years of clashing with them."

"So what changed to make you come here?" asked Zorian. A flash of indecipherable, but decidedly negative emotion welled up in the girl in front of him. "Or is that too personal a question?"

"It's... not really, no," she said, scowling for a moment before schooling her features. She was annoyed at something, but she didn't seem to blame him for it. "I guess there are two main reasons. Ever since the splintering of the Old Alliance, the centralization policies that characterized its twilight years have been somewhat discredited, lessening the pressure on shifter tribes to assimilate. This makes outsider-trained members less threatening to many in the tribe. On top of that, the recent colonization drive to the Sarokian Highlands has many shifter tribes wary, since their lands are directly in the path of settlers. If a group of mages decides to settle inside of our borders, it is not at all certain we could get them to leave without asking the central government for help."

"Help for which they would demand concessions," Zorian guessed.

"Well, they are actually obliged to help us in that regard for free," Raynie said. "It's their duty. But every time we fail to resolve problems ourselves, we weaken our authority and credibility. If we do it too much, our supposed autonomy will end up being only

on paper. So it would be best if we had some of our own mages to handle things. Anyway, those two come together into a situation where the tribal leadership felt we had to acquire some mages of our own, and could afford the risk that comes with such attempts.”

Zorian nodded and spoke no more of the topic, even though he could tell there was more to it. It wasn't as though Raynie had lied to him – he detected no intent to deceive from his empathy – but there was clearly some factor she didn't want to discuss there. Something personal, he guessed. Something that made her angry and bitter at her tribe, which she otherwise spoke about with pride and reverence.

He had a feeling that her coming to Cyoria was something of an exile.

He asked her to give him a rundown of other shifter groups and she jumped at the chance to change the topic to something else.

Shifter politics were surprisingly complex. Aside from cat shifters, the raven and owl shifters had also fully abandoned their tribal roots in favor of assimilation into regular society – they were not quite as successful as cat shifters, but both were doing decently for themselves. The viper shifters had also tried to pursue that path, but theirs was not a successful story – they failed to integrate and were nearly wiped out when they launched a short-lived rebellion during the Splinter Wars. The wolf, deer and boar shifters provided the core of the autonomist faction, which sought to preserve their traditional tribal structure and their special privileges. The bear and fox shifters were aligned with the autonomists, but had been slowly wavering in their support over the years and had powerful assimilationist factions working inside of them.

Finally, there were three more shifter groups that stood out from the rest for a couple of reasons. First, there were the ea-

gle shifters, who couldn't accept being ruled by anyone, autonomy or not. They simply transformed and flew off in the direction of the Winter Mountains, where they somehow survived till modern times. How they dealt with such hostile, monster-infested environment nobody was quite sure, and they wanted nothing to do with the rest of humanity. Not even the other shifters. The second one were seal shifters, who got on the wrong side of Eldemar during the Necromancer's War and were mostly killed off as a result. The survivors left for Ulquaan Ibas along with other losing groups, and were never heard from again. Raynie suspected they wouldn't want to talk to other shifters, even if they still survived in their new home. Finally, there were the pigeon shifters, who were never a tribe to begin with – they were a product of an eccentric mage that managed to get ahold of a shifter transformation ritual and was dedicated enough to create his own shifter clan with it. They were mocked and looked down upon by the other shifters, but Raynie admitted (after some prodding) that they were actually doing quite well for themselves. Being able to turn into a flying animal at will had its uses.

"I'm surprised there aren't more attempts like that, to be honest," Zorian said.

"There are," Raynie said. "They just tend not to go anywhere. They start well, but then run into problems when the first generation shifters start having children. If not handled properly, shifter children tend to grow up somewhat... dysfunctional. Established shifter groups have centuries of tradition to draw on in this regard – new, experimental shifters are stuck with no guidance and must tread with utmost care for the first few generations. Something that a lot of new shifters have no patience for."

The conversation drifted away from the topic of shifters after that, shifting to a discussion of the recent monster invasion of the city and how it affected them. Zorian largely deflected Raynie's

questions about what exactly he did in 'his' team whenever they went hunting, as he suspected Raynie would be a lot less willing to just accept Zorian's implausibly high skills than Taiven was, and she didn't push the issue too much. He was rather surprised how big of an effect the monster invasion had on her, though.

"Honestly, this whole monster crisis is making me very self-conscious," Raynie revealed. "I was sent here to learn magic and become an asset to the tribe, and I thought I was doing fine in that regard... but now I know that many of my classmates are good enough to go after real dangers already and I'm... not. I thought I was among the top of the class, but it seems that's true only academically. I don't like it. I should have been among those of you going out there to fight those things."

He had no idea how to respond to that, so he just kept silent. The conversation died down after that, and they went their separate ways. There was no mention of a second meeting, but she did mention he was welcome to ask her more questions if he thought of anything else. That was more of an approval than he'd expected to get, really.

And yes, she did indeed expect him to pay for both of them.



Zorian turned his new library pass in his hands, idly studying the identification glyphs etched on its surface. The name on the pass was not his, of course, since he'd brazenly broken into someone's house and stolen it... but the chances he would get confronted over that were, surprisingly enough, negligible. As he quickly learned when he tried to use his new pass, the higher passes weren't just a slip of inert paper like his old one was – they were small wooden panels imprinted with a magical identification array of glyphs. To use them, one just had to walk up to the doors leading to the restricted section of the library, and then insert the panel

into the depression next to the door. If the pass authorization was high enough to access that particular section, the door would unlock and the visitor could walk inside. No interaction with the librarians was necessary, and nobody asked to see his pass when he tested it, even after he'd spent several hours in the mind magic section.

Honestly, he was feeling rather foolish at the moment. He expected the restricted sections to be guarded by some fiendish bit of security and identity checks around every corner, and instead he found a security system a child could break. If he knew it was this easy, he would have done this far earlier. As far as he could see, the only danger was that the man he'd stolen from might realize he'd been robbed... and Zorian really wasn't worried about that. He had picked his target carefully, took nothing except the library pass from the house he'd broken into, and had done his best to leave no evidence of his entry. Even if the man suddenly started caring about the library pass he hadn't used for months and noticed it was missing, Zorian really doubted he would conclude somebody stole it. Who the hell breaks into people's houses in order to swipe their library passes?

All that said, Zorian suspected that if he tried the same trick to access some really deeply restricted section, he would be stopped cold by firmer security. He would have to acquire a top level pass at some point and test it out near the end of a restart.

Right now, though, he had to see just what Xvim had in store for him. He pocketed the library pass and approached... the door...

He frowned. What the hell was happening? This was where Xvim's office was located, he was sure of it – had been here countless of times, and everything else was exactly where it should be. He just...

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting the mental shield snap shut over his thoughts. The compulsion to ignore the

door to Xvim's office melted away, and his eyes finally stopped skimming over it like it didn't exist. No, now that he thought about it, it was more like he had dismissed it as irrelevant. As *obviously* not what he was looking for. If he'd been less sure of himself, who knows how long he would have looked for the door before figuring it out.

Opening his eyes and forcing down his annoyance at Xvim's antics, he knocked on the door and then immediately entered without waiting for permission to do so. He found Xvim calmly staring at him, fingers steepled together.

"Pitiful," Xvim declared. "That such a crude trap managed to snare you, even for a minute, shows how woefully unprepared you are for the dangers of mind magic."

"Yes, sir," agreed Zorian easily. He was too inured to Xvim's attitude to really get worked up by it anymore. "That is why I professed a desire for a training partner to Miss Zileti."

Xvim waved his hand through the air once, as if warding away a particularly annoying fly, wordlessly letting him know how little he thought of that idea.

"I understand, from talking to Ilsa, that you are a natural mind mage, yes?" Xvim asked. It was apparently a rhetorical question, because he didn't wait for Zorian's response before continuing. "It is commendable that you are trying to correct your deficiencies on your own initiative. Too many mages with such natural talents mistake their inborn advantage for actual mastery, wasting their potential and putting everyone around them at risk. Even themselves. *Especially* themselves."

Wow, was that actual praise from Xvim?

"Sadly," Xvim continued, "your attempt, much like the shaping skills you displayed at our session last Friday, falls embarrassingly short of achieving actually worthwhile results. It is up to me, as your mentor, to mould you into something resembling a compe-

tent and responsible spellcaster.”

Ugh. Never mind.

“I see,” he said, somewhat sourly. “Please forgive my impertinence, but I was not aware that you were an expert in mind magic. I thought you taught advanced shaping exercises for fourth-year students.”

“I also do private lessons for particularly talented first and second years,” Xvim said, a ghost of a grimace flickering over his face for a moment before he smoothed it into his usual impassiveness. Xvim probably didn’t think much of their ‘talent’. “And, more relevantly, I teach a fourth year elective dealing with defense against hostile magic. Obviously, this includes mind magic as well.”

“Ah,” said Zorian. That did a lot to explain Xvim’s constant mind shield. Still... “I feel I should point out that my innate ability grants me a very powerful and flexible mental shield.”

“Oh? How interesting,” Xvim said speculatively. “Tell me, is your ability purely defensive or can you reach out and touch other people’s minds too?”

“The second one,” Zorian admitted. “That’s why I asked Miss Zileti for help – I needed a willing target that would let me practice telepathy and mind reading on them.”

“In that case, you probably already know about the mental barrier I’m currently sporting,” Xvim stated.

“Well yes, but not because I tried to access your mind or anything,” Zorian lied. “It’s just that the base form of my talent is a passive form of empathy that tells me what other people are feeling, and I cannot sense anything from you. As far as I can tell, that only happens when they are shielding their mind somehow.”

“I am certain that is the only reason why you know of it, and that you have never even entertained the thought of getting revenge on your insufferable mentor by taking a quick peek at his mind,” Xvim said indulgently. “As it happens, though, I *want* you

to try and invade my mind. Please do your best to get past my mental barrier and tell me how it compares to your own.”

Oh, this was absolutely perfect. A chance to attack Xvim and get away with it? How could he refuse? Still, as annoying as his mentor was, he didn’t really want to hospitalize the man, so he *didn’t* immediately launch the strongest mind spike he could form into his unprepared defenses. No, instead he first ran some light probing attacks to see if he could find any obvious imperfections (he couldn’t) and then launched a quick succession of weak attacks to gauge the strength of Xvim’s shield.

It was a very solid thing, comparable in strength to what Zorian and the aranea could create, which surprised him a great deal. On the other hand, that meant he didn’t really have to hold back. He powered up his strongest, most focused mind spike and slammed it directly into the mental barrier.

Though outwardly calm and composed, inwardly Zorian grinned in savage glee as he felt Xvim’s mental shield crack and buckle under his sudden onslaught...

...and then the moment passed, and Xvim’s mental barrier immediately snapped back into place, as perfect and unyielding as it was at the start.

Zorian’s eyes involuntarily widened in shock. N-No way... he repaired it!? How? He wasn’t a psychic, he was sure of it, and no spell he knew of could repair itself. Certainly not that quickly. *Zorian* couldn’t fix his mind shield that quickly. Hell, the aranea he practiced with couldn’t make their defenses snap back to an intact state that quickly.

He launched three more powerful attacks in quick succession with the exact same result: the attacks did damage to Xvim’s mental barrier, but it was repaired so quickly and thoroughly that a lesser attacker could have been fooled into thinking it had never been damaged at all.

He narrowed his eyes. No. No, he was not going to be foiled in this. Brute force wasn't working, but he hadn't been trained by the aranea for nothing – he had far more than that at his disposal. He started executing basic attack patterns taught to him by Mind Like Fire, treating Xvim like a fellow psychic instead of a mage using a structured spell, and slowly the limits of Xvim's defenses revealed themselves to him. For one thing, Xvim did not seem to feel his probing attacks – anything not strong enough to crack his mental barrier was effectively undetectable to him. Secondly, his barrier was completely uniform – he never reinforced a spot he was attacking, even if he repeatedly targeted the same place over and over again.

When he next attacked, he did not use a powerful but momentary mind spike – he picked one part of Xvim's mental shield and started crushing it. He didn't let up, and slowly it began to crack under his mental pressure. No repair was possible – his attack was overwhelming the shield's regeneration, widening the cracks and bringing it closer and closer to total collapse. He diverted a few tendrils of power from the main attack into the widening holes in Xvim's defenses, causing the man to visibly flinch as telepathic forces seared his surface thoughts...

"Stop!" Xvim ordered, raising his hand into the air in a halting gesture.

Zorian immediately withdrew, letting Xvim recreate his mental defenses and regain his composure.

"Well," his mentor said, massaging his sinuses. "An afternoon headache, just what I needed today. I suppose that will teach me to tempt my students. Nonetheless, it was a fascinating experience. Less classical mind magic, and more akin to something a memory moss, an azure sea hermit crab or a cranium rat swarm would employ."

"That wasn't a spell you were using to shield your mind, was

it?" Zorian asked.

"No, it was not," Xvim confirmed. "It was unstructured magic, much like your own abilities."

"But how?" Zorian asked. "I can tell that you aren't... well, a natural mind mage like me."

"Mind magic shaping exercises," Xvim said simply, as if that explained anything.

"There are shaping exercises for mind magic?" asked Zorian, surprised.

"There are shaping exercises for every field of magic," Xvim said. "They are essential for building a proper foundation around which you can base your spells."

Right, stupid question. What he *should* be asking was how doing shaping exercises allowed Xvim to do a reasonable impression of a full-blown psychic. He was a bit of a one-trick pony, but to be fair, it was a very nice trick.

"I was not aware that doing shaping exercises can give you unstructured magical abilities," Zorian remarked.

"Really?" Xvim asked him curiously. "What did you think shaping exercises were, if not unstructured magical abilities? Do enough of related ones over the years, and they're bound to build up to something greater than the sum of its parts. In the case of mind magic, the ability to defend against it is so universally coveted that countless training regimens for gaining mental defenses have been devised over the centuries. What I displayed is not a common skill by any means, but is not particularly rare either."

Zorian frowned. Come to think of it, a fair number of people he'd encountered in the past had some form of mental defense that didn't really feel like a structured spell. Alanic for instance, as well as Rea. Zach also had some sort of mental shield, according

to Spear of Resolve – one she did not feel comfortable tampering with. He really should have suspected something like this earlier.

"Can you also use telepathy and mind reading in an unstructured manner, too?" he asked Xvim, acting on a hunch.

"Me, personally? No. I've never had an interest in anything other than defending myself," Xvim said. "But if you're asking whether it's possible, the answer is yes... with caveats. It requires great dedication for rudimentary results – such an aspirant would never be able to duplicate the attack you just casually did, for instance, even after a lifetime of honing their skills."

He knew it – it was just like soul sight. Getting a reduced version of the ability that affects only yourself was doable with a lot of work, but reaching out and applying it to someone else was all but impossible.

"So?" Xvim said impatiently, breaking his contemplation. "The comparison?"

"Err, right. Your shield seems to give you far less feedback than mine does, it's too uniform in composition and your response to attack is very predictable and exploitable for someone who knows what they're doing," said Zorian, relishing the chance to make Xvim on the receiving end of criticism for a change. Xvim simply nodded, giving no indication that his pride was wounded by the barrage. "On the other hand, your shield has far fewer imperfections and you can repair it a lot faster than me."

"Well then," Xvim said, leaning back on his chair. "I guess we know what you'll be practicing today, then, don't we?"

"Alright," said Zorian. He was fine with the idea, really. Improving his mental defenses was always welcome in his mind. "How is that going to work, though? I don't think any classical mind spell can do much to me, barring surprise attacks like that trap you put on the door."

"Surprises come in many forms, mister Kazinski," Xvim said,

reaching into his drawers and retrieving a spell rod, which he promptly pointed at Zorian's face. "Allow me to demonstrate."

Zorian hurriedly strengthened his mind shield, determined to weather the incoming mental attack Xvim was launching at him, but what hit him wasn't a mind magic spell. It was some sort of dispelling wave, and his mental shield evaporated upon contact with it like a raindrop hitting a burning oven.

Then the knockout spell hit him.

He resisted. He may have been stripped of his mental shield and caught off-guard, but he was still an experienced mage and he went through Kyron's 'resistance training' too – the relatively minor spell Xvim used could not subdue him. But the point was made, regardless.

"A *proper* mind mage," Xvim said, "would have reconstructed his shield before the second spell had been even cast."

Zorian sighed. Of course they would have.

"Start over?" he guessed.

"Start over," Xvim confirmed.

In a scene that Zorian would rapidly begin to hate with every fiber of his being, Xvim once again pointed the spell rod at his face and blasted his mental shield into oblivion.



Following their Monday session, Xvim largely replaced their regular sessions with mind magic related ones, constantly pushing his defenses and giving him long lists of mind magic shaping exercises to try. Most of these exercises were absurdly easy for Zorian, teaching things he already had an instinctive grasp of, but searching the restricted section of the library with his brand new pass yielded some less intuitive ones that actually taught him something new.

He didn't intend to duplicate the circumstances that led to Xvim's new attitude in future restarts. While he'd definitely learned some stuff from Xvim when it came to mental combat, Xvim was ultimately an annoying teacher to learn from and nothing he wanted to teach Zorian absolutely *required* his help to work.

Besides, his meetings with Tinami weren't really getting anywhere. He wasn't really getting much from them himself, and Tinami basically turned his every attempt at interaction into an interrogation attempt, trying to figure out who had taught him to be as good as he was currently.

She also seemed to have blabbed about his meeting with Raynie, since everyone in class seemed to know about it when he came to the academy on Monday. Probably as revenge for refusing to answer her questions. In any case, that pretty much killed any sort of good will he may have had with Raynie – she accepted that he was not at fault when they talked later in the day, but she still didn't want to be seen anywhere near him after that. It was probably Benisek loudly congratulating him in front of the whole class that really screwed him over when it came to that.

Why did he ever think that hanging around that guy was a good idea?

Oh well, live and learn. Seeing how his social endeavors were in tatters for the rest of the restart, he focused his energies on finding the aranean treasury, his personal experiments, and tracking down and interrogating the invaders. The latter two were doing just fine, but his quest for the aranean treasury stubbornly yielded no results. He resolved to take the Filigree Sages up on their offer to take them to the Cyorian settlement in exchange for their help with memory manipulation – maybe aranean explorers would be more successful than him, and more help with his memory reading skills was always welcome. He should also save the Yellow Cavern

Guardians from their invader again, just in case they had something new to tell him now that he had some actual experience with mind reading under his belt.

His invasion-related activities steadily continued as weeks passed, yielding no revolutionary results or critical revelations, but his memory reading skills were getting pretty good and he had found some interesting targets that might actually know something interesting. Unfortunately, his constant attacks had made the invaders cautious and paranoid, and everyone important was always armed and under tight security – Zorian didn't feel confident going after them under such conditions. He would go after them in a future restart, when they hadn't had the forewarning that he was coming for them.

As the end of the restart approached, Zorian laid off the Cultists a little, limiting himself to raiding their caches and monitoring their activities. The caches held no crucial clue or amazing treasure, but one of them did have a whole lot of cash (which Zorian intended to put to good use in future restarts) and the potion collection he stole at the start of the restart looked promising. Kael claimed he would need another restart to finish going through them, but some of them were clearly advanced combat potions that produced clouds of acidic vapor upon breaking, doused everything in unquenchable fire and similar effects. That sounded quite compatible with Zorian's fighting style, in all honesty.

And then, several days before the summer festival, his spying effort finally gave him the alert he had been waiting for: the leadership of the Cult of the Dragon Below issued an order to one of their low-ranking groups to kidnap Nochka. It wasn't the same team as it was the last time, nor was the kidnapping scheduled to occur on the same date it had in the previous restart, but his efforts had caught the order anyway.

He ambushed them halfway to the Sashal family house, when they were still herding their giant centipedes through the sewers. His initial idea was to seize control of the centipedes and make them turn on their masters, making it look like they lost control of the beasts. Unfortunately, the mage controlling them knew what he was doing – the moment Zorian attempted to influence the minds of the monsters he clamped down on his control over the centipedes and shouted a warning to the rest of the group that they were under attack.

So Zorian used his backup plan and chucked one of the combat potions he recovered from their cache into their midst. The centipede controller, as well as three of his centipede minions, died on the spot, frozen solid when the bottle broke and the glittering blue liquid made contact with the air. Alas, that revealed his hiding spot, forcing him to shield himself from a barrage of offensive spells the three surviving cultists had started peppering him with.

Fortunately, with no more controller mage to contest his control, the last centipede was child's play to commandeer. Before his three attackers had realized what was happening, the centipede's poisonous pincers bit down on the leg of one of them, and they had to defend themselves from a danger in their own midst.

They never stood a chance from that point on, though they had managed to kill the centipede before Zorian finished them off. His task done, he left the scene, wondering what the Cult of the Dragon Below was going to do now that its plans had been foiled. Were they going to come after Nochka again, with more resources this time? Just how important was she to them, anyway?

He supposed he would find out soon.



To Zorian's surprise, Nochka was never attacked after that. Instead, the cultists attacked another family the day after that – this

time a rather prominent officer serving in Eldemar's military who happened to be one of those pigeon shifters that Raynie didn't think much of. The man and his wife were unharmed, but their eight-year-old son was kidnapped by their unknown assailants and no ransom demand had been issued.

Unlike the cultists' attack on the Sashal family, this one garnered a great deal of attention from the newspapers and the authorities. After all, their new target wasn't just some random nobody, but a member of Eldemar's military... and they didn't bother with some flimsy 'monster attack' setup this time, choosing instead to just barge in and kidnap a kid during the night. Quite a bit more attention grabbing.

So. Clearly the cultists needed a shifter, probably a shifter child, for some purpose. Primordial 'summoning', most likely. They needed one so badly they were willing to kick over an anthill just before the invasion, exposing it to a huge risk of discovery.

But it didn't have to be Nochka, apparently.

"Hey, Zorian," Kirielle called out, distracting him from his musings.

He looked towards her and found her trying to paint a face on the next generation wooden golem he had made for her. It had a whole bunch of minor improvements over the old one, but Zorian suspected Kirielle only really cared about one of them – the new version had long, brown 'hair' attached to its head, based on her request. Apparently she decided that it wasn't lifelike enough for her.

"What?" he asked.

"Who are you taking out to the dance tomorrow?" she asked.

"It's none of your business," said Zorian. Ugh, he would have to make sure to be out of the house by tomorrow evening, just in case Ilsa sent someone after him again.

"Are you going out with the red-headed girl you're dating?" she asked.

"N- Wait a minute, how do you even know about that!?" Zorian protested.

"Kael told me," she said, biting the wooden end of her paintbrush for a minute before adding some fine touches on the golem's new eyebrows.

Stupid Kael... he probably thought this was all so terribly amusing.

"I think you could use a girlfriend," Kirielle said, before turning towards her new golem. "Don't you agree, Kosjenka?"

Just as it had been made to do when presented with something that sounded like a question, the golem nodded its head gravely.

"See, even Kosjenka agree-"

"Kiri," Zorian cut her off.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

OVERWHELMED

Perhaps it was because she 'knew' that Zorian already had a date, much like everyone else seemed to believe, or perhaps it was simply a matter of Zorian being more circumspect with his intentions this time around, but Ilsa didn't send any girl after him in the end. Not that Zorian had stayed at Imaya's place long enough to see that in person, of course – that could have easily left him stuck with an unplanned date for the evening *again* – but he had left a scrying beacon in the house so he could check up on it periodically.

A part of him was annoyed he even cared about that. In the grand scheme of things, such petty drama did not matter in the slightest... there wasn't enough time left in the restart for the consequences of ignoring it to really catch up to him. And besides, he could hardly be blamed for not showing up on a date he had never arranged to begin with! But, well, he was curious... and it wasn't like checking up on the house from time to time was some huge commitment on his part.

No, most of his time was spent on hovering on the edges of the invasion proper, trying to spot breakaway groups small enough to ambush. Well, that and repeatedly telling himself that he didn't have to interfere every time he saw the invaders kill helpless civilians, since they were going to be just fine when the loop restarted.

The first thing was complicated by the variety of monsters that accompanied the mages, who all had very good senses and came in great numbers. The second was complicated by the sheer brutality the invaders displayed to everyone in their path. For heaven's sake, some of them were breaking into random houses and murdering entire families inside! Not even looting anything, just committing mindless slaughter of non-combatants for no real reason. Madness.

He knew stuff like that happened during the invasion, of course, but it was never this... *personal* for him. He was there this time, witnessing the behavior in detail and cold-bloodedly deciding where to engage the invaders and where to move on. And he wasn't talking about avoiding groups that were straight-up too big for him to handle – those were easy to ignore, since he had never felt compelled to help others if doing so would cost him his own life in return. No, he was talking about groups that were entirely manageable with his current skills... except that he couldn't figure out a way to deal with them without killing everything. And what would be the point of *that*? He needed Ibasan mages alive so he could read their minds – that was what this was all *about*. An ambush that did not result in subdued mages to interrogate was a waste of time and mana, as well as liable to summon Quatach-Ichl to dispatch him. The ancient lich always personally intervened when someone got too successful against the invading forces.

And that was without even considering the possibility that Red Robe was secretly lurking somewhere out there in the city, waiting for a big enough disturbance to clue him in that a time traveler was back in Cyoria. He didn't think that option was very likely, what with Red Robe completely abandoning his support of the invasion lately, but it was not an option he felt completely safe discounting. No, sticking to his original plan and avoiding unnecessary engage-

ments was definitely the right choice to make.

Maybe it was a good thing his mind kept going back to the stupid date drama – if nothing else, it gave him something to distract himself with.

Fortunately for his deteriorating mood, he soon found a duo of Ibasan mages that had strayed too far from their main group and were only lightly defended. Well, relatively speaking. They had two war trolls and twelve skeletons as bodyguards, with another six war trolls vandalizing shopfronts not too far from where they were standing, but he was confident he could deal with that if he could surprise them.

He made his way towards the group, mentally nudging the iron beak whose senses he was tapping into to fly closer to his targets so he could examine them more closely. There was something deliciously ironic about using the invaders' own scouts against them like that, but the real reason he was using the iron beaks instead of simply scrying on the invaders was that iron beaks had much better vision than he did and could also see in the dark. Very useful, that. He had also tried to employ the same trick on the war trolls that hung around the invaders, but found their senses very hard to process. Trolls had terrible eyesight, and were color blind to boot – their main sense was their ridiculously good sense of smell and, to a lesser extent, their hearing. Not to mention they were far less mobile than the iron beaks, and the Ibasans kept a much tighter leash on the brutes than they did on their iron beak flocks. Hmm... he wondered...

Acting on a hunch, Zorian focused on the nearest iron beak flock and tried to dominate the one flying on the tail's end of the flock. It was surprisingly willful for an animal, but his attempt was not contested by anyone and the iron beak soon broke off from its group and made its way towards Zorian. Huh, that worked. Nobody seemed to be reacting to his actions, either. Convenient.

Apparently the iron beaks were a bigger weak link of the invasion than he'd thought!

He removed a potion vial from his pocket and handed it to the dominated iron beak that had landed next to him. It took some time, but eventually he managed to telepathically convey to the magical corvid that it shouldn't clutch the vial too tightly in its claws unless it wanted bad things to happen to it. That done, he directed it to dive bomb the Ibasan duo with the vial.

He would not have been surprised at all if his ploy had ended up as a failure. A lot of it depended on the iron beak executing everything flawlessly, since Zorian was only dominating the iron beak, not puppeteering it – a dominated creature executes orders to the best of its own ability, not the controller's. That was nice, in the sense that there was no way Zorian could have puppeteered the bird precisely enough to pull off something this complicated. It did mean he was a bit of a helpless observer as a result, though. Oh well, even if the ploy failed it should at least act as a proper distraction for his own attack...

The iron beak exceeded his expectations. Not only did it approach the two mages from behind, entirely on its own initiative, it dropped the vial at the exact spot Zorian told it to aim at. The *exact* spot. That had got to be some innate magic ability at work – they were uncannily accurate with their feather attack too, come to think of it. In any case, once the vial hit the ground it exploded into a cloud of yellow gas that knocked out the two Ibasans in a matter of moments. Their bodyguards weren't affected – the war trolls because their magically-enhanced metabolisms kept the knockout gas from working, and the skeletons because they had no metabolism to affect – but once their controllers went unconscious, it became ridiculously easy to goad the war trolls into attacking the skeletons. It took less than a minute before every skeleton was reduced into dust and splinters.

He directed his iron beak to make a few passes at the two trolls, and the bird interpreted that as 'send a couple of feather volleys straight at their eyes (ouch), after which the two former bodyguards ran off to chase the bird in blind anger, leaving Zorian free to approach the two knocked-out mages unopposed.

This was the fifth group he ambushed tonight, and the first one where everything had gone so smoothly. He didn't even have to personally fight in the end! He really should use iron beaks more extensively in the future.

After dragging the two unconscious bodies to some less exposed place, he took a deep breath and dived into their memories.

Memory reading, more than any other branch of mind magic, deeply resembled divination in the way it functioned. You had to decide what you wanted to look for, and if you were asking the wrong question, your answer would be worthless or misleading. In Zorian's case, there were four main things he looked for whenever he read the minds of Ibasan mages: whether they knew about any mage in a garish red robe, where the primordial 'summoning' ritual was supposed to take place, what they knew about the goals of the invasion and, last but certainly not least, whether they knew anything about the time loop or time travel in general. The same thing he probed the minds of cultists about, really. He was lucky this time, in that one of the two mages lying before him was a higher ranking mage that should hopefully know more than the common grunts he had been dealing with thus far.

None of the Ibasans knew anything about a mage wearing red robes, and the two men he currently had at his mercy were no exception. Follow up questions regarding missing members which had left the group around the start of the time loop revealed that despite their inability to maintain discipline during the actual invasion, the Ibasans ran a pretty tight ship during the lead-up to it. Anyone who stepped out of line was severely punished by the

Ibasan leadership, and the handful of cases where someone tried to abandon the invasion resulted in Quatach-Ichl hunting them down like dogs as an example to everyone else. Consequently, all such attempts had stopped long before the time loop had begun.

As far as Zorian was concerned, that pretty much killed the possibility of Red Robe being an Ibasan invader. He had suspected as much, considering how Quatach-Ichl treated Red Robe during that evening, but it was nice to have more confirmation. It was still possible he was connected to the Cult of Dragon Below, which didn't (and couldn't) exercise anywhere near the same control over its members.

As far as the location where the primordial ritual was concerned, none of the Ibasans officially knew anything about it... but it was apparently a sort of public secret among group commanders (such as the one whose mind Zorian was currently reading) that the 'summoning' was supposed to take place on top of the Hole, or at least as close to it as humanly possible.

Zorian felt pretty stupid when he found that out. Of course. Of course it was the Hole, the city's biggest and most obvious landmark. He had even known that the Cult assigned special significance to the damn place, he just never... damn it. He shook his head. In his defense, the lower-ranking cultists were convinced that the ritual was going to take place in some super-secret place that nobody knows about.

As for the goals of the invasion, that was something Zorian found very easy to extract from the minds of his victims, as they knew very few actual facts about that. Only the very top of the Ibasan leadership seemed to know what they were really trying to accomplish here, and the common grunts were going along with the whole thing almost entirely because Quatach-Ichl was going along with it too. The ancient lich was held in very high regard by the Ibasans. As a thousand-year old lich, he was an almost im-

possibly ancient mage, and had power and skill to match his age. He was alive back when the gods still spoke to humanity, and was rumored to have been blessed by several of them. On top of all that, he had a reputation for being harsh but fair, as opposed to a lot of other Ibasan leaders who simply had a reputation for being harsh. He was something of a saint to these people, as strange as that looked to Zorian. The mindset was that if Quatach-Ichl said this was possible and worthwhile to pull off, then it was. It was just that simple.

Also, there was a general feeling among the Ibasans that Al-tazians were all a bunch of degenerate weaklings that would surely fall like wheat before the mighty men and women of Ulquaan Ibasa. Then again, that particular brand of rhetoric was common in Elde-mar too, so he didn't think it all that notable in the grand scheme of things.

As for time travel, his current victim knew nothing of it, just like everyone else he- wait! There was something. It wasn't about the time loop, or time travel, but apparently Eldemar had a secret research facility deep, deep within the Dungeon, dedicated to researching time magic. Time dilation, to be more precise. The facility was heavily defended, with insanely good security measures – as they had to be, considering the sheer depth the facility was located at – so the invaders had decided to leave it alone. Some of the Ibasan leaders, notably Quatach-Ichl, were known to be unhappy about that. They felt something important had to be there, if Eldemar was willing to maintain a research facility in such a dangerous environment, and wanted to have it. Unfortunately for them, the rest of the leadership felt the number of troops and effort required to crack their defenses could not be justified with such speculative gains.

That was... interesting. Although the Ibasan mage he was memory-reading did not know the exact location of the facility,

Zorian was pretty sure *he* did. The map left to him by the matriarch had a number of locations marked on it, two of which he had never been able to reach to check out. One was surrounded by Ibasan forward bases and patrolled too heavily for him to ever approach it successfully – Zorian presumed this was their main base. The other was ridiculously deep, and he never even tried reaching it – he did not think he could survive a journey into such depths. Frankly, he was kind of amazed the aranea managed to map the Dungeon that deep, considering even powerful mages would think twice about descending to that depth.

He had no proof, but he strongly suspected this was the time magic research facility discovered by the Ibasans. And considering the matriarch had marked it down as important, it almost certainly had some relevance to his situation.

He dived deeper into the man's mind, looking for more information. He felt his victim's mind quake under the severity of the probe but persisted anyway – any compunction about hurting these people had evaporated after watching them rampage around the city for several hours.

The path outlined by the matriarch wasn't the only one, apparently, or even the main one. The government did not supply the facility through a perilous journey down the winding tunnels of the Dungeon proper – they did it by descending down through the Hole until they reached the desired depth, where they had drilled an artificial tunnel into the wall in order to connect the facility with the outside world. Of course, while that path avoided most of the dangers associated with such extreme depths, it was still insanely dangerous for anyone without authorization to be there, so that did not help him much. Maybe if he-

Oops. He pushed it too hard – overwhelmed by his (still rather crude and unsophisticated) memory probe, the man's mind collapsed into a chaotic, undecipherable mess. He would be getting

nothing more out of him. Damn it.

He fired two piercers at the unconscious mages, killing them both, and turned to leave, only to find an iron beak watching him closely from a nearby window sill. It was non-hostile, simply scrutinizing him. Zorian checked the feel of its mind, and found that it was indeed the very same iron beak he had dominated earlier, just like he suspected. His influence over it had dissolved a while ago, though, so that couldn't be the reason why it was so docile towards him. Huh.

If nothing else, he'd expected it to resent him for overriding its will. He sensed no animosity from the bird, however – just satisfaction and schadenfreude at seeing the Ibasan mages dead. Either the iron beaks didn't like the Ibasans much, or this particular iron beak was not a fan.

"So," Zorian said. "How do you feel about helping me kill more of these?"

The iron beak cocked its head to the side, uncomprehending. Right, still only an animal, if a very clever and willful one. He sent the bird a telepathic impression of two of them killing more invaders.

The iron beak answered with a shrill screech and a burst of bloodlust so strong Zorian found himself taking a step back from the animal.

Hate. Grudge. *Kill.*

"Right," he mumbled to himself. "I'll take that as agreement."

He didn't bother to dominate the bird this time – he just instructed it to find another small group of invaders and started looking for more iron beaks to possibly subvert.



Zorian subdued two more groups after that, neither of which had anything new to teach him, before Quatach-Ichl suddenly tele-

ported in front of him and blasted him in the face with one of those jagged red disintegration beams he loved so much. He died instantly, unable to raise any defenses in time.

Oh well, the night had been coming to a close anyway. At least he'd managed to experiment a little with the iron beaks flying around. Sadly, he had discovered that only a tiny minority of them were receptive to his control, and contacting the wrong ones invariably caused the entire flock to descend upon him like a murderous mob. The previously subverted birds also immediately switched sides back to their brethren when this happened, which he really should have expected but somehow was still taken entirely off-guard the first time it happened. In any case, the iron beaks definitely hated the invaders for some reason, but turning them against their masters was very difficult. Something kept them loyal, and the few mages whose minds he had questioned for an answer didn't know what it was – they thought of iron beaks as dumb animals and paid no heed to their thoughts and motives.

He began the restart in the same general way he had started the last two - by scouting the state of the invasion, getting his mana crystals, helping Taiven clean up the Dungeon of monsters, and so on. Except, of course, that he was far more effective at all of those this time around. He also stole a better library card for himself immediately and recreated Kosjenka for Kirielle, among other minor additions.

The newest restart, much like the two that preceded it, showed no sign of future knowledge by the invaders. This was the third consecutive restart where Red Robe unceremoniously ditched them, and Zorian was starting to suspect this was now a normal situation rather than just a momentary whim. Most likely, Red Robe had completely lost interest in the invasion after their confrontation.

The question was - why? Why do that after he had spent all

those restarts stubbornly handing out knowledge to them?

Well, perhaps a better question would be, why had he been doing that in the first place? What did helping the invaders do for him? Was it just a way to keep Zach focused on some highly visible, but ultimately irrelevant quest so he wouldn't question things? Or perhaps a way to muddy the waters, so to speak, and hide the aftershocks of his own actions by regularly inducing a big splash at the start of every restart? Maybe. But the sheer amount of information he provided to the invaders made him think there was more to it than that. It was incredibly optimized to do as much damage to the city as possible – Red Robe must have sunk an enormous amount of time and effort to produce something like that. The outcome of the invasion mattered to him in some personal way. So why stop? What changed?

Zorian tried to think of it with a properly paranoid mindset. Red Robe thought that the aranea had brought an unknown, but large number of people into the time loop. These people were organized and also crafty enough to evade his notice for years. Not something that would be easy to hunt down and purge. Zorian had also displayed mind magic in their battle, so the one encounter Red Robe had had with these people involved one of the few types of magic that could permanently deal with him. All of this meant that the time loop got infinitely more dangerous for Red Robe all of a sudden. There was a legion of enemies plotting against him and lurking around every corner.

If Zorian was in Red Robe's place, would he immediately begin to plot against this group, laying down traps and ambushes and trying to track them down? No, definitely not. He would get away as soon as possible, not just out of Cyoria but out of the entire wider region around the city. If he began the restart somewhere in the city, he would get the hell away at the start of the restart, much like Zach seemed to be doing. He wasn't sure how long he

would stay away, but Zach had yet to stop leaving the city at the start of every restart, and he was the reckless one out of the three of them.

Maybe it wasn't so strange that Red Robe was staying away from the city at the moment. In hindsight, that bit of misdirection by Spear of Resolve had been far shrewder than Zorian had given her credit for at the time. But how long would it be before Red Robe realized that the legions of enemy time travelers simply didn't exist.

There was another option. If Red Robe was helping the invasion in an attempt to optimize it, so that it could be as effective as possible once the time loop ends, and if the aranea were only ejected from the time loop instead of soulkilled, as Red Robe claimed... then any further optimization attempts would be a total waste of time. Once the time loop ended, the aranea would be alive and well again, and any plan developed in their absence would give worse results than the one Red Robe had previously developed. Admittedly, Zorian mostly liked this option because it meant that the aranea were recoverable, but it would also explain a lot of things. Such as Red Robe's reluctance to use his soulkill spell more liberally. If 'soulkilled' persons were only gone for the duration of the time loop, that would neatly explain why he didn't use it on non-loopers – that would be entirely counterproductive, since he would still have to deal with them eventually, except that he wouldn't have the option to try out different tactics against them in the time loop, and couldn't find out what worked best.

Zorian could only hope that investigating the invaders would bring some answers to his questions. Though if everything else failed, he supposed he could always behave like Zach and simply launch an endless stream of suicidal missions aimed at breaking into the time magic research facility, since that was clearly relevant to the time loop somehow. He was bound to succeed eventually,

right? If Zach was able to kill Oganj with that method then surely he could break into one measly facility.

Hmm, maybe he was thinking about this wrong – he should outright recruit Zach into the attempt. He was still a bit leery of contacting the other boy, both because that would mean revealing himself to Red Robe if he was monitoring Zach and because he was not at all sure Zach would be of any actual help to him at this point, but if he was reduced to metaphorically banging his head on the wall then he might as well involve someone who has spent gods know how many years in the time loop honing the skill at doing exactly that.

Something to keep in mind when the time comes, anyway.



With the start of classes, Zorian decided to approach Raynie again while skipping on the mind magic training with Tinami. He still hoped to get to know the Aoife heir better, but it was clear that trying to get close to both Raynie and Tinami at the same time was unfeasible, and Raynie seemed the easier one to handle. He did not recreate his initial request as closely as he had intended, but Raynie agreed to set up a meeting between them nonetheless.

Benisek had a spontaneous attack of clumsiness when he had tried to loudly congratulate Zorian and ended up sprawling on the floor of the classroom after tripping over his own two feet. It was a funny and mysterious thing, and Zorian hadn't had absolutely anything to do with it, but it sure was nice that he'd only made a scene out of himself instead of himself *and* Zorian, wasn't it?

Still, while he had high hopes that his attempt to get to know Raynie better would go better this time around, the fact was that interacting with her involved a lot of waiting time – he might as well try to get to know another one of his classmates in the meantime. And since female classmates had a high chance of producing

the same kind of problems that Tinami had in the previous restart (because that was just how his luck worked, damn it), that someone should probably be a guy. Hmm, which one of his fellow male students looked interesting... oh! Edwin was really interested in golems, wasn't he? He had both of his parents in the golem-making business and couldn't shut up about them the last time Zorian had asked a mildly-topical question about the subject. Well... he might as well show Edwin his own golem designs and ask him what he thought. It would be interesting to see how his designs compared to ones made by someone hyper-focused on the field.

He waited until classes were over and then walked over to where Edwin and Naim were talking. Like always when he saw them together, he found it interesting how different the two of them were, both physically and in terms of personality. Edwin was a short boy, with pitch black hair and slightly darker skin tone that hinted his ancestors were relatively recent arrivals from the south, or perhaps even from Miasina. Naim was a relatively unassuming brown-haired boy of average height, distinguished only by the fact he was rather athletic and fit for your average student. Edwin was talkative and expressive, getting excited easily and often gesticulating heavily when he spoke. Naim was calm and restrained, like some sort of serene monk who had achieved enlightenment and could thus no longer be fazed by anything anymore. They were like the sun and the moon, yet somehow they'd ended up as inseparable.

He had to admit, he felt just a little bit intimidated by the prospect of approaching them. He was worried they would be suspicious of him, suddenly approaching them out of the blue like that. Zorian's previous relationship with the two was polite, but very, very distant. They had hardly known each other. Then again, that was an accurate description of his relationship with most of his classmates bar Benisek.

But he need not have worried. Edwin was naturally a friendly sort, and only got friendlier when he found out why Zorian was talking to him. And while he did sense some exasperation from Naim, that was solely because of the topic of the conversation rather than Zorian's presence as such. He was not as crazy about the topic as Edwin.

"That's a nice stabilizer for the kind of small doll this is intended for," Edwin said, tracing the relevant glyph sequences with his finger. "I don't think it would work for something larger and heavier, like a proper, man-sized golem made out of solid steel, but it's downright inspired for this. I'll have to remember this. I don't understand why you put these in, though," he said, jabbing his finger at the trio of compressed nodes he used to fine-tune the design. "They're inelegant and just plain unnecessary. The design works perfectly without them, and they don't seem to do anything except randomly tweak things with no rhyme or reason."

"Actually, the design *doesn't* work without those," Zorian said. "All of the prototypes were breaking down on me until I got sick of trying to make it work like it was supposed to and just forcibly tweaked things in the manner you're looking at. It works fine now, but it makes altering the design a real pain. I'm hoping you can help me find the underlying issue that's tripping me up."

Edwin gave him an incredulous look. "Wait... so this is, like, an *actual* design. Not just theory work? You've built one of these?"

"Well, yeah," Zorian said. "What would be the point, otherwise?"

"But isn't that super expensive?" Edwin asked curiously.

"No, it's just moderately expensive," said Zorian. Though in all honesty, his sense of what was expensive and what wasn't had probably gotten utterly skewed while he was in the time loop. "But I'm funding it out of my own pocket and no one can really stop me from spending my money on whatever I find appropriate."

"Oh no, I'm not criticizing you," Edwin grinned. "Hell, I wish I could do the same! You sure you don't need an assistant or anything?"

"It's... a possibility," Zorian said hesitantly. He could see that Edwin was very serious about his suggestion, and it surprised him. He had thought he would have to make an effort to get him to cooperate on specific projects, and here he was proposing partnership. "How much time can you dedicate to this?"

Naim gave a short, amused laugh. He was largely content to quietly sit on the sidelines thus far, but apparently he couldn't resist reacting to this.

"That sort of thing is all he does in his free time," Naim said with a light smile. "The real question is just how long your patience will last before you tell him to knock it off already and go home."

"Oh shut up, you," Edwin complained. "Like you are any better, mister training. You have your martial arts, and I have my golems."

"I have a lot on my plate lately, so I'm not exactly sure how much time I can dedicate to this. But I think I can spare a couple of hours every two or three days if you're up for it."

"I'm up for it," said Edwin. "For a chance to see how my designs work in practice, I'd even be willing to wake up before noon during the weekend. What's keeping you so busy anyway? The classes are only starting."

"Ah, well, I do a lot of independent studies," said Zorian. "The golem experiments you already know about, but I also do a lot of studying into spell formula in general, as well as alchemy, general purpose utility magic and so on. I do advanced shaping exercises and practice combat magic whenever I find the time."

"Sounds a bit unfocused," Edwin said. "Impressive that you manage to fit all of that into your schedule, though."

"Yes, and you still found time to join in the monster hunts," Naim noticed.

"I think of that as combat magic practice," Zorian said.

Naim gave Edwin an amused look. Edwin scowled back at him.

"What?" Zorian asked.

"When I told Edwin I wanted to join a hunter group to practice my combat skills in real situations, he called me an idiot. He said no one else would be dumb enough to risk their lives for *training*," Naim said, patting Zorian on the shoulder like an old pal. "Well, it seems there are two of us. Welcome to the idiot club, Zorian."

"Right," Zorian mumbled. "But wait, what other reason would a student like us have to join a monster hunter group?"

Naim shrugged. "Money. Fame. Duty.

Oh right, some people get paid to do that stuff. And aren't stuck in a time loop that made stuff like fame and duty utterly unattainable.

Before he could actually say anything, another one of their classmates suddenly decided to enter the conversation.

"Forgive me for butting in like this," said Estin Grier, suddenly speaking up from behind Zorian. "But I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Do you mind if I comment a bit?"

There was a brief pause, as the three of them stared at the newcomer. In the end, it was Edwin that broke the awkward pause.

"We're just talking, man," Edwin huffed. "It's not a private club or anything. Go ahead and say whatever you want to say."

Zorian glanced at Estin, studying him for a bit. The boy was one of the students he once suspected might be Red Robe – well, just 'the third time traveler' back then, since he hadn't met the guy yet – since his family emigrated to Eldemar from Ulquaan Ibasia. If he was being truthful to himself, the boy's appearance had contributed to those suspicions – Estin was a tall, severe-looking fellow, with sharp facial features, dour expression, thick eyebrows, black hair and eyes of such dark brown they looked almost black too. Him being very withdrawn and rarely

speaking unless prompted by someone or something did nothing to dispel the rather sinister impression he got from the boy.

But as far as Zorian was able to piece out, Estin was really just a normal, albeit extremely intimidating student. He had no links to the invaders and didn't really behave like someone aware of the time loop.

"Very well," Estin nodded seriously. "I was going to note that while most of the students didn't join the monster hunts *solely* in order to test and hone ourselves in the crucible of battle, they surely considered that an additional point in favor of participating. One can have multiple goals for deciding something."

"So... you also like combat magic practice?" Naim surmised.

"Yes," Estin agreed. "That is one way to interpret that. And with that, we can see that there are three of us who wish to test our combat skills and grow. Perhaps we could help each other. Have a meeting so we can trade news and personal styles, spar, and other such things."

For someone who stayed quiet most of the time, Estin sure was very verbose once he got going. Still, he was all for Estin's idea, since he'd been curious about their level of combat skills ever since he'd heard they participated in monster hunts. Naim was also interested, so after discussing it for a while, the three of them decided to ask Ilsa to let them borrow a training hall sometimes in the future. One with actual ground, because apparently Estin's magic 'didn't work well with indoor environments', whatever that meant.

Estin also asked about Edwin joining them, but he wasn't interested. Edwin didn't like to fight, and had no interest in honing his combat skills. Zorian assured the golem enthusiast that he still intended to work with him on their golem designs.

He just had to figure out a way to fit these two new obligations into his already overloaded schedule.



Finding a training hall suited to their needs turned out to have been largely a non-issue – the academy had lots of training halls, and most of them were free to use by any student. Not all of them were billed as combat magic training grounds, but they all had basic safety wards in place and could be unofficially used as such. According to Ilsa, such 'misuse' of academy resources had been rampant for quite some time already, and was accepted as normal even by the teachers these days. As such, she recommended they just commandeer whatever place they needed for a few hours instead of waiting a week for the academy to give them an official time slot that may or may not suit them, at a training hall that may or may not be what they needed. They just had to make sure they weren't interrupting a sanctioned study group or some such.

Armed with that knowledge, they toured some of the available options until they found a training hall that was really just a walled-off and warded section of academy grounds, and thus had plenty of soil and rocks that Estin apparently needed to really show off.

Estin, as it turned out, was one of those people with an innate magical ability. Specifically, he could manipulate earth, rocks and similar materials in an unstructured manner, much like how Zorian could work his mind magic. Estin was rather cagey about the specifics of how his ability worked, since it was apparently his family bloodline and they were trying to keep it semi-secret, but it apparently wasn't immediately usable in its untrained form and Estin's current abilities were a result of considerable talent and a lot of work. In the handful of mock-fights they did to familiarize themselves with each other's skills, Estin used the ability exclusively to levitate large clumps of earth and rocks around himself, interposing them between himself and incoming spells with unerring accuracy. Well, if he could see the attack coming anyway – he didn't

fare so well when Zorian made his magic missile loop back and come at him from behind his back. It also took some time for him to form a sphere, and he didn't seem capable of controlling more than four at any particular time, because when Zorian launched an eight-missile swarm at him he simply surrendered and asked him to tone it down in the future.

Still, it was a pretty useful trick he had there. Blocking with the spheres didn't seem to take any attention from Estin, allowing him to focus purely on peppering his opponent with offensive spells while his spheres defended him. If he had something more dangerous than magic missile in his arsenal, or if he could actually weave a homing function into those magic missiles, he might have actually posed a problem for Zorian.

Well, a problem for him so long as he held back so very badly. He decided in advance that the only spells he was going to display was his mastery of magic missile and basic shield spells, and that appeared to have been a good choice because he was beating both of them pretty decisively even with that. Especially Naim. As a first generation mage with no special magic or familial history to draw on, he was limited to the same 'magic missile and shield' combination that Zorian claimed to be limited to, but without the years in the time loop to hone his skills at those two spells to near-perfection.

If he were fighting against pre-time loop Zorian, Naim would have wiped the floor with him. He had more than twice the mana reserves that old Zorian had, and had clearly known how to cast those two spells years ago and had been slowly honing them all that time. On top of that, he was highly fit and agile, and in his fight against Estin he simply dodged every projectile that the other boy sent his way. The old Zorian couldn't weave a homing function into his magic missiles, and would thus not be any more successful than Estin in that regard.

But sadly for Naim, he wasn't fighting Zorian's past self, and thus ended up overmatched in his own game. Zorian's shield was impenetrable to anything the other boy could dish out, and dodging didn't work against Zorian's attacks.

After this, Naim and Estin decided to move on to hand-to-hand combat, probably specifically to spite and one-up Zorian. Knowing he was useless in a fist fight and would just embarrass himself, Zorian immediately bowed out of that, conceding he had no chance against either of them. They were both very smug about that.

Well whatever, let them have their consolation prize. Better than being bitter at Zorian for besting them, that's for sure. In any case, the two of them had no less than five rounds of that, and it became obvious by the end that Naim was just plain better at that than Estin was, despite Estin's greater size and bulk. He would later find out that this was what Edwin had been talking about when he implied that Naim was just as obsessed with martial arts as he was with golems. He practiced martial arts religiously every single day, and was good enough to get invited to national contests in the field.

After that, they decided to share training methods and other advice – something that ended up surprisingly useful to Zorian, since both of them had found some neat little shaping exercises that Zorian never thought to look for, but which ultimately ended up with Zorian doing most of the talking and demonstrating. He expected as much to happen, though – he *was* the most experienced person among them, after all.

He left the meeting pleased with how it turned out. Considering that both Naim and Estin wanted to have another meeting like that, Zorian supposed they were pleased with it too, even though Estin was throwing him some sour looks when he thought Zorian wasn't looking. When they did organize another meeting, though, it wasn't just the three of them that showed up.

Briam, Kopriva and Raynie also showed up, wondering if they could join. Naim and Estin immediately dumped the decision on him, spontaneously designating him as the group's leader. Lovely. He accepted, of course. If nothing else, he was pretty sure that sending Raynie away would not reflect too well on him and his plans to get closer to her.

The problem was that all three of them were very raw and untrained when it came to actual combat magic. Briam was admittedly already a member of the hunting group, but that was solely because he had his fire drake familiar – his spells were almost entirely centered around supporting that living flame thrower. Kopriva was in the process of becoming a member in a hunting group, but also not due to combat magic as such – she got in on the basis of providing her team with alchemical bombs and potions, and was heavily reliant on them herself. Raynie probably had some of her shifter magic to fall back on if really pressed, but she was keeping that part of her a secret and her mastery of classical combat spells was nothing to write home about.

Somehow, they still managed to make the meeting work, but it involved a lot more work and responsibility than Zorian was comfortable with. Since he was 'the leader', it mostly fell upon him to help the newcomers out.

At the end of the meeting he was sought out by Raynie, who handed him an envelope with the time and place for their meeting. It was the same restaurant she had used last time, which he supposed made sense if the owner was a personal friend of hers like Kiana claimed.

While this was happening, Zorian was in the process of finalizing his agreement with the Filigree Sages. In exchange for transporting them to Cyoria, guarding their 'salvager crews', and transporting their finds back to their home, Zorian had secured three different mind magic teachers, one of which was supposed to be an

expert in memory reading and manipulation. Said memory reading expert also agreed to probe the minds of up to five prisoners that Zorian brought to her and share the findings with him. Finally, and a lot less critically, Zorian was entitled to a portion of the things the aranean salvager crews found in the settlement – only important because it gave him the excuse to closely monitor their activities, ostensibly so they wouldn't cheat him out of his due, but really just so he knew how to properly 'salvage' the place in future restarts.

Embarrassingly, it took less than two days for the Filigree Sages to do what Zorian couldn't manage in an entire restart. Apparently the solution to finding the Cyorian web's treasury was to descend down the deep vertical shaft which the Cyorian aranea used as garbage disposal, except that halfway to the bottom was a hole in the wall that led to their treasury. The hole was big enough for an aranea to comfortably pass while lugging cargo, but Zorian would have to crawl to pass through the opening and into the main chamber. The shaft actually had numerous such tunnels of various sizes branching off of it, all but one of which were dead ends, but it wasn't that hard to narrow it down once you knew what the trick was.

According to the Filigree Sages, shafts like these were the 'secret' to the ease with which the aranea could penetrate even very deep layers of the dungeon without getting slaughtered in the process. While a shaft like that did allow for some of the horrid things from lower layers to reach you easier, they were very defensible and could always be collapsed on invaders if incursions got too frequent. In cases where such shafts didn't exist, aranea were liable to create them via application of stone shaping spells.

The actual treasury was... huge. A lot of space was taken up by huge spools of spider silk thread which were presumably the web's primary source of income. But there was also a lot of raw

currency there, both in the form of paper notes as well as precious metals and gems. A fair number of alchemical explosives and potions was also there, including heaps of different healing potions that the salvage crews claimed were optimized for aranean biology. They were very excited about those, and wanted Zorian's help in contacting whoever made those – they seemed very dismissive about the possibility that the Cyorian aranea produced those themselves. There were quite a few spellbooks, alchemical recipe books, or spell formula blueprint compilations - many of them highly restricted, rare or very expensive. The Filigree Sages intended to cart all of them off back home for research purposes, but they agreed to let Zorian peruse them and copy a few choice bits for his own use. That would be enough to keep him busy until the end of the restart, so he was perfectly happy with that.

Finally, the vault held a lot of stuff that was really only of interest to aranea. Leather pouches and straps that aranea used for carting things around, nutrient blocks that were the aranea equivalent of dry rations, things like that. The Filigree Sages, at least, seemed very intrigued by those, marveling at the Cyorian web's technological sophistication and ingenuity. It all looked very underwhelming to Zorian, but he supposed it wasn't easy establishing a technological society when you have no hands.

Amazingly, the treasury was only the tip of the iceberg. There was another secret part of the settlement he had never found - a secret magic research room, which could only be accessed by selectively disabling a few choice bits of the warding scheme in one of the rooms, and then passing through the newly-opened hole in the ceiling. Sadly, there was a further layer of defenses even beyond that, and neither the Filigree Sages nor Zorian had been able to crack the wards on the second door thus far. The leader of the salvagers was starting to toy with the idea of simply smashing the door, but worried that there was some kind of self-destruct mech-

anism inside that would destroy the contents if the entrance was forced open. That was how Filigree Sages secured their own magic research rooms, apparently.

Finally, there was a room for storing records, which Zorian hadn't noticed simply because it had never occurred to him to try and connect his mind to the one particularly lumpy wall in the back of the settlement. Apparently the bumps were 'memory stones' – magic items that could record thoughts and memories, and which were apparently the aranea's equivalent of written records. Personally, Zorian didn't think this method was nearly as convenient as written records, but the Filigree Sages claimed this was a much more natural and convenient method for them, so what did he know? The important thing was that the records room held information about most of the dealings and operations the Cyorian web had had with the humans on the surface, barring top secret ones, and that Zorian could possibly coopt some of their organization for his own purposes. The Filigree Sages had no interest in that, seeing as how they intended to simply cart off anything that wasn't nailed down rather than establish some kind of long-term presence, so they simply pointed the room to him and told him to do whatever he wanted with it.

Embarrassingly, Zorian remembered noticing the wall the first time he searched the place and thinking its unique texture might be significant... so he dug it up with alteration spells and was disappointed when he found nothing but solid rock behind it.

It was after one of these meetings with the Filigree Sages that Zorian came back to Imaya's place and found Taiven waiting for him. Curious. They didn't have another monster hunt scheduled until tomorrow. Maybe she wanted to talk about upping their tempo? They were extremely successful this time around, thanks to Zorian making full use of his future knowledge, so maybe she wanted to strike while the iron was hot. If so, he would have to dis-

appoint her – he had too many things on his plate to devote more time to that.

The moment he got closer and she noticed him, however, he immediately realized she wasn't here about something like that. She was upset. She asked to speak to him in private so he led her to his room and locked the door. He had heavily warded it at the start of the restart with a permanent warding scheme, so there was no need to waste time on privacy spells.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What's wrong, he asks," she mumbled.

Crap, she was upset at *him*. He didn't remember doing anything to make her upset, though.

She took out a light blue crystal and slammed it at the desk of drawers next to his bed.

"What's that?" she demanded.

"That's a rhetorical question, surely?" Zorian asked, baffled. "It's a piece of crystalized mana, of course."

"Yes, but why do you have an entire crate of that under your bed?" she demanded.

Zorian frowned. "You've been rooting through my stuff without my permission?"

"No, your little sister was," she said. "She and Nochka were playing princesses and making crowns out of crystalized mana for the two of them, Kana and Kosjenka. I walked in on them and asked them where they got those 'pretty stones' they were using."

Damn it, Kiri!

"Okay," said Zorian, taking a big breath to calm himself down. "Putting that aside for the moment, why has this gotten you so upset? Why does it matter if I've got a crate of crystalized mana under my bed?"

She balled up her hands into fists, seething in her own frustration and... self-loathing? What?

"Because everything!" she finally shouted, slamming her fist into the nearby wall and causing him to flinch back in shock. "Everything! Everything, everything, everything!"

"Taiven, please!" shouted Zorian, frantically trying to calm her down. "Just calm down, you're not making any sense!"

Was she... crying?

"How can you be so good at everything!?" she half-shouted at him, pushing him away. "You're good enough at alchemy that Kael praises you. You create golems in your free time. You're so good at divinations that adult professionals accused me of lying when I told them how good at finding monster nests you are. And you're apparently good enough at combat magic that they're letting you teach your own group!"

"That's not-" Zorian tried to explain.

"Don't try to lie to me!" she snapped at him. "I know you're a better combat mage than me. You try to hide it, but I can tell. I'm not *stupid!*"

"I never claimed you are," Zorian assured her.

She ignored him.

"I worked on this for years," she cried. "I'm two years older than you and I worked *so hard!* Every day, every weekend, every moment I could spare. I made sure to focus; not spread myself too thin. I *live* for this. And then I find out that not only are you better than me in the one thing I focused on, you also have time for all these other things too! How!? How are you so much better than me? *What am I doing wrong!?*"

"Nothing!" Zorian hastily assured her. "You're honestly pretty damn awesome, Taiven, and the only reason I got even close to your level is because I'm a dirty cheater who cheats."

"Then show me how to cheat, too, damn it!" she shouted.

Before he could say anything in response to that, she... wrapped him into a hug and started sobbing into his shoulder.

He awkwardly returned her hug after a few seconds, desperately trying to think of a way to handle this situation.

He couldn't think of anything at the moment. In light of that, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that Taiven didn't look like she would stop crying any time soon.

A SHOW OF TRUST

The idea that someone might connect all the dots and realize his abilities were way too developed for his age was not a foreign idea for Zorian. He tried to make sure that the abilities he showed to any one person or group were firmly within the realm of possible, but he always knew that a sufficiently curious and dedicated individual could track down enough clues to realize something didn't quite add up. There was no solution to this, as far as he could tell – not unless he wanted to spend most of his time performing an incredibly elaborate and boring act. Something which he wasn't sure he was capable of, and which probably wouldn't be too good for his sanity. Ultimately, he decided that the whole thing was largely a non-issue. As long as he wasn't caught doing something illegal, he could simply tell such amateur detectives to get lost. Well, he'd probably be more formal and courteous about it than that, but that was what it all boiled down to in the end.

He was even aware that it might be Taiven who caught on to him. In many ways, she was in an ideal position to do so. She was probably the only person who actually had a solid idea of what was normal for him and what wasn't, and was thus far more likely to realize just how abnormal and sudden his current skill growth was. He had been interacting with her pretty heavily lately, giving her

lots of material to work with. And lastly, they'd known each other from before. They were... friends. She would feel entitled to an explanation of some sort, and would be a lot less hesitant about confronting him than someone else might be.

And yet, despite all of that, Taiven still managed to completely blindside him in the end. He expected her reaction to be a lot of things, but never did he imagine she would break down into tears. It was just so unlike her. Yes, she was a very emotional girl, but she was also the sort to keep going forward and never let anything get to her.

He glanced to the left, where she was sitting on the bed beside him. She was a mess. She had stopped crying for a while now, but after-effects were still very visible – red face, runny nose, the standard stuff. Still, her emotions had leveled off in the past few minutes, so maybe she was ready to talk now?

"Feeling better?" he asked.

She lightly punched him in the shoulder as a response.

Yes, definitely feeling better.

"This sucks," she complained. "I came here all fired up, ready to get some answers, and in the end we didn't even have a proper fight. I just made a fool of myself. Why couldn't you have been more angry and defensive and... Zorian-like?"

"Err, sorry?" he said, mildly confused. He was tempted to ask just how she defined 'Zorian-like' but decided it would be best if that remained a mystery for now. "To be fair, you weren't behaving very Taiven-like either."

"I guess," she conceded. "Tell me something. Have you always been this talented? Have you been lying to me this whole time?"

"No," he answered simply.

She scrutinized him for a moment, watching for any sign of uncertainty and shiftiness in his eyes and posture, before sighing heavily.

"Figures," she said. "I thought as much. You'd have to be very dedicated to keep up the act for so long, and I can't think of a reason why you'd bother. Still nice to hear it from your own mouth, though. Except... that only leaves one option on the table. That you overtook me in everything, including my specialty, in the few short months since we last saw each other. That..."

"You're wrong," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I did not overtake you. I am confident that if we fought, you'd be victorious nine times out of ten. You're still better than me."

If he didn't just use mind magic to incapacitate her right from the start. Or ambush her. Or cover the battlefield in enough explosives to level a building. But he was pretty sure Taiven wouldn't count those as 'real' victories anyway, and aside from that, his point still stood.

"It doesn't matter," she huffed. "With the kind of ridiculous growth you're displaying, you'll close that gap in a handful of weeks and then leave me in the dust. And you'll have all that other stuff you're tinkering with too. Am I wrong?"

"Sort of," he said. She gave him an annoyed look so he immediately clarified. "It's complex. There is no way I'll be able to close the gap between us 'in a handful of weeks', as you said. But time flows differently for me than it does for you, so I'll get a lot more than that."

"What? What the hell are you saying?" she asked, giving him an incredulous look.

"We'll come back to that later. Before I say more on the topic, I want to know what got you so upset about this," he said calmly.

"Say what? Zorian, you can't say something like that and just go 'but we'll talk about that later'. This... this demands immediate clarification! This will be bugging me in the back of my head until I get an answer!" she complained.

"I know," Zorian said, smiling widely. "That's why I'm not explaining anything until you tell me what's going on."

She glared at him. He only smiled wider.

"You're evil," she told him, looking away. "Besides, I already told you what's bothering me and I'm pretty sure you heard me just fine. Everything I've done, all the skills I've spent my life honing... if you can surpass it all so easily, then what the hell have I been doing all my life? I don't know what kind of cheat you used, and it honestly doesn't matter because *it shouldn't have been enough!* I'm good at this and I live for this, you can't just decide one day to pursue the same field as me and then catch up to me in less than three months... while not even focusing on it properly! The only way that could be possible is... is if I were never really that good to begin with..."

"Oh come on," Zorian protested, quickly wrapping Taiven into another hug to forestall a second round of crying he could feel welling up inside of her. "That's so totally ridiculous. Why would you doubt yourself like that? How does me being better erase your own accomplishments?"

"Accomplishments?" she asked incredulously, pushing him away. "What accomplishments? I work as a freaking teacher's assistant, Zorian. For a non-magical class no less! Do you honestly think that's what I hoped for when I graduated?"

He winced. So Taiven wasn't as sanguine about that 'temporary setback' as she pretended to be... In retrospect, he shouldn't be so surprised by that – while failing to secure herself a mentor immediately after graduation was by no means the end of the world, it was bound to be a severe blow to her confidence. Still...

"Taiven, aren't your parents both battlemages?" Zorian asked. "How come they haven't pulled some of their connections to find you a mentor, or even just a better job?"

"Oh, my parents would love to find me a mentor," Taiven

scoffed. "In fact, they already have someone in mind! He's one of their old friends who's long left the exciting parts of the business behind him when he lost his leg to a rock worm. He's all about being cautious and minimizing risks, and he never does anything more challenging than routine pest extermination. Of course, that's precisely why my parents want me to learn from him. If they had it their way, I'd be hunting mutated rats until I was thirty or something."

"Ah..." said Zorian awkwardly. He seemed to have walked straight into a touchy subject there.

"Yeah," Taiven said. "I love my parents, and I know they just want to keep me safe, but we just don't see eye to eye there."

"Okay, sorry to bring that up then. But really, if the reason you're so upset is that you think you're some kind of failure, well... you can rest easy. You're an awesome combat mage. As awesome as you ever were, and nothing I do can change that."

"I'm... not sure I really believe that," Taiven sighed. "I couldn't find a mentor. The team I made wasn't going anywhere until I recruited *you* in it. Meanwhile, my parents keep insisting I'm not ready and that it's a good thing I've had such a slow start of my career. It's nice to hear some encouragement, but it rings a little hollow considering... you know."

"Taiven, I'm not so good because you're secretly bad and nobody bothered to clue you in until now," Zorian said. "I'm so good because I had more than four years to hone my skills since we last saw each other."

Taiven looked at him like he had grown a second head.

"That's right – I'm actually older than you now," Zorian said. "With that in mind, it is actually pretty amazing that I am *still* not capable of casually sweeping you aside in a fight. Sure, I could kill you instantly from an ambush, but if we clashed head to head in a battle of pure spellwork, I would have to use every trick at my

disposal and still wouldn't be guaranteed a win. *That* is why I keep insisting you're awesome."

"I don't understand," she said. "You don't sound like you're joking, but that's what this looks like to me. How can you be older than me? That's not how age works, Zorian."

"Ah, did you already forget what I told you earlier?" Zorian asked, amused. "About how time flows differently for me than it does for you? I seem to remember you said it would keep bugging you until you get an answer..."

"Look, you know I'm not one for riddles and intellectual maneuvering," Taiven said crankily. "Why don't you just tell me what's happening here, okay?"

Sure, why not.

"I've lived through this month before," he said. "Many, many times. Every time I die, or on the night of the summer festival if I don't, my soul gets wrenched back in time to the start of the month. It's an endless loop that sees me getting stronger and more capable with each passing restart. Since you don't retain your memories across restarts, my growth appears abrupt and inexplicable to you, but it's really nothing more than your typical gradual improvement. Believe it or not, you're the one that taught me a fair deal of that combat magic you're so jealous of."

"Shut up. I'm *not* jealous!" she protested.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Out of all of that, *that's* what you chose to focus on?"

"Yeah, well, at least that one has an easy response," she said. "What the hell am I supposed to say about the rest? Sure, it would explain your skills perfectly, but it's just so..."

"Crazy?" Zorian offered.

"Yes," she agreed. "And also terrifying. You're basically saying I'll get killed in a few weeks and replaced with a one-month younger version of me. And that this isn't the first time this hap-

pened, it's just that I don't remember any of it. That's like something out of a horror story!"

"I prefer to think of it as just memory loss rather than death," Zorian said. "You're still you, you just lose a couple of weeks of your life."

"Repeatedly," she added.

"Repeatedly," Zorian confirmed. "I'm not saying it isn't terrifying, just that I don't think it's equivalent to death. Admittedly, I'm a little biased here – if I thought that the time loop murdered millions of people at the end of every restart, I'd have probably gone insane from stress a long time ago."

"Ah," she winced. "Sorry, I guess I'm still thinking of this as some kind of hypothetical scenario instead of something that's actually happening. Still, assuming you're not just pulling my leg here – and I swear to heavens, Zorian, if you are pulling my leg I'll glue your mouth shut with that really nasty gunk they use on dangerous prisoners – that's still pretty messed up. And also very unfair. Why are *you* the only person to remember anything?"

"I'm not," he said. "There are at least two other people looping with me, possibly more. One of them wants to destroy Cyoria."

She stared at him for a second before getting up from her position. For a moment he thought he had gone into too much detail too fast, and that she was going to walk through the door, but instead she started looking through his drawers, searching for something. He thought about telling her off for rooting through his stuff like that, but decided to wait and see what she was up to.

She eventually found an empty notebook and a working pen in one of the drawers, appropriated one of the larger and thicker books in his room and then reclaimed her seat on the bed.

She opened the notebook on her lap, the heavy book she took serving as an improvised table, and quickly scribbled something down on top of the page.

Huh, he'd never thought of Taiven as someone to take notes like that.

"There, I'm ready," she said. "Why don't you start from the beginning this time..."



In the end, he wasn't sure whether he had convinced her what he was saying was true or not. She took a lot of notes, asked even more questions, and then just left after telling him she had to think about things.

A far better outcome than he had expected to get, honestly. He really hoped she would overcome her disbelief and accept his story. It would be nice to have someone other than Kael to talk to about time loop related things. Not that there was anything wrong with the morlock boy, far from it, but sometimes he really wished he could get a second opinion about stuff.

Of course, it would hardly be him if that little bit of hope that came his way wasn't soon balanced out by something or someone popping up to complicate things. In this case, that someone was Xvim. When he arrived at his office the next day for their weekly mentoring session, he was informed that 'his' training group had been noticed and that Xvim was not happy at all that such an amateur had delusions about being fit for a teacher. In order to *make him* fit for a teacher, Xvim decided to step up their schedule – they now met three days a week instead of the usual one.

He really hated that man.



His talk with Raynie was going well, in his opinion. If nothing else, she was a lot more relaxed than she had been in the previous restart – she'd even ordered a glass of wine to go with her meal. Of

course, he wasn't actually learning anything new from her, since she was telling him the same things she had told him the last time they'd done this, but that was to be expected. He couldn't exactly continue on where they last left off without explaining where he got that information, and he didn't feel like making something up. The week had been stressful enough, he was fine with just going with the flow like this.

"You know," Raynie said, taking a small sip from her glass, "I'm getting the feeling that you already know most of what I'm telling you."

Oops. It seemed Raynie was a bit more perceptive than he gave her credit for. He didn't think he was being particularly careless, so maybe she was just that good. Probably for the best that he'd never tried to lie to her, then.

"Sort of," he admitted.

"Why did you ask me something you already know the answer to, then?" she asked.

"So I can compare it with what I already know and see whether you were feeding me a bunch of lies or not," he said.

She snorted derisively. "I think you've confused me with one of your cat shifter friends. Don't you think it's kind of rude to assume the worst of people like that?"

"So you're saying your visit to our training group the other day *wasn't* about you testing me to see what I would do?" he asked with a smile.

"Ugh. It was so obvious, huh?" Raynie sighed. "Well, it wasn't *just* that... but yes, I wanted to see how you would treat me."

"And?" he asked curiously. "What's the verdict?"

"It's good," she said. "You didn't lash out at me for being so clearly underpowered compared to you and your buddies, but you also didn't drop everything to spend the entire meeting hovering

around me, trying to 'help'. A fair treatment. I respect that. I don't want special privileges."

"So you intend to keep coming, then?"

"Yes. As I said, seeing your reaction was just a part of it. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to get better."

There was a brief silence as Raynie seemed to considering something.

"So, Zorian? I'm curious about something," she eventually said. "What is it that drives you to try so hard? I mean, you're near the top of the class at every subject, and you seem to be good enough for a fourth-year when it comes to combat magic. That had to have taken quite a lot of work. What are you trying to accomplish?"

Hum. What an interesting question. His reason for pushing himself at so many magical skills was, of course, that he very much needed them to survive... but that wasn't true for all of them. Some of them he pursued for personal reasons, because he had an interest in the field. The funny thing was, he no longer had any idea what he wanted to actually *do* with his life once he was out of the time loop. Most of the career paths he had been eyeing before he got stuck in the time loop no longer appealed to him. They were too modest and routine for someone of his current skills, and he would only get more capable as time passed.

He could do better than that. But better *how*?

"Independence," he eventually answered. Raynie gave him a curious look so he hurried to clarify. "My family and I don't really get along. I want to get away from them as soon as possible. Buy my own place, get a source of steady income to support myself, things like that."

All true, except that he already had the skills to achieve all of that easily. But it was the best answer he could come up with on such short notice.

"I see," she said. "I apologize if I'm overstepping my boundaries, but why aren't you getting along with your family?"

"It's a bit personal," Zorian sighed. "And also a long story. But the short version of it is that my parents have never cared much for me. I am the third son and a disappointment."

"A disappointment?" Raynie asked curiously. "Do I want to know?"

"You probably already know this, but I have a really famous older brother," Zorian said.

"Yes, Daimen," she nodded. "What about it?"

"I'm not him," Zorian said simply.

"Ah," she said, drawing the word out. "It's *that* kind of disappointment. But shouldn't your other brother have the same problem, then?"

"He does, but he's more charming and social than me," Zorian shrugged. "He'll never measure up to Daimen, but he's ultimately alright in their book."

Also, Fortov was a selfish asshole and could go straight to hell for all that Zorian cared.

"Interesting," she said. "Let me present you with a hypothetical situation. Imagine it was not Daimen who came first. Imagine it was *you*, and your parents treated you as their chosen son. But then Daimen came about, and they promptly switched their favors to this new wonder child. Your time in the spotlight is over, and your parents fully expect you to move aside for their new darling. Do you think you would still have the same attitude you do now?"

Oh boy. He had a feeling this wasn't really a hypothetical situation at all.

"Well..." he said, swallowing heavily. "Truthfully, I don't think it's possible for me to know what this hypothetical me might think and feel. So much would change in my life that I wouldn't be the same person sitting here today. *However*, assuming someone mag-

ically switched me with this alternate version of me... yes, I would have the same attitude."

"You wouldn't try to fight for your birthright as the firstborn?" she asked.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "The alternate version of me, having experienced my parents' favor, might see some value in trying to get it back. *I* would still seek to strike out on my own as soon as possible. The scenario doesn't change anything for me."

"I see," she said, lost in thought.

Not long afterwards, they finished their talk and went their separate ways. As he walked back to Imaya's place, he wondered whether he'd answered her 'hypothetical situation' correctly.

She agreed to meet with him next week, so perhaps she would eventually explain what that was about.



He spent the rest of his Saturday working on the next golem with Edwin. This one was going to be a little more ambitious, being made out of steel and much bigger than Kosjenka – though not nearly as big as he had originally wanted, since Edwin had informed him that construction of golems taller than a meter in height was prohibited unless one had a special license. He had already broken that law in a previous restart, and he was definitely going to break it again in future ones, but there was no need to do so right now. He didn't think Edwin would report him, but he probably wouldn't want to help him break the regulations so brazenly. Them being arrested would be but a brief inconvenience for Zorian, but Edwin wouldn't think of it that way.

The next day he immediately left the house in the morning and descended into the tunnels below Cyoria. One way or the other, the magic research room was getting opened – if he could not by-

pass the wards on the entrance, the Filigree Sages would break down the door to get in, consequences be damned.

He didn't really agree with this decision. It had been less than a week since the Filigree Sages had started their salvaging operations, so he didn't see why they were in such a rush to get it open. Well okay, they did explain why they were in such a hurry – the Cyorian underground was highly coveted territory among the aranea, being a center of their magical and technological revolution and all, and they were worried that the neighboring webs would swoop in and muscle them out any day now. Of course, Zorian knew from previous restarts that the neighboring webs weren't going to come any time soon, but he couldn't exactly tell the Filigree Sages that he had seen the future and that their fears were unfounded.

But no matter, even if they ended up destroying the contents, it wasn't some great harm, at least from his perspective. He could always try again in future restarts.

He approached the dead settlement and he reached out telepathically to the guards posted by the Filigree Sages, announcing his arrival. Circle of Fortune and Golden Dust, the overseer of the Filigree Sages' expedition, moved to greet him.

[Welcome back, Zorian Kazinski,] the aranea greeted. He had told her previously to just call him by his name, but she hadn't taken him up on that. [Any news from the surface?]

[Nothing too important,] he said. [The monster incursions are beginning to peter out so the number of monster hunters stalking the Dungeon should see a sharp drop soon.]

[Good,] she said. [This place is outside their usual patrol routes but I still worried some of them would stumble upon it. Are you ready for the attempt?]

[I guess. I still think you're rushing, though.]

[We are,] she admitted. [I am not casting aspersions on your

combat skills, but you're still just one mage. If nothing else, you cannot be in more than one place at the same time. We have to work quickly.]

They soon arrived at the room that held the research room. Six more aranea were already inside, two of them analyzing the wards while the other four waited for a command to break down the door. After conversing with the two aranean ward breakers for a few minutes, Zorian created a floating disc of force to stand on and lifted himself towards the hole in the ceiling where the entrance stood.

He took out the ward analysis device from his jacket – the 'pocket watch' that Taiven had been hired to retrieve so long ago, and whose absence clued him in to the existence of the treasury. He had located it inside the treasury uncovered by the Filigree Sages and, while he fully intended to dismantle it to see what made it tick, for now it was more useful to him intact, serving its intended purpose. He channeled a divination spell through the device and got to work.

From what he and the aranean ward breakers had been able to tell thus far, there were three main layers of defenses on the entrance. The first one would electrocute anyone touching the walls of the entrance. The second one would superheat the air inside it to lethal temperatures. The third one would bring down the entire ceiling on top of wannabe looters. All three had complicated and hidden trigger conditions, tied to a detection layer that neither he nor the aranean ward breakers could figure out.

Obviously, the third defense was the priority to disable, but it also appeared to be the defense most sensitive to attempted tampering. The Filigree Sages had worked out a way to neutralize it, but doing so would no doubt trigger all other defenses – both the two they were aware of, and any further ones they had yet to detect.

The ward analysis device really showed its usefulness, though – the detection layer, so byzantine and obscured from scrutiny in the past, simply unraveled under its power. It was... not as bad as he feared. He could do this. He contacted Circle of Fortune and told her he thought he could disable the defenses. The aranea in the room exploded into a flurry of activity, mostly vacating the room in case he overreached and brought the whole room down. Circle of Fortune and the two ward breakers, however, remained. The ward breakers would help him in the attempt, while Circle of Fortune simply announced that she 'had to be there'. He didn't argue with her, too absorbed by the task in front of him.

Over the course of the next hour and a half, he and the two aranean ward breakers slowly and carefully neutralized the detection layer and then moved onto unlocking the door itself. The door itself had some additional defenses, relatively minor in nature but strong enough to really ruin their day if they triggered any of them – it was to his immense relief, then, that they managed to get it open without setting off a single one.

Unfortunately, that's when the defenses inside the room itself, completely separated from the main ward scheme and therefore undetectable from the outside, activated. If Zorian hadn't reacted immediately by erecting a shield in front of them while simultaneously directing the force platform they were standing on downwards at maximum speed, the incoming explosion would surely have killed them on the spot. Even with that, they ended up crashing painfully on the floor of the cave, dazing them for a couple of crucial seconds.

There was no time to sit down and recover, though, because the ruined entrance to the research room was starting to pump sickly yellow gas into the room and Zorian had no intention of seeing what effect it had when breathed in. He held his breath and quickly sealed the entrance with a bubble of force, stopping more

gas from pouring in, before casting a spell he'd seen Kyron cast once during the invasion. He raised his hand into the air and concentrated on the gas, causing it to surge towards his outstretched palm, where it flowed into a small, compact ball.

Moments later, once he was sure he'd gotten all of the gas, he restructured the churning ball of poison gas into harmless, inert dust and took stock of the situation with Circle of Fortune, who was lucky enough to escape the incident without consequences. The two ward breakers were not so lucky – they weren't dead, but it was close. It turned out that aranea could not hold their breath like humans, so they ended up breathing in some of the poison gas in the room before he neutralized it. They would recover, but not any time soon, so Circle of Fortune asked him to drop them off back at the main Filigree Sages' settlement and pick up a new pair of ward breakers as replacements.

He later sent some ectoplasmic eyes and other remote sensors into the room to check it out, and found it completely wrecked by the explosion and coated in some dangerous looking green slime. Circle of Fortune just mentally shrugged, pronounced the entire thing a bust and ordered the entrance to the room walled off with alteration spells to prevent any further surprises coming from there.

[Don't beat yourself up over this failure,] Circle of Fortune told him. [If we had gone through with our original plan, those defenses would have still gone off, probably killing the entire assault team assigned to breaking down the door. Plus, we'd also have had to deal with other traps you ended up disabling before you ran afoul of that last set. This is a much better outcome.]

Well, that was one way of looking at it. He left Circle of Fortune to deal with the final cleanup of the situation and went off to find his mind magic teachers among the aranea.

It didn't take long for him to track them down to one of the

isolated corners of the dead settlements, where the three of them were huddled together and engaged in telepathic conversation.

Before this restart, such intra-aranean conversations were completely opaque to him – telepathy was not language-independent, so unless the aranea ‘spoke’ in a manner he could understand, he was out of luck. Now, however, one of those teachers had begun to teach him how to understand and use the aranean telepathic language, so he could actually understand a few snippets. He was still a rank beginner at it, of course, but it was enough to understand the general topic of the conversation. They were discussing the three strongest neighboring webs – Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers and Deep Blue – and the threat they would pose to the expedition if they decided to send a war party to Cyoria. Sadly, that was about as much as he could figure out from the conversation. The details totally escaped him.

He made a mental note to see if he could find something about the neighboring webs in the records room. It might be a good idea to visit them sometime and see what they had to offer.

[Greetings,] he sent to all three of them. [Am I interrupting something important?]

[We’re just killing time,] Voice of Peace answered for them. She was the teacher that was supposed to help him learn how to interpret aranean senses, thoughts and memories. She’d decided on her own initiative that this included teaching him the aranean language, claiming he would never be really capable of making sense of the aranean mind without being fluent in it. She was also the most enthusiastic of his three teachers, often willing to work with him beyond their officially allotted time or go beyond the strict boundaries of what she was assigned to help him with. [Are you here for your daily lesson?]

[Yes,] he confirmed. [I know I’m a little early, but the project to open up the magic research room was a bit of a disaster.]

[We've heard,] said the aranea known simply as 'Hammerer' – an rather apt name, considering the aranea in question specialized in telepathic combat and favored powerful, unrelenting assault. [Circle of Fortune was always the reckless sort. At least you made sure nobody died. I must admit I didn't expect much from you when I heard you were supposed to guard us, but it seems you are actually useful from time to time.]

[Hammerer!] Voice of Peace protested.

[I just say it how it is,] Hammerer responded, not in the least bit contrite.

[Let's not bicker in front of our student. It sets a bad example,] said Memory of Sublime Glories, the last of his three teachers. Zorian got the notion that she resented him somewhat and considered the job of teaching a lowly human to be beneath her. Or maybe teaching in general, he wasn't really sure. Either way, she was too professional to let that get in the way of her job, so he had no cause to complain. [Are we following the same program we did the last time?]

[I don't see why not,] Zorian said.

[In that case, we will continue where we left off yesterday. As an aside, I will not be able to help you further unless you acquire someone to serve as a, ah, *practice subject* for our next session. You indicated this would not be a problem?]

[No,] Zorian stated. [It won't be.]

It should be trivial to ambush one of the cultists and drag him down here for interrogation and memory magic practice. The only thing he was unsure of was whether to go for a low-ranking member who probably didn't know anything but whose disappearance would go largely unnoticed or if he should aim higher. He would have to think about it some more.

[Before we start though, I'd like your opinion about something,] Zorian said.

[Oh? What about?] Memory of Sublime Glories asked. [Is this about that massive memory packet lodged inside your mind, perhaps?]

Ugh. This was a problem with learning memory manipulation from the aranea – he had no choice but to let Memory of Sublime Glories inside his head somewhat. He was pretty sure he would detect any serious breach of trust on her part, but it was hard to prevent her from taking a sneak peek at his thoughts every now and then.

[I thought you said you'd refrain from doing that?] he asked her, annoyed.

[I barely looked,] she protested. [An aranean memory packet inside a human mind, especially one of that size, is just very noticeable. Besides, you were just thinking about letting me examine it in more detail, so why are you complaining about that? I'm about to get a much closer look at it anyway.]

Zorian sighed in defeat. He hated it when the aranea responded to his thoughts before he actually put them into words. It was just rude. Still, she was essentially correct – he needed her to take a look at the matriarch's memory packet and tell him what she saw, because to his own amateur mental senses it seemed to be degrading already.

If that was true, then he needed to know how much time he had.

After a bit more back and forth he reluctantly opened his mind to her and agreed to let her take a closer look at his mind so she could figure out what was happening with the memory packet. Thankfully, she seemed to behave herself, so the explosives around his neck remained inert and undetonated.

Eventually she withdrew from his mind and gave him the verdict.

[I'm afraid you're correct,] she said. [The boundaries of the

memory packet have indeed begun to fall apart.]

His heart sank. That was precisely what he was afraid of. He wasn't ready. If he opened the package now, he doubted he would get anything out of it. But if he waited...

[How long do I have?] he asked.

[Hard to say. I've never seen a memory packet that big, so it's hard to judge how the decay will progress. It can stay stable for another three months, I think. Maybe four. If you really want to be certain, though, you'll have to open it within the next two months.]

[Isn't there anything that can be done to stop, or at least slow the decay?] Zorian asked desperately.

[Repairing memory packets is fairly easy if you're the one who made them,] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [Far less so if somebody else did. I don't think I could repair something that elaborate, and you would never trust me to tinker that deeply with your mind, anyway. I will teach you the basics of the skill, if you wish, but to get good enough to repair that thing you will have to secure a better teacher.]

[Any idea where I could find one?] Zorian asked.

[The Luminous Advocates probably have what you need,] she said. [I heard they can be hard to deal with, though. They drive a hard bargain.]

Ugh, those guys. Well, desperate times called for desperate measures. If nothing else, getting enough money to pay for their outrageous prices should be fairly trivial at this point.

[In that case, I'd like to postpone our current lesson plan for a bit and concentrate on memory packets and how to repair them,] he told her.

[Of course,] she agreed easily. [Here is what you do...]



He returned home later in the evening, tired and depressed. He had hoped to do some more work after his visit to the Fili-gree Sages, but between the failure to secure the contents of the magic research room intact and the confirmation that the matriarch's memory packet had begun to unravel, he didn't feel like doing anything.

"Oh, you're back!" Imaya exclaimed when he entered the house. "Your friend has been waiting for you for a while now. She's in the basement with Kael right now. Do you want me to call her or are you going to get her yourself?"

His friend? Her?

"Taiven?" he guessed. Imaya nodded. Huh, that was a lot earlier than he had expected to hear from her. This could be either very good or very bad. "I'll go see what she wants."

"You know, the last time your 'friend' visited you, she left the house looking like she had been crying," Imaya said casually.

"Is there a reason why you're pronouncing 'friend' like that?" Zorian asked her suspiciously.

"You're not breaking young girls' hearts, are you, mister Kazinski?"

"Ugh. There is nothing like that between me and Taiven, okay? And besides, if anyone is the heartbreaker here, it's definitely Taiven," he protested.

She gave him a curious look.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it," he said, shaking his head.

Thankfully, she didn't press the issue, so he went to the basement to talk to Taiven and see what she decided. He found her talking with Kael about the time loop, comparing notes and discussing time travel mechanics.

"So does this mean you believe me?" he asked her hopefully.

"I suppose," she said. "This is still all very fantastical and unreal to me, but everything you told me seems to check out. Or at least

the parts I can actually check do. And Kael here seems convinced you're telling the truth, too. So yeah, I guess I kind of believe you."

"Is there anything you can tell me that would help me convince you in future restarts?" Zorian asked.

"Kael and I talked about that for a while," she said. "I don't know. Any personal information I could give you would just creep me out if you started spouting it off all of a sudden – I'd sooner decide that you've been spying on me or that you're reading my mind than that you are a time traveler. If you just tracked me down at the start of the restart and started showing off everything you've learned inside the time loop, I'd definitely accept that something strange is going on, but I'd probably think you're a shapeshifter in disguise or possessed. It's only because I interacted with you pretty heavily for a whole week that I never doubted that you're... well, *you*."

"How about this then: I start the next restart the same way I did this one, joining your group and all, wait for a few days for you to get annoyed with my growth spike, and then confront you about it on my own initiative before you have a chance to get really fed up with it," Zorian tried.

Tension that he never even noticed until that moment seemed to drain from her shoulders and she sagged in relief.

"What?" he said, frowning.

"I... was afraid you'd just keep duplicating the circumstances that led me here over and over again," she admitted. "Even if I don't retain memories of it, I don't want to be repeatedly reduced to tears. It was humiliating once, thank you very much."

"Truth be told, I wasn't okay with the idea of repeatedly making you cry, either," he told her. "So that option was definitely off the table, even if you were okay with it."

She looked away, embarrassed.

Kael cleared his throat to get their attention.

"I hate to break up the moment, but we have much to talk about," he said.

"Yes," Taiven agreed, relishing the chance to change the topic. "First of all – Zorian, why haven't you contacted Zach yet? This 'Red Robe' of yours is a threat to you both, and you said yourself that you think he's at the center of all this. It only makes sense to work together. I don't understand your reluctance to talk to him."

"First of all, there is a possibility that Red Robe is monitoring Zach and tracking his movements. If so, then contacting him would mean revealing myself to Red Robe," Zorian said. "Secondly, I suspect that the moment I contact Zach, my whole schedule is getting thrown into the trash can. I have some fairly urgent things I need to do in the near future, I can't drop everything to hang out with Zach. Even assuming he is fairly understanding of my goals, he'll still probably insist on taking part in my activities. Since the things I'm doing require subtlety, which he entirely lacks, that's a problem. All in all, I just don't think it's a good idea to involve myself with him at this moment."

"So, what, you intend to avoid a potential ally just like that?" Taiven asked.

"Only until I'm done investigating the invaders and I can get the matriarch's memory packet open," Zorian said. "After that, I will probably go out and meet with him to see what he has been doing and whether we can help each other."

"Huh. Alright," she said, somewhat mollified. "That makes more sense. To be honest, I thought you'd be a lot more stubborn about this than that. Kael said you had some sort of grudge against the guy, and I know how you are with your grudges."

"Well, Kael is wrong. I don't have a grudge against Zach," he said, giving the white-haired boy an annoyed look. "But whatever. One problem solved. What else do we need to talk about?"

Kael ripped out a page out of his notebook and offered it to

Zorian.

"We made a list," Kael said with a smile. "Taiven had a lot of suggestions."

Zorian accepted the piece of paper with a sigh and began to read. She really knew how to pick a day to drop this on his head, didn't she?

When it rains, it pours.

FINE STRUCTURES

Zorian was starting to realize he didn't understand Taiven nearly as well as he thought he did. And it wasn't just the surprising amount of insecurity that lurked behind her seemingly endless optimism and confidence that made him think that – it was also the amount of thought and consideration she put into his time loop situation. When he told her about his situation, she actually listened to him without interruption, and even took notes, and then later came back with a list of questions and ideas. This was very atypical behavior for her. Taiven was pretty much a prime example of the 'less thinking, more action' philosophy, and she even admitted that she still wasn't entirely convinced about the whole 'time loop' thing, so he was rather baffled about her motives and thought processes.

Still, while the list she had made with Kael's help was kind of surprising, it contained nothing particularly revolutionary, and all of the points could be boiled down to four basic questions. Why didn't he get help from more people around him than her and Kael? Why didn't he tell the government or academy authorities what was going on and get their cooperation? Why was he pursuing so many magical fields instead of properly focusing on them, one at

a time? And lastly, why didn't he try harder to develop his combat magic!?

Zorian found the last one especially amusing. It was only a few days ago, after all, that Taiven was breaking down into tears over his 'incredible combat skills', yet now she was saying he should have put *more* effort into them.

You just couldn't satisfy some people.

Alas, Taiven didn't find her complete turnaround of opinion nearly as amusing as he did. Zorian's logic for putting combat magic practice squarely in the 'secondary goal' pile – namely, that very few of his problems could be solved through direct violence and that he just wasn't terribly suited for combat magic in the first place – had been summarily rejected by Taiven, who decreed that she would be helping to bring him up to snuff in that regard. Through sparring.

Constant, daily, dangerously serious sparring. He'd apparently had no idea what he was getting into when he'd decided to go along with her idea, because there was a huge difference between sparring with Taiven when she thought he was just a precocious amateur with a couple of tricks and sparring with her when she considered him a serious threat right from the start and wasn't afraid of hurting him. She was vicious and merciless, and he was honestly afraid she would end up killing him if he didn't give it his all, despite all the safety wards embedded into her family's training hall. It was just a bit too intense for his liking.

Maybe she was still a little bitter about him improving so much in so short a time.

"Are you ready?" she asked him, twirling her combat staff playfully in her hands.

"No?" Zorian tried. He'd just finished another frustrating session with Xvim, and didn't get to rest at all before coming over to Taiven's place. The last thing he wanted to do right now was get

smacked around in the name of training.

"Too bad," Taiven snorted derisively. "We're starting. Go!"

Yeah, he didn't think that would actually get him anywhere. He immediately threw himself to the side, dodging her opening shot. Which wasn't a magic missile or anything reasonable like that – no, she opened the battle with a powerful beam of force. 'Force lance', as the spell was called, was her new favorite when fighting him. He knew better than to try to shield against it this time – the beam was practically designed for cracking simple force barriers, focusing an immense amount of penetrating force on a tiny patch of the shielding surface. Some of the stronger, more advanced shields could withstand the beam, but nothing in Zorian's arsenal could truly stand up to it. He had learned that lesson very painfully in the first few spars he'd had with Taiven during the past few days, and he still had bruises all over his chest and arms to prove it. Even at their highest setting, the safety wards couldn't blunt the power of the spear-like beam completely.

No, the only realistic defense he had against that spell was moving out of its way. The good news was that beam spells like those couldn't home in on targets, so dodging them was an option. The bad news was that a beam traveled blindingly fast and was really hard to evade at the distances he and Taiven fought at. Plus, he kind of sucked at dodging.

The last few days had forced him to learn quickly, though, and in this particular case he was fast enough to move out of the beam's path.

He responded immediately with a gust of wind, trying to knock her off-balance and possibly blind her. Sadly, this was not the first time he'd tried that and she simply countered it with a weather shield before throwing a fully-powered fireball at him. Gods, she really wasn't playing around, was she? He fired off a dispelling wave to negate it, since the alternative would be to tank

it with a much more expensive aegis. Besides, cost concerns aside, the spherical shield would leave him immobile while in place, and Taiven would be sure to capitalize on that.

A force lance that quickly followed the fireball told him that this was indeed her likely plan – if he had stood still and tried to tank the fireball, the force lance would have caught him flat-footed.

He threw a small swarm of magic missiles at her, all of them on a very direct trajectory towards her. They were just bait, really, intended to take advantage of a certain predictable maneuver Taiven liked to do, where she countered such attacks by firing a massive battering ram of force that not only swept the attack aside, but also acted as a counter attack at the same time. That's why he immediately followed up his barrage with a ray of electricity, which would be completely unaffected by her blast of force.

He guessed her response well this time. She had tried to respond with a force battering ram, but then caught onto his plan half-way through and dodged the beam he'd sent at her. As for himself, he used the disturbance in her attack rhythm to initiate a short-distance teleport, transporting himself behind her back. She noticed him, of course – she was probably using that mana-sensing trick she'd taught him so long ago – but she could do little else but raise a hasty aegis to shield herself against the blast of force he'd sent at her. He followed this up with a force lance, intending to give her a taste of her own medicine, but she expertly dodged that and sent an eight missile swarm at him, forcing him to fire another dispelling wave to deal with them. He kind of wondered why she still kept bunching up her projectile swarms together like that when she already knew that allowed him to take them all out with a single counter-spell. Maybe she couldn't? He knew he had better shaping skills than her, so maybe that kind of fine control over one's projectiles was beyond her.

He teleported again to evade another battering ram of force and then sent his own missile swarm at her, each missile following its own exotic trajectory to make them hard to track and take out.

That battle raged like that for another couple of minutes, before Zorian was forced to concede defeat due to running out of mana. It was a good fight in his opinion, if nothing else because he didn't get any new bruises this time around. Taiven complained, of course, lecturing him about pacing himself better, but the simple truth was that she was driving him way too hard for him to be conservative with his mana use. He would rather be too frivolous with his mana use and lose due to exhausting himself than end up on the receiving end of an offensive spell again.

"You know, running out of mana like that in a real battle basically means you die," Taiven said.

"And getting speared through the lung by a force lance doesn't?" Zorian countered.

She stared at him. "Okay, yeah, you got me there."

She walked over to a nearby bench and motioned him to sit beside her.

"Have you thought about that list Kael gave you?" she asked.

Of course he had. He even discussed with her some of the points she'd brought up over the past few days, although he suspected she didn't like his answers all that much. Interpreting her question as a demand for a more long-winded, comprehensive explanation, he started telling her about the reasoning behind his decisions.

His reasons for not getting help from more people, and especially official authorities of any sort, were simple to explain. The more people he told about the time loop, the greater the chance that they would let something slip to the wrong person and lead Red Robe back to him. Unless they had something he really needed, and which he simply couldn't get by any other way,

it was best to keep them ignorant of the time loop. Truthfully, even telling Taiven was probably a pointless risk. He told her about the time loop for the same reason he kept taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria, despite his little sister being nothing but a huge liability and time sink – he wanted someone familiar to talk and confide to.

He kept his mouth shut about that last detail in his explanation to Taiven, though – he doubted she would appreciate hearing that. Instead he focused on the fact that virtually no one would be willing to believe him about being a time traveler, and that convincing them would probably take weeks and could easily cause quite a stir. This was especially true in regards to her ideas about contacting the city government or academy authorities. Zach had already tried to notify them about the time loop and had never been taken seriously – there was no reason to think Zorian would be any more successful at it than Zach was.

"Didn't you say Zach is kind of an idiot?" Taiven asked curiously.

"Sort of," said Zorian. "But in this case, I think he's far more suited to the task than I am. There is no way I'd ever be as trustworthy to authority figures as Zach."

"Ah, yes, the natural mind magic thing," Taiven said.

"Well, that too, but I was actually thinking about how I'd probably never be as forthright and honest about things as Zach probably was," he admitted. "I'd hide things and people would notice and be wary of me as a result."

Taiven gave him a long, searching look. "You're not even telling *me* everything, are you?"

"I'm telling you most things," he said. "Everything I think is relevant."

She stayed silent and gave him an annoyed look.

"Anyway," he said quickly, looking to change the subject, "even

ignoring that, contacting Cyoria's authorities is a particularly bad idea because there is obviously someone high in the administration that is cooperating with the invaders. I'm almost certain by now that whoever is leading the Cult of the Dragon Below also has a high position in the city government – it would explain why the members of the cult keep getting lucrative contracts from the city and exemptions from all sorts of normal regulations – and it would make sense for Ibasans to also have someone in their pocket.”

“I keep forgetting that part,” Taiven admitted. “Which is pretty bizarre, now that I think about it. Finding out that some crazy cult has thoroughly infiltrated our city government is honestly one of the scariest parts of your story, but the part where I'll apparently get erased out of existence at the end of this month sort of drowns out everything else.”

Ouch. She was still fixated on that. He did his best to move the conversation along, tackling her concerns about spreading himself thin next.

Her complaints that it would be better for him if he picked one or two things to really focus on held merit. Unfortunately, there was a reason why he was not doing that - he kept encountering various emergencies during his time in the time loop, which forced him to often drop topics or push them into the background to accommodate the newest priority that just sprung up on him. The second issue basically amounted to personal weakness – he could only focus on something for so long before he got thoroughly sick of it and had to do something else. Since he aimed to be a generalist mage anyway, he didn't think of this as some huge issue he had to work on, but he understood why a tightly-focused spellcaster like Taiven would be annoyed with him for that.

“As for not trying harder at combat magic, well... we already discussed that topic enough, I think. You already know my opinion on the matter,” he told her.

"Yet you keep coming to these spars anyway," she noted. "I know I was kind of pushy about it, but it's not like I can really *make you* come if you decided to put your foot down."

"Well, I *do* want to get better at it," he shrugged. "No reason to refuse free practice. I just wish you would tone it down a little."

"Oh, come on. What are you afraid of?" Taiven scoffed. "Aren't you a big, bad time traveler that can't really die?"

"Treating death as a nuisance could easily become a habit that would kill me for real once I'm out of the time loop. Unless there is a pressing need for it, or some downright amazing opportunity, I'd like to avoid dying too much," Zorian said. "Also, you *do* realize that the time loop only resets when Zach dies, not when I do? If you end up killing me, you'll have to live with the consequences 'till the end of the month."

The look she gave him told him that no, she did not realize that.

Yup, that was more like the Taiven he knew.

She mumbled something about sensitive little flowers and then leaned back on the cold wall behind them. Rather unhealthy, that.

"You know, you don't have to rely on me to help you with combat magic," she said. "There are quite a few combat magic instructors in Cyoria. With the amount of money you have at your disposal and the ability to keep spending it over and over again, you could get instruction from all of them. Combat magic may not be a priority for you, but keep that in mind. This is a killer opportunity, and you will never get anything like it outside of your time loop."

Zorian frowned. "What do you mean?"

"A lot of mages simply won't teach you if they know you've been taught by their rival or competitor," she told him. "As in, they'll refuse out of principle. There is quite a bit of difference

in teaching your personal tricks to some young mage who is just starting out and teaching them to this extremely talented guy who has absorbed the teachings of several veteran mages. Hell, some mages won't want to have anything to do with you if you seem too competent, period. They don't want to create a competitor that will overshadow them and steal lucrative opportunities from them in the future."

"No offense Taiven, but Daimen never had any trouble securing powerful teachers," Zorian said. "If anything, the number of people who wanted to mentor him increased as his talent became known to people."

"I don't doubt it," she said. "But I guarantee that some doors also became closed to him at the same time. For you, that doesn't have to be the case – not only will prospective teachers never know who else taught you in the past or how good you really are, you can also do things like sign apprenticeship contracts without them really binding you to anything. Hell, you could accept some really shitty deals if it meant getting some of the really deep secrets people have. Just... think about it, okay?"

"I am thinking about it. I've been thinking about that sort of thing since the start of the time loop. It's just that more pressing issues keep cropping up and eating into my time," he said. "I'm surprised you're bringing that up, though. Doesn't that bother you? I mean, we're basically talking about weaseling out the secrets that these people have spent their life gathering without compensating them in any way."

"Well, yes," she said. "But realistically speaking, I'd do it in a heartbeat if I was in your place. And frankly, so would nine tenths of those same experts you're feeling sorry for. Are you seriously telling me you haven't been doing something like that all this time?"

"Sometimes," Zorian said. Ilsa stood prominently in his mind,

since he'd flat-out become her apprentice to get her to teach him some of her stuff. "But I have been keeping a mental list of people I 'owe' in this way, and I was thinking of doing something for them once I get out of the time loop. It's already quite a long list, though, and I don't know whether I can even do anything for some of them..."

"Ugh," she grunted, looking away uncomfortably.

"What?" he asked.

"You're a really weird guy, Zorian," she complained. "You can be such a selfish jerk at times, and then you say stuff like that and I realize I don't understand you at all."

"The feeling is mutual, Taiven," he told her with a smile.

"What, that you think I'm a selfish jerk or that you don't understand me either?" she asked.

"Both," he said. Man, she really walked into that one...

She made an outraged sound and gave him a light shove.

"You're violent, too," he added.

"Whatever," she said, getting up from the bench. "I'll bring Grunt and Mumble to our next spar so you can have some variety. I think I can also call in a few favors from my former classmates who also went for combat-related careers and have them fight you a few times as well. Your spellcasting is technically flawless but you need better combat reflexes."

Zorian gave her a curious look.

"Why are you being so proactive about this?" he asked her. "I know you hate me bringing it up, but it was only a few days ago that you hated the idea of me surpassing you in your own field. Why did you change your attitude so drastically? You don't even fully believe in the time loop story, according to your own admission."

"Because your life is on the line," she told him seriously. "That's the most important thing I got from your explanation. If it weren't

for that... well, I'd be hell of a lot more jealous and bitter about all this. But it's not just an advantage, you have a heavy responsibility on your shoulders, and someone is trying to get you killed. In light of the chance that you might not make it out of this alive, all of my frustrations seem so... petty in comparison."

Huh... was *that* why she was so insistent he needed to work more on his combat skills?

"Don't die, okay?" she said when he didn't say anything for a while. "You're the best friend I have."

Zorian fidgeted uncomfortably, unused to that kind of confession and mystified as to how he should respond to it. The snide, cynical part of him felt that was a pretty sad admission. He hadn't exactly been a nice person in his pre-loop days, and he had nursed a grudge against her ever since she'd laughed at his love confession. If the invasion and the time loop had never happened, would he have gotten over that in time to salvage their friendship? Or would he have continued to push her away until she eventually gave up on him, completely unaware that she apparently considered him her best friend?

"I'll try not to," he eventually told her. He couldn't promise anything. Telling her that he would definitely live and that she had no cause for concern would be a lie and they'd both know it. "Say, Taiven, did you put some thought into how we can make this time loop work to your benefit? You know, like Kael did for his alchemy?"

"Well, no," she said, shaking her head sadly. "It's useless, isn't it? Practicing combat magic requires shaping skills and routines that cannot be transferred via written notes. What could either of us possibly do to help the other Taiven?"

"I could teach you various shaping exercises and note which ones work best for you, though," Zorian said. "I could show you the different combat spells I found over the restarts and note which

ones you handle the best and what the most effective way of training you in them is. Kirielle's magic lessons are at least two times more effective now than they were when I first tried to teach her, so it should be utterly trivial to create a training program that would let you grow twice as fast as you would without it."

"Just how much stuff do you think you can cram in one month?" Taiven asked skeptically.

"We won't know 'till we try it, will we?" Zorian countered. "And besides, there is no reason why the final training plan has to be limited to a month. Does *every single new thing* you learn necessarily build atop things you already mastered?"

"No?"

"There you go. That means we can break down a training plan into month-long chunks and optimize them separately. We can get at least a year that way, especially if you branch out in some necessary support skills that you've been ignoring. Your lack of divination skills is really felt in any restart where I decide not to join you, for instance."

Taiven looked torn. She was clearly excited about the idea but at the same time she felt... guilty about it?

"I don't know..." she said. "That sounds really time consuming, and you don't really get anything out of it. You said yourself that you already have too many things vying for your attention."

She was right, of course. Still, he owed her *something* for all the help she'd given him in the past, and this seemed like a perfect way to pay her back. He would find the time if he could. Maybe not a lot of time, but still.

"I was going to look into combat magic-related shaping exercises anyway," he said. "It might actually be a better idea to go through those together with you than to study them alone. You would know which ones are more useful better than I would. And besides, who says I have to hover around you all the time – I'm sure

you can do a lot of testing yourself and then write a notebook for me to transfer into the next restart like Kael is doing. Or just tell me what you found out face to face before the summer festival.”

It didn't take much convincing before Taiven was fully on board with the idea. In a way, this was what she had asked of him back when she lost her composure – to 'show her how to cheat, too'. He promised to bring an initial batch of spells and shaping exercises tomorrow on their next spar and then left to take care of other obligations.

He wondered how long it would take for her to realize that she had agreed to spend day after day doing shaping exercises. He'd have to practice his Xvim impersonation for tomorrow.



In the ruins of the aranean settlement beneath Cyoria, Zorian patiently waited for Memory of Sublime Glories to finish memory probing the Ibasan mage he had captured and brought to her for interrogation. He had ventured deep into invader-held underground to retrieve this man, and was fortunate to stumble upon one of the middle-ranked leaders of the invasion force, so he had high hopes for the result of Sublime Glories' memory dive.

In the meantime, he kept floating above the cavern floor not far from the aranea and her victim, holding himself aloft with the personal levitation exercise. In his left hand he held one of several small stones, which he kept disintegrating into dust in similarly non-structured manner. He had mastered both shaping exercises a long time ago, but the mild disruption effects present this far underground made them mildly challenging and thus a nice way to pass the time.

He was starting to run out of rocks when the aranea finally withdrew from the invader's mind and approached him.

Obviously, he had not told Memory of Sublime Glories anything about time travel, so he was not surprised that her report didn't mention anything remotely related to that. Still, she found out plenty of things of interest.

[The Ibasans are scared of you,] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [Well, not you personally, but the human nations on this continent are a source of constant worry for them. The technological revolution you are undergoing has not taken root on their island, and they fear they will gradually become powerless and irrelevant as time goes by. Since your nations have recently gone through several rounds of self-destructive wars and a deadly epidemic, and are at their most disunited in a long while, a lot of Ibasans feel that the time to strike at you is now. There has been a lot of agitation to launch some kind of invasion, but apparently there is also an influential faction that thinks such an invasion would be utter suicide and advocates trying to reopen diplomatic links to the continent. In light of that, this attack seems to have two main goals. The first is to make this nation look weak to others, thereby making any potential invasion by Ulquaan Ibasa look more attractive to their less warlike kin back home. Such a perception of weakness could also possibly ignite another continental war that would weaken everyone on the continent further. The second goal is to destroy any chance of official peace between Ulquaan Ibasa and Eldemar, thereby making the position of the reconciliation faction untenable.]

[They're not scared that Eldemar might respond to the attack by outright invading Ulquaan Ibasa?] Zorian asked.

[Ulquaan Ibasa is remote and inhospitable, and Eldemar has continental rivals to worry about,] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [They expect a response, but nothing substantial. A series of raids at most.]

Zorian wasn't so sure about that. Eldemar had been prospering

for some time now, and the government was quite proud and aggressive. He wouldn't put it past the current royals and the Noble Council to launch a full scale invasion of Ulquaan Ibasas out of sheer principle, costs be damned. Especially since the Ibasans were diplomatically isolated and not part of the byzantine web of alliances that prevented the larger Splinter States from simply attacking the smaller ones and absorbing them through force of arms.

As the aranea continued with her findings, however, it became obvious that the Ibasans had not simply relied on empty hope to discourage such an invasion. Sometime near the beginning of the month, just before the start of the time loop, the Ibasans had managed to overrun Fort Oroklo without alerting Eldemar that it had changed hands.

Situated on a small island to the northeast of Eldemar and named after the general that had defeated Quatach-Ichl's army at the conclusion of the Necromancer's War, Fort Oroklo was a small but important installation that served the dual purpose of being a monitoring station for keeping an eye on Ulquaan Ibasas and a supply base for Eldemar naval patrols. The Ibasans apparently called it 'Fort Dagger', because they considered it a knife pointed straight at their throat. So long as Eldemar held Fort Oroklo, they had a perfect staging ground for any raid or invasion on Ulquaan Ibasas.

Before Eldemar could launch an attack on Ulquaan Ibasas, it first had to retake Fort Oroklo – a heavily-warded fortress situated on an excellent defensive position.

[Some of this doesn't make any sense,] Zorian complained. [According to you, the Ibasans are transporting their forces straight from Ulquaan Ibasas to Fort Oroklo, then from Fort Oroklo to some unknown point in the Sarokian Highlands, and then from there to beneath Cyoria.]

[Yes, what of it?]

[That's not enough stops for an effective teleportation chain,] Zorian said. [Only two stop points for a journey of such distance, with the final destination point being deep underground to boot? There is no way that's really what's happening. If they were sending letters or small packages maybe, but no way could you transport an army like that. Even if Quatach-Ichl is the best mass teleporter in the whole damn world, the mana costs for such long jumps would be completely impractical on that scale.]

Admittedly, such a small number of stops would do much to explain how they could transport such an army through Eldemar territory without being discovered by Eldemar, but...

[They're not teleporting in the manner we've seen you do it,] Memory of Sublime Glories noted. [They are using some kind of stone construct to open a dimensional passage between two points. Like a door to another land.]

What?

[Can you describe that 'door' in more detail, please?] Zorian asked, frowning.

Instead of answering with words, the aranea promptly projected an image of said 'door' that she pilfered from the man's mind straight into his mind.

It wasn't a stone arch like he expected – instead, it was a collection of stone 'bars' arranged into a form of a large, skeletal icosahedron. Suspended in the middle of this bizarre geometric construct, like a window cut into the very air itself, was the dimensional gate. It appeared circular at first glance, edges marked by a warped, blurry outline that looked as if someone had ran a finger through a wet painting and smudged all the colors together. As the aranea helpfully rotated the image, however, it became obvious that the gate looked circular no matter from which direction it was seen. It was spherical.

Well... he supposed that answered some things. The gate spell

was pretty much the pinnacle of dimensional magic, requiring both a lot of mana and extreme shaping skills to pull off successfully, but the invaders did have an ancient lich on their side. If anyone could casually open a gate, it would be Quatach-Ichl.

But...

[They were inspired by ancient artifacts called Bakora gates,] the aranea added. [Though unable to actually figure out how the Bakora gates work or how to activate them, they realized that the 'icosahedron' thing around them is meant to stabilize the dimensional passage and make it last indefinitely. Or at least as long as you keep supplying it with enough mana. So they made their own version of it.]

[Wait, you're saying that thing down there is constantly active?] Zorian asked incredulously.

[According to our prisoner, yes,] the aranea said. [As far as he knows, the door is never shut down.]

Gods, a *permanent* dimensional passage like that... no wonder the invaders could bring such a huge force beneath the city and keep supplying it. He fired off a bunch of additional questions about how the knockoff Bakora gate was made, what its limitations were and so forth, but found that their captive had no idea of any of those things. Anyone except the leaders of the invasion was unlikely to know such things, and possibly no one except Quatach-Ichl, who seemed to be in charge of maintaining the gates.

Annoying. Still, the fact that the invasion was supplied by permanently active dimensional gates did provide certain opportunities. For instance, it meant that if he could capture the gates fast enough, he could get access straight into the heart of Ibasan operations, perhaps even Ulquaan Ibas itself. Destroying the gate in their main base would no doubt utterly cripple the planned invasion, unless a new gate was easy to build, which he doubted. Finally, it opened the possibility of stealing the design from whoever

made the thing – something he definitely wanted to do if it was at all possible.

Hopefully the design wasn't exclusively held by Quatach-Ichl or ran on children's souls or some such, because that was one amazing piece of magic.

[What about the research facility I've told you about?] Zorian asked.

[Nothing that you don't already know,] Memory of Sublime Glories told him. [Frankly, I think you're going about this the wrong way. You say the previous aranea found out something important about that facility? Well, I don't think they did it by reading the minds of Ibasan invaders. Admittedly, I cannot tell that for certain without getting access to some of their leaders, but they seem to neither know nor care about what's down there. Except for the lich, and as we both know, they'd never succeed in reading that thing's mind.]

[Well they clearly got information about it from someone,] Zorian said.

[Yes, well, it is a *government* facility. It stands to reason that someone from the government knows what they do down there. Chances are that if you want to find out about the facility through the same methods that the previous web used, you are going to have to target whichever government official that facility is reporting to.]

That... was a good point. He had no doubt that Spear of Resolve would attack a city official without the slightest bit of hesitation if she felt he had answers to her questions and she felt she could get away with it. And she could definitely get away with it, since she knew she was stuck in a time loop and none of the consequences would matter beyond a certain point.

[A valid point, but let's refrain from antagonizing the city government for now,] he said.

[More than fine with me,] the aranea responded.

Having exhausted all of the topics Zorian could think of, they bid each other goodbye and agreed to meet the next day for his usual mind magic lessons.



Weeks passed, and while he didn't make any incredible breakthroughs, his various projects kept slowly advancing forward. He absorbed everything about memory packet creation and reinforcement that Memory of Sublime Glories could teach him, he dutifully practiced what the other two Filigree Sages had to teach him, he scoured the academy library for interesting shaping exercises for both himself and Taiven, he built no less than three different golems with Edwin, and he learned a large number of spells from the books he and the Filigree Sages had found in the aranean treasury.

The most interesting of these new spells were a couple of highly illegal teleport variations that could punch through weaker teleport wards. If he could master those, he would get a major mobility boost within the city. Admittedly, it was possible that the city authorities could detect when someone was bypassing the city's teleport redirect in that fashion, but even if they could indeed do that, that would still make those spells incredibly useful during the actual invasion, when they'd be far too busy with other things to deal with him.

Oh, and he also met with Raynie a couple of times. He was given a lot of information about the current political climate among shifter tribes and their history, which was kind of interesting but probably not really important for anything. The meetings were a nice distraction, though, so he didn't care that he wasn't really learning anything.

"So there is something I'm kind of curious about when it comes to shifter magic," Zorian said. "I apologize in advance if I'm asking you to reveal some kind of tribal secret, but what exactly is the big advantage of being a shifter as opposed to just using a potion or a ritual to assume an animal form? I know that shifters can eschew material components that are otherwise needed to make a transformation shell and that you can do a partial transformation to access the senses and other traits from your alternate forms, but that seems a little underwhelming, all things considered..."

"Well, you have to remember that shifters originate from a different time, when other methods of transformation were far less developed and common than they are now," Raynie said. "But there are some things you're missing. The shifter transformation is much faster and safer than anything you can cook up with your alchemy skills, and you automatically get instincts to go along with your new form. A normal mage that transforms into an animal will have big problems moving in their new body and even interpreting the animal's senses if they're too different from what humans are used to. A shifter can innately understand how their alternate form works, so it doesn't take much for bird shifters to learn how to fly as easily as birds or for wolf shifters to actually understand what their enhanced noses are telling them."

"Ah," said Zorian in understanding, remembering how badly he flew while transformed into an eagle, even after spending several sessions practicing his flight. "Yeah, that does sound like a major improvement over a transformation potion."

"There is also a stealth factor to consider, as your cat shifter friends can attest," Raynie continued. "It's much easier to use transformation magics covertly when you can transform at will, whenever you want, to what *extent* you want, with no strange movements and material aids required. And since we're on the topic of your feline friends, let me ask you something that *I've* been kind

of curious about. Did you know all this stuff about shifters before you met the cat shifters, or did you only research the topic because you started hanging out with them?"

"I'd known about shifters for a while by the time I met them," Zorian said. It was true, in a way. "I was searching for help with something and came to Vani for advice. He actually advised me to seek you out."

"Me!?" she asked incredulously. She frowned. "Or do you mean shifters in general?"

"Both. But he recommended you by name," Zorian said.

"Oh?" she leaned forward in her seat, curious. "And what exactly could I help you with?"

"It doesn't matter," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I've already gotten help elsewhere, and I've been told by others that you couldn't have helped me anyway."

"Oh come on," she huffed. "That's just teasing. You can't just say something like that and then say it doesn't matter. Either you tell me or I send a letter to Vani, asking him what he sent you to me for."

Ugh. He didn't think she was serious, but if she was that could easily lead to awkward questions about why Vani doesn't remember ever talking to Zorian in the past. He really had to learn how to watch his tongue better; he was becoming as bad as Zach.

"It's very personal so I'd appreciate if you leave the matter alone, okay?" Zorian sighed. "The short story is that I had the misfortune to end up on the receiving end of a necromantic spell and had a piece of foreign soul spliced with my own. I wanted answers as to what exactly happened to me, and Vani suggested I approach your tribe for help. But since he had no idea how to actually find them, he named you as a possible contact."

"Ah, that's... more serious than I thought," she said. "I'm sorry I pried. Are you..."

"I'm fine," said Zorian, waving her off. "Don't worry about it. I found a nice priest that helped me learn how to sense and protect my soul, so there should be no further incidents like that."

"I see. That's good," she said. She stared to the side for a few seconds, considering something, before refocusing back on him. "So did you at least get any good abilities out of the whole thing?"

"I'm... not sure," Zorian said evasively. "I'm still not sure what exactly the newest addition to my soul is or what it does."

"Really?" she frowned. "But didn't you say you learned how to sense your soul?"

"Yes, so?"

"So why don't you just focus on the spliced part for a while and try to figure out what it is? That sounds important to know. I know you probably want to forget about whatever happened to you, but as a shifter I can tell you it's very unhealthy to ignore parts of your soul because they won't ignore *you*."

"Hold on, how would I sense a part of my soul?" Zorian frowned. "That wasn't a part of the lesson I received from the priest."

Raynie opened her mouth to say something before quickly closing it. She stayed silent for a while, considering something.

"You know," she finally said, "I'm not sure whether anyone other than shifters would even want to sense specific parts of their soul. No need, probably. Unless they intend to modify it somehow, and that's usually a bad idea. And also not something a priest would do, unless they're a very heretical priest. So your teacher probably didn't even know that it could be done."

"Oh," Zorian said lamely.

"Do you want me to teach you how to do it?" Raynie asked.

"What?" asked Zorian. "Really? Aren't shifters very secretive about their magic?"

"No?" Raynie said uncertainly. "Not about stuff like this, anyway. This is simple stuff, every shifter learns how to do this as a child. They have to if they want to make use of their abilities properly. I can't see any harm in teaching you how to do it if you're willing, and I kind of feel like I owe you for all the help you've given me during the practice sessions you organized."

Huh, something good came out of that time sink? This restart was just full of surprises.

"Well, I'm willing," he shrugged. "Name the time and the place."

He didn't have much hope that a technique designed to sense a part of your soul would give him anything particularly substantial about his soul marker, but it didn't hurt to try and see if it led to something.

At the very least, Raynie implied it was a simple thing to learn, so it shouldn't become another thing vying for his time.



As it turned out, the method for sensing parts of your soul turned out to be rather simple when someone actually pointed it out to you. Well, provided one had already gone through the trouble of developing a personal soul sense beforehand. The results he got when he used it to inspect his soul were... better than he hoped. He actually *could* sense his marker and the way it was woven into his soul, but unlike shifters, he didn't get any instinctive understanding of its function and how to use it (if it could be actually used by the one it was stamped on). Which made sense, considering it was not actually a part of his soul in the way a shifter's alternate form was.

Raynie herself seemed unfazed by the partial failure and told him to keep trying for a while. It usually took months for shifters

to fully map out the way different parts of their soul interacted with one another, and while she doubted his case made him as complex as a shifter she felt it was too early to give up after a single day or two.

Fair enough. He supposed he could set aside an hour or two every weekend and see if it led anywhere.

In the meantime, the day of the summer festival approached and Zorian became consumed with preparations for the end of the restart. This time, he had something a bit more ambitious he wanted to try out.

He was going to try and infiltrate the Ibasan main base during the invasion and pass through the dimensional gate to see where it led. And then, hopefully, find someone new and more interesting to interrogate on the other side.

THE OTHER SIDE

"I'm ready," Zorian said. "You can start casting whenever you want."

Estin, his current practice partner, gave him a solemn nod and started launching magic missiles at him in quick succession. Zorian calmly intercepted them all with his shield, dividing his attention between watching the way Estin was casting the spell so he could help him improve it afterwards and trying to work out the absolute minimum shield strength he could get away with to safely tank the attacks. A bad idea usually – if this had been a real spar, like the ones he had been having with Taiven recently, being as cheap as possible with his counters would be a recipe for disaster. But well, his practice group had pretty much given up on those when he was involved. He was too good and didn't know how to hold back properly, so these days he mostly served as a living target and dispenser of advice.

Not that this made him useless to the group, far from it, but it did mean he had to get creative to get some personal benefit from attending these practice sessions.

After fourteen magic missiles, Estin stopped casting and they switched positions, with Estin defending himself and Zorian attacking. The former Ibasan was the only person in the training

group who could really tank one of his magic missiles at maximum power, so there was no need for Zorian to hold back. The floating earth spheres Estin used as shields were far more resilient than he initially gave them credit for, soaking up his magic missiles with ease. No matter what he tried, he could not even shatter one, much less punch through them. It was an interesting challenge.

He had largely reached a plateau in terms of magic missile strength. Like all spells, magic missile had a limited amount of mana it could be supercharged with, and Zorian was at the point where he simply couldn't cram in more mana without hopelessly destabilizing the spell boundary. That was a shame, as magic missile was his most energy-efficient combat spell, thanks to the amount of practice he put into it. In fact, the spell was so mana-efficient at this point that it was playing merry hell with his ability to judge how far his mana reserves had grown. He could cast about 35 of them in quick succession, which was more than four times the amount he could cast before the time loop – that shouldn't be possible, especially since he was sure his mana reserves still hadn't topped out yet, so the most logical conclusion was that his magic missiles required significantly less mana now than they had in the past. The magnitude system probably wasn't designed with people like him in mind. He doubted a lot of people practiced magic missile as doggedly as he did.

And yet, for all the refinement his magic missile now had, he knew from Kyron that he still hadn't reached the pinnacle of the spell. A *properly* executed magic missile would be totally invisible. Which his magic missiles weren't.

He had an idea about that, though.

No one in the practice group other than Estin could reliably tank one of his magic missiles without their shields giving way. Even his normal missiles often proved too much for them, never mind if he really powered them up. As a consequence, he had been

forced to learn how to adjust his attacks downwards to something they could deal with. He quickly found that trying to purposely weaken his missiles was pretty hard. Strategically sabotaging the spell boundary to make the spell less mana efficient was inelegant and offended his professional pride, but trying to make magic missile technically perfect yet functionally weaker was not as easy as it appeared at first glance. His reflexes, honed over the years spent in the time loop, and even the very construction of the spell itself naturally tended towards a certain optimum effect. Going against it was a constant struggle.

Still, he had gotten the hang of the ability to dial down the missile's power after a few days, and had discovered that when he dialed the power low enough, he could get the shine and opacity to drop like a stone. At the very lowest point, he could produce missiles that were nothing but a faint warp in the air – and sadly, about as effective on anything they hit. Still, practicing the spell at these lower power levels made it easier to see the faults and imperfections he made in the spell boundary, and fixing those immediately led to a small but noticeable increase in his mana efficiency when casting his normal version of magic missile.

He had a feeling this was the secret to effectively developing proper invisible force spells – don't start by making normal versions invisible, instead reduce the power and work on making a weaker version more technically perfect and mana efficient. Then steadily work your way up until you end up with a flawlessly executed, fully-powered version.

None of the books he'd found actually outlined this method as a possible training regimen, instead suggesting endless repetition of the spell as a method, but Zorian felt his idea had merit. He had little to lose by trying it, since the officially suggested training method consisted of mindlessly practicing the normal version for years and even decades at a time. Yes, he was stuck in a time loop,

but there had to be a better method than *that*.

After he'd failed to get through Estin's earth defense, he called for a brief pause to let everyone replenish their mana reserves. He personally didn't need the break – he was purposely using only a small fraction of his reserves during these practice sessions, and he had already honed his ability to assimilate ambient mana as far as it could go, so it generally took him only a few minutes to go back to his top form. The others needed to catch their breath, however, and he had to be mindful of that.

If nothing else, he was learning the limitations of people around his age. He had honestly forgotten what it was like to be on their level, and had trouble judging what people his age found challenging or even downright impossible. Hopefully this experience would make him better equipped to pretend he was a normal student in the future, or at least more aware of what would attract people's attention and to what extent.

The break was eventually interrupted when Edwin marched into the gathering, the latest golem they'd made following after him.

"Hey Edwin," Naim greeted. "What brings you here? Finally decided to join us?"

"Ha, no. No, I'm here because of this," he said, grasping the little golem by its shoulders and proudly pushing it forwards so the group could take a look at it.

The construct was pretty impressive, even if Zorian was a little biased in thinking that. Being little less than a meter tall, the golem did not look particularly intimidating, but he doubted anyone would mistake it for a harmless toy. Its slender, humanoid figure was made out of alchemically-treated steel and powered by a comparatively massive crystalized mana battery that supplied it with plenty of power. Its movements were smooth and natural, and despite Edwin's rough handling, it never lost its

balance like Zorian's previous golems would have. The golem looked and moved like a credible little helper and last ditch defender/distraction.

They did a good job of making it, Zorian felt. Enlisting Edwin to help with his golem making had definitely been the right decision.

"Neat," Naim shrugged. "That's what you and Zorian have been working on all this time, isn't it? What about it?"

"Yes," Zorian agreed. The last time they met, he left the golem with Edwin so the other boy could run a bunch of tests to see if it worked properly. Did Edwin find some critical flaw in the construct or did he just come to brag about their success? "Is there something wrong with it?"

"It?" Edwin asked with faux outrage. "His name is Chelik, and he's absolutely perfect! I mean, just look at him! Everyone, meet Chelik. Chelik, say hi to the nice folks gathered here."

The golem quietly gave a brief wave before letting its metallic hand unceremoniously drop again.

Yeah, apparently Edwin just wanted to brag. Zorian caught Estin and Kopriva rolling their eyes at the spectacle, while Briam and Raynie seemed honestly impressed by the little golem. Naim just continued smiling serenely, and Zorian couldn't tell whether Naim was honestly happy for his friend or just humoring the guy.

"Unfortunately, there was one part of him that I just couldn't test properly," Edwin said. "We warded this little beauty with every defensive ward we could manage. Well, Zorian did, I just kind of watched and took notes. But never mind that, the point is that Chelik here should be able to shrug off a *lot* of damage and disruptive spells and..."

"You want us to try and damage it," Estin surmised.

"Yes," Edwin agreed with a grin. "I'll just move aside and then you can all just attack it together."

"All of us?" Raynie asked curiously.

"Yeah," Edwin nodded. "He's really tough, so don't worry about overkill. I don't think any of you can really do anything to it individually."

Estin frowned, clearly taking that as a challenge, before putting one of his palms on the ground in front of him. For a second, nothing happened. And then, without any warning, the ground beneath Chelik opened up like a set of earthen jaws and pulled it into the resulting hole before snapping shut. The poor golem was left with most of its body trapped under the soil, with only its head sticking free.

Edwin stared at the buried golem for a second before glancing uncertainly towards Estin. The other boy inclined his head to the side, smiling faintly, clearly very pleased with himself.

"Okay. Claim disproven," Edwin chuckled awkwardly. "Could you please unbury him so we can move onto further testing?"

Eventually, they did try to bring down the little golem with a collective magic missile barrage and predictably failed. Even Zorian's missiles did not damage Chelik in any way, though hitting the limbs and head could imbalance it and knock it to the ground. Estin tried to hammer it into scrap with one of his earth spheres, but only succeeded in knocking it to the ground and rendering it immobile so long as the sphere was pressing down on it. Kopriva chucked a vial of alchemical acid at it, but this didn't work either. Finally, Briam went ahead and summoned his familiar and had the juvenile fire drake breathe fire at the golem for a while. That at least had some effect, in the sense that the golem ended up visibly heating up as a result. The fire wards weren't able to deal with sustained fire magic, it seemed. Edwin terminated the testing at this point, not wanting to see Chelik actually destroyed.

A satisfactory result, all things considered. The vulnerability to being buried and otherwise restrained was a large and obvious

weakness, though, and Zorian was already considering what he could do to overcome it when making golems in the future.

The end of Edwin's golem test ultimately also signaled the end of the current practice session as well, and most people excused themselves and left afterwards. The day of the summer festival was only a few days away, so this was basically the last training session he would have with the practice group. That fact left him strangely sad – he had originally resented the loss of free time that came with the meetings, but the classmates he taught had ended up growing on him a little. It was nice to have someone actually respect his skills and achievements for a change, instead of constantly reminding him about how inadequate he was and how far he still had to go.

He turned towards Raynie, the last person to remain at the training round with him. She didn't look like she intended to excuse herself, so he assumed she wanted to talk to him.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Did you find out anything about your extra soul bits?" she asked.

She was stalling for time, but whatever. No reason not to answer the question.

"Sort of," he said. "I found a few ways to interact with it, but I only know what one of them actually does. Or at least I *think* I do. I'll try it out soon to make sure."

Yes, it was rather surprising, but apparently the marker actually *was* designed to be interacted with by its bearer. There were multiple... switches, for lack of a better word, that were clearly meant to do something once they were activated. A good number of them were utterly inert, and did not react at all to his probing, either because he did not know how to interact with them properly or because they were broken in the marker's transfer from Zach to Zorian. A lot of them were perfectly functional, however, and

readily responded to his probes, eager to be set off like exuberant little puppies. He shied away from actually experimenting with them, since they gave absolutely no indication what their function was.

All except one. There was one command switch that immediately gave him a vague impression of what it was meant to do when he tried mucking around with it. He planned to test that one at the conclusion of his portal infiltration attempt.

"Make sure to have someone watching over you when you do that," Raynie cautioned. "At the very least they can call for help if you collapse or something."

"I will," Zorian lied. "Now why don't you tell me what's really bothering you."

"It's nothing you can really help me with," she sighed. "I just feel like complaining to someone, I guess. I have no one here to confide to, except for Kiana. My fault, really. I didn't try very hard to make any other friends. I don't want to bother Kiana about this again, so..."

"Well, feel free to complain," Zorian told her. "Is this about your family, perhaps?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "I sent them a letter last week. Asked them if I could come home for the summer festival. They said I wasn't welcome. Well, not really in those words, but I can read between the lines."

Harsh. What did she do to deserve that kind of response? Well, Raynie did say she wanted to complain, so he would probably find out soon. He opted to stay quiet and let her talk.

After a moment of quiet while she collected her thoughts, she started her story.

"The leadership of my tribe is hereditary," she said. "The first-born son of the current chief inherits the mantle of leadership from his father. Simple enough, but the problem was that my father

didn't have a son. My mother had a hard pregnancy when she bore me, and the tribe refused to bring outside healers to help. After I was born, she could conceive no further children. Or at least that's what we all thought for a time. Regardless, it was decided that in the absence of a male heir, even a daughter would do. Nobody wanted a succession crisis."

Hmm, so the tribe accepted a female leader but wasn't too happy with it. Considering the 'hypothetical scenario' she'd asked him about earlier in the restart, he had a feeling he knew where this was going...

"As I grew up, I was constantly told I had to be strong for the tribe," Raynie said. "That I have to work hard and embody the ideals we represented, so that there could be no question as to whether I deserved my position. I never resented that. I was proud of my tribesmen and my parents, for putting so much faith in me. I did my best, and I was good at it. Good enough that, in time, even my staunchest critics had fallen silent. But then mother got pregnant again."

Zorian winced internally. It was a son, wasn't it?

"Nine months later, mother gave birth to the baby boy that my father had always wanted," she said bitterly, confirming his suspicion. "I wasn't sidelined immediately, of course. They had to make sure my brother was not defective in some way before doing something so rash. I had hope for a time that I might succeed in keeping the mantle through superior skill and effort, but of course he ended up being a blasted prodigy. It was clear that he would eventually eclipse me. I... did not take it very well. I did not step down from my position quietly, and some of the tribe members even supported me. Mostly because they felt I had proven myself capable while my brother was still a relative unknown, and the designated heir had never been stripped of their position like that, so the whole thing was a bit questionable. But ultimately, my worst

enemy was my own father – I had thought he was proud of me, of all I had accomplished, but in the end he was the one arguing most vehemently that I should move aside so my brother can take the mantle. How could I have possibly won that battle when my own father stood against me?”

”So they don’t want you back because they think you’re a threat to your brother’s legitimacy and the tribe’s leader?” Zorian spoke out.

”I *am* a threat to his legitimacy,” Raynie said. ”Was. I don’t know. I’m not really sure about anything anymore. I feel like nothing I did mattered in the end. What do I even have to live for, now? All my life I was taught to live for the tribe, but I’m not sure I even want to go back there when they finally deign to let me return. What is there waiting for me? I don’t think I’ll ever be happy living back there.”

Zorian studied her for a moment, wondering if he should try and comfort her. She seemed more angry than sad, though, and he had a feeling she wouldn’t appreciate such a gesture. Best not to risk it.

”So you being here is your exile, then?” he asked.

”Pretty much,” she answered. ”Me being here allows them to cement my brother’s position without my interference. Plus, me being educated by outsiders and taught outsider magic destroys whatever shreds of legitimacy I had left.”

”I can’t understand why they won’t let you home for the summer festival, then,” Zorian said. ”Not that I understand why you’d even want to go back to your father and brother you clearly can’t stand, but that’s beside the point. The point is that if you’ve been outmaneuvered that thoroughly, surely there is no harm in letting you go back home for a few days. That seems very petty of them.”

”I was a bit of a bitch to my brother the last time I was home,” she admitted. ”I guess the little shit went crying to our parents,

because they've been keeping him away from me ever since. They seem to think there is a risk of me killing him. So insulting."

They kept talking for a while – well, Raynie kept talking, he mostly just listened – but eventually she ran out of steam and just fell quiet for a time before announcing it was late and that she should go. Before she left, however, she told him that she enjoyed their meetings and asked if they could continue meeting like that, even if his original purpose for approaching her had long been fulfilled at this point.

He agreed. Of course he did. And despite her stoic demeanor, he could tell she was very happy to hear that. But the summer festival was just around the corner and she would soon forget any of this ever happened. The next time they met, they would be virtual strangers to each other.

He decided not to befriend Raynie again in the future. Not while the time loop was still in effect, anyway. If he ever managed to get out, though, he told himself that he would try to befriend the red-headed shifter for real. She reminded him of his pre-time loop self too much to just ignore it. Her problem was, as she said, something he couldn't really help her with... but maybe just having an extra friend would be enough.

He remained at the training ground for quite some time afterwards, lost in thought, before making his way back to Imaya's place.



It was the day before the summer festival and everything was ready. He had stopped Nochka's kidnapping again, crafted all of the equipment he would be using in his gate-crashing attempt, and evacuated the Filigree Sages back to their home. Now all that was left was to gather the findings Kael and Taiven had made with

their personal research and store them inside his mind for future restarts.

Fortunately, he was currently meeting them both in Imaya's basement for exactly that purpose.

"Here," Taiven said, handing him a small notebook. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm kind of glad the month is coming to a close. You have no idea how annoying it is to practice shaping exercises all day, every day."

"Taiven, I've had Xvim as my mentor for the past four years," Zorian pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah..." she waved dismissively.

"Show me what you've learned," he told her.

"What? But it's all written down there," she protested, pointing at the notebook in his hands.

"Doesn't matter, I want to see it personally," he insisted. "Some things really cannot be written down."

She had progressed nicely, he decided fifteen minutes later. Some things he considered trivial didn't really work out, which meant he either wasn't teaching them properly or Taiven was spectacularly unsuited for them, but there were also some exercises that came almost naturally to her. It was a good start, if nothing else.

"That was way too slow," he said. "And you fumbled a bit towards the end. Start o-"

"If you say 'start over' one more time, Zorian..." Taiven warned him.

"Fine, fine, I'll stop channeling my inner Xvim," he chuckled. "We'll stop here. I got what I needed, I think. Kael, how about you? Are my eyes deceiving me or has the amount of notebooks you got for me actually *shrunk* from what it was initially?"

"You said you memorize how the whole book is made with that spell of yours, not just text, so I figured I would write as dense as possible and save space that way. A single book takes the same

amount of space in your memory regardless of how much is written in it, if I understood you correctly," Kael said.

"That's true, but the alteration pattern I store is never flawless, so some imperfections are bound to creep up in the reproduction. I hope you didn't make the letters too small..."

Some quick testing proved that Kael's condensed writing survived the memorization-reproduction process just fine, so Zorian went ahead and memorized the whole stack.

"Well, that's it I guess," Taiven said awkwardly. "I guess we'll see each other in the next restart. Not that I'll remember any of it..."

"Actually, I'm going to skip going to Cyoria for a couple of restarts," Zorian admitted. "I need to find a way to halt, or at least delay the degradation of the Matriarch's memory package. And also to advance my memory reading skills so I can get something out of it if I fail. I can't waste time on classes before I solve this."

"Fair enough," Kael said. "I'll note that I have pretty much exhausted all the low-lying fruits when it comes to my research. I'll need to reach out to other experts and maybe acquire some restricted materials through less than legal channels the next time we do this. I know you're justifiably leery of making too many waves, so you'll have to discuss this with my other self."

Just as well that he was putting his routine in Cyoria on temporary hold, then. He didn't need a distraction like that right now.

The group separated after a while, with Zorian leaving to find Kirielle. There was one last thing he wanted to do before the end.

"Kiri, do you think you could show me your drawings?" he asked.

She didn't need much convincing. She ran out of the room and soon returned with a thick stack of papers that represented her artistic endeavor over the course of the past month. She drew anything that caught her fancy, it seemed – the sparrows that liked

to gather on the street in front of Imaya's house, the house they lived in and its inhabitants, the trees in the nearby park where she played with Nochka, and so on. He was especially impressed with the handful of images that depicted Cyoria's main train station – not only did she remember what all the various storefronts they'd visited looked like, she even memorized many of the individual items that had been on sale. Zorian had forgotten most of that stuff roughly five minutes after they had left the train station, but Kirielle had remembered it well enough to draw a realistic picture of it an entire day afterwards.

If he ever found some time to kill, he should ask Kirielle to teach him how to draw. He doubted he would be any good at it, but the mental image of his little sister trying to teach him something was amusing.

"...and this one is Nochka's kitty fo- err," Kirielle fumbled, barely catching herself in time. She threw him a panicked look and then tried to shove the drawing of the young black cat beneath some of the already inspected drawings.

Heh.

"Her kitty form, perhaps?" Zorian asked innocently.

"You knew!" Kirielle gasped.

"I knew," he confirmed. "So could you tell she's a shifter on your own or is she simply as bad at keeping secrets as you are?"

"I'm not bad at keeping secrets!" she protested. "And, um, she kind of slipped that she can do magic and I bugged her until she showed me what she can do."

Ah yes, the eternal tendency of people to brag about their skills. Well, that and Kirielle's incredible ability to keep bringing the subject up until the victim decides it's easier to just give in and humor her. He didn't blame Nochka for giving in, considering how often he ended up doing the same.

Nochka's indiscretion aside, there were no further surprises

waiting for him among Kirielle's drawings. He then tried to cast the memorization spell to commit the entire stack to his memory, but found that Kirielle was intensely protective of her work and strangely suspicious of his actions. It took a while for Zorian to convince Kirielle that the spell he wanted to cast was totally non-destructive and that he wouldn't even dream of burning her artwork or anything similar. Really, where did she even get the idea?

"Fortov once burned a bunch of my drawings when I asked him to show me some magic," she admitted. "Said it was a joke."

Zorian rolled his eyes. Yes, that sounded about right for Fortov. Knowing Kirielle, she was probably being extremely annoying and disruptive... but that was still a very shitty thing to do.

"I'm kind of insulted you'd compare me to Fortov, but whatever," Zorian said. He quickly memorized the stack and handed it back to her. "There. All done."

Kirielle quickly leafed through the papers to make sure he really hadn't done any damage and then left to put the drawings back to her room.

She was back soon enough, though, looking worried.

"Zorian, why did you want to memorize my drawings?" she asked. "You could just ask me to show them to you whenever you wanted to take a look. Are you going somewhere?"

Zorian gave her a sideways glance, wondering what to tell her. He would be leaving her behind during the next few restarts, and he kind of felt guilty about it, but there was no helping it. It was why he was 'wasting' some of his mental space on her drawings instead of filling it out with something more practical.

She was pretty observant to have come to that conclusion, though. She probably noticed some of his other preparations.

"Yes," he admitted. "I am. After the summer festival."

"Oh," she said. "But don't you have to attend classes?"

"Well yes. But this is more important," he said. "Don't worry, I won't be gone long. You won't even notice I'm gone."

Surprisingly, she accepted this explanation without complaints. Good. The last thing he needed was for her to freak out this close to the end.

"But," she decided, "you have to bring me a gift when you come back. Or I'm telling mom you left me alone with a bunch of strangers."

"Sure," said Zorian, rolling his eyes. He wondered if gifting her with the drawings she'd drawn herself in previous restarts counted as cheating.

Probably. But he was going to do it anyway, just to see how she reacted.



The dimensional gate beneath Cyoria was a difficult target to approach. One had to avoid numerous Ibasan patrol groups to even get near it, and then the prospective attacker had to deal with an entire defensive base built around the gate if they wanted to actually pass through. Storming such a place was a task for a battlegroup, not a single mage, and would give the defenders plenty of time to shut down the gate if they felt the base was about to fall. Not to mention that Quatach-Ichl could and probably would come to their aid if such a major assault was launched on the place. No, the only viable way of accessing the gate was to sneak in somehow. A rather unlikely endeavor, considering the place was teeming with mages and war trolls, and likely had plenty of detection wards layered on top of it too. But Zorian had a plan. A rather reckless plan that he'd never even think about trying outside of the time loop, but it was a plan regardless.

At its core, it rested on the assumption that the Ibasans would send almost everyone they had to participate in the invasion

proper, leaving only a handful of defenders to guard the gate. Thus, the best time to make the attempt was when the invasion had already begun. If the Ibasans were smart and cautious, that wouldn't be true and his plan would be over before it even began. If they were *really* smart and cautious, the gate would be shut down the moment the invasion began and all of his plotting would have been for nothing. But Zorian was willing to bet that the Ibasans needed all the manpower they could get for the fighting on the surface, and that the leadership needed the gate functioning so they could retreat safely to their island. There was a lot of sea between Eldemar and Ulquaan Ibasa. He was hoping they would just leave behind a skeleton crew at the base, with orders to summon Quatach-Ichl if they get into more trouble than they can handle.

Thus, when the day of the invasion had finally come, Zorian immediately descended deep into the tunnel system beneath Cyoria and started looking for some nasty critters to dominate. Something strong enough to cause a distraction, but weak enough that the defenders wouldn't panic when it started throwing itself on the base defenses. Just a random monster attack that would distract everyone and give Zorian a chance to slip inside unnoticed.

It took him some time, but he eventually found a pack of hook goblins – small, flightless, bat-like humanoids whose front limbs sported huge, hook-like claws. Highly dangerous up close but easily killable. A threat but not *that* much of a threat. Perfect.

Then he waited. As time went by, his prediction of Ibasans withdrawing virtually everyone to participate in the invasion gradually came to pass – the Ibasans were indeed withdrawing nearly all patrol groups around their base, allowing Zorian to finally approach the place and lay his eyes on the center of Ibasan invasion. Well, he already knew its basic layout from the memories extracted from the captured Ibasans, but that wasn't the same as seeing it

first-hand.

The base was situated in a massive cavern, and was quite large. It was practically a small town, which was not very surprising considering the amount of forces the Ibasans normally kept here. In the center of the settlement stood a handful of stone buildings that were probably raised from the cavern floor via alteration. The gate was in the middle of this section, serving as the heart of the settlement. Surrounding the fancy stone buildings was a ramshackle collection of tents and pens where the peons and war trolls lived.

There were no walls around the settlement, but each of the tunnels connecting to the cavern had a checkpoint that served as a first line of defense.

Zorian waited for a while for the numbers to thin out further and when they remained static for a while, mentally pushed the hook goblins to attack one of the checkpoints, doing his best to boost their bloodthirstiness and suppress their fear. He didn't have to do much, honestly – hook goblins seemed to be almost perpetually angry creatures, going utterly berserk at even the slightest provocation. They fell upon the checkpoint, screeching and clawing, and the base immediately went into an uproar.

Zorian's original idea was to use the distraction to attack one of the other checkpoints while everyone else was distracted, but that turned out to be unnecessary – when he reached his chosen target, he found out that its guards were unprofessional enough to leave their posts to help out their buddies against the hook goblins. Or maybe the base was even more short on manpower than he originally suspected? No matter, he decided to simply take advantage of the situation and waltzed in.

He made it all the way to the gate without being stopped, or even confronted by anyone. At one point he crossed paths with a mage running towards the battle site but it only took a weak suggestion from Zorian that he was *'completely normal, nothing to see*

here' and the man promptly put him out of his mind and kept running. He honestly didn't expect it to be that easy. Unfortunately, when he reached the dimensional gate itself he found that it had its own guards and that they refused to leave their posts, despite the commotion.

Four mages and two trolls. He could deal with them perhaps, but he didn't think he could do it without raising a ruckus. Shame. He was just about to throw caution to the wind and start chucking around fireballs and explosive cubes everywhere, when one of the other defenders came running and started shouting at the mages around the gate. The hook goblins had broken through the checkpoint and the newcomer wanted them to signal Quatach-Ichl to come and save them.

Uh, oops? He honestly didn't think his little minions would end up winning. It seemed that not only did the Ibasans leave a skeleton crew to hold the base, said skeleton crew was composed out of the dregs of their force. No wonder this infiltration was so easy.

Fortunately for Zorian, no summoning of Quatach-Ichl would take place. The mages guarding seemed horrified at the very idea. Their leader ranted for an entire minute about how the ancient lich would have them all flayed alive if they summoned him to deal with a bunch of stinking hook goblins, and eventually sent two of his fellow guards and both of the war trolls to contain the incursion.

Zorian could only watch incredulously as the gate was suddenly left with only two mages to guard it. Well. That certainly made things easier. He waited for a while for the other Ibasans to get some distance away from the gate and then chucked a vial of sleeping gas at the two remaining guards from his hiding place. One of them, the one that spoke to the panicked defender and seemed to be their leader, managed to stumble out of the cloud in a semi-lucid state and promptly received a piercer in the head

for his troubles. The other collapsed into sleep, as intended, and Zorian blew the cloud away with a gust of wind before hurriedly approaching the dimensional gate they were guarding.

Zorian itched to examine the thing in greater detail, but no, this wasn't the time for that... the current priority was to find out what was on the other side. Looking through the opening itself, he could see that the gate led to an empty, spacious room devoid of further guards. Which was rather weird – were the Ibasans really leaving one end of the gate undefended? He tried extending his mind sense through the dimensional opening and was pleased to note that the gate was no barrier to his mind sense. And even gladder that he could detect no hidden enemies.

Suspicious, but mindful of the limited amount of time he had, he took a deep breath and stepped through the gate.

He felt a tendril of magic brush against his soul protections the moment his foot touched the floor of the destination room, trying to identify him. It recoiled from his spiritual defense and Zorian immediately felt the atmosphere in the room change, becoming heavier and more foreboding. He had been detected by the wards and labeled as an intruder.

Behind him, the edges of the dimensional opening started crackling with lightning. The gate then began rapidly shrinking and soon winked out of existence entirely in a soft flash of light.



Though the closing of the portal had taken him off guard, Zorian was ultimately unconcerned about its disappearance. He was already through, after all, and at least this way the Ibasan forces on the other end of the gate wouldn't be able to pursue him.

He quickly looked around and confirmed that the room was indeed empty, aside from the now-inactive stone icosahedron

erected in the center of it. There was only one door in sight, and Zorian immediately blasted it to splinters rather than open it normally. No need to risk getting hit with some hostile ward effect because he was dumb enough to grasp the handle. Quickly leaving the gate room, he started exploring the place, trying to find out as much as he could before the Ibasan forces on this side of the gate, alerted by the wards, came running to deal with him.

Except that there were no Ibasan forces. And he wasn't in some hastily erected base, either. He quickly found out that the gate had been situated in a basement of a pretty luxurious mansion. A very large, seemingly abandoned mansion. Zorian was confused at first – the first gate in the chain was supposed to lead to some isolated place in the Sarokian highlands after all, so he kind of expected a wilderness camp surrounded by trees.

Then the defenders of the place finally tracked him down, and he understood where he was. The undead boar that just tried to bite his leg off was exactly like the ones that assaulted Lukav every restart.

He *was* in the Sarokian Highlands. Specifically, he was in Iasku Mansion. And the place was apparently teeming with undead.

He frantically dodged a knife thrust by his assailant – a silent, knife-wielding man wrapped in concealing black clothes. Zorian had shot him through his head with a piercer earlier, but that didn't seem to bother him too much. Another black-clad, knife wielding corpse advanced at him from the left, and the blasted boar looked like it was readying for another charge.

Zorian threw a glowing cylinder on the ground in front of him, causing a disruptive, dispelling pulse to wash over everything around him. The three corpses attacking him collapsed lifelessly to the ground, the pulse having destroyed the magic that kept their animating souls bound to their bodies.

Zorian sighed. That was the third dispeller grenade he had

been forced to use since coming to this place. He'd only ever had five of them to start with, not having expected to fight hordes of undead today. Most of his other single-use items were gone as well. He knew this mission was likely to result in his violent death, but this was still kind of annoying.

And also more than a little dangerous. The presence of so much undead meant there were necromancers inside. It might actually be dangerous to die here.

He was just about to go back to the gate room and barricade himself there when a living person entered his mind sense, heading straight for him.

Well, crap. That was the necromancer, wasn't it? Of course it was. That must be why the undead backed off after that last attack. He quickly scattered his remaining explosive cubes on the floor in front of him and retreated deeper into the corridor.

Then the door on the other end of the corridor opened and a tall, muscular man with a huge mustache stepped into the corridor. He took one look at Zorian and smiled jovially, like seeing an old friend who he hadn't heard from in years.

"Welcome!" he said. "I am Sudomir Kandrei, the owner of this humble abode. May I ask why you have invaded my home?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Zorian, taking a step back. Step deeper into the corridor, step deeper into the corridor... "The door was quite open, all I had to do was step through the gate. If you didn't want anyone coming through, surely you wouldn't have left that thing so unprotected. Why, I bet a whole army could just waltz through this place if you weren't careful..."

Zorian took another step back. Sudomir followed him, taking a step deeper into the corridor-

Now! Zorian sent a pulse of mana to the explosive cubes, triggering them and sending the entire corridor into a-

No, actually nothing happened at all. What the hell?

"Wards. Wonderful things, aren't they?" Sudomir smiled. "I can't have things exploding in my own home, you see. And besides, even if you did catch me in that trap, that wouldn't have killed me. I assure you I am quite hard to kill."

Lovely. Zorian stared at the man in front of him for a second and then concentrated on his marker for a second.

"What are you doing?!" Sudomir asked harshly. He could probably see that he was doing something with his soul. Damn necromancers and their cheating soul sight.

Zorian ignored him and ordered one of the 'slots' of the marker, the one that actually gave him an impression of what it was supposed to do, to activate. His vision immediately turned dark and then he woke up back in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning.

He sighed in relief, confusing Kirielle. Thank the gods that worked.

POLITICS

Sitting alone in the train's compartment, Zorian stared through the window at the passing landscape, lost in thought and not really paying attention to what he was looking at. He was supposed to have disembarked already, but the events that had happened at the end of the previous restart were still at the forefront of his mind and he figured it was best to delay his plans for a few hours until he was less distracted. It wasn't like he had some tight schedule to follow this early into the restart.

Closing his eyes for a second, he searched his soul for the marker switch he'd used to escape Sudomir and immersed himself in the impressions it gave him whenever he connected to it. The switch in question did not announce its purpose in words, but it made itself understood anyway – it was the abrupt end of everything, followed by a return to the beginning.

Revert to starting point. That was what the switch claimed its function was, and, as far as Zorian could tell, that is exactly what it had done when he'd used it at the end of the previous restart.

He had a way to end the current restart at whim. He could start over at any time without leaving behind a soul that could be interrogated and messed with. Hell, he wouldn't be leaving behind

anything – the world would end on his command. All it took was pressing a switch.

That changed everything. Necromancy, in many ways his worst enemy, was suddenly a lot less dangerous and frightening. The risk of having his suicide rings taken away or negated by fancy wards also became a lot less worrisome – the marker was virtually impossible to detect or take away from him. Many ideas he had previously dismissed on the grounds that they were too dangerous to attempt, such as exploring Iasku Mansion or pissing off Quatach-Ichl by aggressively going after Ibasan forces, were suddenly back on the table.

Getting killed or knocked out before he could react was still a danger, though, as was the possibility of being drugged into submission. He wondered if he could set up some sort of contingency to trigger the revert switch automatically upon his death... it would require delving deeper into soul magic, but that may be a smart thing to do anyway, and eliminating one of his major remaining weaknesses was no small feat.

A possible issue was that the revert switch might affect Zach and Red Robe as well, not just him. Was their restart cut short as a consequence of his action in the previous restart? Probably. It must have been, if the switch worked like he thought it did. There was a chance they'd failed to note the abrupt end, since he'd activated the revert switch very close to the time it usually ended at anyway... but since he intended to keep using the revert switch, that wasn't going to last very long.

It didn't really matter, though, even if they had noticed. Both Zach and Red Robe had already known there were at least two other time travelers in the time loop, so this told them nothing particularly important. Well, it might come as a bit of a shock to Zach, since he'd never had his restart cut short like that, but whatever. He could now experience what it was like for Zorian when

the other boy went around fighting dragons and whatnot.

Opening his eyes, Zorian withdrew from the marker and re-focused his attention on the passing landscape for a bit. It did not hold his attention for long before his mind drifted back to the events of the previous restart.

Truthfully, he hadn't expected his gate exploration initiative to be as successful as it ended up being. He had expected to face better and more numerous defenses on the Cyorian side of the gate, and once he managed to step through it, he expected to emerge into *another* heavily guarded Ibasan base. He hadn't expected to live long once on the other side. In fact, it honestly would not have surprised him if he had died before ever reaching the gate itself, nevermind actually accomplishing much on the other side. The first try had been primarily about testing the Ibasan defenses to see what he was dealing with.

Well, apparently he had been far too modest in his ambitions. He got everything he had been hoping for, and more. Now that he knew just how undermanned and unprofessional the defense of the gate was, and that there were no Ibasan reinforcements on the other side to come to their aid, he could afford to be a lot more direct in future attempts. Bringing a small army of golems and wiping out every defender so he could study the gate at his leisure actually seemed like a viable option. Granted, he would have to do it without giving the defenders a chance to summon Quatach-Ichl, but it seemed doable. As a bonus, said golems would be heaven-sent against the hordes of undead infesting Iasku Mansion. They were just as tireless as the living dead, and had no souls for the necromancer to mess with.

Of course, it was impossible to think about Iasku Mansion without automatically considering that final confrontation he'd had with Sudomir Kandrei at the end, and that soured Zorian's feeling of success somewhat. He got out of the situation unscathed

in the end, but the fact was, he got thoroughly outplayed and backed into a corner by a dangerous necromancer and had to rely on an untested ability to escape from his clutches. That wasn't the way Zorian wanted his conflicts to go.

To be fair, though, the situation might not have been as bad as it looked. The restart was nearing its end by that point, so perhaps he could have stalled the man long enough to avoid any serious consequences. Failing that, he could have thrown a maximized fireball at his feet and hoped that reducing his body to fine ash interfered with Sudomir's ability to snare his soul. It was hard to know how dangerous the situation truly had been without knowing more about Sudomir's personality, or the limits of his necromancy skills.

Well, he was going to find out more about the man very soon. For one thing, Sudomir was the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, and therefore a public figure – there should be lots of information available about him, in both official and unofficial sources. For another, Zorian intended to keep attacking the gate beneath Cyoria and exploring Iasku Mansion at the end of every future restart. There was no reason to pass up on that, really – the defenses of the gate were sufficiently flimsy that it wouldn't eat much into his schedule to organize an assault at the end of the month, and the revert switch made the idea of exploring a necromancer's lair a lot less crazy than it was up until recently.

He definitely had to do something about the wards on the place, though. Sudomir seemed to have placed some very sophisticated stuff on Iasku Mansion, and Zorian didn't feel comfortable just ignoring them. Who knows what kind of exotic, forbidden stuff a necromancer like Sudomir wove into his warding scheme?

Maybe he could avoid triggering the wards at all? If he could find some way to pass the initial authorization test upon stepping through the gate, the wards should stay dormant. There had to be

a keystone or some such that let people pass through unmolested, there was no way Sudomir keyed in every individual Ibasan into the damn ward scheme.

After some thought, he decided that such a bypass would be useful, but would likely just delay the problem – if it was Zorian in Sudomir’s place, he would have definitely placed further tripwires around the mansion to foil such abuse. Considering how much Sudomir relied on his wards to deal with intruders, he was bound to have thought of that and more.

He was wrenched out of his musings by the voice of the station announcer, who informed him that the train was soon going to arrive to its next destination. Deciding he had delayed things a bit too much as it was, Zorian grabbed his luggage and went off in search of an exit.

It was time to visit the aranean colonies again.



The last time Zorian had tried to get instructions from the Luminous Advocates, the result was a frustrating negotiation process that had lasted for nearly three weeks and had consumed the entirety of his funds in exchange for useful, but decidedly non-critical knowledge. The one thing he had needed back then, they had been unwilling to teach him. Consequently, he had stopped bothering with them. Especially since he had since found other, much more reasonable webs to trade with.

The situation had changed, however. He was a lot better at mind magic now, so they should hopefully look down on him a lot less. He was also in a much better position to satisfy their assorted demands, thanks to the discovery of the aranean treasury back in Cyoria and the ability to steal money and resources from the Cult of Dragon Below by raiding their caches. Finally, after

getting taught about aranean culture and customs from Voice of Peace, he had come to a conclusion that he had likely bungled his previous interaction with Luminous Advocates somewhat. He had come off as impatient and disrespectful, which probably had a lot to do with them dragging the negotiations out for several weeks – it was both the means of pressuring him into giving them greater concessions and a way of getting back at him for a perceived slight.

That was why, when Zorian went off to meet with the Luminous Advocates on the first day of the restart, he didn't offer a trade proposal. Instead, he simply introduced himself and asked for a meeting sometime in the future. He was told to come back in two days. He did just that, at which point he presented the Luminous Advocates with a gift and spent several hours pretending he'd just dropped by to have a friendly chat with them instead of anything serious. Only then did he present his offer, starting with a very ambitious plan where he offered a lot and demanded just as much. They refused, of course, making a counteroffer that was ridiculously more in their favor, and so the negotiations began...

It took them an entire week and a half to agree on a deal in the end, which was slow and annoying, but still a lot better than before. The agreement, much like the one he'd had with the Filigree Sages in the previous restart, went beyond his primary goal of learning how to repair memory packets and also encompassed refinement of his basic telepathy skills, practice of mental combat techniques and further development of his ability to tap into and interpret aranean senses. The last one was not something the Luminous Advocates had any real experience with, by their own admission, but they were willing to lend him their considerable expertise on the topic. In fact, that was the part of the deal they seemed most excited about.

Of course, Zorian didn't spend said week and a half idling around while the Luminous Advocates dragged their feet – he

spent most of that time scouting out other aranean webs to see what they were able and willing to offer him. He visited the Talisman Bearers, Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Silent Doorway Adepts – the three ‘shady’ webs that the Illustrious Gem Collectors had informed him about back when he’d first sought other aranean webs to learn from. Back then he didn’t feel safe dealing with them, but his skills at shielding his mind had grown considerably since then. He also toured the seven webs in the vicinity of Cyoria that he’d found out about from the Filigree Sages – the Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers, Deep Blue, Crystal Torches, Indestructible Silver Order, Stone Revelation Chanters and Riddles of Opening. All of them were interesting in their own way, but none of them could really help him with his memory packet repairing problem better than the Luminous Advocates could.

The Talisman Bearers were a magic-focused web – the most heavily magic-focused one that Zorian had ever encountered – and were thus a bad choice to go to when dealing with a relatively exotic mind magic issue like his. Still, visiting them had not been a waste of time in the slightest. Out of curiosity, he had bought several of the metal discs they used for their spellcasting to see how they worked. The spell formula designs etched into the discs blew him away – subjected to size and scarcity restrictions largely foreign to human spellcasting communities, the Talisman Bearers focused on squeezing in as many spells as they possibly could onto their primary spellcasting tool. The design was complex and incredibly dense, but it worked smoothly and efficiently, without the destructive resonances and disruptions that usually plagued such highly compressed spell formula constructs.

The discs were useless to Zorian in their natural state – he wasn’t an aranea, and these tools were very much intended for aranean use. Still, they were sufficiently similar to human spell formula that he could learn a lot from studying them. Consider-

ing how much he relied on items, any advantage in that area was noteworthy.

The Ghost Serpent Acolytes refused to see him. Apparently their god/guardian spirit told them he was bad news and that they should tell him to get lost. He had no idea what that was about, but it automatically made the web a lot more interesting than he expected. What did the spirit know about Zorian that pissed it off so much? He left the Ghost Serpent Acolytes alone for now, but he made a mental note to visit the web again in the next restart, before doing anything else, to see if they reacted the same way.

The Silent Doorway Adepts were another surprise, because the 'doorway' in their name came from the Bakora gate around which they built their settlement. That was very, very interesting. They got really uncomfortable when he started asking questions about it, too, blatantly trying to change the subject. They claimed the gate mystified them as much as it mystified humans, but Zorian wasn't sure he believed that. There was definitely a story there, and their web *was* famous for having some kind of secret magic that allowed them to get into places. Still, it was obvious he wouldn't be getting anything out of them on the topic, so he politely backed off and moved on to other topics.

Sadly, they had no interest in teaching him things. They pointed him back towards some of the webs he'd already known about, such as the Luminous Advocates, and that was that. That was not to say they were not interested in trade, though – they very much were. They showed passing interest in most of the stuff he offered, but what really caught their attention was crystalized mana. They really wanted crystalized mana for some reason – they were willing to take all of it off his hands, if he was willing, or as much as he could spare otherwise. In exchange, they offered a wide variety of magical items and tomes, all clearly of human origin... and many of them very much illegal. They also offered

to put him in contact with some of their human 'trade partners', in case he wanted something they currently lacked. They also admitted, after some prodding, that they could provide him with information about other aranean webs – where they could be found, what they were famous for, and what their weaknesses were. They warned him, however, that they would cut all ties with him if he misused such information.

After some thought, Zorian asked them about alternatives to the Luminous Advocates when it came to mind magic specialists, agreeing to their price for such information. After a few hours, their representative returned with the information in question, giving him the names and locations for about eight more webs that were notable for their mind magic mastery. He thanked them for the information and left.

The seven webs around Cyoria all had some things in common. For one, they were all very friendly to humans and a lot easier to talk to than any of the other webs he had been interacting with recently. For another, they were all magic-focused webs – Cyoria was the epicenter of the aranean magical revolution, and all nearby webs had adapted to take advantage of that in some fashion. Finally, they were a lot more hostile to their neighbors than the other webs he had spoken with. The Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers, Crystal Torches and Indestructible Silver Order all tried to hire him to attack their neighbors, and the Burning Apex outright stated that they intended to massacre the entire Riddles of Opening web whenever they got the chance, down to the last male and child. Oh, and all of them were very interested in any information about the Cyorian webs and any possible weaknesses they might have.

Zorian suddenly understood why Spear of Resolve had been so worried about her neighbors and wanted to get humans on her side.

Thankfully, none of the webs actually insisted that he had to help fight their battles, and were happy enough to engage in more peaceful forms of trade. Naturally, Zorian was primarily interested in mind magic instruction. The local groups, although primarily magic focused, did have decent grasp of their innate mind magic... especially when it came to telepathic combat. Most of them were fine in tutoring him in their abilities, although the Stone Revelation Chanters and Indestructible Silver Order required a higher level of commitment than he was able to spare in this particular restart. In addition, most of them also traded in exotic alchemical ingredients gathered in the deep dungeon, some of which were impossible to acquire on the open market.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to hide from a bunch of natural mind readers that he had contacted other aranea groups in the area while receiving tutoring in mind magic from them, so he could only get instruction from one of the local webs. Most of them didn't care if he was also receiving instruction from the Luminous Advocates, though, except for the Crystal Torches, who refused to teach him anything if they weren't the only ones teaching him.

He chose Deep Blue in the end, because they were one of the three major webs in the area and struck him as the most peaceful of the lot. Also, Deep Blue mind magic specialized in dominating and manipulating the various monstrous denizens of the Dungeon. Zorian figured their methods of dealing with creatures very different from themselves might also be useful in his quest to understand the aranean mind. And if not, well, being more effective at herding and neutralizing magical creatures was still a pretty useful skill to have.

Thus, he'd secured himself two tutorships from two different aranea groups for the restart. The Luminous Advocates complained, questioning the usefulness of a web like Deep Blue

when he'd already secured the services of 'the best of the best', but Zorian couldn't help but notice that they got rather more motivated in their teaching ever since he'd done that.

Trying to arrange for a third group of aranean teachers would definitely be a mistake, though. Best not be too greedy.



Not much happened until the very end of the restart. He dutifully kept learning mind magic from the Luminous Advocates and Deep Blue, and when he wasn't doing that, he was advancing his studies in other magical disciplines and preparing things for the upcoming gate assault at the end of the restart. He was rapidly going through magical books he'd recovered from the aranean treasury in Cyoria, writing down any interesting spell he could find and outright memorizing ones that looked particularly useful. Ward analysis divinations, new combat spells, mind magic of the more structured kind... he'd learned so many new spells he had trouble remembering them all. He was also steadily trying out new shaping exercises, writing down which ones were easiest to work with, which ones had a trick to doing them right and which ones became much easier if he did some other exercises before them. He was surprised how lacking the various exercise manuals were in regards to crucial information like that.

By the time the restart was nearing its end, Zorian was ready for another attempt at the gate. He had adjusted his arsenal in light of what he had discovered about his opponents and thus had made six golems to bring along with him as support. He'd also captured several Ibasans during his trips to Cyoria, trying to discover a method of passing through the gate without triggering the wards on Iasku Mansion. Sadly, none of them knew the answer to that particular mystery. He could only hope that the actual gate guards were better informed.

Finally, he had tried to find out as much as he could about Sudomir Kandrei without attracting too much attention. Since the secret master of Iasku Mansion was also the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, he did that by teleporting to the town in question and started asking people questions and reading their minds while they talked. He found out that Sudomir had an excellent reputation among the people he governed – he was a capable administrator under whom the city grew a lot more rich and influential than it had previously been. He took full advantage of Eldemar’s northern colonization drive to catapult the city to prominence, and then generously spread the wealth gained from that among the locals. He was known to be a rather secretive and private person, but very friendly and talkative when actually interacting with others. He was a powerful and talented mage, with a specialty in wards. His wife had died during the Weeping, and he was hurt deeply by it, never bothering to remarry.

Interestingly, Iasku Mansion wasn’t as big of a secret as Zorian first imagined it to be. Quite a few people knew that Sudomir had some kind of secret hideout in the wilderness to the north, and that shady stuff happened there. However, most people thought that Sudomir’s brand of shadiness involved smuggling of restricted merchandise and organizing drug-fueled orgies and what not. Basically, they thought he was connected to organized crime groups, not that he was animating corpses and betraying the country.

On the day of the summer festival, Zorian went to Cyoria and descended into the dungeon below the city to wait for the invasion to start. He couldn’t find the group of hook goblins he’d used previously – him not being in Cyoria and killing monsters with Taiven had completely altered the distribution of monsters in the Dungeon compared to the previous restart – so in the end he settled for a female tentacle-tailed scorpion. Mostly because she had hundreds of young, and they followed her lead in everything. If

he ordered her to attack the Ibasan base, they would do the same, with no need for specific directions coming from him.

Zorian slipped into the base while she and her brood distracted the defenders, much like he had last time. The golems, being much slower than him and very un-stealthy, were ordered to stay behind while he went off to subdue the more disciplined mages and war trolls stationed around the gate itself.

The war trolls were annoying. He needed the mages alive so he could interrogate them about the gate protections and the methods they used to summon Quatach-Ichl, but anything that would disable them would also fail to work against the war trolls. After some thought, he simply set up incineration traps a fair distance away from the gate and then started using a combination of guidance spells and gas bombs to bombard the area around the gate from a fair distance away. He turned the entire area into a thick cloud of sleeping gas, probably wasting more than half of the bombs needlessly, but whatever. The important thing was that the mages all ended up incapacitated and the war trolls came running after him, screaming their heads off.

They ran straight into the incineration traps, but rather than dying a horrible, fiery death, they survived the experience just fine. It took only a second for Zorian to realize what was happening. They weren't regular war trolls – no, these were the same sort of hyper-resilient ones that he and Taiven had encountered in one of the previous restarts. The ones that shrugged off fire. He teleported away in time to avoid being crushed to a pulp by the huge iron maces the two trolls wielded, but it was a short-distance teleport and they were upon him again in a heartbeat.

The resulting battle, which consisted mostly of Zorian teleporting around and throwing things at increasingly angry and injured war trolls, resulted in expenditure of nearly all of his prepared explosives and the destruction of four of his golems when

he was forced to summon them as distractions half-way throughout the battle. Damn it.

But at least he was alive and well, and the same could not be said of his opponents. The war trolls were eventually frozen solid by freezing rays, after which he shattered them into pieces just to be sure. Live and learn – next time he was using frost traps instead.

Checking up on the rest of the Ibasans, he found them losing against the tentacle-tailed scorpions. They managed to wound the mother, but that only made her spawn go berserk with rage and they surged forth with suicidal fury. The Ibasans scattered in front of them, and Zorian made sure to pick off anyone that looked like they were actually making a dent in the horde or trying to organize the defenders.

With most of the threats neutralized, he went back to the gate and banished the cloud of sleeping gas that clung to the place so he could reach the mages he'd incapacitated.

What he found from their minds was encouraging. First of all, the four he'd incapacitated were the only ones that knew how to contact Quatach-Ichl. That was why the other defenders came to beg them for help in the previous restart – they weren't asking for permission to summon Quatach-Ichl, they literally didn't know how to do it themselves. The method itself consisted of a simple sending spell, though one that required a particular keystone to actually reach the ancient lich.

He had seen the keystone in question before, he realized. It was the teardrop-shaped amulet of polished black stone that high-ranking Ibasans always wore. He thought it was a purely ornamental thing to mark their station to other Ibasans, since it gave off no magic and had nothing whatsoever etched into its surface, but apparently he was wrong. Even now he could not figure out how it was supposed to work as a keystone, and he didn't dare analyze it too deeply, lest he trip some invisible tripwire and summon

Quatach-Ichl to his location. He didn't feel like receiving a disintegration beam to the face at the moment.

Also, the way to enter the gate 'properly' consisted of letting a high-ranking Ibasan step through the gate first. This signaled to the wards in Iasku Mansion that everything was fine and everyone who entered after them is with them and thus also okay by association. Zorian did not know whether these specific Ibasans were keyed into the wards themselves or if the wards were detecting the presence of the keystone they all had on their person, and he didn't care. He simply pushed one of the unconscious Ibasans through the gate, amulet included, and stepped through afterwards. Just to be safe, he instructed his two surviving golems to immediately follow after him.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the wards failed to react to his presence and the gate didn't close. Success.

"Let's see what I can find before Sudomir realizes he has an intruder in his home," Zorian mumbled to himself, stepping over the unconscious body of the Ibasan he pushed through the gate.

He motioned his two golem bodyguards to follow after him and then moved deeper into Iasku Mansion.



Considering it was one of the invasion points used to attack Cyoria, Iasku Mansion was surprisingly empty. Now that he didn't have to dodge undead attackers all the time, Zorian had time to explore the interior and was baffled by how seemingly ordinary it was. It was an empty, but otherwise unexceptional mansion.

He encountered neither traps nor undead until he tried to move towards the very center of the mansion, where he suspected Sudomir was located. At that point he crossed some invisible threshold and he felt the wards try to probe his soul and fail. A

heavy feeling promptly settled down around him as the wards concentrated their energies around him.

Knowing that the hordes of undead inside the place were making their way towards him and no longer caring about stealth, Zorian started testing the wards to see what exactly they did. He began by throwing one of his last remaining explosives in front of him and activating it to see if it would work. It did, but that didn't necessarily mean the adjustments he'd made since last time were actually working. In the previous restart, his explosives had worked just fine at first, only to suddenly fail when he faced off against Sudomir. In all likelihood, the warding scheme only turned on its heaviest defenses when Sudomir commanded it to do so, and left them dormant otherwise to conserve mana.

Trying to scry on the dimensional gate to see if it had closed when the wards turned on him failed – nothing inside the house could be targeted by any of the divination spells he was aware of. Teleporting out didn't work, and connecting a recall tether to a stone cylinder and launching it through the window as far as it could go didn't allow him to recall himself out of the place either. The wards were also filling the entire mansion with a low-powered shaping disruption field – not enough to stop him from casting things, but definitely making his spellcasting take longer and require more concentration.

He considered simply escaping outside through the windows – a surprisingly viable option, since they were very large and could be opened easily from the inside – but decided not to. Sudomir seemed pretty talkative in the previous restart, and now that Zorian knew he had a guaranteed way out, he wanted to see what would happen if he talked to the man. Maybe Sudomir was the sort of person who liked to gloat? It was stupid, but there were people like that.

Over the next half an hour, Zorian fought against an endless

stream of undead. Unlike last time, he was able to conserve his dispeller grenades and other items by relying on his golems to keep some of the animated corpses busy while he tackled the rest. He was sufficiently effective at whittling down the army of undead, in fact, that Sudomir eventually decided to withdraw his remaining forces rather than see them all destroyed. Or at least that's what Zorian assumed, since all of the undead boars and black-clad corpses turned and fled at some point.

Huh. He did not expect that. He wondered whether Sudomir would even show up without Zorian being completely exhausted by his minions. Sudomir was clearly watching him, either through divinations or via some spying function embedded into the wards, so he surely knew Zorian was still dangerous to approach.

Shrugging, Zorian started analyzing the wards with the help of the ward analysis device he took from the aranean treasury. If Sudomir decided to stay away, that just meant he could deconstruct his warding scheme at his leisure, and that was still a win in his book.

Like he suspected, the wards did not like him trying to figure them out. If he hadn't already outed himself as an intruder, he was certain that his current attempt at analysis would have branded him as such immediately. Zorian expected as much – that was why he hadn't tried that the moment he stepped through the dimensional gate. What he didn't expect was for the wards to actively fight back against his analysis. The shifting of the local ward fields around him and the repeated disrupting pulses directed his way were disturbingly adaptive, too intelligently used to come from a mindless spell construct. Was Sudomir somehow adjusting the warding scheme on the fly or were the wards themselves somehow intelligent?

The air in front of him shimmered in a vaguely humanoid shape, and Zorian immediately fired a force lance at the spot. The

shimmer was unaffected, though, and soon solidified into a ghostly image of a familiar man. A tall, older, muscular man, dressed in an expensive brown suit. He had a huge mustache and a smiling, sunny expression on his face.

Zorian wasn't fooled, though. While Sudomir's illusionary projection tried to give off an air of happy indifference, his smile was noticeably more strained compared to how it was the last time he had seen him.

"Hi there!" Sudomir greeted him through his projection. "I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but this is a private residence. You can't just come in here and start tearing the place apart! What did I ever do to you, anyway?"

"I'm surprised you're willing to show your face so openly, Sudomir Kandrei," Zorian stated, scanning his surroundings to make sure Sudomir was not trying to distract him with his projection while setting up a surprise attack.

"Ha! A mage of your caliber doesn't stumble into a place like this accidentally," Sudomir scoffed. "Your skills, your equipment... you already knew who and what was here, I'm sure. The interesting question is, who are *you*? It's only polite to introduce yourself to people, don't you know?"

"Why did you help the Ibasans organize their attack on Cyoria?" Zorian asked, not interested in giving any personal information to Sudomir and not really finding the man's antics amusing. "The death toll is in the thousands, and will only grow larger by the end. What did those people ever do to *you*, Sudomir?"

"Ah. It's nothing personal, really," Sudomir shrugged, his smile dimming somewhat. "They're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Politics can be brutal like that."

"Politics?" asked Zorian incredulously. "They're trying to release a primordial to rampage around the continent and you think that's somehow in your political interest!? I can understand how

the Ibasans think this is a good thing for them, but what about you? Why would *you* want that to happen?"

Sudomir stared at him for a second with a judging look on his face.

"So you know about that too, huh?" he said, clacking his tongue in distaste. "Well, I don't think I feel comfortable discussing my goals with you, my dear home invader. However, just between you and me, I'd wager the Ibasans are too optimistic about this primordial's supposed danger level. It's going to do a lot of damage, I'm sure, but to imagine it running around the continent, destroying things at whim? Not a chance. I give it at best a week before Eldemar gathers enough troops to kill it. And that's assuming it's not just a dumb animal that will wander into the first trap they set for it."

"That's a very reckless attitude to have about the scenario," Zorian frowned. "What if you're wrong?"

"Nothing in life comes without risk," Sudomir said in a lecturing voice.

Ugh. He was going nowhere with this conversation, and the man was blatantly stalling for time. He dispelled the projection with a wave of his hand and started walking towards the center of the mansion again, his two golem bodyguards walking in front of him. There was no point in trying to analyze the wards again, since he couldn't get through the weirdly intelligent safeguards Sudomir had put in place to prevent such things.

Another ghostly projection shimmered into existence in front of him, but he dispelled it before it had a chance to speak.

"Now that's just rude!" a disembodied voice echoed all around him. No more projection this time – just sound that followed him around wherever he went. "We were having a conversation!"

There was a locked door in his way, so Zorian chucked one of his three remaining explosive cubes at it. It failed to work when

he gave it a signal to explode.

"Sorry, but no explosions in my house," Sudomir's disembodied voice declared.

Zorian frowned. Just like in the previous restart. And he had adjusted his explosive to try and counter the effect too. Worrying. By themselves, anti-explosion wards were nothing new. Every important building had them. Most of the time, though, they were just basic things that could not stand up to Zorian's craftsmanship. Sudomir's wards could not only counter his basic explosives, but also his specialized work that was expressly designed to work inside a heavily warded area.

His hand instinctively grasped one of the explosive rings he carried around his neck. His old suicide method, which he opted to still carry around just in case. He quickly took off one of the rings and threw it at the door, wanting to see if *they* would work. The suicide rings were his most sophisticated work, after all, designed to work no matter what the circumstances.

The ring failed to blow up. Hmm. Maybe the wards worked on some exotic principle that totally shut down all spell formula-based explosives?

To test that theory, he threw a bottle of liquid explosive, alchemically made and devoid of any fancy spellwork, at the door in question. The bottle exploded as intended, sending dust and wooden splinters everywhere.

So alchemy-based explosives still work. Good to know.

"Just how many expendables did you bring with you?" Sudomir asked him through his voice spell. "It must have cost a fortune! I'm flattered that you spent all that money on little old me, but is that really the best use of your resources?"

After that, the remaining undead in the mansion started attacking him again, trying to ambush him from nearby rooms as he tried to navigate the confusing inner layout of the mansion. They

failed to actually hurt him, but they slowed his advance to a crawl and ended up being enough in the end.

He literally ran out of time – the restart ended before he could track down Sudomir and confront him.

Oh well, there was always next time.



The next restart was largely similar to the previous one. He still contacted Deep Blue and the Luminous Advocates for mind magic instructions and largely spent the entire restart working on his mind magic. He did make a minor deviation at the start of the restart in order to visit the the Ghost Serpent Acolytes, though.

They told him the exact same thing they had in the previous restart: the Ghost Serpent says he's bad news and that he should go away. Trying to find out why he was bad news yielded no results – the spirit the web in question worshipped refused to say what about him was 'bad news'. The very knowledge of what sort of bad news he was, was in itself bad news. He was the worst news.

Bizarre. Well, disliking someone for no reason was no crime and, short of attacking the Ghost Serpent Acolytes, there was nothing Zorian could do about the situation. And if he attacked them, then he was kind of vindicating the asshole spirit in a way, wasn't he?

His lessons with the Luminous Advocates progressed at a rapid pace. By the end of the restart, he was ready to attempt to repair the matriarch's memory packet. It worked... sort of. The packet wasn't exactly fixed, but he'd halted the degradation and bought himself another two months before it would start to decay again. That, the Luminous Advocates informed him, was the only thing that could really be done about a decaying foreign memory packet – you mentally stitch it together and it would hold for a time, but

that process was in itself destructive to the packet, so there were only so many times one could repair it. Based on the size and condition of the matriarch's memory packet, the Luminous Advocates thought it could only be repaired one more time without risking its destruction.

He had two more months to get better at memory packet repairs, after which he would get one more chance to buy some time. That meant that, depending on how good the second round of repairs went, he had about four or five more restarts at most to get good enough at interpreting aranean memories to read the memories stored in the packet.

He decided he had to get some experience with reading aranean memories. *Actually* reading aranean memories, not doing simplified exercises with aranean tutors. Of course, neither the Luminous Advocates nor Deep Blue would agree to work with him on that, and he would bet that no other web could be talked into it either. No, that sort of thing was virtually always a hostile act – something you do to your enemies.

So the solution was simple. He had to find some aranean enemies.

His first idea was to go after the Sword Divers. After all, they did try to ambush him once, and he still held a grudge about that, even if they didn't remember any of it. It even worked for a time – he managed to ambush several Sword Diver patrols and captured them for memory reading.

His first two attempts to read the aranean mind ended up about as well as his first attempt at reading human minds. That is, not well at all. He improved quickly, however, and soon found out some interesting things about Sword Divers. They had a habit of attacking vulnerable mages, it turned out – they limited themselves to mages that tried to explore the Dungeon beneath Korsá, and they were very careful about whom they targeted, but they were

definitely willing to attack anyone they saw as an easy target. They also lived very deep in the Dungeon, and any time they made the wrong person 'disappear', they just retreated from the surface layers until the searches and outrage died down.

And that is what the Sword Divers did when they realized someone was targeting them – they flat out abandoned the Dungeon beneath Korsa, retreating into the depths. Having read their minds, Zorian knew it would be weeks, perhaps months before they deigned to return, and he didn't dare follow after them.

So he just looted their surface money stashes (more out of spite than because he really needed the cash) and went searching for more targets.

He asked both Deep Blue and the Luminous Advocates if they knew an aranean web they wouldn't mind targeted. Surprisingly, it was the Luminous Advocates that were more interested – he expected Deep Blue to jump to the chance, considering their neighborhood, but they were actually pretty content with their current situation. They did offer him a job, however... one that they claimed would buy him pretty much anything he wanted out of them. Basically, they wanted him to get rid of the crystal ooze that was harassing their resource gathering expeditions into the deeper parts of the Dungeon.

Crystal oozes were virtually immune to physical damage, quite fast, absorbed most forms of magical energy, could shoot arrow-like shards of crystal at things that annoyed them, and even a tiny prickle from one of their crystal blades and shards would rapidly turn a living being into a crystal statue. They were sometimes called crystal basilisks, and they were one of those nightmare monsters that nobody actually wanted to fight unless there was no choice.

Deep Blue didn't seem very surprised when he declined their offer.

As for the Luminous Advocates, they were apparently under constant threat from a web they called 'The Demon Skin Web' or the 'Howling Ones'. Those weren't their real names, but since that particular web refused to talk to any of the other ones and simply did the telepathic equivalent of screaming whenever someone tried to talk to them, the Luminous Advocates didn't know what to call them. The Luminous Advocates indicated they wouldn't mind to see them gone, or at least thinned out a bit.

Well, by the end of the restart, Zorian had found out a lot of things about them. Such as that they called themselves Challengers of the Unspeakable, and were the so-called 'old aranea' – the magicless, original webs that got conquered, assimilated or exterminated by the newer, magic-using webs originating from underneath Cyoria. They had watched all their old neighbors fall before the tide of magic-using newcomers, either through violent conquest or through magic-using immigrants, until they were the only ones left. As far as they were concerned, it was the Luminous Advocates who were 'The Demon Skin Web'.

Tragic, but Challengers of the Unspeakable were also violent killers that actively raided their neighbors, and even nearby human communities when they could get away with it. Zorian had no qualms about raiding them back.

Finally, as the end of the restart approached, he started finalizing his preparations for another gate assault. This time his golem brigade would hopefully survive long enough to actually step into Iasku Mansion along with him, giving him solid superiority over Sudomir's undead guards.

As they say, third time's the charm.

WELL OF SOULS

Far away from any established path or settlement, in a small artificial cave that Zorian had made to serve as his workshop and base of operations, there was a large wooden table. A mass of papers was strewn over it, and Zorian was staring at it with a small frown. The collection of scribbled notes and crude diagrams in front of him would no doubt look like a haphazard mess to the casual observer, but there was a pattern to the chaos. Zorian had spent a fair amount of time assembling the entire thing, and each piece of paper was exactly where he wanted it to be.

Absentmindedly tapping his pencil on the table, Zorian considered the information laid out in front of him. Everything he knew about Sudomir and Iasku Mansion was there on the table, along with any other information he thought might be relevant for the upcoming gate assault. Truthfully, he already had a plan for the event... but it never hurt to double-check things, just in case he had forgotten something crucial. There were only three more days left until the summer festival, so if he wanted to make any significant changes to the plan, this was pretty much his last chance to do so.

After his conversation with Sudomir in the previous restart, Zorian was now fairly sure that the man had his own goals he

wanted to accomplish, and was effectively a third faction of the invasion force. He was not just being a loyal member of the Cult of the Dragon Below or sympathetic to the Ibasans – he was hoping to gain something out of this endeavor, and it wasn't the same thing that the other two factions were fighting for.

Sadly, he had been unable to figure out what Sudomir had been alluding to when he said he supported the invasion because of 'politics'. That could mean anything, really – there was no shortage of reasons why someone might want Cyoria gone or taken down a peg. Sudomir might be trying to alter the internal balance of power within Eldemar to advance his pet cause or trying to destroy Cyoria's regional importance to boost the power of his own town and domain. He might be trying to weaken Eldemar as a whole on behalf of foreign interests or he might simply want to distract the central government by destroying a major loyalist stronghold and giving them an external enemy to focus on. The possibilities were endless and he had no way to narrow things down.

Well, no way besides repeatedly invading Iasku Mansion or attacking Sudomir directly. The former he was already doing, and the latter was hard to pull off. It was too easy for Sudomir to teleport away if Zorian decided to attack him on the job, and Zorian didn't know where the man went when not attending to his duties. Certainly not to his home in Knyazov Dveri, which was virtually abandoned most of the time. Knowing Zorian's luck, Sudomir was probably spending most of his time safely ensconced in Iasku Mansion, which was essentially unassailable before the day of the invasion.

No, his current way of going about things was definitely the correct one. Sudomir was never as vulnerable as he was on the day of the invasion, and not just because he foolishly sent virtually all of his forces to join the invasion and then left the obvious hole in his defenses completely unguarded. Iasku Mansion was

obviously more than just a secret base for Sudomir, otherwise he would have been far more willing to cut his losses and run in the previous restart. There was something there – something he was unwilling to abandon, even after being metaphorically caught with his pants down and steadily backed into a corner. Zorian had a feeling that if he could find this mysterious something, he would solve the mystery of what Sudomir's real goals were easily enough.

He spent several more minutes poring over the papers in front of him, considering and discarding various possibilities, before his eyes fell on the small cluster of notes dealing with Iasku Mansion's warding scheme. His frown immediately deepened. Those wards worried him. His research told him there were several methods that Sudomir could have used to achieve the sort of reaction Zorian had experienced when he had tried to analyze the wards, but in all honesty? The most likely answer was that Sudomir had bound souls into the mansion's warding scheme. It seemed fairly obvious, considering Sudomir was clearly very necromancy-focused, and it would explain the weird ominous feelings he kept getting whenever the wards recognized him as an enemy. Most wards weren't so obvious about targeting someone.

Another point in favor of such a theory was that Iasku Mansion wasn't situated on a mana well, as far as Zorian could tell. He had spent several days wandering around the area where Iasku Mansion was located, mapping the local geomantic web and dodging winter wolf patrols, and he had found no evidence of a convenient underground ley line that could be tapped into. In other words, Iasku Mansion couldn't possibly support a warding scheme of any appreciable power. Not with conventional methods, anyway. Souls though... souls continued producing mana, even after death. It was what made them so valuable to spiritual entities like demons and was one of the reasons why undead were so much more convenient to use than golems. It would take a lot of souls

to power the sort of wards that Iasku Mansion sported, but it could be done. And Sudomir clearly had no problems getting souls, considering how many undead guards he had at his disposal.

Unfortunately, the illegal nature of soul magic made it difficult to gather solid information on its limitations and peculiarities. Even if he really was dealing with a creepy soul-powered house, Zorian had no idea what that meant for Sudomir's capabilities or how to exploit it. Coupled with the fact that Sudomir no doubt had some kind of last resort defense set up at the heart of his domain, and Zorian was feeling just a little bit uneasy about blithely walking in there without knowing more about what he was dealing with.

Fortunately, he was a mage. He had a way of eating his cake and having it too.

The basic idea came from seeing Sudomir's projection. Zorian couldn't really project himself through the mansion like that, since the wards would stop him, but he could pilot his golem army remotely. That would be very impractical for most mages, but he was a telepath, and a pretty damn good one at this point. All he had to do was install a bunch of telepathic relays into each golem, along with some moderately complex spell formula work to make them understand his telepathic commands.

It worked well. No, it worked *better* than well. Maybe it was because he had animated the golems himself, and they thus had affinity to his own thoughts, but ordering them around telepathically was very fast and smooth – almost like controlling additional bodies. He could never achieve that sort of precision and coordination with verbal commands, and Zorian was wondering if there was any point in even bothering with conventional control methods in the future. Unless he was designing golems for someone else's use, verbal commands were only useful as a backup method for times when his telepathy was being disrupted.

Unfortunately, there were some problems with his idea of simply throwing his golems at Sudomir and orchestrating things from relative safety. For one thing, the fact that he wasn't there personally meant he would be unable to use any magic to help them out. There was no way to cast spells remotely through his puppets – even his mind magic didn't extend beyond the golems themselves. He also wouldn't be able to activate his dispeller grenades and other spell items with mana pulses, which had necessitated a complete redesign of his arsenal into something cruder and less versatile. Finally, there was a fairly major issue of Sudomir seeing through his setup and disrupting his control over the golems. According to the books, that was the major reason why remote control schemes weren't more popular among mages – they were too easy to disrupt if the opponent knew what he was doing. Hopefully his solution to that problem would work. Come to think of it, he should probably check up on that now...

Dropping his pen on the table with a small sigh, Zorian left the planning room (as he had dubbed it) and went to the crafting chamber where he assembled his golems and other equipment. Most of the golems were already done at this point, silently standing at the far end of the room where they wouldn't be in the way, awaiting orders. Six golems – two of them big and bulky to soak up damage, and four smaller and faster ones to serve as a backbone of his little force. He extended his mind to them momentarily, testing their responsiveness to see if the control interface had degraded since their last test. It hadn't. Good. The first dozen or so versions had been very unstable, but it seemed he had ironed out all the flaws in the latest batch. He turned his attention to the reason he came here – his last, currently unfinished creation.

It didn't look like much, in all honesty. Thin, almost skeletal, and yet smaller than even his four agility-focused combat golems. The animation core that powered it was likewise underwhelming

– the golem in question couldn't do *anything* without constant, detailed instruction. It would be useless for just about any purpose... except, hopefully, for the one that Zorian designed it for.

Namely, for being his body double. The golem was specifically designed to mimic his size and proportions, with an animation core meant to synchronize with his telepathic orders as smoothly as possible. Magical sensors allowed Zorian to see and hear through it as through his own senses, and while he couldn't achieve the same amount of hand-eye coordination while using it as he could with his own body, it should be enough to throw around grenades and walk around well enough to pass as a human being.

He glanced at the nearby alchemical container, where a syrupy pink liquid bubbled softly upon a carefully regulated fire. The artificial skin solution looked pretty much done to his eyes, but the recipe he had bought claimed the whole thing needed to simmer for at least another fifteen minutes so he left it alone for the moment, putting the golems through another round of tests to pass the time.

Finally, once the fifteen minutes had passed, he dumped the artificial skin solution over the golem and quickly started molding it into something resembling himself before it solidified and became unmodifiable.

Half an hour later, he stood back to inspect his handiwork. It... was kind of bad. The golem didn't really look like him much, or even entirely human, despite his best efforts. Either he sucked even more as a sculptor than he'd thought he did or he should have taken the solution off the fire sooner, recipe be damned. But it was adequate, really – some strategic goggles, heavy clothing and maybe a large hat should be enough to hide the imperfections. It should look human enough to fool Sudomir, at least until he could face off with the necromancer in person, at which point the man's

soul sight would allow him to see through any amount of disguise anyway. Hard to hide that the golem has no soul, after all.

Oh well, even if the idea turned out to have been stupid and unnecessary in the end, he regretted nothing. He'd always wanted to make a body double of himself to offload some of his more annoying duties onto, and this seemed like a step in the right direction. Animation spells could get scarily intelligent at the highest levels of sophistication, so it should be possible to design a lookalike golem that could pass casual inspection and pose as him.

Looking at the misshapen thing in front of him, though, Zorian knew he was quite far from being able to create something like that.

He'd never be able to skip family gatherings with *this*!



By now, the gate assault had become something of a routine for Zorian. He dealt with the Ibasan defenders virtually flawlessly, the only complication being that the pair of cave drakes he'd used as a distraction had fallen a little too quickly for Zorian's liking. They were big and tough, but apparently hordes of weaker opponents were a better choice for keeping the defenders busy until he could secure the gate. Still, all of his golems had survived the attack on the Ibasan base, and most of his spell item stockpile was still unspent, so Zorian considered the first phase of the attack a success. With the gate secure, the real operation could begin. He pushed the unconscious body of one of the Ibasans through the gate to fool the mansion's wards into thinking the incursion was authorized and then stepped through, his golem battlegroup trailing behind him.

The plan was simple: Zorian would remain in the gate room, guarded by one of the big golems, while the rest of his force would

be sent deeper into the mansion to confront Sudomir. Zorian would be essentially projecting himself through the smallest, most human-looking golem, occasionally giving the rest of the golems superfluous verbal commands to complete the illusion. Hopefully this would fool Sudomir into thinking he was dealing with two human invaders, one of whom was just guarding the gate while the other one led a force of golems deeper into his domain, rather than just one human that was directing the golems remotely. Not only should it keep Sudomir from trying to disrupt Zorian's remote control, it should also keep Sudomir's attention firmly on the advancing golems and reduce the chance of him sending his forces around to strike at real Zorian.

The first surprise came when his golems had reached the spot where the wards had turned on him in the previous restart. This time they didn't activate. Strange. After thinking about it for a while, Zorian decided it was probably because none of the golems had souls. The detection wards were probably soul-based, just like everything else in this house.

Sadly, that only delayed the problem, as he soon encountered a locked door he had to go through to keep advancing. The golem Zorian was puppeteering didn't have anything to pick the lock with, and even if it had, it lacked the manual dexterity to perform something as finicky as lock-picking, so he just ordered the big golem to smash the door aside.

Unsurprisingly, that proved too much for the wards to ignore, and they immediately turned hostile. Zorian ordered the golem group forward, trying to get them as close to the mansion's center as possible before Sudomir scrambled his undead forces and tried to intercept them.

Curiously, the dimensional gate stayed open, despite the activation of the wards. Zorian could feel the wards' agitation as they realized he was a threat and intensified around him, but

even though he triggered the wards in such a brazen manner, even though he was right there in the gate room, the dimensional opening refused to close shut. Obviously triggering the wards outside the actual gate room sidestepped the automatic shutdown contingency, but that sounded like such a silly oversight that Zorian couldn't help but think Sudomir wanted things to work like that. Surely a warding expert like Sudomir wouldn't make that sort of mistake? And even if he did, he almost certainly had a way to shut down the gate on his own initiative, independent of any automatic shutdown.

What was he missing here? Why would Sudomir *want* the gate to remain open, even if he had intruders inside his mansion?

Well, whatever. Only one way to find out. The golems pressed onwards, even as the first waves of undead began to crash into them. Zorian had plenty of spell items to burn this time, so he used them quite liberally on the attackers to great effect. His advance was steady and unstoppable, and the attacks on his golem group became increasingly frantic and disorganized as time went by. Sudomir hadn't even tried to contact him, in person or via projection.

There were far less traps than Zorian expected there would be, though in retrospect it made a lot of sense that Sudomir wouldn't seed his corridors with explosives and other destructive effects. Nobody wanted their possessions trashed by their own defenses, and the mansion was usually filled to the brim with guards anyway. When Zorian did finally encounter a real trap, it came in the form of a gas trap that rapidly filled an entire hallway with thick, yellow smoke. Considering that the gas had no effect on his golems and that the activation of the trap was soon followed by one last attack by the mansion's undead defenders, Zorian guessed that the gas was poisonous. It was a pretty good way to debilitate unprepared living foes while leaving the undead boars and warriors un-

affected. The smoke also reduced visibility for anyone relying on regular sight, while the undead didn't seem affected by the resulting visibility issues.

Sudomir had clearly put in his all into this one last attack, even sending a pair of flesh golems to reinforce the more familiar boars and black-clad human corpses. The flesh golems managed to destroy two of his smaller golems before being torn apart, but the result was never really in doubt. The undead were destroyed and Zorian broke through the last door standing between him and his destination. The golem he was puppeteering stepped into the heart of Iasku Mansion, and the sight honestly left Zorian speechless.

The room was large and cylindrical, with every inch of the walls covered with spell formula glyphs. Rather than being simply etched or painted on, however, the glyphs were made out of a shiny, silvery metal embedded into the walls. The really eye-catching thing, though, was the massive crystalline cylinder placed into the exact center of the room. It stretched from floor to ceiling, affixed to them via stone bases and thick metal bands, and emanated a soft blue glow that dimmed and brightened in a slow, regular pattern. Like a gigantic, glowing, cylindrical heart.

Zorian stared at the glowing pillar and the glyph-covered wall in silence, wondering what the hell he'd stepped into. He had expected to find something interesting here, yes, but the sheer scale of the thing in front of him was rather intimidating.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sudomir said, stepping from behind the pillar. "It took me years to build all of this. It's a work of love, and I'd really hate to see it damaged. So be a little careful with those explosives you are toting around here, okay?"

Zorian frowned at the man in front of him. Sudomir was just standing there, smiling at him cockily. It was as if he was daring Zorian to attack him. For a moment, he debated simply ordering his golems to surge forwards and crush Sudomir into paste, but he

decided to hold back for the moment. He wanted to see if he could get something out of the man first.

"The cylinder is a soul storage device, isn't it?" Zorian spoke through the golem. "That's how you're powering the wards in this place. There must be hundreds of souls trapped there..."

"A *soul storage device*!" Sudomir repeated, sounding quite outraged. His left hand twitched uncontrollably for a second before Sudomir used his other hand to still its movements. "You think all of this is just..."

He burst into laughter, like he'd just heard a very amusing joke.

Was it just Zorian or did Sudomir sound just a little bit unhinged this time?

"My dear, foolish, uninvited guest... you have no idea what you have stumbled upon here, do you? Look around you!" said Sudomir, making a sweeping gesture with his hands to indicate at the room they were standing in. "Do you really think this place is just a simple soul storage device? No, no, my friend – what you are looking at is a veritable well of souls containing thousands of spiritual essences, and with enough room for a million more!"

"A million souls?" Zorian asked incredulously. "Come on now, Sudomir... how would you even gather that many souls in a timely manner?"

"Cyoria has almost half a million people," Sudomir said, shrugging lightly. "If the attack on Cyoria goes as planned, most of them are going to die tonight. They will then go here to join the ones I've already gathered."

He knocked on the crystal pillar lightly for emphasis.

"What?" asked Zorian, a horrifying realization dawning on him.

"Oh yes... This place?" began Sudomir, spinning in place with his hands outstretched. "This is the equivalent of an antlion pit for souls. Everyone who dies in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion has their

soul drawn here and trapped in the well. Normally, that doesn't mean much, since we're in the middle of nowhere. But now..."

"The gate," Zorian said. "It allows you to extend your soul trap over the city while the Ibasans go about killing people. That's why you haven't closed the gate, even after you realized you were under attack."

"Every moment that the gate spends closed is a moment during which souls are not flowing into the well," Sudomir said. "And, you see, there were no more attackers pouring in by the time I noticed the intrusion. Only you two... or perhaps just one? I can't see a soul on you. You didn't react at all when I flooded the corridor with breath-stealer gas, either. Not to mention how suspiciously passive the mage next to the gate is. You're some kind of fancy projection, aren't you?"

Before Zorian could say anything, Sudomir started laughing again, loudly and hysterically, his hands twitching and clenching in a disturbing manner. Zorian was pretty sure at this point that there was something very wrong with Sudomir. He had triggered some pretty radical change in the necromancer with his successful invasion. The laughter, the twitching, the unusual candidness of his responses... Sudomir looked almost drugged. Did he panic in the face of the crisis and take some ill-advised enhancement potion? Or maybe perform some spell with severe side-effects? Whatever the answer, Sudomir was steadily becoming more unstable as the conversation progressed and Zorian didn't think he would get much more out of him.

"Why? Why!?" Sudomir screamed suddenly, instantly transitioning from laughter to overdramatic despair. His skin writhed like snakes were swimming through his flesh and his eyes began to shine with a soft blue glow. Yup, he'd definitely panicked and done something stupid. "Why did you come here!? Everything was going so well, so perfectly! All those years of planning, all the

sacrifices I made... I won't let you take it all away from me! I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Zorian ordered his golems to attack the man, but he had made his move far too late. Before the golems could reach him, Sudomir's body rapidly expanded and twisted, transforming into a huge humanoid monster. It was green, vaguely reptilian and had small, vestigial wings growing out of its back – like a cross between a troll and dragon.

The golems he'd ordered to attack Sudomir kept charging at their target, undaunted by the transformation, but the creature was stronger and more agile than Zorian's creations. It probably was part-troll, too, because it definitely regenerated like one when wounded. It did not take long for the smaller golems to be reduced to scrap, and the big golem wasn't doing so well either.

Zorian was just about to hit it with every spell item he had left when he found out that the troll-dragon thing could breathe fire too. The poor golem he was following didn't last a second under the heat before failing.

The big golem disappeared from his control less than a minute later. Knowing that he had no chance against this transformed, berserk version of Sudomir, Zorian stepped back into the Ibasan base on the other side of the dimensional gate and then tried to analyze the gate to see how it worked.

Predictably, the gate soon detected his tampering and shut itself down. Of course. He kind of figured that would happen. Well, at least that way Sudomir couldn't get to him, and he'd also located one of the traps Quatach-Ichl had placed on the gate to prevent tampering with it. It would take a fair number of restarts, but he felt he could locate and dismantle the protection on the gate with a bit of trial and error.

He didn't have much time to consider things, though, because Quatach-Ichl showed up soon after the gate closed to see what was

happening. Zorian activated his restart switch rather than confront him.



At the start of the next restart, once he had a chance to calm down and think about things, Zorian decided that Sudomir had to be dealt with somehow. Originally he'd gone after the man because he had seemed like an easier target than the Ibasan leaders and probably knew a lot of their sensitive secrets, but the revelation about his soul gathering operation really disturbed Zorian. He had no idea what one would need hundreds of thousands of souls for, but it couldn't possibly be good. Politics, he'd said. Hmph.

Still, this soul trap of his... it should be very obvious to someone who knew what to look for. Large-scale magic like that couldn't be hidden easily. Was that why Sudomir had gotten rid of every soul mage in the region? So they couldn't stumble upon his twisted masterpiece and report him to the government? If so, then dealing with Sudomir might simply be a matter of reporting the man to central authorities and having them deal with everything.

He didn't need this kind of distraction at the moment, though – the matriarch's memory package was steadily degrading and he was running out of time. Thus, for the next two restarts he continued doing what he had been doing thus far: visiting aranean webs in order to learn more about memory packets and the aranean mind. He still made two gate assaults at the end of each restart, but he no longer tried to access the soul well in the center of the mansion. He didn't see the point – he completely lacked the expertise to make sense of that thing, so he doubted he would learn anything from studying it. Instead, he simply explored the rest of the mansion, building a map of the place and trying to see if there was anything

else interesting about it. He didn't find much, though. Certainly nothing that could compare with the soul trap in the central room.

He also tried to make sense of the teardrop pendants the Ibasans wore around their necks, also without much luck. Analyzing them did not bring down Quatach-Ichl's wrath on him like he had feared, but there was nothing there to indicate he was holding a functional keystone. The only thing he could think of was that the material itself was perhaps the key. Zorian couldn't identify it, and it was totally indestructible to casual efforts. It kind of reminded him of Quatach-Ichl's skeleton, which was also black in color and incredibly resistant to damage.

Although the Luminous Advocates remained his primary aranean teachers in these two restarts, he also checked out the eight webs he was referred to by the Silent Doorway Adepts. Sadly, only three of those were in any way useful to him: The Mind Temple, Perfect Phantasm Crafters and Adherents of Contemplation. Zorian chose to learn from the Mind Temple in the first restart and the Perfect Phantasm Crafters in the second one. The Adherents of Contemplation were too fond of riddles and non-answers for his taste.

The Mind Temple were all about memory, though more focused on honing and organizing their own memories than reading and modifying other people's ones. Still, they had quite a lot of expertise when it came to memory packets, even if what they taught him was centered more about him making his own memory packets than repairing foreign ones. His skills at making memory packets were good enough by now that he would never really forget anything he specifically tried to remember. If nothing else, that should drastically reduce the number of notebooks he had to write and store at the end of each restart – the alteration method was still useful for transferring other people's notes across the restart, such as Kael's research, but most of his own needs were now better

served by directly organizing his memories with mind magic.

The Perfect Phantasm Crafters had a very indicative name. They specialized in making illusions – ones made out of real sound and light, as well as simple tricks of the mind. They couldn't really help him with his memory package problem, but Zorian would also have to actually interpret the information inside the package once he opened it, and Perfect Phantasm Crafters knew a lot about the difference between human and aranean minds. They had to, if they wanted their illusions to work on humans.

However, as helpful as the Perfect Phantasm Crafters were in that regard, there was ultimately only one thing that consistently helped him to understand aranean thoughts – beating up aranea unconscious and forcibly rooting through their minds. Even getting Lukav to make him an aranea transformation potion and assuming their shape for a few hours hadn't helped him as much.

At the end of the second restart, he tried repairing the matriarch's memory package again. It was the last time he would be able to extend the deadline, and he was hoping to get four or five extra months before he had to open it.

Instead, he got three.

Damn it.



Though he had only three more months until he had to open the matriarch's memory packet, Zorian decided to stop seeking lessons from the aranea and simply go back to Cyoria, taking Kirielle with him as usual. There was no point in seeking the lessons at the moment, since he could no longer repair the packet and the only thing that could really improve his ability to understand it was attacking aranea and reading their minds. He didn't need to set aside an entire restart to do that. Besides,

he wanted to ask Kael about his opinion of Sudomir and his operations, since the morlock was the only friendly necromancer that Zorian knew.

He didn't tell Kael about Sudomir and his soul trap immediately, though – that was bound to be rather upsetting to the boy, considering that a lot of Kael's friends and acquaintances were killed by Sudomir and probably ended up in that soul well of his. Not really the best topic to broach just after you told someone all about the time loop and the Ibasan invasion that was going to hit the city in less than a month. He would let Kael browse through his notebooks in peace for now and broach the subject later.

Unfortunately, coming back to Cyoria meant that he had to suffer through Xvim's stupid exercise sessions again. Levitate these marbles, make them glow different colors, assemble them into different shapes... so boring. Wait, fuse two marbles together? What? Xvim usually didn't give him any alteration-based shaping exercises during these sessions. But no matter, he had already tried that shaping exercise on his own, so it was still trivial to perform it.

Xvim frowned at him. Should he be worried or celebrate that he induced that kind of reaction out in the usually imperturbable man?

Worried, it turned out. Xvim's demands immediately became atypical following that. Zorian was told to levitate water, to freeze it solid, to make a perfect cube out of ice and then quickly cut it in half without shattering it, to reshape a coin, to burn images into wooden panels, to make a coin spin, to shape candlewax, to hold his hand over a candle flame without getting burnt, to make dice fall on one specific side Xvim called out, to repair a damaged watch, to wilt a flower, to teleport a snail...

Quite a few exercises were utterly beyond Zorian, especially the latter ones. Others he could do, but not with the surety that

he knew Xvim demanded of his charges. And yet, Xvim did not triumphantly stop once he'd found something that Zorian was incapable of and then tell him to practice that until he got it right. Instead he just moved on to something else, apparently just testing him to see where his limits were.

"Tell me honestly," Xvim said. "Are you truly Zorian Kazinski?"

"Yes?" Zorian said, baffled. "Why would you ask that?"

"You are too good," Xvim told him bluntly.

What? *Now* he decided he was too good at this? Bizarre. What did he do to perturb Xvim so much? He couldn't really remember doing anything more impressive than usual.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Zorian said. "I am definitely Zorian Kazinski, though, no doubt about it."

"Then how do you explain your shaping skills?" Xvim asked. "They are completely implausible for your age and known background. No matter how talented you may be, your shaping skills are just too... *thorough*... to be anything but a product of years of practice."

"I started early," Zorian tried.

Xvim gave him an unamused look.

"I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, mister Kazinski," Xvim said with a sigh. "I know it was me who taught you those shaping skills you are currently displaying. Not all of them, but definitely the ones that you have learned properly. Not only do you display some tells that I don't think anyone other than me would have taught you, but you also seem to know me well enough to anticipate my requests before I even speak them."

Oops. He hadn't even realized he'd been doing that.

"The thing is, mister Kazinski," said Xvim, leaning forward and fixing him with a small glare, "I don't remember ever teaching

you. And I assure you that I have a *very* good memory. I would like an explanation, if you don't mind."

Zorian was silent for nearly a minute, thinking of how to answer that. He could just play dumb, but he had a feeling that Xvim wouldn't let this go and the most likely explanation for the confusion was that Zorian had used mind magic on Xvim in the past. Considering that he was, in fact, a highly capable mind mage, and that this would be hard to hide under determined scrutiny, it was in his best interest not to let things degenerate into actual legal investigation.

He could just hit the restart switch and start over, but... that felt a little excessive at this point. He could always do that later if the situation continued to deteriorate. Plus, activating the switch so early in the restart might bring unwanted attention from Zach and Red Robe.

Would it be so bad if he told Xvim the truth? The man knew how to protect his mind, and probably wouldn't go around telling everyone who would listen that his student claimed he was a time traveler. As much as Xvim annoyed him, he was a capable adult mage that clearly knew a lot about limitations of magic and how to go about developing it. He could be quite useful if he could convince him he was telling the truth.

"I'm waiting, mister Kazinski," Xvim said.

"Alright," Zorian relented. "The truth is that we're all trapped in a time loop of sorts. The whole month leading up to the summer festival repeats itself endlessly, but most people forget everything that happened when time resets itself. But some people remember, and I am one of them..."

Xvim listened to Zorian's story in silence, neither asking questions nor professing disbelief. Zorian didn't tell the man everything, of course – he said nothing about the invasion that happened at the end of the restart, for instance, and he kept informa-

tion about himself and his abilities to a minimum. Definitely not telling the man who suspected him of messing with his mind that he was more than capable of doing just that!

Eventually, Zorian's explanation wound down and silence descended upon the room. Xvim seemed to be lost in thought for the moment and Zorian was content to wait for the man's reaction.

"So," Xvim said eventually. "You are saying that we have been having these practice sessions for several years now, except that I forget all about them every few weeks."

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"That must have been a miserable experience for you, then," Xvim observed candidly.

"Err..." Zorian fumbled, unsure how to respond to that.

"I am still not sure whether to believe you about all this," Xvim said. "It seems quite unbelievable. However, assuming you are indeed telling the truth, I feel compelled to apologize for the actions of my... previous selves. You see, I make it a point to be very demanding with my charges for the first month or two of our mentorship."

What?

"What?" Zorian asked incredulously, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

"It builds character and weeds out the unfit," said Xvim, giving him an unrepentant shrug. "Moreover, most of the students being sent my way need to be humbled somewhat, for their own good. Unfortunately, a 'time loop' does not play well with such ploys. I wouldn't have put you through several years of that kind of treatment if I had any control over the situation."

Zorian was torn between wanting to laugh and slugging the man in the face. He subjected every student to several months of being an utter jerk as a test of character? That was so stupid! How could he possibly think that was a reasonable thing to do?

"I cannot possibly put into words how much I want to hit you right now," he told Xvim seriously.

"We'll talk about expanding your vocabulary later," Xvim told him dismissively, before depositing a pen and a piece of paper in front of him. "For now, please list a few things I can check to confirm your story."

Shooting Xvim one last glare, Zorian picked up the pen and started writing. This was going to be one long restart, he could already tell.

SUBSTITUTION

Time travel was a hard thing to prove. It was 'known' to be impossible among mages, and proof to the contrary usually boiled down to possession of impossible knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, that often simply wasn't convincing enough. There existed a nigh-infinite number of ways to gather information with magic, none of which required time travel, and impossible skills could just as easily mean you were not who you claimed you were. There was little that Zorian could tell Xvim that couldn't be explained with something more mundane than time travel.

Still. While Zorian had no idea whether Xvim was actually going to accept his story, he was confident that the information he'd written down on the sheet of paper in front of him would at least give the man some pause. The restarts varied greatly in how they developed, but some things always remained the same, which meant that Zorian could give Xvim a multitude of small predictions about the upcoming days. Things like what was going to be written in the newspapers, what magical stores would announce special sales in preparation for the summer festival and what students would end up leaving the academy because of the monster incursions. It helped that it had been less than a week since the

restart had begun, so events didn't have the time to diverge too much yet.

Individually, each of the things he'd written were easy to explain. When taken as a whole? He would have to be the best damn spy in the whole city to acquire that kind of information, and it *still* wouldn't explain how he'd known about some of the more sudden events on the list.

He handed the list to Xvim, who quickly scanned it and then pocketed it with a silent nod. He told Zorian that he would try to verify his claims over the weekend and that Zorian should visit him again on Monday.

And that was that. A decent outcome, all things considered. Zorian halfway expected Xvim to criticize his penmanship and tell him to start over and write properly this time around. He bid Xvim goodbye and left.

He was in the process of walking back home, idly trying to think of a good way to broach the topic of Sudomir's soul well to Kael, when he spotted a green-haired girl waving at him in the distance. Surprised and distracted as he was, it took him several seconds to realize who he was looking at, even though green hair was pretty damn rare and therefore a huge giveaway. It was Kopriva Reid, one of his classmates.

He waved back uncertainly, wondering what that was about. It was common courtesy to greet your classmates when you meet them outside the academy, of course, but this wasn't the first time Zorian had encountered Kopriva outside the academy and she had never reacted like this in the past. She'd give him a nod if they passed each other by or say hello if he did it first, but never try to attract his attention like she just had. Which made sense, really. She was almost a total stranger to him, just like most of his classmates. So why was she...

Oh. Nevermind, he was going to find out what she wanted

soon enough. She was crossing the street and making a beeline towards him.

Zorian studied her as she approached, trying to see if he was in some kind of trouble. He felt no hostility or apprehension emanating from her, so probably not, but Kopriva always kind of intimidated him. Less so since he got stuck in the time loop – before he used to actively avoid her whenever possible – but even in his current situation he'd rather not tangle with someone from House Reid. He was still vulnerable to being drugged senseless, and that was kind of their specialty.

He clearly wasn't the only one who found her intimidating, either. She was a tall, shapely girl – something Zorian could attest to at the moment, what with her getting ever closer to his position – but very few people had tried to court her over the years. Even Benisek refrained from making a pass on her, which was pretty damn amazing. Zorian was pretty sure that Akoja was the only other girl in their class who Benisek had never tried to flirt with.

"Zorian, you can't believe how glad I am to see you here," she said once she'd finally gotten close enough. He raised his eyebrows at the statement. "You live together with Kael, right?"

"Yes," he confirmed, curious what that had to do with anything.

"Good. I agreed to meet with him about a business deal today and he gave me the directions to this 'Imaya's place' where you two live, but... I seem to be misremembering something because I can't find it," she said. "Could you give me some directions here?"

"I can do better. I'm on my way there myself, so if you don't mind I can just walk you there," he said.

"Great! I was hoping you would say that," she grinned at him. "Lead the way, then. And don't mention to anyone that I got lost, okay? That was pretty freaking embarrassing, I don't know how I messed up so badly. If Kael asks, we just... met on the way by

accident. Kind of true, anyway.”

Zorian nodded in acceptance and they both set off towards Imaaya's place. He couldn't help but frown at Kopriva slightly, though. Business deal? Was this what he thought it was?

Unfortunately, Kopriva noticed the look and misconstrued its meaning.

“What's that look for?” she asked defensively. “You don't approve of me coming to your place or something?”

“It's not like that,” Zorian assured her hurriedly. Man, she was prickly. “It's just that when Kael told me he was going to find someone to buy those 'rare' alchemical ingredients from, I didn't expect this to be the result. I thought he would go to someone... well, *older*.”

When Kael had told Zorian that he had to get ahold of a fair amount of normally restricted alchemical ingredients to continue with his research, Zorian had thought the morlock would go to some shady shop or something, not try to broker a deal with one of their classmates. Then again, Zorian had to admit that that the idea wasn't stupid as such. House Reid, of which Kopriva was a member, specialized in growing magical plants and processing them into alchemical ingredients. It was also a public secret that they were heavily involved in the sale of drugs and illegal alchemy products in general, and through that maintained deep links with organized crime groups. There was a highly publicized trial against the House a few years back, since several smuggling rings were found to be led by 'exiled' members of the House, but nothing came out of it in the end. House Reid was responsible for a sizeable proportion of Eldemar's herb fields, greenhouses and forest preserves, some of which nobody except House Reid knew how to tend to, so the government wasn't willing to antagonize them too much.

So yes, there was some logic to Kael approaching Kopriva to acquire the needed ingredients, though Zorian was still very sur-

prised it had worked. He would have expected Kopriva to act outraged at the implication that she was engaged in criminal activities, fearing some kind of trick. That's what Zorian would have done in her place. He would have to ask Kael how he had done it later, just in case there was some secret to it that he should know about – he did intend to make use of criminal networks himself in the near future, after all.

"Wait, you're in on that?" she asked, surprised.

"Yeah. We're in a partnership of sorts," Zorian said.

"Huh," she said, giving him a speculative look. "I would have never guessed you were involved in something like this. You just seem so straight-laced, you know? Then again, you're a pretty driven guy, and my grandfather always said that nobody ever got powerful by following the law."

Such sage wisdom from the older generation.

"To tell the truth, I would have never guessed you'd be involved in something like this, either," Zorian said. "I mean, weren't you annoyed when Kael approached you about this? Doesn't it bother you that one of your fellow students automatically assumed you were involved in your family's 'other business' simply because you're part of House Reid?"

She snorted derisively.

"Everyone assumes that anyway," she said. "They're just too polite to say it out loud. At least most of the time. Besides, I made some uncharitable assumptions about him as well. I wouldn't have acknowledged any random offer, you know? If *you* had been the one to approach me, I would have told you to go to hell. And possibly punched you, if you didn't back off after that. But since Kael is a morlock, I assumed his offer is actually genuine. Morlocks have a reputation of their own, you know..."

Ah. So *that's* why it had worked so easily.

Kopriva then tried to talk him into telling her what he and Kael

needed so much restricted material for and how they had gotten the money to pay for it. Zorian actually answered the first, saying it was for benign medical research (totally true, unless Kael was misleading him) but refused to answer questions about the money. He took the chance to ask her if she was planning on reporting them to someone, reading her surface thoughts to make sure she was telling the truth. She denied that – truthfully, as far as he could tell – and seemed more amused than insulted by the accusation. She didn't really believe they wanted the materials for medical research, though. Zorian didn't bother convincing her he was telling the truth.

After that, the conversation shifted to other, more casual topics. Mostly academy-related, as that was a relatively inoffensive subject, but Kopriva sometimes pried into his private life when she saw a convenient opportunity to do so. It was interesting, as she hadn't been this talkative in the previous restarts when she'd joined his combat magic group.

Eventually they reached their destination, at which point Kopriva met Imaya. His landlord had either never heard of House Reid or had an even better poker face than Zorian had thought, because she looked positively overjoyed about Kopriva's visit. She insisted that Zorian was rude not to offer Kopriva something to eat and drink before dragging her away to hash out a deal.

"Food before work," Imaya said in a lecturing voice. "That's the rule."

Since Kopriva seemed actually excited at the prospect of eating some homemade cookies, Zorian went along with it. He wasn't in that much of a hurry.

He really shouldn't have been surprised when Kopriva asked Imaya for a glass of beer, or when Imaya gave them both a glass in response. He covertly transmuted the liquid into something non-alcoholic while they weren't looking, but that just made the stuff

taste even viler than it usually did, so he may have shot himself in the foot there.

In the end, while the deal was successfully concluded, what was supposed to be a relatively short visit ended up taking most of the afternoon. Kopriva even ended up meeting Kirielle, with whom she got along surprisingly well – he would have to talk to his sister later about what was acceptable for conversation around the green-haired girl, since Kopriva said she would drop by again next week to deliver the materials. He should probably have a talk with Imaya as well, just in case the older woman really had no idea who she was dealing with.

Ultimately, though, Zorian did not worry about the whole thing too much. The deal was largely arranged by Kael, for Kael, with Zorian's role being mainly to pay for it all. As such, he felt it was only proper to let the morlock boy take care of it while Zorian focused on something else.

Gods knew he had too many things vying for his time as it was.



Zorian's plan for the weekend consisted of two solid days of aranea fighting and accompanying memory reading to practice for the eventual opening of the matriarch's memory packet. Sadly, the plan didn't survive collision with reality. His first target – the Burning Apex web in the vicinity of Cyoria – turned out to be a rather poor choice for aggression.

They were a martially-inclined web, proficient in both magic and mental combat, and had spent most of their existence in fierce competition with the neighboring webs. The patrol he ambushed seemed like easy targets to him, but they ended up being anything but. They worked together flawlessly, had some sort of mental attack that could partially pass through his mental barriers and had

prepared the battlefield beforehand. They ended up maneuvering him into a pre-existing explosion trap and detonated a boulder right next to him. He managed to shield himself against the bulk of the blast, but he still ended up with a severely wounded arm and a multitude of minor scrapes. Plus he had a raging headache from when he failed to shield against their telepathic attacks properly.

He activated his recall stone and fled.

The damage was nothing really serious, he later found out, but it would take several days before he was completely healed, even with the healing potions that Kael was supplying him. Since embarking on further campaigns against the aranea while in less than top form struck him as a terrible idea, his plans would have to be delayed. Damn it.

At least Kael was happy. Ever since he had found out that Zorian could teleport all over the country as he pleased, he had been trying to talk Zorian into taking him to the northern wilderness so he could gather herbs, mushrooms and other materials for his research. Zorian had been decidedly against it, considering it to be a waste of time... but since his plan was already shot to hell and he couldn't do much at the moment, he figured he would grant Kael's wish just this once.

Accordingly, Sunday found Zorian wandering around the forest with Kael. Zorian had expected his role would be to simply teleport Kael around and protect him from anything that sought to kill them, but Kael was feeling talkative that day and insisted on explaining everything he was doing to Zorian. Every time they encountered one of the plants Kael was looking for, the morlock boy told him why the plant could be found in that particular place, what it was useful for, and how to harvest the plant correctly. All of which was very important information that was not easy to get ahold of – one could not find this sort of thing in most books, as people were reluctant to share this sort of information. It was all

too easy to overharvest specific magical plants if too many people were doing it, so there was a tendency among herbalists to guard their secrets tightly and only pass them on to their apprentices. Even so, quite a few magical plants went totally extinct over the centuries due to unchecked exploitation, making potions they were used for impossible to make in modern times.

So yes, it was a good thing to know all this. And yet...

"I still don't see why you wanted to do this so badly," Zorian complained as he used a knife to harvest some sort of river grass. The thing was tricky to harvest correctly, since one had to cut it quickly and in exactly the right place or its alchemical properties would be completely ruined. Not an easy thing to do with one wounded hand. "We could have just bought all of this in a store and saved ourselves so much time. Yes, I know it would have been rather expensive, but I could afford it. Easily. Money is less of a problem for me than time."

"I'm afraid you are wrong," Kael said, shaking his head. The morlock boy was crouching not too far from Zorian, staring at a large boulder like it was the most interesting thing in the world. Zorian felt the urge to ask Kael what the hell was so interesting about that rock, but eventually decided he didn't want to know. "The things we are gathering are very hard to find in a store. They tend to be snapped up by wealthy, influential alchemists who buy them straight from the people who gather them in the wild. They never reach the shelves."

"Really?" Zorian asked, surprised. "Strange. You'd think someone would just start cultivating them if they're in such high demand. You know, like House Reid and so many others are already doing for other useful magical plants."

"Not every plant can be grown in controlled conditions," Kael told him. "Many of them cannot survive outside their natural environment for whatever reason, and that environment is either im-

possible or uneconomical to mimic artificially. Others will grow just fine, but will lose whatever essence makes them useful if not taken care of in just the right way or exposed to very specific conditions. Some of them can be transplanted into gardens and survive, but will never grow or reproduce afterwards. Some of them grow so slowly that nobody can be actually bothered to wait for them to grow to maturity."

"Okay, I get it," Zorian said, interrupting his lecture. "Magical plants are very hard to domesticate. I actually knew that already but the ones we're gathering just don't seem all that special to me, you know? But if you say otherwise, I will take your word for it. I'm not a botanical expert by any means."

"Neither am I, but I do know a few things about the topic. My adoptive mother insisted I had to know these things if I wanted to be a real alchemist," Kael said, rising to his feet and discarding the clump of moss he had been scrutinizing up until a moment ago. "Are you done with those? Do you need some help?"

"Here," Zorian said, handing Kael the river grass he harvested. "I think I got all of them correctly but you should probably check to make sure."

Kael glanced at the small bundle in Zorian's hands and immediately discarded three of the stalks that Zorian had apparently ruined without realizing it. How Kael could recognize that on first sight, Zorian had no idea.

"We're done here, I think," Kael said, looking around for a second. "I don't think we'll find anything else here without a lot of walking around. Do you think you can teleport us to the next section of the forest now?"

"Sure. My mana reserves were replenished a while ago," Zorian said.

"Let's go then. Deeper into the wilderness this time around. We haven't been attacked by anything truly dangerous the entire

day and I want to see if I can find some ghost ivy or moonflowers," Kael said, gesturing northward.

Zorian nodded, unperturbed by the somewhat increased danger. While there were quite a few creatures that could kill them that deep in the forest, he should be able to notice them in time and teleport them to safety. A minute later they popped over to their new destination and Kael started looking around to assess their surroundings.

"Teleporting is so very convenient," the white-haired boy commented. "I can't wait to learn how to do that. How long do you think it would take me to learn how to teleport like that?"

"I don't know. A year or two?" Zorian speculated. "If you work hard on your shaping skills, that is. As little as a couple of months if you work with me to create a training regimen for you like I'm doing for Taiven."

"Ha. I might take you up on that at some point," he said. "I'm wasting a lot of your time and nerves as it is, though, and I don't want to be greedy."

"You've been a lot of help over the restarts," Zorian assured him. "You've earned some consideration from me, as far as I'm concerned."

"I see," Kael said speculatively. "In that case, I'd like to pester you a little about those disappearances happening around Knyazov Dveri. Many of these people had been my friends and acquaintances, and their fate rests rather heavily on my mind. I know you have been busy in these past few restarts, but did you perhaps look into the matter at some point?"

Well. He hadn't planned on having this talk during this particular outing, but he supposed this was as good a moment as any to tell Kael about Sudomir's soul trap thingy.

"Actually, about that..."



Zorian had fully expected Kael to freak out when he heard what Sudomir was doing in his isolated forest mansion, and he was not disappointed in that regard. If anything, Zorian greatly underestimated how furious the morlock boy would be by the end of the story. Kael, in a rather stunning display of recklessness, wanted them to go visit Iasku Mansion immediately so he could inspect Sudomir's soul trap. It took almost an hour for Zorian to convince the other boy that this was a spectacularly bad idea – Zorian was still wounded, Kael was not thinking straight, and neither of them had done any preparations for such an expedition.

"You realize what this means, right?" Kael asked him. It was apparently a rhetorical question because Kael immediately answered it himself. "Every one of those times you died during the invasion, your soul was likely sucked into that thing along with everyone else's."

"Yeah, so?" asked Zorian. "The time loop mechanism clearly doesn't care about that. It just plucks my soul out of the pillar and goes on to do its thing like usual."

Though now that Zorian thought about it, that in itself might be a clue as to how the time loop really functioned. It could be that the time loop mechanism was just so powerful that it could casually extract his soul out of a giant soul prison that probably had a million safeguards against someone doing that very thing... but it could also be that the way it all worked just sort of sidestepped the problem. If the time loop really destroyed everything whenever it rolled back time, it might not really matter where his soul ended up in the end, so long as it's still intact.

"Yes, and the collection process is apparently sufficiently benign that you have suffered no soul damage from being exposed to it multiple times," Kael said. "That's good to know, at least. It def-

initely puts some of my fears to rest. But Zorian, I... I'm honestly not sure how much I can help you with this. When you really get down to it, I'm really just a dabbler in soul magic, and Sudomir is clearly an expert at the field. He has also delved deep into areas of soul magic that I wouldn't have even touched, so even if I were an expert I might not have been of any help. I'll see what I can find out in the next couple of days, but in all likelihood you're going to have to find someone else to help you deal with Sudomir."

"I don't suppose you have any recommendations?" Zorian tried.

"I already gave you a list of people I know who dabbled in soul magic and, well, Sudomir already got most of them," Kael shook his head sadly. "Sorry. Maybe try that warrior priest that Lukav is friends with? He clearly has considerable experience with soul magic and he sounds like he could help. In fact, the priesthood in general might be your best bet. They regularly go after people like Sudomir, and have both the qualified experts and the experience necessary for something like this. I'm pretty sure they won't just dismiss your claims out of hand. They take reports of necromancy very seriously, and your accusations should be easy to prove – just teleport someone in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion and let them see the evidence themselves."

"That's an interesting idea. I might actually try that in the next restart, if you really end up being unable to help me in any way," Zorian said. "Though I'm worried about that escalating into something huge and attracting Red Robe's attention. Sudomir is connected to the invasion pretty tightly, I don't think the Ibasans would stay secret for long if Iasku Mansion came under attack like that."

"Honestly, that might actually be a good thing," Kael speculated. "Red Robe thinks you are part of an army of time travelers out to get him, right? If so, it might actually be suspicious if you

don't periodically do something big like that."

"Well, maybe," Zorian said. "But it's still a huge hint to Red Robe, telling him where to look to find out more about his opposition. I feel it's too dangerous to expose myself to danger like that."

After a while, they ran out of ideas to bounce back between each other and uncomfortable silence descended between them. Kael's inability to help much against Sudomir clearly kept eating away at him, gradually worsening his mood, and Zorian didn't know what to say to cheer him up. He doubted Kael even *wanted* to be cheered up. Eventually, Kael decided to simply cut their expedition short and asked Zorian to teleport them back home.

The gathering trip was over.



Monday came, and with it his meeting with Xvim. Xvim had never told Zorian when exactly he should drop by for their talk, so Zorian decided to come see him once his classes were over and he had no other obligations. Xvim, as it turned out, had other ideas. The man ended up causing a small stir by barging into Zorian's first class of the day to pick him up, evidently impatient to talk to him. He had no idea whether this was a good or bad thing, and Xvim refused to discuss anything until they were safely seated inside his office.

"So," Zorian asked. "What's your final verdict?"

Instead of answering, Xvim took a palm-sized stone orb out of his drawer and handed it to Zorian.

"Channel some mana into this orb," Xvim told him.

The moment Zorian did so, the stone sphere lit up in a soft yellow glow. That was very familiar to Zorian. It reminded him of those basic training orbs they were given during their first year at the academy – the ones that helped students learn how to reliably

channel their mana into the target. What was the point of making him do something like that again?

Wait...

"Is this thing testing my mana signature?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Yes," Xvim confirmed. "Everyone's personal mana is unique. You can hide or change your mana signature, but you cannot mimic someone else's to the best of my knowledge. The most you could do is trick the orb into giving a false positive, but I'd be able to tell if you were tampering with it in that fashion. It seems you really are who you claim you are, mister Kazinski. I expected as much, but it would be sloppy not to check."

"First it was a lock keyed in to my mana signature, and now this. How exactly did the academy acquire my mana signature? I don't remember giving it at any point," said Zorian, handing the orb back to Xvim.

"Every time you used one of these training orbs during your first year," said Xvim, waving the stone orb in front of Zorian's face, "you were effectively giving the academy your mana signature. It was just a matter of locking the orb down to preserve it for future use."

"And that's legal?" Zorian frowned.

Xvim nodded. "Required by law, even. The government likes to have everyone's mana signatures on hand for investigations. It greatly simplifies a lot of identity disputes and the like."

"Right," Zorian sighed. "So now that we've established I'm indeed Zorian Kazinski..."

"Yes, the 'time loop' problem," Xvim said, putting the orb back into his drawer. "I assume you are aware of the prevalent opinion regarding time travel?"

Zorian nodded.

"They say it's impossible," he said. "I know. But that's theory-

"And a lot of failed experiments," Xvim interjected.

"-and my personal experiences say otherwise," continued Zorian, ignoring Xvim's interjection. "Whatever 'prevalent opinion' says, I can clearly *see* that time travel is possible. It's just a question of whether I've convinced you I'm telling the truth or not."

"You've convinced me there is something to your story, at least," Xvim said. "But I'm afraid I'm going to need more convincing before I actually accept the idea of a time loop. Do you think you could clarify some things for me?"

The next hour and a half consisted of Xvim questioning Zorian about the rules that governed the time loop and the events surrounding it. The questioning was detailed enough that Xvim probably realized Zorian was hiding some things from him, but the man never called him out on this. He also never wrote anything down, simply staring at Zorian and listening to his explanations in silence. It was honestly all a little unnerving.

"The material world has been cut off from the spiritual realms?" Xvim asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "And you didn't feel this merited an inclusion in that list of things you gave me at the end of our Friday meeting?"

"Well, what would that prove?" Zorian defended himself. "Nothing about that says specifically 'time travel'."

"No, but it helps ameliorate one of the major issues that has been bothering me about this scenario," Xvim said, staring at him. "Namely, the incredible scale of the event you're describing. You've described the time loop as a cosmic phenomenon – it doesn't just wrench your soul into the past, it literally rolls back time for everything *except* you and your fellow time travelers. That's an implausible claim. The universe is very big and magic as we understand it has sharp limitations. But if the time loop had to cut off the material realm from the spiritual sphere to do its work, then that means it is somehow limited in scope, and that makes the whole thing a

lot more believable to me. Did you speak to an astronomer to see if there were any irregularities in the stars and planetary orbits?"

"No," Zorian frowned. "Why do you think there would be irregularities?"

"Because any responsible spell designer tries to minimize the costs of the spell, regardless of how much mana he has at his disposal," Xvim told him. "If I was in charge of building a spell that does what you describe, I wouldn't have bothered extending the effect beyond what I absolutely had to. Why burn resources unnecessarily? No one has ever set foot on the other planets, much less the distant stars. You could simply replace the heavens with an illusionary screen and be done with it. Most people would never know the difference."

"But astronomers might," Zorian guessed.

"Yes. Especially if the spell originates from the time of the first Ikosian emperor like you said it might. There were no telescopes back then, and even professional starwatchers relied on their eyes to note the changes in the heavens. An illusion good enough to fool them might not be enough to do the same today," Xvim said.

"I guess it's worth a try," Zorian said dubiously. "Though I'm honestly kind of skeptical that will go anywhere. I'm pretty sure you can't just isolate our planet from the rest of the celestial bodies without breaking everything horribly and killing us all in the process."

"There has to be a limit somewhere," Xvim said. "I'll talk to the couple of astronomers I know and see what they tell me. In the meantime, make a note somewhere to include the spirit world severance factoid in your list the next time you try to convince me that the time loop is real. It should do wonders for your credibility. Also, make sure to sign the list with this."

Xvim took out a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to him. Written on it in neat, perfect writing was a long string

of letters and numbers. The whole thing was completely random and nonsensical as far as Zorian could tell.

"Some kind of coded message?" Zorian mused out loud.

"Something similar. I've made a lot of contingencies over the years, including ones for when I expect to have my memories edited against my will and want to send messages to my future self," Xvim said, surprising Zorian. That was... quite paranoid. And also a good idea – he should probably make his own version of that. "You will have to memorize the whole thing perfectly for this to work – if even a single number or letter is out of place, the whole thing is ruined."

Zorian took several seconds to commit the code to his memory and then immediately created a memory packet around it, permanently preserving it for flawless recall in the future.

"Done," he said, handing the slip of paper back to Xvim. "What now?"

Based on the various adventure novels Zorian had read as a child, he kind of expected Xvim to promptly burn the paper slip in his hand to prevent it from coming into the wrong hands. But no, Xvim just put it back into his pocket and gave Zorian a searching look. Disappointing.

"That, mister Kazinski, is something that *I* should be asking *you*," Xvim said. "I was originally worried that you might be an imposter and that you might have been editing my memories. Regardless of whether or not you really are a time traveler, you have effectively put those fears to rest. Truthfully, I have no right to demand anything more from you. What now, indeed."

"Well, you *are* technically my mentor and you're supposed to advise me about how to develop my magic," Zorian tried, hoping that Xvim would actually do his job properly for once. He was curious how Xvim's teaching looked when he was not putting his charges through some messed up dedication test.

"Unfortunately, this is probably not the best time for that. I would need to thoroughly test your skills to see how I can best help you, and I've kept you away from your morning classes for too long as it is," said Xvim. "I should have something ready for you when we meet again on Friday."

"Not another batch of shaping exercises, I hope?" Zorian couldn't help but asking.

"No," Xvim said, smiling slightly at the question. "While I definitely intend to correct any obvious deficiencies in your magic base and raise your shaping skills to acceptable levels, I'm actually thinking of advancing your dimensionalism studies as far as they can go. That is, after all, the magical field that deals with things like time manipulation, which makes it uniquely relevant to your situation. It is a hard and demanding field of study, but if you could endure several years of my trials and keep coming, you doubtlessly have the required patience to succeed at it."

Huh. That actually sounded kind of nice. The first part sounded a little ominous, but he would reserve judgment until he actually saw what that entailed in practice. He didn't actually mind the idea of being taught some shaping exercises, so long as Xvim didn't resort to the same frustrating grind that he had employed in the past, and actually explained to Zorian how he was supposed to go about performing the exercise.

In any case, the meeting was very much finished at this point, so Zorian said his goodbyes and left Xvim's office.

It was probably the first time he had ever left that place feeling better than he had when he entered it.



Over the next few days, the aftereffect of Zorian's failed campaign against the Burning Apex web gradually faded away, leaving

him completely healed. Kael was still poring over his necromancy books and tinkering with some kind of spell item he was building, and refused to talk to Zorian about Sudomir. He claimed he was pursuing a lead and that he would discuss things with him when he was ready. Zorian had a feeling that Kael was a little annoyed with him over his handling of the soul trap reveal, but he really couldn't think of what he could have done so much better. Maybe Kael didn't like that Zorian had waited so long to break the news to him? On the other hand, Taiven had reacted much better when he had told her about the time loop this time. She was a lot more receptive to the idea if he didn't wait for her to have a breakdown before telling her.

All in all, the recovery period was a bit boring and Zorian found himself searching for something to pass the time with. Just for fun, he recreated Kirielle's drawings that he had stored in his mind and showed them to her. She frowned a lot while inspecting them, especially at the ones that clearly depicted the interior of Imaya's house and its inhabitants, but she did not seem willing to claim them as her own work. Instead, she criticized the technique of whoever drew them and suggested improvement, which amused him. She then asked him where he got them, and was annoyed at him when he insisted that he conjured them fully formed out of his head, which was also amusing.

Somehow, the resulting argument led to Kirielle giving him an impromptu drawing lesson and Zorian was bored enough at the time to go along with it. According to Kirielle, he was actually decent at drawing, which surprised him. She even claimed he could get as good as she was if he was willing to work on it. Considering how swamped with everything he always was, he doubted he would ever find the time for something like that. Then again, perhaps he could use an actual hobby...

It was during one of those slow days that Zorian went to the

academy library in search of a book that talked about Eldemar's internal politics. Partly because he couldn't shake off the feeling that Sudomir's offhand comment about how he was working with the invaders because of 'politics' wasn't *completely* false, and partly because his recent musings about House Reid made him realize just how rudimentary his knowledge about Eldemar's power structures really was. He doubted he would really find an answer as to what Sudomir was referring to, but it probably wouldn't hurt to educate himself a little on the issue.

In theory, Eldemar's internal situation was relatively simple. The country was a monarchy, with the power of the Crown kept in check by a Council of Elders – a gathering of nobles that were ostensibly supposed to advise the monarch and help them govern the country efficiently. The seats were hereditary, each held by a different Noble House. That was why they were 'Noble' – they had a seat on the Council of Elders, and were thus involved in the direct governing of the country. A regular House, while usually afforded a fair amount of special privileges and autonomy, did not have a say in how the country as a whole was run.

Of course, reality was far more convoluted than that. The Crown and the Council of Elders clashed all the time, the Houses routinely overstepped their bounds if they thought they could get away with it, organizations like the Mage Guild and the Holy Triumvirate Church wielded considerable influence of their own and powerful independent actors tried to play all sides for their own benefit. And that was not even getting into the issue of semi-autonomous entities like the shifter tribes or the Free Port of Luja.

Basically, the matter was complicated and Zorian's initiative didn't accomplish all that much. He was just about to give up and go home when he stumbled upon Tinami. Or rather, she stumbled upon him – he was stationary, with his back turned to her, and the only reason he knew she was there was that he could recognize her

mind through long exposure to her during previous restarts. He was content to ignore her at first, pretending he didn't know she was there... but since she was sufficiently curious to look over his shoulder to see what he was reading, he decided to say hello in the end.

"Hello, Tinami," he said, not bothering to turn around. She immediately jerked back in surprise at the words. Ha. Surprise successful. Taking care to wipe the smile off his face, Zorian turned around to face the girl. It was only polite to look at someone when you were talking to them, after all. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"N-no, sorry," she said, stumbling for a moment but recovering her composure quickly. "I was just curious about what you were reading. And I just have to ask: 'Splinter of Splinters'? Really, Zorian? That's kind of..."

She paused for a moment, clearly searching for a polite term to use.

"Why would you ever read such trash?" she finished eventually.

Zorian looked at the book in his hands. He hadn't noticed anything too bad in the book thus far, though admittedly he wouldn't call it *good*, either. Frankly, the only reason he was idly reading through it was because one of the other books he had already read and liked listed it among its sources.

"I'm trying to find out an answer to a political question, but I know very little about politics," Zorian answered honestly. "So I'm mostly just reading things at random, leafing through whatever book catches my attention."

He placed 'Splinter of Splinters' back on the shelf. The book was boring as hell anyway.

"What kind of topic are you looking for?" Tinami asked him.

"I'm trying to find out a political reason why someone would

want to burn Cyoria to the ground," Zorian told her bluntly. "Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Are we talking about external or internal forces?" Tinami asked, completely unperturbed by his admission.

"Internal," Zorian clarified. "I'm pretty sure the number of external enemies that want the same is numberless."

"Not really, no," Tinami said. "Cyoria supplies critical products to the entire continent. I think only Sulamnon and a handful of others would be glad to see it completely gone."

"What about Ulquaen Ibasa?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Them?" Tinami scoffed. "Who cares what they want? They can't do anything to us except raid our shipping. And as long as Eldemar controls Fort Oroklo, even that is just a minor nuisance."

Zorian hummed non-committedly. He couldn't really fault Tinami for that logic, since he would have likely said something similar before he had experienced the invasion and found out who was behind it.

"Fair enough," he said. "So what I'm getting from all of this is that you know a thing or two about politics, yes?"

"I am an heir of one of the Noble Houses," Tinami shrugged. "I'm required to know this sort of stuff. So yes, I suppose I do."

"Excellent. Then, do you think you can recommend me a book about Eldemar's internal politics that isn't... 'trash', as you say?" he asked her.

He expected her to either say no or give him a title or two to look for. What he did not expect was for her to drag him across the library for over fifteen minutes in search of something that met his exact criteria. By the time Tinami was done 'suggesting' things to him, he'd ended up with three different books, one of which was a huge scary tome that made Zorian sleepy just looking at it. He was starting to think he had made just a tiny bit of a mistake when he had asked her for help in this matter.

"Sorry, I went a little overboard," Tinami apologized, sounding honestly apologetic.

"It's fine," Zorian sighed. "Though I'll be honest with you – I really doubt I'm going to read all of this."

He shook the stack of books in his hands for emphasis.

"If you must pick one of the three to read, read 'Time of Tribulations,'" Tinami told him. Oh good, that wasn't the big one. "That's the important one. The Splinter Wars and the Weeping completely rearranged the political landscape everywhere in Altazia, but especially in Eldemar. Without understanding what aftershocks they caused and how countries dealt with them, you will never really understand Eldemar's politics."

"I see," Zorian said quietly. That did make a lot of sense – the Splinter Wars essentially created Eldemar in its current form, and the Weeping actually originated from Eldemar. Nobody at the time realized just how dangerous it was, in the early days of its spread, so it had significant effects on the country. It would be surprising if those two events *hadn't* changed things greatly. "I guess it has something to do with the significant death toll of mages those two caused?"

"Sort of," Tinami said. "It has to do with replacing them. Before the Splinter Wars, far more mages belonged to an established House or had at least one mage parent. First generation mages like yourself were... well, not rare exactly, but far less common than they are now. After the Splinter Wars and the Weeping, though, a lot of those Houses and families went extinct or bankrupt, unable to deal with the chaos of the times or the loss of critical members. The last thing Eldemar wanted to do was downscale their operations due to lack of mages, so somebody had to replace the dead. The result was a lot of first-generation mages flooding the magical market in previously unseen numbers."

"So?" Zorian asked. "I guess I'm a little biased, being a civilian-

born student myself... but why is that a problem?"

"Not a problem as such, no," Tinami said carefully. "But it definitely changed the politics of the country beyond recognition. First generation mages are educated and supported by the Mage Guild, and by extension the Crown of Eldemar. When Houses and other autonomous groups clash with the Crown, first-generation mages overwhelmingly side with the Crown. The influx of civilian-born mages helped Eldemar bounce back from the Splinter Wars and Weeping incredibly quickly, but it also strengthened royal power and made the Mage Guild far more important than it used to be, and that scares a lot of factions."

"Interesting," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. "How does that relate to Cyoria and people who want to see it burn, though?"

"Well, Cyoria is absolutely critical for first generation mages who want to make it big," Tinami said. "Most other mana wells have sharp limits on the amount of mana they produce, and thus have tight regulations about who can perform what magical business in the area. They're usually controlled by some established group or even a House, and aren't very friendly to newcomers unless they're willing to become someone's underlings. The Hole, on the other hand, spews incomprehensibly vast amounts of mana into the air every single second. Far more than anyone could really use up. There is never a shortage of ambient mana in Cyoria, so nobody cares about how many mana forges, research facilities and various other facilities are built in the city. Unsurprisingly, the city is absolutely flooded with first-generation mages, which makes it a major loyalist stronghold. It's so important to the central government, politically speaking, that some people call it the second national capital. Anyone who has an axe to grind against either the Crown or the Mage Guild might want to see it gone. Though I rather suspect that anyone expressing the desire to see it literally burned to the ground is just being overdramatic. Our ex-

ternal political situation is sufficiently dangerous that no one really wants to weaken the nation too much, and Cyoria is both a major population center and a magical powerhouse.”

”So, what I’m getting from your explanation is that people who most want to see Cyoria gone probably come from various Houses that dislike their historical importance being eroded,” Zorian said. Sadly, that didn’t explain Sudomir’s remark as far as Zorian could tell – he had no idea whether Sudomir was a first-generation mage, but he definitely wasn’t a part of a House. ”But the thing is, there are plenty of Houses, even Noble Houses who have their headquarters stationed here. Yours, for example. Or House Noveda.”

”Not every House likes every other,” Tinami shrugged. ”There are plenty of them that would hold a celebration if every Aoep spontaneously died in their sleep.”

Ouch.

”But it’s funny you would mention the Novedas. You know what happened to them, right?”

”They all died except Zach,” Zorian said immediately.

”Yes, and then the Crown placed Tesen Zveri as Zach’s caretaker, and he sold off nearly everything they owned to his friends and associates for pocket change while paying himself a huge caretaker fee. Few people will outright say so, but the man basically looted the entire House of everything they had. And the Noveda were very, very wealthy,” Tinami explained. ”If Zach wasn’t such an idiot, I’d imagine he’d be extremely bitter about the city authorities that were complicit in the deed. I could totally imagine myself wishing for Cyoria to burn down to ashes, if I were in his place. At least on an emotional level.”

Huh.

”You know,” Zorian said. ”I think I want to hear more about that story...”

CONTAINMENT

The idea that Tesen Zveri had been stealing from Zach was not entirely surprising to Zorian. For one thing, he'd known for quite a while that Zach and Tesen did not get along, what with Zach occasionally thrashing the man at the beginning of the restart for no apparent reason. For another, Zach had explicitly told Zorian in one of the restarts that he did not approve of how Tesen had been managing his properties. It did not take some great genius to see that this was more than just a simple difference in opinion. Theft was one of several explanations that Zorian had considered as a possible explanation, but he could never quite figure out why Tesen would risk his reputation for what was surely just pocket change to someone of his stature.

As it turned out, Zorian had been thinking too small. Tesen wasn't siphoning some money off the Novedas' accounts here and there – he just plain went after everything they had. Surprisingly brazen. What kind of forces stood behind Tesen that would allow him to be so shameless about abusing the trust he was given? What kind of machinations and political maneuvering had compelled the royal family to assign such a hostile caretaker to the last surviving member of a House that had been so loyal to them in the past?

All in all, when Zorian had asked Tinami to tell him more about Zach's caretaker and his looting of House Noveda's properties, he'd expected quite a story. Something lengthy, complex and dramatic. What he got instead was a rather underwhelming tale of simple greed and corruption.

The appointment of Tesen Zveri to the position of Zach's caretaker was completely devoid of controversy at the time the decision was made. Tesen Zveri was the patriarch of Noble House Zveri, who had been close allies of House Noveda, and his reputation had been quite good at the time. Thus, when Tesen nominated himself for the position of Zach's caretaker, few people had any objections. He was a high-ranking nobleman, a powerful mage and an ally of the House that he was supposed to care for – who could really contest his appointment?

Unfortunately, Tesen's greed turned out to be stronger than his sense of obligation or respect for his deceased allies. From the moment he had acquired the rights to manage the Novedas' property, Tesen wasted no time in abusing them as much as possible. Most of their property ended up being sold to members of House Zveri at laughably low prices, and the profits made from those sales largely went to Tesen himself in the form of exorbitant 'caretaker fees' that he paid himself for doing such a fine job at managing things.

"And nobody protested about that?" Zorian asked incredulously. "The Crown? I heard House Noveda were big allies of the royal family. Or one of the Novedas' many vassal families and contractors, they must have had *some* power and they surely couldn't have liked what Tesen was doing. Or hell, other Noble Houses – at least some of them must have felt sympathetic to Zach's cause."

"House Noveda was indeed a close ally of the Crown," Tinami confirmed. "But so is House Zveri. And unlike Noble House

Noveda, Noble House Zveri survived the upheavals largely intact. For the Crown to go after Tesen would have meant alienating one of their major remaining allies at a time where they could ill afford to do so. I suspect the Crown was unpleasantly surprised by Tesen's behavior, but decided to look the other way out of practicality."

She paused for a second, frowning slightly as she considered things.

"Plus, I hear Tesen generously donated some of the artifacts and funds from the Novedas' treasury to the Crown," she eventually continued. "Actually, he was rather generous about spreading the Novedas' wealth around in general. I imagine that's how he quieted most of the criticism."

"I see," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. "They have their slice of the pie, so now they're no longer inclined to protest too much. Still, if Tesen had been as blatant about things as you said, you'd think that somebody would have tried to do something. Some people just don't care about money. Or at least not enough to let something like this go unchallenged."

"Ah, well, I make it sound really obvious but it's really not," Tinami said. "The truth is that Tesen was always going to end up selling off a lot of Noveda properties and halting many of their activities, even if he had been acting in good faith... the problem was more about who he sold things to and at what prices. He was supposed to slim down Noble House Noveda to a strong, manageable core. Instead, he used virtually all of their wealth to enrich his family and further his political career, leaving only a tiny sliver to Zach. But that's not something that is immediately obvious to casual inspection. You would have to launch an investigation into the matter to prove anything, and that would give Tesen plenty of time to mobilize his connections and shut you down before you get anywhere..."

Well, if it actually took some digging to realize what Tesen had done, then that would certainly help explain some things. Such as why none of their other classmates seemed to know about Zach's situation. Most of them were terrible gossips, so if Zach's situation was widely known, Zorian would have known about it too by now.

Though really, considering how readily Tinami was telling him all this, he wondered how it was possible that she'd never told this to the rest of their class.

He decided to just ask her about it.

"Well, if we were having this talk a year ago or so, I wouldn't have told you all this," Tinami told him. "Back then we had Zach in our class, and I wouldn't have wanted to say anything before talking to Zach about it. But now Zach is no longer in our class, so it doesn't matter anymore."

Ah, yes – since Zach fled Cyoria at the beginning of the restart, just like he always did in recent restarts, it made sense to assume he had given up on the academy. His poor showing during their first two years of education probably made the theory even more plausible than it would otherwise be...

He wondered whether Zach had known what Tesen had done to his inheritance before the time loop. He had a hunch the answer was no, since nothing about Zach's pre-loop attitude indicated that he was in any way concerned about his future or angry at his guardian, but he could be wrong. Maybe Zach was a very good actor.

"How much do you think Zach knows about all of this?" Zorian asked Tinami.

"I don't know," she said. "I only tried to sound him out once, and... uh, I guess I was too oblique because he thought I was hitting on him."

Zorian couldn't help it. He laughed.

"It's not funny!" she protested.

After several more minutes of questions and answers, Zorian found out that Tinami couldn't really give him any details about Zach's situation. She knew about the situation in general terms, but the specifics were understandably hard to come by. The conversation did, however, give Zorian an idea – what if Zach wasn't the only one that had happened to?

"Oh yes, that sort of thing is not exactly a rare occurrence," Tinami said when he shared the notion with her. "A lot of weakened Houses and smaller families ended up being dismembered like that in the aftermath of the Splinter Wars and the Weeping. Most countries had too many things on their plate to go after every shady thing that was happening, especially if the people doing the dismembering were closely aligned with the government or some other powerful faction. In fact, compared to the fates of some other heirs, Zach is fairly lucky. Some of them were quite literally looted of everything they had. Once their 'caretakers' were done with their properties, they were basically thrown out on the streets with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The Novedas are still a Noble House though, so Tesen couldn't really go that far. He needed to have some smokescreen in case someone started throwing accusations. So Zach still has his mansion and can live off a healthy trust fund, and Tesen can point to that if somebody tries to charge him with anything."

Interesting. Zorian highly doubted that Zach wanted to see Cyoria burned to the ground just because the city's leadership was complicit in the looting of his House – the other boy seemed too good natured for that – but he could totally imagine some of the other, less fortunate and thus less forgiving individuals wanting to strike back at the people who had profited at their expense. No matter who'd get caught in the crossfire. Could Red Robe be one of the people in that position? That would help explain why the other time traveler seemed to want Cyoria destroyed so badly...

Well, he had no way to confirm that, so that would remain just an idle thought for now. Though, once he opened the matriarch's memory packet, he should probably try to track down those kinds of people living in Cyoria and check up on them. Just in case.

His talk with Tinami did not last long after that. They both had things they needed to be doing, and he was getting the impression that Tinami was starting to get a little suspicious of Zorian's fixation on the topic. Surprisingly, she wanted to meet with him again... or maybe not so surprisingly, since she implied she wanted to ask a favor of him. After agreeing to another meeting, Zorian said goodbye to the girl and went back home.

The moment he arrived back at the house, he realized he had stepped into pandemonium.



After coming back to Imaya's place, he found that Kopriva had dropped by and brought the alchemical ingredients Kael had asked for. Normally that would be excellent news, but it turned out that her timing had been somewhat... unfortunate.

She wasn't the only person to have dropped by at Imaya's house that day. Rea and Nochka had also decided to come over, Nochka so she could play with Kirielle, and Rea so she could have a drink and chat with Imaya. Then, Taiven arrived as well, wanting to discuss something with Kael. Thus, when Kopriva had come over to deliver the package, Kael was locked in his basement with Taiven and Imaya was busy talking to Rea. The job of letting Kopriva into the house fell to the three remaining inhabitants of the house – Kirielle, Nochka and Kana.

Kopriva had already met Kirielle, but not Kana. Kael didn't want their classmates to know he had a daughter, so he had kept her out of sight the last time Kopriva had come over. But Kael

wasn't there, and Kirielle couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it, so when Kopriva asked Kirielle to introduce her friends, she thought nothing of revealing Kana's true identity.

At that point the rest of the household got involved, with Kael freaking out and trying to convince Kopriva to keep Kana's existence a secret, Kirielle repeatedly trying to apologize to Kael, Kopriva being visibly amused, and Imaya trying to run damage control. Amusingly, it turned out that Taiven hadn't known Kana was Kael's daughter either – she just sort of assumed she was Imaya's daughter, despite her having the same sort of vivid blue eyes that her father had, and never sought confirmation about it from anyone.

Sadly, everyone was too caught up in the drama to pay attention to the packet of alchemical ingredients that Kopriva had brought over... well, everyone except Nochka. *She* decided that this mysterious packet was very interesting and worthy of examination. Unfortunately, either Kopriva had failed to secure the ingredients properly or Nochka had examined the package too enthusiastically, because she managed to breathe in a bit of hallucinogenic dust from the package and started losing control over her form. Her eyes became slitted like a cat, she grew a tail and claws and started hissing at people who tried to examine her to see what was wrong.

That started the second round of drama, with Rea being upset that her daughter was basically outed as a shifter and that Kopriva had left 'dangerous substances' within reach of children, Kopriva trying to defend herself, Kirielle assuring Rea that it's okay because she already knew her friend can 'turn into a kitty', Rea being angry at Nochka for being so indiscreet, and poor Imaya playing peacemaker for the second time that day.

At this point Zorian had come back from his talk with Tinami and was told what happened in his absence.

"I was only gone for a couple of hours," Zorian complained. "Damn, you people work fast."

He was immediately faced with a plethora of unamused looks.

"Okay, look," he said placatingly. "I think you're all making mountains out of molehills here. First of all, I'm pretty sure Kopriva has no intentions of spreading rumors about Kana amongst the student body..." Mostly because he'd read her mind to make sure. "...and I don't think anybody here really minds Rea and Nochka being shifters, either."

"What makes you think I'm a shifter as well? She could have inherited it from her father for all you know," Rea protested, folding her hands over her chest.

Zorian ignored her remark.

"Really, the only semi-serious issue was that Nochka ended up drugged," said Zorian.

"I swear I secured the package properly," Kopriva mumbled.

"Nochka probably punctured something with her claws," Rea admitted with a sigh. "She likes to use her claws to remove wrappings and such."

"Nevertheless, the package was here because of me... and Kael, but that's beside the point. The point is, I feel somewhat responsible for what happened. What do you think would be an appropriate compensation for this?"

"Oh, there is no need-" began Rea, only to get cut off by her own daughter.

"I want a doll," Nochka slurred. The effects of the alchemical dust she breathed had faded, but were still far from gone. "Like the one Kiri has. She said you made it."

"I made a doll for Kiri?" Zorian asked, before he realized what Nochka was referring to. "Oh wait, you mean Kosjenka. That's technically not a doll, but whatever. Assuming your mother agrees, I don't see the problem with that."

"Is this 'doll' going to explode if treated roughly?" Rea asked suspiciously.

Not an unreasonable fear. Some magical items held a substantial amount of mana inside of them and could thus easily detonate if handled roughly. In this particular case, though, that would never happen. He didn't trust Kirielle around explosives any more than Rea trusted Nochka around the same.

"No, it will just stop being animated," Zorian said. "The golem is powered by ambient mana and made mostly out of wood, so there is nothing in there that could explode if it breaks."

"Then no, I have no objections," Rea shrugged. "Though really, this is quite unnecessary. Nochka is just milking this for all it's worth and I wouldn't blame you at all for simply telling her off."

"Mom!" Nochka whined. "You're supposed to be on my side!"

Zorian was distracted from the spectacle by a burst of emotion coming from Kana. The little girl was fidgeting like crazy in Kael's lap, clearly waging some internal war with herself. Though she was as silent as ever, Zorian could feel through his empathy that her attention was squarely on him. She wanted to... tell him something?

"Let me guess, you want a doll too?" Zorian said, taking a wild guess at what was bothering her.

Kana nodded so fast her head looked like it was going to fall off.

A round of laughter from everyone present followed that exchange.

"Alright, alright," Zorian sighed. "I get it. Two new golem-dolls coming up. I'll be busy in the near future, but they should be done over the weekend."

Now that he thought about it a little bit, this sort of development wasn't that surprising. Kirielle had been making both girls jealous of her new toys for a whole week now, so it made sense

that they'd want one of their own if they thought they could get away with it. They were probably just too polite to ask for one in previous restarts, or simply couldn't think of a good way to ask.

"Damn it, now I'm getting a little jealous," Kopriva grouched. "Why don't *I* get a doll too?"

"You're too old to play with dolls," Zorian told her, rolling his eyes.

"You can play with Kosjenka when you visit," Kirielle offered.

"Aww," Kopriva grinned, ruffling Kirielle's hair. "You're a sweet kid. It's hard to believe you're related to someone like Zorian."

Hey...

"Brother is really great," Kirielle protested, pushing Kopriva's hand away from her hair so she could straighten it back into place. "He's like a hedgehog. He gets nice once you get past his prickliness."

Ugh. And they were just getting started, too. After completely defusing a tense situation and promising to make expensive toys for a couple of little girls? Truly no good deed goes unpunished.



Friday came, and with it Zorian's next meeting with Xvim. This time, however, Xvim didn't want to hold their session inside his office – instead, he led Zorian to a restricted training ground he had reserved for the day. They would be doing 'serious magic', Xvim claimed, so his office was no longer sufficient for their purposes.

"I have talked to some astronomers since we last met," Xvim began, unlocking the door of the training ground and shooping him inside. "I have nothing conclusive yet, but the results thus far are not encouraging. There have been no significant deviations

among the celestial bodies. Additionally, the planets in particular are being closely watched because of the upcoming planetary alignment. It is unlikely they are illusionary – the affected area likely includes the entire solar system.”

”Provided it is, in fact, limited by area,” Zorian pointed out.

”Yes,” Xvim agreed easily. ”That is true. However, while my forays into astronomy have met with rather disappointing results, I’ve found something interesting while researching time magic. Tell me, have you ever heard of Black Rooms?”

”What, the ones that let you spend several years inside while only a day passes outside? Those actually exist?” Zorian asked incredulously.

”No, those ones are definitely fake,” Xvim said, shaking his head. ”But ones that can stretch a day into a month do. And the interesting thing is how they achieve that kind of extreme time dilation effect. Time magic has sharp limits in how effective it can get – even the most powerful hastening effects can only speed up time four to five times before they hit a wall. At that point, no matter how powerful and skillful the mage is, the boundary between two temporal flows starts to unravel.”

”So how can Black Rooms speed up time by a factor of thirty, then?” Zorian frowned.

”By isolating them from the rest of the world,” Xvim said. ”That’s why they’re called Black Rooms. They have to completely enclose the area and seal it off. This greatly lessens the stress of the temporal boundary, but it also makes it impossible to interact with people outside while the Black Room is working. Once the time dilation is engaged, nothing goes in or out until the effect is broken. Material supplies, magical communication... nothing goes through. Even contact with the spiritual planes is blocked.”

Zorian frowned. ”I see. So there is precedence for powerful time magic to require an enclosed area to function properly. But

from what I understand, the principles behind the Black Rooms would require the affected area to be literally enclosed in a physical box."

"The time loop is clearly a more advanced piece of magic than the Black Rooms, so it's likely it uses a more subtle method of sealing off the area of effect," Xvim responded.

"I suppose," Zorian said, acknowledging the possibility. "I'm curious, though – how come Black Rooms are such a mystery? I only knew of them as rumors up until this point. Surely Eldemar would not hesitate to use them openly if they're so effective?"

"In addition to needing tremendous amounts of mana, Black Rooms are very difficult to use properly," Xvim said. "Due to the way they're cut off from the outside, one has to plan each use very carefully – if the organizers failed to account for something critical, the whole operation is essentially ruined, and a lot of time and mana has been wasted. Black Rooms cannot be turned off and on at will, and the mana cost of an operation has to be paid in full at the start. I understand there is a lot of controversy surrounding the Black Rooms, with many people disputing their actual usefulness and claiming they're a huge waste of money. Some of the more spectacular failures associated with them do not help their reputation."

"Oh?" Zorian asked, intrigued.

"Initially, Black Rooms could not prematurely terminate the time dilation field once it was turned on," said Xvim. "Once the Black Room was on, whoever was inside was stuck until the spell wore off."

Zorian winced. Yeah, that had been bound to end poorly.

"At least one group died of thirst after an administrative mix-up caused the organizers to stockpile too little water into the area before activation. Another group almost died of starvation after some form of insect snuck into the food supply and managed to

ruin most of it before the infestation was detected. Even if everything was done properly, you are still essentially imprisoning several people in a small, cramped space where they have no privacy and little to entertain themselves with. Fights were common, with several experiments culminating in a bloodbath. In one memorable case, the entire group managed to mutually kill each other off – there were literally no survivors once the Black Room finally opened.”

“What about sending individuals?” Zorian asked.

“Most people can’t handle total isolation for long,” Xvim shook his head. “Besides, it costs exactly the same to run a Black Room for one person as it does for several of them, and the more people you send in, the more work can get done.”

After that, Xvim asked Zorian to demonstrate some of his flashier magic – mostly combat magic and landscape alterations, but also teleportation, which actually worked unimpeded within the training ground, unlike in most of Cyoria. It made sense, considering Xvim had told him during their last meeting that he intended to teach him dimensionalism.

After a while, his mentor decided he’d seen enough and motioned him to stop.

“You seem to have no specialty that I can see,” Xvim said.

“Well, I guess my specialty are spell formulas,” said Zorian. “But that is not exactly something I can demonstrate quickly and at whim.”

“Just as well,” Xvim said. “I know comparatively little about spell formulas and would be ill-equipped to evaluate your skill in the field.”

Wait, Xvim actually *didn’t* have expertise in something related to magic? Some of Zorian’s amusement and surprise at the notion must have shown on his face because Xvim actually decided to provide an explanation.

"I understand why so many mages are fascinated with spell formula, but I always found them to be somewhat distasteful myself," Xvim said. "They are a crutch, most of the time. With a proper mastery of a spell, you wouldn't need them."

"Right," Zorian scowled. He understood why someone obsessed with perfection in mana shaping would have low regard for magical aids that sidestepped the need for that, but there was more to spell formula than making spell rods and such...

"I'm not criticizing you, mister Kazinski," Xvim said. "Just explaining my lack of interest in the discipline. You can go far if you really master your specialty. But enough of that – when I said you don't seem to have any specialty, I meant in regards to mana shaping fields. You seem to be a generalist when it comes to those, yes?"

"I seek out whatever magic is relevant to me at the moment," said Zorian. "But yes, in general I try to master a little bit of everything. As far as I can tell, the main reason people specialize is time constraints. I'm not quite immune to that, but I'm pretty sure I can get good at several fields instead of just one."

"The path of an archmage," Xvim nodded. "I approve. For someone in your situation, aiming for anything less would have been a waste. I'm glad I don't have to convince you of that, at least."

Huh. Did Xvim just praise him for something? In any case, this reminded him of something he had been wondering for quite a while...

"Are *you* an archmage?" Zorian asked Xvim.

"An archmage is not an official rank that someone assigns to a person," Xvim said. "It is simply a term for a mage who has mastered several fields of magic to such an extent that they could outdo a typical specialist mage when it comes to those fields. I suppose the term could be applied to me, but it would be shockingly arrogant of me to claim it on my own. One is only ever a real archmage

when other people start referring to you as such, and not many people use that term to describe me. Then again, not many people know about me in the first place, and I prefer it that way..."

So that would be a yes, basically. Surprising that a person like that would be willing to work as a teacher at the academy – people like Xvim were incredibly rare and in high demand. Then again, Xvim did say he liked being an unknown, so perhaps a relatively quiet job like this one was just what he wanted.

"Do you have a specialty?" Zorian asked. He figured that since Xvim was in a relatively good mood at the moment, he might as well milk it for all it's worth and try to find out more about the man.

"Defense against magical attacks of all sorts," Xvim said. "I actually teach an advanced class on the topic in your fourth year of education. Of course, if one aims to defend against something, they must first get to know it. And thus, I have become familiar with many a type of magic. But let's get back to *you*, shall we? I have to say, for one aiming to become an archmage, your way of going about it is somewhat... suboptimal."

"How so?" Zorian frowned.

"For instance, your way of choosing which mana shaping exercises to practice," Xvim said. "While practicing a wide selection of different exercises like you've been doing is certainly useful, it is not really the best avenue of approach for a generalist mage. You would have been better served by focusing on raw mana manipulation and sensing. Such basic shaping exercises are time consuming and give no short-term benefits, but the cumulative effect of their mastery decreases the learning time of every spell and improves spellcasting in general."

"I haven't really heard about such shaping exercises," Zorian said, feeling a little lost.

"It's not something a specialist mage would care much for,"

Xvim said. "And most people who write books are specialists. Your age works against you here – most people don't start dabbling in those exercises until they're much older, no matter how talented they are, so the people you spoke to probably didn't think you'd be interested in those. Young mages like you have plenty of low-hanging fruit with much faster payoff to amuse themselves with."

"Right. So what are we talking here exactly?" Zorian asked. "I'm drawing a blank as to what sort of 'raw mana manipulation' I could be doing as an exercise."

"Well, one major deficiency I noticed in your skills is that you don't seem to perceive mana around you to any appreciable extent," Xvim said. "And I'm guessing your ability to perceive your personal mana flow is hardly any better than that of the rest of your classmates. For someone of biological age, that would be entirely adequate, if rather disappointing. In your case, it really is inexcusable."

Zorian was tempted to ask whether it was inexcusable by Xvim's standards or the more sane standards of the rest of the world. But he didn't. This was absolutely fascinating and he had largely gone numb to Xvim's barbs by now.

"From everything I've read, mana sensing is a rather advanced skill that even long-time mages struggle with."

"Yes, but you seem to be rather bad at it, even accounting for that," Xvim noted. "I'm guessing this is a consequence of spending so many years in Cyoria, which is awash in ambient mana. It's good for training, certainly, but it instills a certain amount of... wastefulness in young mages."

Zorian didn't need empathy to notice the distaste on Xvim's face when he said that.

"On top of that, it is very difficult to practice perception exercises in a place like this," Xvim continued. "The ambient mana

suffuses everything, dulling your senses. It would be far better to practice mana sensing somewhere outside the city to start with. This training ground is specially warded to keep the majority of the ambient mana out of it – did you notice that?”

“No,” Zorian admitted with a frown. Though now that Xvim mentioned it..

“This is what I meant when I said your ability to sense mana is deficient,” Xvim said. “You should have noticed it right away, the moment you stepped into the training ground. But no matter, that’s why I’m here – to help you overcome your many flaws and become the best you can be. In any case, while the exercises I’m about to teach you would be normally rather hard to practice outside of this training ground, you are capable of teleportation. I suggest you simply teleport into the countryside outside of the city when you want to work on your ability to sense mana. Now pay close attention to what I’m about to do..”



At the end of the session, Zorian was honestly feeling a little overwhelmed by Xvim’s program. While the man was less of an asshole in this restart, he was still a very demanding teacher who pulled no punches when he seriously taught people. He had ended up showing Zorian more than twenty exercises aimed at improving his ability to sense mana, both inside and outside of him, and he expected Zorian to work on them for several hours every single day. On top of that, Xvim also showed him several exotic teleportation variants that Zorian was also expected to learn by their next meeting and gave him a deceptively simple shaping exercise related to dimensionalism.

The exercise involved taking a random rock and trying to form a so-called ‘dimensional boundary’ around it. Apparently,

the formation of such a boundary was the first step in just about every piece of magic dealing with time and space – the teleportation spells he loved using so much formed a boundary like that around him every time he used them, and would fail instantly if something prevented the spell from creating it. Like a ward, for instance. Getting better at shaping the boundary could easily improve just about every dimensionalism spell he cared to cast in the future.

The problem was that the dimensional boundary was completely invisible to normal senses, making the exercise really hard to practice. How do you create and shape something you can't see and can only vaguely feel via crude feedback your personal mana gives you? He didn't think he could get the hang of that exercise any time soon.

Of course, if his ability to sense mana – especially his personal mana – was on a higher level, the exercise would have instantly gotten a lot easier. Zorian was pretty sure Xvim had only given him that exercise to drive the point home how important mana sensing was and how much his lack of skill there was holding him back. Ugh.

Days went by quickly. Kael was still working on the Sudomir problem, but Zorian had plenty of things to hold his time, so he left his morlock friend in peace. His attacks on aranea webs were restarted, though this time he was less ambitious and picked a bunch of minor webs instead of a relative juggernaut like the Burning Apex. Accordingly, his attacks went a lot better and his aranea memory reading skills got lots and lots of practice. Since he was already rooting through the memories of defeated araneas, he decided to kill two birds with one stone by searching their minds for interesting mind magic skills. He found nothing really revolutionary, but every minor trick and variation of a known technique he learned from his fallen foes added up to something

in the end.

He met with Tinami again, like he agreed to. Like she hinted at in their last meeting, she wanted to ask him for a favor – specifically, she wanted him to give her his family tree. A weird request, but apparently she was collecting that information from all of her classmates for a ‘personal project’. His cynical side insisted that this was a code name for ‘secret Aoape information gathering operation’, but who knew really. Maybe she was just really interested in people’s lineages in addition to spiders. In any case, Zorian saw no reason not to humor her and promptly cobbled up something for her in his notebook. The execution was a bit lacking, unfortunately, since his knowledge of his family tree was a bit sketchy. Especially on his mother’s side, since she hated talking about her witch mother and anything related to her.

Tinami didn’t care about how sketchy it was, though. If anything, she seemed to be even more excited about it when she found out Zorian had a witch among his ancestors. Considering the origin of Noble House Aoape, he probably shouldn’t be surprised about that.

Despite the incident with Kopriva’s alchemical supplies, Rea kept coming to Imaya’s home and bringing Nochka along with her. If anything, Rea’s friendship with Imaya seemed to have only become firmer in the wake of revelations about her shifter nature. Meanwhile, Nochka and Kana were proud owners of their own toy golems – Nochka had asked for her golem to be given a feminine form like Kosjenka’s, and named it Rutvica, while Kana was a bit of a surprise in that she wanted her toy golem to look male. And have white hair. Zorian had no idea what she called it, but Kirielle and Nochka seemed to have decided its name was Jaglenac amongst each other.

In other news, Kana seemed to have realized that Zorian had some method of understanding her thoughts, because these days,

whenever she wanted to have her desires known, she simply dragged him off from whatever he was doing so he could interpret for her.

And here he'd thought she was a little angel. Turns out he just hadn't had anything she'd wanted up until now.

Finally, as the end of the restart began to approach, Kael finally decided he'd run out of options. He asked Zorian to teleport him in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion so he could try to analyze the soul trap. He didn't think that would accomplish much, but there was little else he could think of.

Zorian agreed, and decided to take Taiven along with them. Mostly because he intended to try to analyze the soul trap himself, from the perspective of a spell formula specialist rather than a soul mage, and he needed someone to defend them against the iron beaks and winter wolves patrolling the wilderness around the place. Taiven had no objections, and even relished the chance to fight something, so they were off.

They only stayed a short while, and Zorian had to break off his analysis to help Taiven defeat the flock of iron beaks that had started to harass them, but it was enough for Kael to decide the whole thing was beyond him.

Kael was very quiet and subdued after that.

The next day he'd made an excuse to drag Zorian out of the house and asked him to teleport them to the north of Knyazov Dveri so he could visit his wife's grave.

"We're here," said Kael, pointing at the small abandoned cottage just ahead of them.

"Finally," Zorian mumbled, breathing heavily. He felt sorry for Kael, he really did, but when Kael said the place was 'not far from the main road', he didn't quite think the morlock boy meant this. An hour-long trek, uphill, along a bumpy, narrow forest path was not what Zorian would describe as 'not far'. Also, how the hell was

Kael not affected in the slightest by the journey? The boy didn't look all that fit to him...

Once they reached the cottage, Zorian took a minute to catch some breath and looked around. Kael immediately went to the back of the building to tend to the two simple, earthen graves that stood there.

"Pretty isolated place," Zorian noted, wandering over to help Kael get rid of the grass and weeds that had completely overrun the place. "No offense, but why did you end up burying your wife here, of all places?"

"I didn't have much choice back then," Kael said. "There was only one village in the vicinity, and they're very backwards, superstitious folk. They'd never let a witch and her daughter get buried in their cemetery along with their own dead. And even if I could make them accept it somehow, they'd just vandalize it the moment I wasn't looking."

"Disgusting," Zorian frowned.

"It's fine," Kael said, shaking his head sadly. "This was their home. It somehow feels appropriate for them to be buried here."

"So this other grave...?" began Zorian.

"Fria," said Kael. "My mother-in-law, and also my teacher. She died just before Namira did."

Namira, Zorian learned, was the name of Kael's deceased wife. The crude gravestones (that Kael had presumably made for them) said their last name was Tverinov. Apparently Kael had assumed their family name when he married Namira. That was pretty interesting – it was not unheard of for a husband to take on his wife's name, but it did not happen very often. Usually only civilians who somehow managed to marry into one of the Houses did that.

Then again, maybe it was a witch thing. He knew that one of the reasons his mother and grandmother did not get along was that mother decided to take father's family name instead of the other

way around. Considering that mother's choice seemed very conventional in the grand scheme of things, his grandmother's objections had always seemed strange to him.

They both stood there in silence for a while, not saying anything. Finally, after several minutes of comfortable silence, Kael spoke.

"I'm sorry," Kael said suddenly.

"For what?" Zorian asked curiously.

"I wasted your time," Kael sighed.

"What?" Zorian asked incredulously. "You just wanted to visit your wife's grave, there is nothing wrong with that."

"No, I'm talking about Sudomir and his soul trap," Kael said. "I kept stalling for over two weeks and I have nothing to show for it. I should have given up long ago, but..."

"Ah," said Zorian. He'd kind of figured out that wasn't going anywhere after the first week or so. "That. It's fine, really. Are you sure there is nothing new you can tell me?"

"Nothing," Kael said, shaking his head. He then reached out into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small notebook. He handed it to Zorian. "Here. I wrote down everything relevant I could think of into that notebook. Keep in mind that this is literally just me making wild speculations, though – I have no way to know if anything I wrote there has any basis in reality. "

"Right," said Zorian pocketing it for the moment. There would be time to read it later. "Still, even if it's just speculation, it's clearly not *nothing*."

"I guess," Kael said. "But I still feel pretty useless."

"Why?" Zorian asked curiously. He had known for a while that Kael was frustrated by his inability to offer help against Sudomir, but he never really understood why Kael felt so deeply about that.

"I don't know," admitted Kael. "Maybe it reminds me of how Fria and Namira contracted the Weeping, and I could do nothing

except helplessly watch as they wasted away. Or maybe I'm overthinking things. I heard it's a bad idea to psychoanalyze oneself."

Zorian couldn't help but wince visibly. Kael didn't often refer to his personal tragedy, so sometimes it was hard for Zorian to keep in mind how traumatic these deaths must have been for his morlock friend. He had never lost anyone he personally cared about to the Weeping, but he'd heard that those who fell to the disease suffered horribly before the end.

It was at times like this that Zorian really understood how the specter of that epidemic still hung over many people's lives. It had only been a handful of years since the Weeping, after all, and many people were still mourning their dead.

"I hope you don't think less of me for asking this," said Zorian. "But how did you end up as a married father at thirteen, anyway?"

Kael burst into laughter.

"What?" he asked, greatly amused. "All these restarts and you never thought to ask me this before?"

"Well, I never seem to find a good opening to—" Zorian fumbled, caught off guard by the rapid change in Kael's demeanor.

"Sometimes, Zorian, you're just too considerate," Kael said, shaking his head with a final chuckle. "I'd have asked by the end of the third restart for sure if I was in your place. And by the way, you're off by two years. I was actually fifteen when I got Kana."

Zorian gave him a strange look.

"I'm older than I look," Kael explained. "I'm two years older than the rest of our class, but Ilsa said that doesn't really matter."

Huh. He'd never have guessed Kael was two years older than him.

"Anyway," Kael said. "There is not much to say. My mother died in childbirth and my father resorted to alcoholism soon afterwards, so I learned to stay away from the house most of the time. The village children didn't want to associate with a morlock, so

I ended up wandering the wilderness a lot, looking for things to sell for extra cash. One day I stumbled upon Namira in the forest and she led me to this place to meet her mother. Eventually Fria found out about my situation and offered to take me in. I agreed, of course."

"What, you weren't scared away by rumors of witches making potions out of children's blood?" Zorian asked jokingly.

"Well, the rumors also said morlocks like me ate people, so I didn't put much stock in them," Kael said. "Anyway, I soon found out that Fria's motives weren't entirely motivated by compassion. She wanted an heir, and Namira did not have much talent for magic."

"I thought witch magic was heavy on the potions and very light on anything that would require actual shaping skills?" asked Zorian.

"It is," confirmed Kael. "And Namira was still horrid for it. She didn't have the instincts or the mentality for it. Since Fria really didn't want her secrets to die with her, she needed to teach her magic to someone from outside the family. And she chose me, because... well..."

"Namira fancied you?" Zorian guessed.

"Yes," Kael sighed. "She actually made it an official condition for teaching – if I wanted her magic, I had to marry her daughter. But really, I'd have agreed to marry Namira even if she didn't provide any incentive for me to do so."

Kael spend the next half an hour telling Zorian small, inconsequential stories about his life in the cottage next to them. It seemed to help his mood immensely. Finally, he took a deep breath and signaled to Zorian that they should go back to Imaya's place before the inhabitants got worried.

"I have made no mention of Sudomir's soul trap in my research journals," Kael said suddenly, just as they were about to leave. "If

I ever ask you about him or the disappearing soul mages in the area, just lie to me. Say you have no idea what is happening or something. It's not like I can do anything about it and it makes it completely impossible for me to focus on my work. I felt horrible these past few weeks, and I failed to get anything done on the alchemical side of things."

Zorian stared at him for a second before nodding in agreement.

"Consider it done."

OUT OF CONTROL

The new restart began in the same manner as all of his previous restarts – with Kirielle mercilessly jumping on top of him to wake him up.

"Good morning, brother!" Kirielle yelled on top of him. "Morning, m- Hey!"

With a simple act of will, Zorian seized Kirielle telekinetically and levitated her into the air. She stopped her customary morning greeting with a startled yelp, her hands grasping around her in a panicky attempt to find some sort of purchase and stop her ascent. She struggled in vain. Perhaps if she had been expecting Zorian to levitate her off of him, she could have grabbed onto something in time, but she had been caught completely by surprise and was entirely at his mercy. After a few moments of wild flailing, she seemed to realize this and pouted at him.

"That's not fair," she complained, looking down on him from her vantage point above him. "Since when can you even do that?"

Zorian ignored the question, instead studying the magic he was using to levitate her with his mana perception. He was still a long way from mastering even the most basic forms of mana perception, but an entire month of Xvim's tutelage was definitely showing its results. Even a rudimentary ability to

sense his own mana flow helped immensely when performing unstructured magic like he was currently doing, allowing him to notice and correct minute flaws in his technique that would have otherwise destabilized the whole undertaking. It was somewhat embarrassing that he had neglected such a potent skill all this time, but maybe it was fortunate he had done so. It was Xvim's guidance, as much as the shaping exercises themselves, that was responsible for his rapid growth in the skill, and he would have wasted a huge amount of time if he had tried to piece things together on his own.

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, Kirielle suddenly started struggling again, swiping at him with her hands in an attempt to reel herself back down. Zorian promptly floated her further up in the air, causing her to miss his covers by a few hairs.

"Oh, come on!" she whined. "Zorian, don't be such a jerk! Put me down!"

Zorian gave her an evil smile and started to float her sideways, away from the bed...

"Slowly!" Kirielle quickly clarified, catching on to what he intended to do. "Put me down *slowly*!"

He thought about letting her fall and then telekinetically catching her in the last moment before she hit the floor, but quickly discarded the idea. He wasn't *that* confident in his unstructured levitation skills... or his timing, for that matter. He gently floated Kirielle down to the floor and got out of bed.

Unfortunately, Kirielle was rather fascinated by her brief experience with magical levitation, and was instantly upon him, bombarding him with an endless stream of questions. Well. That kind of backfired on him. He just couldn't get her to calm down...

"How long can you keep doing that?" Kirielle asked.

"I don't know," Zorian said. And he really didn't, but he was hoping that if he answered some of her more inconsequential ques-

tions, she would eventually give the matter a rest. As such, he tried to give her a more detailed answer. "It would depend heavily on how docile you were being and whether I had something else disrupting my concentration. At least an hour, assuming I had your cooperation."

"Great!" Kirielle said happily. "In that case, I have an idea!"



Zorian slowly descended down the stairs, trying not to make too much noise. The idea, after all, was to surprise Mother, and he couldn't exactly do that if-

"Zorian, get down here already!" his mother shouted, the sound of her footsteps making it clear she was rapidly approaching the bottom of the stairs. "Your breakfast is getting... cold..."

She entered the main hallway where the stairway was located and then stopped to stare at the spectacle. Zorian himself was fairly unremarkable, but Kirielle was floating in the air beside him instead of using the stairs.

There was a brief moment of silence as the two sides stared at each other, one in surprise and the other in expectation of an eventual reaction. In the end, though, it was Kirielle who eventually broke the standoff. The little imp just didn't have the patience to stick to the plan.

"Mom, I'm flying!" Kirielle announced loudly, waving her hands up and down in mimicry of flapping wings.

Mother opened her mouth for a second to say something but then thought better of it. She silently rolled her eyes and turned her back on them, mumbling something uncharitable about mages and children.

"When you're done playing around, come and eat," she told Zorian, before disappearing into the kitchen again.

Zorian and Kirielle shared a glance. Conveniently enough, with Kirielle floating beside him as she was, they were actually at the same eye-level.

"It was totally worth it," Kirielle opined.

Yeah. Yeah, it was.



"Thus it so happened that Sumrak's quest for restoring his lost memories took him to Korsa, where he descended into the tunnels beneath the city in search of the mythical Scorpion Swordsmen, and the even more mythical Orb of Memory which they guarded," Zorian spoke dramatically. "Little did he know, however, that the Scorpion Swordsmen were not nearly as honorable as the myths had made them out to be, and that his journey into the depths beneath Korsa would be his most dangerous adventure yet..."

Zorian swept his hand through the air with a flourish, and the illusion that was there promptly dissolved into ectoplasmic smoke, only to reform into a completely different illusionary scene.

Kirielle sat on the edge of her seat, listening in rapt attention. Over the various restarts, Zorian had more or less worked out what sort of things Kirielle found impressive and interesting, so it wasn't very difficult to keep her attention these days. Which was good, because it made the long train ride at the start of the restart a lot more bearable, for both of them, than it would have otherwise been.

Only half of his attention was on the story he was telling, though – he was also considering what to do in this new restart. More specifically, he was considering whether to have another relatively quiet restart like the previous one had been, or if he should notify the Triumvirate Church about Sudomir's soul trap. The first option seemed more sensible – he had only two

more restarts (including this one) to raise his skill at interpreting aranean memories to levels necessary to open the matriarch's memory packet, and he couldn't afford to get distracted too much. Aside from that, the second option was very attention grabbing and had the potential of leading Red Robe straight towards him if he did it even slightly wrong.

The choice seemed obvious, but Zorian was getting concerned. Red Robe was being too quiet. Sure, the third time traveler may be laboring under the delusion that there's a whole army of other time travelers out to get him, but Zorian would have still expected Red Robe to make some kind of move by now, even if strictly through proxies. That Zorian could detect no trace of Red Robe's actions was slowly making him more and more paranoid. It didn't help his peace of mind that both Taiven and Kael were even more certain than Zorian that Red Robe was planning something big rather than simply laying low. Stirring the hornet's nest a little by exposing Sudomir to the authorities just might create enough waves to reveal what Red Robe was planning...

In addition to that, pointing the authorities towards Sudomir was bound to do wonders for his investigation into the invasion and their leadership. There was no way that an investigation into Sudomir would not point them towards the Cult of the Dragon Below and the Ibasans. That was almost certainly going to save Zorian months of work, if only because he could watch carefully who they'd arrest and then investigate those people on his own in future restarts. And if he could actually gain access to written records and the investigators' memories? Absolutely priceless.

His main problem with trying to map out the organization of the invasion was that he was just one person and had to conduct his investigation under utmost secrecy. An official investigation would not labor under similar limitations. In fact, Zorian suspected that no matter how skilled and experienced he became over

the restarts, he would never really be able to match the investigative power of the entirety of Eldemar and its counter-intelligence agencies. People who worked there had dedicated their whole lives to this sort of thing, and he knew for a fact that Eldemar had mind mages of their own under their employ. They could discover things that Zorian wouldn't even think of looking for, because he didn't possess the necessary background to know which questions to ask.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He would have to be very, very careful, but this could be just what he needed to connect everything together.

Yes, he was definitely approaching the Church when they arrived in Cyoria...

"Hey, don't space out now!" Kirielle protested. "You haven't finished the story. We just got to the *good* part!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Zorian apologized hurriedly. He found it kind of amusing that what Kirielle considered 'good parts' usually involved fighting of some sort. Well, that or usage of some kind of epic magic. "As I was saying, the Scorpion Swordsmen had just led Sumrak to the supposed secret area where the Orb of Memory rested on a pedestal, beneath the Holy Stalactite, when suddenly his guides turned on him..."



Though Zorian had resolved to approach the Triumvirate Church about Sudomir, his first action upon settling a little in Cyoria was not to go to the nearest temple – it was to track down Xvim and tell him about the time loop. He saw no point in wasting time by waiting until Friday to confront him, as the sooner Zorian told him about the time loop, the sooner Xvim would accept it as true and start working with him again. In fact,

Zorian had hoped that Xvim would be even easier to convince this time, since he was in possession of the password thingy that Xvim had given him in the previous restart.

Unfortunately, 'easier' didn't mean effortless. Despite the password (that Zorian was certain he had memorized correctly), Xvim was highly suspicious of him. It took several hours' worth of questions before he was willing to accept Zorian's story even provisionally, and he didn't seem terribly convinced even then. He told Zorian they would talk more on Friday and then basically kicked him out of his house.

Maybe he should have waited until Monday and spoken to Xvim in his office instead of visiting him at his home...

No matter. Depending on how things went with the Church, he might actually need a free week to set things up properly.

The next day, he went to a temple. Specifically, he went to a temple he had already visited in the previous restarts – the one with the nice green-haired priest and the future-divining high priestess. There was no particular reason to pick that temple over the others other than familiarity, but he didn't think it would matter. Whatever temple he went to, they would still report to the same parent organization.

Batak was as polite and welcoming as always – he immediately greeted Zorian upon his arrival at the temple and ushered him inside. After serving them both some tea and engaging in some small talk, he probed Zorian for his reason of coming.

"It's unusual to see a young man like you visit our temple," Batak remarked. "Do you do this often?"

"Well, no," Zorian admitted. "To be honest, I tend to avoid temples. I've had some bad experiences with them in the past. But I wanted to report something and ask for some advice, so here I am."

"Oh? What kind of bad experiences?" Batak asked curiously.

Of course he wanted to know about *that*. Zorian would have thought that 'something to report' would have aroused Batak's curiosity more, but apparently not.

"It's a bit of a long story," Zorian sighed. "The first thing you have to keep in mind is that I am an empath."

"As in, you can sense other people's emotions?" asked Batak. "A useful gift."

"When trained," Zorian nodded. "But as a child, I had no control over it. I didn't even *know* I'm an empath. All I knew was that being around large groups of people made me sick and dizzy. And back in my home town of Cirin, the temple was usually packed full of people. The few times my parents brought me there, I ended up fainting and causing a bit of a stir..."

"That's unfortunate," Batak said sympathetically.

"Not as unfortunate as the old priest's reaction was," Zorian said, shaking his head. "He really took my reaction personally. He decided that I have some kind of 'bad blood' that was repelled by the holiness of the temple."

"Bad blood?" Batak asked incredulously.

"My mother was of witch lineage," Zorian clarified.

"Ah," Batak said in understanding. "That makes more sense. While I don't condone the man's reaction, it was not entirely unreasonable to believe you have some witch-descended bloodline issue going on with you. Lineages were very important to witches, and they loved inheritable magic abilities. Many of their influential families had some kind of bloodline power to draw on."

"Wait," Zorian frowned. "Then my empathy..."

"It is entirely possible," Batak nodded.

Damn. So it was possible that the bigoted old priest could have actually been right about him, at least in a way? Because if his empathy really was something he had inherited through his

witch lineage, then 'bad blood' really did have a hand in his fainting episodes...

He didn't know whether to be amused or bitter about that.

"I thought empathy was fairly generic, as far as special powers go," Zorian said. "Lots of people have it, relatively speaking."

"Special powers don't pop out of nowhere," Batak said. "Most are a product of potions, rituals, spiritual possession and the like. But sometimes these powers can get transferred to a person's descendants while staying dormant for a generation or two before resurfacing. It's a bit of a public secret, but when a child is born with a magic power 'out of nowhere', that almost always means the child has some interesting things hidden in their family tree. In regards to empathy being relatively common, well... I'm guessing that there are more people with, shall we say, *interesting* backgrounds than most people would be willing to admit."

That was very interesting, because witches were endemic to Altazia, but empaths could be found all over the three continents inhabited by humans. Zorian didn't think all those empaths in Misina and Hsan drew their roots from some witch born in Altazia. Assuming that Batak was indeed right and 'random' empaths originated from an ancestor that deliberately made themselves psychic, that would mean that lots of people managed to turn themselves psychic over the course of history.

In other words, there was some kind of reliable method of turning normal people into psychics circulating around. It couldn't be too easy, since empaths were still rather rare, but clearly it wasn't impossibly hard either.

There was also the matter of his family. If his psychic nature was indeed some kind of pseudo-bloodline thing, then his mother and siblings were bound to have it as well, if only in a dormant fashion. He knew that most of them were not full-blown psychics, since he would have felt it if they were, but maybe Daimen was. His

oldest brother did have an uncanny ability to understand people...

Well, there was no way to confirm it one way or the other. Daimen was in Koth, and Zorian didn't think he could reach him even if he dedicated an entire restart just to get there. Unless he found a way to instantly reach another continent or something, they would never meet while the time loop lasted.

In any case, even if the rest of his family weren't fully psychic, there may yet be a way to awaken their dormant magic talent. It was surely easier to unlock a dormant magic ability than to create it out of nowhere, so he couldn't help but wonder if it was possible to, say, make Kirielle psychic in a relatively easy and painless fashion. Not that he would do that, as the idea of a psychic Kirielle absolutely terrified him, but maybe once she was older and able to handle the power responsibly...

"Anyway," Batak continued after a short pause, "I believe you said something about wanting to make a report and needing advice?"

"Yes," Zorian said. He then withdrew a blank, sealed envelope from his pocket and handed it to Batak, who frowned at him.

"An anonymous report?" Batak mumbled to himself.

Personally, Zorian didn't feel this was very anonymous. Anonymous would have meant sending the letter through normal mail, without ever having to meet face to face with anyone. Unfortunately, as much as Zorian liked that idea, that would have gotten him nowhere. Such a report would not be taken seriously at all, and would likely be thrown into the trash before it ever reached someone important. If he wanted the Church to actually do something, he had to talk to an actual priest and have them vouch for him that his report had been made in good faith.

"I have to ask, is this absolutely necessary?" Batak said, concerned.

"The information contained in the letter concerns the crimes

of a highly influential person with plenty of subordinates," Zorian said blandly. "If my name is known, I would fear for my safety."

"I see," Batak sighed. "Very well, I will forward your report to my superiors as it is. I must warn you, however, that they are not terribly fond of anonymous reports. They are seen as unreliable. Rest assured that your concerns will be looked into, but it may take some time before the Church investigators get around to it."

"How long is 'some time'?" Zorian frowned.

"A few weeks. Possibly months, if something more urgent comes up," Batak said.

Damn. So much for that idea. It seemed he would have to go with his plan B – talking to Alanic Zosk. He had wanted to avoid doing that, since he kind of doubted that the old warrior priest would just leave him be without any questions afterwards, but it seemed he had no choice. If he absolutely had to make a face-to-face report to someone, Alanic was probably his best shot. The man was almost certain to believe him and *probably* cared enough about Zorian to keep his identity secret.

He could always just end the restart prematurely if things got too out of hand.

"Well, with that out of the way, what can I advise you about?" Batak asked, pushing the letter to the side of the table.

"Souls and necromancy," Zorian told him bluntly.

"Oh," Batak said, suddenly sitting a little straighter. "That is... quite an unusual topic to ask about. Young man, the only advice about necromancy I can give you is: don't use it."

"I wasn't planning to," Zorian shook his head. "What I want to know is why somebody else might do so. And also why they would feel the need to gather thousands of souls and keep them imprisoned in a giant crystal pillar."

Batak gave him a blank look, glanced to the side of the table where Zorian's sealed letter was innocently resting, then gave Zo-

rian another blank look. Then he placed the letter in front of him again and wrote 'URGENT' on top of the envelope in big, blocky letters before setting it aside again.

Well. Zorian still intended to go talk to Alanic, since he had no idea how much influence Batak's little remark would have on his superiors, but he was still touched by the gesture.

"You probably know this, but souls are very mysterious things," Batak said seriously. "They have many functions, most of which we can't even understand, much less influence. But their most important function is not, as many mages believe, that they allow one to produce and shape mana. It is the fact they serve as a living, breathing record of everything a particular entity is."

Zorian raised his eyebrows in incomprehension.

"The gods originally gave souls to living beings in order to record their thoughts and forms, so that their lives may be preserved after death and their deeds properly judged in the after-life," Batak said. "For that reason, the gods, who had intimate knowledge of how souls worked, were capable of many miraculous things. So long as they had access to a person's soul, they could bring them back to life, even if their bodies had been reduced to ash and scattered into the winds. They could peer into their soul to examine their entire life from the moment they were born. They could restore a person's youth by regressing their forms to the state they once possessed. According to some stories, they could even create an identical copy of a person, indistinguishable from the original in every way."

"Copies of people?" Zorian frowned.

"It is not that strange," Batak said, waving his hand dismissively. "The simulacrum spell does something very similar. While simulacrums are in no way flawless, they are sufficiently real that some people have argued the use of the spell is inherently unethical. They believe that every time a simulacrum disperses, a person

dies.

"Do you?" Zorian asked.

"No," Batak shook his head. "Naturally, I follow my Church's dogma, and it states that only things with souls are considered people. Simulacrum do not have them. But this is a digression, and I am not an expert on such magic. What is important is that soul magic has the potential of giving earthly mages godlike powers over their fellow man. It is little wonder, then, that many people have coveted such power over the years. Their efforts have been mostly in vain, but that doesn't stop necromancers from committing atrocity after atrocity in an effort to unlock mysteries of the soul."

Zorian considered this information for a few moments. The idea of souls as divine recording devices was totally plausible to him, since he could clearly see that simply sending his soul back in time could keep his memories intact. Which was rather curious, now that he thought about it – it was common knowledge that human minds were stored inside the brain. Was his soul overwriting his brain cells upon the start of every restart or was something yet more exotic going on there?

Though there was something about that story about gods making copies of people that was nagging him in the back of his head. He felt like he was missing something important.

"So why is soul damage so catastrophic to the body?" Zorian asked curiously. "Clearly the connection between the body and soul is not just one-way."

"Clearly," Batak agreed. "But nobody really understands the nature of that connection and the way it works. It is known that souls cannot think or feel when not embodied in something. The soul needs a body, even if it's just an ectoplasmic shell... but the body equally needs a soul. It's likely that such a catastrophic reaction to soul damage has a lot to do with a person's life force, however."

Zorian wracked his brains for a moment, trying to remember what life force had to do with anything. If he remembered correctly, life force was simply a special type of personal mana that wasn't part of a mage's mana pool and was used exclusively by the body to keep itself living and resist foreign magics. Since the amount of life force rarely varied much between humans, and couldn't be used to power spells, the academy instructors hadn't spoken much about it.

Wait. That was it, wasn't it? Life force was something every living being had and depended on to stay alive. And it was basically just an exotic form of mana. And the outer portion of the soul – the part that can get warped and mutilated – was the one in charge of regulating a person's mana flow. If a person's soul was damaged, that would cause their very life-giving energies to spin out of control...

"I understand now," Zorian nodded. "Though, if I could trouble you for a few more questions..."

Two hours later, Zorian wrapped up his conversation with Batak and left the temple. Strangely, the green-haired priest actually expressed a wish for Zorian to drop by some time for another chat. Strange. Zorian would have expected the man to be rather leery of him after discussing such a topic. He gave Batak a non-committal response, unsure whether he should take the man's offer, and left for home.



The next day, Zorian went to Knyazov Dveri to talk to Alanic. Since he had saved Lukav from Sudomir's schemes and helped Alanic drive off his own attackers, he figured that the man would be well disposed towards him and inclined to listen to what he had to say. Just to be sure, however, Zorian had made a little

detour before talking to the warrior priest – he went to the house of Vazen, the merchant that did Sudomir's dirty work, and stole all the incriminating evidence from his safe.

In the end, though, Alanic didn't even look at all those papers Zorian had brought him. The moment Zorian started talking to him about a mansion full of undead and the soul trap surrounding it, he demanded that Zorian teleport him to the place immediately. Not tomorrow or in an hour or when he was done looking through all the gathered evidence – *immediately*.

So Zorian did just that, internally grumbling about all the effort he had wasted into preparing his case. Wasn't Alanic in the least bit afraid that Zorian would teleport him into some sort of pre-arranged trap? No, apparently he wasn't.

Once Zorian teleported them to the edge of Iasku Mansion's ward, Alanic just stood still and stared in the direction of Iasku Mansion in total silence. This continued for quite a long time.

"Uh, are you okay?" Zorian finally said, unable to restrain himself any longer. "Shouldn't you be casting spells to confirm my story?"

"There is no need," Alanic said calmly. "I can feel the spiritual sinkhole tugging at my soul easily enough."

Zorian looked at Alanic in alarm.

"We're in no danger," Alanic assured him. "The effect is weak and the souls of living beings are tethered to their bodies too strongly to succumb to it. It's only because my awareness of my own soul is so high that I can easily spot it. You have some measure of soul awareness too, I see, but too little to notice such things."

So a sufficiently good soul mage could tell that the soul trap existed just by entering its area of effect? No wonder Sudomir considered everyone with a hint of aptitude in the field a threat to his plans. Even if most of the people he killed and kidnapped weren't

on the level of skill that Alanic displayed, it only took one to blow his conspiracy wide open.

Suddenly, Zorian noticed a group of dark dots flying towards him and swore internally. Damn iron beaks.

"I hate to interrupt you, but some of the mansion's guards are already coming towards us," Zorian told Alanic. "If we don't leave, we'll soon be flooded with winter wolves, undead boars and the like. I speak from experience."

"Oh, so you've done some sneaking around the place already?" Alanic asked curiously.

"Had you read all the information I brought you, you would have known that," Zorian grumbled.

"Worry not, we'll get back to the information later, when we start organizing an assault on this place with the army."

Zorian gave Alanic a surprised look, startled.

"What?" Alanic laughed. "Did you think we were going to infiltrate this place? No, we're bringing soldiers, artillery and several mage combat groups and sieging the place into submission. And you're going to help me investigate the rubble."

"What, I don't get any say in this?" Zorian asked, unable to keep a bit of challenge from creeping into his voice. Damnit, this was exactly what he was afraid of..

"Don't complain," Alanic told him. "I know what you're going to say: you don't want to be involved. You want to go home and pretend this has nothing to do with you, right?"

"Well, yeah," Zorian admitted. "I gave you all the information I know, what more do you want from me?"

"I truly doubt you've really told me everything you know. And the army will be doubtful as well," Alanic sighed. "They will want to find you, and they would eventually succeed at doing so. If, on the other hand, you are clearly working for *me*, they will be leery

of going after you. Strange as it may sound to you, you are far safer beside me than you are on your own."

As if to punctuate his claim, Alanic pointed his hand at the approaching iron beak flock and snapped his fingers. A dazzling beam of electricity erupted from his palm and struck the leading bird. In the blink of an eye, the beam arced from one bird to another, jumping from target to target.

In but a moment, a twenty-strong flock had been reduced to a rain of charred corpses and blown-off feathers that descended on the forest canopy.

Okay, he had to admit, that was very impressive. Especially since he knew that Alanic was a fire specialist. It would seem his specialization wasn't as narrow as Zorian had thought.

Still...

"How would the army even know I exist unless you tell them about it?" Zorian argued.

"I'll have to tell them about it," Alanic said, shaking his head. "I'm not much of a liar, and they can be rather shrewd and persistent. It wouldn't take them long to figure out that I'm working with someone else, and they will naturally want to know who that person is."

Ugh. How annoying. Should he just dismiss this restart as a failure and start over?

...No, not yet. Maybe he could get this to work.

"I need to stay anonymous," Zorian eventually said.

"We will work something out," Alanic said dismissively.

And that was that. From that moment onward, Alanic considered him his subordinate.



Zorian had to admit, it was kind of amazing how quickly Elde-mar could mobilize its forces once it identified a serious threat. It

took only four days for them to organize the assault on Iasku Mansion and mobilize the necessary troops. The Triumvirate Church was involved too, sending two groups of twelve warrior priests each to support the several hundred soldiers and nearly fifty mages that Eldemar itself threw at the problem. Four huge war golems and thirteen magic-enhanced cannons served as heavy support.

Zorian himself was not involved much in the preparations. He mostly just silently followed Alanic around, clad in a face-concealing robe that the warrior priest had given him. The few times he had to speak, he did so exclusively through a magic orb that could translate his thoughts to speech. He had made it himself, surprising Alanic somewhat. Apparently Zorian's standards were a little skewed again, and what he thought was a mildly-useful trinket was actually something that was worth quite a bit of money in stores and took some practice to learn how to use.

From what Alanic had told him, the rest of the force thought he was some kind of elite investigator in the employ of the Triumvirate Church and were more than a little intimidated by him. Alanic seemed endlessly amused by that. In any case, very few questions had been asked about his presence, but the restart was still young and Zorian didn't dare hope that could last. At least for now, though, his identity was secure.

He really felt out of his depth in all of this, though. This wasn't what he'd had in mind at all when he had decided to make the Church aware of Sudomir's schemes. Hell, Sudomir himself was probably long gone now – there was no way he hadn't noticed all the preparations going on around him.

He told Alanic as much one day, but the warrior priest didn't share his opinion.

"Sudomir has invested a lot of time and money into that place," he said. "There's no way he's going to abandon it without a fight."

Four days is not enough for him to evacuate his possessions from that place, and he probably had less than that. I doubt he noticed the preparations straight away.”

”If you had moved more carefully in the start, you could have probably arrested him before he realized what was happening,” Zorian said.

”Not at all. You can’t just suddenly arrest a popular and influential mayor like Sudomir like that,” Alanic said. ”You need solid evidence, or else people will cry foul. What you gathered is a good start, but nowhere near enough. Attacking a mansion full of undead is a lot easier to justify, and I’m sure we will find plenty of evidence to convict him inside.”

Zorian shook his head, not really convinced, but he didn’t argue the point further. He would just have to wait for the assault to see how things went. Alanic and the army might be right, after all.



Considering the amount of forces the army planned to bring to bear on Iasku Mansion, there was no way to really launch a surprise attack on the place. Even with the use of teleportation, it would take quite a while to bring everyone over to their destination and assume proper positions. As such, the initial phase of the plan called for three groups of mages to arrive first and erect a large-scale teleport ward over the entire region – hopefully preventing Sudomir from simply teleporting out when he realized the sheer scale of the assault heading his way.

Well, that part of the plan went off without a hitch. Unfortunately, erecting the anti-teleportation had been like kicking over the hornet’s nest – almost as soon as the wards solidified, endless streams of undead started pouring out of the mansion, as well

as from the storage facility next to it. Skeletons, undead boars, flesh golems, massive abominations of stitched human flesh (Zorian didn't even know Sudomir had those; then again they were just up-scaled versions of a normal flesh golem) – the amount of re-animated soldiers Sudomir had at his disposal was mind-boggling. Zorian could only presume that he hadn't faced such hordes in his own incursions on Iasku Mansion because by that point most of these joined the invaders in their attack on Cyoria.

Caught off-guard by the ferocious counter-attack, the army struggled to organize its forces. Fortunately, these were all disciplined and experienced soldiers, and they came here fully expecting to fight against undead hordes. It would take a lot more than this to demoralize them.

Cannons fired again and again into the approaching horde, thinning the ranks considerably. The four solid-steel war golems, although far inferior in numbers to the giant flesh-stitched monstrosities mixed into the undead ranks, proved to be far superior to them in strength and durability. The giant flesh golems failed to make a breakthrough, being thrown back again and again until they fell apart. Nonetheless, the chaos of that initial exchange meant that a lot of mages and ordinary soldiers fell to the horde. Ten mages and more than 50 normal soldiers became casualties in the first ten minutes of the battle.

After that, however, the army had had enough time to get a grip on the situation. As had the mages. After some initial difficulty, they finished some kind of multi-mage spell and a pair of giant fire vortexes suddenly sprang into existence in front of the approaching horde.

Almost like living beings, the two vortexes wove through the undead ranks, sucking up reanimated bodies into their center, where they were burnt to a crisp. The strange thing was that instead of growing weaker with time, the vortexes only seemed

to be getting stronger with every undead body they consumed.

The few reanimated corpses and flesh golems that survived the artillery, war golems, and fire vortexes were met with a hail of grenades and high-caliber bullets wielded by normal soldiers and none of them survived to make contact with the assault force.

And then the top of Iasku Mansion exploded upwards. For a moment Zorian thought that Sudomir had perhaps once again panicked in the face of a determined attack and did something to screw himself over, just like he had during their last encounter, but then something inside the resulting dust cloud roared.

Something huge. The roar reverberated through the area, creating a shockwave of force that blew away all dust and debris shielding the top of Iasku Mansion from sight. As such, Zorian was treated to a sight of a massive metal platform that was almost entirely taken up by an equally massive skeletal dragon. Its gleaming white bones glowed with countless lines of yellow light that signified a staggering amount of spell formula etched onto the long-dead bones, and instead of being hollow, its ribcage seemed to be crammed full of some kind of metal machinery and likewise looked rather sophisticated in nature.

What.

What!?

Why did Sudomir have that thing!? Why hadn't he ever given any indication he had something like that in the past!?

The skeletal dragon didn't care about Zorian's internal incredulity and muttered curses. Its entire surface lit up with a pale yellow light, creating some sort of ghostly mimicry of a membrane over its wing bones, and then it lazily took flight.

It set off straight towards where Zorian and Alanic were standing.

The battle for Iasku Mansion had begun.

THINGS FALL APART

Zorian was caught thoroughly off-guard by the appearance of the skeletal dragon. After all, he had already explored Iasku Mansion during the previous restarts, and thus thought he knew what kind of forces Sudomir had at his disposal. He could hardly believe he'd managed to miss something so big and dramatic. On top of that, the way in which the skeletal dragon revealed itself was very loud and dramatic, and it clearly knew where to find Zorian, since it immediately set off towards him...

Well, probably not towards him specifically – in all likelihood, it just went after the assault force leadership, trying to perform a decapitation strike. Not a bad idea, since most of said leadership was concentrated in one command area. Granted, such an attack needed a proper strike force – one that could somehow bypass the frontlines to reach the command area in the back, and one that was strong enough to overcome the defenses protecting it – but the skeletal dragon coming after them probably qualified. It could fly pretty fast, after all, and it was clearly infused with very potent magic.

Unfortunately, the leadership of the strike force included Alanic, from whom Zorian never strayed much due to the role

he'd assumed in front of the rest of the assault force. So now he had a huge dragon skeleton coming straight at him.

"Safest place in the entire battlefield, my ass," Zorian mumbled gloomily, just loud enough for Alanic to hear him.

The stern priest said nothing, instead focusing on casting a spell of some sort. An anti-scraying measure, if Zorian interpreted his chants and gestures correctly. Zorian supposed that Alanic was disturbed at the ease with which Sudomir had managed to pinpoint their command area, and was trying to prevent further surveillance.

Glancing around him, Zorian noticed that the other mages in the command area were also hurriedly casting spells. The command area became a hurricane of activity in a flash – well, even more so than it already had been during the opening clashes of the assault. Despite this, Zorian remained still, aware that any contribution of his would likely cause more harm than good. He could barely understand what was going on around him, so how could he make sure he wasn't getting in the way? Unless one of the mages asked for his assistance, he would refrain from doing anything.

The dragon had barely started its flight towards the command area when a thick black cloud rose into the sky from the forest around the mansion. Iron beaks. Their numbers blackened the sky and filled the air with ominous cawing that could easily be heard all the way to where Zorian was standing. Sudomir probably intended them to serve as a distraction for the skeleton dragon.

The swarm of magical corvids quickly separated itself into five smaller flocks and descended upon the assault force, sending a rain of knife-like feathers at the Eldemarian soldiers. In response, one Eldemarian war golem pointed its metal palms at the approaching iron beaks and a series of explosions erupted in the midst of the flock, killing hundreds of birds with each detonation. The regular soldiers were not defenseless either, and soon brought out some

kind of grenade launcher devices and started firing potion canisters into the air. They detonated into flashes of light and electricity, effortlessly scything through the attacking birds. Despite this, the iron beaks kept coming, their numbers seemingly endless. If anything, the death of so many of their kin only made them fiercer and angrier, if the increased volume of cawing and feather attacks was any indication.

Zorian frowned and shifted in his place uneasily. He had been uneasy with the trajectory of the whole restart for a while now, feeling he had completely lost control over events a while ago. Seeing the scene in front of him, that unease only grew stronger. The Eldemarian forces might even lose at this rate. Should he end the current restart and start over?

No... no, not yet. He was taking a bit of a risk, since dying here meant getting sucked into that soul-gathering pillar that Sudomir had in his mansion, but he wanted to see how things would develop. At the very least, he wanted to see how the battle would end. Maybe Sudomir had more surprises in store for them, not just the undead dragon currently flying towards him.

And speaking of the skeletal dragon, Zorian had expected it to swoop in and try to tear them apart in melee combat. Most skeletons could not manage much beside that. Evidently, though, the spell formula and machinery used in this skeletal dragon's construction were not there just for show. Still on its way towards them, the dragon skeleton opened its maw and fired a thin yellow spell beam at them from within the depths of its skull. The beam was faint and translucent, but Zorian knew better than to assume this made it weak. It crossed the distance between the dragon and the command area in an instant, losing little of its coherence in the process.

Thankfully, the mages in charge of the defense had good reflexes – in the brief moment between when the skeletal dragon

opened its maw and the beam flew out, they managed to erect a barrier to tank the blow. Unlike the barriers that Zorian was familiar with, this one wasn't a thin layer of force – it was a thick, gelatinous wall of ectoplasm that distorted everything seen through it.

The undead dragon's beam impacted the wall and blew a huge crater in its surface, easily digging through more than half of its thickness. However, the nearby material in the rest of the wall quickly flowed into the hole, filling it up in a matter of seconds. Soon, the whole thing looked as if it had never been damaged in the first place.

The dragon fired the beam two more times, trying to overwhelm the defense by targeting the same spot on the wall through continuous fire. It failed. It simply could not deal enough damage to counteract the wall's regenerative abilities.

Undaunted by the failure, the skeletal dragon continued flying towards the command area. The two fire vortexes that were created to deal with the initial undead horde, still going strong, moved to intercept the creature. The dragon actually swerved from its trajectory to confront one of the vortexes, breathing some kind of massive dispelling wave at it. Although the flame of the vortex grew noticeably dimmer in the wave's passage, it resisted dispersal. At the same time, volley after volley of spell projectiles started homing in towards the undead dragon as it entered the range of defending mages. The spells hurled at it were very diverse – just about every one of them was different from the rest in some fashion. After a while Zorian realized that they were testing the dragon's wards to see if there were any obvious weaknesses in its defenses.

Unfortunately, the attack spells hurled at the skeletal dragon were about as successful as the dragon's long-range attack on the command area was – which was to say, they weren't. Part of the problem was that the skeleton dragon was surprisingly agile,

swooping through the air with incredible grace, and a part of it was that it had its own forcefield to protect itself. It was just a simple force aegis, nothing fancy, but there was a reason why the aegis series of spells was so popular among mages – they worked pretty well. A layer of force like that could stop anything that a physical obstacle could... and most spells couldn't go through solid objects.

Still, the spell volleys continued to come, and the two fire vortexes did their damndest to engulf the dragon and drag it into their fiery depths. Though the vortexes looked like energy constructs, they could evidently exert plenty of physical force, because they managed to completely halt the dragon's advance. Their attempts to do actual damage nonetheless proved completely ineffectual. The skeletal dragon seemed to possess inexhaustible quantities of mana for the purposes of powering its defenses, and everything that connected with it was shrugged off. It was probably powered by captured souls, much like the mansion it was defending.

But the skeletal dragon's advance had been halted, and no defense was truly perfect. One of the mages found a spell that was remarkably good at burning through the thing's shield (some kind of disc made out of purple fire that glued itself to the surface of the shield and kept draining it) and eventually the first layer of the skeleton dragon's defenses fell. Unfortunately, the undead dragon seemed to have realized it had found itself in an unenviable position and promptly intensified its struggles. It fired one attack after another at the fire vortexes, occasionally sending an attack or two at the other threats targeting it, causing both vortexes to disperse.

And then it fired its yellow beams again, but this time it didn't aim them directly at the command area or the rest of the Eldemarian forces. Instead, it fired the beam at the ground in front of its targets, dragging the beams across the landscape. Huge amounts

of dust and gravel were thrown into the air, reducing visibility and disrupting many the spell volleys coming after it. Many of the spell projectiles fared poorly when aimed through dust clouds, detonating prematurely or veering off course.

By now, Zorian was completely certain that he was not dealing with a mindless automaton like most of the undead were. The decisions made by the skeletal dragon clearly indicated there was a sapient mind driving its actions – either the construct itself was not as mindless as your average skeleton or Sudomir was personally piloting it through some remote link, much like Zorian had been piloting his golems the last time he'd invaded Iasku Mansion.

If the dragon was not a mindless undead, then that meant it was potentially vulnerable to mind magic. He tried to extend his mind sense far enough to check up on the idea, but the dragon was still too far away for that.

"Can you lure it closer?" Zorian asked Alanic. "I know it's dangerous, but I might be able to disable it if I can get close to it."

"We're already working on it," one of the mages close to them said suddenly, cutting into the conversation before Alanic could say anything. "We have a surprise of our own prepared for it once it gets close enough, but we can't be too blatant about luring it here or it will realize something is wrong and keep its distance. What do you have in mind?"

"I want to try attacking its mind," Zorian admitted.

"Oh? A mind mage, huh?" the man asked him rhetorically, giving him a speculative look. "Could work, I guess. Tell me when you think the moment is right and we'll try to give you an opening."

Zorian didn't really understand what kind of opening they thought they could give him when it came to mind magic assault, but he nodded in assent anyway.

While most of the mages had been trying to deal with the un-

dead dragon, the rest of Eldemar's forces had been busy dealing with the iron beaks assailing them. At some point, isolated packs of winter wolves and war trolls had joined the iron beaks in their counter attack, but somehow Eldemar's forces were still holding. After a few minutes, Zorian noticed that some of the mages were teleporting away and returning with extra forces and realized how – apparently Eldemar had been prepared for the possibility of the assault going wrong and prepared reinforcements to be brought in as needed. A small but steady stream of new mages and mundane soldiers constantly kept trickling into the area to strengthen the existing forces.

"It's coming!" the mage that had previously spoken with Zorian shouted. And indeed, the undead dragon had clearly decided it was done playing around and made a beeline straight at the command area once more. The man turned to Zorian. "We'll hit it with a dozen paralysis bolts the moment it comes close enough. It probably won't do anything, but it should tie up some of its mental defenses. The moment I give you the signal, do your thing. You have one attempt, and then we'll go with our plan."

Zorian concentrated at the approaching enemy, extending his mind sense as far as he could in the skeletal dragon's direction. The dragon fired beam after beam at the barrier protecting the command area, and the damage done to the wall was noticeably growing more severe as it got closer. At point blank range, it could probably cut through the wall of ectoplasm and deal actual damage to the command area... provided it still had enough power to punch through the rest of the defensive wards that had been erected around the area when the place had been made. Still, even if the wards could hold out against the beams for a time, they surely would not last long. It was best to stop the thing as quickly as possible.

The skeleton dragon accelerated as it got closer, clearly intend-

ing to ram the wall with its entire mass, trusting its durability. The moment it had entered Zorian's psychic range, however, he knew he had it. He could sense the mind behind the dragon clear as day. It was shielded, but Zorian could immediately tell it was not enough to stop him from breaking through. He didn't have much time, though, the dragon was traveling pretty damn fast and-

Twelve bright blue bolts suddenly converged at the approaching skeletal dragon, cast by the mages around Zorian. This close, their target could not dodge, even with its amazing aerial acrobatics, and its force aegis had been exhausted long ago. The moment the bolts had struck the undead dragon, their combined force smashed the mental shield protecting its mind like a hammer striking an egg. For a fraction of a second, the dragon's skeletal form even grew rigid, continuing to fly forward due to existing momentum but temporarily paralyzed by the combined effect of those twelve bolts. But although the paralysis itself had been shrugged off almost instantly, that was immaterial – the important thing was that its mental shield had been stripped away from it, leaving it completely unguarded.

Zorian immediately launched a barrage of psychic knives straight at the mind that controlled the dragon. The controller recoiled in pain and shock, caught by surprise by the brutal assault, and Zorian took advantage of its weakened influence on the undead dragon to seize control of it for a moment.

In an instant, the skeleton dragon changed the direction of its flight downward, plowing straight into the ground with all of its considerable speed. Mountains of dust and gravel erupted into the air as it dug a deep trench into the ground below, slamming into several trees (the trees came out worse in the collision) before gradually coming to a halt some distance from the command area.

For a moment, everyone around Zorian halted and turned towards him in silence.

"Holy hell," somebody said. "That actually worked."

"It's still intact," Zorian said tersely. "And the controller is still fighting me for influence. All I can do is keep it still for the moment, and even that isn't going to last long."

Indeed, while the undead dragon's controller had been caught off guard by Zorian's move, the fact was that trying to attack a controller through the puppet they were controlling was not an easy thing to do, even for him. It greatly lowered the speed and power of Zorian's mental attacks, and the controller had already restored their mental defenses by now and was doing his damndest to reassert control over the skeletal dragon. The blasted thing clearly had some kind of powerful control array built into it, because Zorian was quickly losing the battle for control over it.

"You've done more than enough," Alanic said, before turning to one of the army leaders around him. "Fire the living metal rounds."

Behind the command area, four hidden artillery emplacements opened fire, each one unerringly hitting the immobile skeletal dragon. Instead of exploding, the projectiles erupted into a tangled mess of silvery threads that wrapped themselves around the skeletal dragon, seeking to entangle it firmly.

"Originally we wanted to use this to force it down to the ground," Alanic told him. "But this is even better. Once the living metal roots itself into the ground, that thing will never set flight again. How long do you think—"

Zorian felt the mind behind the dragon finally wrench control of the body away from him, and the immobile form of the skeletal dragon suddenly began to struggle and thrash against the metal threads.

"Nevermind," Alanic sighed. "I guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

Though the undead dragon struggled fiercely, the metal

threads appeared unbreakable. They writhed and coiled like some kind of metallic worms, constantly seeking purchase on the long-dead bones. Far from freeing itself, the dragon's struggle seemed to only leave it in direr straits, as the threads took advantage of its shifting and thrashing to bind it more firmly. It tried to render the threads inert by breathing a dispelling wave at them, cycled through four different magical fields (also doing nothing to the threads), before finally trying to fire its deadly yellow beam at the nearby command area. Unfortunately for it, the threads had restricted its movements too much by that point, and it could no longer point its head in the proper direction.

Frustrated, the dragon roared, much like it had when it had first revealed itself. This close, its roar was more than just an intimidation tool – the sound was loud enough to rupture one's eardrums and the kinetic shockwave created by the roar itself could easily send an unprotected man flying. Fortunately, the command area was warded against such relatively minor damage and Zorian simply had to endure some painful ringing in his ears in the aftermath.

Eldemarian forces started to rain spells and artillery shells at the dragon, apparently unconcerned with the possibility of damaging the living metal threads that were keeping the undead dragon chained to the ground. For good reason, it turned out, as nothing seemed to do any damage to them. Or perhaps any damage dealt to them was immediately healed – the living metal thing they were made of seemed to be a very morphic, malleable material.

Sudomir didn't seem to like the predicament his fancy undead superweapon found itself in, because not long after the attack barrage started, several massive magical projectiles were launched into the air from Iasku Mansion. They ascended high into the sky before descending down to the earth again, travelling across a parabolic trajectory and crossing immense distances in the process

– far beyond what normal magic was capable of.

Zorian was reminded of that very first invasion (that he could actually remember), and the fake fireworks that served as a beginning of the invasion. It was the same thing. He could instantly tell he was dealing with artillery magic. Spells like those took a long time to cast and used incredible amounts of mana to power them, but they had both extreme range and extreme damage potential.

Zorian wasn't the only one who had immediately figured it out. Almost immediately, the leadership of the assault force decided to abandon their current position – two of the projectiles were aimed at the command area, and nobody was sure whether the existing defenses would hold out against even one. Fortunately, artillery spells like these ones were very slow, making it easy to move away before they hit. Fundamentally, they were intended to be used against static targets, and were ineffective against things that could move out of the way. But Zorian suspected that Sudomir never intended for them to actually die – he just wanted to disrupt their attack on his pet undead dragon. A ploy that was quite successful, as Eldemarian forces scrambled to get out of the way of the descending artillery spells.

But Eldemarian mages didn't just passively run away. Even as they shifted their forces to escape from the blast areas, they began to cast artillery spells of their own as retaliation. Soon, several new artillery spells rose in the air, targeting Iasku Mansion. Sudomir had still struck first, though, so by the time they were halfway to their target, the artillery spells that had been launched from Iasku Mansion reached their destination. One of them was, amazingly enough, targeting the skeletal dragon. It seemed Sudomir was gambling on the idea that his dragon was tougher than the living metal threads that kept it restrained.

The world erupted into fire, light and noise.

Almost immediately afterwards, the skeletal dragon flew out

of the dust cloud created above its former prison. It was missing one of its legs, and some of its bones were cracked, the spell formula inscribed on them growing dim, but it still moved. Some of the living metal threads still clung to its bones, stubbornly refusing to let go, but there were too few of them now to do anything more than annoy it. It seemed that Sudomir had gambled correctly.

The world exploded again as Eldemarian artillery spells reached their destination as well. A shining golden dome of force intercepted the projectiles, shielding Iasku Mansion from devastation, but it was left dim and flickering in the aftermath.

The undead dragon immediately turned back, retreating towards Iasku Mansion. Its retreat seemed to signify a general retreat, because the surviving winter wolves and war trolls also fled back into the safety of their base.

As for the iron beaks, their numbers had been cut down to less than half, and the moment they saw the skeletal dragon fleeing from the assault force they scattered in every direction, flying away from Iasku Mansion at maximum speed. Scanning the minds of several frantic iron beaks flying above him, Zorian could tell they had no intention of ever returning to this place. Whatever force Sudomir had used to keep them on his side was apparently insufficient to make them ignore the massive losses they had suffered in this battle.

The first battle for Iasku Mansion was finished, but nobody was fooled into thinking the rest of the siege would be easy.



Over the course of the next several hours, Sudomir did his best to stall Eldemar's forces as much as possible. His surviving forces launched constant raids on the assault force, doing little damage at this point but successfully breaking the army's forward

momentum. The skeletal dragon, in particular, was still a menace – it no longer made bold, frontal attacks like the one it had performed in the beginning, but it made sure to go after any perceived weakness or recklessness. In addition to that, the area immediately around the mansion was full of hastily erected traps, both magical and mundane, as well as ambush parties composed out of those familiar black-clad undead corpses that Zorian had met before in Iasku Mansion. Finally, the defensive wards on the mansion were running at maximum power, burning through whatever mana reserves they had stockpiled to resist the constant artillery bombardment that was being directed at it ever since Sudomir had launched his artillery spells at the assault force.

At first, Zorian felt that this kind of stalling action was a perfectly sensible decision on Sudomir's part. He was probably buying himself enough time to evacuate his Ibasan buddies back to their other bases through the dimensional gate in his basement, and would probably escape through it himself at the end. But as hours went by, it became obvious that Sudomir really intended to fight the assault force to the bitter end for some reason. He could have surely escaped ages ago if he really wanted to.

Regardless of how determined Sudomir was to defend his mansion to the end, the outcome had already been decided at the end of that first battle. As hours passed, the noose kept tightening around Sudomir's neck. The forest around the mansion was burned down to cinders to prevent further ambushes and traps, Sudomir's stockpile of undead minions eventually started to run out and the mansion's wards were clearly on the verge of breaking.

And then Sudomir did something that Zorian would have never expected him to.

He surrendered.

Even more amazingly, his surrender was not some kind of trap like Zorian suspected it was when he first heard about it. In the

end, Sudomir really did open the gates of his mansion and powered down the defensive wards, letting himself be captured. That... just didn't make sense to Zorian. He could have escaped easily enough – the Ibasans inside the mansion certainly hadn't stayed – Eldemarian forces found plenty of evidence that a lot of people had been living inside the mansion until very recently, but no-one other than Sudomir himself was still present. Even if the Ibasans had shut the gate on him, Sudomir could have surely just ridden into the sunset on his fancy skeletal dragon.

Zorian waited for a while to give the Eldemarian investigators a chance to explore Iasku Mansion, and then went to confront Alanic about his concerns.

"What is there to be confused about?" Alanic asked him. "If Sudomir had persisted in his resistance, we would have collapsed his stronghold on top of him and he would have died. Nobody wants to die, least of all a necromancer."

"But the gate we found in his basement..." Zorian began.

"Yes, shocking stuff," Alanic frowned. "It does seem strange that he did not retreat through the gate along with his unknown allies, doesn't it? But you have to remember, just because they co-operated doesn't mean they were actually friendly to one another. It could be that he expects better treatment as an Eldemarian captive than as a long-term guest of his so-called allies."

"Even so, it shouldn't have been too hard to flee from the battle if he was determined," Zorian insisted. "He could have flown out, for instance. Gods know we couldn't have really stopped that pet undead dragon of his if it had simply flown off in a random direction."

"No, but we could have tracked it," Alanic said. "But yes, you are probably right. He could have fled. But that would have meant that we would have leveled this place to the ground. Sudomir seems to be very attached to this place. It seems this is his life's

work, and he is loath to see it gone.”

He cares about his soul trap thing so much?

“Isn’t it destined for destruction anyway?” Zorian asked, frowning. “Surely Eldemar is not going to let a giant soul trap remain intact?”

Alanic stared at him for a few seconds before sighing heavily. “They’re definitely going to release the souls trapped within. Too many people know about them by now, and it would be a huge scandal if it became known they let so many innocent souls remain trapped in that thing. At the very least, I’m sure I can get the Triumvirate Church to apply pressure on Eldemar to do so. Unfortunately... I cannot guarantee that the device itself will be destroyed. Sudomir’s work is utterly repugnant, but also very impressive to some people. It’s entirely possible he can reach some kind of agreement with Eldemar’s government.”

“Agreement?” Zorian asked incredulously. “How could that possibly work? I know that Eldemar has some secret necromancers under their employ, but Sudomir is...”

“I know,” Alanic said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “But it would be completely in line with Eldemar’s previous behavior to retool this place into a secret research facility and then place Sudomir ‘under house arrest’ here. He would be forced to work for Eldemar, and all manner of restrictions would be imposed on him, some of them ethical in nature, but that is obviously a far lighter punishment than a monster like him deserves. I’m almost one hundred percent certain that this is what Sudomir is aiming for.”

“I see,” said Zorian unhappily. He knew that Eldemar was no image of perfection and goodness, but he was still unpleasantly surprised that they would be willing to work with someone like Sudomir.

Then again, they still didn’t know that Sudomir wasn’t just

practicing illegal magic, but was also actively betraying the country to foreign enemies. Zorian suspected that Eldemar would be a lot less willing to make use of Sudomir once that little fact came out...

"Of course," Alanic continued, "if I were to find out something particularly damning about the man before Eldemar's black divisions have a chance to sequester him to one of their compounds for questioning, then such an agreement might become politically unworkable. There is only so much that can be swept under the rug, after all."

Zorian gave Alanic a suspicious look.

"Meaning... what, exactly?" Zorian asked.

"Your ability to target Sudomir's mind through his bone dragon puppet was very impressive," Alanic noted. Huh, so it *was* Sudomir who had been piloting that thing. Zorian had wondered about that. "Even if it was for but a moment, you must be a pretty good mind mage to have achieved that."

Wait, Alanic was offering him a chance to root through Sudomir's mind for information? Why yes, Zorian was very much interested.

"Say no more," Zorian told Alanic, trying not to show his enthusiasm. "I'll be happy to help you interrogate him."

"Come with me, then," Alanic said, turning around and motioning for Zorian to follow after him. "Mind you, we'll only have an hour or so alone with him. This isn't exactly an official interrogation and there is only so much I can bend the rules..."

Zorian didn't really care. Frankly, he had a strong feeling he was going to have to terminate this restart prematurely sometime soon anyway, so getting into trouble like that was no big deal. He was just happy this opportunity had fallen so neatly into his lap. He thought he would actually have to try and scheme to get access to Sudomir. He followed after Alanic, mentally preparing a list of

questions he wanted Sudomir to answer.

"How come you didn't just pump him full of truth potions and interrogate him that way?" Zorian asked. He knew that Alanic had done that sort of thing in previous restarts, so it was a bit strange to see him hold back in that regard now.

"That leaves too many traces in the victim's metabolism," Alanic said, shaking his head. "I did say I'm bending the rules here, didn't I? I need to be able to play dumb when Sudomir accuses me of using magic to force answers out of him."

"Right," Zorian nodded. "Sorry for being dumb, but I have no experience in things like these, so you'll have to be a little patient with me."

"An expert mind mage that has no experience in things like these," Alanic stated blandly, visibly rolling his eyes. "Right."

Zorian decided not to respond to that. There was no way he could explain how he had really gotten his mind reading skills, so it was best to stay silent and quietly appreciate the way Alanic was not questioning him about that. For now, anyway.

Sdomir looked surprisingly good for someone who had gotten captured by an Eldemarian assault force. He was wearing shaping-disrupting manacles on his wrists and an exploding collar around his neck, but other than that he appeared completely unharmed. He seemed jittery and impatient when they came in, giving Alanic a sour look but not saying anything. Reading his surface thoughts, Zorian found out that Alanic had already been here a couple of times to ask the man questions, and Sudomir was already sick of him. The man refused to discuss anything with Alanic, apparently aware that there was something fishy about him being sent in as an official Eldemarian interrogator.

Zorian shrugged and got to work. He didn't try to be subtle – he immediately performed a powerful mental attack on Sudomir, ruthlessly crushing his mental defenses and sending feelers deep

into his mind. Sudomir clutched his head in pain, powerless to resist. This close to Zorian, and with his ability to cast spells suppressed by the manacles he was wearing, Sudomir had little hope to expel Zorian from his mind. He couldn't even scream or shout for help, since Zorian had prevented him from doing that.

The only difficult thing was making Sudomir speak his answers out loud for Alanic's benefit. He didn't want the warrior priest to know just how effortlessly he could root through someone's memories, but forcing the man to do something was far harder than simply interpreting Sudomir's thoughts and memories... and also, Sudomir was under compulsion not to speak about certain topics. It turned out he had gotten clever and placed a geas on himself before surrendering, placing restrictions on his ability to discuss some things. Stuff like his cooperation with the Ibasans and the planned invasion of Cyoria. This was, of course, completely unacceptable. A big part of reporting Iasku Mansion to Alanic was Zorian's desire to blow the whole conspiracy thing wide open, so the geas definitely had to go.

Zorian was not really a soul mage, so simply removing the geas was out of the question. Fortunately, he didn't have to do that to neutralize it. Mind magic was a known bane of the geas-type spells – a geas couldn't prevent a mind mage like Zorian from lifting information straight from someone's mind, and it could not compel one to follow an order they could not remember ever receiving. One of the reasons why geas were not more popular throughout history was that if the recipient of the geas was unwilling to play along, they could simply pay a mind mage to purge their memories of the restriction they labored under. The geas would still technically exist, but the compulsion to honor it would be gone.

The geas Sudomir had placed on himself was very fresh, less than a day old, and thus it took less than five minutes for Zorian to make Sudomir forget it ever existed. He didn't even bother no-

tifying Alanic of its existence.

In any case, once the full scale of Sudomir's activities started to come to the surface, Alanic decided that he no longer cared about keeping the interrogation short and covert. The interrogation lasted for hours, and only ended because Zorian was afraid he might permanently cripple Sudomir's mind if he kept rummaging through it incessantly. During those several hours, Zorian found out a wealth of information about the Ibasan invaders, Cult of the Dragon Below and Sudomir. Most of this information involved the identities of collaborators and places where evidence could be found to doom them all – this was the sort of information that Alanic was most interested in, and Zorian saw no reason not to give it to him. In fact, he intended to visit some of these people himself in some future restarts, but for now he would simply step aside and let Alanic go after them.

For Zorian, though, some of the more interesting pieces of information he got from Sudomir concerned the man's reasons for doing what he did. The core of everything seemed to be the fact that his wife died. To be fair, Sudomir was an unscrupulous necromancer even before then, but it was only after his wife contracted the Weeping and passed away that he'd really lost it. Rather than accept her death and move on, he extracted her soul and tried to bring her back to life. He failed, naturally. Apparently it was not a simple thing to make a dead soul think again, to say nothing of actually restoring it to a semblance of life. Eventually he bound his wife's soul to Iasku Mansion, restoring a measure of her mental faculties in the process. That was why the warding scheme of the place could intelligently respond to scans and attempts to bypass it, and also the reason why Sudomir had been utterly unwilling to see it destroyed. He would rather let himself be captured than abandon his wife's soul to eventual destruction.

In fact, the biggest reason why Sudomir agreed to help the

Ibasans was that Quatach-Ichl promised to give him the ritual needed to turn his wife's soul into a lich. A normal lich creation ritual required a living person to work correctly, but Quatach-Ichl claimed he could modify it to work on the disembodied soul of Sudomir's wife too. Whether Quatach-Ichl was lying about that was anyone's guess.

The other reason for helping the Ibasans invade Cyoria, the 'politics' part that Sudomir had mentioned in the past, was that Sudomir wanted to legalize necromancy. After all, his wife was soon to come back to life as a lich, and he certainly didn't plan to die of old age if he could help it either, and it was impossible for him to hide things like that in the long term. Especially if he intended to keep his political position, which he definitely did. Thus, he wanted to make Eldemar drop some of the restrictions surrounding soul magic, or at least to make some special exceptions for him in particular. To that end, he felt he needed to make Eldemar weaker (so they would be desperate for his help) and himself stronger (so he could be the savior they were in desperate need of).

The actual details of Sudomir's master plan eluded Zorian, as they were too complex and convoluted for him to figure out in a mere couple of hours. And frankly, Zorian didn't care that much. He found the whole thing crazy to start with, and felt that it was all just an excuse anyway – Sudomir helped the Ibasans because he wanted his wife back. Everything else was just him lying to himself.

Zorian also encountered a couple of other interesting facts while searching Sudomir's mind, such as the means Sudomir had used to control the iron beaks. Apparently it was a mixture of kidnapping their chicks to hold as hostages and dominating some of the more influential members of the flock. Iron beaks were fiercely protective of their young and intelligent enough to understand a hostage situation, and also didn't seem to realize

their leadership structure had been magically subverted, so this ploy worked surprisingly well. Zorian still wasn't sure if it was possible to do anything with this information, but he filed it away for future musings.

Eventually, the topic of the interrogation drifted to the issue of primordial summoning (well, more like Zorian guided it there, but whatever) and Zorian decided to see if Sudomir knew the answer to a question that had been bothering Zorian for quite some time.

"Why does the Cult of Dragon Below need a shifter child to complete the ritual?" Zorian asked.

"Children. Plural," Sudomir said. He had mostly stopped struggling against Zorian's mental probes by now, since it hurt a lot less that way. Currently he mostly focused on trying to shift the interrogation away from sensitive topics. Too bad for him that Zorian knew a great deal about what he and his allies had been doing in the past several months. "The ritual needs at least five shifter children to work. Ideally more."

Zorian frowned. Five children?

"What happens to them?" Alanic asked.

"Sacrificed, of course," Sudomir said, rolling his eyes. His thoughts told Zorian that he considered that a very stupid question. Ask an obvious question, get an obvious answer.

"Why so many?" Zorian asked. "And why children? Why *shifter* children?"

"There is only so much primordial essence one can extract from any particular shifter," Sudomir said. "And that essence gets progressively more integrated into the shifter's body as they age, making it next to impossible to extract. Only very young shifters have any significant amount of free floating primordial essence in their bodies."

What?

"Explain," Alanic told him.

Sudomir sighed. "Simply splicing a foreign soul into your own won't make you a shifter. At least, not the kind people are familiar with."

A stream of disjointed flashes flew across Sudomir's mind and Zorian dived deeper into his memories to investigate. Sudomir knew this stuff because... he had been doing research into shifters for years now. He had captured dozens of shifters, experimenting on them in a brutal fashion to see what makes them tick. He even made several attempts to produce one, the most successful one being his production of the Silver One. Disturbingly, though, the Silver One wasn't a human granted the ability to turn into a winter wolf, but the opposite – he had grafted a human soul onto a winter wolf, granting him increased intelligence and ability to turn human if he so wished. That... why would he do such a thing!?

Zorian took a deep breath and pushed the thought out of his mind. While horrible, Sudomir's shifter experiments were basically a drop in the bucket as far as Sudomir's crimes were concerned. Asking him about it would just waste the little time he had left with the man.

"In order to make the transformation so flexible and thorough, the ancestors of modern shifters had to use something more," Sudomir continued. "Specifically, they used a bit of primordial blood they had recovered from the creature imprisoned beneath Cyoria. That particular primordial was noted for its shapeshifting prowess, and thus served as a potent catalyst for their own rituals. It is one of the reasons why their shifter rituals are so hard to acquire for outsiders. Even if they can procure the instructions for the ritual, they still need the blood of an existing shifter to perform it, because they're the only ones with primordial essence coursing through their blood."

"The cultists want to use that primordial essence as a key to open the prison," Zorian mused out loud.

"Yes," Sudomir confirmed. Zorian could feel that the man liked talking about this topic, as it shifted the interrogation away from his misdeeds onto someone he didn't much care about. Although he was technically a member of the cult, Sudomir didn't seem to have any emotional attachment to his fellow initiates. "In a way, that essence is still a part of the primordial, and can thus be used as a tool for bridging the gap between our world and the pocket dimension where the primordial has been imprisoned."

"Pocket dimension, huh?" Alanic said.

"That is why they call it a 'summoning' ritual," Sudomir said. "Technically, the primordial isn't on the same plane of existence as the rest of us. The gods made a special extra-dimensional prison to shove it into. Such pocket dimensions always have a place where they touch our reality, though, and the cult has long ago found where the anchor point for the prison is."

Zorian was forced to terminate the interrogation soon afterwards, but before he did so, he made sure to memory wipe Sudomir of his recent memories. As far as he was concerned, the interrogation had never taken place.

As they left, Alanic commented on the fact Zorian was not using any words or gestures to perform his mind magic. His tolerance for Zorian's peculiarities was probably steadily approaching the breaking point, and he would soon demand some kind of explanation. Unfortunate, but the lack of gestures and chants was not something Zorian could fake – he was pretty sure an expert mage like Alanic would notice if he tried to make something up to mask his ability.

By the time he'd finally gone back to Cyoria, it was already evening and Kirielle was sound asleep. Imaya remained awake to wait for him, which Zorian found a little bizarre – he had already made up an excuse yesterday for the fact that he would be absent for an entire day, and told her not to wait for him. She cared a bit

too much about her tenants for a landlord, in his opinion.

As he went to bed, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of chaos was going to follow in the wake of the fall of Iasku Mansion. He supposed he would find out soon.



In the next couple of days, Alanic left him alone and refrained from getting him involved in further investigations. That didn't mean that he and the rest of Eldemar's authorities were idle, though – in the days that followed, Cyoria was rocked by one scandal after another as important people started getting arrested and brought in for questioning left and right. Zorian paid close attention to who was getting arrested, even though he actually already knew most of them due to his interrogation session with Sudomir.

Aside from paying attention to the arrests going around him and the reactions they were causing, Zorian also executed several attacks against various aranean webs to continue accumulating experience needed for interpreting the matriarch's memory packet. He was good enough at picking his targets at this point that he had few issues with actually subduing aranean patrols, but he found the experience very draining in an emotional sense. He was basically attacking random aranea for no reason whatsoever, all because he needed a victim to practice his memory reading on, and it was hard not to feel like a villain. Some of the aranea begged him to stop or repeatedly tried to talk to him instead of fighting back. He simply withdrew whenever he encountered such individuals, seeking out more aggressive individuals that actually fought back against his unprovoked aggression, even though that was infinitely more dangerous and definitely not the most efficient strategy.

A few days more passed before Alanic had finally contacted him, using a letter, of all things. The message was short, basically

telling him that some people were asking about him, but that he was successfully dodging their questions for now. The letter warned Zorian not to draw further attention if he wished to remain anonymous, since people were already interested in him. Fair enough. He had already decided he would terminate the restart in a few more days – he just wanted to wait for a little while longer to see if something interesting would happen, since he didn't think the arrests had reached a critical point yet.

By this point Kael had moved into the house and Zorian had already told him about the time loop and given him his research notebooks, so he decided to tell him a little about Sudomir and the information he had learned from the man. He omitted any information about Kael's friends and acquaintances, since the morlock had told him to keep that secret from him, but that still left a lot of stuff to talk about.

"Oh? Shifters have the essence of a primordial inside of their bodies?" Kael said, surprised.

"That's what the man said, at least," Zorian nodded. "I can't help but wonder how this extraction thing works. Do the cultists really have to kill those kids to get this 'primordial essence'?"

"Almost certainly," Kael nodded. "It sounds like it's part of their life force. It would make sense for something that is inherited from parent to child. Regardless of method, removing someone's life force is never benign. Ritual sacrifice is simply the fastest way to perform blood magic on them, but even if the cultists used something fancier, the results would likely be the same."

"Blood magic?" asked Zorian curiously. "You know what that is?"

"Ah, right, you probably don't know. The mage guild does tend to suppress that information, doesn't it?" Kael mused. "Blood magic involves using people's life force, usually to fuel various spells. Life force is really potent, much more so than regular mana,

so the temptation is always there. Of course, not only are blood magic rituals incredibly dangerous, using your life force also has terrible effects on the body. Thus, most mages who dabble in it prefer to use other people's life force instead of their own. You know all those stories about villains that ritually sacrifice people for power? They're basically doing blood magic."

"Oh. So that's blood magic? Kind of underwhelming," Zorian said. "I thought it would be something incredibly arcane and sinister, considering how obsessive the mage guild is about purging any mention of it from books."

"Blood magic is very easy to do, so long as you have a steady stream of sacrifices," Kael said. "And there is little variation in the amount of life force between different humans. Any random civilian will do as a sacrifice. It's a very quick if bloody road to power, and the mage guild is afraid that if the information about blood magic was freely available, you would see blood mages popping up all over the place. I've also heard that blood magic can be used to 'steal' other people's bloodlines and special abilities, and you can imagine how all those super-special Noble Houses would feel about *that*. The mage guild cracks down on it very viciously, and blood magic produces too many victims for a practitioner to hide for long."

Before Zorian could continue the conversation, a series of explosions started to erupt across the city, causing them both to run outside to see what was happening. They found the rest of the inhabitants of the house to be unhurt but confused and frightened by the detonations, though Zorian already had a pretty good idea what was happening.

His suspicions were confirmed when he climbed to the roof of the house and took a look at the city around them, only to see vast swathes of it burning and many of the streets overrun with war trolls and hostile mages.

The Ibasans and the Cult of Dragon Below had decided to launch their invasion early.



The next several hours were a blur. Though the invaders didn't have the support of iron beaks and the undead normally provided by Sudomir, and though Cyoria's forces were far more prepared for foul play this time around, the invaders still had a lot of firepower and did their best to cause huge amounts of damage. Though he wanted to go out and explore this unusual invasion, Zorian couldn't bring himself to abandon the rest of the household alone and undefended to the invaders. Instead he stayed at home, eliminating small groups of invaders that had decided to target this area of the city and occasionally using divination to spy on other parts of the city when things were relatively quiet.

Interestingly, despite him eradicating at least six battlegroups, Quatach-Ichl never showed up to deal with him. Presumably he was a lot busier this time around, and couldn't afford to deal with a minor issue like him.

To be honest, he didn't understand what the Ibasans were trying to accomplish by launching this premature attack. At least their original plan to attack during the summer festival had a chance to really do some lasting harm to the city, while this one was doomed to fail right from the start. Then again, maybe they didn't have much choice. They surely knew by now that Eldemar's investigators were onto them, so waiting for the summer festival was clearly stupid... but with Iasku Mansion shut down, perhaps retreating to Ulquaan Ibasia in a timely manner was impossible.

After a while, his scrying attempts noticed that fighting was especially fierce around the Hole. This was where most of the invading forces were concentrated, and Quatach-Ichl never seemed

to move far from the place. Were the invaders gambling everything on the successful summoning of the primordial? It certainly seemed so. A part of him wondered if that meant Nochka had been kidnapped and was being ritually sacrificed as he watched, but he pushed that thought aside. He couldn't do anything about it, even if she was, and she would be alive when the next restart begins.

It was interesting, though. If the cultists successfully released the primordial from its extra-dimensional prison, he would finally be able to see for himself how dangerous and destructive it was. The restart wasn't even close to ending, after all, so the primordial would have plenty of time to show its might.

Hours ticked by and Zorian suddenly realized this was it. The fighting around the Hole had reached a fevered pitch, with Elde-mar's soldiers frantically trying to surge forward and overrun the invaders while Quatach-Ichl rained a dizzying variety of suppressive fire on the forces arrayed against him. At some point one of Cyoria's mages actually managed to melt half of his skull off with some kind of golden fire, which was the first time Zorian had ever seen something do actual damage to the ancient lich, but that didn't seem to hold him back much. Above the Hole, and presumably on the inside of it, space shuddered and writhed, distorting everything like hot summer air. Slowly, jagged black threads started rising into the air from the depths, zig-zagging through the air and occasionally forking offshoots.

They were cracks, Zorian realized. Reality was breaking.

Suddenly, a huge volume of space in the center of the cracks simply... caved in, creating a pitch black hole that hung in the air. Something huge and dark brown, like a hand studded with mouths and eyes, shot out of the rip in space, but Zorian didn't have time to study it much. Without any prompting from him, the marker on his soul suddenly activated and everything went black.

He woke up in his bed in Cirin, with Kirielle wishing him a

good morning.



With a sigh, Zorian helped Kirielle unload her luggage from the train, his mind still on the events of the previous restart. Why did the time loop restart when it did? Was it because Zach just happened to die at that point, or was it – like Zorian suspected – because the primordial was successfully released into the world?

What kind of relationship did the primordial have with the time loop? Was the whole point of the time loop to prevent its release? He wondered whether the time loop ended when it usually did because a month was how long a default restart lasted or because that's when the primordial was usually released and he never bothered to stop the ritual until now. Hm.

"Welcome to Cyoria, Kiri," he told her. "Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

He was cheating, of course. He *knew* that Kirielle found Cyoria's central train station impressive. This time, though, something else seemed to have attracted her attention.

"Umm," she said, pointing behind him. "I think that guy wants to talk to you."

Zorian turned around, only to see a pissed-off looking Zach stomping towards him. Zorian was so shocked at the sight that he didn't move at all until the boy was practically in his face.

He opened his mouth to give him an awkward hello, but before he could say anything, Zach's fist shot forward in a blur and punched him in the face.

Chapter Fifty-Three

PHANTOMS

The moment Zorian realized that there was a fist flying towards him, he instinctively tried to take a step back to avoid it. Unfortunately, his and Kirielle's luggage was right behind him and he was never really a hand-to-hand fighter to begin with. Surprised and imbalanced as he was, Zach's punch not only connected with his face but also sent him sprawling to the ground, the back of his head slamming painfully against the unyielding concrete.

He didn't black out, but the force of the impact still left him in a confused daze for some time. It couldn't have been very long, just a couple of seconds, but when he regained the ability to process what his senses were telling him, he found that his surroundings had absolutely exploded in the brief period of time he was incapacitated. Kirielle was screaming for help at the top of her voice (and she could scream really, really loudly when she wanted to) while simultaneously kicking and clawing at Zach like a cornered lynx. Zach, for his part, looked very confused and panicked, awkwardly trying to fend off Kirielle's attacks without hurting her while trying to explain himself. Sadly for him, his words were largely unintelligible due to Kirielle's shrill and incessant shouting. The boy seemed to be at a total loss as to how he should deal with the situation he found himself in.

In other, less public circumstances, Zorian would have probably stayed on the ground for a little while longer, amused at Zach's predicament and feeling the boy deserved his fate. Served him right for punching him out of nowhere like that. As it was, he scrambled to his feet as quickly as possible while looking around. As he thought, they were attracting a lot of attention from people around them – everyone in the vicinity was watching the situation, talking and whispering amongst themselves and pointing fingers at them. It was likely that the only reason why nobody intervened into the situation yet was that Zach was visibly 'losing' against Kirielle, making the situation sufficiently comical to put them at ease. Still, that could change any moment now. He was pretty sure he saw a couple of policemen hurrying over in their direction, if nothing else. Best to stop this before it escalated.

He shouted for Kirielle to stop and calm down, and was a little surprised when she immediately stopped attacking and retreated behind him. Considering how fiercely she had defended him, he sort of expected her to be harder to restrain. But no, apparently now that he was back on his feet, it was his own responsibility to defend them both. Fair enough. Logically speaking, he *was* better qualified to stand up to Zach than a nine year old girl. Logic could be misleading, though – he doubted he could ever put Zach on the defensive as much as Kirielle had a few moments ago. It was a good thing that Zach didn't look like he wanted to continue attacking him any time soon.

Kirielle poked her head from behind Zorian to give Zach one final glare, causing him to flinch slightly, before turning to Zorian and giving him a questioning look. No doubt she wanted to know why this total stranger just punched him in the face out of nowhere. It was a good question. Why *did* Zach just do that? Hell if Zorian knew. He had considered the possibility that Zach might be hostile to him when they finally met, yes, but this wasn't really what

he had in mind when he thought of a hostile Zach. Punching him in the face was hostile, yes, but physically attacking your target in a crowded train station was not a proper way to ambush a fellow time traveler. Even Zach should know this. So what was this about, really?

Sighing heavily, Zorian ran his hand through his hair in frustration and gave Zach a good hard look. Two things immediately jumped out to him. First of all, he couldn't sense anything from Zach – as far as his empathy and mind sense were concerned, the boy in front of him did not exist. He had no thoughts or emotions at all. That meant that the Zach in front of him was either a very good illusion or under the effect of mind blank spell. Considering his punch felt quite real, he was going to assume it was the latter. Evidently Zach had come to this meeting a lot better prepared than he had been in the past. Secondly, he should probably get Kirielle's nails clipped after they got to Imaya's place, because they were evidently long enough to draw blood if she used them to scratch people. Zach had received a pretty nasty-looking wound on his forearm during his brief 'battle' with her.

As he noted before, Zach didn't seem interested in fighting with him anymore. The boy looked back at him with a strained smile and greeted him with a quick, awkward wave of his hand.

'Ugh,' Zorian thought to himself unhappily. 'This guy...'

"This," Zorian announced out loud, "is all one giant misunderstanding."

"Yes!" Zach immediately agreed, nodding frantically. "Totally a misunderstanding."

Of course, it couldn't really be that simple. Zach and Zorian spent the next fifteen minutes explaining to Kirielle that they were classmates who knew each other from before and that this was just Zach making good on his promise to punch Zorian in the face the next time he saw him for being a big jerk. Or so Zach claimed,

anyway.

Zorian could hardly believe what he was hearing. That was serious? He had to admit he did vaguely remember Zach promising something along those lines in that awful souckill restart when they had last seen each other, but he hadn't thought much of it. People make proclamations like that all the time. Zorian had totally forgotten about it until Zach reminded him about it.

In any case, after they were done explaining things to Kirielle, they had to explain things again to the policemen that had come to check up on the disturbance. Since Zorian had stood up in Zach's defense, they decided not to arrest him... so instead they issued a monetary fine to both of them for fighting in public. Zorian personally thought that was totally bullshit, but since Zach immediately promised he would pay both of their fines out of his own pocket, he decided not to protest too much.

Then it was time for a *third* round of explanation. Since Zach's attack on Zorian took place so soon after their arrival in Cyoria, Fortov was still around and decided to check up on this disturbance happening nearby. It was pretty bizarre seeing Fortov actually concerned for his and Kirielle's wellbeing for once in his life, but the concern did not last very long. Once Fortov realized they were both fine and that Zorian's attacker was his 'friend', he quickly left them alone to go back to his friends.

Not that Zorian was complaining, of course – the less time he had to spend around Fortov, the better. Still, this was the first time since forever that Fortov had sought him without intending to get a favor. He even managed to restrain himself from insulting Zorian in the course of talking to him. It was novel, and therefore interesting.

"Well then," Zorian clapped his hands. "Now that *that's* done, we should get going. Our new landlord is waiting for us, and I want to get somewhere where people aren't staring at us and talk-

ing behind our backs.”

“Is he going to come with us?” Kirielle asked, giving Zach a suspicious look.

“Yes,” Zach confirmed. He had largely recovered from Kirielle’s attack by now, regaining most of his usual confidence. “I need to talk to your brother about some things.”

“What kind of things?” Kirielle demanded.

“Serious things,” Zach said.

She looked to Zorian for confirmation and harrumphed dismissively when he nodded in agreement to this.

“You’re both stupid,” she pouted. “Acting like that in public... and I was actually scared we were under attack and everything..”

“Don’t be like that,” Zorian told her, using one of his arms to draw her into a one-armed hug. “I was really touched by your defense of me, you know? I’m pretty sure this was the first time someone stood up for me like that since... well, ever.”

“She’s too much,” Zach said, studying the three bloody lines Kirielle had scratched into his forearm.

“So I’ll tell you what – if you show some patience with Zach today, I’ll answer any question you may have about the whole thing later in the evening before we go to sleep,” Zorian told her, ignoring Zach’s whining.

“Really?” Kirielle asked, peering at him suspiciously.

“Really,” Zorian confirmed. While Zorian didn’t usually tell Kirielle that he was a time traveler, he wasn’t violently opposed to the idea. Since it seemed he was going to interact with Zach pretty heavily in this restart, he didn’t see much harm in telling her what was really going on. He was pretty sure Red Robe would sooner track him down by monitoring Zach’s movements than by following a chain of distorted rumors back to Kirielle.

“Really?” Zach asked, looking at him curiously.

"Yes, really!" Zorian huffed. What's with all this disbelief? It's almost as if they didn't expect him to tell the truth or something. "I already told her about the restarts before, and it wasn't a problem."

"You did?" Kirielle frowned. "But I don't remember you telling me anything about any 'restarts'."

"Completely understandable," Zorian said, patting her on the head. "Don't worry, all will become clear later."

He hoped. He glanced at Zach again, wondering why the boy tracked him down now, of all times, after spending so many restarts avoiding Cyoria.

He really did hope Zach's arrival would make things clearer instead of just complicating things further.



Zorian had originally intended for this restart to be much like the previous ones, but with the sudden inclusion of Zach into his schedule, he decided that plan was untenable and would have to change. Accordingly, he did not bother meeting Nochka this time around, instead taking Kirielle and Zach straight to Imaya's place. Kirielle had a tendency to blab just about anything to Nochka, who was not exactly very good at keeping secrets herself, and that didn't mesh too well with his intention to tell Kirielle about the time loop in this restart.

The first half of the journey was uncomfortably subdued. Well, Zorian himself didn't mind the peace and quiet all that much, but he knew that neither Kirielle nor Zach were predisposed to be that silent for long periods of time. The two did not know how they should act in the presence of the other and thus kept to themselves. That lasted up until it started raining. At that point Kirielle decided she wanted to play around with the rain barrier Zorian set up around them, just like she usually did at the start of the restart,

Zach's presence be damned. That turned out to have been the ice breaker, and they both got more talkative all of a sudden. Both towards Zorian and to each other.

Of course, he and Zach could not really discuss the time loop out in the open with Kirielle around, so their conversation mostly took place in the form of discussing their magical skills and occasionally demonstrating a spell or two to Kirielle and each other. Aside from being a useful conversational tool, it also allowed the two of them to compare their abilities against one another to see where they stood in regards to magical ability. Well, somewhat – obviously Zorian wasn't laying bare his entire skillset to Zach's scrutiny, and he doubted the other time traveler was being perfectly forthright either, but still. Just because the comparison wasn't complete did not mean it was worthless.

What Zorian discovered was humbling. While Zach was very combat magic focused, just like the boy had admitted to him in the past, he had made good use of the time loop to turn himself into a well-rounded mage. He was the sort of archmage that made other archmages envious – he had expertise in just about every type of magic, including the notoriously difficult and specialized medical spells. He actually healed the scratch marks Kirielle gave him as a proof of that claim. Even in regards to crafting-oriented magics like alchemy and spell formula, which Zach admitted were his least favorite fields and which Zorian specialized in, the last Noveda still possessed sufficient expertise to debate Zorian in a non-vacuous manner.

Finally, the little demonstrations they did for Kirielle clearly showed that Zach's shaping skills weren't any worse than Zorian's. Despite having huge mana reserves, Zach had *excellent* shaping skills.

Whatever Zorian could say about Zach's choices in the time loop, he clearly hadn't been standing idle this whole time – he

had been steadily working on his skills for decades, and it showed. In retrospect, it was horribly arrogant of Zorian to even think he could have caught up to the guy in little more than 5 years.

"You know, I can't help but notice that your older brother left pretty quickly and didn't even try to talk to me," Zach said. "Not that I'm complaining, since it works out better for me that way, but you'd think he'd be more interested in someone attacking his little brother in public."

"He knows that neither of us can stand him, so he keeps away," Kirielle said casually, doing her best to snatch the little animated water drakes flying around her out of the air. Zorian and Zach had competed earlier to see who can create more realistic-looking drakes out of the surrounding rainwater, so the entire shield bubble was still full of them. Zorian was pretty sure he won, but Kirielle was the judge and she claimed she couldn't tell the difference. The little traitor.

"I don't think he's that considerate," Zorian scowled. "He just didn't feel like spending time on us. He had better things to do than waste time on his younger siblings."

"No, I'm pretty sure he knows you hate him," Kirielle said, shaking her head. "He even said so when we were alone once. It's why he tries to avoid you if he can help it. He thinks he's doing you a favor."

Zorian frowned. He supposed he hadn't been terribly subtle about his opinion about Fortov, so he wasn't really surprised that Fortov knew. He did find it hard to accept that Fortov's behavior was motivated by anything other than his selfishness, though. If he wanted to do Zorian a favor, why was it that he still came to Zorian from time to time to ask for favors? That was the worst reason possible for approaching him – the whole reason why he hated Fortov was because he always had to make up for Fortov's failures to do his job in addition to his own duties.

"So you think I'm being too harsh with him?" Zorian asked curiously. Before he had gotten stuck in the time loop, the mere insinuation that this was the case would have been the equivalent of throwing a lit match in a bowl of lamp fuel. Now he found himself honestly curious about what Kirielle thought about the topic.

"No. Yes. Maybe," Kirielle said. "I mean, he's still a jerk and I don't like him either. So I know how you feel. But maybe us being mean to him back isn't the correct thing to do. Maybe he'd be better if we were more patient with him. I'm not. I try being nice to him sometimes, but he makes it very hard."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Zorian snorted derisively.

"You know, I'm getting the idea that your family is a little messed up," Zach said.

"You have no idea," Zorian said. "And that's probably a good idea. Let's end the subject here, okay?"

"Fine, fine," Zach acquiesced. "So, is this the place?"

Zorian looked at the house Zach was pointing out and nodded.

"That's Imaya's house, yes. Let me just arrange for everything with the landlord and unpack a little and then we can talk. Do you have a place already lined up?"

"I... didn't think that far," Zach admitted.

Zorian sighed. Figures. "Then we'll go to the ruins of the aranean colony in the tunnels below us. There is already a pretty good warding scheme protecting the place."

"Oh, so you know where that is?" Zach said, perking up. "Did any of the spiders survive?"

"Spiders?" Kirielle mumbled, brows furrowed in thought. Zorian could tell she had been analyzing their every word during the entire walk, trying to figure out what they were hiding. It was both commendable and amusing.

"No, none," Zorian shook his head. Zach immediately deflated.

"So it's just the two of us, or...?" he asked hopefully.

Though his empathy could pick nothing from him, Zach wasn't a terribly hard person to read. Zorian realized that Zach really wanted to talk to fellow time travelers. The more of them there were, the better. He must have been very lonely and bored all these years he spent in the time loop.

"Just... let me drop off Kirielle at the house and then we'll talk," Zorian said.

"You better not forget your promise," Kirielle warned, jabbing him in the ribs with her bony little index finger. Yeah, she was definitely getting her nails clipped when he got back.

"Fine," said Zach. "I'll wait for you to-"

"Oh no," Zorian said, cutting him off. "Do you know what Imaya would do to me if she heard I left a person out here in the rain instead of inviting them inside? And she'd definitely hear, because Kirielle is too much of a tattletale to keep her mouth shut."

"Hey!" said tattletale protested.

"She won't care that you're a mage and can easily protect yourself against the rain. I'd be hearing lectures and snide comments for days," Zorian said. "You're coming inside and introducing yourself to Imaya."

And so, with Kirielle and Zach in tow, Zorian walked up to Imaya's door and knocked...



After an hour or so, once everything had been arranged, Zorian led Zach into the depths of Cyoria's underworld. Along the way, Zorian explained the truth behind what happened to Zach. There had been no large number of time travelers – just him and the araneas piggy-backing on him using memory packets. And in the aftermath of their confrontation with Red Robe, the aranea were all dead – soulkilled, according to Red Robe. While Zorian

had some doubts about that, it was undeniable that the aranea started every loop dead from that point on.

Once they had reached the dead aranean settlements and Zach had had the chance to study the place for a while, they sat down and began to talk.

"I tried to find this place immediately after that restart," Zach noted, staring at the nearby aranean corpse. He was surprisingly shaken by the dead settlement, considering aranea were rather inhuman and he had known them for a very short time anyway. "All I found were some isolated aranean corpses like this one."

"Those were basically guard posts," explained Zorian.

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe I'd have tracked it down eventually, but then this... 'Red Robe' tried to ambush me."

Zorian perked up. This was the first clue he had about Red Robe's activities in the wake of Zorian's confrontation with him.

"He attacked you?" Zorian asked, leaning forward with interest.

"Attacked me and lost," Zach grinned proudly. "He's not that hard to beat without Quatach-Ichl to support him."

So Zach was good enough to defeat Red Robe in a straight one-on-one fight. That was good to know.

"I guess he was counting on the advantage of surprise, but I saw his ambush from a mile away," Zach continued. "I knew he was probably stalking me so I was already on guard. Still. He managed to escape in the end, and I didn't really feel safe wandering around these tunnels with someone like that hunting me. I basically left Cyoria and hid for the rest of the restart."

"Did he ever come after you again?" Zorian asked.

"Yes. Once," Zach said. "In the very next restart, he tried to attack me at its very beginning. He teleported straight through the wards on my home and tried to kill me while I was still in the bedroom, getting dressed."

"And he once again fled when you defeated him?" Zorian asked.

"Well, I'm actually the one that fled there," Zach said, coughing uncomfortably. "I was still half-asleep and in my underwear, okay? I didn't expect him to come after me so early. Anyway, from that point on I have been leaving Cyoria at the start of every restart to prevent further surprises like that. Even if Red Robe never came after me again after that one surprise attack."

"Hmm," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. He doubted that Red Robe spent all this time trying to track down Zach, so this still did not explain why he had been quiet all this time... but it was interesting information nonetheless. What did Red Robe want from Zach so badly?

"So... why did you stop hiding now, of all times? And did you really have to punch me in the face like that?" Zorian asked sourly. "My teeth still hurt from that."

"Do you even have to ask?" Zach scoffed. "You have been stuck in this time loop along with me for gods know how long, and you never came to me about it. No, worse than that – when I came to talk to you, you played dumb and did things on your own behind my back. You deserved a good punch in the face just for that."

Zorian fiddled with his glasses awkwardly. Okay, it did sound kind of bad when he said it like that. But he had good reason for behaving like he did! He really did!

"But you know, I understand," Zach continued. "I got played like a drum by that red robed fucker that's looping along with us. He messed with my mind and was probably monitoring me somehow–"

"You're sure he's not doing it right now, right?" Zorian cut in with a question.

"I know how to shield myself from tracking magic, Zorian," Zach said frostily. "Better than you, I imagine. It's just that I usually

didn't bother with it, since I thought I was the only person aware of the time loop, so why bother? Ever since that night, though, I've been layering non-detection spells on myself constantly. The asshole hasn't managed to track me down once in all this time. I doubt anyone can."

"I can," Zorian noted. "But then again, I seem to have an advantage that Red Robe does not seem to possess. I'll trust that you know how to protect yourself."

Zach gave him an unreadable look. Almost without thinking, he tried to focus his empathy on the boy to get a better feel for his emotions, only to suddenly remember that Zach was under the effect of mind blank when he felt nothing at all from the boy.

Yes, Zach could definitely protect himself if he wanted to.

"You'll tell me about that later," Zach said, shaking his head. "Anyway, sorry for snapping at you. I'm still kind of angry at myself for getting screwed over by Red Robe. I get a little testy about the subject. But anyway... I understand. It was dangerous to just talk to me directly with Red Robe lurking in the background. I still think you should have talked to me, but I can see why you'd think otherwise. I can even understand why you left that night without bothering to explain anything to me, considering what ended up happening."

Zach gestured towards a nearby aranean corpse for emphasis.

"So I decided to leave you alone for a while. Even once it became obvious that Red Robe was no longer after me, and had essentially disappeared into thin air as far as I could tell, I stayed away so as to not attract attention to you. Just in case Red Robe was somehow watching, despite all my precautions. I figured you knew what you're doing, and once you were ready, you'd come to me so we could tackle the time loop and this Red Robe guy together."

How did he expect Zorian to track him down if he purposely made himself as untraceable as possible? Nevermind, he'd ask that

question some other time. Best not to interrupt the boy now.

"And then you pull that crap in the last restart," said Zach, anger leaking into his voice. "You're finally making a move, and in a big way too, triggering the invasion several weeks early, but you made no attempt to involve me in any way. How can I not be angry? How can I not want to punch you in the face? Do you think so little of me? Just because you saw me brought down by two incredibly powerful opponents, one of which is a thousand-year-old lich, you think you can-"

"Zach, Zach, listen, that... that wasn't intentional,"

Zorian said hurriedly, trying to stop Zach from getting too angry. He had a feeling he was going to get another punch in the face if he let the boy get going too much. "I never intended that restart to blow up like that. The whole thing was a mistake, it escalated way beyond what I was comfortable with, but I was curious and-"

"Did you even intend to contact me? Ever?" Zach asked him bluntly.

"Yes. Absolutely," Zorian confirmed. "Probably after this very restart."

Zach leaned back in surprise, giving him a surprised look.

"Oh," he said, anger draining right out of him. "Well, if that's so, then it's probably good I came to you when I did, isn't it?"

"I'm kind of in the middle of something important," Zorian sighed. "I really should be focusing on that. Hell, I should have been focusing on it in the previous restart too, instead of messing around with Iasku Mansion and the invaders, but I can get really stupid sometimes. That's why I only wanted to contact you after this restart."

"If it's so important, why not let me help?" Zach asked curiously.

"It's not something you can help me with," said Zorian. "Remember those memory packets the aranea used to retain aware-

ness between restarts? Well here's the thing..."

He then launched into an explanation about the matriarch's memory packet and how he had been trying to hone his aranea memory interpreting skills to a high enough level to understand its contents. This also led to a discussion about Zorian's mind magic abilities. Zach was clearly uncomfortable with mind magic, which made sense considering how it was used against him. After some internal debate, Zorian offered to have a look inside Zach's mind to see what exactly Red Robe had done to him... but Zach predictably refused. He admitted that he didn't really trust Zorian that far yet, and maybe never would. Zorian was just glad the other boy didn't take offense at his offer.

"So if I understand you correctly, you're attacking isolated aranean patrols in order to practice memory reading skills on subdued aranea," Zach said.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"And you think I can't help you there?" Zach asked incredulously. "Zorian, you're a total idiot."

"Err," Zorian fumbled, not sure how to respond to that.

"Zorian, with my help you would not need to waste time stalking isolated patrols. We could just walk up to the main aranean settlement and take them all head on," Zach told him. "I've done that before. I didn't just spend all these past months just keeping out of Red Robe's sight – I've also been investigating things on my own, such as searching for other aranean webs around the continent to see if they can help me. Except that I'm not psychic like you and they can be incredibly dismissive and rude to 'flickerminds' like myself. I've been attacked plenty of times, and I know exactly how to fight them. They're no match for me at all. The power disparity is so big I can actually focus on incapacitating them instead of aiming to kill – even when they attack in groups. With my help, you could have had hundreds of aranean practice dummies every

week, maybe every *day*. It largely depends on how fast we can find new webs to target.”

Zorian stared at Zach for a few seconds before swallowing heavily. That... that was a good point. He hadn't even considered that.

“Well, what's done is done,” Zach shrugged. “But I'm here now, so you have no excuse to keep being stupid. When do we start?”



In the end, Zorian decided there was no reason to delay things – they would be going after their first web the very next day. In the meantime, he went back to Imaya's place and talked to Kirielle. She claimed to believe him when he said he was a time traveler, but Zorian could sense she wasn't entirely convinced yet. Even after he recreated a stack of her drawings from his mental storage and showed them to her.

Though that part did seem to make his story a lot more plausible to her.

“I'm relieved,” She told him before going to bed for the night. “You were so nice to me, it was really scary. I was afraid you were replaced by some kind of shape changer.”

“Go to sleep, Kiri,” Zorian sighed.

The next day Zorian located one of the smaller webs in the vicinity of Cyoria and took Zach there. He wasn't entirely convinced the operation would go as smoothly as Zach had promised, but Zach soon made all his fears groundless: the aranean web in front of them was subdued with terrifying ease.

There were no fancy tactics involved. Zach simply walked up to the settlement's main entrance tunnel and started raining down spells on the ill-prepared defenders. Waves of translucent blue force battered them against the walls, animated serpents made out

of lightning electrocuted them and grasping ectoplasmic threads entangled them and stopped them from simply fleeing. When they realized that Zach was immune to mind magic, the aranea turned to traps, ambushes and mass attacks – but Zach simply punched through them, barely slowed at all. Magical traps were dispelled, non-magical traps disabled with alteration spells, the mass attacks and ambushes Zach simply tackled head on and won anyway.

In less than half an hour, every aranea that did not flee was incapacitated or dead. Aside from actually locating the web, Zorian hadn't done much and had just stood back and watched the carnage.

Zach was absolutely terrifying.

"Do you think this will be enough for you to work with?" Zach asked, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet and giving him an expectant look.

Zorian gave him an annoyed look. He could sense at least fifty aranean minds around them. The asshole knew well enough that this was more than Zorian could have subdued in an entire week of non-stop attacks on aranean patrols. This was just him taking a 'subtle' swipe at him.

Then again, considering the level of skill Zach had just displayed, maybe he deserved to be a little arrogant.

"Yeah," he said. "It's plenty."



After talking about things for a while and exchanging information, both Zach and Zorian agreed that neither of them knew all that much about the time loop. Like Zorian had long suspected, Zach spent most of his time trying to think up a way to counter the invasion and had not put much thought into what the time loop actually was. According to him, he always thought he had to find

a way to counter the invasion in order to end the time loop. He could not explain why he thought so, since his memories were full of unexplained holes, but he felt very sure about that.

That could be a confirmation of Zorian's earlier theory that the release of the primordial was what triggered the restart, but it could also be a compulsion that Red Robe had put on Zach to screw him over. After all, the release of the primordial in the previous restart involved very visible cracks in space heralding its coming... something that Zorian had never witnessed before. And it wasn't like he had never observed the area around the Hole during the last moments of previous restarts. Why had the release of the primordial never caused such dramatic symptoms in the past?

Regardless, they both agreed that opening the matriarch's memory packet was their best bet for getting some solid answers. Accordingly, over the course of the next week, most of their time was spent on tracking down and attacking various aranean webs. They attacked a new one every single day, and the amount of experience in reading aranean minds that Zorian had accumulated was incredible. Zorian probably read more aranean minds in that one week alone than he had in the entire two previous restarts combined.

The especially important part was that Zorian was no longer just reading the minds of random guards and patrol aranea, but also the minds of their leaders and even matriarchs. Not only were these higher-ranking aranea especially hard to read (and thus gave the most useful experience), their thoughts were also an entire order of magnitude harder to interpret. There seemed to be a method among aranea to turn their mental powers inward onto their own minds, and most higher-ranking aranea had at least some expertise in it. Zorian wasn't exactly sure what those techniques were designed to accomplish, but they altered the thoughts and perceptions of the user immensely.

As a matriarch of a powerful web, Spear of Resolve was doubtlessly a user of these techniques as well. If Zorian had tried to interpret her memories without having taken this into account, he would have likely been in for a nasty surprise.

On Monday, when classes began, Zorian visited Xvim's office to try and bring him into awareness of the time loop again. In the previous restart, Xvim had been very suspicious of him and his overtures hadn't gone anywhere. It was difficult to know how much that had to do with his approach and how much of it was a product of all the arrests in Cyoria at the time, but Zorian was not taking any chances this time. He suspected he had tried to move a little too fast in the previous restarts, so this time he was more conservative.

He waited until Xvim was in his office before visiting him, tried to reduce his arguments to bare essentials and then finally handed him the code the man made him memorize. Xvim still told him to come back on Friday in the end, but Zorian had a feeling things would end up working better this way.

He was right. On Friday, Xvim tentatively accepted his story and once again decided to help Zorian grow by honing his dimensional magic and shaping skills. For now he just tested Zorian's abilities to see where he stood, but he promised to have something more substantial for him next week.

Considering how busy this restart promised to be, Zorian was perfectly fine with that kind of pace.

The first week also reminded him how much more Kirielle focused on him when there was no Nochka around to distract her. Without a friend of similar age to spend most of her time with, Kirielle focused most of her attention on trying to monopolize Zorian's time as much as possible. He had almost forgotten how clingy and annoying she could be, and now resorted to building all kinds of magical toys for her to amuse herself with and leave him

alone for a few minutes. Thankfully, she liked puzzles, and there were a lot of magical puzzles described in old spell formula books – mages loved inventing them for some reason.

Later in the week, when Kael and Kana moved into the house, some of that attention shifted onto Kana. In the restarts where Zorian introduced Kirielle to Nochka, Kana inevitably ended up as something of a third wheel to the two of them. They played with her, sure, but in any group of three people, someone was going to get pushed to the side... and Kana was much younger than Kirielle and Nochka, and silent to boot. He kind of suspected that Kana was happier with just Kirielle around.

Since Kael was always informed of the time loop the moment he arrived at Imaya's house, and since Zach often visited the place to speak with Zorian, the two of them finally had the opportunity to meet and talk with one another. Although they did discuss the time loop a little, Kael had yet to fully absorb the content of his notebooks yet (that was getting harder and harder as the number of past restarts and the number of notes in them increased), so that didn't really get anywhere. Instead, they mostly talked about alchemy. And the Weeping. Zorian would have thought they'd shy away from the topic, but apparently they were perfectly fine with bonding over their shared tragedies.

Currently, both Zach and Zorian were sitting beneath a tree in the middle of nowhere – a small copse of trees surrounded by farmland in the vicinity of Jatnik, not really a notable area in any way. Zach was currently trying to make an unbroken crown of daisies (and failing hilariously) while Zorian stared at the map of Eldemar that had every web they had located marked on it. Thanks to the memories of various matriarchs and aranean diplomats that Zorian had recently viewed, he now knew the locations of hundreds upon hundreds of new webs. Deciding where next to attack was actually quite a problem at this point.

"Hey, Zorian," Zach suddenly said, discarding the daisy crown he was building in a huff after accidentally tearing it apart again. "I know you're on a time limit, but do you think we could take a few days to find a specific aranean web?"

Zorian gave him a curious look. Truthfully, he found their current pace very demanding and stressful, and would have probably begged for a break soon enough anyway.

"I could, yes," he nodded, pointing at the map in front of him. "I won't say the map we have is really comprehensive or anything, but even if the web you're looking for isn't on it, it can probably point us in the right direction."

"Yeah, that's why I'm bringing it up," Zach said. "I originally wanted to wait until you opened the matriarch's package before mentioning this, but the more I think about it, the more I think we should check this out now. Maybe it will be crucial in understanding what the matriarch was thinking."

"What is it?" Zorian asked.

"Spear of Resolve told me back then that if anything should happen to her, I should go talk to the 'Ghost Serpent Acolytes' web," said Zach. "She refused to say where they are or how to reach them, though. That's why I have been visiting the aranea webs ever since then."

Zorian frowned. Ghost Serpent Acolytes? The web that refused to speak to him because their spirit told them he was 'bad news'? Could it be that they or their spirit knew something about the time loop?

Well, the time loop did sever the link between the material plane and the spiritual ones, and the Ghost Serpent Acolytes worshipped some kind of snake spirit. Even if it was a native spirit, and thus lived in the material world, maybe it still had some kind of connection to the spirit planes and knew something important.

"I know where they are," Zorian said. "There is no need to

search for them. I can just tell you where they are."

"Oh," Zach said. "Wow, and I spent so much time looking for them... I can't believe I could have just popped over to you and asked you where they live. We really should have met sooner than this, it seems."

"Yeah," Zorian agreed. "Anyway, it's probably best if I just point you in the right direction and don't come with you. Every time I tried to talk to them in the past they said their spirit doesn't like me and that I should go away. It says I'm bad news."

"That's weird," Zach frowned. "What did you do to piss it off?"

"Nothing," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I even tried visiting them soon after the restart began, before I ever interacted with any aranea. They react exactly the same way. I don't know what's up with that, but it's best if you go there alone and don't give them any indication we know each other."

After listening to Zorian's directions, Zach immediately teleported away to meet with the Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Zorian himself returned home to wait for him and get some much-needed rest. However, it was only several hours later that Zach returned to Cyoria as well and came over to Imaya's place to talk to him. He walked up to the table Zorian was sitting at and sat down next to him, an unreadable expression on his face.

"They wouldn't see me," Zach said. "Their spirit says I'm bad news."

"Really? So we're both bad news," Zorian hummed, tapping his fingers against the table. "Did they say why you're bad news?"

"No," Zach shook his head.

"Do you think we should just attack them and read their memories?" Zorian asked. He was all for being considerate, but it was obvious at this point that Ghost Serpent Acolytes held some important piece of the puzzle in regards to the time loop.

"No," Zach said quickly. "If they know we're time travelers, perhaps they have some method of perceiving the restarts. Attacking them might forever sour their opinions of us. Maybe we try going there at the same time and refuse to leave until they agree to speak with us?"

Zorian arched an eyebrow at Zach.

"What?" Zach defended himself. "It's worth a try! Don't underestimate the effectiveness of being annoying for extended periods of time."

In the end, Zorian agreed to go along with Zach's plan of annoying the Ghost Serpent Acolytes into talking with them. He notified Kirielle and Imaya that he'd be gone from the house for a while and then left with Zach to visit the suspiciously judgmental web.

The moment they approached the aranean settlement, they were immediately ushered inside. Zach and Zorian gave each other an incredulous look and tried to ask their aranean guides why they were admitted so readily when Zach was turned down earlier in the day as bad news. They were simply told that the Ghost Serpent wanted to see them and that they neither knew what was happening nor cared. They just did as they were told.

Eventually they were led into a large circular cavern filled with water. There was a large rocky outcropping jutting from the center of this miniature underground lake, and a stone bridge connected the entrance to the cave to this rock. The ceiling of the cave was covered in small clumps of glowing white crystals, giving it an appearance reminiscent of the night sky full of stars, and the waters of the lake were dark and still.

All in all, the cave gave off a very eerie feel to Zorian.

Floating in the middle of this underground lake, just above the rocky outcropping, was a giant, milky-white, translucent snake. The only spot of color present on the ghostly serpent were its eyes,

which had a soft pink glow. Spirit names were often very fanciful and poetic, but it seemed that the Ghost Serpent was exactly what it advertised itself as.

The moment he and Zach entered the cavern, the Ghost Serpent focused its large slitted eyes on them. A wave of pink light rippled across its ghostly scales, travelling out from its eyes and down to the very tip of its tail, and then it spoke.

"Leave us, leave us, leave us," it said, its voice soft and melodious, not a trace of a hiss in the pronunciation. Why it felt the need to repeat the order three times was anyone's guess, since the aranea immediately began leaving the chamber after it had instructed them to leave.

The Ghost Serpent waited for the aranea to leave and seal the entrance before it began to speak again.

"How?" It demanded. "How can there be two of you? I know the rules well enough – only one can enter and only one can leave."

"We don't know what you're talking about," Zach protested, folding his hands across his chest. "Why don't you start from the beginning, okay?"

"You cannot order me, Branded One!" The Ghost Serpent snapped, coiling through the air angrily before fixing its glowing pink eyes at Zach again. "I hate you, hate you, *hate you!* Thief and murderer! Liar and egg smasher!"

"Hey, that's slander!" Zach protested. "We don't even know each other! This is the first time we've met!"

"Is it? Is it really, really, really?" the Ghost Serpent asked with narrowed eyes, once again employing the unnecessary repetition in its words. "I wouldn't know, even if it is, would I? I know how this works. You both bear the Brand." It glanced at Zorian for a second. "That is the only reason I'm talking to you. I know the Brand and I know what it means. Most have forgotten it, dormant as it has been in the past few Cycles, but I am older than the mountains

and rivers, and I remember. I remember the crimes they did – the way they made me fall. And if they behaved as they did at the End, who dares even imagine what they did in the In-Between? But the Branded Ones are one and there are two of you. This makes no sense, sense, sense!”

“Ghost Serpent, you must believe us when we say that we understand very little about what is happening,” Zorian said. “I have gathered from your words that you know about the time loop, yes?”

“The time loop?” Ghost Serpent repeated slowly, as if tasting the words. “An interesting choice of words. But nobody remembers the In-Between. Only the Branded One. This is something that has happened again and again in the past. It is not difficult to understand.”

“Then please shower us with your wisdom and explain it to us dumb people,” Zach said, rolling his eyes.

“You’re saying there have been more time loops in the past?” Zorian asked hurriedly, before Zach had the chance to piss off the Ghost Serpent for good. Fortunately, it seemed that while the Ghost Serpent knew about the time loop, it did not actually retain the memories between restarts. It just knew that it was stuck in the time loop and could recognize them as time travelers due to their marker... which meant that this situation was possibly reproducible, and even if they bungled things up, it should still be possible to retry this conversation again.

“They were regular like the progression between night and day,” Ghost Serpent replied. “Every four hundred years, whenever the planets aligned. But the Gate has been lost for some time now, or perhaps the Key. Alas, it seems someone has finally enacted this wretched thing again. May he burn in the molten heart of the world forever, ever, ever!”

The Ghost Serpent writhed in the air for a moment, seemingly

overcome with anger and outrage at the person responsible for the time loop. Then it focused on them both once again and spoke.

"I remember. Do you not?" It asked. "Do not answer, I can see it on your faces. I do not understand how the Brand can be shared, but clearly it has happened. I do not wish to talk to you anymore."

"Please, oh great spirit of this cavern," Zorian knelt, hoping that flattery and some humility may buy them some time. "I can see you have been wronged grievously by the Branded Ones in the past. We do not dispute your grudge. But we have been thrust into the time loop unknowingly and without any say on our behalf."

"Flattery is good, but useless here," the Ghost Serpent said. "I know how this works, works, works... you will come here again and again, sucking me dry of any knowledge and wisdom, learning of my fears and weaknesses, and you will take, take, take until there is nothing else. The only thing to do is not to engage you at all. What can you do to me, after all? Today I die, and tomorrow I live once more."

"We just want to know how this time loop works," Zorian said.

"Yes!" Zach agreed. "Just tell us what is happening here! If we are really the evil masterminds you imagine us being, then you'd be telling us something we already know anyway."

Ghost Serpent hovered in the air silently for a while, considering the request.

"Very well," it said eventually. "But after that, you must leave. And if you have any honor at all, you will never visit me again. Even after I have forgotten."

"We promise," Zach said easily. Zorian couldn't help but wonder if the boy really meant it. After all, the Ghost Serpent could be such a useful source of information...

"Promises are but wind, but they are better than nothing at all," Ghost Serpent said. "Watch closely."

The spirit shifted its gaze to the still waters around them, and a large sphere of water floated up in the air from the surface. After a few moments, the sphere flew over to where Zach and Zorian were standing and started writhing like it was about to burst.

Instead it unfolded into a crude diagram – a single horizontal line with an upturned triangle balanced on top of it by the tip.

"The bottom link is the Beginning and the End," the Ghost Serpent said. "It is the world you were born in, and the world you will die in. The triangle is the world of In-Between. It exists between the moments, constantly destroyed and recreated anew. A lifetime condensed in a moment. We are all trapped in this place, phantoms created for the Branded Ones like you to learn from and test themselves against. When the fires that fuel the world of In-Between run out, we will all fade away into the void... except for the Branded One, who will go to the End, to live through this month one last time, time, time..."

"Wait, are you saying this is all fake?" Zach asked incredulously. "That we're all some kind of illusion!?"

"A reproduction, not an illusion," Ghost Serpent replied. "If you could mimic a painting in every stroke and shade, would it not be as real as the original from which it sprang?"

"But that's-" Zach began to protest.

"Enough!" Ghost Serpent snapped. "I have given you what you asked for. Honor your end of the bargain and leave, leave, leave! Guards! Escort them out, out, out!"

And then, before either Zorian or Zach could protest further, the Ghost Serpent dived into the waters of the lake and disappeared from view. Despite its ghostly appearance, its dive caused a huge splash, forcing Zorian and Zach to quickly shield themselves or be thoroughly drenched.

Okay, that was just *rude*.

Regardless, the aranea soon came and politely, but firmly

threw them out of the settlement. They both stood outside in silence for a while, lost in their own thoughts.

"So..." Zach said. "What do you think?"

"I think that I need to open that memory packet as soon as possible," Zorian replied.

The Ghost Serpent's story had given Zorian a horrible suspicion about what Red Robe had been doing all this time...

THE GATE IS BARRED

In the wake of their talk with the Ghost Serpent and their subsequent ejection from the aranean settlement, Zach and Zorian teleported away to a sufficiently distant and remote location and sat down to discuss what to do next. And that's when the arguments began.

Zorian really wanted for them to separate for a few hours. He needed some alone time to think about what they'd heard. To make sure his logic was solid. He had his suspicions already – terrible, *terrible* suspicions – but they weren't the sort of thing he'd want to blurt out lightly. In fact, he wasn't sure he wanted to confide them at all... to anyone. Even Zach.

Another reason why he wanted a short break from his fellow time traveler.

Zach didn't want to play along, though.

"We should talk about this now," Zach argued. "While the memory is still fresh in both our minds.

"I have a really good memory," Zorian argued. Indeed, he had specifically memorized the entire meeting with the help of mind magic, and would never forget any of it. He could review the memory in vivid detail as many times as he wished. "It would be better if I had a chance to think about the spirit's words for a while."

"Well, that's fine," Zach said, giving him a dismissive shrug. "You can do that. Who's stopping you? But there's no reason why you can't do that here with me. I can be patient. I'll just... quietly sit here by the side and wait until you're ready to talk. It will be like I'm not even here."

Zorian gave him an annoyed look. He had serious doubts about Zach's ability to sit quietly like that for extended periods of time, and even if he could... it wasn't the same. There was no way Zach didn't know that.

"Look," Zach said, matching his annoyed look with his own. "I know how this goes. If I let you get away now, you'll use that time to think up some stupid story to throw me off with. You know something."

"I don't know anything for certain," Zorian protested, shaking his head. "And frankly, if I wanted to keep my suspicions to myself, I wouldn't have bothered to invent some kind of elaborate lie to deceive you. I would have simply refused to tell you anything."

Zach shifted uneasily for a moment.

"Okay," he said. "I guess I was being a little unfair there. Sorry. But still, you aren't seriously considering just leaving me in the dark, are you? After I informed you of that stupid snake and helped out with your mind magic training? Surely you realize how fast that would kill any sort of trust between us?"

Zorian looked away. Of course he realized that! But it wasn't that simple! If what he was suspecting was correct, then how could there ever really be trust between them?

"There can only ever be one winner in this game", Spear of Resolve had said in her fragmented message.

"Only one can enter, and only one can leave", said the Ghost Serpent.

If only one time traveler could keep the gains made in the time loop and the rest get dissolved into the void, like they had never

existed at all, then how could they ever truly cooperate with one another? Any alliance would just be a temporary convenience, inevitably ending in betrayal.

And when all was said and done, Zorian was pretty sure that Zach was in a much better position to screw him over than Zorian was to do the same. The time loop seemed to recognize Zach as more legitimate, if nothing else.

Still, while a big part of him screamed at him to keep quiet about his theories at all costs, there was a small but equally insistent part of him that argued against keeping Zach in the dark. This situation seemed strangely familiar to him...

After a while, Zorian realized what was bothering him. The idea of him hiding this sort of knowledge 'until he could be sure' and Zach being bitter at him for doing so... it reminded him so very much of his arguments with Spear of Resolve before she was soukilled. And for good reason – he was pretty sure his current suspicions were exactly what she had tried to keep secret from him. He was thinking of treating Zach the same way he had been treated in the past. And he knew how much he had hated the matriarch's secretiveness back then...

Did he really want to basically re-enact the matriarch's secretive scheme, despite the catastrophic way it ended up resolving? Wouldn't it be better to treat Zach the same way he wanted to be treated?

The trust had to start somewhere.

"Fine," Zorian sighed, turning back to face Zach again. "I'll tell you."

"Finally," Zach shouted in exasperation, raising his hands in the air. "I thought I'd have to hit you to make you come to your senses."

Note to self: talk to Zach about his unfortunate tendency to resort to physical violence to solve personal disputes. Right now

they had more pressing topics to discuss.

"I should note that this has the potential to really destroy any chance of us trusting each other," Zorian sighed. "I mean, we *already* don't trust each other. You keep that mind blank spell up at all times when you're around me, for instance. That spell is harmful for your mind if you keep it up non-stop. I don't believe for a second that you don't know this. So you apply it up specifically for our meetings because you're afraid I'll mess you up with my mind powers if I get the chance."

Zach flinched, his face morphing into a comical expression of surprise. It reminded Zorian of that time he had caught Kirielle raiding the kitchen pantry for sweets a few years ago.

"You don't have to feel guilty," Zorian interrupted his response, shaking his head sadly. "It's smart. I would have done the same in your place. But it helps illustrate my point – we already don't trust one another. How much more, then, would we be paranoid around each other if we knew only one of us could exit the time loop with their mind and magic intact?"

"What?" Zach asked incredulously. "How? Why?"

"The Ghost Serpent pretty much stated it outright – only one time traveler gets to leave the time loop," Zorian said. "The rest... disappear forever, I suppose. It makes sense, really – I don't think there was ever supposed to be more than one time traveler. Or 'Branded One', as the Ghost Serpent calls us. A reference to the marker, most likely. Anyway, if our situation is as unprecedented as the spirit suggested, and the time loop mechanism was only ever designed under the assumption-"

"Zorian," Zach interrupted him. "Don't take this the wrong way, but... your explanations suck. I have no idea what you're talking about. Well, okay, I kind of do, but still. Start from the beginning, please."

"Fine," Zorian sighed, trying to squash his annoyance. "The be-

ginning. First of all, no time travel is technically happening here."

"No?" Zach asked, frowning. "How is that? The illusion world thing?"

"There is no illusion," Zorian said, shaking his head. "It's all real. *We're* real. Flesh and blood and soul and everything else. We're not living in a spell construct or some fancy dream."

"That's good," Zach said, breathing deeply. "It would just kill me inside if it turned out that everything I've learned in here is fake and that I'll be the same old Zach I once was once I wake up in the real world. So what *is* this, then – an actual copy of the real world?"

"Why not?" Zorian asked. "The gods have been known to copy people completely, duplicating them down to their souls and all. Plus, it seems that even mortal mages once knew how to conjure actual matter from nothing. Here, let me show you something..."

Zorian took out a piece of paper and some alteration tools out of his backpack and created a copy of one of Kirielle's drawings in front of Zach, explaining how the spell functioned to the other time traveler.

"That's a damn useful spell combination," Zach said. "I can't believe I never learned about it in all this time. This would have made so many things easier..."

"Yes, well... I can teach you how to cast the spells later," Zorian said. "Anyway, this is what I believe the time loop is essentially doing, albeit on a much greater scale. Whatever is behind this took a blueprint of the world, much in the same way I did with Kael's notebooks and my little sister's drawings. A mind-bogglingly detailed image of a single moment in time across the entire planet. Possibly beyond. And it is repeatedly producing a replica of the world based on that blueprint, allowing it to run for a month before destroying it and starting over."

Zach stared at the drawing Zorian recreated, lost in thought.

This particular one depicted two sparrows in the middle of fighting one another. It was pretty impressive how perfectly Kirielle managed to capture this one moment of their battle in a static image. If only she was as dedicated in her magic studies as she was in her art...

"That's crazy," Zach eventually stated.

"And time travel isn't?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow.

"I don't know, it somehow sounds more plausible to me than this," Zach said, sighing. He handed the drawing back to Zorian. "I guess it does make a lot of Ghost Serpent's ramblings make sense, though. But here is what doesn't make sense - if our original world is real, and this copy we're living in is also real... where are we exactly? An entire world takes up a lot of space, after all."

"In a pocket dimension, I'm guessing," Zorian answered. "I have no proof, but hear me out. It is clear that, in order for this whole setup to work, we have to be under an insane amount of temporal acceleration right now. Otherwise, how could only a moment pass in the real world while we spend decades or even centuries in this... looping world?"

"Ah, I get it," Zach said. "It's not that the time doesn't pass in the real world while we're here - it's just that time flows so fast here that barely any time has passed in the real world."

"Exactly," Zorian said. "But this sort of temporal acceleration is on a whole other level than even the best temporal acceleration facilities currently in existence."

"Yes, so?" Zach shrugged. "Compared to copying the whole world, that seems pretty underwhelming."

"I guess," Zorian agreed. "But I suspect there is more to it than just the creator of this thing being ridiculously powerful. Time acceleration rooms have to be isolated from the outside world in order to work with any sort of efficiency. But this isolation is still done through magical wards and physical obstacles like walls,

which means there is only so much you can separate them from the rest of existence. A pocket dimension, on the other hand, only touches our reality in one particular spot – its anchor point. You can't get more isolated than that, and I bet the possible temporal acceleration is much bigger if you enclose the target area in its own pocket dimension."

"So, you think the time loop is actually a physical copy of the world, enclosed in its very own, temporally accelerated pocket dimension," summarized Zach. "The time loop has a ridiculously detailed image of the real world as it was at the start of this month, and it periodically recreates the whole world based on that."

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "I'm only guessing all this, but it fits with what I found out so far."

"And here I thought this thing couldn't possibly be any crazier," Zach complained, burying his face in his hands. After a second or two he straightened up again and looked at Zorian. "So how does this affect us? How is this different from this *actually* being a time loop?"

"For one thing, it means that ensuring a perfect month is impossible," Zorian said. "You can't live through one loop, decide you really like how it turned out and then end the time loop and continue on from there. If you want to do things 'for real', you have to leave the time loop. You will then be flung back at the beginning of the month to try everything one last time."

"Okay, that *is* an important difference," Zach admitted.

"Secondly, the Cyorian aranea will almost certainly be alive and well in the real world," continued Zorian. "If everything here is a copy, and the pocket dimension is deliberately isolated from the real world as much as possible in order to facilitate temporal acceleration, then it's unlikely that anything done to people in the looping world affects their real life counterparts."

"He could always soulkill them again in the real world, though,"

Zach pointed out, frowning.

"I doubt he can," Zorian said. "I don't think the spell actually kills souls. I think it simply marks them in some way, letting the time loop mechanism know it should not recreate them at the beginning of the new restart. If the time loop is, as the Ghost Serpent believes, some kind of training mechanism, then it makes sense to include a function like that into it. It allows the Branded One to get rid of impassable obstacles by removing them from the loop entirely."

"What? That's so unfair," Zach complained. "Why does he get such an ability and I don't?"

'You might have had it at some point,' Zorian thought to himself. 'It's quite possible Red Robe got it from you and then wiped your memory of the spell...'

"Do you think it might be possible to... unmark them somehow?" Zach asked. "It's nice that the aranea aren't permanently gone, but it would be nice to have their help within the time loop too."

"I don't know," Zorian said. "It depends on what exactly has been done to them. There is still another issue."

"Yes?" Zach asked curiously.

"Considering what the time loop really is, I don't think we can just passively wait for the mechanism to run out of power," Zorian said. "It seems likely to me that staying inside the looping world once it runs out of power equals permanent destruction. If we want to survive the collapse, we have to deliberately leave this place before it's too late. Which is a problem, since neither of us knows where the exit is or how to access it."

Zach stared at him in shock. It seemed he hadn't really considered this possibility.

"And on top of that, the Ghost Serpent said only one person can exit this place," Zorian sighed. "Meaning that the moment one

of us leaves the looping world, all the other time travelers still inside are dead. Erased out of existence, really."

"We don't know this," Zach protested. "How would the stupid snake know something like that anyway? You heard what it said – it has no memories of anything that happened during previous time loops. It could be making things up to divide us. It certainly hates the 'Branded Ones' enough to try something like that."

"Still, what if the spirit is right?" Zorian asked. "What if only one of us can 'win' this?"

"Then neither of us leaves until we figure something out," said Zach immediately, straightening his posture. He gave Zorian a direct and determined look. "We'll figure out a way to get both of us out alive and well. There must be a way."

Though the boy was immune to Zorian's empathy due to his mind blank spell, Zorian could still feel the passion behind his words. Zorian had to give it to him – Zach could be very inspiring when he wanted to be. Unfortunately, there was a very important detail he had forgotten...

"The thing is," Zorian noted quietly, "it's not just the two of us who are here. Red Robe is in this world as well."

Zach paused for a moment, not saying anything.

"...shit," he finally concluded.

"Yes," Zorian agreed. "I think I know why we haven't seen any sign of him in all this time."

"You think he's trying to leave?" Zach asked, fear creeping into his voice.

"It's what I'd do in his place," Zorian said. "He thinks there is an unknown amount of other time travelers plotting against him, at least one of whom is a better mind mage than he is, and you have effectively slipped from his grasp. Why take the risk of confronting all that when he can just leave the looping world and erase all his enemies out of existence in the process? He's been in this place long

enough that he's probably gotten most of what he wanted out of it, anyway."

"Damn it," Zach swore, kicking a nearby rock in frustration and beginning to pace around the place. "Damn it! Why!? Why is it always like this!? I finally, *finally* get some answers about this shit and of course I'm three steps behind some asshole who is doing his best to screw me over! Zorian, please tell me you have some sort of idea where the exit is."

"This is just a wild guess, but I suspect it might be in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria," Zorian said. "Spear of Resolve was very insistent on making sure I learned its exact location, putting multiple redundant copies of that section of the map. There must be something important there."

"That's great!" Zach said, brightening up. "When can we go there?"

Zorian snorted derisively. "Not for a long, long time. The place is insanely well secured. Even Quatach-Ichl refused to attack the place without army support."

"Damn it," Zach swore. "Of course it couldn't be that simple."

"I'm hoping that the matriarch's memory packet contains some crucial information about the topic," Zorian noted. "At the very least, it should tell me what about that place is so important. That way we can at least know whether or not to waste our time on the place."

"Well that's something at least," Zach sighed. "Hopefully we don't find the exit, only to see Red Robe just about to leave when we get there."

"Don't tempt fate," Zorian told him. "Anyway, I just have to ask. Suppose we find the exit and Red Robe isn't there..."

"I already told you. No one is getting left behind," Zach said, correctly guessing Zorian's question. "Once we confirm where the exit is, we'll mess up Red Robe until he's no longer a problem, and

then we sit down and figure out a way to get both of us out. And if we can't figure it out ourselves, we'll find someone who can. It's a big world out there, someone must know a way to help."

Zorian stared at his fellow time traveler, a bit humbled by his optimism and sense of ethics. He kind of wished he could sense emotions off the boy, though, because he couldn't help but wonder if Zach was feeding him a bunch of idealistic rubbish while quietly planning to leave the time loop at the first opportunity. How much could he afford to trust the boy?

And in the back of his head, a small, treacherous part of his mind whispered: how much could Zach afford to trust *him*?



After that talk, Zach and Zorian threw themselves into aranea hunting with newfound fervor. Day after day, week after week... in all honesty, the different webs were already starting to blur together a little in Zorian's mind.

But it was effective – his ability to interpret aranean memories was growing by leaps and bounds, and he had even identified what the high-ranking aranea were doing with their own minds.

They were manipulating their own thoughts, doing things like filtering distractions out of their senses, blunting inconvenient emotional highs and placing compulsions on their own behavior. It seemed to be a way to increase productivity and ensure better decision making.

It was also incredibly dangerous. Improperly done, this sort of mind magic could render one dead, catatonic, irreparably insane or worse... and it was a branch of magic that was easy to do incorrectly. Nobody truly understood their own mind, after all.

Despite the danger, Zorian found the idea fascinating. It wasn't literally an intelligence boost, but it almost functioned like

one. He would probably try to dabble in it at some point... but not now. He had his hands full at the moment. He just hoped that Spear of Resolve's mental manipulations weren't as radical and convoluted as some of the other aranean elders he had seen recently.

Zorian's lessons with Xvim proceeded without incident. He decided not to tell the man about his latest findings about the nature of the time loop, as he still didn't know what to think about that himself, and was worried about how Xvim would react to finding out he was just a copy. He was a remarkably calm and collected man, but that would be quite a revelation. He did, however, ask Xvim about pocket dimensions.

Unfortunately, Xvim knew virtually nothing about them. The secrets of their creation were rare and closely guarded – only the greatest of mages could make even a tiny one, and they did not share that knowledge lightly. Xvim had claimed he had never seen one in his entire life, despite talking to a lot of capable mages, which made Zorian a bit amused. Technically, Xvim was looking at a pocket dimension right now, he just didn't recognize it as such.

Between his interaction with Zach, aranea hunting and lessons with Xvim, Zorian was constantly busy. It was tiring, and he opted not to do many of his usual routines from previous restarts. He never went to hunt monsters with Taiven, for instance, and never told her about the time loop either.

Finally, as the end of the restart began to approach, Zorian decided he had prepared as much as he could. He informed Zach he would try opening the matriarch's memory packet soon and that he was taking a two day break from aranea hunting to get some rest before the attempt.

Kirielle, at least, was ecstatic about that. She could finally have him all to herself for two whole days... or at least that's how she seemed to interpret his decision, anyway.

It was currently the second day of his self-imposed rest, and he was lying on his bed, reading a rather silly piece of fiction dealing with time travel. It was a book about a man who went three years back into the past to prevent a devastating war and save his lost love. The story was more amusing than Zorian thought it would be when he started reading it, but that was probably just him – the story was supposed to be a romance, not a comedy, it's just that he personally couldn't take it very seriously.

The time travel spell was powered by love, of all things – what kind of magic was *that*?

Kirielle interrupted his fun by jumping on top of his bed (and him) and elbowing herself in by his side, where she pretended to read the book with him for a while.

"Can I ask you something?" she suddenly asked after a while.

"Go ahead," Zorian said, turning the page. Kirielle quickly stopped him and turned the page back where it was. Huh, maybe she actually *was* reading along...

"Do you always bring me along when you go to Cyoria?" she asked.

Oh. That question again...

"No, not always," Zorian admitted.

"Why?" she asked immediately, outrage creeping into her voice. He could tell she kind of expected that answer, but definitely didn't like it.

"Because it's dangerous," Zorian admitted. "Zach isn't the only time traveler beside me. There is a third person looping, and he is after us. Truthfully, the sensible thing would have been to *never* bring you along-"

"No!" Kirielle protested.

"-but I'm just too damn nice to do such a thing," Zorian finished.

"Mom says that praising yourself is in poor taste," Kirielle informed him.

Zorian gave her an annoyed look and promptly dropped the open book on her face. She sputtered indignantly for a moment before lifting the book and trying to use it as a bludgeon against him.

She gave up quickly when she realized it wasn't very effective. And when she noticed Zorian was trying to distract her from her questions.

"Why don't you call the mage guild on this guy if he's so dangerous?" she asked.

"Because he's a time traveler and they would be of no help," Zorian said, rolling his eyes. "I doubt I could even get them to believe me. And even if I could, it would just be a huge clue for the jerk as to where he can find me."

"That sucks," Kirielle declared.

"Yup," Zorian agreed.

She fidgeted nervously for a moment, setting the book down beside her on the bed.

"Am I of no help?" she asked.

"You help keep me sane," Zorian told her.

"That's it? I totally defended you from Zach back at the train station," she pointed out huffily.

"Okay, you definitely have a point there," Zorian admitted. Even if he hadn't been in any real danger, Kirielle's actions were still glorious. "But really, what are you getting upset about? Are you afraid if I don't bring you along every single restart, I'll get bored of you or something?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Daimen and Fortov both went to the academy, got themselves new friends and forgot all about us. Then you went there as well, but couldn't get any friends and I know it's

kind of mean, but I was glad for that because that meant you didn't forget about me-

"Kiri..." Zorian sighed.

She ignored him and continued with her explanation, quickly spilling out word after word and barely pausing for breath, as if it was all going to disappear if she stopped.

"-but you were still getting so distant and you were always, always annoyed at everything. And then you bring me along and you're suddenly nice, but now you suddenly have this Zach who is a time traveler like you and he will remember and I won't and-"

"Kiri, there is no way Zach can replace you," sighed Zorian, hugging her to stop her from getting herself even more upset, and rolling his eyes at her when she could no longer see him. She got worked up over the dumbest things sometimes. "The guy is almost as annoying as you are, and he doesn't even have an excuse of being nine years old."

She proceeded to hit him in the back for that comment. Well, at least she wasn't crying.

"I'll forgive you for not bringing me with you sometimes," Kirielle eventually decided. Very generous of her. "But you're not allowed to forget me!"

"Sure," he agreed easily. What kind of request was that anyway?

But the more he really thought about it, the more he realized he might not have a choice in the matter. If Red Robe decided to leave the time loop and collapse this entire world behind him, what would the future have in store for him and Kirielle? The real Zorian and Kirielle, that is, since the Kirielle he was looking at was just a copy, same as he was...

And that was another thing. He was just a copy of the real Zorian. If he found a way to return into the real world... what was going to happen to the original? Ugh... he was getting a headache

just thinking about it. He'd kind of have preferred it if the time loop simply switched his soul with that of the original – that would mean he was killing the original Zorian by exiting the time loop, but this looping world had effectively killed hundreds of such Zorians already, so what difference would one more make?

Would the original Zorian agree with such assessment? Would he accept that it was okay for him to die so that a future version of him might live? In all honesty, probably not... but there was no way that would stop him from performing the switch if he had to.

Tomorrow he was going to finally open the matriarch's memory packet. He really hoped it had the final pieces he needed to figure out this puzzle once and for all.



"Alright," said Kael, handing him a vial full of glowing yellow liquid. Inspecting it closely, Zorian could see that the glow was not uniform, but instead came from tiny glowing motes swimming inside the liquid. "This is the potion I was talking about. The potion of self-awareness. It's meant to improve a person's ability to block out distractions and focus inwards. It's typically used to help train people's ability to sense their mana reserves and souls, but I suspect it will help for this type of mind magic to work as well."

"How reliable is your information about this stuff?" asked Zorian suspiciously, swirling the liquid inside the container. "Did you test it somehow or...?"

"This is what my teacher used to help train my... abilities," Kael said. "It definitely works for its intended purpose. And while I'm not entirely sure it will help you in your task, it definitely won't hurt to take it. Zach volunteered to test the potion a few times, so I know for a fact it doesn't interfere with mind magic."

He pointed towards the boy in question and Zach promptly gave Zorian a thumbs up and a bright smile.

Ugh. The jerk refuses to drop his mind blank around him for any reason, but he blithely drinks a bunch of strange potions made by a junior necromancer he just met. Sometimes he just didn't get that guy.

"Fine. Here goes," said Zorian, quickly downing the liquid.

Almost instantly, Zorian's mind sharpened to an incredible degree while, paradoxically, the outside world began to feel distant and indistinct. It wasn't that his senses suddenly grew worse, because they were as sharp as they ever were, but what they were telling him suddenly became a lot harder to focus on.

He stopped struggling against the effect and let his mind turn inward. He could sense his heart beat, his muscles shifting as he fidgeted in place, the blood coursing through his veins... he could sense his mana reserves and the way they reacted when he tugged at them... his personal soul sense, normally so faint and sluggish to respond, suddenly seemed much easier to understand...

Damn. Why hadn't he asked Kael for something like this earlier? This would have been incredibly useful back when he was trying to develop a personal soul sense.

No, he couldn't get distracted – he discarded these visions and instead dived into his own mind where the matriarch's memory packet stood. He did not feel the same sense of increased clarity this time – probably because his mind magic was already too good for the potion to improve – but that was okay. He mentally grasped the decaying memory packet and began to carefully take it apart.

Not carefully enough, it turned out. The packet, already on the verge of falling apart completely when he began, couldn't tolerate Zorian's still somewhat inexperienced touch. It violently burst apart, momentarily dazing Zorian with a burst of confusing images (some kind of defense mechanism, maybe?), and the memo-

ries contained within began to rapidly fade away from his mind.

Swearing internally at his failure, Zorian scrambled to access some of the memories before they all faded away.

Previously, Zorian had been hoping that Spear of Resolve hadn't delved as deeply into the mental self-manipulation as some of the other aranean elders had. Now he could safely say he was an optimistic fool. The memories currently floating in his mind spoke of an absolute master in the field that made all the other 'expert' araneas look like total underachievers in comparison. Spear of Resolve seemed to have found a way to turn part of her mind into a magical calculator, could somehow temporarily separate her mind into multiple parallel threads of thought and could integrate perceptions of multiple araneas into a unified, coherent whole. And that was just the stuff he could figure out in the short time he had been given. Even if Zorian had been given several extra years to get better at reading aranean memories, he doubted it would have helped him interpret the memories locked inside the memory packet.

And yet, despite all of this, there was one particular memory that Zorian could easily understand... because it had been made understandable specifically for him.

[If you are reviewing this memory,] the matriarch's memory echo said, [then in all likelihood, our plans were foiled and things went awry. It also means you have gotten good enough at mind magic to dive into the memory packet and read some of my memories. Well done. I hope you have had the courtesy of respecting my privacy and leaving the rest of my memories alone.]

Zorian could literally feel the smugness in her words. As in, she had made sure to attach that particular emotional impression to that particular section of the message. She knew damn well he had no hope of interpreting the rest of her memories.

Even in death, that spider was mocking him.

[I know you think I had it coming by rushing into this, but hear me out. I have sought out every clue about the time loop I could find. Most of what I'm about to tell you comes from the patron spirit of another aranean web – the Ghost Serpent Acolytes. Seek it out if you haven't already, though be warned that the spirit might not be too happy to see you.]

What an understatement. Did the matriarch not realize the depth of the Ghost Serpent's hatred of time travelers, or did she simply think her warning was sufficiently informative?

[Other sources include the researchers at the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria – you can find its location in the map I've attached inside this message – as well as some of the invaders that had the chance to interact with our mysterious time-traveling foe. It seems the invaders were quite curious about their new informant and have invested considerable time and effort into figuring him out.]

Damn. His investigation into invaders never seemed to produce any results as far as Red Robe was concerned. Then again, by the time Zorian was able to investigate them properly, Red Robe was no longer interacting with them at all.

[What I have gathered from all this is that this time loop is some kind of... fake, parallel world. We're real, but we're not. It's hard to understand. Or maybe accept. The problem that arises from this is very simple: the time loop is degrading. I can't tell how long it will be before it collapses entirely, but I do know that simply waiting for it to end would be disastrous. One has to deliberately *leave* this place. And everything I've gathered about our time-travelling foe from the invaders suggests he is completely unconcerned with finding the exit or leaving. I do not believe for a second that our foe is too stupid to see the importance of this or too complacent to make it his priority. The obvious conclusion is that he has already found the exit, and he can leave at any time.

Thus, stopping him was of utmost importance. No matter what, he couldn't be allowed to leave the time loop.]

Oh this was bad...

[And also, if I am honest with myself...] The ghostly memory of the matriarch hesitated, as if wondering whether to say the next part at all. [If I am honest with myself, I had been hoping that I could find out how our mutual foe joined the time loop. So I could join it as well... and then, eventually, leave it before anyone else could.]

Wait, what?

[I'm not heartless, mind you. I would have done everything in my power to help the alternate version of you on the other side. Zach too, for that matter. But I had essentially been planning to betray you. The amount of good I could do – for my web, for my species and yes, maybe even for myself... it's so very irresistible. I hope if you ever get out of this place, you will not blame my other self for my own weaknesses, but I simply cannot see how I can make any other choice. It's nothing personal, but there can only ever be one winner in this game. I am truly sorry.]

That... Zorian almost tore the entire message apart in anger after listening to that. All this time he had been feeling guilty about her dying, hoping that Red Robe was lying and there was some way to bring them back... and it turns out Spear of Resolve was planning to screw him over?

But no. No, he wouldn't be destroying the message. It was important. Too important for him to throw it away.

He would listen to the message to the very end. He owed Spear of Resolve that much, at least. Even if she tried to betray him.

[I am unsure if this message is even necessary. But if the time loop can so casually create copies of us, it can surely destroy us just as easily. Our foe clearly has deep knowledge of how the time loop works. Thus, this message. I hope it won't be necessary, but just

in case, I put in a map to point you towards the invaders' bases and – more importantly – the time magic research facility deep beneath Cyoria. I am rather sure the time loop exit is located there – it is an ancient artifact called 'the Sovereign Gate'. You can find its legend in various books easily enough, I'm sure. The security is high, but you will find a way to access the facility peacefully at the end of this message. The Gate did not react to me no matter what I did, but maybe it will to a proper time traveler like yourself. Otherwise, you may have to find 'The Key' to get it to open. This is bad, since – if I have interpreted the Ghost Serpent's ramblings correctly – the Key consists of the five imperial treasures of the first Ikosian emperor. The ring, the crown, the staff, the orb and the dagger. These items are all lost, likely scattered across Miasina. You'd have to conduct your search on a whole other continent. I didn't think it was possible, even with the help of something like working Bakora gates, so I didn't put too much effort into tracking down rumors surrounding them...]

After that was a map of Cyoria's underworld, largely identical to the one he already had but with the various holes in his version filled out with relevant information. Finally, the matriarch gave him information on the government inspector that had the authorization to access the time magic research facility, to check up on their work and make sure they weren't wasting government funding. According to the matriarch, the man was not even a mage, and was easy to impersonate... which was how she had gotten access to the place.

Aside from the pre-arranged message, he did not get anything else out of the memory packet. But truthfully, the message was already a little too much for him. The matriarch's plans to betray him, the fact that Red Robe might have figured out a way to leave a long time ago, the stuff about the Key in the end...

Eventually the effects of the potion wore off and he found him-

self drawn to the world around him again. Both Zach and Kael were eager to see what he learned from the packet and Zorian did his best to tell them about his findings. All except for the way Spear of Resolve planned to betray him. That felt a little too personal at the moment.

The unanimous conclusion was that they had to access this time magic research facility as soon as possible. Accordingly, Zorian would raid the government inspector's place the very next day to steal his identity badges and everything else they needed to gain access to the place.



Two days later, everything was ready. Since it would be a bit implausible for government inspectors to consist of two teenagers, Zach had bought them both a shapeshifting potion on the black market that turned them into nondescript, middle-aged men. Which was... weird. Regardless, with their appearances changed and with all the necessary documentation in their hands, they simply walked into the appropriate city office and demanded access to the facility.

Zorian had been worried that Spear of Resolve had been insanely lucky on her own try and that somebody was going to call their supposed superiors to confirm their orders and identity... but no such things happened. They weren't even suspicious about the fact that there were two of them when there should have been just one.

Zach, being an idiot, actually asked them about this. Zorian was about to wipe their memories and shout at him, but it turned out they saw nothing wrong with his question.

Awful security.

"You must be new," the guy talking to them said. "That place gets inspected constantly. The royals are afraid someone is going

to steal their precious 'Sovereign Gate', so they check up on it constantly. That's why there's so much security around the place. Honestly, I don't understand why the researchers tolerate it. If I was in their shoes, I'd send the damn thing back to the royal treasury so I can work in peace. I bet it isn't even the real thing..."

After that, they were directed to a fancy magical elevator on the edge of the Hole, which took them down to the facility in question. Along the way, they passed next to the various other, less secretive research facilities – one of the armed guards that rode along with them was talkative and wouldn't shut up about them. Zach actually engaged the man in conversation, which was nice, because it allowed him to stay silent without looking too rude.

The other guard was as silent as Zorian. The two of them shared a friendly eye roll with each other in regards to the two gossips next to them and then ignored each other for the entire ride.

Finally they reached the place, passing through two more armed checkpoints that merely glanced at their papers before shoos them inside, and then they were finally inside.

They were greeted by a pair of researchers – one middle-aged, and one that couldn't be more than 18 years old in Zorian's estimation. They offered to give them both a tour of the place, and were quite surprised when they accepted the offer.

"We don't often get inspectors that are actually interested in our work," the middle aged man commented. He had introduced himself as Krantin Keklos earlier. "Most just want to see the Sovereign Gate to see it's still there and intact, and then leave as soon as possible."

"Oh, we definitely want to see the Sovereign Gate as well," Zach said, smiling. "We just thought it might be interesting to see what else you have got down here."

"Of course," Krantin said. "Rest assured that we have been tak-

ing good care of it. We're grateful to the Crown for allowing us to study such an amazing artifact."

"You don't believe it's a fake like everyone else seems to," asked Zorian curiously.

"I'm not sure if it's the Sovereign Gate of historical legend," Krantin admitted. "But it is surely a genuine artifact from the Age of Gods."

Over the next hour, Krantin and Aread (his younger assistant who mostly let Krantin take the lead) led Zach and Zorian through the facility to demonstrate their work. Zorian could tell that Krantin was absolutely ecstatic to give someone he considered influential a tour of the place, despite his subdued attitude. He wanted more funds and support from the Crown, and thought that pandering to them might help him get it.

There were three main portions of the facility. The first was a series of three Black Rooms – the first and smallest was reserved for experiments on plants and animals, while the two bigger ones saw human use. The second portion dealt with combining alchemy and temporal acceleration in various ways. Finally, the third and last part was based around a large black cube about four meters long on each side. There was a door-like depression on the side of the cube, but Krantin explained that they had never managed to get it open.

Carved into this door was a very familiar geometric diagram – a horizontal line with an upturned triangle balanced on top of it.

"There it is," Krantin said, sweeping his hand towards the black cube. "The Sovereign Gate. Despite the legend surrounding it, we believe it is some kind of powerful time acceleration room rather than a literal gate to another world. Sadly, we have never really managed to activate it. I had high hopes that the upcoming planetary alignment and the resulting amplification of dimensional magic might be the key to getting it to work, but no

such luck. Shame."

"Amazing," Zach said staring at the cube with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Yes," Krantin agreed. "It's hard to believe something like this had just been gathering dust in the Noveda family treasury for countless decades. If it weren't for Mister Zveri's generosity in donating some of Noveda's unneeded artifacts to the Crown, who knows how long it would have languished there undiscovered!"

"Yes," Zach said frostily, grinding his teeth. "What a generous guy, that Tesen."

"Well," Krantin coughed, realizing he had struck some kind of nerve, "Although I'm happy to answer any questions you may have, this is about it for what we do here. If you would-"

Looking around, Zorian looked around to confirm they were alone in the area for the moment and then reached out to the two researchers' minds. Though both Krantin and Aread were highly-trained mages, they were specialists in time magic and had no real mental defenses. In just a few seconds, Zorian forced their minds into mindless stupor. They remained standing on their feet, and looked fine at first glance, but they were effectively unconscious.

Zach raised an eyebrow at their sudden silence.

"You got them?" he asked, turning to Zorian.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "So. Do you know how we can activate this thing? And is it even wise to do so? I mean-"

"We should try touching it," said Zach.

...yeah, okay. It wasn't like Zorian had any better idea.

"We should do it together, though," Zorian remarked.

"Oh, right – that way we will hopefully both activate it at the same time. We both have the same marker thing, so it should work, right?"

"Right," Zorian agreed uneasily. He wasn't so sure personally, but what else he could do? If the matriarch was right, Red Robe

already knew about this place and could leave whenever he wished. The time loop still existed, though, so clearly he didn't. Why not? Zorian would have in his place.

He needed the answers the thing held.

"On three," said Zorian. "One, two... three!"

The both pressed their palm against the diagram on the door in perfect synchronization with each other.

Two seconds passed.

"Nothing is happening," Zach complained. "Damn..."

"No," Zorian frowned. He could feel something reaching out from the cube in front of them, trying to access his marker. Asking for... confirmation? "I could feel something. I don't know if you can feel your own marker yet-"

"Not really, no," Zach said.

"Well, anyway, I think if I just-"

He flipped one of the switches on his marker. The mysterious force reaching out from the cube immediately rushed into him. Everything went black.

Zorian half expected to wake up in Cirin again, with Kirielle jumping on top of him and wishing him a good morning.

But he didn't. He was instead floating in a black, featureless void. And Zach was right beside him.

"Woah. What happened," Zach asked, looking around. "Where are we?"

"The cube wanted me to give it confirmation of some sort," said Zorian. "So I said yes. And here we are."

"If we're permanently stuck in this void because of you, I'll never forgive you," Zach warned him.

"You would have done the exact same thing in my place and you know it," Zorian said.

"Well yeah, but aren't you supposed to be the paranoid, sensible one? Agreeing to unknown requests from a mysterious ancient

artifact sounds pretty stupid to me.”

Before Zorian could say anything, another person popped into existence in front of them.

No... not a person. The entity in front of them was vaguely humanlike, but that was clearly just a crude façade. It wore no clothes, but that was okay because it had no genitals, body hair or anything else other than smooth skin. Its face was blank and apathetic, and its eyes were glowing white voids devoid of iris or anything else except soft light spilling out of them.

“Welcome, Controller,” the entity said, its voice soft and emotionless.

Zach reacted faster than him – he immediately reached for his spell rod, only to find it effectively glued to its holster. Checking himself, Zorian noticed his own spell rods suffered similar fates. In fact, his very clothes seemed to be glued onto his skin and though he could feel his mana reserves he didn’t seem able to manifest any of that mana at all.

“Who are you?” Zach demanded. “What is this place?”

“I am the Guardian of the Threshold,” the entity said, as apathetic as its face. “And this is the control room.”

“I don’t think this is a physical place,” Zorian noted. “Notice how your clothes seem to be a part of your body.”

“Hey, you’re right...” Zach said, frowning as he tried to roll up his sleeves and failed.

“We’re some kind of projections,” Zorian said. “As is the entity in front of us.”

They both stared at the entity in front of them. It seemed to interpret their attention as some kind of prompt.

“What is your request, Controller?” the Guardian asked.

“Can we leave this place?” Zorian asked.

“Of course,” the Guardian agreed easily. “Do you want to do that now?”

"By leave, we mean go back to the bodies we're being projected from," Zach clarified.

"The answer remains the same," the Guardian easily responded.

"What about leaving the time loop?" Zorian asked.

"Time loop?" the guardian mouthed uncomprehendingly. Its eyes flashed for a moment before it refocused on them again. "I'm sorry, but the gate is barred."

"What?" Zach protested. "What the hell do you mean 'the gate is barred'?"

"The Controller has already left the time loop," the Guardian explained. "It's not possible for anyone else to leave."

There was a brief silence as Zach and Zorian processed this claim.

"But I thought we were the Controller," Zach protested.

"You are the Controller," the Guardian agreed easily.

"But you just said the Controller has left the time loop," Zorian frowned.

"He has," the Guardian confirmed.

"Why is the time loop still in existence, then?" Zorian asked.

"The time loop cannot end while the Controller is still inside the time loop," the Guardian said.

"So the Controller has left the time loop, but you can't end the time loop because the Controller is still in the time loop?" Zach asked incredulously. "Don't you realize how stupid that sounds?"

"I don't think we're dealing with a sapient being," Zorian said. "It's some kind of animated spell performing its function and getting confused that there are multiple Controllers when there is only ever supposed to exist one. Guardian, how many people are you talking with right now?"

"Only the Controller can access this place," the guardian placidly answered.

"So wait..." Zach said in a trembling voice. "You're saying..."

"Red Robe has somehow tricked the control room into thinking he's the Controller of the loop," Zorian sighed. "He has already left. And so no one else can leave."

"The gate is barred," the Guardian confirmed.

Well, fuck.

End of Arc 2

CONTENTS

41	Myriad Clashing Motives	1
42	Sum of its Parts	25
43	Overwhelmed	49
44	A Show of Trust	77
45	Fine Structures	101
46	The Other Side	125
47	Politics	149
48	Well of Souls	173
49	Substitution	195
50	Containment	221
51	Out of Control	247
52	Things Fall Apart	269
53	Phantoms	299
54	The Gate Is Barred	327

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