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# MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc III - Part 3

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## Chapter Eighty-Three

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# SCORPION

Zach and Zorian were sitting in one of the many empty rooms in the Noveda mansion. This wasn't something that often happened. Despite this being his home, Zach didn't like to spend too much time in the place. Very few people lived there, relative to its size, which gave the mansion an empty, almost abandoned atmosphere that Zach found uncomfortable. Even before the time loop, he liked to spend most of his day outside, visiting friends and wasting time.

Zorian kind of wondered about these friends of Zach. He had never really seen Zach interact with any of them through the restarts. From what Zach told him, though, most of them were in the same situation as Benisek – kind of friendly with pre-time loop Zach, but not really *that* close to him and very ill-suited for dealing with the implications of an endlessly repeating month. Much like Zorian pretty much stopped interacting with Benisek, Zach seemed to have totally stopped bothering with these casual friends he had once had. It was a bit sad, though maybe Zach intended to continue interacting with them more heavily once he was out of the time loop...

Regardless, the reason for their uncharacteristic presence in the Noveda mansion was simple: the place still had a well-crafted,

perfectly functional warding scheme and the two of them didn't feel like traveling outside of Cyoria and creating a temporary base just to have this discussion. Thus, they simply retreated into one of the private study rooms that could be found in the estate and hoped this would be enough to foil any spying attempts by Quatach-Ichl or others.

The room was pretty nice. It was small but luxurious, with heavily decorated wooden furniture, several marble statues, magical lighting and temperature control and bookshelves lining every single wall. The center of the room contained a table and some chairs, and sitting in the center of that table was the object that Zach and Zorian had gathered to discuss.

The ring. One of the pieces of the Key that they had to bring to the Guardian of the Threshold in order to reopen the time loop exit and one of the artifacts associated with the first emperor of Ikosia. It was made out of solid silver and largely featureless, with no notable decorations or gems. A few faint lines and sigils covered its surface, only visible upon close scrutiny. It did not seem very imperial, unlike the crown that Quatach-Ichl was wearing or the palace orb.

If they had not possessed the tracking function of the marker on their side, it would have been very hard to pick it out as special from the rest of the small trinkets that the sulrothum high priest had been carrying. Just like the palace orb, it seemed completely immune to divinations of any sort.

They already knew what it did. Maybe it was because they already had plenty of experience with the palace orb, but figuring out how the ring functioned only took a visit to the Guardian of the Threshold and half a day of tinkering with it. It was just that the end result was... not as useful as they had hoped.

"Interesting thing, isn't it?" Zach said, picking the ring up and making it spin on its edge like a top. "Heh. Of course, it's more

useful for me than it is for you... but that may be a good thing. At least we won't have to struggle with the question of who to assign it to in the future, like we do with the palace orb!"

Zorian clacked his tongue at the analysis. The ring had an intriguing main function: it somehow granted the wearer an ability to use soul perception through it. As far as Zorian knew, there was no other item with a similar function, which made the ring quite interesting and unique... but also very useless for people like him who had already unlocked soul perception through other means.

Zach, of course, was another story. Due to the safeguards on his marker, unlocking his soul perception was anything but easy. Most methods to do so required one to be brought to the very edge of death and tampered deeply with the user's soul to achieve their goal. The soul perception potion Silverlake made for Zorian did the same, which was why they had not bothered to have Zach try it out thus far. They just didn't think it would work and didn't want to cut a restart short for now. The soul perception ring basically negated any need for such dangerous unlocking, giving Zach a way to practice soul magic easily.

Frankly, Zorian suspected the ring was created specifically with the goal of solving this kind of issue. Since it was extremely difficult for a controller with an intact marker to unlock their soul perception through classical means, it made sense for Shutur-Tarana to prepare a workaround for his successor.

"It's a bit inconvenient that the ring is so hard to get to, though," Zorian remarked. "The ring only grants you soul perception while you wear it. No ring, no soul perception. If you started each restart with the ring on you, like the controller was probably supposed to, then that would be a minor issue. As it is, it will take us a week at minimum to get ahold of it in each restart, and that's after optimizing things..."

"Yes, that does suck," Zach agreed. "I definitely intend to try

and figure out a way to gain soul perception 'the right way', so that I don't need to depend on it, but this is still good. I doubt finding an alternative will be easy and we know from your example that simply unlocking soul perception is just the first step in the process and that a lot of training is needed to use it – with this, I can get started on that right away."

"I guess that's true," Zorian nodded. A part of him was annoyed that Zach got to skip a large chunk of the work Zorian had to do to gain his soul perception ability, but he knew that was just his jealousy talking and that this was objectively a good thing. "It still feels to me like the ring is relatively underwhelming, at least compared to the other two examples we know about. Even its time loop related skill is not that exciting."

Like all Key pieces, the soul perception ring had an ability that could only be accessed inside the time loop by the current controller. Specifically, the ring could place a tracking marker on target souls, allowing the ring bearer to track their movements with ease. According to the Guardian of the Threshold, the markers persisted across restarts, allowing them to know exactly where people started their restarts and what their usual routines were.

Or at least that's the effect they *would have had* if Zach and Zorian had started the restart with the ring. Since they hadn't, the value of the tracking markers was greatly reduced.

In any case, Zach and Zorian had tested the ability on various animals and random bystanders and found that the marker placement was fast and stealthy, that the ring could keep track of marked entities across intercontinental distances, and that divination wards didn't seem to hamper the effect in any way.

This sounded pretty amazing, and it was, but the markers had a serious flaw. Namely, anyone skilled in soul magic could detect when they were placed on them. This meant that Quatach-Ichl was effectively immune to it, as was Sudomir, Silverlake and a



whole plethora of other potential targets.

"They can't *all* be amazing," Zach shrugged. "And truthfully, I think the real issue is less with the usefulness of the ring and more with how late we got ahold of it. If I had the ring with me right from the very start, it would have been an absolutely priceless treasure. The tracking ability alone would have saved me a ton of work and some dying. Currently, we're both so good at divinations, memory reading, stealth spells, various tracking magics and things like teleportation that the ring is no longer very impressive to us. But that's just us being awesome, not the ring being underwhelming."

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. There was a lot of truth in that.

"Besides, it may be a good idea to place these tracking markers on all of the high ranking cultists and Ibasans to see if they're doing something we don't know about," Zach said.

"That would take quite a bit of effort, though," Zorian pointed out. "The ring just gives you the distance and direction of your target, and only one at a time as well. You'd have to constantly pay attention to the ring, cycling through all of the tracking markers and matching the information you receive to places on the map to see where they actually are in actually useful terms. Then you'd have to go out personally to check up on any interesting movements to see the details of what is going on, or send a simulacrum, and—"

"You've done more complicated projects before, Zorian," Zach said, waving him off.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him.

"You... do realize it's you who will be doing this, right?" he asked Zach. "After all, you're the one who's going to be wearing the ring. What with you needing its soul perception granting abilities..."

The look on Zach's face when he realized he just dumped a

huge amount of work in his own lap was truly priceless.



Although Zach and Zorian had successfully retrieved the imperial ring from the Ziggurat of the Sun and found out what it did, there was no time for celebration. Quatach-Ichl's surprise visit had completely changed the dynamics of their current restart, and they had to prepare. One of these preparations was gathering everyone's research notes and the like. Normally this would be done just before the very end of the restart, but since there was so much chance of things going wrong this time around, Zorian decided to speed things up a little.

At the moment, this meant visiting Kael in his basement alchemy lab to see how his projects were progressing. This would be normally rather mundane, but nothing seemed to be entirely mundane in this particular restart. Apparently Silverlake had figured out who Kael was at some point in the restart and had talked to him a few times already. Sadly for Silverlake, Kael had given her a chilly reception. Their previous interaction seemed to have left a bad impression on Kael, something that did not surprise Zorian in the very least, so he was not at all eager to reacquaint himself with her. The fact that she showed unhealthy interest in his daughter Kana, due to her witch roots, probably didn't help. Sadly for *Kael*, though, that didn't deter Silverlake in the slightest, and she decided to barge in on this meeting to give them both her personal opinion on what Kael had been doing all this time.

"It's terrible," she stated without preamble.

Zorian had pretty much expected that. Kael probably did too, but he was too much personally invested into his project to just ignore the provocation.

"It's not terrible," Kael said in a clipped tone, not even bothering to look at her. "There, now it's your word against mine. What now?"

"Now I win, because I'm a wise, experienced witch and you aren't," Silverlake said smugly. "Really, I don't understand why you're so angry with me. Are you really still so angry about the way I spoke to you back when we first met? Don't be so petty! They're just words. I guess I was a little harsh, but can you blame me? Fria totally broke the rules when she took you under her wing and taught you all these things. A harsh word or two is really nothing compared to what I *could* have done... bah, kids these days don't know what's good for them."

"It's not terrible," Kael repeated, completely ignoring her attempts to pick on their shared past. "In fact, the potions and the research I have produced over the restarts are so good that they produce an uproar among Cyoria's medical and alchemical community if I release them too carelessly."

"Well I'm not saying it's *worthless*," Silverlake clarified. "But considering the amount of resources you had at your disposal and the sheer advantage given to you by the time loop... it's underwhelming. It's *terrible*. So many missed opportunities. So much lost potential."

Zorian did not try to inject himself into their bickering, but Silverlake's statement made him frown. No doubt Kael's methods could be better than they were, but what exactly was she talking about? In his personal opinion, Kael's work was pretty incredible.

Back at the beginning, when Kael had told him he wanted to research things with the help of the time loop, Zorian had agreed to help, but didn't really think Kael's work would have any wider impact. He knew this would be a tremendous personal boon for Kael, of course, allowing him to figure out the best recipes and production methods for known potions. The sort of thing that estab-

lished alchemists don't share with anyone except their apprentices. But affecting the medical field as a whole? He knew that Kael was something of a young genius that had been specifically recruited by the academy because the folk healing remedies he had been producing to support himself and his daughter were good enough to get some influential people to take notice, but still. Alchemy was a very profitable occupation and many alchemy-based Houses and organizations had experienced, well-funded researchers on their payroll. What could one beginner alchemist, working in his basement, do that they could not?

Indeed, at first Kael focused primarily on improving his personal alchemical technique. He experimented with replacing expensive alchemical components with cheaper ones, with increasing potency of the standard cures, with cutting down the production time and skipping certain steps... small things, but they added up. They added up in ways that Zorian honestly hadn't expected. It turned out this sort of production optimization was rarely done on such a small, personal scale by the big alchemical groups. They usually produced their potions in large batches, so figuring out the best recipes and production procedures by a single alchemist working on an individual potion or two was of very limited usefulness to them. Plus, if something could be done by a lone alchemist with a relatively cheap setup, it was much easier for it to be stolen by outsiders or leaked by angry former employees and so on. Thus, they rarely invested too much into that kind of research.

Granted, there were no doubt plenty of individual alchemists that worked exclusively with small scale setups, and they had done plenty of research on their own... but they rarely shared these insights with anyone who wasn't family or a chosen successor, and many times ended up taking them to their grave. The fact that Kael had done years of research, funded by considerable resources and in cooperation with many individual alchemists and Healers that

Zach and Zorian had helped him contact, and was entirely willing to release it to the public... it was a lot more important than Zorian realized.

This wasn't all, of course. Thanks to the support Zorian had given him, Kael was eventually able to be much more ambitious in his projects. Though he still pursued simple refinement of the production process, he had already picked most of the low-lying fruit in that regard. Now he was going after things like trying to combine several medical potions into one, experimental self-diagnosis potions that allowed a person to feel the state of their body with great clarity, and attempted cures for diseases that didn't have any accessible cures on the market. Of course, Zorian had a feeling this last one was what Kael really wanted to focus on. The death of his wife and mentor during the Weeping had clearly left a great mark on him, and seemed to serve as his primary motivation to try so hard in his alchemical pursuits. But these sort of ambitious projects were quite hard, and Kael was having very limited success there. Especially since, in every single restart, Kael had to re-familiarize himself with what he had been working on before he began building upon it.

"Missed opportunities, huh?" Kael said, leveling Silverlake with an unamused glare. "So what would you have done in my place, then?"

"For starters, I would have been *far* more liberal and unrestrained with human experimentation," Silverlake told him immediately.

Both Kael and Zorian flinched at this.

"Oh, look at you two babies!" Silverlake cackled. "You're living in a time loop, are you not? When are you going to do human experimentation if not now? You are surrounded by perfect test subjects! Any damage you do will be conveniently wiped out at the end of the month and you have the unprecedented ability to

test various versions of a medical potion on the exact same patient without your previous attempts affecting the later ones and muddying the waters in regards to which one is really better. Really, it's practically criminal that you're not taking advantage of this..."

"First of all, I don't care that I'm trapped inside a time loop and people won't really suffer and die – I did not go down this path to hurt people," Kael told her firmly. "Secondly, even if I didn't balk at this on ethical grounds, it's still a terrible idea. The other alchemists and healers aren't stupid. Any potion developed through unchecked human experimentation will be obvious as such – people will surely realize that I couldn't have possibly developed such a potion without going through an inordinate amount of test subjects and send the authorities to check up on me."

"At which point they will find absolutely nothing, because you did everything in the time loop, erasing all the evidence," Silverlake said. "They're just accusations. Just keep insisting you're a genius and you figured it all out in a dream or something equally absurd. You're way too skittish. I think you'll find that a lot of powerful people won't care that you've done everything nicely and according to law. So long as you make too many waves they will want you under control or gone."

Kael was silent for a few seconds.

"You might be right," Kael conceded after a while. "But I don't care. I already said my main problem is with the ethics of the whole thing, not whether or not I can get away with it in the end."

Silverlake glanced at Zorian.

"No way," Zorian said, shaking his head. He had seen just how messed up 'unrestrained' human testing can get while trawling through Sudomir's memories. While Silverlake *probably* had a lot tamer things in mind than that, he'd rather not risk it.

Silverlake ignored him, tapping her chin with her finger and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like 'if you want

to do something right, you've got to do it yourself'. This being Silverlake, though, Zorian had no idea if she was being serious or was just trying to piss him off.

"Well, never mind that, then," Silverlake shrugged. "Second idea, then. Did you two ever contemplate recruiting governments for help? They already have existing logistics and infrastructure, and the amount of resources even a minor statelet has at its disposal is vast."

"Yes, but we decided against it in the end," Zorian said. "Governments do things very slowly. Getting them to commit to anything worthwhile would take far more than a month, unless I was willing to use mind magic to speed things up. Which I'm not."

"Ah, but I wasn't suggesting you try to negotiate a deal with them or beg for handouts," Silverlake said with a grin. "All you have to do is 'leak' your potion formulas, research notes and other secrets to various governments and their research teams. Make it seem like they originate from their rivals and bitter enemies to light a fire under their ass and then simply stand back and watch what they do with it all. No need to convince them of anything – just dump things into their lap and swoop in at the end of the month to steal all their work."

That... might actually work.

"Huh," Zorian said. "You do raise a good point there."

"You shouldn't have said that," Kael said. "She'll be absolutely insufferable from now on."

Silverlake just cackled in obvious satisfaction.

"Well then," she said. "Do you want to hear the rest of my ideas?"



Once all of the preparations had been done, Zach and Zorian went to the address Quatach-Ichl had given them to contact him.

They had already discreetly checked the place out earlier and knew the place was actually a just a small, seemingly-innocuous corner store. The ancient lich had never given them any secret phrases or contact methods, so they were a little mystified as to what they were supposed to do when they arrived there. Just call for Quatach-Ichl by name? However, it turned out that they need not have worried. The man behind the counter seemed to immediately know who they were and what they were at the moment he saw them. He pointed them towards a door to the storage room, which wasn't actually a storage room, where Quatach-Ichl had already been waiting for them. His black, metallic-looking skeleton just sat there on a chair in one corner of the room, tapping his fingers against his leg bone and observing them as they approached.

Well. That was kind of creepy. How the hell had the lich known they were coming? Surely he hadn't spent the whole day here, just in case they decided to drop by...?

"Wow, you were waiting for us all this time?" Zach said loudly, bluntly drawing attention to the fact. "We must really mean a lot to you."

"I left a spare body in here and 'jumped in', so to speak, when I was informed you were coming over," Quatach-Ichl said, rising from his chair and making a few casual gestures in the air. A cloud of ectoplasm rapidly condensed around the black bones and then solidified into a familiar fleshy guise. He smiled at them lightly. "Still... I will admit I was rather looking forward to this. After speaking to you that day, I couldn't help but check up on some things and I must say you're even more unusual than I thought."

"Oh?" Zach prompted.

"For instance, there is no evidence that you are anything other than regular human teenagers," Quatach-Ichl said. "I thought, before seeing you up-close, that you may be shapeshifters or possessor entities wearing teenage bodies. Having seen how perfectly



your souls slot into your forms, I can effectively rule that out. I have also managed to get a better glimpse at what you are doing and I have to say... you are even more capable than I thought you were. It is really curious that you have managed to amass so much magical skill, money and contacts while being so young... and even more importantly, while evading the notice of people who keep an eye out for such things."

"Well, those people clearly aren't very good at their job because *someone* managed to organize an entire invasion right under their noses," Zach deadpanned. "In comparison to that, overlooking a couple of precocious teens is a minor matter, don't you think?"

"Ha! There is a lot of truth in what you're saying," Quatach-Ichl laughed. "The security around here is terrible. Still, the only reason we have been able to pull this off is that we have many of the local authorities infiltrated and that I secretly take care of... problematic elements. We are not completely undetected in the way you two appear to be. Furthermore, we are operating in 'impossible' fashion, using magics that nobody is aware are possible, and we have only recently ramped up our activities to their present level."

"So have we," Zach pointed out. "If you've been observing our activities as closely as you claim to have, you've surely realized we only started to ramp up after seeing you do the same."

"That's a curious way to put it," Quatach-Ichl said, cocking his head to the side in a questioning manner. "As far as I can tell, you didn't just ramp up your activities... it's more like you hardly even *existed* up until a few weeks ago. And many things you're pursuing have no conceivable connection to stopping us."

There was a brief silence as both sides quietly studied each other and their reactions.

"Well," Zorian said eventually. "I hope you don't expect an answer from us in that regard."

"Oh no, of course not," Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head. "I'm just thinking out loud, that's all. So. I presume you have an offer for me, yes?"

"Yes," Zach nodded. "We want you to help us break into Elde-mar's royal treasury and retrieve the imperial artifact stored there."

Quatach-Ichl gave them an incredulous look.

"Alright, you've got me there," he said after a second. "I honestly didn't expect that at all."

What followed was an exhaustive, two hour long session of questions and answers where Zach and Zorian tried to prove to the ancient lich that they weren't crazy for trying to pull this off. They showed Quatach-Ichl the various building plans and other information that they had gathered about the royal treasury in the past, pointing out that they already did most of the work and just needed his help with overcoming a few final hurdles.

They weren't lying, either. They actually already knew how to bypass most of the defenses without being detected, it was just that the final stretch of defenses was extremely closely guarded and was basically impossible to breach in secret. As far as they could tell, any opening of the treasury was automatically a big deal and sent an alarm to people in charge of defending it. This was even true for when the royals were going in. It was just that the official openings were always announced well in advance, so the guards knew to ignore the alarm in those occasions. Thus, Zach and Zorian needed to fight their way in after a certain point, stay inside long enough to find and claim the dagger, and then escape without getting trapped inside. This was beyond them at the moment, but if they had help from someone on the level of Quatach-Ichl, it might be enough for them to succeed.

Quatach-Ichl initially thought the idea of assaulting the royal treasury was stupid and bound to fail. He even accused them of trying to get him to sabotage his own invasion plot by drawing

attention to himself in this manner. However, greed was a powerful motivator and once Quatach-Ichl realized that the break in had a large chance of actually being successful, he started to seriously consider it.

There was a big problem with the negotiations, of course. Both sides wanted the imperial dagger. Sure, the royal treasury no doubt held all kind of valuable treasures and documents, but very few of them were priceless in the same way that the dagger was. Quatach-Ichl had lived for more than a thousand years, and had all the money and mundane wealth he could possibly wish for. Some of the other artifacts stored inside could potentially be interesting, but it wasn't a sure thing and they wouldn't have time to sift through them all to pick the cream of the crop. No matter what they offered, Quatach-Ichl wouldn't budge in the slightest. As far as he was concerned, they could have anything else in the treasury, so long as he got the one thing he truly cared about – the imperial dagger itself.

Truthfully, this was all according to plan. Zach and Zorian always knew Quatach-Ichl wouldn't agree on a deal that would involve him giving up an imperial artifact. In fact, Zorian strongly suspected that Quatach-Ichl would immediately attack them once they were outside to claim the imperial orb from them as well. However, so long as they managed to break into the royal treasury proper, they did not care much. Even if they failed to wrest the dagger and the crown away from the lich in the aftermath, the whole thing would still have been worth it. This was because getting into the inside of the treasury would give them a chance to analyze the main wardstone that protected the entire complex, hopefully letting them outright bypass the defenses in the future.

Thus, they eventually 'reluctantly' agreed to let Quatach-Ichl claim the dagger in exchange for the first-claim right on everything else they encountered inside.

Quatach-Ichl gave them a strange look after that, not saying anything for a while, before suddenly turning more jovial and praising them for their 'sensible attitude'. Half an hour later they hammered out a deal and agreed to meet in two days in Eldemar City...



Zach and Zorian were calmly walking through the treasury corridor, escorted by four stony-faced guards. They ignored the guards and employees they occasionally encountered along the way, behaving like their presence was completely natural. Three times they encountered invisible detection fields that would have announced their presence to ward supervisors deeper inside the treasury complex, and it took less than two minutes for Zorian to subvert each one into letting them pass without alerting anyone. After a while, they encountered an actual security checkpoint with a couple of mages and gun-wielding soldiers. Zach just casually greeted the group while Zorian flashed an access badge in front of their faces without saying anything. The guards gave them questioning, uncertain looks but didn't bar their path. There was no official visit to the treasury scheduled, but the group was escorted by guards and had the symbol of royal authority. The group continued on.

Quatach-Ichl trailed after those two, observing everything curiously. After they put some distance between themselves and the security checkpoint, he decided to speak up.

"The mystery grows," he commented, glancing at the four guards marching beside them. "These guards you have dominated into helping us have very few giveaways that they are being manipulated into doing this. No jerky movements, no hesitation... other than being a little overly serious, there is no clue they are being controlled by another. I had no idea you were such a

capable mind mage. If you had such abilities, wouldn't it be easier to manipulate someone with legitimate access to this place into secretly retrieving the dagger for you?"

"Impractical," Zorian said simply. He didn't want to explain that his ability to control people was really quite limited. He may be a powerful mind mage, but he never invested much effort into figuring out how to execute those kinds of long-term compulsions. Even the aranea considered that kind of 'deep mind editing' to be sinister and repellent, to say nothing of himself. His specialty was telepathic combat and memory reading, not enslavement.

"You know, Ulquaan Ibasia has much more relaxed laws regarding mind magic than any country on the continent," Quatach-Ichl lightly commented.

"Are you seriously trying to recruit me at a time like this?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"I'm just pointing out you'd get a lot more appreciation for your skills if you emigrated there," Quatach-Ichl shrugged.

Zorian said nothing in response. They soon reached the point of no return – the doorway that could not be opened without throwing the entire treasury into high alert.

Even opening the door was not easy. It was incredibly sturdy, as were the walls it was attached to – they could not be battered down with raw force or blown off their hinges. Two keys were required in order to open it, neither of which could be safely acquired, and using them required the presence of the Chief Treasurer, who had to lower the local wards in order for the keys to work. Even if everything was done correctly, the treasury opening alarm would still sound, and defenders would swarm over to see what was going on if no opening had been scheduled for the day.

There were other entrances to the royal treasury, including a 'secret' one that could be accessed through the dungeon, but all

were defended just as heavily.

At the moment, the only solution Zach and Zorian had for this door was to outright attack the local wards until they shut down and then use the copies of the two keys they had produced earlier to open the door. Which kind of worked, but the local wards were no joke. Bringing them down was a very time consuming process for the two of them, leaving them low on mana and beset by every defender in the building.

"We're going to need your help here, as discussed," Zorian told the ancient lich.

Quatach-Ichl simply nodded absent-mindedly, studying the door in front of him.

Then they began. All three of them started assaulting the warding scheme, subverting, negating and pushing back the defensive field. Zach and Zorian were both very good at defeating wards by now, but Quatach-Ichl completely blew them out of the competition there... and not just because of his monstrous mana reserves, either. His skill at dismantling magical defenses was incredible. In retrospect, it probably wasn't that unusual. The lich had been alive for more than a thousand years. He probably had deep knowledge and sophistication about every form of magic there was.

The warding scheme did not take their aggression passively. It was the type of ward that actively struck back against attackers and it pushed back against them endlessly. Waves of telekinetic pressure and temperature extremes assaulted them, strange rainbow light tried to put them to sleep and nearby decorative wall tiles exploded into clouds of miniature razors. They were undaunted. Zach and Zorian had known those defenses were there before they had even started, and all three of them were capable of easily defending themselves from attacks on this level.

By now, the entire treasury was in high alert and the first defenders were starting to approach them at high speed. Zach was

about to direct some of his energies into dealing with them when Quatach-Ichl casually swept his arm backwards and fired one of those jagged red beams he was so fond of using onto the ceiling behind them. He must have hit something critical because the entire section of the corridor immediately caved in, showering everything in a thick cloud of dust and gravel and cutting them off from the approaching first wave of defenders.

"Pointless distractions," Quatach-Ichl said curtly. "Just focus on the wards."

The wards didn't last long after that. Once they were gone, Zach and Zorian inserted the keys into the door, which started to slowly open with a heavy grinding sound. There was no way to speed this up, but they didn't have to wait for it to fully open. The moment a small crack was produced between the door and the wall, Quatach-Ichl used some strange dimensional spell to twisting the resulting opening into a man-sized portal. Zorian decided he really needed to learn that spell. Being able to effectively squeeze through even the tiniest opening was pretty neat.

Once they were through, they were faced with another problem. A pair of huge, hulking golems made out of some kind of glossy black material barred their path. They both held strange shotgun-like guns that fired metallic webs instead of bullets and they were incredibly resilient. They were clearly intended to keep intruders busy rather than actually kill them, so Zorian didn't think it was a good idea to try and tangle with them.

He deployed the palace orb, retrieved a pair of huge golems out of it and sent them to keep the treasury golems busy while they continued on.

"Interesting golem design," Quatach-Ichl commented. "I don't recognize the manufacturer."

After a second of thinking, Zorian decided he felt like bragging a little.

"I made them," he admitted.

"Oh? A man of many talents, I see," Quatach-Ichl said. "I must admit I always thought golem making was just a squeamish man's necromancy, but recent advances in the field are pretty impressive. Perhaps I might commission some work from you in the future."

The actual treasury wasn't just one giant room filled with gold coins and priceless magical artifacts, like Zorian had idly imagined. Instead it consisted of numerous individual vaults, each with its own reinforced door that had to be battered down to claim the contents inside. Nothing was clearly labeled, which meant that finding anything specific was a total chore unless you knew exactly where to go. Since Zach and Zorian had a marker that let them sense the dagger's location, though, it wasn't long before they managed to track it down. Quatach-Ichl claimed it immediately for himself, giving them a challenging look. The two of them had no intention of fighting the lich for the dagger, though. Or at least not in this place.

In any case, this dagger wasn't the only thing they wanted out of this place. They also wanted to locate the main ward stone of this place and it wouldn't hurt to also smash up a few more vaults to see if there was something particularly interesting inside. They both made a handful of simulacrum and sent them to scatter all over the place... but were caught a little off-guard when Quatach-Ichl proceeded to create enough simulacrum to accompany each one of theirs.

Apparently he did not trust them to have even their simulacrum out of sight. Or maybe he was just that curious about what they were up to. Either way, they decided not to make a big deal out of it and simply went about their work.

Eventually, they managed to find the main wardstone. It was hidden under the metal floor and shielded from most divinations, but Zorian managed to track it down anyway. He didn't have



enough time to study it in great detail, and it couldn't be moved without destroying it, but even that brief examination gave him plenty of ideas for the future. The treasury wardstone was a real work of art, and Zorian definitely intended to come here again to take a few more looks at it.

As for the vaults, they held all sorts of wealth, rare materials and mysterious items... but it was really hard to figure out what was truly useful to them and what wasn't in the short amount of time they had. They ended up piling everything they recovered into the palace orb for later study and just forgot about them for now.

"That orb is much bigger and more convenient than I thought it would be," Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum mused idly beside. "I think I may have underestimated its usefulness just a little."

Quatach-Ichl actually had his own pocket dimension containers, but they were apparently a lot less expansive than their own, which meant he had to be much more selective about what to take from the place than they were.

Of course, the Eldemarian guards and military were anything but idle while they were doing that. It was less than five minutes before they managed to break through the collapsed corridor and four giant golems wrestling each other in the middle of a corridor, and then the fighting began.

In all honesty, they had probably stayed too long inside the treasury. Too many forces had rushed to the place, making it very hard for them to fight their way out and escape. They couldn't simply open a gate to outside with the simulacrum trick, because apparently the treasury wards were thorough enough to shut that idea down. The ward stone was too tough to be destroyed in any reasonable amount of time. If it were just Zach and Zorian, this may very well have been the end of this particular restart.

However, they had Quatach-Ichl on their side, and he had ap-

parently already prepared a contingency for this kind of situation.

The only warning Zach and Zorian received about what was about to happen was when the sounds of distant screams and detonations started resounding in the distance, as if the treasury defenders were fighting another enemy outside as well as them. Before they could ask Quatach-Ichl what was happening, a nearby wall collapsed as a huge sphere of black metallic bones slammed directly into it and crushed it under its weight.

The sphere quickly uncoiled into a large, crocodilian skeleton that swept through nearby space with its tail, sending treasury defenders flying away like wooden toys. Fireballs, force blades, disintegration beams and a wide variety of grenades rained down on it immediately afterwards. Some of them were even doing damage.

But it was too little, too late. Before their attacks could deal anything more than superficial scratches, it noticed Quatach-Ichl and immediately barreled towards him.

"Please tell me that's a friend," Zach said.

"Ha! You can say it's a pet of sorts," Quatach-Ichl laughed. "Jump on it when it gets close and make sure you hold on. If you let go, you're on your own. There is no way I'm coming back for you."

If someone had told Zorian a few years earlier that he would be riding through the streets of Eldemar on the back of a giant skeletal crocodile-thing, after having robbed the royal treasury in the company of a thousand-year-old lich... well, he would have told them that they have an overactive imagination. Yet, that was exactly what had happened. Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl managed to fight their way out of the treasury while riding the lich's 'pet' and simply kept rushing forward. By the end the poor crocodile thing ended up falling apart, having sacrificed itself to save them from one last coordinated spell barrage by the Eldemarian military, but by then they had already left the radius of the city wards and tele-

ported away.

Now for the hardest part: dealing with Quatach-Ichl...



Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl were hiding inside a small cave under a random field. It had been more than half a day since they had broken into the royal treasury, and they had the exact same problem that Zach and Zorian had had when they had made their attempt at the treasury in the past – somehow, the Eldemar forces were tracking them down everywhere they went.

[How annoying,] Zach commented to Zorian telepathically. [I was specifically paying attention for something like this and I never noticed any sort of tracking mark being placed on us or on any of our possessions.]

[I can't detect anything being done to our souls, either,] Zorian replied. [It's really frustrating. How exactly can they track us so unerringly? They clearly don't know our actual identities, just like they hadn't known in the previous restart we've done this, so it must be something like a tracking mark or magical tether. We're both experienced with detecting those kind of things, so why can't we find it?]

Quatach-Ichl, who was currently sitting on the floor of the cave in complete silence, looked like he was engaged in some kind of intense meditation. Zorian could tell through his soul perception, however, that Quatach-Ichl seemed to be doing some rather intense personal soul searching. He could tell because the lich's soul was usually perfectly calm and controlled, but now it churned and pulsed as if caught in a storm. Presumably the lich thought the tracking method had been placed on their souls and was trying to locate it. Zorian had done the same with no results, so he didn't get his hopes up that Quatach-Ichl would find anything this way,

but it was worth a shot. At least he wasn't flipping out and trying to kill them for dragging him into this mess.

Maybe if they–

"It's a tether made out of divine energies," Quatach-Ichl suddenly said, rising from the floor of the cave and dusting himself off.

"Divine energies?" Zorian repeated incredulously.

"Like the ones that make up my soul stabilization frame and power divine artifacts," Quatach-Ichl said. "There must be an item somewhere in that building that automatically connects to the soul of any being that comes within a certain distance of it. How insidious. If I didn't have so much experience sensing the piece of divine magic in my own soul, I would have never been able to detect it."

Damn it, divine magics were so unfair. No wonder they hadn't been able to find the way the Eldemar authorities were tracking them...

"Can you sever it?" Zach asked.

Quatach-Ichl shook his head. "Perceiving divine energies is one thing. Affecting them is another. I have no way to get rid of the tether, although I can tell it's not permanent. It will eventually weaken and fade away."

"Eventually being...?" Zach tried.

"A couple of weeks at least," Quatach-Ichl said calmly.

"You are too calm," Zorian pointed out. "Clearly you have already found a solution."

"Yes," Quatach-Ichl said smugly. "The tether may be made out of divine energies, but it ultimately has the same weakness that all such magical tethers have – a maximum distance it can support before it snaps. If we go outside the range of the item we are tethered to, the magic will break and we'll be free to enjoy our ill-gotten gains."

"Ah," Zach said. "Wow, this is easier than we thought, then!"

"Of course, being made by a divine artifact, the tether no doubt has a downright absurd maximum range it can support... and Eldemar's authorities will probably take the anchor item out of the treasury to keep us in range of the effect if they notice us trying to break the tether this way. So not only do we have to travel extremely far away from here, we must do it so quickly that Eldemar's authorities cannot keep up with us."

Zach and Zorian looked at each other before turning back to the grinning lich. He probably thought he had them – that they had no method of traversing vast distances quickly enough and that he would be able to squeeze some kind of concession out of them in exchange for helping them break the tethers on their own souls.

Well... he was wrong.

"I don't see the issue here," Zorian shrugged.

"No?" Quatach-Ichl asked. "I'm not sure you understand... just teleporting around a little isn't–"

"No, we get it," interjected Zach. "It's just that, no matter how ridiculous the range of this tether is, going to Xlotic is probably enough to make it snap. And if not that, then we can just continue on to Koth instead."

Quatach-Ichl stared at them with an uncertain look on his face.

"Do you want to come with us?" Zorian asked innocently. "It probably isn't so easy for you to put so much distance between yourself and Eldemar on such a short notice."

"Yeah, you've helped us a lot tonight, so it's only right for us do something for you too," Zach nodded, playing along.

They didn't actually expect Quatach-Ichl to agree to their suggestion. After all, going with them involved stepping through a dimensional portal without knowing where it really led. That wasn't something you did unless you thoroughly trusted the other person, and Quatach-Ichl didn't even trust them enough to leave their simulacrum wandering around unsupervised.

They opened a portal to Xlotic, and Quatach-Ichl followed after them, surprisingly calm. He did not comment at all on the fact they knew how to cast something as rare and difficult as a dimensional gate, or the fact they arranged for said gate to open to another continent on a moment's notice. He simply observed everything around them, his eyes sweeping over the desert horizon with a thoughtful expression.

"Cities to rubble, fields to dust..." he murmured quietly. "What a depressing sight."

Hum. Zorian had never really thought about it before, but Quatach-Ichl was probably the only living person that had seen Xlotic as it had been before the Cataclysm.

In any case, Quatach-Ichl then closed his eyes and once more started sensing his soul for the tether. He opened his eyes ten minutes later and nodded to them.

"It's gone now," he said. His voice was devoid of any trace of joy or satisfaction, though, which set off some alarms in Zorian's mind. "Apparently Xlotic is far enough that the tether ended up breaking when we crossed over here through the gate. Or maybe once the gate closed behind us. Can the tether maintain connection through a dimensional gate, even if the people are far outside its range in terms of actual distance? Interesting stuff. Too bad this is hard to reproduce and study. And too bad none of this is real, no?"

Zorian couldn't stop himself from flinching a little at that statement. Quatach-Ichl narrowed his eyes at the movement.

"I thought so," he said, voice serious. He started to slowly circle around them, eyes never breaking contact with them. Like a predator. Zach and Zorian assumed fighting stances, but did not make any aggressive moves. "I should have figured it out earlier. I really should have. The fact everyone got cut off from the spirit planes all of a sudden should have been a massive warning as to

what was happening, but it sounded so incredulous that human beings could cause something so grand in scope and effect. When I found that the aranea beneath Cyoria had just suddenly dropped dead one day, I was just happy an obstacle had disappeared and did not think on it as hard as I should. It was only when I talked to you that things started to become clear... but I, in my arrogance, refused to see the truth."

"We have no idea what you're talking about, bag of bones," Zach growled at him.

"It all clicked when you just casually opened a dimensional gate to another continent," Quatach-Ichl continued, ignoring his claim. "There had been something about your attitude that had bothered me right from the start, when I first talked to you in that tavern, but it is only now that it starts to make sense. You showed up out of nowhere, loaded with money and skills that make no sense in light of your past and age... like two adult mages badly pretending to be a couple of teenagers. You are fine with giving up divine artifacts in exchange for information and throw huge amounts of money on speculative research... as if material possessions don't matter to you, only knowledge. You don't like me killing people, but you have no problems butchering Eldemar treasury guards to get what you want... like those guards were never actually real to begin with."

Quatach-Ichl stopped his circling. Silence descended on the whole scene for several seconds, with nobody saying anything. Though everything was still and quiet, tension invisibly started to ratchet up.

"This whole thing... is some kind of giant illusion, isn't it!?" Quatach-Ichl finally concluded. They said nothing, and the lich took their silence as a confirmation of his idea. "I should have seen it sooner, but I was too full of myself. How could I, mighty Quatach-Ichl, be snared into some kind of illusion like that? I in-

stinctively rejected the truth until it was staring at me right in the face. But now... now I'm going to have some answers. Some *real* answers!"

He attacked, his organic guise melting away to reveal the black skeleton wreathed in green light that lurked beneath the skin.

They were ready for him.

Quatach-Ichl immediately went for soul magic this time, not even bothering with disintegrators and energy spells. Presumably because, while he wasn't actually certain how this 'illusion' he was caught in worked, he had already noticed Zach and Zorian did not seem to value physical things much and thus suspected these weren't their real bodies. If he wanted to defeat them, he needed to aim for their souls.

Well... he was kind of right about that, but Zach and Zorian had come here prepared. Their souls were fortified with defensive wards and they were not as defenseless and terrified in the face of soul magic as they once were.

Pulses of ghostly light assaulted them, but they warded them off with some effort. They responded with more mundane attack spells like incineration rays, ground liquefaction spells, destructive black blades of spatial force and so on. Quatach-Ichl defended himself with haste, force fields and animated sand creatures, but responded solely with soul magic attacks.

After a few exchanges, Zach and Zorian decided to reveal the next layer of their preparations – the trap wards they had placed on the area beforehand. The truth was, Quatach-Ichl really was kind of stupid for following them here through an unknown portal, because this was one of the several places where Zach and Zorian had prepared a trap for him. Granted, they had thought they would have to force him here through the gate, but this way worked too.

However, Quatach-Ichl had evidently prepared himself too. Before the wards could fully activate, the ancient lich removed



one of his 'decorative' bracelets and crushed it.

Four cubical constructs made out of black bones materialized around Quatach-Ichl, as if emerging from some kind of hidden pocket dimension around him. Each of them had four skulls embedded into their sides, their eye sockets burning with a dim green flame. Through his soul perception, Zorian could detect that each skull held a trapped soul inside of it. Powerful ones too – they had probably been harvested from talented and experienced mages, not some random bystander.

The skull cubes pulsed, seemingly synchronizing with each other, and then started unfolding into their own warding scheme then began to overpower the ones Zorian and Silverlake prepared in this place.

Well. Time to go all-out, then. Zorian deployed the palace orb and summoned Alanic, Silverlake and Xvim, who had been patiently waiting there for just this moment.

The fight quickly heated up, spells flying left and right. Quatach-Ichl was forced to give up on using exclusively soul magic to attack them. Soul magic had never been especially suitable for actual fights, which was why Quatach-Ichl didn't usually use soul magic as his first resort. Now, faced with five dangerous enemies, he could no longer afford to use such suboptimal tactics.

Zorian expected Quatach-Ichl to retreat at this point. He could no doubt tell he had no chance of winning this fight, and those skull cubes floating in the sky were effectively negating the trap wards that Zorian and Silverlake placed on the area to keep him from simply teleporting or flying away.

But Quatach-Ichl didn't do that. He kept fighting like a man possessed, throwing vast amounts of mana into every single spell. Finally, after a particularly well-executed haste spell, Quatach-Ichl managed to produce a wind gust spell sufficiently powerful to lift them off their feet and scatter them. Normally they would have

glued their feet to the ground to prevent that, but the sand of the Xlotic desert simply wasn't hard enough to let them do that – something they hadn't realized until it was too late.

Quatach-Ichl immediately followed it up with a huge pulse of soul magic that aimed to stop everyone in the vicinity. Zorian fortified his soul immediately before it hit... and then realized it was just a distraction.

Before anyone could recover from the wind blast, Quatach-Ichl hasted himself again and thrust his hand towards Xvim, hitting him with two spells in quick succession. The first was a powerful dispel which stripped the man of all his personal defense spells... including his mind blank. The second was some kind of mind magic spell.

Shit...

Zorian didn't hesitate. He immediately used his telepathy to plunge into Xvim's currently unprotected mind and started a mental tug of war with Quatach-Ichl, trying to eject the lich from his mentor's mind.

The spell Quatach-Ichl had cast was some kind of memory probe, he quickly realized. Powerful, but very crude and destructive by Zorian's standards. It probably hadn't done any permanent damage to Xvim yet, but it probably would if this continued for long. Thankfully, although Quatach-Ichl appeared to be very good at mind magic, he was still using a structured spell and didn't have that much experience in actual telepathic combat. Soon, the lich decided to retreat from Xvim's mind on his own.

Alanic recovering and trying to melt him down with a massive fire spell probably had a lot to do with that. Not even Zorian could trawl through someone's memories and pay attention to a fight at the same time.

In any case, Zorian suspected that Quatach-Ichl had gotten what he wanted out of Xvim's mind in the end. His body appear-

ance was hard to read, but he looked like he was a little... rattled.

"Wait!" Quatach-Ichl said. "Stop!"

They didn't stop, of course. Not until he suddenly took his crown off his head and threw it on the ground in front of them. And then did the same with the imperial dagger they retrieved from the Eldemar's royal treasury.

Huh. Zach and Zorian signaled the others to stop fighting for a moment.

"Take them," he said.

"You're just going to give them to us?" Zach asked curiously.

"We both know they are meaningless to me," Quatach-Ichl said curtly.

"How much did you glean from those memories you stole?" Zorian asked curiously.

He glanced towards Xvim, but his mentor gave no indication that the experience had shaken him up to any significant extent.

"Enough to know how meaningless this all is. At least for people like me," Quatach-Ichl said, sounding a little defeated. He laughed hollowly. "Ha ha ha! You really got me good! I have to say, if you just—"

It only took a moment for them to be caught off-guard. They had unconsciously relaxed a little after Quatach-Ichl seemingly gave up and no longer made aggressive moves, and the lich immediately took advantage of it. He once again put himself under the effect of haste and then rushed straight at them, literally running up to them... and then he exploded.

Later, Zorian would wonder what exactly tipped him off and made him immediately activate his marker's restart switch when he realized he Quatach-Ichl was rushing at them. Was it because he unconsciously sensed something through his soul perception? Because of some unexplainable hunch? All he knew was that, when Quatach-Ichl started detonating his own soul in that last

suicide attack, Zorian had already initiated the restart ending protocol.

They still ended up being caught by part of the blast before the restart ended. Zorian's soul was engulfed in a soul-corroding, excruciatingly painful blast of spiritual energies before everything went dark.

His last thought was that he hadn't even known a soul could be detonated like that...

## POWERLESS

Zorian slowly awoke in his bed in Cirin. His head was fuzzy, his body hurt all over and he had trouble remembering what he had been doing in the previous restart. Confused and in pain, he remained lying in bed for a time, fading in and out of consciousness.

Gradually, his mind began to clear up and he started to get concerned. Something was wrong. Yeah, he was feeling absolutely terrible, but it was more than that. Something was subtly off about this situation, and it was really starting to bother him.

'Oh, right,' it suddenly dawned on him. 'Kirielle didn't wake me up by jumping on me. I woke up on my own with no one else in sight. That shouldn't be possible unless something has gone very, very wrong...'

The moment he realized this, it was as if something clicked inside his mind and it all came back to him. The sudden visit of Quatach-Ichl, the theft of the dagger from the royal vaults with his help, the final battle they had against the ancient lich and the insidious soul attack he used just before the restart ended... the memories flooded into his mind suddenly and without end. The process was forceful and alien, as if *something* was shoving these thoughts directly into his brain with little regard to his wellbeing.

The waves of pain and nausea radiating from his damaged soul suddenly intensified, and he barely managed to roll himself out of bed before vomiting his guts out all over the floor of his room.

Dimly, he was aware that Kirielle rushed inside when he started making noise and then rushed back out screaming for mother to come and help, but he was in no position to react to that. It took all of his strength just to remain conscious and weather the pain. His soul felt like it was going to split apart, and he instinctively knew that it would be a terrible mistake for him to black out at the moment. He and Zach had long theorized that their soul synchronized somehow with their body at the start of every restart, interfacing with their life force and rearranging their brains to account for the memories they gathered over the restarts, and it looked as if this was true... except that in its current state, it was no longer capable of smoothly completing that process. Without Zorian's conscious efforts to stabilize his soul, it would not only ravage his body and mind but possibly also injure itself further in its fumbling.

If he lost consciousness now, who knew when he was going to wake up next? A small, panicked part of his mind feared he had already spent the majority of their remaining restarts in a soul damage induced coma, but he shoved that thought aside for now. This wasn't the time to worry about that. For now, all he could do was grit his teeth and deal with the problem at hand.

He didn't know how much time he spent in that state, shivering on the floor of his room as he fought to stay awake, but eventually Mother and Kirielle rolled him over onto a blanket and carried him off to a guest room to recover in. Somehow, he managed to persist through it all until his soul finally calmed down. When he finally recovered enough to talk, he found out that it was still the first day of the restart. He had failed to react when Kirielle came to wake him up, and stayed that way for about two hours before

waking up. Mother and Kirielle seemed shaken at the severity of his apparent illness, and refused to let him get up and walk around on his own in the aftermath. They also called for a local healer to come and check up on him, which was very annoying yet perfectly reasonable in light of what happened, so he could hardly object to it.

Predictably, the healer failed to find anything really wrong with him. He was not a mage, just a local who knew how to recognize common illnesses and hand out appropriate potions in response. He failed to find anything seriously wrong with Zorian, so he simply suggested that they watch him closely for a few days to make sure it didn't happen again. Mother was rather unhappy with his 'uselessness', but she did seem more at ease after receiving the diagnosis.

When they finally left him alone for a while, he decided to chance things and reached into his marker, even though he knew the action would aggravate his soul damage somewhat. He had to know how many restarts they still had left.

The marker told him he still had 25 iterations left, which caused Zorian to breathe a sigh of relief. He didn't lose any of the restarts, it seemed.

Unfortunately, this was where the good news ended. The damage Quatach-Ichl's last attack did to his soul meant that he was currently completely incapable of casting anything – attempting to perform even the simplest of shaping exercises caused his soul to radiate waves of pain and nausea throughout his whole body in protest. Though this would go away in time, he estimated it would take at least three months before he was back in his top form. Perhaps as much as four or five months if circumstances forced him to push things and he kept aggravating his injuries.

Zorian suddenly realized that he relied on his magic for practically everything these days. He had already forgotten what it was

like to be a weak, mundane teenager. Even coming up with a plan for going forward that didn't involve the use of a teleport spell was hard...

Damn it. He doubted Zach was any better off than he was, considering he had yet to visit Zorian after so many hours into the restart, so this was pretty much a total disaster. Even though they hadn't spent any of the restarts in a coma, the inability to use magic was going to sharply limit their options in the upcoming restarts. There was no way they would dare approach Silverlake or Quatach-Ichl with an obviously damaged soul like this, for instance. Additionally, the ancient lich may be able to recognize the soul damage as having been done by himself in some fashion – Zorian had no idea how one would go about doing that, as he found no traces of foreign soul fragments in his soul, but he wasn't a millennia-old lich like Quatach-Ichl.

He sighed. He had really underestimated the ancient lich. He probably should have been raging internally at the amount of grief he caused them, but in all honesty? Zorian found himself kind of impressed by the decisiveness and ruthlessness Quatach-Ichl had displayed. It took mere moments for Quatach-Ichl to decide, after seeing Xvim's memories, that the time loop was real and that he should sacrifice everything to hit them where it hurt the most. Most people would be doubtful at the information they received or too shocked to think clearly, but Quatach-Ichl didn't hesitate at all to sacrifice his own soul in an attempt to take them down.

Zorian could see the logic. Without Zach and Zorian mucking things up, Quatach-Ichl was pretty much guaranteed to get what he wanted out of the invasion of Cyoria, and potentially cooperating with them had little appeal to him. Possibility of betrayal aside, he was a thousand-year-old lich – what use did he have for a measly decade or two? Still, knowing all of this intellectually, and being able to disregard self-preservation in order to pull off a sui-



cide move... those were two entirely different things. Zorian had no idea that a person could detonate the outer layer of one's soul in order to launch a massive suicide attack on the souls of everyone in the vicinity, but even if he did, he would not have expected Quatach-Ichl to use such a maneuver after less than a minute of consideration. Zorian knew that he would be unable to act so boldly if he had found himself in Quatach-Ichl's shoes, and it boggled his mind that a lich – people that are typically obsessed with personal survival at all costs – was able to steel himself into pulling off a suicide move so easily.

Well. Putting that aside, he suddenly realized he had a tricky problem on his hands. Namely, he had to find a way to convince Mother to let him go to Cyoria so he could check up on Zach. From what he remembered, the last time he failed to wake up in time it was due to the Sword Diver attack in one of the restarts, and he had to remain in Cirin for the rest of the month to make Mother calm down and let him out of her sight. This time the situation looked much worse, and he needed to convince her to trust him far more than she had been willing to the last time around.

He could already feel his headache getting worse.



It took two whole days of constant nagging and arguments before Zorian was able to convince Mother to let him go. He thought about just boarding a train when she wasn't looking, but the look in her eyes made him suspect she would drop everything and follow after him if he tried that. She could be remarkably stubborn that way. Strangely, it was Father who ended up helping him by arguing in his favor. He actually seemed impressed that Zorian was willing to push through his sickness and keep attending classes, and ended up helping him convince Mother to let him go to Cyoria. It was a very surreal experience to Zorian, since he couldn't

remember the last time his father took his side or approved of his choices. He didn't know how to feel about that.

In any case, Mother eventually relented on the whole issue, though she did insist he take Kirielle with him. So she could 'keep an eye on him', supposedly. It was amusing to see her pause in surprise when he immediately agreed to her request.

The journey was a bit of an unpleasant shock to him. Robbed of his magic and still plagued with phantom pains and tremors, he struggled to carry their luggage and they both ended up getting caught in the rain for a while before they sought shelter in a nearby inn. He ended up renting a tiny, overpriced room for a single night, since the rain wouldn't be stopping any time soon.

Kirielle wouldn't stop complaining about getting wet for nearly an hour and screamed like a baby when she saw a particularly large cockroach crawling along the wall of their room.

Being unable to access his vast magic abilities was an unusual and very unpleasant experience.

The next day, he brought Kirielle to Imaya's place. Thankfully, she did not make too much of an issue out of their arrival, even though Zorian had not arranged for anything with Ilsa in this particular restart.

Then he went searching for Zach.

He quickly realized this wouldn't be as easy as he imagined. Zach was, he soon found out, officially missing. Tesen Zveri, Zach's legal guardian, was organizing a search for him and called for anyone who had any information about his whereabouts to contact him immediately.

That was... very familiar. Almost nostalgic, really. It was pretty much the same situation that he had faced during the first few restarts after he got pulled into the time loop.

He wondered what that meant. Was this some kind of addi-

tional time loop safeguard that kept the controller gone until they recovered, or was this just Zach's guardian freaking out about finding a comatose Zach and faking a disappearance? Personally, Zorian would bet on the latter. Quite a few people apparently knew how inappropriate Tesen's handling of Noveda's affairs was, so if Zach were to fall mysteriously unconscious all of a sudden, he would be one of the prime suspects. Zorian could totally see Tesen fearing that the coma would be blamed on him and faking a disappearance until he can decide what to do, much like Jornak did with Veyers.

In any case, it was relatively easy to prove which one of the options was correct. Zach and Zorian both had a marker with an identical key, and Zorian knew a tracking ritual that would let him locate his fellow time traveler with ease.

All he had to do now was find someone to help him cast it. Because he was currently incapable of doing it himself.

Gods, he hated this restart so much...



The room was silent. Zorian was supremely calm and collected, staring Xvim right in the eyes despite the look of annoyance present on his mentor's face.

"So let me see if I got you correctly," Xvim said. "You are a time traveler, you fought a millennia-old lich with Zach in the previous version of this month that I can't remember, your soul has been damaged so you conveniently can't demonstrate any of this amazing magic you apparently know and now you want me to help you rescue Zach from the evil clutches of Tesen – his legal guardian who is secretly behind his recent disappearance, despite organizing a nation-wide search for the kid."

Zorian considered it for a second.

"Yes, that's pretty much what I'm saying," he nodded.

"Get out of my office."



Ilisa carefully studied the stack of papers in front of her, one hand propping up her chin while using the other to slowly tap her finger against the desk in a steady rhythm.

Zorian patiently waited for her to finish reading. If this didn't work, he would have to take a risk and seek magical assistance through black market channels. Dealing with criminals while being essentially powerless was taking quite a bit of a risk, but there was nothing he could do. He needed to know what was going on with Zach.

"So all I need to do is cast this spell on you and tell you what the results say?" Ilisa eventually asked, giving him a suspicious look.

"That's right," Zorian nodded.

"It looks like a tracking spell," she noted.

"It is a tracking spell," Zorian confirmed.

Ilisa raised an eyebrow at him.

"Dare I ask what it's supposed to track, then?" she asked.

"It's kind of personal," Zorian said, doing his best to look depressed and desperate. "I'm afraid my friend has gone missing. Please, Miss Zileti. You know I'm not a troublemaker student and I don't ask for much. It... it would mean a world to me if you did this for me!"

Ilisa snorted derisively at him.

"Hmph! You need to work on your acting skills, Mister Kazinski," she told him. "That aside... I had professor Chao tell me about a strange little visit from you recently."

Ugh. He was still kind of annoyed that Xvim was so unwilling to entertain his claims. Being implausibly good at magic was ap-

parently really important for convincing the man there was something to his crazy time travelling claims. Well, convincing him quickly, in any case. He could probably wear down the man's skepticism with a lot of time and effort, but he didn't want to wait that long to tackle this problem.

"Is this friend of yours Zach Noveda, perhaps?" Ilsa tried after he didn't say anything for a while.

"He could be," Zorian shrugged.

"Zorian..." Ilsa sighed, folding her fingers into a triangle in front of her. "Putting aside that I have never really heard of you interacting much with mister Noveda in the past... what if you're right? What if Zach has really been kidnapped by his caretaker and taken somewhere? I cast the tracking spell and give you the location. What do you do with it? How can an academy student like you handle the guards and the security measures that this place would undoubtedly have and rescue Zach?"

Zorian internally debated the merits of explaining to her that his plan was to simply hire black market mercenaries to do the parts he himself could not, but eventually decided it was a bad idea. He had no real excuses in regards to where he got all the money needed to hire such people or why he thought he could judge their skills and character well enough to identify which of them are worth hiring and which aren't.

"You don't have to worry about it," he told her, giving her a reassuring smile. "I'm just trying to find a friend. I'm sure it won't be all that difficult."

She gave him an unamused look. Yeah, he probably should have just gone to the black market right from the start instead of bothering with this...

Contrary to his expectations, though, she didn't just throw him out of her office immediately after.

"Give me two days, okay?" she eventually told him. "I need to

speak with the academy leadership about this.”

“Huh?” Zorian said, surprised. “I’m not sure I understand. Why would you need to kick this up so high? It’s just a tracking spell...”

“And let you get in over your head and disappear as well? I don’t think so,” Ilsa said. “If we’re going to do this, we may as well go all the way. Besides... mister Noveda is a student of our institution. It is well within our rights to try and locate him if he goes missing.”

She pushed the stack of papers towards him and tapped it a couple of times for emphasis.

“Now...” she said, “explain to me how exactly this tracking spell works and why you think it can find mister Noveda when so many professional diviners have tried and failed to do the same.”



It was fascinating to watch how quickly and effectively the academy could mobilize itself when it really cared about something. Perhaps it was because the House Noveda had some secret ally among the academy leadership or because the academy saw the whole situation as a chance to score some free reputation points, but they really did assemble a team to go check up on the location Zorian would provide them with.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little intimidated by the attention suddenly directed at him. For one thing, he wasn’t actually completely certain the tracking spell would work. While he personally didn’t think it very likely, it was still possible that Zach’s disappearance was really just some sort of time loop safeguard and that he was literally nowhere to be found. It would be quite awkward if that happened.

Thankfully, the tracking spell worked just fine. Zach was just outside of Cyoria, in one of the smaller private estates that tech-

nically wasn't owned by Tesen but could be connected to his family if one looked deeper. The group assembled by the academy immediately stormed the place, presenting official-looking authorization documents when questioned about their motives and identity. There were guards in place, but they were apparently not paid enough to face off against a numerically superior force from a well-known institution and they quickly decided to stand down and give them free rein. The secret basement Zach was being held in was cunningly hidden, but since Zorian was there to serve as a living tracking device, it was simple enough to find it anyway.

Zach was in a soul-damage induced coma, just like Zorian expected him to be. Due to his inability to cast anything, including soul diagnosis spells, he couldn't be sure why Zach had ended up in a worse state than he did, but he had his suspicions. Zach's control over his own soul was much weaker and cruder than Zorian's, as was his ability to retain mental discipline. If he woke up early on in the restart like Zorian did and had to fight to stay awake and prevent his soul from going berserk...

Well. Even Zorian found that struggle to be a challenging one.

In any case, Zorian was now presented with a new problem. Even though he had been crucial in tracking down Zach, he now couldn't access his unconscious body at all! The discovery of his unconscious body had kicked up a media storm that didn't look like it was going to die down any time soon and he had been transferred to an expensive hospital and placed under guard. Zorian was not a family member, nor did he have any other known links to the Noveda heir, and many people were suddenly questioning his involvement in all this. The academy was taking his side for now, but Ilsa told him things were a bit delicate at the moment. Tesen was trying to distance himself from the matter, bitterly denying he had anything to do with Zach's coma or imprisonment outside of Cyoria, and his faction pushing hard for Zorian to be arrested so

he could be 'vigorously questioned'.

No matter. Even if Zorian could see Zach, what would he do with his unconscious body? Before he visited Zach in the hospital, he had to figure out how to accelerate his healing. Who knew how long it would take for Zach to wake up if he had to rely on his natural rate of recovery? Fortunately, this was something he could actually tackle with his current abilities.

Sudomir, just like many necromancers, often ended up damaging his soul in various ways while training and practicing his craft. As such, he had invested a lot of time in tracking down methods of accelerating his recovery, and Zorian had made sure to steal most of these out of his head during their interrogation sessions. A lot of these were purely personal soul magic exercises that were useful only to the soul mage using them, or complex ritual spells that he wasn't capable of casting right now, but a few actually came in the form of potions that could be administered to others.

And alchemy did not require any mana shaping. His inability to do magic did not hold him back here in the slightest. So long as he could track down and buy the appropriate materials, he would be able to create the potions in question.

Getting materials for such a relatively exotic potion was anything but easy, of course. Many of them were not sold on the open market, and even if they were Zorian did not have enough money on him to buy them. He thought about robbing invader caches again, but his lack of magic made that a far riskier proposition than it usually was. Additionally, he had attracted quite a bit of attention to himself lately, so going out for a little midnight stealing was probably unwise. Thus, he ended up amassing the necessary funds the hard way – he bought a bunch of raw materials with his available money, made a handful of rare, hard-to-make potions with them, sold them for money, used that money to buy even more raw materials, and so on. It took him a week of that to get enough



money to buy what he *actually* wanted, and then another four days before he had managed to track it all down and finished the potions.

The end result was three different bottles, one holding a milky white liquid, another a blood red syrup that looked as if it was constantly boiling and the last one a glossy, pitch black pill that floated in the center of the bottle as if weightless.

He took all three of them and departed in the direction of the hospital that held Zach. He was still not allowed to visit him, but who cared about that? Through a strategic use of sleep bombs and other disabling potions, he managed to gain access to Zach's room, after which he proceeded to force-feed the three soul cures to his unconscious body, one after another.

He immediately left afterwards. It would take a while for the potions to actually take effect, and it would be best if he were far away from the scene of the crime when people found the trail of unconscious bodies he had left in his wake.



The news of the second 'attack' on Zach while he was in the hospital kicked up another round of controversy and several dramatic vows by the hospital staff and city authorities that the perpetrator was going to be caught any day now. Considering that not even Zorian's worst detractors seemed to suspect him as the perpetrator made him rather doubtful of that claim, though. One amusing detail was that the hospital claimed they had caught the attacker in the act and 'heroically fought him off', which was why Zach supposedly hadn't been hurt more as a result of the break-in.

While he waited to see what the result of his intervention would turn out to be, Zorian looked into what had happened to Alanic, since the battle priest was one of the few competent and

reliable soul mages he knew of. Sadly, with Zorian being unable to teleport and busy with the whole Zach situation, he never did intervene to save Alanic from Sudomir's assassin, so by the time he checked up on him the man was already dead. Frustrating. It did make him kind of curious how those assassins were even capable of killing someone of Alanic's caliber. Investigating the case a little revealed he was essentially ambushed while sleeping, allowing his attackers to kill him before he even realized what was going on. That... kind of made sense, yeah. If Zorian saved Lukav, Sudomir panicked and acted prematurely, trying to kill Alanic through sheer force before Lukav could contact him and tell him someone was killing people like them. If the assassination of Lukav went through without issues, Sudomir would act with due caution and planning and kill Alanic in his sleep.

In any case, the treatment worked far better than he had hoped – four days after he fed Zach those potions, his fellow time traveler woke up from the coma. Not long after that, he demanded to see Zorian, which pretty much shut down any further attempts to keep Zorian from visiting the hospital.

"How are you feeling?" Zorian asked his fellow time traveler.

"Like crap," Zach grumbled. He gave Zorian a suspicious look. "I heard you're the one who tracked me down after my asshole caretaker just stuffed my unconscious body down in some basement. I guess I should thank you for that, but... how are you so much better off than me? Did you not get caught in the blast or something?"

"You know our conversation is probably being eavesdropped, right?" Zorian asked him.

"So? Just put up a privacy ward on the room and be done with it," Zach told him.

"I can't," Zorian sighed. "I can't really cast anything right now." Zach was quiet for a few seconds.

"Ah," he said finally. "I guess you didn't get off as lightly as

it appears. You probably don't want to hear this, but that kind of makes me glad. I kind of prefer it when you have to suffer through this crap with me."

"Jerk," Zorian said, though there was no real heat in it.

"Yeah, yeah... but seriously, why are you already walking around while I can't even stand up without vomiting all over myself?"

"I'm not sure, but... do you perhaps remember waking up in your own room for a moment before losing consciousness again?" Zorian asked him.

Zach frowned.

"It's hard to remember," he said after a few seconds. "Maybe?"

"Hm. Well, we're going to have to continue this particular topic when you get out of the hospital," Zorian told him. "Can you estimate how long it will be before you're back in top form?"

Zach frowned. "I don't know. Four, five months? Something like that."

Zorian breathed a sigh of relief. Although Zach's condition was worse than his own, it would seem it still wasn't *too* bad...

"Is there something urgent you need right now?" Zorian asked him. "As you can imagine, my ability to acquire things is a bit limited at the moment, but I'll do my best."

"All I want right now is to be out of this damn hospital," Zach grumbled. "But I don't think that's going to happen before the end of the month, considering what I've overheard, and neither of us has the ability to force the issue right now."

It was as Zach said. He spent the rest of the restart trapped in the hospital while Zorian had to dodge increasingly insistent questions about his involvement in the 'Zach affair' and his personal activities.

Thankfully, before those things could really get anywhere, the summer festival had arrived and the restart came to an end.



The next five restarts were relatively relaxed. With their souls so heavily damaged and their spellcasting impaired, Zach and Zorian couldn't really do anything particularly dangerous or strenuous, lest their recovery be prolonged even further or their soul damage become permanent.

Whether it was Zach or Zorian, they had no choice but to patiently wait for their soul to heal, so they gave up on doing anything serious and decided to just have fun and work on some of their easier skills. A part of Zorian was aghast at taking a break with their time steadily running out as it was, but forcing themselves would gain them little while risking a lot so he did his best to suppress it.

Unexpectedly, having his soul damaged actually ended up being quite a boon to Zorian's skill with soul perception and soul magic in general. It allowed him to map out his soul in far greater detail and enhanced his understanding how souls generally functioned. There were some things that were very hard to notice when things were going smoothly, and some pieces of the soul were far easier to comprehend when one compared intact and damaged versions of the soul to one another. He knew from reading Sudomir's mind that necromancers often deliberately mutilated other people's souls for that exact reason, destructively studying the anatomy of the soul to enhance their own skills, but one could never really perceive foreign souls on the same level of detail as one could perceive their own. As far as Zorian knew, no soul mage was crazy enough to deliberately damage their own soul as heavily as Zach and Zorian had gotten theirs damaged just to enhance their knowledge of soul mechanics, so their current opportunity was somewhat unique.

Although Zach started from a lower level, his skill in regards

to personal soul perception also grew by leaps and bounds in this period, since he invested a huge amount of effort into it – much more than Zorian himself. The fact that he had ended up worse in the wake of Quatach-Ichl's soul attack seemed to have affected him greatly.

Aside from soul magic, the two of them also worked on their basic shaping skills and tinkered rather heavily with alchemy, since this was the one magical discipline that hadn't been affected by their injuries in the slightest.

They didn't try to inform anyone of the time loop during this time. Most of the notebooks and other gathered information had been stored in the palace orb, which they couldn't actually access at the moment. They still interacted with many of the people they previously worked with, but mostly for the sake of fun and hanging out this time.

They spent an entire restart diligently going to class, being as helpful as humanly possible to every teacher and student they encountered. They spent a restart shapeshifting into various animals through transformation potions and explored the city and its surroundings through alien senses and perspectives. They dabbled in painting, sculpting, wood carving, drawing and various art skills. They went on a tour of Eldemar and its neighbors via train and other mundane methods.

And when the last of these relaxing restarts was drawing to a close, Zorian realized he wasn't sorry for it all. Even though they kind of wasted their time, even though they would only have 19 iterations left once this restart was finished... he was at peace with it all.

"We really need to give it our all in the upcoming restarts," Zorian said to Zach one day. "19 restarts aren't that much and we never know when something like this can happen again. If we had gotten this injured with only a handful of restarts left, that would

have been the end of us right there. Do you think we should still mess around with Quatach-Ichl after this?"

"Hell yes," Zach said firmly. "I mean, yeah, he really got us good this time, but we still haven't figured out a good way to break into the royal vaults without his help. And besides... while he ended up messing us up, he also showed us a really good way of taking him down with relative ease."

"Oh?" Zorian asked curiously. "And what would that be?"

"See, I think we've been overthinking things a little," Zach explained. "Instead of trying to lure Quatach-Ichl into a trap of flooding him with golems and enemy mages, we should be relying on our strengths to defeat him. Well, *your* strengths in this case. I'm talking about mind magic, of course."

"Mind magic?" Zorian said, stunned. "But with his mind blank on..."

"Xvim also had his mind blank on and it didn't stop Quatach-Ichl," Zach quickly pointed out. "It would be tricky, but if we time things right and I get a moment to concentrate properly, I'm pretty sure I can hit the guy with a powerful enough dispel to get rid of his mind blank. Just for a moment, but that should be enough for you, right?"

"I'm quite sure that Quatach-Ichl has some measure of skill with defending his mind," Zorian said carefully. "The fact he was able to search Xvim's mind so quickly in the heat of battle shows he's quite proficient in mind magic. Still... I don't think he's psychic and the brief telepathic clash I had with him didn't impress me much. I suppose it could work."

"It *will* work," Zach insisted. "Your mind magic is terrifying, and I bet it has been centuries since Quatach-Ichl has been targeted by a mind mage he couldn't kill in under a second. So long as we can stop Quatach-Ichl from murdering you before you finish subverting his mind, I think this could work amazingly well."

"You say that like it's such an easy thing," Zorian sighed. "But you're right, that *is* an interesting idea. Certainly better than fumbling wildly for a solution like we have been doing thus far. I kind of suspect Quatach-Ichl has rigged his soul to be withdrawn back into his phylactery if his mental defenses are ever seriously breached, though. That's what I'd do in his place."

"That still means we get to pick up the imperial crown from his abandoned skeleton, though," Zach said with a shrug. "That's the only thing we truly need from him. Everything else is just a bonus."

Zorian supposed he was right about that.



The next restart they decided to spring back to work and get their plans back on track. Their souls were fully healed as far as they could figure out and they didn't have too much time to waste. Thus, they quickly established a simulacrum link to Koth and Xlotic, recovered the palace orb, stole the Pearl of Aranhal, and then boarded their brand new airship and set off towards Blantyrre.

It would be a long and dangerous journey. Blantyrre was the largest of the world's continents, but it was separated by miles and miles of open sea from the nearest human port. Just making sure they stayed on the right path was a problem, since the endless expanse of water provided few clues as to whether or not they were going the right way and neither Zach nor Zorian were proficient in this kind of navigation. On top of that, the shortest path to the continent, which they pretty much had to take, passed uncomfortably close to a large island inhabited by dragons, Hundreds upon hundreds of dragons. It was called, somewhat unimaginatively but accurately, Dragon Island.

Dragons generally weren't fond of humanity, and the dragons of the so-called Dragon Island were especially belligerent. They not only killed any human that tried to disembark on the island itself, but actively patrolled the waters around it for any passing ships. If they spotted any, they demanded ruinous tributes in exchange for not destroying the vessel. Zach and Zorian had asked around to see what the dragons found fitting to their tastes and were prepared to pay the tribute for their safe passage, but the airship was very eye-catching and dragons were known to be capricious at the best of times. It was best to prepare for a fight just in case, and a dragon was always a headache to fight.

On top of that, some of the sea monsters were known to be able to attack aerial vessels, firing jets of water and energy attacks at things flying above them. It didn't happen often, and the Pearl of Aranhall usually flew quite high in the air, but it meant that Zach and Zorian could never fully relax and had to be constantly on the lookout for potential problems.

Still, things were finally moving again and that was the important part. They would make the attempt at the dagger and the crown again in this restart, and they would lay down the groundwork for finding the location of the staff as well.

In the meantime, they were about to establish contact with Quatach-Ichl again. It was time to arrange for a trade...



## CRITICAL MASS

Zorian would be lying if he said that interacting with Quatach-Ichl again didn't fill him with dread. Aside from the fact that the ancient lich had reached an unfathomable level of expertise in soul magic and could possibly detect residual damage on their souls, their current trade offer was fundamentally different from what they did during their last interaction with him. Before, it was Quatach-Ichl who approached them. Last time, he had blindsided them with his sudden visit. He had the initiative right from the start, which doubtlessly helped lessen the level of threat he felt from them. This time, it would be *them* who were going to blind-side *him*... and Zorian was not at all sure the ancient lich could take that gracefully.

Yet, Zorian knew he had to risk it. The fact was, their current initiatives were insufficient. Even if they managed to gather all the keys together in one restart before the time ran out, that wouldn't be enough. Not for Zorian, anyway. The problem of how he was supposed to exit the time loop still remained. His original self was still out there in the real world, so he couldn't just order the Guardian of the Threshold to shove his soul into his real body and be done with it. The Guardian of the Threshold may be confused about his controller status, but it would surely notice there was al-

ready a soul in Zorian's original body upon trying that. And even if that could be sidestepped somehow, there was still the matter of how to seize control of the body from his original self.

Zorian had a couple of ideas on how he could leave the time loop despite this issue, but all of them required incredibly advanced knowledge of dimensionalism and soul magic to accomplish. Quatach-Ichl had both, and it was likely that the insights he had into those two fields were impossible to find elsewhere. Zorian couldn't afford to ignore this priceless source of information, no matter how dangerous it was.

Arranging a meeting with the ancient lich proved to be rather simple, at least. All they had to do was go to the same corner store that Quatach-Ichl had sent them to the last time they had interacted with him and ask about him. The man behind the counter acted as if they were crazy, but not long after they left, the cranium rats suddenly became a lot more interested in them and started following them around. Zorian simply kept stealing away the individual rats from the collective for a few days before Quatach-Ichl decided to contact them personally and arranged for a meeting.

At the moment, Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl were sitting in a private booth of a relatively 'high class' restaurant near the city center. Not exactly the type of institution Zorian liked to frequent, in part because just getting a seat in one of those was pretty hard for an unknown teenager like him, but Quatach-Ichl had been the one to pick the location and he was evidently in the mood to show off his wealth and influence. He was using the same face and flesh-and-blood look he did the last time they met in a public location – either this appearance was his usual persona for dealing with people or this was how he once looked before discarding his flesh for an undead existence.

"What an interesting offer," Quatach-Ichl said, playing around with his fork thoughtfully, occasionally tapping it against his glass.

He had ordered an expensive meal and wine for the occasion, but did not touch any of it throughout the entire meeting. "I'm no stranger to people seeking me out for my wealth of magical secrets, but usually their offers are... hesitant. They're leery of angering a powerful lich, they aren't sure if I am really as good as they heard and they're trying to pay as little as possible to get what they want. They start small, asking for relatively minor things in order to puzzle out how I think and what it would take to get what they *really* want..."

The ancient lich then made a dramatic pause, pointing at the small pile of divine artifacts and rare materials that Zach and Zorian brought to him as payment for his 'wealth of magical secrets', as he put it.

"You though?" Quatach-Ichl continued. "You're immediately going for the kill. You want nothing less than my complete pocket dimension creation expertise – an extremely rare, almost priceless set of secrets – and you're willing to offer no less than five divine artifacts and a plethora of extremely rare materials in return. I'm impressed by your boldness, but I can't help but wonder... are you not worried I will cheat you or that this will end up a disappointing trade in the end? You are, after all, trading physical goods for information of uncertain value. I could easily just ignore you after pocketing the goods or play dumb and give you mere shadow of what you asked for."

Zorian mentally agreed with this, but wasn't really worried. Although many things about the ancient lich were enigmatic, he was pretty sure he had a good read on his sense of honor. Quatach-Ichl prided himself on his sense of fairness. He would not cheat them unless he thought they were trying to cheat him first. The real challenge was to make him agree to the deal in the first place.

"Although I don't dare claim I know you, you are as famed for your honorable behavior as you are for your great magical skill

and brutality in warfare,” Zorian said. Quatach-Ichl smiled idly, clearly viewing all three traits as a compliment. “We feel that if we can reach an agreement with you, you will do your best to honor it.”

“Perhaps my knowledge of pocket dimensions isn’t as extensive as you think it is, though,” Quatach-Ichl pointed out. “I am indeed a man of many talents, but that is quite a rare and exotic field of study. You may end up disappointed by the results of the trade.”

“If so, we will accept it quietly and in good grace,” Zorian shrugged. “We’re willing to take a gamble.”

“Hm. Although it is not a smart thing to admit such a thing in these kinds of negotiations, I feel you are being a little too reckless here,” Quatach-Ichl noted thoughtfully, giving them both a piercing look, as if trying to see through their souls. “It would have been smarter to try and do a smaller trade at first just to see if my pocket dimension skills are worth the more substantial investment.”

“Well...” said Zach with a cheeky smile. “Although this is generally not a smart thing to admit in these kinds of negotiations, the fact is we’re in a bit of a hurry. Slowly feeling you out and haggling over the details would take too long. That’s why the terms we offered you were so generous, see?”

“Generous? Debatable,” Quatach-Ichl scoffed. “I was merely questioning your logic just now. I said nothing about how good the deal appears to *me*. What you are seeking is pretty damn valuable.”

“Yes, but so is our payment,” Zach immediately shot back. “We realize that reaching out to you so suddenly and asking for such a heavy favor is a bit unreasonable. We also realize that, being in a bit of a hurry, we are innately in a disadvantaged position compared to you. We’re on a time limit, you aren’t. That’s why we’re willing to offer as much as we did, though – in normal circum-

stances, we would never consider this a reasonable trade."

Quatach-Ichl stared at them for a few seconds. Perhaps he was trying to put pressure on them through silence to see how they would react?

"You're pretty interesting people," Quatach-Ichl said. "I think that's why I haven't simply told you to screw off by now. That's what I'd normally tell people if they tried to give me this kind of deal. Are you really teenagers? You are way too calm for people that are supposed to be, what, 15 years old?"

"Why bother even asking?" Zach challenged. "We already know you've tried to spy on us before inviting us here, so you probably know enough about us to answer this yourself."

"I do know some basic facts about you two," Quatach-Ichl admitted. "It's just that they don't make much sense. How the hell did two academy students gather all this and find out how to contact me? Who are you really?"

"It's a secret," Zorian said blandly. There was no point in trying to explain. "But since we're asking private questions about one another, let me ask you a question of my own. How exactly did you talk no less than four cranium rat swarms into working under you? What the hell did you offer them to make them open to co-operation? I can't even get them to talk to me, much less work for me."

"Heh. Are we including that information as part of our deal?" Quatach-Ichl asked with a grin.

"No," Zorian snorted derisively. "I was just curious."

"And also changing the subject," Quatach-Ichl noted. "But fine, I get it. If you want to keep your true identity secret, I won't pry. But you know, if you really are as young as you appear, then we have another problem on our hands. Namely, I'm not sure if you're even capable of learning how to perform dimensional magic on the level you are asking about. What makes you think you are

qualified to learn from me?”

“That is not an issue,” Zorian insisted. “We know we can perform this level of magic because we are *already* capable of creating pocket dimensions.”

“Oh?” Quatach-Ichl said, a little incredulously.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. They would have to be careful not to make themselves look too amazing, or else Quatach-Ichl might notice something was wrong and attack them again. But this particular bit of information was impossible to hide, considering what they were asking of him. “We are asking you for advanced guidance, not asking you to teach us the basics of the field.”

Zorian then removed a bracelet from his wrist and handed it to the ancient lich, who gracelessly snatched it out of his outstretched hand and began to scrutinize it.

The bracelet was something Zorian had personally created before coming here. It served as an anchor for a miniature pocket dimension. The internal space was tiny, barely enough to store a book or two, but that wasn’t important. The important thing was that it proved that not only were they capable of creating pocket dimensions, they could create *advanced* ones.

Most products of pocket dimension magic came in the form of boxes, chests and other rigid containers that had their internal volume expanded beyond what their outside form would suggest. These kinds of objects were relatively easy to make, as anchoring a pocket dimension to an internal space of a hollow, inflexible object was a relatively simple task. Well, as much as any pocket dimension creation could ever be easy, anyway.

A more advanced procedure was to use dimensional magic to expand the interior of more flexible containers like bags, backpacks and pockets. Although this sounded rather convenient, fabric was relatively fragile and hard to imbue with spell formula. After a few years of use at most, such objects inevitably fell apart,

sometimes causing catastrophic failures when least expected.

Finally, there were objects like the palace orb and the bracelet that Quatach-Ichl was currently holding. These objects were not containers with expanded interior at all. They were self-contained pocket worlds anchored to an object. Accessing the contents of such a self-contained space was tricky without dimensional magic, which drastically reduced the amount of people that could use them, but they were incredibly stable. They could be inflated to downright ridiculous sizes, if one had a sufficiently stable anchor object... as the palace orb amply proved. The bracelet Zorian cobbled up in the last few days was pretty underwhelming in that regard, but he was sure that Quatach-Ichl would recognize what it signified nevertheless.

After a minute or so of silent study, Quatach-Ichl handed the bracelet back to Zorian and then unceremoniously drew all the divine artifacts and exotic materials towards him with a sweep of his hand. After a few quick movements, they all disappeared into his pockets.

Neither Zach nor Zorian moved to stop him.

"Alright," Quatach-Ichl said with a small nod. "You win. I accept the deal. Since you have said you were in a hurry and I'm going to be busy with something soon, we can start tomorrow."

Busy with something... what a funny way to hide the fact he was planning an invasion of the city and the release of the primordial trapped in the Hole. Still, Zach and Zorian were pretending not to know about that in this restart, so they said nothing about that. After arranging for their next meeting place and hammering out some minor details, they turned to leave only for the lich to stop them.

"One more thing," Quatach-Ichl said. "Who messed up your souls so badly?"

Zorian couldn't help but jolt a little at the question.

"W-What?" he asked.

"Your souls are scarred," Quatach-Ichl said matter-of-factly. "The damage is faint now, and will probably go away completely in a few years, but less than a year ago you must have been in an absolutely miserable condition. A normal person would take years recovering from something like that. Much of it would be spent comatose, too. I guess I should add soul magic to the list of things you are inexplicably proficient in?"

Damn it. So he *could* detect it... though it didn't look like he recognized it as something inflicted by him in particular.

"Does it matter?" Zach challenged.

"No, I guess not," Quatach-Ichl said, frowning. "But it makes me even more certain you are not really who you present yourself as. You are fortunate I have something else occupying my attention at the moment, or else I would not be as willing to let this go so easily. Make no mistake, though – once I've cleared up my schedule a little, I'll come back to visit you so we can clear some things up..."

Zorian did not outwardly react to this proclamation, but inwardly he was breathing a sigh of relief. No doubt Quatach-Ichl meant this as a veiled threat, but so long as nothing happened within the bounds of the time loop, Zorian didn't really care about that. Provided they didn't mess up in some other way as the restart developed, they should be fine.

Hopefully Silverlake would take his warnings not to investigate into Quatach-Ichl more seriously this time around.



Whether because Quatach-Ichl didn't know that they were aware of the invasion this time around, or because he never discovered just how expansive their activities around the region



really were, the lich didn't seem to view them as very threatening this time around. They were kind of baffling, yes, but he had an invasion to organize and he had no idea he had a time limit when it came to figuring them out.

In regards to his obligations, he fulfilled them to the letter. The agreement called for him to provide them with instructions for two hours every day, and he was never late for the arranged time, nor did he stay so much as one minute longer than they agreed. If he withheld some of his expertise, it was in a way that neither Zach nor Zorian could tell the difference – the amount of information he had for them was enough to keep them busy for quite a while. He spoke clearly and understandably. He readily clarified his statements if he saw they did not understand him. He pointed out any obvious mistakes they did under his supervision and explained the logic behind his instructions rather than let them 'figure things out for themselves'. He never lost patience with them or insulted them. He was, strangely enough, probably the best teacher Zorian had ever encountered.

Realizing that a soul-defiling, warmongering, thousand-year-old lich was his ideal academic instructor was a somewhat unnerving realization for Zorian.

That aside, having Quatach-Ichl's dedicated help in understanding pocket dimension magic made Zorian suddenly aware that it wasn't just the lack of qualified teachers and instruction manuals that was holding him and Zach back from advancing quickly in the field. Embarrassingly enough, it often happened that Quatach-Ichl was pushing ahead in his lessons and the two of them struggled to follow along. To put it bluntly, the real bottleneck to making the most out of those lessons was their own lack of talent and comprehension, not Quatach-Ichl's unwillingness to instruct them to the best of his ability. Zorian had a feeling the ancient lich was laughing at them on the inside

about that.

Zorian knew this kind of result was to be expected.

It wasn't that Zach and Zorian were stupid, or that their work ethic was lacking... it was just that they lacked any special advantage when it came to learning something like pocket dimension magic. They had no special talent or bloodline related to the field and neither of them was the kind of genius that could easily grasp the complexities of this relatively mind-bending, unintuitive field of study. There was little that could be done to speed their learning process up, at least through traditional methods of advancement.

So Zorian turned to non-traditional methods instead. For a while now he had been hesitating about delving deeper into the field of mental enhancements he had been messing with, afraid that he would permanently mess up his own mind in the process. Now he decided to risk it and ordered his simulacrum to kick things up a few levels. Aware that time was steadily running out, they did not complain much and simply jumped at the task with enthusiasm that honestly surprised him. He supposed that since he himself had set aside his fears and resolved to tackle the issue, they inherited his determination as well... unlike in the past, where he himself had viewed the endeavor with apprehension, and thus his simulacrum had been similarly unenthused about risking themselves.

For the moment, his idea was to try and create a sort of mental calculator and internal clock, since a lot of the problems with pocket dimensions came from the inhuman timing and precision required to pull off certain stages successfully. Normally this was achieved via a complex system of divination magic, which added an extra layer of complexity to an already tricky task. If he could strip away the divination scaffolding and just do all the number-crunching, measurements and timing decisions purely in his head, the magic would get significantly easier.

Of course, it turned out to be not that easy. While Zorian knew that creating a mental calculator was very much possible, since it was one of the more common modifications aranea tinkered with, it was a tricky thing to pull off in practice. Several of his simulacrum had to be forcibly broken out of their experiments after they fell into strange mental states, endlessly counting the number of pebbles around them and such. Thankfully, none of them were so far gone that they had to be destroyed and recreated, so they were able to learn from their mistakes instead of starting from scratch and trying to guess where their predecessors made a mistake.

Additionally, he was also experimenting with hyper-focused mental states and with trying to replicate the hydra's unity of self with his simulacrums. He had a feeling that if he could synchronize himself with a handful of his own simulacrums the way a hydra could synchronize its multiple minds into one self, many complex pieces of magic would become relatively trivial to perform.

Of course, these kind of mental enhancement were only of possible benefit to Zorian, and did not help Zach in any way. For this reason, and also because he wanted to hedge his bets, Zorian also started to look more closely into blood magic and enhancement rituals. After all, some creatures were innately good at dimensionalism in various forms. Phase spiders, for instance, were capable of instinctively creating small pocket dimensions to hide themselves in. Blink toads could teleport short distances, voidsoul deer could bend space around them to make spells and projectiles launched at them miss and the silverstripe mole was rumored to be able to perceive dimensional cracks and boundaries in some strange fashion. It might be worthwhile to try and steal those kinds of abilities for a while, just to see if they could offer them with some kind of important insight or capability.

Of course, Zorian was currently not very well versed in either

blood magic or regular enhancement rituals, so he would first have to practice with something relatively simple and then slowly work his way up to what he wanted...

Alternatively, he could just hire an alchemist to make him an enhancement potion with desired ability, but such enhancement potions did not confer the sort of instinctive competence with the gained ability that a properly executed enhancement ritual did.

In any case, both the mental enhancement route and the blood magic route were long-projects. It would be at least a couple of restarts before he could make an effective use of them, maybe more. Thus, Zorian ended up turning to something more immediate to get the most out of Quatach-Ichl's teachings – his spell formula expertise.

Zorian knew for a while now that most old, experienced diviners had specialized divination compasses they used to perform their work. Zorian himself rarely bothered with them, preferring to simply dump information straight into his mind and sort it out mentally, but he had tinkered with such devices often enough in the past. Kirma's divination flower thingy and the spell formula crafters she referred him to were especially useful in this regard. Now he embarked on a project to create such a divination compass, one specialized in figuring out divination related to dimensionalism and pocket dimension creation.

In this, at least, he had plenty of success. Spell formula were one of the things he had focused on pretty heavily throughout his entire time in the time loop, and he had reached an extremely high level of skill when it came to them. Producing a working version of such a dimensionalism-specific divination compass took only two days, after which he rapidly improved the design, producing newer and more potent versions every couple of days. By the time the end of the restart was approaching, these divination compasses had become so good that Quatach-Ichl took notice of it and commis-

sioned a couple of them for his own use. In exchange, he provided them with the names and locations of two secretive mages that also knew a thing or two about pocket dimension magic – information that was almost as priceless as Quatach-Ichl’s own lessons, as far as Zach and Zorian were concerned.

Gradually, the end of the restart started to approach...



While trying to deepen their understanding of pocket dimension magic consumed most of their energies in this particular restart, it was far from being the only thing they worked on. An equally critical, though far more boring task was to make sure the Pearl of Aranhal reached Blantyrre safe and intact. A mission that was thankfully far easier than they had ever hoped it would be. No sea monsters bothered them, and while no less than three dragons spotted them as they flew near the Dragon Island, they were surprisingly easy to keep at bay with flashy combat spells and a single experimental, magic-enhanced cannon that Zorian had installed on the ship. Neither the spells nor the cannon actually did any damage to the dragons in question, but they kept the beasts from simply rushing at them and rippling the hull into shreds. Perhaps because they had never seen an airship like theirs and did not know what combat abilities to expect from it, all three of the dragons limited themselves to probing attacks and flying in circles around them for a few hours to see if their response times and attentiveness would ever slip up.

It helped that each of the dragons attacked alone. Only after one of the dragons had given up on bothering them would the next one try his luck. If all three of them had united against them, Pearl of Aranhal would have been doomed without question. Thankfully for them, dragons were notoriously solitary creatures that viewed their own kind largely as competition rather than kin.

They lived and hunted alone, only forming societies if pressured to do so by outside aggression. Zorian had heard there had been a few ill-considered campaigns in the past that sought to systematically wipe out dragons in a particular area, only for the dragons in question to temporarily amass themselves into massive flocks that devastated everything around them for a while before eventually breaking up again when they were certain the danger was gone. Aside from that, dragons were largely an individual threat, and dragons of Dragon Island were no exception.

Unfortunately, while their journey had not been delayed by dragons and sea monsters, their own lack of navigational skill had lengthened the journey somewhat. Additionally, while the people who made Pearl of Aranhall were world-class experts, it was still a prototype that had never really been tested or truly finished before being sent on such an ambitious journey... meaning that it had almost broken down several times along the way, almost crashing them into the sea at one point and forcing them to drastically slow down at several points along their chosen route.

But in the end they made it. Five days before the restart was about to end, the Pearl of Aranhall finally spotted the shores of Blantyre.

Five days was not enough to really do anything, though. If they had to go through this kind of lengthy, annoying journey in every single restart, only to be left with measly five days per restart to locate the imperial staff, they were guaranteed to fail. Thus, their first and very urgent priority was to locate a Bakora Gate somewhere on the continent. Any Bakora Gate, really. That way they could reach the continent in only a handful of days with the help of Silent Doorway Adepts in subsequent restarts.

Sadly, this was not an easy task. Bakora Gates were scattered all over Blantyre, but the continent was vast and the Gates were small. Searching for them blindly would take forever, which

meant they had no choice but to seek the natives for help in finding them.

The trouble was, Blantyrre was not inhabited by humans. The steaming equatorial jungle that covered Blantyrre was home to a multitude of sapient species, but the most advanced and powerful force were the lizardmen. They lived in great stone cities along the coast and the rivers, and although they were very awfully primitive by human standards, they were more or less the only ones qualified to help Zach and Zorian locate a Bakora Gate somewhere around here. Not only were they the only species on Blantyrre that kept any sort of written records, they also regularly traded with humans from Xlotic and Altazia, which meant that some of them actually spoke a language that Zach and Zorian could understand.

Unfortunately, while the lizardmen did occasionally trade with humans, getting the location of a nearby Bakora Gate out of them was still a huge chore. For one thing, they existed as a collection of small kingdoms and quarrelling city-states that rarely shared information with one another, so unless a Bakora Gate was literally in their territory there was no chance they would know about such a strange but ultimately useless artifact. For another, only the priesthood was literate and knowledgeable of obscure places and artifacts like these, and they were not terribly fond of outsiders. Finally, while the lizardmen did occasionally trade with humans, they did so with great caution and only in a strictly regulated manner. If they wanted information, they couldn't just walk into a lizardman city and start asking questions – they had to go through official channels and make a formal request.

Pressed for time as they were, Zach and Zorian resorted to shock and awe to get what they want. Rather than carefully approaching the local rulers and making respectful diplomatic requests for information about Bakora Gates, they brazenly flew Pearl of Aranhall straight above the nearest lizardman

city, teleported themselves into the city center and then started throwing around gold, gems and some spices that they heard lizardmen liked at everyone in the vicinity until someone came to talk to them, at which point they promised great rewards for any information about the Bakora Gates. Then they moved on and repeated this process in every larger city they encountered as they flew around the coast.

The reaction was everything they hoped it would be. The lizardmen may be primitive, but they had their ways, and news of their airship and what they were seeking quickly spread to every lizardman power in the vicinity. Soon, everyone knew that two immensely powerful human mages were flying around in their fancy airship and promising fantastic rewards to anyone who could lead them to a Bakora Gate. Admittedly, this did cause a lot of the lizardmen to come forward with fabricated tales of nearby Bakora Gates, but those were easily seen through by Zorian. Lizardmen emotions were not alien enough to give Zorian's empathy too much trouble.

Eventually, three days later, they were summoned by one of the local kings from a river city-state deeper in the continent's interior. The emissary brought with him a very lifelike drawing of a Bakora Gate as proof that they were telling the truth, which was good enough for Zach and Zorian to immediately set out towards the place.

This was why, at the moment, the two of them were standing in a luxurious stone throne room of a lizardman king, curiously observing their surroundings while they waited for the king to actually arrive and talk to them. Lizardmen rulers seemed to be fond of mosaics made out of gems and colored stones, and this one was not an exception – the walls were dominated by some kind of epic battle scene between two lizardmen forces. One of the two sides, which Zorian presumed to represent the forces of the city they



were currently in, was clearly dominating their opponents, boldly advancing forward, while the other was in the process of being pierced by spears, clubbed over the head by heavy clubs or down on their knees and begging for mercy. An absolutely giant lizardman floated in the sky above the scene, curiously observing the battle. Probably a representation of one of the lizardman gods...

Zorian's idle musings were interrupted by the loud entrance of the lizardman king. A procession of musicians playing some kind of annoying flute-like instruments came first, playing ear-splitting whistles while a bunch of lizardmen children ran around and threw petals on the ground in front of the approaching king. The lizardman throne guards, which had been leaning on their spears and chatting amongst themselves in their incomprehensible lizardman tongue, quickly assumed a proper posture and pretended they had been alert and battle ready all this time. They also banged their spears against the floor a few times and let loose a keening wail that was probably some kind of salute.

As for Zach and Zorian, they just stared at the spectacle, not sure how to react. Perhaps because they had arrived so unexpectedly or because those rulers had not been so wealthy and powerful as this one, but this was not the way the other lizardmen kings had behaved in front of them.

"Uh, what's the proper procedure for greeting a lizardman ruler again? Are we supposed to bow or shake hands or something?" Zach whispered to him uncertainly.

"Why are you asking me?" Zorian protested. "You're nobility, not me. You should be the one who knows things like this."

"Please," Zach scoffed. "You're the one who is constantly interacting with various talking monsters. This is totally your area of expertise!"

Zorian turned his attention to the approaching king. He was surprisingly short compared to the warriors scattered around his

palace, though the massive gem-encrusted headdress and glittering golden jewelry hanging off of him immediately marked him as the ruler regardless. In one of his hands he carried a black staff with a large, glowing, amber stone affixed on top. Four particularly massive lizardman warriors flanked him on both sides, which made for a somewhat amusing contrast between them and their king. What was not so amusing was the look in their eyes and the emotions they were radiating. Unlike the normal palace guards, these four took their jobs very seriously and their yellow, slitted eyes followed them with a threatening intensity – if they made so much as a threatening movement, they were ready to shove a spear through their throat without warning.

Also accompanying the king was another lizardman with lots of jewelry and an elaborate headdress, although one less impressive and of slightly different type and color scheme. Zorian suspected that *she* (he was pretty sure it was a female lizardman) was the high priest of the city.

And though she wasn't as overtly hostile as the king's honor guard, she clearly did not like them. At all.

Zorian inwardly sighed. Of course nothing could ever be easy...



Zach and Zorian had already managed to claim the imperial ring from the Ziggurat of the Sun in the past. Since they now knew that it was held by the sulrothum high priest, getting it was slightly easier than it had previously been, when they had yet to even locate where it was. However, easier didn't mean easy. The sulrothum high priest resided in the innermost, most heavily defended portion of the ziggurat. Getting to him still required a large-scale assault on the sulrothum settlement, which was... non-ideal.

Rather than organize another assault on the Ziggurat of the Sun in this restart, Zorian agreed to try something different this time around. After establishing a base near the ziggurat using Bakora Gates, they brought over a dozen or so aranean mercenaries and instructed them to spy on sulrothum guards and patrols. Although sulrothum minds were as alien to the aranea as they were to Zorian, the aranea were far more experienced with making sense of alien minds than he was. They did it all their lives, after all.

At the same time they began ambushing and killing sulrothum hunting parties and patrol groups leaving the ziggurat, in the hopes that doing this continually would eventually force the high priest to confront them directly or at least motivate to sulrothum to try and negotiate with them. After all, the colony would surely starve if they couldn't send anyone outside without them disappearing, right?

Unfortunately, the sulrothum didn't behave like they hoped they would. Rather than investigate the problem, they simply barricaded themselves inside and no longer tried to leave the ziggurat. It was baffling. Either the colony had sizeable stockpiles of preserved food and felt certain they could last for a while under siege or there was a Dungeon entrance somewhere below the ziggurat and they decided to brave the tunnels to feed themselves instead.

Either way, it was annoying. Thankfully, the aranea were somewhat successful in their information gathering.

"So," Zorian asked the aranea in front of him. "I don't think the damn wasps are going to poke their heads out of their turtle shells any time soon. Do you have something useful to report?"

"I think so, yeah," Storm Dream, the aranea in question, answering him through a voice spell so Zach could hear her too. "First of all, the ring you're after? It's not an accident that the high priest has it on him. He knows what it does and is actively using it."

Oh.

"Now that I think about it, that does make sense," Zorian mused. "I could tell the last time we met that he's a soul mage. That was a bit unusual, since sulrothum aren't exactly known for their magic abilities, but I thought nothing of it at the time. Since he's wearing a ring that grants soul sight, though, I guess it's to be expected he became interested in that type of magic. We're fortunate he didn't populate the ziggurat with undead guards or something."

"Probably wouldn't happen, even if he knew how to do that," Storm Dream said. "They're very religious and they seem to attach great importance to being cremated upon death. Some nonsense about returning to the 'sun mother' and whatnot."

"Well, they should be happy about all those patrols we fireballed to death recently, then," Zach said cheekily. "They got a proper burial as they died."

"Yes. Well," Storm Dream said after a second of awkward silence. "If you want to lure the high priest out of the ziggurat, I have only two ideas. One is to wait for him to come outside on his own to perform one of his periodic 'land blessings' and 'reading of the signs'. The next such occasion should be about two months from now and—"

"Too long," Zach immediately said, shaking his head.

"I don't understand why you're in such a hurry about this... the ring has been in the high priest's hands for years now. It's not going anywhere," Storm Dream said, with no small amount of exasperation. "But fine. The other option is to try and ally yourself with the nearby sulrothum tribe that this particular bunch has a rivalry with. I'm not entirely sure, but I think he would come out of the ziggurat and support his warriors if he thought it was a rival tribe attacking them instead of scary human mages with their unfair, mysterious magic and thunder sticks."

"Ah," nodded Zorian. The thought of seeing if the tribe had any local enemies and allying with them had honestly didn't even occur to him. A silly mistake, in retrospect.

Zach and Zorian discussed the merits of the idea for a while, before Zorian noticed that Storm Dream was shifting in place uncomfortably and looked like she wanted to say something more.

"What?" he asked her.

"It's... probably just a stupid coincidence, but the sulrothum high priest has the same kind of knife you do," she said.

"My knife?" Zorian asked incredulously. Since when did he even carry a kni- "Oh! Oh. You mean this?"

He tapped the knife hanging from his backpack. It was the divine artifact they had recovered from the palace orb – the one they had no idea what it did. Zorian sometimes liked to inspect it, staring at it while futilely hoping he would finally succeed in unlocking its mysteries.

"Yes, like that one," Storm Dream said. "I know you humans churn out thousands of identical objects as a matter of course, but I thought it was strange that a sulrothum high priest on another continent carries the same kind of knife like you do. Especially since their one is of immense religious importance to them and has an impressive magical ability."

"Oh? Do tell," Zach prompted. "What magical ability?"

"The high priest can use it to command a sand worm of immense size hidden beneath the sands of this place," Storm Dream said. "It could be just more superstitious nonsense, I guess, but I don't think so. Maybe the sulrothum are overstating the worm's real size, but they seem pretty certain of its ability to repel all intruders, so it should be pretty impressive. If your knife is the same, then... maybe you can control it too?"

Zach and Zorian were silent for a moment.

"I knew it was stupid," Storm Dream said. "Just... forget I said anything."

Zorian thought about the gigantic flying sand worm they had faced in their last assault on this place. The creature was an immense threat, only kept manageable by Zach's incredible combat prowess and their extensive preparations before the battle. And the way its mind had completely stopped Zorian's mental abilities like a brick wall, unlike any other mental defense he had ever seen...

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Zach asked him quietly.

"I doubt our dagger can really control the sulrothum sand worm," Zorian said. "But it's too bad that we already killed the giant hydra guarding the palace orb, I'll say that much."

It was just a suspicion, but Zorian felt it was likely that each knife was keyed in to a different creature. Assuming that the strange flying sand worm was the divinely-enhanced guardian of the imperial ring, it made sense that a knife that the sulrothum probably found near the ring was keyed to it. By the same logic, the knife Zorian currently held in his hand was probably meant to control the hydra instead, since it normally seemed live in and guard the orb.

"Next time, then," said Zach dreamily. "I like the idea of having my own pet hydra, you know? We could pit it against the stupid sand worm while we tackle the sulrothum ourselves. Or we could throw him at Quatach-Ichl, just to see the look on that stupid bag of bones when a massive hydra starts screaming and charging at him... or just take it on a walk through Cyoria like some kind of oversized dog and just soak in the people's reactions... lots of potential there..."

Zorian looked at the dagger in his hand and then grasped it tightly.

Next time, indeed...



As the end of the restart began to approach, Zach and Zorian turned their attention to something they had been gradually building up to throughout the entire restart – raiding the royal vaults for the dagger again. They sought out Quatach-Ichl for help again, too – partially because they still hadn’t grasped the details on the inner wards, so his help in getting inside was still critical, and partially because they still had designs on his crown.

Zorian had to admit he was more morally conflicted about betraying Quatach-Ichl this time around. After all, the ancient lich had been nothing but helpful throughout the entire restart. It felt wrong, *dishonorable*, to just stab him in the back like this in the end...

Then again, didn’t Quatach-Ichl indicate during that initial negotiation they had with him that he would return to interrogate them after his little invasion business was over? Perhaps he was just looking for excuses to make himself better, but seen in that light this attack could easily be viewed as pre-emptive defense on their part. Plus, the lich clearly intended to invade Cyoria as normal – a fact he sometimes cryptically alluded to during his lessons, but one which he never actually made clear to them. In a very real way, that was betrayal as well.

He supposed in the end it didn’t matter. Quatach-Ichl once again agreed to help them steal the dagger from the Eldemar’s royal vaults. They once again achieved their goal, successfully fought their way out of the capital city and then kept running from the Eldemar military until Quatach-Ichl figured out the nature of the tracking device that was used to track them. They again opened a dimensional gate to Xlotic and stepped through it...

The moment Quatach-Ichl followed after then they shut off the gate and attacked him with no warning.

There was no talking. They attacked silently and without hesitation, and Quatach-Ichl took their ambush entirely in stride. As an endless barrage of incinerating rays, impossibly sharp dimensional blades and disintegration blasts suddenly rained down on him, he quietly blocked, dodged, teleported and retaliated in return. He did not rage at their betrayal or try to talk to them to find out their reasons. Perhaps he had been expecting it. Maybe he was just that used to sudden ambushes. Whatever the case, he silently accepted their challenge and met their attack head on.

The desert quaked. Sand was melted and turned to glass over and over. Several hidden wards and traps that Zach and Zorian prepared in the area in advance activated, only to be shattered and neutralized by Quatach-Ichl. The ancient lich summoned a bunch of skeletal undead giants from some internal storage space on his person and Zorian responded by throwing his combat golems at them to keep them busy. Zach managed to shear off Quatach-Ichl's leg with one of his attacks, but the lich simply reattached it in the next moment. Three of Zorian's simulacrum sacrificed themselves to keep him alive when facing Quatach-Ichl's counterattacks, their inhumanly tough metallic bodies unable to withstand the ancient lich's attacks.

It was then, right in the middle of the heated battle, that several hidden devices revealed themselves in the distance, blanketing the whole area with small, fast-moving silver discs.

Most of the silver discs were completely mundane, meant purely to mask the real threats. Some of them were infused with specialized magic meant to stress and overload typical force shields that protected mages against physical projectiles.

And finally, a small number were special. They were infused with the same sort of soul severing magic that was once used by Kael to make the coin that ended up banishing Quatach-Ichl back to his phylactery.



In order to make sure Quatach-Ichl couldn't simply push away all the discs with a simple wave of his hand, Zach and Zorian immediately intensified their attacks. Despite that, Quatach-Ichl took the little silver projectiles as a deadly threat, never letting a single one touch him, raising the ground as walls and pillars to keep them at bay when the shield disruptors started to eat away at his magical shields.

But the silver discs did their job of occupying his attention anyway. So busy was he with avoiding them, dealing with Zach and Zorian's normal attacks and trying to counterattacks that he overlooked a far larger silver disc hidden in the sands nearby. This disc was also imbued with soul severing magic, and with a much more potent form of it, too.

Upon dodging one of their attacks, Quatach-Ichl ended up stepping on it and it visibly discharged a wave of white light straight into him.

For a moment, the whole battlefield stilled. Quatach-Ichl was momentarily frozen in place, a look of surprise on his face. Zach and Zorian waiting with bated breaths to see if the lich would collapse into a lifeless pile of bones in the aftermath.

And then the lich moved.

"Heh," Quatach said, speaking up for the first time since the battle had started. "You got me. But do you really think a stupid trick like that can beat me?"

Well no. He did not think that. But as a distraction, it worked better than Zorian had ever hoped it would.

The moment Quatach-Ichl had finished talking, a massive wave of dispelling energy erupted out of Zach, powered by most of Zach's remaining mana. It washed away everything in the vicinity, completely catching Quatach-Ichl off guard. For just a moment, all of his defenses went down.

Including his mind blank.

Zorian immediately reached out with his mind and began his attack.

Quatach-Ichl's mental defenses were impeccably made. They were thick and without any obvious flaws, and he could rebuild them in an instant, just like Xvim. Considering his endless reserves of mana, this meant that even Zorian would fail to break through them if he tried to gradually wear them down. He could never hope to win a battle of attrition against the ancient lich, not to mention that every second he failed to break through was a second that Quatach-Ichl could use to murder his fleshy body to remove the mental threat he posed. Thus, Zorian held nothing back when attacking the lich. He poured all of his mana into a quick succession of telepathic attacks.

After three such attacks, he was delighted to see some actual exploitable flaws starting to appear. Quatach-Ichl was proficient enough in fixing the aftermath of a single mental attack, but multiple ones in succession strained his defenses. As powerful as he was, the ancient lich had probably not encountered a mind mage that could meaningfully threaten him for a very, very long time. His defenses had probably once been truly flawless, but since he had not had to use them in ages, he had gotten a bit rusty.

Too rusty to stop Zorian, in any case.

With one final push, Quatach-Ichl's mental barrier shattered into countless pieces, leaving his mind defenseless before Zorian's telepathic might. Letting loose an ear-splitting scream of incoherent rage, Quatach-Ichl swung his skeletal hand towards Zorian, firing a jagged red ray in his general direction.

Zorian did not stop. Even when the ray hit him, severing his left arm just below the shoulder and sending waves of incredible pain throughout his whole body, he did not stop. He sank deeper and deeper into Quatach-Ichl's mind, paralyzing his skeletal body and starting to root through his long-term memories...

Without warning, the mind Zorian was invading suddenly disappeared. The bones Quatach-Ichl had been animating fell to the ground, lifeless.

The lich had admitted defeat and fled.

"Ha! We... we did it!" yelled Zach breathlessly. "Oh man, I can't believe we actually succeeded in beating the stupid bag of bones. We— Oh shit. Zorian, your arm!"

"Y-Yeah, I know," Zorian said, looking at the mangled stump connected to his left shoulder. "I'm... not feeling too well. I think I'm going to lie down a little."

Zach was saying something, but Zorian could no longer hear him. Everything was kind of fuzzy and eventually he just closed his eyes and let himself fall to the ground.



Two hours later, Zorian had woken up from unconsciousness only to find Zach beside him and his wound professionally bandaged. It was just something he had learned while learning medical magic, Zach explained. Apparently his teachers had insisted he learn some good old-fashioned mundane care for the injuries, and lost limbs were included in these lessons.

So now Zorian would get to experience what it was like to live with a missing arm for a few days. Lovely. The time loop was a gift that just kept on giving. In any case, they had to move fast. Quatach-Ichl was bound to be utterly furious with them, and they weren't really sure how long it would take him to possess another body and come after them. They had learned that this time varied a lot from lich to lich while researching the topic, ranging from a few hours to several days. Considering how good Quatach-Ichl was, they should probably assume it was the shorter option.

After hurriedly breaking into the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria, they asked Guardian of the Threshold about the

crown and dagger they had newly acquired. They quickly found out that they had guessed correctly – the crown gave the Controller the ability to place temporary markers on people, bringing them into the time loop for a limited time, while the dagger gave the Controller an ability to place a special kind of marker on a soul of the target, letting the time loop know it should not recreate their soul in future restarts. Soullkill, as Red Robe called it.

Just like the orb and the ring, both items also had a mundane function that even normal people could use. The crown acted as a personal mana storage, which they already knew thanks to Quatach-Ichl, but it was nice to have confirmation anyway. In particular, Quatach-Ichl's story had not made it clear whether the amount of personal mana stored in the crown was proportional to the one using it or fixed. Now they knew it was fixed in size. For Quatach-Ichl this gave him ten times more mana reserves than he usually had, but for Zorian it would be far more since his reserves were relatively tiny in comparison. Though it would also take him forever to fully fill up the crown, as well.

As for the dagger, it had the ability to 'cut that which cannot be cut'... or to put it more plainly, it could hurt immaterial spirits. An ability that was probably far more impressive in the distant past, when spirits were around every corner and a pissed-off god could send their servants to mess you up at any time. These days, its base ability was of dubious usefulness.

Upon leaving the time magic research facility, they temporarily set the dagger aside and started feverishly tinkering with the crown, trying to figure how to activate its ability to place temporary markers while sending urgent messages to every member of their little conspiracy. Thankfully, by now they had a fair bit of experience in making imperial artifacts work, so after a few hours they succeeded in figuring out how the crown worked.

And then they got to work. By now, a whole throng of peo-

ple had gathered around them. It was not just people like Alanic, Xvim, Silverlake and Daimen that were there. There were also various teachers from the academy, some of whom Zorian was familiar with (Ilsa, Nora and Kyron) and some of whom he wasn't, but which Xvim assured him were dependable and could be counted on. Kirma, Torun and several other select members of Daimen's team were also there, as was his fiancée Orissa and some of the members of her House. Many, many aranea were also scattered about, hailing from the Silent Doorway Adepts, Luminous Advocates, Filigree Sages and others that Zorian felt could be helpful and wouldn't freak out. Lukav was also here, as were some other people that Alanic had vouched for.

While Zach and Zorian had been running around Blantyrre, planning how to beat Quatach-Ichl and scouting out the sulrothum in the ziggurat of the sun, their fellow conspirators had been tasked with gathering all these people and informing them about the time loop. Thus, everyone here knew what they were dealing with. They did not necessarily believe in this crazy story, but that didn't really matter because seeing was believing.

The restart was soon going to end, and then they would experience the truth first-hand.

Zorian steeled himself a little and went out to face the crowd around them.

"Zorian... what the hell happened to your arm!?" Taiven asked him with a horrified expression.

"It doesn't matter," he said, waving her off with his one remaining hand. "I'll get it back soon, as good as new."

"So!" said Zach happily. "Who wants to be first?"



## A NEW WORLD

"Good morning, brother!" Kirielle screamed, her voice disgustingly shrill and cheerful. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian sighed, stretching his arms and legs while Kirielle babbled on top of him. Another restart, another annoying wakeup call from Kirielle. He gave his little sister a silent, complex look, which caused her to hesitate for a second and ask him what's wrong. Zorian didn't answer. Instead he suddenly started shaking like a madman, taking advantage of that brief moment of indecision when she loosened her grip on him to push her off to the side. She fell on the floor with a soft thud and an indignant yell. She was back on her feet in a flash, though, annoying him with questions about the academy and requests to 'show her some magic'.

In other words, she was still the same old Kirielle he had come to know over the restarts. He had thought about including her among the many people who gotten a temporary marker in the previous restart, but in the end he had decided bringing her into the time loop would be reckless and cruel. Unlike the others, Kirielle was just a child. Her personality had yet to fully form, and there was no telling how being stuck in a constantly repeating month would warp her thinking. She also couldn't keep a secret to save her life and had no way to really contribute to their projects. Not

to mention that if he failed to find the way to extend the temporary markers before the sixth restart was up, he would have to watch her forget six months' worth of memories... that would be a hard pill to swallow.

No, the idea was definitely off-limits. While he would have appreciated a chance to have more meaningful interaction with Kirielle, it wasn't worth inflicting existential dread on a nine-year-old and dragging down everyone's chances of survival just for that.

After a few minutes, he finally coaxed Kirielle into leaving the room. He promptly locked the door and created a single simulacrum. It was a simple ectoplasmic copy. This early in the restart, he had neither the time nor the materials to create the golem bodies necessary for the improved mechanical simulacra he usually liked to use. However, accessibility was more important than mana efficiency in this case. He needed the simulacrum now and not later.

The moment it popped into existence, the simulacrum gave him a silent nod and then teleported away. There was no need to explain anything. The simulacrum had a simple task, planned out all the way in the previous restart and now simply put into practice. His copy was to go to Cyoria and immediately hunt down and dismantle all four cranium rat swarms lurking in the city. It would doubtlessly alarm Quatach-Ichl if he did that, but it had to be done. With all these new time loopers walking around, the swarms were too much of a threat. They needed them gone, and the sooner it was done, the better.

After dispatching the simulacrum to his task, Zorian went down into the kitchen to eat something while waiting for Ilsa to arrive. He couldn't help but be a little nervous. While Ilsa's visit at the beginning of the restart had long since become repetitive and routine, meeting his invocations teacher should be different this time around. She was, after all, one of the people they placed



a temporary marker on. If everything went well, she had retained her memories of the previous restart.

He shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts. He was kind of annoyed at himself for being so emotional over this. Previously, when he and Zach were considering going down this road, he had imagined himself facing this scenario with a stoic attitude and cool assurance borne out of years of experiences and conflicts in the time loop... but reality was cruel and his nerves were not as steely as he imagined them to be. Would the temporary markers work as advertised? Would they work at all? Would Ilisa be able to take first-hand experience of the time loop in good grace or would she flip out and start flinging spells at him, demanding answers? He couldn't help but worry about questions such as this as minutes ticked by. What was taking her so long, anyway? He wasn't sure, but he thought it didn't usually take this much time before she—

There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" said Zorian quickly, rushing for the door. Mother looked amused at this kind of reaction, but said nothing as he ran past her.

He opened the door and found Ilisa standing there. She looked... no different than she usually did at the beginning of the restart. The same clothes, the same judging look, the same stack of documents held in her hands. However, that was only outward appearance. To his empathic senses, she was practically radiating uncertainty and apprehension.

They stared at each other in silence for a while.

"May I come in?" Ilisa eventually asked.

"Hmm? Oh!" said Zorian with a small laugh, wincing inwardly at his behavior. "I guess I spaced out a little. Forgive my manners, Miss Zileti. Come in, please."

"Thank you, Mister Kazinski," she said, stepping into the house.

Although his momentary brain freeze wasn't the most flattering way to start a meeting like this, it seemed to have put Ilsa at ease somewhat, as he felt a lot of the tension drain out of her in the aftermath.

Like usual, Mother immediately left the house when she realized who had come, taking Kirielle with her. This left Zorian alone with Ilsa to ostensibly discuss his electives and whatnot. But, well...

"Same as the last time, I suppose?" Ilsa asked, waving the academy documents in front of her. When Zorian answered yes, she simply threw the stack to the side and sighed. "Of course. You probably heard this all a hundred times by now. I don't even know why I brought these along with me."

"Clinging to a sense of normalcy in light of a very bizarre situation," Zorian guessed. "I was the same, back when I was first dragged into the time loop. I spent quite a few loops going through the motions."

"You were a teenager who barely started learning magic, though. I am an experienced adult mage. I should be better than this," Ilsa countered, frowning slightly. She was silent for a few seconds, tapping her fingers against the table as she considered what to say next. "So this is real? We really travelled back in time?"

"It's a little more complex than that, but yes," Zorian said. He didn't want to get bogged down in details of how the time loop actually worked. "Did the marker we gave you work?"

"Obviously," she scoffed. "How would we be having this conversation otherwise?"

"What I meant was... did you completely retain your magic and memories?" Zorian clarified. "Any holes in your recollection or difficulty in doing magic?"

"That's a possibility?" she asked, surprised.

"It might be. As I said in the previous restart, this is the first time we have done something like this," Zorian said.

She gave it a thought for a minute before shaking her head.

"I don't feel there are any obvious blanks in my memories," she said. "I did forget quite a few things, but I think that's just me being forgetful as usual. My memory is hardly flawless. As for magic, well... I'm a grown mage that has reached most of her potential years ago and a month is not that long of a time. Plus, it wasn't like I did any real training sessions in the span of this month."

"In other words, any growth in shaping skills you may have experienced is so miniscule that you wouldn't even notice if it was gone," Zorian surmised.

"Yes, that," Ilsa nodded. "I guess I can learn a new spell or two this time just to see if I retain them the next time the world... resets."

"I can probably just ask Kael. The effect of even one month on his shaping skills and spell knowledge should be dramatic enough to tell," pointed out Zorian.

"I suppose that's true," said Ilsa. "Plus, now that I think about it, I'm probably going to improve my shaping skills and learn quite a few new spells just by helping you out over time. Though you never did really explain what you wanted our help with..."

"Yes, we did not explain our plans and reasons too deeply in the previous restart," admitted Zorian. "Partly because we didn't want to overwhelm people with information, but also because we suspected you would only take us seriously after you witnessed the time loop with your own two eyes."

"Ha. Well, you're probably right about that," Ilsa laughed. "Xvim tried to explain how the time loop worked when he was trying to convince me to accept a mysterious soul marker from my two teenage students. I confess I didn't pay too much attention to it, since the whole idea was so crazy. I'd have probably been even

less interested in what you and Zach had to say."

Well, at least she was honest.

"Do you want me to explain now?" Zorian asked.

"No," she said immediately. "I don't think I could pay attention well enough at the moment. I'm still rather disturbed at reliving the same month all over again. You said this has been happening for a while now?"

"Yes. The time loop has repeated itself many, many times," Zorian said. "This is just your first time remembering it."

"So, before this I was just... obviously reliving the same month over and over again? Repeated the jobs, taught the same classes and spoke the same conversations?"

"Well, sometimes me and Zach shook things up a bit and you reacted accordingly, reacting to the changes," Zorian said. "But yes. Without a marker, people do not retain continuity across restarts."

"I tried to talk to some of the people around me before coming here," Ilsa admitted. "Just to check if they really don't remember anything. I couldn't resist. I don't think I revealed anything crucial, but I feel it's only fair to let you know."

Zorian sighed. He suspected she wasn't the only one to make such 'discreet' tests, and that there would be more of that stuff to deal with later... but that was okay. They kind of expected that.

"I understand the need for confirmation, but please try to be responsible about this," he said. "It would be a disaster if the knowledge of the time loop reached certain people."

"And now I'm being lectured by one of my teenage students," Ilsa said, clacking her tongue. "How low the mighty have fallen. But fair enough, I do understand we have a mighty, millennia-old lich breathing down our necks. Your fight against him has left quite an impression on me, I must say..."

Zorian just made a slightly sour expression in response. Unsurprisingly, Quatach-Ichl had taken great offense at them trying

to look through his memories and stealing his crown. While Zach and Zorian were placing temporary markers on people, Quatach-Ichl was burning down the Noveda estate and Imaya's house as the first step of his revenge. Fortunately, all inhabitants of Imaya's place had been evacuated to Koth by that point, and Zach couldn't care less about the Noveda estate. The ancient lich remained quiet after that, probably because he couldn't find them and still had an invasion to execute.

Then Zach and Zorian had the bright idea to bring the new loopers to Cyoria on invasion day, to show them how high the stakes really were. Despite being under a plethora of powerful divination wards and constantly moving, Quatach-Ichl somehow noticed them.

The resulting fight completely leveled the street they were fighting in.

"Though Quatach-Ichl is a huge danger, I'm pretty sure the Eldemarian government, the Triumvirate Church, powerful Noble Houses and other powers would also make problems for us if they knew," Zorian said. "So please be careful."

They spent the next half an hour discussing various things – the mechanics of the time loop, the way things usually developed if Zach and Zorian did not interfere with things, and the details behind the Ibasan invasion. Ilsa turned out to be just as interested in the invasion of Cyoria as she was in the time loop itself. Then again, that was probably not too unusual. They brought people to witness the attack for a reason.

"You don't seem to care much for the suffering and devastation we witnessed," Ilsa eventually said, a note of condemnation in her voice.

"I'm just a little numb to it all, that's all. I've seen it happen too many times, sometimes from the memories of the invaders themselves," Zorian said. "It's impossible for me to have the same

visceral reaction to it that you probably have.”

“You read their memories?” she asked, surprised.

“I had to,” he simply said.

“Of course you’ve dabbled in mind magic too,” she said in a strange tone.

“Dabbled?” Zorian huffed. “This annoys me more than it probably should. I did not ‘dabble’ in it – I’m a natural mind mage who spent years honing his skills.”

She seemed to be at a loss for words upon hearing that.

“This situation is endlessly bizarre and disturbing,” she finally said after a few seconds.

“Agreed,” Zorian nodded. “I’ve been stuck in this time loop for nearly eight years, not counting all the time dilation chambers, and I still think that.”

“Time dilation chambers?” Ilsa asked. She suddenly shook her head. “No, never mind that for now. Eight years is actually not as long as I thought it would be.”

“I got included rather late into this thing,” Zorian said. “Zach is the one who has spent decades inside the time loop.”

“Ugh. Every answer gives me five new questions,” Ilsa complained. “You know what? Let’s stop this for now. You are planning to take the train to Cyoria, right?”

“Yes, I’m taking Kirielle with me, so I need to pretend I’m somewhat normal. Of course, if you are willing to teleport us to Cyoria yourself...”

“No,” she said immediately. “I’m taking a train ride with you instead.”

Zorian was taken aback at the proclamation. He knew that things would be very much different now that other loopers were walking around, but he couldn’t help but get blindsided by things like this.

“Uh, why?” Zorian asked uncertainly.

"You might be used to it, but I've just watched the city get brutally invaded by hordes of monsters and undead," she told him. "I'd like to stay away from Cyoria for a while, and this is a convenient excuse."

"Oh," he said lamely.

Come to think of it, it had only been a few hours at most since the invasion, at least from her perspective.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked him.

"Not at all," he said, shaking his head. "Just watch out for Kirielle if you plan to ride in the same compartment as us. She has an intense interest in magic and anything related to it, and she's probably going to find you absolutely fascinating."

"I don't see a problem with that," Ilisa smiled. "It's nice to see kids interested in my work."

Zorian didn't bother to clarify things.

Some things were better as a surprise.



Mother did not look very surprised when Ilisa informed her she would be accompanying them to the train station. It probably seemed entirely sensible to her that Ilisa would use a train to get back to Cyoria. The two of them got along pretty well with one another, and were soon happily chatting along as they waited on the station for the train to arrive. Zorian mostly ignored the conversation, as it sounded like your typical parent-teacher discussion. Kirielle was too excited about going to Cyoria to care about the teacher that had decided to stick around for a while longer, but Fortov did feel the need to approach the group and say hi after seeing Ilisa present. That was a little new.

"You didn't include Fortov among those who received the marker," Ilisa observed quietly.

"No," Zorian whispered back. "He's useless and I don't like him."

Ilisa had nothing to say in response to that, just giving him a guarded look in return.

Maybe he really was a little harsh towards Fortov. Still, he honestly couldn't see any good reason to give the guy a temporary marker. Fortov was unreliable and had no work ethic, so including him in the time loop would be about as wise as including Kirielle.

Eventually they boarded the train and set off towards Cyoria. Kirielle became more wary of Ilisa when she realized the teacher was going to stay in the same compartment as them, but... well, it was Kirielle. Patience was never her strong suit. She barely lasted half an hour before she started bombarding Ilisa with questions.

Ilisa was a patient woman, but after an hour and a half of Kirielle's chattiness, Zorian could feel she was starting to get rather exasperated with the whole situation. Thus, he decided to have mercy on her and distracted his little sister with a bunch of visually impressive illusions and stories.

Ilisa observed the illusionary scenes he conjured up with a surprising amount of interest. Try as he might, he just couldn't figure out what she found so fascinating about those. Weren't they just illusions? She was a mage at the continent's best magical academy. Surely she had seen plenty of those in her life...

Eventually he decided to ask her. Since he didn't want Kirielle to listen in on them, he established a mental link to her and spoke to her telepathically. She was badly startled at first, flinching at the sudden voice in her head, but she recovered quickly. Her response was swift and smooth, with no unintentional thoughts leaking through. It was clear that she had experience with this kind of communication.

[You can ignore the shaping disruption of the train wards,] Ilisa telepathically sent back through the link. [I mean, of course you



can. For someone like you, doing that is a minor thing. I could do it too. However, casting such sophisticated illusions while being suppressed by the wards... that takes considerable skill. Did you say you were trying to pretend you are 'somewhat normal'? How is this even remotely normal?]

[Err, well... it's not like Kirielle can really tell how amazing this is,] he sent back lamely.

Truthfully, neither could he until this point. He learned these illusions pretty much solely to entertain Kirielle. They were just little tricks to him, and so was the ability to bypass the laughable disruption wards on the train. It completely slipped his mind that someone like Ilsa could figure out exactly what he was doing and how difficult it was and find it notable.

[So,] Ilsa sent. [You are good enough at combat magic to fight a thousand-year-old lich. You are a mind mage and an illusionist. You can teleport around with ease and open dimensional gates. You can create duplicates of yourself. You are an expert golem maker, with all that implies. You say you achieved all of that in, what, eight years?]

[Pretty much, yeah,] Zorian confirmed.

[Forgive me for being blunt here Mister Kazinski, but aren't you a fairly average mage?] Ilsa asked curiously. [I never got an impression that you are some amazingly talented person from the information I was given. And trust me, people had looked into it. Whenever a world-class talent like Daimen appears, their family is always investigated in case their boons run in the blood.]

[Aside from being an innate mind mage, I am indeed pretty average,] Zorian said calmly. Ilsa's comment might have infuriated him once, but these days he no longer cared. [I know what you're thinking, and yes – my rapid growth as a mage is all due to the time loop. It doesn't just give time, you know. It's also given me nigh-limitless resources, access to restricted materials and plenty of nor-

mally unobtainable experience. It's also put me under enormous pressure, keeping me constantly motivated in a way I otherwise wouldn't be. I honestly think anyone could do what I did, if put in the same position. Well, provided they didn't just break under the pressure...]

Ilisa stayed quiet for a while, but Zorian could practically feel the gears turning in her head. She was probably realizing for the first time the sort of amazing opportunity the time loop represented.

[I think I'm getting just a tiny bit jealous of you, Mister Kazinski,] Ilisa eventually concluded.

[Don't envy me just yet,] he told her. [There is still a good chance that I will get erased in the end, and everything I have worked for will be for naught.]

[What?] she asked, startled. [What do you mean?]

With that, he started explaining the situation in detail to her. He told her about Red Robe, the uncertainty about whether they could even get out of the time loop, the problems he had to solve to survive the exit, and so on.

It took a while to go through everything. Strangely enough, Ilisa looked calmer and more reassured by the end, even though he had just told her there was a big chance they would *all* lose everything at the end. Then again, maybe it wasn't so strange. She already knew that temporary markers like her own only lasted six months. Compared to that, a more distant deadline that would also destroy Zach and Zorian probably didn't seem so intimidating. On the contrary, she may have found it reassuring that they also had the same fate waiting for them, if they failed.

[I was wondering why you decided to include so many people in this time loop, instead of just monopolizing the whole thing for yourself and Zach. Your situation is quite desperate,] she said, humming to herself audibly enough for Kirielle to hear her and

give her funny looks.

[You don't have to sound so happy about it,] Zorian grouched. [But yes, we really do need your help badly.]

Ilisa was mostly included because of her connections. Though she acted a bit low key most of the time, she knew many people and was owed quite a few favors. Hopefully, she could help them convince people to go along with whatever crazy plans they came up with and smooth any ruffled feathers they caused along the way. Considering how few other members of their little conspiracy were diplomatically inclined or familiar with bureaucratic wrangling, this was a valuable skill.

Plus, she was a powerful alteration expert. Zorian wasn't sure, but he felt she might be able to help him produce his golems faster. She couldn't animate them, of course, but he was currently producing such a large number of them every restart that it took a while to simply create enough mechanical bodies for animation. If Ilisa was as good at alteration and material alchemy as Xvim claimed, she should be able to take over that part of the production process and free Zorian to do other things.

[Why not just hire someone to do that for you?] Ilisa asked when he told her that. [I hear from Xvim you've been doing that a lot already.]

[I can't,] Zorian shook his head. [Anyone I contract will surely figure out what I intend to do with such a sophisticated metal doll, and making combat-capable golems is forbidden without a license.]

[Makes sense,] Ilisa said. [You don't want to have random mages building themselves a private army of golems in their free time.]

[Exactly,] Zorian said. [I might be able to coax a person to build me a single puppet, but if I order a batch of twenty puppets, they'll freak out. Nobody wants to get implicated in an attempted

rebellion or whatever. I'd be lucky if they didn't immediately report me to the government when they throw me out of the shop.]

Ilsa nodded. After some thought, she changed the subject. [You know, all this talk about golem and alteration is reminding me of something I thought of when you were explaining how the time loop works. Destroying the entire world and then recreating it out of nothing... it reminds me of a persistent ambition of mine...]

[Oh? You mean true creation?] Zorian guessed.

[You know about it?] Ilsa was surprised. [I don't remember talking about it around you... I suppose one of my previous incarnations told you about it?]

[Yeah,] Zorian confirmed. [I sought you out quite often in the beginning to learn from you. You taught me much of what I know right now, or at least gave me a push in the right direction.]

[We'll have to talk about that more on some other occasion,] Ilsa said with a smile. [It looks like you owe me and I don't even know about it. How am I supposed to know to seek you out for favors if I don't even know that I have leverage over you? But anyway, true creation... yes, in a way, the time loop is the ultimate expression of that desire of mine. A magic that creates an entire world, over and over again. Are you sure you have no idea how it is done?]

[No, sorry,] Zorian said apologetically. [That power is absolutely godlike in scope and mystery. Or rather, *primordial*, since the Sovereign Gate seems to be made out of one of those.]

[Considering the stories of mortal mages doing it in the past, and in light of the fact that there is a device that can repeatedly create an entire world, I am convinced it is easier than most people suspect. Maybe I'll be able to figure something out by observing this constantly recreated world I'm in,] Ilsa said wistfully.

[Maybe,] Zorian said doubtfully. He doubted she would really

get anywhere with that, but he wouldn't stop her.

Eventually, Kirielle dozed off and the telepathic conversation died down a little, leaving both Zorian and Ilsa lost in their own thoughts.

The train continued its routine journey to Cyoria.



When Zorian, Kirielle and Ilsa arrived in Cyoria and disembarked, they found there were people already waiting for them. Zach being there was kind of expected, but he was also accompanied by Xvim, Kyron and Taiven. Most people did not react to this, of course, but Kirielle knew damn well that there was something fishy about that and kept giving everyone weird glances and got really quiet for a time. Zorian also noticed Fortov staring at him weirdly in the distance. He wasn't sure how much his brother really knew about him, but he was probably aware that Zorian hadn't had any real friends until recently, so having a bunch of people wait for him at the train station was beyond unusual. He did not make any move or approach, though, since nobody was attacking anyone and Zorian didn't look like he needed help.

After dropping off Kirielle at Imaya's place, the group found a secluded location and started talking. Kyron, their combat magic instructor, was included into the group due to his high combat skills and the fact he had connections to people in Eldemar's military. He was the first to speak up.

"These temporary markers you placed on us to retain our memories... can they be revoked?" Kyron asked.

Of course the first thing they wanted to discuss was the markers. Zorian didn't blame them. He knew he would have been the same if he were in their place. He was kind of mystified why they hadn't just asked Zach about that while they were waiting instead of saving it until now, but maybe they had talked about other

things, such as how the time loop worked. Or maybe they had just gathered together quite recently and hadn't had the time to discuss anything. He knew that Zach hated waiting and had a habit of showing up late, so he probably hadn't been at the train station for long.

"Yes," Zorian told him bluntly.

"At will?" Kyron asked next.

"Well, we need the crown that is currently in Quatach-Ichl's possession to do it," Zorian said carefully. "So not really, no."

"Also, removing the marker only prevents you from keeping your magic and memories when the world resets next," Zach said. "It doesn't wipe away what you achieved until that point."

"Can the marker be reapplied once it runs out or is revoked?" Xvim asked.

"I know what you're thinking," Zach sighed. "Sadly, it's not that easy. Yes, you can place a marker on the same person the second time, but only after twelve restarts have passed. You can't just remove the marker and then reapply it to extend the time."

"I imagined it was something like that," Xvim admitted.

Zorian suddenly yelped in pain. After looking around, he realized Taiven had pinched his arm for no discernible reason.

"Why did you do that!?" he protested.

"I wanted to make sure your arm is really fine," she said, frowning.

Zorian suddenly realized this was the same arm that ended up getting cut off by Quatach-Ichl in the previous restart. He had pretty much been a cripple the last time that she had seen him.

Still, how the hell was it okay for her to just pinch him like that!? Huffing with indignation, Zorian stepped away from Taiven and maneuvered himself to place Ilsa between the two of them. Ilsa gave him an amused look in response.

"So what's the plan?" Kyron said.

"We are hoping we can figure out a way to adjust the temporary markers into lasting indefinitely," Zorian said. "Admittedly, tampering with a piece of magic that probably had gods involved in its construction sounds hopeless... but we suspect that Red Robe entered the time loop through this very method. If so, it should be possible for us to do it as well."

"Right, if Red Robe could have done it, surely all of us working together should be able to work something up," Zach said.

"And if you fail?" Xvim insisted.

"We will hopefully gather the entire Key before all six restarts run out, at which point we will be able to unblock the exit," Zorian said. "If we have an exit method also ready by then, we might be able to just get you out of the time loop at that point. At which point it doesn't really matter that your marker will run out."

"And what, you're just going to continue in the time loop alone afterwards?" Taiven asked. "Or are you just going to create new temporary loopers once we're gone? And then get them out too? I don't know about the rest, but I think the world doesn't need three different Taivens."

"Actually, we would just exit the time loop with you," Zach said. "We already got almost everything we could wish for out of the time loop. No need to risk everything by being greedy and cutting things close. If we can leave six months from now, we will."

Silence greeted this proclamation. Zorian knew that the new loopers were worried about their motives, afraid that he and Zach were trying to make use of them as much as possible before discarding them. Not an unreasonable fear. Temporary markers were pretty much designed with that in mind. Presumably the controller would place these on people without ever informing them of the time limit, allowing them to reap all the benefits of having a person work with them for six months and then conveniently forgetting everything. However, Zach and Zorian did

not intend to use the temporary markers just to get a convenient workforce. They got them into the mess and they would do their best to get them out of it. Maybe they would fail in the end, but it wouldn't be for the lack of trying.

"Well," Xvim eventually said, breaking the silence. "We'd best get to work, then."



Days passed, and the effects of the many new loopers rapidly became evident. Kael arrived in Cyoria earlier, barely a day after Zorian did. Lukav and Alanic did not need to be saved from Sudomir's machinations. Taiven no longer bothered hunting monsters with her team. Ilsa's classes were completely different, since she decided she would shake things up a bit. The cranium rats had been completely wiped out by Zorian's simulacrum on the very first day of the restart, with the exception of a handful of individuals the simulacrum had saved up for study. Their usual routine of convincing Xvim, Alanic and Silverlake that the time loop was real became unnecessary, freeing up a surprisingly substantial amount of time.

Finally, not having to gain the trust of the Silent Doorway Adepts before they could use their ability to operate the Bakora Gate network meant they could access distant places from the very start of the restart.

Thus, once Zach and Zorian had sorted out the situation in Cyoria for a bit, they used a Bakora Gate to reach Koth so they could pick up the imperial orb... and maybe get themselves a pet hydra.

Before they did that, though, they decided to visit the Taramatula estate to see if everything was fine there. Daimen had assured them that the people he had picked were reliable, but Zorian knew better than anyone that Daimen said a lot of things...



When they arrived, they found the whole estate to be a hive of activity, people constantly coming and going, and there were people already waiting for them. There was no need to justify themselves or try to get them to admit Daimen was present, like they usually did the first time they contacted them in the restart. Still, while not having to wait at the door was convenient, what came later was not. Just like the new loopers back in Cyoria, the new loopers in Koth also wanted their questions answered, and what was supposed to be just a short check-up ended up being a grueling question and answer session that lasted for most of the day.

"I really hope this is a one-time thing," Zorian groused later to Daimen. "You were supposed to explain these sort of things to them, Daimen."

"I did!" Daimen protested. "They just wanted to hear things from you, I guess. Can you blame them?"

"I guess not," Zorian said. If Daimen had explained things fairly, then these people must surely know it wasn't Daimen who was really in charge. It made sense that they wanted to talk to the people who are the source of the temporary markers and have first-hand information. "Anyway, did you get your team ready? Will the Taramatula really cooperate when you inform them you want to send their best trackers all the way to Blantyrre all of a sudden?"

This was the main reason he and Zach wanted Daimen's cooperation, and why they allowed him to include so many people into the marked group. To put it bluntly, they needed these people to find the staff. They had managed to track down a Bakora Gate on Blantyrre in the previous restart, thanks to the help from that lizardman king, but that was just the first step. The next was to track down a tiny little staff on a giant, jungle-covered continent. To put it bluntly, this was something that he and Zach alone were utterly incapable of doing. Zorian would never say this out loud to

Daimen, but he and his group were probably the most critical people to receive the temporary markers. Without them, they would probably never find the staff. This was one of the primary reasons they decided to go down this path to begin with.

"My team will listen to me, even if I tell them we're going to Blantyrre through a dimensional gate opened up by my little brother," Daimen said proudly. "Hell, they'd probably go along with it even if I alone received the marker, but they would complain more. With Torun, Kirma and other critical members of the team also on board, though, everyone will readily fall in line. As for the Taramatula... well, I'm not sure what level of support we can get out of them, but we will definitely get something. The main problem is that we're being a bit unreasonable and pushing for full commitment to this project without the idea being even hinted at before now. That's not how House Taramatula usually does things, to say the least, so some tension and incredulity are to be expected."

"Will it help if I give you money and resources to throw at them?" Zorian asked. "I know House Taramatula is not poor, but I'm pretty sure me and Zach could gather enough money to finance a small state if we really try. Not to mention a large amount of priceless materials that cannot be bought on the open market."

Daimen looked at him with a strange mixture of horror and joy, his face alternating between various unusual grimaces.

"I hate you," he finally said. "You better plan to gift some of that money to your poor older brother when we get out."

"Aren't you pretty well off?" Zorian asked, arching his eyebrow at him. "You're even marrying into nobility."

"You can never have enough money," Daimen said. "Never. And yes, please do send all that money here if you can. Trying to flat out bribe the Taramatula directly with it wouldn't go well, but I'm sure they would look more favorably on the plan if we agreed to

pay for all the equipment and mercenaries out of our own pockets. And some completely unrelated gifts would probably be appreciated."

Zorian nodded and made a mental note to mention the matter to Zach.

And speaking of Zach, his fellow time traveler... well, *one* of his fellow time travelers, now... was already waiting for them at the front gate, humming to himself happily.

Zorian didn't have to ask to know what the other boy was thinking of at the moment.

"Say," Zorian asked Daimen. "Do you know what the legality of owning a giant, magically-enhanced hydra is in Eldemar? Just asking for a friend."



## AGENTS OF THE CROWN

Deep in the jungles of Koth, in what was otherwise an unremarkable patch of rainforest, a situation was unfolding. The trees shook, the animals vacated the area in panic and the underbrush was trampled underfoot as a gigantic, furious hydra thundered through the area in pursuit of its target. Its eight heads fanned out and snapped angrily towards anything in the vicinity that failed to get out of its way, breaking low-hanging branches and killing any animal that was too slow to flee.

As for Zorian, who was its target, he simply kept running and dodging while marveling at the incredible speed with which the hydra was able to move through the thick vegetation of the rainforest. He had thought its size would make maneuvering difficult and allow him to easily keep ahead of it, but he had seriously underestimated its ability to just plow through everything in front of it without stopping. He was purposely running through the most difficult terrain he could find and he never even came close to losing it. It was constantly trailing just behind him.

A blue, translucent, ectoplasmic eye constantly trailed after Zorian, hovering above his head and staring at the hydra. It was through this eye that Zorian was able to keep track of the hydra's movements and dodge its attacks, despite having his back turned

to it. Otherwise, if he were forced to run blind or had to periodically slow down to turn around, the hydra would have grabbed him a hundred times by now. Though the spell itself was very simple, very few people would be able to process information from two different perspectives like that. The fact Zorian could look both in front of him and behind him at the same time, while maneuvering through a treacherous, obstacle-filled jungle floor was proof that his experiments with mental enhancement were bearing some fruit.

The chase led them next to a fallen, rotting log covered in moss and mushrooms. Without its main body slowing down at all, one of the hydra's eight heads reached down and bit into it, lifting it out of the ground and launching it at Zorian. Half a dozen monstrous centipedes and one very terrified squirrel tumbled out of the rotting log as it sailed through the air, having hidden in it when they noticed the rampaging hydra approaching. Zorian reacted instantly, making a few silent movements and causing a bright red ectoplasmic hand to materialize in the air behind him and slap the log aside. It collided with the nearby tree where it exploded into a shower of rotting wood. Both Zorian and the hydra simply charged through the cloud of wooden shrapnel, one with the aid of magical shields and the other through the power of supernatural toughness and regeneration.

"Zach, what the hell are you doing there!?" Zorian yelled. "I've been running for ages here! Did you figure out the dagger or not!?"

Zach, who was trailing behind both of them while occasionally making funny poses and waving the dagger in his hand at the hydra, seemed to pause at the question.

"It's hard, okay!" he yelled back.

"I'm running low on mana here!" Zorian said. "If you don't figure it out soon, I'm calling this off."

In truth, the hydra posed very little threat to Zorian. If the

situation ever got too dangerous, he could have always teleported away or simply flown away too high for the hydra to reach. However, that would leave it free to turn around and shift its attention to Zach, which would defeat the whole purpose of this setup. The point of him leading the hydra on the merry chase through the Kothic jungle was to give Zach the time he needed to figure out how to use the dagger on the hydra. Something that didn't seem to be going too well.

Oh well. On the bright side, if Zach couldn't figure it out by the time Zorian ran out of mana, it would be Zorian's turn next. Zorian would actually prefer if *he* was the one who figured out how to use the dagger, since he and Zach had agreed that whoever succeeded at this would get to 'own' the hydra. He had a good feeling about his chances, since, unlike Zach, he had soul perception unlocked. Surely that would–

"Hydra!" Zach suddenly shouted, dramatically pointing the dagger in the monster's direction. "I am your master now! Kneel before me!"

No less than three of the hydra's head glanced towards Zach, giving him a hateful, contemptuous look before returning their attention to Zorian again.

Before Zorian could say anything, Zach suddenly teleported right on top of the hydra and plunged the dagger straight into its back.

Zorian wanted to scream at his fellow time traveler for being such an idiot. Not only had Zach exposed himself to incredible danger, since the hydra's heads could twist backwards to reach people foolish enough to climb on its back with incredible speed and ease, the boy had also invalidated all the effort Zorian invested into making sure the hydra was focused on him and him alone. Even if Zach got away from this stunt completely unscathed – and he probably would, in all honesty – the hydra would no longer ignore him

from this point onward.

Indeed, the moment Zach popped into existence on top of the hydra's back, before he even finished plunging the dagger into its flesh, the monster was already stopping its charge, all eight of its heads refocusing on this sudden new threat. However, the moment the dagger sank into its back, a strange thing happened. Instead of simply ignoring the puny wound and biting down on Zach anyway, the hydra suddenly stiffened as if paralyzed. Its many heads froze in the air, jaws still stretched wide for a lethal bite, staring at Zach with confused, uncomprehending eyes.

"No way..." Zorian complained weakly.

"Ha ha!" Zach laughed, wrenching the dagger out of the wound and quickly straightening himself up. The hydra's back not being the most stable of grounds, he almost lost his balance upon doing that and had to spend several seconds to stabilize himself. The hydra remained completely motionless throughout all of that. Zach slapped the closest hydra head a few times playfully. "What did I tell you, eh? I really *am* your master now. Kneel!"

The command seemed to break the hydra out of its paralysis. Without hesitation, it dropped to the ground. Being a quadrupedal life form, it couldn't really exactly kneel as such, so it instead just dropped on its stomach and lowered its many heads on the ground. The sudden motion completely unbalanced Zach, however, sending him tumbling down the creature's back with a strangled cry. He hit the ground with a dull thud, landing on one of the exposed rocks, and then spent the next minute and a half rolling around in pain on the ground.

Zorian eyed the hydra for a few seconds before deciding not to approach for now. It was no longer attacking him, but he had a feeling that might change if he made any moves towards its new 'master'.

"There is no way that was the correct command phrase to ac-



tivate the dagger, is it?" he eventually asked.

"Ugh. Damn, this hurt," said Zach, laboriously rising to his feet while using the nearby hydra as a stabilizer. He did his best to dust himself off and get rid of the branches and bugs stuck in his hair. "And no, that wasn't the command phrase. The way to activate the dagger is to first cut yourself with it to establish resonance and then cut the hydra to forge a bond with it and finalize the deal."

Zorian gave him a curious look. "How the hell did you figure *that* out?"

"I, err, accidentally cut myself with it while trying to mess around with it while running," Zach admitted with an awkward laugh. He turned towards the hydra, whose many eyes diligently followed his every move. "Anyway, who cares about that! It doesn't matter how I discovered the dagger's usage, all that matters is that the hydra is finally mine! Well ours, but you know..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Zorian said, clacking his tongue. He'd normally be annoyed about losing a bet like that, but it was probably better this way. There was no guarantee he would have uncovered such a curious method of activation himself.

He felt the hydra's mind a little. He kind of expected to find the hydra resentful of being effectively enslaved like this, but he found the creature to be mostly curious instead. Confused and a little scared too, but mostly just curious. It did not seem to harbor any ill will towards Zach. Zorian had never heard of a monster control method that was that thorough and effective, and the hydra should be highly resistant to mind control due to its unique mind anyway. He had a feeling this was more than just control – in some strange way, the hydra was conditioned to regard the bond forged by the dagger as innately legitimate and did not struggle against its bindings at all.

Zorian was torn between being impressed by the maker of the dagger for pulling it off and disturbed that such a thing was possi-

ble.

In any case, the friendliness was only towards Zach. The moment Zorian tried to step closer the hydra immediately jumped to its feet and interposed itself between Zorian and its master, hissing and snapping its jaws at him menacingly.

"Oh come on," Zorian complained. "That guy doesn't need your protection from me. If anything, I would need to be protected against him if we seriously fought..."

The hydra didn't understand human speech, and probably wouldn't have listened to him even if it did. It was about to lunge at Zorian when Zach placed his hand on its flank and stopped it.

"Hey, knock it off," Zach said. "That guy is our friend, okay? No eating friends."

It took a few gestures and shouting before the hydra managed to understand what its new owner was telling it, at which point it gave Zach something reminiscent of an incredulous look, as if unable to believe Zach would be friendly to someone like Zorian, who had led it on a wild-goose chase for a better part of an hour.

"I know, I know... he can be very annoying, but he's very useful and mostly means well," Zach said sagely, patting the hydra gently on the flank.

The hydra directed one last unhappy hiss in Zorian's direction before grudgingly standing down and indicating it would allow him to get close without attacking him. Possibly.

Zorian folded his hands over his chest and gave Zach an unamused look.

"Don't worry, I'm sure she'll warm up to you in time," Zach told him, grinning widely. "Princess is just a little shy."

What?

"W-What!?" Zorian blurted out.

"It's a she," Zach said, nodding sagely. "I know, I was a little surprised myself when I felt that through the link and--"

"No, not that!" Zorian snapped. "You're seriously naming a hydra 'Princess'?"

"Why not?" Zach challenged. "What's wrong with that name?"

The newly named 'Princess' focused three of her heads on him, as if daring him to say anything.

Stupid reptile. It didn't even understand what they were talking about but felt the need to side with Zach anyway...

"It's a stupid name," Zorian told him bluntly.

"It's a great name," Zach disagreed. "A royal name for a very royal girl. She's a divinely empowered guardian of an imperial item... that's pretty high-ranked if you ask me. Plus, you know how royals like to refer to themselves in plural? 'We' this and 'we' that... well, Princess here can talk about herself in plural and be completely factual! So there. It's actually very clever and you were just too judgmental to figure it out."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted. "If that's your logic, why not call her 'Queen' instead?"

"Because 'Princess' is a more ironic name for a giant hydra," Zach admitted.

Zorian spent the next fifteen minutes trying to argue the issue before giving up. It took another hour after that to coax Princess back into the imperial orb for transport – she wanted to follow around after Zach like a puppy, and was confused why he wanted to abandon her in the orb so soon after their bonding.

Zorian had to say, watching Zach awkwardly try to convince a clingy hydra that he would be back and that she should stay put was kind of amusing.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Zach ended up winning that bet after all.



After recovering the imperial orb and tentatively subduing the hydra guarding it, Zach and Zorian turned their attention towards the sulrothum at the Ziggurat of the Sun and the imperial ring in their possession. They already knew they could steal their ring if they launched a big enough attack on them, but that took a great deal of time and effort. Well, the presence of Princess on the battlefield would probably make an all-out assault a little easier this time around, but it would still be a major undertaking that would consume a lot of their time and resources that would be better spent elsewhere.

"It's a pity Princess is too big to fit in the ziggurat corridors," lamented Zach. "Otherwise we could just climb on top of her and charge in, trampling and brushing aside any sulrothum that got in our way."

"If our attack was that unstoppable, the sulrothum would probably just pick up whatever they can and flee," pointed out Zorian. "They'd probably flee underground, and it would be an utter pain to track them down then. Not to mention they have a massive sand worm on their side. We don't want to get in an underground battle with them, I think, even with Princess on our side."

"Hmph," Zach mumbled unhappily. "How about we just infiltrate the ziggurat through this underground connection, then? We might be able to avoid a massive battle that way."

"They have their pet sand worm constantly guarding that," Zorian pointed out, shaking his head sadly. "I bet we're noticed instantly through whatever exotic senses that thing has... and then it collapses the whole tunnel on top of us before we can do anything. Considering the layout of their Dungeon entrance, I think it was made by the worm in the first place, so they probably have no qualms about destroying it. They can always command the sand worm to create another one later."

Zach was silent for a while.

"How about... just soul-killing the entire colony?" Zach finally asked. "I mean, it makes me a little uncomfortable to use tactics like that, but this is pretty much what the damn knife was made for."

"It's definitely an option," Zorian said after a short pause. "However, we probably wouldn't be able to get all sulrothum with this and we don't know how many of them know about the ring and its importance. If we kill most of the colony but one of the survivors takes the ring and runs, things could get really bad. Right now we know where the ring is. If a shattered group of sulrothum survivors takes the ring and spends a day or two running around in the desert or, gods forbid, the depths of the Dungeon..."

"Yeah, you're right," Zach said. "It's too risky. Even if we get them all, there are neighboring sulrothum tribes and other denizens of the desert to consider. If they discover the state of the ziggurat and loot the ring before we reach it, we would still have a problem on our hands."

"Speaking of the neighboring sulrothum tribes, do we still go forward with the idea of arranging an alliance with them?" Zorian asked. "The idea is nice, I admit, but it may very well take more time and effort to do it that way than to just send our own army at the ziggurat."

"Not if we use Princess!" Zach declared triumphantly.

"You want to use the damn hydra for everything these days," Zorian scoffed. "You're like a little kid who just got himself a new toy and now wants to show it to everyone. How the hell will that thing help us convince the sulrothum faster?"

"There is no need to be jealous, Zorian," Zach chided. "You lost the bet fair and square. In any case, I think you greatly underestimate the impression of power we will project when we show up with a giant menacing hydra in tow. I bet those tribes will be trip-

ping over themselves to stay on our good side after seeing that."

"Or they'll be too scared to even talk to us," Zorian pointed out.

"Then we just smash them until they're willing to listen," Zach shrugged.

"This is starting to sound a lot less like arranging an alliance and a lot more like us bullying the neighboring tribes into being our reluctant army," Zorian pointed out.

"Eh, I think of it more as an 'aggressive demonstration' than bullying," Zach said dismissively. "We would have had to prove our strength for them to take us seriously, anyway. But really, so what if we end up cowing them into submission forcefully? We're already attacking the ziggurat tribe without any provocation. We lost the moral high ground a long time ago, I think."

True.

"Alright," said Zorian. "Let's try to make them willing allies if possible, though. I have another task I want to give them, and they probably won't try very hard if our overwhelming force is all that keeps them in line."

"Oh? Something important?" Zach asked.

"Maybe," Zorian answered. "There is a magical creature called a tunneler toad, which lives deep within the Xlotic desert. They live in a series of hidden worlds left by some forgotten ancient civilization, called Ishmali Reservoirs by the ancient Ikosians, because they seem designed primarily as water reservoirs. They're basically large caverns full of water, enclosed in their own pocket dimensions. The reservoirs are largely uninteresting, but the tunneler toads themselves have a curious ability to detect pocket dimensions and enter them with ease. In their natural habitat they use this to pass in and out of the Ishmali Reservoirs as they please, using them as a hidden nesting ground, but the ability is said to be usable on any pocket dimension they come across."

"Ah, I see, this is for that blood magic initiative you want to

set up," Zach said. "Why do you need the sulrothum's help for this, though? If the toads live only around these reservoir things, they should be easy to find. It's not like the reservoirs can move, right?"

"They're static but I'm afraid the records of where the reservoirs are located have all been lost in the Cataclysm, and no one had bothered to track them down again as far as I can tell," Zorian said, shaking his head. "With much of the interior now covered in desert and taken over by sulrothum tribes and worse, the reservoirs have become extremely isolated. Not to mention that most people are neither master dimensionalists nor tunneler toads, so they would be unable to track down and enter these hidden worlds even if they wanted to. Thus, if we want to find tunneler toads, we must find a desert native that has heard about strange toads that sometimes seemingly vanish into thin air, only to just as suddenly reappear later."

"Annoying," Zach remarked with a frown. "Is this really necessary? We have lots of candidates for ability theft when it comes to magical creatures with relevant abilities."

"None of them are easy to track down," Zorian pointed out. "Not only are they rare and mostly extinct near human-dominated territories, the very nature of their abilities means these creatures can hide and retreat with incredible ease. The other may very well be even more annoying to find. If you think tunneler toads are bad, wait till you hear how annoying it is to track down a phase spider without it taking the initiative to reveal itself."

"Right," Zach said, clacking his tongue unhappily. "I guess I'll try to be a little nicer to the stupid wasps." He paused for a second. "So we're really going to start dabbling in blood magic and enhancement rituals in this restart, then?"

"Yes. Although we should start with something relatively easy and well tested," Zorian confirmed. "Eagle Eyes enhancement, for instance. Or any of the simple physical enhancements that aim

to improve the user's strength, stamina, regeneration and so on. Well-known, straightforward things that are unlikely to go catastrophically wrong when attempted by beginners like us."

"Not really instilling me with a sense of confidence here, Zorian," Zach complained.

"What can I say?" Zorian shrugged. "Blood magic is dangerous. If it makes you feel any better, I will be going first."

"It does not," Zach said. "We both know it will be me who has to take the biggest risks in regards to this. I have way more mana to burn on permanent enhancements and I am also proficient in medical magic, so I will be able to push my limits more and understand life force manipulation way better than you."

Zorian didn't dispute him. While he had no intention of piling most of the risk on Zach, his fellow time traveler was likely right in his prediction.

"Eh, don't make such a grim face," Zach said dismissively. "I already agreed we should do this when we talked before, didn't I? I didn't change my mind."

"I kind of feel I'm pressuring you over this," Zorian admitted.

"I'm not that easy to pressure," Zach assured him. "You've been trying to pressure me to let you inspect my mind for a long time now, for instance, and I have never let you do it."

"I still think that's a mistake," Zorian told him.

"And the answer is still no," Zach said, grinning. "See? Pressure ineffective. I agreed with this creepy blood magic stuff because I honestly think you're right. We're too slow at figuring out primordial prisons. Only distasteful, unconventional methods like this can let us find a shortcut we need."

"Fair enough," Zorian said. Personally, he did not find blood magic to be *that* creepy, and even viewed it as a potentially useful tool for usage outside the time loop, but he understood where Zach was coming from.



They spent two more hours discussing various ideas before they both entered the pocket dimension inside the imperial orb for a very important task.

They had to convince Princess to let Zorian examine how her mind worked without trying to bite his head off for his insolence.

It would prove to be a very challenging task.



As days went by, some curious things began to be noticed by various countries of Koth, Xlotic and Altazia. The first one was that House Taramatula suddenly organized and launched a major expedition to Blantyrre in order to find the fabled imperial staff of Ikosia, sinking a massive amount of money and manpower into the endeavor. The level of support House Taramatula had given to the project was not as extensive as Daimen had hoped, but it was still major by virtually any means, and the frantic speed with which the whole thing was organized and executed was enough to give others pause. The Taramatula seemed almost desperate to track down the staff, and nobody could figure out why. The leadership of the House declined to answer any questions regarding the matter, contributing to the air of mystery.

More importantly, the Taramatula displayed the ability to open cross-continental dimensional passages between their land and their base in Blantyrre. This was not something Zach and Zorian wanted to make known, but proved to be utterly impossible to hide, given the scale of the operation. This information soon spread around like a wildfire throughout various spy agencies, especially ones based in Koth, who were immediately consumed by an intense desire to know everything possible about the situation. Amusingly, this included trying to track down information about the imperial staff. They thought the imperial artifacts were just

historical curiosities, but since the Taramatula wanted the staff so badly, there had to be something special about it. Many people suddenly wanted to get their hands on the imperial staff, or at least hoped to understand what sort of power their rivals would possess should they successfully claim the item.

Zach and Zorian intended to steal the results of all such research near the end of the restart. Who knows, maybe the combined might of all these spy agencies would find something they had overlooked.

The second thing that got people's attention, especially in Al-tazia, was intricate spell formula schematics, alchemical recipes, new spell compendiums and sensitive spy reports that started to surface all over the continent. Nobody knew who was responsible for this, how they had come up with all this in complete secrecy, or what their motives were... and it was completely unknown just how many people had received this assistance, considering many people had simply accepted their 'gifts' quietly and set out to exploit them in secret. Finally, the gifts seemed to be most heavily concentrated in Eldemar, which was a huge concern for everyone around them. This caused a frenzy of speculation and activity across the continent, as people tried to figure out what this meant and how to hopefully take advantage of it.

This was, of course, done by Zach and Zorian. They did it for a very simple reason: to muddy the waters and prevent their newly marked fellow time travelers from standing out too much. It was too much to expect all of them to behave themselves at all times or never make a blunder, especially in this first restart while they were still under heavy impression of their first repeat of the month. Introducing enough waves into their surroundings would hopefully keep most people too busy with other matters to pay attention to crazy stories of time traveling academy professors and the like.

Thus far, the idea seemed to be working, but it would remain to be seen if that would hold out until the end.

This done, Zach and Zorian turned their attention to organizing the search for the imperial staff in Blantyrre. While the bulk of the job was done by Daimen and his men, it was a necessity for Zach and Zorian to get regularly involved. For one thing, the descriptions of the imperial staff were vague and contradictory, so they were the only ones that could identify the staff with any degree of certainty, thanks to their ability to sense the presence of the Key. Additionally, they were necessary for transporting people and supplies all over Blantyrre, since they were the only ones that could easily open dimensional gates from one location to another.

Zorian had been quietly hoping that the immense amount of resources they had mobilized in the search would provide quick results, but his hopes were soon dashed upon the rocks of reality. Finding the staff turned out to be much, much harder than finding a Bakora Gate. The gates were rare and obscure, but fairly distinctive. The staff, on the other hand, was something incredibly common in Blantyrre. The lizardmen loved their staves – they were a popular symbol of authority, and virtually any lizardman ruler and priest had a staff to call their own. While this meant that the imperial staff probably hadn't been thrown away and forgotten in some ancient treasury, it also meant that tracking it down was akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. The one saving grace was that the imperial staff was free of most decorations, being just a plain piece of dark wood, whereas the lizardmen liked to decorate their own staves with gems and feathers and whatnot. Then again, what was to stop the new owner from adding those things to the imperial staff to pretty it up? Ugh...

Influenced by such things, Zach and Zorian decided to approach Quatach-Ichl for lessons again. Originally they wondered

if they should skip their interaction with him in this particular restart, due to all the new time loopers suddenly walking around, but in the end they decided they would risk it. This time, the topic they chose was tracking magic and search spells. This was a relatively safe topic to ask about, and it might help them find the staff faster. A foolish hope, probably, considering the staff was immune to normal divination, just like all the other imperial artifacts. However, Quatach-Ichl was familiar with divine energies in a way that others couldn't match, so perhaps he knew of a way it could be done.

The topic was also potentially useful in tracking down Red Robe once they were outside the time loop, and it might give them an answer about how Quatach-Ichl had managed to detect their presence at the end of the previous restart. Zorian really wanted an answer to that last question, since he had thought his privacy wards were pretty much flawless at this point.

It was really unfortunate that he had been unable to find out anything of worth when he broke through Quatach-Ichl's mental defenses, Zorian thought gloomily. While he was extremely proficient at performing memory probes by now, that type of magic took a long time to really get going and the ancient lich had given him very little time to work with before abandoning his body. He probably shouldn't have tried to find out where Quatach-Ichl's phylactery was located. That kind of information was incredibly important and was thus bound to be guarded with the greatest possible zeal. He should have gone for something fairly mundane. Maybe Quatach-Ichl would have been willing to risk things and spend more time struggling against his mental probe.

At the moment, though, Zach and Zorian were in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria. The two of them were disguised as adult agents of the crown, and were having a private talk with Krantin Keklos, the head researcher and overseer of the facil-

ity.

Krantin was slowly turning the imperial orb in his hands, utterly fascinated with it.

"You understand that we require your complete silence about this matter, don't you, Mister Keklos?" Zorian asked him.

The man suddenly looked up, a slightly confused look on his face. He had evidently been so absorbed in his study of the orb that he had lost track of time.

"Hm? Oh. Oh yes, I absolutely understand the need for secrecy," Krantin quickly said, nodding furiously. "I assure you, me and my team are quite used to working on top secret projects and dealing with potential leaks."

He took another long look at the orb in his hands.

"This thing... it's absolutely amazing," he said, obvious admiration in his voice. "I cannot put into words how glad I am to be given this honor."

"I hope you remember you are not being given this orb just to satisfy your personal curiosity," Zach said gruffly. He was playing the bad guy in their 'fake royal agent' scheme. "We have given you this honor because you are our nation's foremost expert on Black Rooms, and we hope you can turn this pocket dimension into the largest one yet. Can you do it or not?"

"Yes, absolutely," Krantin said. "While the volume of space inside is larger than anything we have ever done, the isolation from the outside world is also unprecedented. We can definitely turn this into a temporal dilation zone. Just..."

"Just?" Zorian prompted.

"W-Well, this is a very ambitious undertaking you are proposing here," Krantin said, stumbling over the words slightly. Zorian could feel that, although Krantin was a little nervous, he was also determined to make the absolute most out of this opportunity he was presented with. "To create this thing you are proposing, we

would have to considerably expand the research facility and design whole new methods of Black Room construction. While I am sure we can do it *eventually*, the amount of time involved is not small. We are a very small team and—”

”You want more money,” Zach said bluntly, cutting him off.

”And people,” Krantin nodded.

He seemed to sense this was important to them. In that case, he felt it was entirely appropriate to ask for increased commitment in terms of resources and available staff.

Zorian did not answer verbally. He just reached into his jacket and handed Krantin a promissory note from one of the local banks. He could have brought actual cash too, of course, but he knew by now that government facilities like this rarely dealt with such things and that dumping large stacks of paper money on them would be a huge mistake. It would raise all sorts of red flags in their heads.

Krantin wordlessly accepted the promissory note and glanced at it. He raised his eyebrow at the number printed on it. Zorian could tell he was appreciative, but not really impressed.

”This is just the initial sum to get you started, of course,” Zorian said. ”You will get further funding once things actually start moving forward, as well as additional bonuses if the project is going particularly well.”

”Of course,” Krantin said, slightly more impressed.

”In regards to additional staff, that is a bit more complex,” Zorian said. ”Due to the somewhat abrupt nature of this initiative, it will take at least a month before we can send some new people here on a permanent basis.”

”That’s fine,” Krantin said easily. ”I can wait a month or several. Just be aware that the longer it takes for additional manpower to arrive, the more the project will stall.”

"I wasn't finished," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Although we cannot send people here officially, you will get several mages skilled in dimensionalism to help you move faster with the project."

Specifically, the man would be getting Xvim, Silverlake, Zach and Zorian. With their expertise in dimensionalism and with the research facility staff's experience in constructing Black Rooms, the project would hopefully result in something useful after a few restarts.

Krantin didn't seem to like the idea, however.

"I don't like experts outside my authority coming here, telling me how to run things," he told them bluntly. "Even if they're highly capable, they don't know the wider context of why we do things the way we do. They would just slow things down and create confusion."

"Are you the facility overseer or not?" Zach challenged. "Are you telling me that you cannot keep a couple of new arrivals in line or bring them up to speed in a timely manner?"

Krantin frowned at him, giving him a slightly angry look.

"These people are being sent here as help," Zorian said in a conciliatory tone. "If, after talking to them, you feel they contribute nothing of worth to the project, you are free to send them away."

"Just remember that their help has already been factored into our projections on how long the project will take," Zach warned.

"Very well," Krantin said, a little unhappily. "I shall give these people a chance, at least. We will see if they are as good as you say they are."

It took them another hour to arrange everything. Zach and Zorian handed Krantin a whole stack of 'official' documentation, which the man merely glanced at before handing it over to the rest of his staff. He evidently didn't even consider the idea that this was all just an elaborate ruse. Zorian hoped the people actually

in charge of processing the documentation would be every bit as careless as their overseer, because many of the documents wouldn't stand up to detailed scrutiny.

"Well," Krantin eventually breathed out. "This has certainly been a productive evening. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Actually, yes," Zorian nodded, handing the man another folder full of documents. "There's been a change in regards to the group that is planned to take advantage of the next Black Room period."

This wasn't how Zach and Zorian usually took over the Black Room beneath Cyoria when they wanted to use it. Normally they just disabled the true group and then showed up with bogus documents at the last possible moment, giving the facility staff little time to consider the issue. This time, however, they planned to bring an entire group with them. Thus, they had taken time to arrange things a little more thoroughly.

"Oh? The Retin's group decided to cancel their scheduled Black Room use?" Krantin said, skimming through the folder. "Strange, they were all so enthusiastic about the whole thing..."

He gave them a knowing look. He clearly knew there was some foul play involved here, but he probably thought it was the government bullying a group into dropping their claim rather than some kind of deception.

He shook his head sadly, throwing the folder to the side.

"I'm curious," he said. "This orb, the sudden changes in resource allocations and the like... are they related to these mysterious 'gifts' I keep hearing about through the rumor mill?"

Hah.

"We aren't paid to ask those kind of questions, and neither are you," Zach told him grimly.

"But probably," added Zorian.



Zach gave him a warning look in response. He was a pretty good actor, all things considered. Did he used to do this sort of thing a lot during past restarts or was he just a natural?

"Alright, I understand. Forget I asked," Krantin said, rising from his seat. "I guess we should both get back to our jobs. When can I expect these 'experts' of yours?"

"Three days from now," Zorian said. That should be enough to see if their ruse worked or not. "We will also periodically drop by to check your progress and see if you need anything."

"Give me sufficient resources and I'll give you what you want," Krantin assured them.

Zorian had no doubt about that. The real question was whether the results would come fast enough to be of any use.

He also swore mentally that if Krantin really produced impressive results with what they've given him, he would find a way to reward him for it in the real world.

Somehow.



In a typical restart, Zach and Zorian had a habit of holding meetings in all sorts of different places: parks, taverns, abandoned houses, constructed houses, tiny caves in the middle of the wilderness... they usually made a choice based on pure impulse and convenience. The novelty of holding a meeting in a new location was also a welcome reprieve from the soul-crushing *sameness* that dominated the time loop.

Now, however, they had a lot more people participating in these kinds of meetings. This completely changed their usual dynamic. They couldn't decide these kinds of things on a whim anymore – they now had to find a space big enough to hold all of them in relative comfort and make sure everyone could gather there in

a timely manner. Public places were pretty much out of consideration – a group of a dozen people of a variety of ages and occupations, plus some giant spiders, would turn heads wherever they went. Additionally, Ilisa got angry at them when they tried to arrange for a meeting in a cold, damp cave in the middle of uninhabited wilderness. Zorian didn't understand what the big deal was, the centipede that tried to climb up her leg was less than a finger thick and the bats didn't bother anyone, but afterwards everyone agreed to only hold meetings in actual buildings.

Thus, the two of them eventually decided to just hold all the meetings at the Noveda Estate. The place had plenty of empty, spacious rooms and very good privacy wards already in place. Though Zach complained that was the boring choice, he agreed with Zorian that organizing meetings elsewhere was more trouble than it was worth.

Thus, at this moment, there was a huge group of people gathered in one of the larger meeting rooms in the Noveda Estate. The actual meeting was already over by this point, but the group had not disbanded for the day. Instead they had mostly broken up into smaller groups that discussed things of mutual interest between themselves.

In one corner, the emissary from the Filigree Sages was having a loud and enthusiastic discussion with Nora Boole. The female spell formula teacher did not seem to mind that she was talking to a giant spider and instead relished the chance to discuss her field of study with a kindred soul. The Filigree Sages emissary, meanwhile, seemed immensely pleased to have found a human mage that was interested in their brand of spell formula. The two of them seemed completely oblivious to their surroundings and the passage of time, so consumed they were in their discussion.

Not far from them, Alanic and Kyron had covered a table full of various maps and were staring at it in silence. Every once in a while

they would point at a random spot on the map and speak a few curt words at each other before falling silent again. Zorian couldn't figure out anything from their brief, mysterious exchanges. In all likelihood, neither could anyone else – everyone seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

In the other corner, Zach was having a loud discussion with the emissary from the Luminous Advocates. This one was less friendly than the one between Nora Boole and the Filigree Sages emissary, though. Zach seemed to be trying to convince the Luminous Advocates to tutor him in mind magic, while the emissary was stubbornly pointing out that Zach wasn't psychic and that this would be a waste of time.

Zorian suspected Zach would get his way in the end. Luminous Advocates were a lot less prideful with them after experiencing the time loop in person, and they now knew exactly how powerful Zach was. They knew they couldn't afford to piss him off, and Zach was unlikely to quit once he set his mind on something, so they would probably cave in eventually. Whether anything would come out of such a lesson was something Zorian was a lot less sure about.

Not too far from them, a small group consisting of Kael, Taiven, Lukav and Daimen was sorting through the various rare materials Zach and Zorian gathered and exchanging stories. The talk seemed to be pretty mundane, focusing on amusing anecdotes and such.

One of the tables was completely monopolized by Silverlake, poring over their documents related to their study of the Ibasan gate. Zorian was pretty surprised at her behavior in this restart, in all honesty. She seemed far more enthusiastic and open about helping them now. It was interesting how dramatically she changed once she experienced the time loop with her own eyes.

Finally, there was Zorian. Like Silverlake, he wasn't really in-

teracting with anyone at the moment. Instead, he was inspecting a table full of divine artifacts that they had stolen for study. He had never made any progress in figuring out these things, but he certainly wasn't about to give up. Especially since Quatach-Ichl had given them definite confirmation that it was possible to at least detect divine energies with regular magic.

Eventually his solitude was broken by Xvim, who walked up to his table and sat down on the chair next to him. He looked faintly displeased.

"Problems?" Zorian asked.

"I have a newfound appreciation for the amount of patience you and Mister Noveda possess," he said blandly. "I've just spent the entire morning marking down a stack of student homework that was absolutely identical to what I had already done in the previous restart and realized this would happen a lot. An unpleasant realization."

"Hah," Zorian said. "You can always just ignore it."

Xvim shook his head.

"That would go against my professional pride," he said. "Just as I demand dedication from my students, I demand the same from myself. A little thing like this should not break me. I shall treat it as personal tempering, I suppose."

"I see," Zorian said, nodding. "I suppose you'd be quite a hypocrite if, after subjecting your students to such an infuriating initial treatment, you ended up losing your patience after only a handful of repeating months."

Xvim hummed in response, not giving a verbal response. He glanced at the divine artifacts Zorian was inspecting.

"You realize, I'm sure, that no one has ever managed to figure out how divine artifacts actually work?" Xvim asked.

"Of course," Zorian said. "But very few people had the opportunity to take one apart over and over again as a method of study."

"Still, I'm surprised you're wasting time on this," Xvim remarked. "Wouldn't it be wiser to spend more time on time loop related things?"

"I would actually classify this as very much a time loop related thing," Zorian answered. "The time loop clearly works at least partially with the help of divine energies. Who's to say they aren't involved with our markers?"

"Oh?" Xvim asked, suddenly more interested.

"It's just baseless speculation," Zorian said. "But I've been thinking about what Red Robe could possibly have that other past Controllers didn't that would allow him to break the limitations placed on temporary markers, and the most likely answer I've come up with is... Quatach-Ichl. I suspect divine energies are involved with the marker somehow, and that the reason Red Robe had been able to jailbreak it is because he had Quatach-Ichl's help. His method of perceiving and possibly modifying divine energies may have allowed him to tamper with the marker in ways that are impossible to us... in which case our efforts to understand and modify the marker are doomed to fail right from the very start."

"I hope you are not right about that," Xvim said after a short pause. "Quatach-Ichl has been alive for centuries. Who knows how long it took him to develop such capabilities?"

Zorian had nothing to say to that.



## MYSTERIOUS WAYS

With the palace orb handed to the time magic researchers for study and experimentation, Princess had temporarily lost her home. They weren't going to leave her in there while the researchers tinkered with the pocket dimension. That would probably end in tragedy, and they still needed her to intimidate the sulrothum tribes into allying with them, anyway.

Although Princess herself was not particularly heartbroken about being away from the orb, the situation did make moving her around a bit of a chore. She couldn't live in the desert. While she could tolerate dry areas, she needed plenty of water to rest in. Thus, Zach and Zorian mostly kept her deep in the Kothic wilderness, where she was happily terrorizing the jungle wildlife, and used dimensional portals to move her where they needed her. Thankfully, while Princess was huge, she was also serpentine in build and very flexible. She could squeeze herself through surprisingly small openings. However, this still meant Zach and Zorian had to expand their dimensional gates to far greater sizes than they typically used, greatly increasing casting time and mana costs involved.

Princess did have her own, divinely-granted teleportation abilities. They had experimented with them somewhat, trying to see if

the hydra had underutilized her gifts somehow, but they were disappointed in the end. Her teleportation powers were exactly what they appeared to be: a short-ranged teleport ability that Princess could use for entering and leaving the palace orb, as well as tactical positioning during battles. It was incapable of transporting her across large distances.

The logistics of hydra transport aside, their alliance building was moving along extremely well. The sulrothum tribes they were visiting were both less secure and less prosperous than the ziggurat tribe. Their settlements had no defensive wards, they had no guardian beast on the level of the divinely-touched sandworm and their equipment was far shoddier than what Zach and Zorian were used to. Thus, when a pair of powerful human mages came to them, riding on a gigantic eight-headed hydra and handing out gifts, none of them dared to simply snub them. Not all of them were eager to work with them, but all of them at least agreed to hear them out.

It helped that this time they had brought an actual sulrothum language specialist to translate for them. The bearded, middle-aged man had only agreed to work with them after Zach and Zorian used Neolu and her family connections to guarantee their trustworthiness, but he had been worth the trouble. Not only was he proficient in the hand language that sulrothum normally used for their communication with humans, he even understood some of their native clicking and buzzing that they used to talk to each other... though he couldn't actually speak it, of course.

Curiously, the man was completely non-magical. Ibak, as he was called, claimed that spells were of little help to him in his job. They only put the sulrothum on edge, as many of them were wary of talking to mages. The devil wasps had great difficulty distinguishing spell chants from mundane conversations, so any time a known spellcaster started speaking they would be viewed with



great suspicion.

At the moment, Zach, Zorian, Ibak and Princess were approaching another of the sulrothum tribes for recruitment. This one was particularly underwhelming, however, and Zorian privately wondered if they should even bother. The settlement was just a series of circular holes dug into a cliff, and Zorian had seen enough of such places by now to estimate the number of sulrothum living there. The tribe probably had less than a hundred members total. Since the group had done nothing to mask their approach and Princess was very eye-catching, the sulrothum scouts had long since spotted them and the entire tribe was a nervous hive of activity. This allowed Zorian to take a look at the decorations and weapons the group was sporting, and he was not impressed with what he was seeing.

"Why are all these tribes so much worse than the ziggurat one?" Zach asked out loud.

He probably did not expect an answer, but surprisingly Ibak had an answer.

"Because of the dungeon access," Ibak said.

Zach and Zorian shot him curious looks, not really understanding.

"While humans like to build their cities on top of accessible dungeon layers, most other species do not, as their less sophisticated magical expertise makes them less capable of dealing with creatures crawling out of the Dungeon on the regular basis," Ibak clarified. "The sulrothum living in the Ziggurat of the Sun are an exception, probably because of the giant sandworm you mentioned. The creature probably allowed them to reshape their local underground the same way human communities do, letting them exploit the place in relative safety. The other tribes do not have that, and thus appear underwhelming in comparison."

"Huh," Zach said thoughtfully. "I guess that sandworm is even

more important than we thought. The wasps really lucked out with that thing."

Before anyone could continue the discussion, Princess released a warbling cry and pointed one of her heads towards a spot on the horizon where a group of sulrothum was flying towards them.

Zorian frowned at the sight. He wasn't surprised that Princess had noticed them before anyone else – she had eight pairs of eyes and was intensely vigilant by nature – but the direction they were coming from and their numbers were unexpected. They were coming from their left, rather than the sulrothum settlement in front of them, and there were twelve sulrothum in the approaching group.

"An emissary from a different tribe?" Zorian guessed. He doubted the tiny settlement in front of them would send out a hunting party as large as this... and if they did, the group would first enter their home to consult with their elders before confronting them.

"Probably," Zach said. "I hope this becomes a thing in the future. This would go so much smoother if the surrounding tribes started coming to us instead of the other way around."

As they grew closer to Princess and the humans accompanying her, the sulrothum group eventually slowed down and landed in the area in front of them. The sulrothum chose a spot that was a fair distance away from their own, trying to make their entrance seem less threatening, but in the end they did effectively block their path and Princess instantly became outraged at the temerity of these newcomers. If Zach hadn't hurriedly calmed her down, she would have already been charging at them, heads roaring a battle cry.

In the end the two groups silently agreed to meet in the middle and negotiate. Zach, Zorian and Ibak ordered Princess to stay in the back and loom over the meeting threateningly, while the appar-

ent sulrothum leader took two bodyguards with him and ordered the rest to similarly stay in the back and look intimidating.

Zorian was kind of biased, but he felt that Princess decidedly won the 'aggressive posturing' competition.

For the next ten minutes, Ibak and the sulrothum leader exchanged words while Zorian took the chance to study the group that sought them out. They were pretty impressive by sulrothum standards, he realized. They were all armed with iron spears and decorated with plenty of war paint, trinkets and various 'magical charms'. The only person that wasn't armed was their leader, who carried a plethora of metal rings and chains but no weapons. He also had a particularly large number of charm bundles hanging off of him, some of which actually looked like they might be doing something. Zorian immediately pegged him as a priest.

After a while the talking died down and Ibak turned to them awkwardly. Zorian could immediately tell that he didn't have good news for them, though the sulrothum themselves remained non-aggressive. Curious.

"What is it?" Zach prompted.

"This group here comes from the Ziggurat of the Sun," Ibak said slowly.

Oh.

He did think those spears were kind of familiar. However, weapons like that were hardly unique to the ziggurat tribe, so he thought nothing of it.

"They know we want to attack them, huh?" Zach mused out loud.

It wasn't that unexpected, Zorian supposed. It wasn't like they were being low-key in their alliance building. Quite the opposite, really. With that in mind, it was probably inevitable that the ziggurat tribe would detect their plans long before the actual attack was executed. Since their goal was to lure the high priest out of the

ziggurat and not to catch the sulrothum by surprise, this wasn't something they cared much about.

Still, they hadn't expected the ziggurat tribe to seek them out for a friendly chat. Try to ambush them, maybe, but not this.

"Yes," Ibak confirmed. "They want to know... what it would take for you to call your attack off."

"What, no threats?" Zach asked curiously.

"No," said Ibak, shaking his head. "Just questions about your motives. Not that I know much about that myself, of course."

Zach ignored the accusatory tone in Ibak's last sentence. While he probably wouldn't betray them to the sulrothum, it wouldn't make them look any less crazy or mysterious if they told him they were doing all this for a magic ring.

"How do they know we don't want to simply take away their ziggurat?" Zach asked. "Ask them that."

"That's... are you trying to start a fight with them?" Ibak asked incredulously.

"I want to see how they react," Zach said. "Just do it."

Ibak muttered something that sounded like a curse in his native language and then started conversing with the sulrothum priest again. Interestingly, the sulrothum did not visibly react to the question at all. It wasn't long before Ibak turned to them again.

"They say three of us are not enough for that," Ibak said. "That you would have brought an army with you if you wanted to occupy something." The sulrothum priest made another series of hand gestures. "They think you want something smaller. Something *portable*. They acknowledge your strength but wonder if a trade wouldn't be preferable to bloodshed."

"What we want they would never trade away," Zorian said, shaking his head.

Should they tell them they were after the ring? No, that might make it harder to lure the high priest out of the ziggurat later... but maybe he would actually agree to hand it to them if he thought it would ward off a catastrophic attack on his tribe? The ring was important, but it wasn't like they were asking him to hand over the sandworm control dagger or something.

"Tell them this is not something they are qualified to negotiate about," Zach suddenly said. "We want to talk to their high priest."

Zorian raised his eyebrow at Zach. Did he really think it would be that easy?

A furious exchange of hand gestures occurred between Ibak and the sulrothum priest, after which Ibak turned to them again.

"They say they are also not qualified to bring strangers before their elders," Ibak said. "They are here merely to find out what you're after and if the conflict can be averted. After that, they will report back to their tribe and receive further orders. They say meeting the leaders of the tribe may be possible, but you have to give them something to bring back if you wish for that to happen."

Zach and Zorian looked at each other briefly. A quiet exchange of telepathic communication occurred between them and they quickly came to an agreement.

"I guess that makes sense," Zach admitted out loud.

Zorian reached into his pocket and retrieved a metal watch from it. Using a quick alteration spell, he melted the portion of the casing and shaped it into a replica of the imperial ring before handing it over to Ibak.

"Tell them to hand this over to the high priest as our response," Zorian said.

"He'll understand," Zach added.

Ibak raised his eyebrow at them but did as he was told. The sulrothum priest hesitantly accepted the ring, turning it in his chitinous hands. He seemed rather dubious about the explanation he

was given, staring at both Zach and Zorian with his large faceted eyes in a searching manner, antennae nervously twitching in all directions.

After a while, he carefully placed the replica ring in one of the many leather pouches hanging off his body and nodded to them in a very human manner. He then waved towards his bodyguards, signaling they were done here. Apparently he realized this was all he would be getting out of them. A few minutes later the entire sulrothum group lifted into the air again and rapidly flew away in the same direction they came from.

The humans silently watched their retreat for a while, before Ibak decided to speak up.

"You brats are too damn mysterious about everything," he grouched. "I don't even know why I agreed to this."

"You're getting paid handsomely for this," Zach pointed out.

"Yet I'm still starting to regret this," Ibak said. He looked towards the sulrothum settlement in the distance. "Incidentally, there is another group of sulrothum incoming. This time for the settlement we were going to visit before we got interrupted by this one."

Zorian looked towards the settlement and noticed that Ibak was correct. The local sulrothum did not dare interrupt the ziggurat tribe emissaries while they were talking to Zorian and others, but now that they were gone, they seemed to be hurriedly assembling their own emissary group to intercept them.

"Are we still going to talk to them about allying against the ziggurat tribe?" Ibak asked.

"I don't see why not," Zach said, shrugging. "There is no guarantee that the high priest will accept our message in good grace. If we thought it would be that simple to get what we want, we wouldn't have started down this path to begin with. We'll keep gathering forces, putting pressure on him while he considers what

to do.”



Neither Zach nor Zorian really thought the high priest would capitulate and hand them the ring without a fight. On the contrary, they felt sure it would make their task of eventually obtaining the ring far harder in this restart. However, on the off chance it did work, it would be pretty much an ideal solution to obtaining the ring in future restarts. Thus, they decided to give it a try anyway.

They didn't expect to be approached by the same emissary group the very next day, inviting them to the ziggurat to talk with the high priest.

Ibak cautioned them against accepting the offer. It was an obvious trap, he said. However, Zach and Zorian did not care. Even if the meeting was just an excuse to ambush them, they still had to go. They were far more powerful than either Ibak or the sulrothum high priest realized, and were unlikely to die. As long as they met the high priest face-to-face and he had the ring on him, they would get what they wanted, one way or another.

Unfortunately, Ibak adamantly refused to follow them into the ziggurat, calling them suicidal fools. Zorian understood the man's attitude. Ibak couldn't possibly know just how capable he and Zach really were, so his concerns were well warranted. However, this didn't make things any less frustrating and the argument was rapidly becoming heated.

The ziggurat tribe emissary calmly observed the argument for a few minutes before casting some sort of spell. Both Zach and Zorian instantly became wary, but it quickly became obvious that the sulrothum priest was casting magic on himself.

The spell was far lengthier and ritualized than what Zorian was used to when dealing with human and aranean mages, involving

nearly a minute of buzzing and gesturing, and at the end of it the sulrothum priest burned a handful of scented materials as some kind of offering to the heavens. An entirely superfluous gesture as far as Zorian could tell, not impacting the spellcasting results at all.

This done, the emissary straightened himself up and faced them again.

"The fight: unnecessary," he declared with a somewhat distorted but perfectly understandable human voice. "Talk: still possible. No need to pressure companion."

Zach and Zorian stared at the sulrothum for a while before Zach spoke up again.

"You could have done this right from the start and you let us talk through a translator all this time?" he asked.

The sulrothum's antenna twitched nervously as he tried to decipher Zach's words.

"He clearly has only a rudimentary knowledge of Ikosian tongue," Ibak said in an exasperated manner. "It makes perfect sense for him to prefer conversing with me, using more familiar hand gestures, than bothering with this."

"My speech: poor," the emissary added. "High priest: much better. Will be enough until we reach temple."

After some more discussion, Zach and Zorian agreed to leave Ibak and followed the sulrothum back to the ziggurat. Despite their worries, they were not attacked at any point in the journey, not even when they entered the ziggurat itself. Instead the emissary dutifully led them through the empty corridors and straight into the temple, where the high priest and his honor guard waited for them.

Zorian was honestly a little surprised. The sulrothum had actually brought them in front of their high priest, just as they had promised. Sure, the room was also packed full of heavily-armed guards and several lesser priests, but it did not seem like they were



walking into an ambush. The sulrothum were tense and agitated, but they did not move to attack them.

The high priest stood proudly in front of the huge sacred fire that served as the heart of the temple. Situated at the top of a large stone dais, the fire illuminated the entire place in dull orange glow. The air was uncomfortably hot and dry, even though Zach and Zorian had spent their time traveling through a scorching desert just before coming here. From his elevated position, the sulrothum high priest silently stared down on them, his multifaceted eyes unblinkingly studying their every move.

A deathly, uncomfortable silence soon descended on the scene. For several minutes, the two sides simply stood in their spots without making a move. Even Zach remained patient and unmoving, reluctant to make the first move.

Finally, the high priest seemed to reach a decision. He reached towards one of his hands and removed a familiar ring from it. He then placed in on his palm and thrust it towards them decisively.

"Take it," he said. His voice was deep and resonant, and echoed dramatically throughout the room.

"Just like that?" Zach asked curiously.

"You do not want it?" the high priest asked.

"We want it," Zach said. "I'm just a little surprised by your behavior."

"I mirror your sentiments, human," the high priest declared. "I, too, am... a little surprised by your behavior. If you wanted the ring, why did you not just come here and ask for it? Why bother with the hostilities?"

Zach looked at him like he was stupid.

"What are you talking about?" Zorian said. "Are you saying you'd have given us the ring if we had simply walked in here and asked you to?"

"Of course," the high priest said. "We are children of angels. What child dares defy its parents?"

"The angels?" repeated Zorian confusingly.

The high priest stared at them silently for a few seconds.

"As I thought," he said, lowering the hand that held the ring. "You do not know."

"No, we really don't," Zach freely admitted. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you tried to contact the angels recently?" the high priest asked.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him. What a ridiculous idea. As if anyone could just contact the angels to have a friendly chat of something. Besides...

"The spirit world cannot be contacted at the moment," Zorian said.

"Ah, so you do know that much at least..." the high priest said, his antennae waving in the air lazily. "Good. Just before the angels fell silent, they graced us with their presence and gave us a warning. They said that in the coming month, a powerful human mage may arrive here and ask for the ring. If that were to happen... we are to simply hand it over without struggle."

Zach and Zorian stayed silent, digesting the explanation. Angels specifically instructed the sulrothum to hand over the ring to them? Well, to the time loop controller, really. To Zach. Did that mean that angels were the ones to give Zach the marker?

It would certainly explain how Zach could have gotten a divine blessing when such things were supposed to be all but extinct in modern times...

"Why would the angels tell you to do such a thing?" Zach frowned.

"I don't know," the high priest said, cocking his head to the side like a curious bird. "You should tell me."

"Well, did they actually give you a description of this 'powerful human mage'?" Zach asked agitatedly. "Did they leave some kind of message for him?"

"No descriptions, no message," the high priest responded curtly. "However, they did assure us not to worry about the loss of the ring. They said... that in the end, the loss would be just a temporary matter."

Before Zach and Zorian could say anything else, the high priest threw the ring at them. Zach caught it in his hand and inspected it. However, that was largely pointless. Zorian could tell through his marker that the ring was genuine, and so could Zach.

"The heavens instruct; the children obey," the high priest stated. "You have what you came here for. You may leave now."

This was apparently the end of the meeting, because then the regular priests soon came to them, and politely but insistently ushered them out of the ziggurat.



Somewhere in the jungles of Blantyrre, not far from the coast, was an unremarkable dirt trail made by the local lizardmen. This was normally a quiet and rarely used road, but today this sleepy peace was shattered by an entire group of humans loudly and messily trudging through the region. Though sheer manpower and powerful magic, they cut down the vegetation that threatened to overgrow the path and continued inexorably towards their destination.

This was Daimen and his personal team looking for rumors about the imperial staff. This time, Zach and Zorian had decided to tag along with them for a while. It had been four days since they had managed to obtain the imperial ring from the sulrothum, and they were still somewhat under the impression of what they had

heard in the ziggurat. They didn't know what to think about the whole incident. Clearly the angels were aware that the time loop was going to be activated and took at least some precautions in regards to that... did that mean they were behind the whole thing?

Zach certainly did not remember even talking to an angel, much less receiving any sort of instructions from them. Of course, it was possible that Red Robe was responsible for that, having erased Zach's memory of that for some reason, but then one couldn't help but ask why they didn't plan for that possibility and leave a message for him through one of their other servants. The ring situation proved they were both capable and willing to make such contingencies when it suited them, so why not for other things as well?

There were no easy answers for that. Even Alanic admitted that this sort of thing did not make much sense to him, though he did not seem to be too disturbed. The angels work in mysterious ways, he said, since they labor under many limitations and restrictions placed on them by the gods. Many times they simply *couldn't* do the logical thing, or even tell you why they are acting the way they do. One just had to have faith that they knew what they were doing and not rely on them too much.

Well, at least this way they had a trivially easy way of recovering the imperial ring...

"See, I told you Princess was the solution!" Zach said, spinning the said ring on his finger.

"This is not how you expected things to go and we both know it," Zorian told him firmly. He looked over to the side where Kirma was fiddling with the brand new divination compass Zorian had made for her. "So? What do you think?"

She didn't answer for a moment, opting to instead cast a quick series of divinations through the device before turning it in her hands a few more times. Like her old one, it was a flower-shaped

and made of metal, but with a much denser array of spell formula. Zorian was pretty sure his work was a massive improvement on what she had been working with up until now, but high level diviners were finicky and what worked for him might not necessarily work for her.

"Very impressive," she finally concluded. "A bit bigger and heavier than I'm used to, but I can work with this. It feels a little weird to accept something this valuable for free, though."

"Free?" Torun scoffed from their side. One of the floating eyeballs that followed him swiveled towards them while Torun simply kept scanning the jungle canopy for something. He had a bad habit of not looking people in the eye while talking to them, letting his floating eyeballs maintain eye contact instead. "He's had all of us searching an entire continent worth of jungle for a straightened piece of wood without having to pay us a single thing. It was about time he started handing out gifts."

"That's not very fair," Kirma protested. "We're also doing this for ourselves, not just for him."

"And I'm paying plenty of money to make this happen," Zorian pointed out.

"Fake time loop money," Torun said dismissively. "Doesn't count."

"Also, why don't I get a gift?" Taiven suddenly asked, having snuck up to them from behind while they were talking. "Seriously, Zorian... you're handing out expensive gifts to strange women, but you don't have anything for your old pal Taiven? Shame on you!"

Zorian looked at her, amused. He'd thought she was still busy gawking at the jungle sights, since this was the first time she had ever stepped foot in one, but apparently she had calmed down a little and decided to seek him out.

Kirma gave Taiven a less friendly look, since she apparently didn't like being labeled a 'strange woman' out of the blue.

"My gift to you is taking you with me to Blantyrre, even though you have no useful skills for the mission and no wilderness survival experience," Zorian told her blandly.

"Eh, I guess that's true," she laughed nervously. "I really do appreciate it, though. Traveling to exotic lands, searching for ancient artifacts... this sort of expedition is exactly what I hoped to one day experience. It's great! It's just too bad I can't put this on my job profile or something."

She was entirely too giddy about the whole thing. On one hand it was kind of annoying to have her dance around the whole group like an excited little girl, on the other hand it kind of made him glad he had agreed to bring her along, since this clearly meant so much to her.

At least she wasn't defenseless. The one time she had walked into a patch of carnivorous plants, she burned them all to ashes before anyone had even realized what had happened. Her inexperience aside, she was a decent combat mage.

Eventually, the group soon reached their destination – a small lizardmen village where they would supposedly find a reclusive sage that knew 'everything' about the history of the region. While the 'everything' was almost certainly an exaggeration, there was probably *some* sort of basis for his reputation, right?

Right.

The village was a humble one, with tiny houses made out of mud and straw. There was a river right next to it, and most of the adult villagers were currently busy tending to their boats, which they dragged onto the shore for easier handling. The children were either shuttling tools and materials between various work groups or chasing each other and play fighting while their parents shouted something vaguely threatening at them. Probably telling them to stop messing around or demanding they get out of the way if they wouldn't help.

Their arrival caused a small commotion in the group, but they were mostly curious rather than wary. Most lizardmen never saw a human in their entire life, Zorian had learned, so they did not know what to expect of them. Since the group was accompanied by lizardmen guides hired in the nearby city-state and no one in the group carried an obvious weapon like a spear or a club, the villagers were not particularly frightened of them.

Annoyingly, this meant that some of the braver children tried to examine them closer or even touch them. One of them specifically picked Zorian as a target, probably because he was one of the shorter humans present, and kept asking him something while poking him.

Lizardmen language sounded nothing like normal lizard hissing. It was more like a high-pitched, warbling bird song. Zorian understood none of it, but by peering into the kids mind and listening to the snickering explanation of their lizardmen guides, he managed to puzzle out that the child was asking him if he was a 'fairy'.

He hated this village already.

In any case, the group eventually set up a small camp just outside the village, with most of the group just idling around while the leaders of the village exchanged gifts with Daimen and went through various ceremonial gestures. The whole procedure was annoyingly lengthy, but apparently necessary. The reclusive sage they wanted to talk with was normally... well, *reclusive*. He wouldn't deign to meet most people, but perhaps if they could convince the village elders to put in a good word for them, he might give them a chance.

Zorian was currently sitting on one of the cut down logs on the outskirts of the village, watching some of the lizardmen children fight the animated mud person he had created out of the ground to distract them from himself. Although the mud

construct had the size and strength comparable to an adult human, the truth was that humans were notably smaller and weaker than lizardmen. Their vaguely crocodilian frames were wider and larger than human ones, and their skin was covered in tough leathery scales. Thus, even though the mud construct's enemies were mere children, it was still being gradually overpowered. This was pretty much how Zorian had intended it to be, however. He didn't really want to hurt the little brats, even if they were loud, grabby and generally annoying.

Not far from him, some enterprising lizardman woman had come to try and peddle her crafts and trinkets to the gathered humans, trying to exchange pottery and necklaces made out of colorful stones for metal tools and fabrics. She was currently 'negotiating' with one of the female members of the group, each of them loudly talking at one another, even though neither spoke the other's language.

He took off his glasses and started obsessively cleaning them. Damn it, when was this damn meeting going to en-

"Why so impatient?" asked a voice beside him. "It is good to sit down from time to time and appreciate the simpler things in life."

His heart skipped a beat when the voice started talking. He turned towards the source of the voice, shocked to find that there was suddenly a strange lizardman sitting next to him. And he did mean 'suddenly'. The lizardman did not register at all on Zorian's mind sense and seemingly materialized out of nowhere when he started talking.

He was also very, very weird-looking. Intricate pattern of blue and white lines was painted over his whole body, and he wore what seemed to be a massive deer skull over the top of his head. A multitude of bone armbands, necklaces and ankle-bands decorated his limbs and neck. Resting horizontally on his lap was a gnarled wooden staff with a huge pearl attached on top of it.



His posture and appearance gave the impression of someone old and worn down – eyes half-closed, scales cracked and faded in places, his posture hunched and drooping – despite that, he inspired a faint feeling of terror in Zorian, who couldn't understand how he had been able to sneak up on him so easily.

"I hear you've been looking for me," the lizardman said. He was speaking fluent Ikosian, which was kind of interesting but way down the list of questions Zorian wanted answered at the moment.

"What? Oh, you're the sage we wanted to speak with," Zorian realized.

"Indeed," the lizardman said, fiddling with one of the bone arm-bands while watching the children play with Zorian's mud construct. "I dislike this kind of attention, so I decided to just meet with one of you and be done with it."

Zorian looked around and realized no one seemed to be paying attention to his conversation with the weird lizardman that had showed up out of nowhere.

"Only you can see and hear me," he said casually.

This was such bullshit.

"Why did you pick me out of everyone else present?" Zorian asked with a small frown.

"I like you," he said. "You took the time to play with the children. Don't you remember what I said earlier? It is good to sit down from time to time and appreciate the simpler things in life."

Zorian looked at him incredulously, not sure if the lizardman was being serious or not. He had only made that toy so the children would let him rest in peace.

"How did you sneak up on me?" Zorian couldn't help but ask.

"I'm old," the lizardman said, tapping the staff in his lap with his scaly, clawed fingers. "Ancient. It's natural to have a couple of secrets."

He did not offer to explain any further and Zorian did not press him.

The staff was probably some kind of divine artifact. Zorian checked it out with his marker, just in case it was the one they were after. It wasn't.

"What did you seek me out for?" the lizardman asked, his half-closed eye focusing more firmly on him.

Zorian quickly described the origin and probable appearance of the staff to the old lizardman. The sage patiently listened to his explanation, saying nothing. He said nothing for nearly fifteen minutes, seemingly lost in thought. Occasionally he whistled to himself softly in the native lizardmen tongue, tapping on his various bone ornaments and drawing some kind of simple geometric diagrams in dirt.

Zorian patiently waited for the lizardman to come to his senses again, not daring to interrupt his musings. Unfortunately, when the sage finally turned to him again, he did not have a favorable answer for him.

"I cannot remember anything that would help you in your quest," the lizardman said, shaking his head sadly. The various bone necklaces hanging from his neck clinked softly at the movement.

Zorian sighed. So much for *that*.

"However..." the lizardman continued, "I have an idea where you might look for more knowledge on the matter, if you feel brave enough. This staff... it is a very valuable thing, yes?"

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"There is a particularly loathsome dragon mage terrorizing our people throughout the entire region and beyond," the sage said. "I don't know her name, but our people refer to her as the Violet-Eyed Disaster, The Covetous One or Typhoon. For centuries she has preyed upon our communities, snatching away

any item that catches her fancy and killing anyone that tried to bar her way. Many important artifacts have been lost to her. If this staff of yours is as important as it seems, she has probably tried to find it and knows a thing or two about its whereabouts. Perhaps... it may already be in her possession."

Zorian gave the lizardman an unamused look. An infamous dragon mage? There were few things in the world more dangerous than that... feeling brave indeed.

Still, the old guy's logic was sound and the idea was worth checking out. Didn't Zach already demonstrate the ability to kill Oganj, who was similarly an infamous dragon mage?

"So what do you—" Zorian began to speak, only to realize the old lizardman was no longer there.

He waved his hand through the air where the sage had been sitting next to him, but hit only empty space.

Groaning audibly, Zorian wandered off to find Zach and Daimen to inform them that arranging the meeting with the sage was no longer necessary.



Zorian woke up with a panicked scream as an endless deluge of ice cold water poured on top of his head as he slept. Stumbling and flailing around in panic, he tried to jump out of bed, but the wet fabric clung to him and made him trip. He tumbled awkwardly to the floor, frantically trying to rub the water out of his eyes while searching for his glasses.

When he had finally come to his senses and looked around, he found Kirielle pressed into a corner of the room by the door, a large bucket clutched tightly in her hands.

There was still water dripping from it onto the floor.

"Kirielle... what the hell are you doing!?" Zorian shouted incredulously.

"I, u-umm..." she stumbled, pacing nervously while clutching the bucket in her hands tightly. "I was trying to make you assume your true form!"

Zorian looked at her like she was crazy.

Actually, scratch that – she *was* crazy!

"True form!?" he asked her. "What the hell are you on about? You just dumped a bucket of cold water on my head in the middle of the night!"

"I read in the book that doppelgangers assume their true forms if you surprise them while they're sleeping," she said. "So, um, if you dump water on them when they're deep asleep, they'll drop their disguise and assume their true form."

Zorian stared at her, unable to believe her explanation.

"You think I'm a face-changer?" Zorian asked her in a calm voice.

"Y-You aren't acting like the Zorian I know," she said while staring at the ground and refusing to look at him. "You have all these friends all of a sudden, you didn't get angry at all when Imaya asked you about Daimen and... you're way too nice to me."

Zorian sighed and ran his hand through his wet hair to get it out of his eyes. He looked at the closed door, confused as to why the entire house hadn't woken up by now because of all the shouting, but then he remembered he had put pretty strong privacy wards on the room.

"If you thought I was a doppelganger, you should have at least gotten someone to back you up when confronting me," Zorian told her.

He made a couple of gestures and pressed his hands against his chest, evaporating most of the water out of his clothes.

"You're too good at magic, too," Kirielle added. "That's another thing that's weird. But, umm... you didn't change forms, so I guess you really are Zorian."

Zorian debated the merits of using an illusion to seemingly morph into some kind of grotesque monster right at that moment, but immediately discarded it as too cruel. As much as he wanted to rage and get back at her, she had good reasons for pulling off this stupid stunt.

He was getting entirely too careless around her, it seemed.

"Yes, I really am Zorian," he told her in an exasperated tone. He took the bucket from her hands and lifted her up before marching back to his bed and plopping her right on top of it.

Right on top of the wet part, that is.

"Why!?" she protested, immediately jumping off the bed and inspecting her suddenly wet behind.

"Punishment," Zorian said pitilessly. "You did say I was too nice to you, no?"

She gave him an angry look but said nothing.

"Anyway," he said. "I suppose I can tell you a little bit about what's going on and why things are so weird right now..."



Time marched on. The search for the staff in Blantyrre, the research on pocket dimensions and other points of interest, the training of people with the aid of Black Rooms and nigh-limitless resources... as the restarts started to accumulate, these and other projects started to gradually bear fruit.

Just like that, another five restarts had passed.



## VICTORY

It was a peaceful summer day in the Great Northern Forest. The vegetation was vibrantly green and thriving, colorful flowers covered the forest meadows, the songbirds were seemingly competing to see which one of them was louder and shriller than the next, and strange insects were flying through the air.

While the vast expanse of trees that covered the northern portion of the Altazian continent was usually portrayed as a dark and foreboding place, crawling with dangerous monsters and hidden dangers, the truth is that the area could be quite beautiful and breathtaking. One just had to be strong enough to survive the challenges and travel the land unchecked.

Zorian, Taiven and Kael were definitely strong enough. Not just because Zorian was present in the group, either. Taiven and Kael had gone through five whole loops by now, each of which included additional time in the Black Rooms. They'd had nearly an entire year to improve their magic, backed by nearly unlimited resources and top-tier tutors. Even Kael, who spent most of that time focusing on alchemy, was now capable of at least defending himself from common threats. As for Taiven, she was a combat magic specialist to begin with. Her power was probably equal to an average professional combat mage at this point. She even had

real combat experience, since she insisted on fighting the Ibasan invaders at the end of every restart and often participated in minor battles that Daimen's team stumbled upon while exploring Blantyre. Even if Zorian decided to stand back and let the other two fend for themselves, there was very little in the forest around them that could threaten them.

Currently, the three of them were resting on a large boulder in one of the forest clearings and playing a game of cards. It was just something to pass the time while they rested their feet. They had been wandering the forest for hours before stumbling upon the clearing, and it looked so perfect for a temporary camp they decided to take a bit of a break. They didn't intend to stay here for very long.

As Zorian pondered his next move, he felt Taiven 'subtly' try to take a peek at his cards with a spying spell. Zorian was proud for her for expanding her horizons beyond flashy combat magic, but that didn't stop him from reflexively crushing her magic into nothingness before giving her a knowing smile. She pouted for a moment, before remembering she was supposed to act like she didn't know anything and schooling her expression into one of indifference.

Kael silently observed the scene from the side before shaking his head in amusement, probably guessing what had happened. Zorian suspected Taiven had tried to use the same trick on Kael as well, though he had no idea if the morlock boy had managed to stop her, or even noticed her cheating. Then again, Kael didn't seem to take the card game very seriously. He seemed to be playing mindlessly, uncaring of how likely he is to win. Zorian supposed this sort of attitude made perfect sense, since this was supposed to be just a nice relaxing game with no stakes, but it faintly annoyed him anyway.

Zorian himself didn't try to cheat, of course. That would suck



the joy out of the whole activity, since it would be so trivial for him to succeed. He simply immersed himself in the game while listening to the sounds of the wilderness around them. His legs throbbed in pain, unused to the level of activity he was engaging in, but he had kind of gotten used to that by now. Even with the aid of potions and mind magic, the beginning of every restart involved Zorian being in a constant state of dull pain because he lived far more actively than he had before the time loop. Hopefully that wouldn't have any long-term mental effects on him once he was out of the time loop...

He was broken out of his thoughts by a loud crunching sound. Looking to the side, he saw Kael with a large yellow root stuffed in his mouth.

Taiven gave Kael a strange, possibly disapproving look.

"What?" Kael complained, chewing loudly. The sound it produced reminded Zorian of someone eating a raw carrot.

"How can you eat that thing?" she asked him.

"It's really tasty," he told her matter-of-factly.

"It's a wild root you washed in a nearby river," she protested. "That cannot possibly be safe or hygienic. Plus, I can smell it from here and it doesn't smell like something you should be eating..."

Kael gave her a challenging look before biting into the root again and chewing even louder.

Zorian pretended to study his cards while inwardly chuckling in amusement. Personally, he wasn't worried about Kael in the slightest. Although the morlock was the weakest of the three in terms of combat strength, he was the person who was most at home in the forest. He had been working and living in this very environment ever since he was a child, and doubtlessly knew exactly what was safe to eat and how.

Taiven had gotten relatively close to Kael after they had both received a temporary marker, since the two of them were arguably

the closest in age and relative skill among the new loopers, so she probably knew that too. Thus, she simply threw her hands in the air with a huff, accidentally showing them a glimpse of the cards she was holding, and dropped the issue.

Zorian took note of her cards and changed his tactics accordingly. This wasn't cheating, of course. Taking advantage of your opponent's mistakes was only natural. It wasn't his problem that he could memorize her entire hand flawlessly after seeing it for only a fraction of a second...

After another fifteen minutes of chatting, playing cards, eating roots and berries and lazing around, the three of them reluctantly decided to move on. After all, this whole expedition originated from Kael's desire to search for rare alchemical ingredients in the depths of the Great Northern Forest. This wasn't really some critical task that had to be done, and the three of them were mostly using it as an excuse to relax and socialize, but they did intend to seriously search for things Kael was after.

For the next half an hour or so, Zorian followed after Kael casting divination after divination and occasionally taking over the minds of forest birds in order to scout the area around them. Taiven also utilized divinations, having achieved some measure of expertise in the field over the various restarts, while Kael mostly relied on his own two eyes. Considering his extensive experience in searching for magical plants, however, he probably still saw and understood far more than Zorian and Taiven did.

Every once in a while the morlock boy would inspect some random stump or boulder, occasionally picking up some other magical plant that wasn't on their list, but which he apparently also considered worthwhile, and occasionally just stared at them meaningfully while pondering some mysterious issue. The backpacks the three of them wore had all been made by Zorian, and were considerably larger on the inside than they appeared, but Zorian

estimated Kael's backpack was already starting to get full from the various plants, jars full of worms and beetles, and even some colorful stones that seemed pretty mundane to Zorian's eyes. Even if they failed to find the things they were searching for, Kael certainly intended to make the most out of this expedition, that's for sure.

Relaxing times like these had become increasingly rare in these last five restarts. Everyone was constantly busy with something, whether it was following some plan, searching for things that could help them, experimenting with exotic magics or simply training their skills. This was especially true in this particular restart, since this was the last restart for the temporary loopers. If they could not figure out a way to modify the temporary markers before the end of the restart, they would lose... well, *everything*.

Sure enough, eventually Kael and Taiven could not help but bring up the issue that was constantly in the back of everyone's mind these days.

"This is the end, isn't it?" Kael suddenly said.

The other two gave him conflicted looks. There was no need to ask him what he meant by that.

"Tell us honestly, Zorian... what are the chances we can figure out how to adjust our markers before this month runs out?" Kael continued, seeing how he had their attention.

Zorian suppressed a sigh. Temporary markers... they had spent almost a year studying them, if one factored in the time spent in Black Rooms, and in that time they had made significant progress. They managed to map the general structure of the markers and figure out what many of the pieces did. They compared these markers to the larger, more complete markers embedded in Zach and Zorian. They placed and removed temporary markers on random people to test possible modifications and see what happened. They found out that, yes, the markers really did contain

components made out of divine energies... and they also found a way to deal with that. Through several ruinously expensive deals with Quatach-Ichl and innumerable destroyed divine artifacts, they managed to create methods to detect and crudely manipulate strands of divine energy inside their markers. Not enough to manipulate them as they wished, but enough to tear out some portions of the structure and change how this divine foundation interacts with more normal magic that surrounded it.

It wasn't enough. Despite their best efforts, the solution remained frustratingly out of reach.

What bothered Zorian most about this was that he didn't think the problem was impossible. They were making good progress. He felt they were definitely on the right track. He felt that this was something that could definitely be solved in time.

Could they figure out a way to prolong the temporary marker in one more restart? No. Not even three would be enough. But maybe if they had five or six... if their soul magic was more developed... if they had easier access to the imperial crown resting on Quatach-Ichl's head... if they had learned how to sense divine energies sooner...

If. If, if, if...

"No," Zorian finally admitted. "There is no chance at all."

All three of them walked in silence for a while.

"I am actually not that upset," Taiven eventually said. "The idea that I could just suddenly disappear at the end of the month was terrifying at first, but I've gotten used to it by now. I even died in one of the restarts."

Zorian vividly remembered that one. Watching Taiven get decapitated by a war troll was strangely upsetting, even though he knew she would be fine in the next restart.

"I mean, I don't *want* to disappear at the end of the month," Taiven continued, "but we've done everything we could and it was

fun while it lasted. If this is how it has to be, then so be it."

"Indeed," Kael said. "Besides, if I understood Zorian correctly, there are only 13 more restarts left at this point. A little more than a year. We're not losing all that much."

"Both of you talk like you think you're dead for sure," Zorian said. "Have some faith, okay? Modifying the temporary markers is probably a failure, but the possibility of exiting the time loop still remains. This was our fallback plan if we couldn't modify the markers, remember?"

"Oh?" Taiven perked up. "That's still an option?"

"Of course," said Zorian. "What do you think we have been doing all this time?"

"Well I don't know," Taiven said with a grin. "That mean old witch keeps complaining about you 'wasting your time on distractions' and 'taking too many breaks from your duties', so..."

"Silverlake thinks everyone should be a tireless golem except her," Zorian said with a derisive snort. "It's not like she never takes any breaks or tinkers with new potions that have no connection to anything urgent."

"I thought that whole project was still shrouded in uncertainty, though," Kael pointed out.

"Well yeah," Zorian reluctantly admitted. "We have yet to actually try things, so it's all very theoretical. However, just because we are uncertain about some things doesn't mean the attempt is bound to fail. It's hard to put actual numbers on things, but I think there is at least a 70% chance that we could transport people's souls into the real world, and 30% or so that we could successfully open a dimensional bridge that would let us physically step out of the time loop."

The two of them gave him complex looks that he could not interpret. It was a little hard to accurately discern their emotions these days, since they had both learned to protect their minds and

emotions with unstructured mental defenses. In fact, this was something that *all* temporary loopers decided to invest time in, once they realized the extent of Zorian's mental powers. Even the ones that already had some level of unstructured mental defenses promptly decided they were insufficient and needed to be strengthened as much as possible.

Zorian understood their reasoning. It was just like that old saying: trust your neighbor, but lock the door. Even if you trusted someone to be a moral and principled person, it was better not to tempt them with easy opportunities. Thus, he did not take such things against them. In fact, he encouraged it. Considering aranea explicitly considered anyone with an unshielded mind fair game for psychic invasion and that they were working closely with several groups of them, getting some level of mental protection was just plain common sense.

"If the only option to exit the time loop is to steal our original bodies from our past selves, I would rather stay here and forget everything," Kael said, shaking his head. "Additionally, I only care about physically leaving if it allows me to take Kana with me. If not, I'd rather stay with her till the end."

Zorian opened his mouth to say something, but then realized that it probably didn't matter that Kana doesn't have the temporary marker. If they physically left the time loop, every person was as good as any other.

Would others also want to bring family members with them? That... could get kind of complicated.

"Err, I might have gone for the soul exit if it was actually an option," Taiven said hesitantly. "I mean, I feel sorry for old Taiven but let's get real here... she is kind of an idiot."

Zorian's lips twitched into a beginning of a smile, but he suppressed it.

"As it is, I am not actually capable of taking this way out,"

Taiven said. "I'm not even good enough to survive Silverlake's soul perception granting potion, never mind possessing my old body. So physically crossing over is the only option for me, really."

Zorian nodded slowly. Truthfully, this was true for most people. People who had zero experience with soul magic would find it impossible to get good enough at it to survive the soul transferal and successfully possess their body. People who were well versed in soul magic, even before the time loop, would probably be annihilated by the originals if they tried to possess them. Aside from Zorian, only Kael, Xvim and Lukav had a good chance of pulling that off. And Xvim, much like Kael, had already ruled out the idea 'stealing his own life away from himself.

"Physical exit is what we're aiming for, anyway," Zorian said. "Transferring souls is more of a last resort than anything."

"Yes, but you admitted yourself that chances of success aren't too high. Not even a coin toss," Taiven noted. "So yeah, there is still hope... but it's nothing to get excited about. Hell, you're probably putting a positive spin on things to cheer us up!"

"No, not at all," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I was actually trying to be conservative with my estimates. I really think this could work."

"There is one thing that's been bothering me about all this," Kael said. "We've spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way out of the time loop, but did you think about what we're going to do if we succeed with this? If we physically step into the outside world with all our skills and knowledge?"

"Stop the invasion from destroying Cyoria?" Taiven tried, raising her eyebrow at him.

"Well, yes. But what about afterwards?" Kael asked. "You have an entire life in front of you, but there is already someone living your life for you. Are you going to avoid your friends and family and set up a new life for yourself elsewhere? Or are you going

to do your best to insert yourself into your old life and damn the consequences? What if someone reports you to the authorities and they come to drag you off? How would you explain your presence and identity?"

Taiven squirmed uncomfortably.

"I don't know," she admitted, biting her lip. "Honestly, I try not to think about things like that. I'm kind of impulsive, so even if I reach a resolution here, I will probably just break it when I actually get there. So there's no point. I can only hope I'll be able to figure something out when the time comes. I don't want to ruin the other Taiven's life, but... I don't know. What about you two?"

"I'm fairly disconnected from most people," Kael shrugged. "So long as I have my own Kana, everything is fine. I guess I would deliver my alchemy notes to my original and then wander off to do my own thing. But I'm not sure very many of us are like that. Silverlake and Alanic, maybe. The rest? There are probably at least a few of them that would fight bitterly for a piece of their old life."

"Honestly? I don't think I could stay away," Zorian admitted. "I'd try to 'reform' my original into something better. Teach him a few things, nudge him into getting closer with Kirielle, things like that. A bit manipulative, but it would come along with personal magic instruction and other help so I think it could work. I wouldn't try to steal his life away, though. If there was no place for me in my old life, I would find something else to amuse myself with."

"As I said, I'm not sure everyone would be so serene about it," Kael pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," Zorian nodded. "Zach and I purposely didn't raise the issue to the group, since we felt there was no way to reach any kind of official agreement on this. No matter the conclusion, someone would disagree. Possibly violently. The entire group might even fragment, if someone feels very strongly about the op-



tion that was chosen or *not* chosen. It's better to keep everyone focused on the immediate problem and worry about these things later."

Despite such efforts, however, they already had a couple of casualties. Two restarts ago, a pair of professors Xvim included into the group decided they couldn't handle the existential implications of the time loop and asked for their temporary markers to be removed so they could forget everything. Additionally, one of the aranea from the Luminous Advocates became so hysterical and violent that the other aranea asked for her to be stripped of her marker and ejected from the group. Zorian wasn't sure what had caused that, but since the other Luminous Advocates mysteriously acquired soul perception around that time, he suspected it was a product of some secret procedure they had collectively performed on themselves. In the interest of not starting a fight, though, he decided not to pursue the issue.

With this being the last restart in which the temporary markers would remain effective, the pressure on people would only increase.

Zorian really hoped nobody would crack too badly before the end.



Spells could only persist for so long. Even the most stable spell, supplied with an ample amount of mana, would fall apart in a couple of hours if not anchored to something. Thus, enhancement rituals had a problem. They aimed to place the user under a permanent magic effect or give them an innate magic ability, but that meant they had to anchor the spell to something to prevent it from decaying.

This was a great problem. Anchoring the magic to one's flesh by inscribing sigils into the skin was ill advised. Forcing large quan-

tities of mana to flow through living flesh, even if it was one's personal mana, was usually unhealthy in the long term. Additionally, the resulting anchor was easy to break by physically harming the sigils, which was likely to result in dire consequences for the user. Abrupt, uncontrolled spell failures were dangerous enough in normal circumstances – when the spell was embedded into one's very flesh and bones, the grisly result could be easily imagined.

Fortunately, there was a solution. Far in the distant past, some nameless mage had discovered how to repurpose a portion of their mana reserves into a spell anchor for the enhancement ritual. Since one's mana reserves were kept naturally stable by the soul, any magic fashioned from them would also be kept stable. The only problem was that since the anchor was literally made out of one's mana reserves, the caster would permanently have less mana at their disposal. The mana used in the construction of the anchor would never recover, since it was still there in the caster's reserves, being stabilized by their soul along with the rest of it.

There was one additional issue, however. Even though an enhancement ritual could grant the user a magical ability, it was ultimately just fancy transformation magic. It never expired, it was almost impossible to dispel and the user had very fine control over it, but they would not get the same instinctive affinity with it that the base creature had.

This was where blood magic came into play. It allowed a mage to anchor the spell not only to their mana reserves, but to their life force as well. The resulting connection was deep and potent – potent enough that the user's descendants had a chance to inherit the ability in question as a bloodline. The innate understanding of the base creature was also transferred over to the new user, allowing them to use it almost as well as someone who had been born with it right from the start.

Enhancement rituals were dangerous. Poorly executed, they could kill the user or permanently ruin them as a mage. More than one mage had completely locked down their mana reserves or transformed them into something that ripped them to shreds from the inside.

Blood magic rituals were dangerous. The user had to cut complicated patterns into their flesh and bleed themselves in order to stir up their vitality and coax their life force into appropriate structures. Unless one knew exactly what they were doing, it was very easy to die of blood loss, or worse.

Zach and Zorian combined the two anyway. They started small, but moved on quickly to more ambitious projects due to time constraints. They made mistakes, but none of them too serious... and any lingering consequences were washed away at the end of every restart. With the help of Kael, they tracked down and talked with surviving morlock blood mages scattered across the continent, seeking advice and tricks of the trade. They practiced with their new abilities and took note of which one worked best for them and why.

Now, with time running out and this restart being so critical, they decided to immediately put those skills into practice. They performed the relevant rituals at the very beginning of the restart. A week and a half later, when their mana reserves and life force mostly stabilized, they gathered Xvim, Silverlake and Daimen for a project that would test their dimensionalism skills to the limit. Something that would prove that they were capable of eventually creating the gateway out of the loop.

They were going to create a miniature copy of the palace orb.

Currently, Zach, Zorian, Silverlake, Xvim and Daimen were all standing on the edge of a massive spell formula circle, equidistant from each other. They had spent the past several hours embedding the spell circle into the ground of this place, followed by

setting up several complicated wards that had to be layered just right for the whole thing to work correctly. Now they were resting and adjusting their minds for the final task in front of them.

There was a luxurious house sitting in the center of the circle, surrounded by a large garden and ornamental trees. It stood in a fairly isolated location and Zach and Zorian actually bought the entire place, so they shouldn't be interrupted by anyone. Silverlake complained about the amount of money that had been wasted on this, when they could have simply 'stolen' a house from someone or picked a random patch of ground, but Zach didn't want to hear it. He wanted his own pocket mansion, and he wanted it to really be his.

In any case, the idea behind their current project was a little different than that behind other pocket dimension creation projects. Previously, Zach and Zorian had focused on isolating a patch of space with a dimensional membrane and then inflating it to desired volume. Now they would be forcibly isolating a large patch of land from the rest of the world, compressing it and then attaching it to a prepared anchor object. In this case, that was a ball of magically-reinforced glass, for maximum resemblance to the palace orb.

This was similar to the method Silverlake used to hide her home from outside scrutiny, but harder. Silverlake simply compressed an area to make it seemingly 'disappear', but it remained connected to the rest of the world. That made her pocket dimension immovable, but easier to actually create. What they were doing now, however, would require them to effectively tear out a piece of reality and put it into a portable box for their own use.

The house and its surrounding land were not nearly as big as the space inside the palace orb. Despite that, attempting this required all five of them to join hands and perform a group magic ritual, employing every trick and advantage they could think of... and they still weren't sure if they could pull it off. Zorian didn't

even want to think what it took to create something like the actual palace orb.

Looking around, Zorian saw that the others were well rested and ready to start. He took a deep breath and stepped forward. Five simulacrum followed after him.

Zorian had long since cracked the method that Princess used to coordinate her eight heads as one entity, and was now capable of using it with his simulacrums. It was a fascinating thing, connecting multiple viewpoints and thought-streams into one unified perspective, but it did have an important limitation: it could only be used when Zorian and his simulacrums were broadly doing the same thing. Such as fighting the same enemy or cooperating on the same task. If he was reading books in Cyoria and his simulacrums were scattered all over the world, each doing their own thing, there would be no connecting points to bind their consciousness together and the hydra method couldn't be used. But for the task at hand, it was just perfect.

He then activated the magic ability he had acquired through the enhancement ritual. He had acquired it from the humble tunneler toad, whose ability to perceive and navigate warped space had seemed most useful for his purposes. It wasn't the best ability he could have gotten, but it was relatively cheap and worked well enough for Zorian's purposes. Anchoring it to his mana reserves robbed him of roughly 8% of his maximum mana, which pained him, but did not affect him *too* badly.

Finally, he activated the mental enhancements he had crafted over the past year or so, helped by numerous aranea experts and even some human researchers. Many of his simulacrums paid with their short lives to test these enhancements, and the end result was appropriately impressive for something made after so much sacrifice. His thoughts immediately became clearer and more focused, his integration with his simulacrums deepened and his ability to

calculate and measure things at a glance became superhuman.

Around him, he saw the others prepare themselves as well.

Zach was leaning back and forth on his feet, humming some sort of tune to himself. He looked relaxed and careless, but there was a distant look in his eyes, as if he wasn't really all there. His choice for the creature to use an enhancement ritual on was the voidsoul deer. Zach seemed to really like its ability to alter trajectories of things in the space around it, since that meant the ability was useful in combat, as well as for things like this. It was a fairly expensive ability in terms of mana reserves, but Zach was easily able to afford it. Zorian could feel the space around Zach ripple and warp as he flexed his new ability in preparation of the task at hand.

Daimen's presence was a bit of a surprise. Before the time loop, Daimen hadn't even known how to cast the gate spell, never mind how to use pocket dimension magic. However, his reputation wasn't for nothing. With a year of time and access to all the restricted material and knowledgeable tutors he could wish for, Daimen had experienced a meteoric rise in his dimensionalism skills. It reignited Zorian's jealousy a bit to see him blaze through things so easily, given that Zorian had to try so hard to get where Daimen currently was, but objectively speaking, it was a good thing to have another capable dimensionalist on their hand. It increased their chances of success immensely.

Daimen had also chosen to dabble in enhancement rituals along with Zach and Zorian – the only one of the temporary loopers that dared to do so. He picked a phase spider that Zach and Zorian were lucky to track down in one of the restarts. Their signature ability, which was literally a power to create small pocket dimensions, was bound to be very useful today.

Silverlake had stabbed six gold-plated stakes into the ground around her and was mumbling something to herself and making

some sort of strange finger gestures. They didn't look like spell-casting gestures. It kind of reminded Zorian of Kirielle trying to perform math with the help of her fingers, except that he knew damn well that Silverlake was frighteningly good at performing calculations in her head. Her growth in skill over the past five restarts was difficult to judge, as she often did things on her own, and gave bullshit explanations when people tried to question her about it. Still, her skill at dimensionalism and soul magic made her one of the key people in the group, and little could be done about it.

Xvim simply stood on the edge of the spell formula circle, staring forward with arms crossed behind his back. He gave off a silent and stoic air, as if the problem in front of them was no big deal at all. Zorian didn't think his magic had improved all that much in the past five restarts, but then again he had already been a highly-capable archmage before the time loop had started. At his level, every improvement took a lot of time and effort as one started hitting their personal limits and their magic plateaued.

With a silent signal, the five of them began casting.

Glowing filaments of light sprang from Zorian's hands, and from the hands of his simulacrum, crisscrossing into a dome of light over the entire area, before seemingly sinking into thin air and disappearing. Silverlake fired pitch black beams from her fingers at seemingly random spots in the air, causing flashes of red light to burst out on the invisible boundary, while Zach and Xvim created pale white rings that spun lazily around the outer perimeter. Space warped and twisted, distorting the house and its surroundings like hot summer air and causing strange currents and whirlpools to be created in the sky.

A spatial membrane eventually sprang up around the house, transparent and spherical. Its surface rippled and undulated like it was made from water. Strands of inky blackness occasionally

radiated from points on its surface, as if reality itself was cracking apart and letting everyone see the terrible void that existed beneath everything. These were hurriedly sealed by the five participants, disappearing into flashes of rainbow light before springing back anew somewhere else. A miniature cyclone whipped about in the air, kicking up dust and pelting the participants with leaves and small stones.

The process took hours and hours. Five times they had to rest to recover their strength, but thankfully the ritual was designed specifically with that in mind. They knew they would not have enough mana to finish the project in one go, so small breathers were planned in advance.

Eventually the process reached a critical point. The spatial membrane turned completely opaque and pitch black, its surface churning wildly like a pot of boiling water. Cracks spread out from the ground as the entire area was ripped out of the surrounding landscape, small tremors threatening to knock down the participants – something that would surely disrupt the casting at a critical moment and ruin everything. In the end everyone kept their balance, but the momentary distraction caused lances of spatial cracks to scythe through the area, reducing trees into chunks and utterly destroying one of Zorian's simulacrum. He managed to compensate for the loss, however, and the casting continued.

The spherical black membrane started to repeatedly expand and then collapse inward, looking almost like a giant black heart. This process continued for several minutes, but if one observed the whole process carefully they would notice that the sphere was gradually getting smaller and smaller. It was being repeatedly compressed into an ever decreasing volume.

When the sphere had reached half of its original size, a fundamental change occurred and the whole area of space seemed to collapse inward, as if it was about to be sucked into a tiny point in the



center. Zach reacted immediately, throwing a large glass ball into the center of the collapsing mass while the rest scattered sixteen stone stabilizers into the surrounding space. Each of the stones was a cube densely covered in spell formula, and they immediately floated into a dense spherical formation around the black mass.

In only a few seconds, the black mass was completely sucked into the glass ball and everything was silent and still. The strange lights and spatial distortions disappeared. The area inside the spell formula circle had completely disappeared, leaving behind a circular crater where the house and garden once stood. In the center of that crater floated an innocuous-looking glass globe, with sixteen stone cubes lazily orbiting around it.

Then, with a deafening boom, all of the stone cubes shattered and fell to the ground. The glass globe was still fine, however – the stabilizers had sacrificed themselves to give that final push for the whole process and firmly attach the newly-made 'pocket mansion' to its portable anchor.

If one looked closely, they would be able to see a miniature, life-like house suspended in the center of the globe. It even appeared intact, which was great. There was a nontrivial chance for everything inside the globe to end up getting wrecked by the stresses of the creation process, if they were not channeled properly.

Complete success.

Everyone gathered around the globe to gawk at it and admire their handiwork. Zach, Zorian, Silverlake and Daimen were in visibly high spirits following the success of such a difficult project. Only Xvim managed to retain his reserved attitude, though Zorian felt he still looked faintly pleased with himself.

"You know, I just realized I have no idea how you intend to power this thing," Daimen said. "Surely this thing requires a great deal of mana to keep stable."

"We placed a permanent miniature gate inside the house,"

Zach said. "It connects to a cavern deep in the Dungeon, sucking up mana to keep both the gate and the pocket dimension operating. It's too tiny for the dungeon denizens to pass through, but mana can be collected just fine."

"Oh? You cracked Quatach-Ichl's permanent gates?" Daimen asked, surprised.

Silverlake puffed herself up, looking pretty smug. Her contributions were pretty crucial in cracking the method Quatach-Ichl used to make his gate stabilization frame. Hers and, oddly enough, that of the Filigree Sages. Their method of creating spell formula anchors had some surprising similarities to the methods Quatach-Ichl used in his construction of the stabilization frames.

"Yes, we finally managed to replicate the lich's methods," confirmed Zorian. "It has limited usefulness to us as a method of transport, though, since it takes a while to make those. It's more convenient to just use my simulacrum as mobile gate creators."

"We have made a great deal of progress," Xvim spoke up. "This globe is a perfect representation of that. However, I wonder if that is really enough to let us make a gateway leading out of the time loop."

Everyone shared a look for a moment as they considered the issue.

"We have a chance," Zorian said.

"The chance is too low for my liking," Silverlake grumbled, before Zorian could say anything else. Her good mood seemed to deflate a little. "If we had another six months..."

"But we don't. We won't be able to crack the temporary markers in less than a month," Zach told her. "Why even waste time thinking about that?"

"Well it's easy for you and Zorian to be so relaxed about that," Silverlake sneered at him. "You'll still be there, even if this all fails, won't you?"

"You are oversimplifying things and you know it," Zorian said, frowning. "The protections on the temporary markers are such that we won't be able to place temporary markers on you for the next six restarts. We have no hope at all of pulling this off without you. Thus, we would be forced to wait until the very last moment to make our next attempt... and if that fails, we are lost. Do you honestly think Zach and I are comfortable with that? We are just as invested in the success of this project as you are."

"Hmph," Silverlake scoffed. "*Almost* as invested, I suppose. But not quite as much."

"What do you think they should have done, then?" Xvim asked, giving her a knowing look.

"They should have experimented more freely with temporary markers and people's souls. There are plenty of people in the world that nobody cares about, and it's not like the damage would have been permanent," Silverlake said, looking Xvim straight in the eye. Her voice was loud and clear, but perfectly calm. "They should have given Quatach-Ichl a temporary marker and recruited him into the group."

Ugh.

"Both ideas were already discussed and soundly rejected, and not just by Zach and Zorian," Xvim pointed out.

"We were already taking a huge risk by dealing with the lich as much as we did," Zorian said. "Even a minor mistake could easily burn all of our remaining restarts away."

"The old bag of bones would be more likely to ruin us than help us," Zach added. "Without us, his plan probably succeeds and Cyoria is leveled to the ground. Why would he want to risk that by helping us escape?"

"Bah!" Silverlake spat. As in, she literally spat on the ground to express her frustration. "I can see when I'm outvoted. Besides, it's too late to change things now... though I still say our chances

are too low? Surely there is something more that could be done?"

"Well, you did say we just need more time," Daimen pointed out. "If the project to turn the palace orb into a Black Room succeeds as well as expected, we should get another couple of months in a time dilation room."

"We already turned the palace room into a time dilation chamber two times by now," Silverlake pointed out. "It was impressive, but the effectiveness was little better than that of a regular Black Room. It just had larger volume. Why expect this attempt to be any different?"

"Well, if Krantin and his staff are to be believed—" began Daimen.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Silverlake cut him off. "In the meantime, I have another idea..."

Although Silverlake could be very abrasive and unpleasant, her skill at dimensionalism was undeniable and many of her ideas were quite insightful. Some of them were even perfectly ethical and legal, shockingly enough.

Thus, the group eventually returned to Cyoria, peacefully discussing various plans along the way...



The search for the imperial staff was long and frustrating. For a long time, they didn't have even the slightest clue how to even narrow down their search. Zorian was almost willing to write off the entire endeavor as a lost cause and focus entirely on the exit portal project. However, Daimen felt it was beneath his pride to let the expedition end in failure, and eventually found a clue.

One of their earliest leads for the staff was a dragon mage called Violet-Eyed Disaster, or just Violeteye for short. However, she was almost as hard to track down as the staff itself, and there were

plenty of other candidates around, so they didn't focus on her in particular. In time, however, a curious fact became obvious – Violeteye seemed capable of instantaneously teleporting herself across vast distances. There was simply no other way to explain how she could get around so quickly and evade pursuers. Dragons were fast flyers, but her speed was unearthly. This idea was reinforced when Daimen and his group caught sight of her and pursued, only for her to disappear when they briefly lost sight of her.

This was significant, since dragon mages had huge issues trying to use teleportation. Dimensional magic was nearly unknown among dragons, and the sort of teleportation Violeteye was performing would be shocking even in a human mage.

She was most likely using some kind of divine artifact to pull it off. And by following after her and repeatedly provoking her, Zach and Zorian eventually confirmed it was a simple, unadorned staff.

Deep in the jungles of Blantyrre, atop a small mountain, a fierce battle was raging between Zach and Zorian on one side and Violeteye the dragon mage on the other. Shattered remains of Zorian's combat golems littered the mountainside, and several large craters lay scattered around the place. Smoke and dust covered the skies.

Roaring in outrage, Violeteye swooped down on Zach's position, opening her jaws and breathing fire at him. The jet of flame was unnaturally hot and concentrated, even for dragon breath – a white-hot incineration beam that set nearby bushes on fire just by passing near them. Without flinching, Zach placed an opaque black shield made out of spatial forces in front of him. The incineration breath sank into the shield and harmlessly disappeared, as if it had never existed in the first place.

Moments later, he was hit by a gust of magically-enhanced wind. It looked rather ethereal, a gentle rainbow glow suffusing

it, but the moment it reached Zach it caused the black shield to collapse into nothingness and almost sent him tumbling down the mountain side.

A trio of stone cylinders flew in the air towards the dragon, shining with dangerous blue light. She managed to knock them away from her before they exploded, but it disrupted her charge and allowed Zach to regain his balance.

She sent a quick glare at Zorian, who was standing in the distance with a gun-like cylinder-launcher in his hands, before judging Zach a greater threat and smashing her tail towards him like a flail.

Zach didn't try to dodge or put some distance between them. He merely cast another spell, causing huge hands of stone to erupt from the ground beneath her, reaching towards her.

Her eyes narrowed imperceptibly, but she continued her attack, trusting her strength and vast reserves of magic. She was justified in her confidence when trading blow for blow with a human, since they could never match a dragon in terms of toughness.

However, her attack... missed.

Her eyes widened in surprise, not understanding what had happened. This wasn't the sort of rookie mistake she could ever make.

If one had looked really closely, though, one could have seen space itself subtly shift around Zach just before the tail slap had descended upon him...

The stone hands closed around the dragon, pulling her downward. She manifested huge ectoplasmic claws to crush them into powder, but the moment of weakness was enough for Zorian's simulacrum, who immediately teleported into the vicinity. Just as she was about to turn her ectoplasmic claws towards the simulacrum, her mind swam in sudden vertigo and her vision grew blurry. When she finally regained her clarity of mind, she found a

glittering crystalline spear flying at her, courtesy of Zach. Arcs of red light sparked dangerously on its surface, promising pain and disintegration to anything hit by the spear.

Invading the mind of a dragon was not an easy thing to do... but it was within Zorian's capabilities, if only for a moment.

Roaring, Violeteye conjured an omnidirectional sound wave that hurled all of the simulacrum away from her like a bunch of rag dolls and destroyed all nearby obstacles. The spear continued to fly, but it was knocked off course and only glanced off her flank, tearing out a chunk of her flesh but largely leaving her intact.

She launched herself in the air and tried to flee. She didn't teleport away like she had the first few times Zach and Zorian had tried to corner her, presumably because the staff she was using had run out of charges by now. However, she was still a dragon, and few things could catch her in flight if she fled at maximum speed.

Zach and Zorian were nearly out of mana by this point, and Zorian was starting to run out of bombs and other items, too. Even Zach, with his immense mana reserves, could not compare to the stamina of the dragon. They could chase her down, but if she kept stalling and disengaging, she would eventually wear them down and maybe even turn the tables on them. She probably knew that and was deliberately using that as a tactic. Considering that she was armed with a convenient retreat in the form of the teleportation staff, this was probably how she usually fought. Wearing down the enemy by repeatedly retreating and coming back was likely second nature to her by now.

Unfortunately for her, Zach and Zorian weren't alone. Before she could get very far, she found Alanic, Xvim and Daimen waiting for her in the distance. A roar of frustration echoed across the entire mountain while Zach and Zorian sat down to recover their mana reserves and catch their breath.

"Ha ha, I bet she didn't expect *that*," Zach said, grinning. His

face was smeared with dust and there was a thin line of blood running down his left arm where a piece of shrapnel managed to get through his defenses, but he appeared to not notice it. "Now she, too, can experience what is like to be worn down by repeated attacks while her opponents take a rest every once in a while."

"Didn't you kill Oganj, who is a famous dragon mage, all by yourself in one of the early restarts?" Zorian asked curiously. "I know he couldn't teleport around and was less annoying to fight, but he shouldn't be any weaker. How on earth did you manage to tackle him on your own?"

"Trial and error," Zach chuckled awkwardly. "Lots of trial and error. I honestly do not recommend it."

They fell silent after that, simply watching the battle unfold in front of them.



"We've done it," Zach breathed.

Laid on the ground in front of him were five objects: a glass orb, a plain metal ring, a gleaming dagger, an ornate crown and a simple staff.

All five pieces of the Key, gathered in one place.

The staff Violeteye had been using was indeed the imperial staff they were looking for. They had already brought it to the Guardian of the Threshold for inspection and found out about its powers. It had the ability to place up to six undetectable recall points and allowed the user to teleport back to their recall points... regardless of the distances involved. Each recall point could only be used once every 24 hours, but this was still a very potent ability.

That was for normal users. For the time loop controller, the staff was even more useful, since the recall points remained in place across restarts. That meant that if one began a restart with the staff



in their hands, they could potentially travel anywhere on the planet in the blink of an eye.

Zach and Zorian didn't begin their restarts with the staff in their hands, though, so the item's usefulness was nearly nonexistent. They had to travel so long and search so far for an item that gave godlike movement capabilities to people... there was some dark humor in the situation, but Zorian didn't feel like he could appreciate it at the moment.

In any case, at this point the whole thing didn't matter. The staff was important because it was part of the Key needed to unbar the exit of the time loop, not because of its innate properties. Of course, by the time they acquired it, they already had the orb and the ring, so they were only missing two more items to complete the set. The dagger and the crown.

The dagger was... well, not exactly easy to acquire, but it was entirely doable at this point. They had familiarized themselves enough with the wards on the royal treasury that they could break into it and steal the dagger on their own, without any help from Quatach-Ichl. So they did just that. It caused a terrible uproar, and everyone was still searching for the thieves, but Zach and Zorian were fairly sure they had covered their tracks well enough.

Getting the crown, on the other hand, had been something they had agonized quite a bit over. They succeeded in the end, but now they had Quatach-Ichl after their heads and the restart was not even halfway over. The ancient lich had plenty of time to track them down and make them pay for what they did, which is something they never let him have in the previous restarts.

Still, with only one piece of the Key missing, how could they possibly resist the temptation to complete it? There was no way they could have waited until the end of the restart to do this. For all they knew, using the Key may give them options that hadn't existed until now.

Numerous people crowded the space around Zach and Zorian, peering at the items on the ground. Pretty much everyone had arrived to take a look at them, even though they were nothing special in terms of appearance. Scattered whispering and quiet speculation filled the air and people speculated what would happen when they were brought before the Guardian of the Threshold.

After some quick discussion, Zach and Zorian decided to bring the Key to the Guardian of the Threshold right away to see what would happen... and they would be taking everyone with them to witness it as well.

Previously, they had already tried to bring a temporary looper into the space of the Sovereign gate and failed. The Guardian of the Threshold later confirmed that temporary loopers are unable to access the space. However, this security measure was childishly easy to bypass through a short duration soul bond that allowed the Controller to simply 'pull' outsiders with them as they entered the Sovereign Gate. Once inside, the Guardian of the Threshold largely ignored their presence, recognizing them as temporary loopers, but completely unconcerned about the fact that Zach and Zorian were breaking the rules. Zach and Zorian had used this method to bring various people into the Sovereign Gate at multiple occasions, so they did not foresee any problems.

Thus, the whole group made way into the secret time magic research facility beneath Cyoria and, after some small preparations, entered the Sovereign Gate.

The Guardian of the Threshold soon popped into existence in front of them, just like he always did. He was still the same human-like glowing entity, his face emotionless like a sculpted statue.

"Welcome, Controller," the Guardian greeted.

"Yeah, yeah," said Zach. "I'm glad to see you too, you lovable idiot. Did you notice we've brought the Key to you?"

The Guardian was silent for a moment.

"One moment, please," it eventually said, before becoming silent again.

In the dark void of the Sovereign Gate space, there was only a silent glowing humanoid and a small throng of people anxiously waiting for his reaction. The Guardian of the Threshold did not appear to mind the large number of visitors, continuing his mysterious pondering with not a care in the world.

The temporary loopers around Zach and Zorian simply squirmed nervously, not saying much. They had learned by now that the Guardian of the Threshold utterly ignored temporary loopers, refusing to answer their questions or even acknowledge their existence. Watching Daimen and Silverlake getting progressively more angry as the entity ignored their comments had been rather amusing for Zorian the first time he witnessed it, but thankfully this time nobody lost their temper.

In any case, the Guardian eventually finished whatever it was doing and started speaking again.

"Everything is as it should be," it said. "They Key is valid. Do you want to claim your privileges now?"

"Privileges? Why, I love privileges," Zach said, grinning. "Yes. Give me all of those."

"Done," the entity immediately said.

"Can I unbar the gate now?" Zach asked.

"Yes," the Guardian of the Threshold confirmed. "Do you want—"

"Yes, damn it, yes!" Zach said, voice full of exasperation. "Do it now."

"As you wish," it said. It paused for a few moment, silently performing some kind of task again. "It is done. The gate is now unbar-ar-ar-ar-ar-ar—"

Zorian watched in growing horror as the Guardian of the Threshold suddenly started twitching and stuttering as if it was

having some kind of seizure. His head rolled around at impossible angles, rotating a full 360 degrees, his entire torso squirming and bulging as if something was trying to burst out of it.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

"What the hell is happening?" someone asked behind him.

"I don't know," Zach said, frowning. "This has never happened before—"

Everything suddenly became quiet. At first Zorian thought Zach had just stopped speaking because he noticed or realized something important, but when he glanced towards him he found Zach gone.

Everyone but Zorian was gone. It was just him, a madly twitching Guardian of the Threshold and a quiet, featureless black void all around them.

He immediately tried to return to his body, but failed.

Shit... Well, at least the Guardian of the Threshold was starting to calm down. He was twitching less, and no longer twisted his head and limbs at impossible angles. Maybe—

A multitude of eyes suddenly snapped open all over Guardian of the Threshold's body, blinking rapidly for a few moments before focusing straight at Zorian. Each one was different. Different sizes, different color, different internal structure. Some of them had multiple irises. Some of them glowed. Some of them were multifaceted, like those of an insect. Some of them made his mind feel numb just looking at them.

**"Zorian Kazinski,"** the Guardian of the Threshold said. Was it still the Guardian of the Threshold? Freaky eyes aside, even his voice was different. It was booming and resonant, with not a trace of humanity in it. **"I have a proposition for you."**

"Who are you?" Zorian immediately challenged.

**"You call me Panaxeth,"** it immediately answered.

Zorian's mind froze for a moment. What... how...

"The primordial?" he asked numbly, his voice filled with disbelief.

"Yes," it answered.

Suddenly, some of its eyes closed and disappeared. The ones that made Zorian hurt to look at, as well as some of the freakier 'normal' ones.

"You can talk?" Zorian asked. It was a dumb question, but he was still in shock and couldn't help himself.

Panaxeth seemed to think so too, because he ignored the question.

**"I can get you out of here,"** Panaxeth said. Its form changed again, additional eyes closing and his form becoming more human-like in both color and texture. **"All you have to do is make a contract with me."**

A contract?

"No thanks," he said immediately, shaking his head in denial.

"You will never get out of here alive without me," it told him. Its voice acquired a human-like quality by this point, and most of the eyes were gone. "The other person didn't either."

"Red Robe?" Zorian asked.

"I never asked his name," Panaxeth said. He looked entirely like a man by now, though his features seem to shift all the time – male and female, old and young, all kinds of skin tones and facial features... "Does it matter? We're talking about you, now. Swear on your life you will help free me and I will incarnate you outside of this crumbling world."

"Why would I do that, though?" Zorian asked.

"You get to live?" Panaxeth asked, sounding a little mystified by his response.

His constant shifting of his appearance slowed down greatly at this point. He seemed to have settled on a female form now, tall and good-looking, with long black hair and a body to die f-

Zorian scowled. The damn thing was slowly changing its appearance to appeal to him as much as possible, didn't it? It constantly cycled through different appearances, all the while paying attention to his body movements and facial expressions to see what evoked a good response in him.

It was showing him what it thought he wanted to see.

Suddenly, the entity shifted into a perfect copy of Kirielle.

"I just want to live and be free!" she said, her lip quivering and her voice on the verge of tears.

"You are not Kirielle!" Zorian shouted at it, his temper rising.

Panaxeth immediately changed forms again, copying Taiven. Then Zach. Then Xvim, Daimen, Ilsa, Imaya...

Some of these people... how did it even know how they looked and sounded? Was it reading his mind?

He immediately strengthened his mental defenses, even though he could detect no intrusion.

"Why are you talking to me now?" Zorian asked. "I was here plenty of times before."

"The gate was barred until now, so there was no point in speaking to you," Panaxeth answered. "I can only get people out when the way is open."

"But you could have contacted me like this all this time?" Zorian asked.

"Yes," Panaxeth confirmed. "The Sovereign Gate has been damaged over the years, some of the safeguards failing. That is why they stopped using it for a long time. However, there is no point in speaking to most people unless they are strong enough to help me and unless the way is open. I did not think you could gather the entire Key before the world crumbled, but I'm glad to be proved wrong. We can help each other, Zorian. We can even discuss additional rewards once I am out of my cage."

"But what if I fail?" Zorian asked.

"You die, of course," Panaxeth said, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. "That's what the contract is for."

"So you get me out of here and in return I must help free you or die?" Zorian asked.

"Exactly," Panaxeth confirmed.

"I'm going to have to say no," Zorian sighed.

Panaxeth stared at him for a second. It seemed to realize it would never be able to convince Zorian to take this sort of deal, no matter what it used to entice him.

"You will regret that," it said. "This was a one-time offer. I will not bother contacting you again."

Zorian was of two minds about this. On one hand that was a bit disappointing, since he would like to have more talks with a primordial to see if he could get something substantial out of it. On the other hand, it was a freaking primordial and it seemed to be reading his mind in some way he couldn't detect!

It was probably for the best that it never wanted to see him again.

"You gave up pretty quickly," Zorian commented. "How are you so sure there is no chance to convince me in the future?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Panaxeth said. "Someone else has already taken my offer."

Zorian's eyes widened at the comment. Before he could ask Panaxeth what it meant by that, the generic female form in front of him disappeared and he was surrounded by noise again. He was once again standing next to Zach, with temporary loopers standing around him. All of them were screaming, shouting and talking at once. It was abundantly obvious that Zorian wasn't the only one who had found himself alone, facing a terrifying primordial entity.

And after the situation had calmed down somewhat and he had done a quick headcount, a terrifying realization suddenly dawned to Zorian.

Silverlake was gone.



## CHANGE OF PLANS

It wasn't long before the group decided to leave the Sovereign Gate space and return to their bodies outside. Partially this was because the Guardian of the Threshold was gone, leaving them on their own in the silent void. When Panaxeth ended his interaction with Zorian and others, he took the Guardian he had been possessing along with him. Or maybe he *was* the Guardian in the end, who could know? Regardless, with the Guardian no longer present, there was little point in them staying there either.

The second, more important reason, was that Silverlake was gone and they desperately wanted to check if she was outside, waiting for them. Although Panaxeth's statement that someone had already taken his offer and her subsequent disappearance strongly suggested she had betrayed them, Zorian held on to the hope that she had merely left the Sovereign Gate on her own. Somehow.

It was a hope that would not last long. Whatever force Panaxeth had used to stop Zach and Zorian from returning to their body had dissipated with his disappearance, so getting out of the Sovereign Gate was done without incident. Once outside, they found Silverlake's lifeless body lying on the floor.

She was dead. There was no evidence of struggle. No wounds, obvious or subtle. No indication of any sort of foul play from the

facility staff or hidden enemies. It was as if her soul simply disappeared from her body all of a sudden, painlessly killing her.

It was the same kind of dead that they had already seen in the aranea beneath Cyoria and the other 'soukilled' individuals they'd come across over the restarts.

A grim atmosphere descended upon the group. Zach was so enraged he incinerated Silverlake's body into ashes before anyone could stop him. Zorian wanted to scold him for destroying critical clues as to what happened, but Alanic placed his hand on his shoulder and shook his head, silently telling him to let it go. Maybe it was better that way. This wasn't the time for starting arguments and they probably got all they would have gotten out of her corpse anyway.

They didn't stay in the time magic research facility for long. They needed to talk to everyone about what they had seen and heard, about what Panaxeth had talked with them in private, but that was best done in the privacy of their base at the Noveda Estate. However, an issue suddenly rose up when they tried to leave the facility. Apparently, while the facility staff accepted their mysterious orders without complaint, they still paid close attention to everyone coming and leaving from the facility. They knew exactly how many people their group had, and they knew that Silverlake had suddenly gone missing.

That was a surprisingly thorny situation to get out of. Zach was still visibly fuming and looked like he was going to start throwing around fireballs at all these people questioning him where their companion had suddenly disappeared to, but Krantin refused to let the matter drop. Unfortunately, explaining that Silverlake was dead and that Zach had already incinerated her soulless body was not an option. In the end, Zorian had to memory edit roughly half of the facility personnel to make them forget Silverlake had ever entered the place that day and then make alterations to the physical

records which also kept track of that kind of thing.

Strange as that sounded, altering physical records turned out to be a lot harder than editing memories. Those records had some very inventive protections against such tampering, whereas the minds of facility staff were largely unprotected against mental tampering.

Still, although the immediate issue was dealt with, Zorian could already see that their headaches in regards to the facility and Silverlake's presence there were only starting. Silverlake had been one of the crucial people in regards to their project of turning the imperial orb into a better Black Room. The void left by her disappearance was going to be keenly felt in the near future.

He still had trouble believing this was actually happening, to be honest. He had fully expected their circumstances to change once they brought the key to the Guardian of the Threshold, but not like this. How could Panaxeth even contact them through the Guardian? Even if the Sovereign Gate was made from a primordial, that primordial was clearly not Panaxeth. He of the Flowing Flesh was imprisoned inside the Hole, the massive circular abyss around which Cyoria was built. He had been stuck there since the time the primordials had been sealed away, presumably. The Sovereign Gate, on the other hand, had been primarily used in northern Miasina before its current use. It didn't make sense... how could Panaxeth infiltrate the time loop mechanism to appear before them? How could he take people out of the time loop? And what had he offered Silverlake to make her swear some kind of death pact with a godlike primordial entity that considered them useful tools at best?

He didn't know. He hoped other people had managed to get something useful out of the primordial, unlike him.

Having finally left the facility, the group gathered in the Noveda Estate. They left people some free time to collect their

thoughts and calm down, and then started discussing what happened.

The first issue, of course, was Panaxeth. Or something that claimed to be Panaxeth, anyway. They had no proof that the unknown entity was telling the truth, but then again it had no reason to lie about that ether. Identifying as Panaxeth would not set anyone at ease. In any case, talking to the rest of the group confirmed what everyone had suspected by now – 'Panaxeth' had somehow dragged each of them into their own individual space for a private conversation.

Everyone except Zach, that is. Zach alone did not merit a meeting with the primordial, it seemed. While everyone else disappeared into their own private space, Zach was simply left alone in the darkness of the Sovereign Gate's area. Even the Guardian of the Threshold was gone, leaving him simply floating in the silent void with no way out until Panaxeth was done with the others.

As for the others, they'd all found themselves in front of the warped, twisted Guardian of Threshold, though most did not see the same eye-covered humanoid that Zorian had. In Kyron's case, for instance, the Guardian grew another two pairs of arms while his torso split open into a giant vertical mouth lined with predatory teeth. Nora saw the Guardian's limbs lengthen while bone spikes erupted from its head, causing it look like it had a bony sea urchin growing out of its neck. This initial monstrous form was then gradually changed into a more inoffensive, human form through a process of constant shapeshifting reminiscent of the one Zorian experienced.

After that, though, the experiences of different people wildly diverged. Not all received the offer of making a contract with the primordial. Taiven and Nora were almost completely toyed with, for instance. Panaxeth simply shifted between different forms while occasionally spouting total non-sequiturs like 'I

like dogs' or 'your mother would be ashamed of you', seemingly studying their reactions. Daimen claimed that Panaxeth had never offered him anything, instead simply trying to question him about what he knew about Zorian – his likes, motives and preferences. Something that visibly infuriated his older brother, though Zorian was unsure how much of that was because Panaxeth was basically trying to get him to betray his family and how much it was the fact that Panaxeth clearly didn't see him as important outside of being 'Zorian's brother'. If the situation weren't so dire, Zorian might have been amused about that.

It also quickly became clear that, even though everyone was reunited at roughly the same time, they did *not* spend the same amount of time talking to Panaxeth. Some, like Zorian, only interacted with the primordial for a short while before being dismissed. Others, especially ones that pretended to actually consider its offer, spoke with the entity for quite a while before Panaxeth tired of them. The primordial employed some kind of time dilation during its interaction with people, lengthening the meeting with ones that seemed like they could be convinced, while spending only a token effort on others.

This probably explained how it managed to convince Silverlake so relatively quickly. If she showed the greatest amount of interest in its offer out of them all, the primordial would have likely extended her meeting as much as it could. Plus, considering how powerful and experienced Silverlake was, she was probably considered one of the most prioritized targets to begin with.

"Were you not worried that the primordial was reading your mind?" Zorian asked them, frowning. "I mean, it seemed capable of lifting people's appearances straight out of my head when I talked to it. It was one of the big reasons I was so eager to get out of the meeting as much as possible."

"He did no such thing while talking to me," Xvim said, shak-

ing his head. "Then again, Panaxeth did not try to copy *any* people while talking to me. He just shifted from one generic form to another throughout the entire talk."

Zorian found it a little interesting how some people, like him, referred to Panaxeth as 'it', while Xvim and others referred to the primordial as 'he'. The cultists did call Panaxeth 'He of the Flowing Flesh', so one could indeed argue that the entity was male in some sense, but it was debatable how much normal gender applied to a monstrous shapechanger like that. The entity assumed a female form when speaking to him, male form in front of others, and an aranea form when speaking to the aranea... it clearly thought little of such things.

"I actually did ask the thing about that when it tried to shapeshift into Kana," Kael said, pausing slightly. "Well, more like I blew up at it and demanded an explanation. Sparingly, it actually gave me one. It said no mind reading was taking place... it was 'just' watching everything we did inside the time loop and taking note of people close to us. That's probably why it tried to convince me while looking like Kana instead of Namira, even though the latter would probably be more effective. Since my wife had died long before the start of the time loop, Panaxeth had no idea what she looked like, and thus couldn't copy her appearance."

"Yes, that is what he said to me as well," Ilsa said. "He tried to tempt me with the secrets of true creation, and I asked how he knew about that. He said the same thing he had to Kael, but he also expanded on it a little bit. Panaxeth claims the Sovereign Gate is not made from a primordial like we thought – it is more like an attachment, or maybe a shell, which must be bonded to a specific primordial in order to work. This can potentially be any primordial, but currently it's Panaxeth."

"That's why he could appear in front of us like that," Zach said gloomily.

"Yes," Ilsa said, nodding. "The Sovereign Gate somehow twists the primordial in question into the time loop as we know it. In a very real sense, Panaxeth *is* the time loop... which means he is aware of everything that occurs inside of him."

"So Panaxeth is watching us even now?" Taiven said, sounding disturbed.

"Probably," Ilsa shrugged. She seemed to take the idea in stride. Or maybe she'd just had more time than the rest of them to come to terms with it.

Zorian was personally very disturbed by this discovery. How were they supposed to subvert the time loop mechanism in order to leave this place, if the time loop was basically a sapient being that was always watching them? It was quite likely that Panaxeth could actively sabotage any escape attempt it did not like. Perhaps it was limited by the safeguards built into the Sovereign Gate, but those safeguards probably wouldn't protect people like him, who were trying to break the system.

No wonder Panaxeth claimed he was never leaving this place without its help. Back then, Zorian thought that meant 'without its help', but perhaps what Panaxeth really meant was 'without its approval'...

"If he is that all-knowing, I wonder why he had not been more effective at tempting us," Xvim mused. "One would think he would have a far better grasp on our character if it could perceive everything we did so far."

"Awareness is not necessarily total awareness," Orissa offered. "I am technically aware of everything my bees do, but if you were to ask me about one particular bee, there is only so much I could tell you."

"The various elementals we consulted did say that primordials view us all like animals, maybe even mere bugs," Zach said. "How much do you really understand the sparrows living in the city or

ants digging up your garden? We may be greater than them, but they are still alien to us. Hell, Zorian can read their minds and memories, and he still has trouble leading them from place to place without using any magical coercion."

"You're talking about that one time he tried to literally herd cats, right?" Kael said, smiling slightly. "I remember that one."

"It wasn't a serious attempt," Zorian complained. "It was just an amusing idea I had when I was bored."

"This isn't the time for this," Alanic said, a little annoyed. "Zach brings up a good point with primordials seeing us all as animals. You don't discuss things with animals, you manipulate them into doing what you want. We should be wary of trusting that creature too much. Although there is probably some glimmer of truth in what it's saying, I suspect it is willing to say *anything*, true or false, if it thinks doing so will increase its chances of escaping its prison."

"I don't know. He seemed pretty honest and forthright to me," Ilsa said, looking at Alanic. "Clearly you also thought there was some value in listening to it, since you were one of the people that managed to engage it in a lengthy conversation. What did you speak about, then?"

Ultimately, only a few people managed to keep their cool and get something substantial out of Panaxeth. Alanic, Xvim, Orissa, Ilsa, Kyron and an aranea named Night Dream were the only ones that managed to interest Panaxeth enough for him to engage them in a lengthy back-and-forth. It made Zorian a little self-conscious to realize he had essentially bungled that meeting. He might have gotten some important answers out of the primordial if he had been a little better at acting.

Then again, were these people really so good at acting or were they actually somewhat tempted by Panaxeth's offer, and the primordial could sense that in their exchange? He could tell that Ilsa, at the very least, was lying when she claimed she had only been



pretending to be interested in the primordial's offer. The others were harder to read.

In any case, Alanic did not appear in the slightest bit uncomfortable about being put on the spot like that.

"We had a big talk about faith, risk-taking and the duty of the individual towards their community," Alanic said.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him. So did a lot of other people, from what he could say.

"And you were scolding me and Zorian for not taking things seriously just a little while ago," Kael scoffed.

"It's the truth," Alanic said. "Rather than just refuse the creature, I asked it why I would ever agree to such a deal. The consequences would be so apocalyptic, especially for Cyoria, that I couldn't imagine how this would be a good idea. Even if I was selfish to the extreme and only cared about myself, the primordial was a threat to all of humanity."

"Oh, I asked him the same thing," Orissa interjected. "He said he had no intention of destroying the world or menacing humanity. All he wanted, he said, was to be free and to free the rest of the imprisoned primordials as well. He would only destroy those who tried to prevent him from achieving those two goals."

"Ha. Well, it said no such thing to me," Alanic said. "Probably because it knew I would not believe that. Instead, the primordial countered my concerns by telling me that the gods had left numerous 'contingencies' in regards to primordials, should they ever successfully escape. If I truly had faith in the gods, it said, what was the harm in setting it free? The contract would be fulfilled the moment it was out of prison, even if it died immediately afterwards. I should have faith in the divine and their works, in which case there was nothing wrong with taking the deal, releasing it out of its prison and then watching it die immediately afterwards."

"Do these contingencies of the gods truly exist?" Zorian asked.

He heard nothing about that, but Alanic was a priest, so...

"I don't know," Alanic admitted. "Even if they did, it is said the gods imprisoned primordials because they had trouble truly killing them. If the gods were incapable of dealing with them in person, I rather doubt a mere contingency could do it. Clearly this Panaxeth did not believe this either, otherwise why would it even make the offer? We then got into a lengthy philosophical discussion about what constitutes true faith and various other things. I doubt you really want to hear about that."

"Maybe later," Zach said. "Orissa, you said you also talked to Panaxeth about what he'd do once free?"

"Yes. Aside from what I already said, I think he alluded to these divine contingencies Alanic spoke about at one point," she said. "He mentioned that, in the process of tearing himself free from his cage, he would likely end up 'weakened and grievously wounded', and that it would take him centuries to fully recover. During that time, he would just hide somewhere and wait until he was fully healed. He was suggesting that I had no reason to care about his goals, because by the time he was ready to make his move, I would have died a long time ago."

After some more back and forth, they confirmed some details with the other members of the group. For instance, it seemed that nobody had been presented with an image of a person that had died before the time loop had begun. In fact, the primordial didn't even bother copying *living* relatives, if the temporary looper hadn't interacted with them within the bounds of the time loop. This led some credence to his claim that he couldn't read minds and 'just' relied on seeing everything that ever happened in the time loop.

This done, they turned to the last three people who had spoken to Panaxeth at any real length. Xvim, Kyron and Night Dream had all asked similar questions, however: they wanted to know the details of what the contract with Panaxeth actually entailed.

Thankfully, this appeared to be a topic that Panaxeth was really eager to talk about.

"So if I understood you three correctly, the contract is as follows..." Zorian said. "You make a death pact with Panaxeth, swearing that you would either free him within a month or die trying. He then takes your soul and 'incarnates' it in the outside world. That is to say, he creates a brand new copy of your body in the real world, at the start of the month, in effect physically ejecting you out of the time loop. Included in the created body is some kind of kill switch that will kill you if Panaxeth is still imprisoned at the end of the summer festival."

"Yes," Night Dream said, her magically produced voice clear and smooth. "It doesn't matter whether you tried your best or why you failed – if Panaxeth isn't free by the end of the deadline, the 'death seal' activates and kills you. No excuses."

"And if Panaxeth is freed at any point before the deadline, this kill switch dissolves into nothingness and you are free to do whatever you want?" Zorian asked.

"Yes, even if Panaxeth dies, our part of the agreement is done," Xvim confirmed. "I asked several variations of that question just to be sure, and he always answered the same. We only needed to get him out, nothing more. Our original selves were not part of the agreement, either, and would not suffer if we failed in our task."

"Probably because their bodies hadn't been created by Panaxeth, so he cannot place his 'death seal' thingy on them," Kyron remarked. "Even if he wanted to make them die with us, he cannot."

"What stops you from taking the deal and then working against Panaxeth? Assuming you don't mind dying in a month, of course," Alanic asked.

"When I asked a question along those lines, the shapeshifting asshole immediately ended our conversation and sent me back to the group," Kyron said. "I guess he really didn't like that question."

From what I can tell, though, the answer is nothing. Nothing stops you from doing just that."

"Then," Kael said hesitantly, "do you think that Silverlake—"

Kyron let loose a short, loud laugh.

"Boy, get real!" he told Kael. "Do you think a selfish, self-centered bitch like that would agree to sacrifice herself for our sake? For *anyone's* sake!?"

Kael sighed, saying nothing.

A quiet murmur rippled throughout the entire group as they discussed the topic among themselves. Zorian listened to it with half an ear while lost in his own thoughts. Truthfully, now that he had heard about other people's experiences with Panaxeth, her choice was... predictable. It wasn't that they had trusted her because they had thought that she was better than this, they had just never realized making a deal like this was even an option. If Zorian had known about this before, he would have been the first one to veto any involvement with her, no matter how useful she could have been to their efforts.

And she had been very, very useful. Without any exaggeration, she was one of the pillars of the group on which their entire plan rested. Zorian wasn't even sure if they could do this without her. Certainly, without Silverlake, their current exit plan was completely unworkable...

"I have to agree with Kyron," Alanic said solemnly. "Silverlake did not keep her attitudes hidden, so this decision should not surprise anyone here. You heard what everyone said on this meeting. The primordial offers people a guaranteed way to save their lives, as opposed to the uncertain odds of survival that we can offer her. She probably wouldn't care if every single person in Cyoria ended up dead as a result of Panaxeth's release, and it might be centuries before the wider consequences of his unsealing became apparent. Plus, there is no telling what kind of prize the creature offered her

to entice her further.”

”She was also clearly already interested in primordials even before the time loop. Including Panaxeth’s prison, specifically,” Zorian said. ”She might have felt more confident about being able to come out on top when dealing with one of them.”

”But she’s immortal, right?” Taiven protested. ”Shouldn’t she take the long view in this? Even if Panaxeth takes several centuries to start wrecking everything, she’ll still be alive by that point!”

”You have to look at it from her eyes,” Zach said. He had calmed down greatly from his initial rage, and was now thinking much more rationally about the situation. ”What’s the alternative? Dying immediately because you couldn’t get out of the time loop? That’s even worse.”

”But if Panaxeth remains sealed, her original self can continue to live in peace indefinitely,” Taiven pointed out. ”She’s risking the long-term future of her original in exchange for a little more life for herself.”

”I don’t think she cares about that,” Zorian said, shaking his head. ”That Silverlake is not *her*.”

”Yes. Did you ever notice she never created any simulacrum? Even when it would have been very useful?” Zach pointed out. ”I don’t think for a moment she was unable to learn the spell. And I don’t think she would sabotage our attempts to escape from the time loop by not creating more skilled manpower. I think she’s one of the people who can’t use them because they would freak out when they realized their lives were fleeting and do something stupid.”

”Well, when you all put it like that, why did we ever agree to work with her in the first place?” Kyron suddenly demanded, throwing his hands in the air in discontent.

”Yeah!” one of Xvim’s academic friends piped in. ”She was a bad idea right from the start! Whose bright idea was to include

her, anyway?"

"What was the alternative?" Xvim challenged, alternating his gaze between Kyron and the other speaker. "Silverlake was brought into the group because she had critical skills that no one else possessed. The only reason we got as far as we did was because we had her working along with us. Even if she betrayed us in the end, it's hard to say whether we would have been better off without her."

No one had anything to say to that.

"Zorian, you're the only one Panaxeth told anything related to Silverlake," Zach said. "Can you tell us anything else?"

"All he said was that someone had already taken his offer, so convincing me didn't matter anymore," Zorian said. He was the only one Panaxeth had felt the need to tell that. "I had no idea what that meant back then, but when I saw Silverlake was missing..."

"Yeah," Zach said, clacking his tongue. "Doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened. So, what now? Now we have *two* hostile loopers to deal with once we get out of the time loop?"

Zorian had to admire Zach's spirit sometimes. Even now, with all their plans being thrown into total disarray, he was still confident they would get out of this alive. It was nice to have someone like that, sometimes.

"Panaxeth's statement was a little confusing, but I think that's right. He was implying that Red Robe had also taken his offer and made a contract with him in order to leave the time loop. Presumably, this is why he spent so much time optimizing the invasion. His very life depends on its success. Presumably, once outside, Silverlake will work with him to make sure Panaxeth's release goes off as smoothly as possible."

"Why does Silverlake accepting his offer mean there is no point in convincing you, though?" Kael asked. "You'd think Panaxeth would want as many agents as possible."

"Probably because every time he transports someone out the gate becomes barred again," Zorian said. "Remember, the whole point of gathering the Key was that the gate was inexplicably barred, even though it shouldn't have been. The Controller has already left, Guardian of the Threshold told us. That probably means that when Panaxeth got Red Robe out of the time loop, it got stuck. The same probably happened now. Even if Panaxeth wanted to transport more than one person, he couldn't."

"But you still have the Key," Ilsa pointed out.

"We do," Zach confirmed.

"So you can probably just unbar the gate again," Ilsa stated.

"Probably," Zach agreed.

"They'd have to be pretty stupid to take any of us into the Sovereign Gate again," Alanic said pitilessly. "I would never do so in their place."

"All of us present refused that thing's deal," Kyron pointed out, a little incensed.

"Or maybe we were just too slow and Silverlake hammered out her deal before we had a chance to do the same," Xvim said. "I agree with Alanic. Now that Silverlake betrayed us, the pressure on remaining people is all the greater. It's a pointless risk."

Zorian watched the argument in silence, not knowing what to say.

This was going to be a long evening...



After finding out what everyone had experienced in the Sovereign Gate, Zach and Zorian departed from the Noveda Estate and went to ransack Silverlake's dimensional refuge for any clues. Of course, Zorian fully intended to also steal any magical secrets or notable resources he found there. Since Silverlake had

betrayed them so utterly, he did not feel bad about robbing her blind in the slightest.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Silverlake's spite and paranoia knew no bounds. When they finally managed to subvert her defenses and break into her pocket dimension, they found it utterly wrecked. It had been reduced to a smoking crater for quite some time before they arrived, most likely because some dead man's switch had activated when she died and destroyed everything. Zorian left a couple of simulacrum to sift through the wreckage for anything of value, but he didn't have much hope they would find anything. The destruction was quite thorough.

The only things that survived relatively intact was a curious arrangement of stones that was apparently responsible for powering her pocket dimension. He had long wondered how she was doing that, since the location itself could not support the dimensional magic she was using to isolate it from the rest of the world. Now he knew. Each of the heavy linking stones, which were built right into the walls of her hideout to disguise them better, had a matching counterpart in the deep in the underworld below her base. The underworld stones siphoned ambient mana from the Dungeon and sent it straight into Silverlake's hideout through the paired stones in the pocket dimension.

He supposed that if he ever wanted to destroy Silverlake's pocket dimension, he now knew a really easy way to do it. He just had to wreck the mana siphoning stones in the Dungeon below her sanctuary and the whole place would soon fall apart on its own.

In any case, with this matter currently being dealt with, Zach and Zorian turned their attention towards the next thing that had to be done as soon as possible.

They had to go back to the Sovereign Gate and talk to the Guardian of the Threshold.



There was danger in doing that, of course. However, it had to be done. They had to confirm their suspicions. First, they had to see if the Guardian would still be there at all when they came back, since it had gone missing when they had last left the Sovereign Gate. Secondly, they had to see if the gate really was barred again like they suspected. If so, a lot of their speculation would be all but confirmed.

Finally, they had to see if the Guardian could shed some light on what happened during their last visit. While it had seemed like nothing more than an automated puppet in the past, there was clearly something more complex going on in regards to that thing.

Only the two of them would be going there this time, of course. Considering Panaxeth completely ignored Zach the last time around and told Zorian he would not bother with him in the future, they probably wouldn't be seeing him on this visit. Even if they did, though, Zorian was far less afraid of him now that he knew he couldn't just reach into his head and start editing things. Whatever restrictions the primordial was laboring under, they clearly prevented him from coercing people into anything.

When they entered the Sovereign Gate, they were relieved to see the familiar figure of the Guardian of the Threshold floating in front of them.

"Welcome, Controller," the Guardian greeted.

"So Panaxeth didn't break everything with his little visit," Zach commented, loudly exhaling in satisfaction. "That's great. Finally some good news."

"Yes," Zorian agreed. He turned towards the floating humanoid of light, giving him a complex look. What was this thing really? "Guardian, is the gate still open?"

They waited for several seconds, wondering why it took the Guardian so long to answer that. Usually he was really prompt with his answers, only occasionally waiting while it looked up

something in the background. As the seconds ticked by, though, they realized he wasn't checking up on things before giving them an answer.

Instead, the Guardian ignored Zorian's question completely.

Uh oh...

"Hey Guardian! Is the gate still open?" Zach said, repeating Zorian's question.

"No, Controller. The gate is barred," the Guardian immediately answered.

Zach and Zorian shared a complex look with each other. On one hand, they just confirmed their speculation about what happened. This was good. It meant they were of the right track. On the other hand...

"Guardian, why did you answer his question and not mine?" Zorian asked the glowing humanoid.

But the Guardian ignored his question, just like he did the previous one. In fact, Zorian realized that, although the Guardian was facing them, he was subtly tilted towards Zach. It was like he was completely ignoring Zorian's very existence.

Just like he had been ignoring the temporary loopers in the past.

"Guardian, why are you only responding to me and not him?" Zach asked, a bit of frustration bleeding into his voice.

"I only respond to the Controller," the Guardian stated placidly.

"I knew it," Zorian said quietly, followed by a small sigh.

Zach stared at the Guardian, getting visibly more and more upset as time went by. Zorian just felt a sinking feeling of defeat, instead. When it rained, it poured.

"This is bullshit," Zach stated angrily, pointing with his finger at Zorian. "He entered this space on his own, by activating his marker. Only a controller can do that!"

"Yes," the Guardian agreed. "He is an anomaly. Those happen sometimes. Something or someone has managed to get past the safeguards and disrupted the integrity of the mechanism. The anomaly can access Controller privileges even though he is not one. I am unable to do anything about that at the moment, but do not worry – the mistake will be corrected at the end of this cycle, when the world is recreated again."

Lovely. Zorian did not need a detailed explanation to understand what the Guardian was implying.

"But why now?" Zach demanded. "How did you figure out he was the anomaly all of a sudden? He had been coming and going here for ages now!"

"Yes. Regretful," Guardian said blandly. "However, you have presented me with the Key recently, which triggered a complete analysis of the existing situation. During this inspection, the anomaly was identified and correction procedures were scheduled to be performed at the first possible opportunity."

"Why?" Zach asked. "What is it about the Key that triggers this?"

"Activating the Key signifies that something has gone wrong with the time loop mechanism," The Guardian answered, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. "Of course a thorough check of everything is in order."

"It does? You never mentioned this when we asked you about the Key," Zach stated accusingly.

The Guardian ignored the statement. Zorian was actually a little taken aback by this, since it meant the Guardian had probably kept them deliberately in the dark about that when they had talked to him in the past.

He supposed it made sense. The key was a security measure meant to confirm the Controller's identity. It made sense not to discuss the details of its operation unless the Guardian felt he had

to, for some reason.

"What about those privileges I claimed, then?" Zach asked. "What does that get me?"

"It affirms your status as the one true Controller and locks out all the other pretenders that may be walking about," the Guardian said.

"What!?" Zach protested incredulously. "That's it? No new functions or abilities or anything like that?"

"As a Controller, you already have all the privileges," the Guardian told him. "You have simply ensured others do not infringe on this."

"Why can Zorian even access this place, then?" Zach demanded.

Hey!

"He is an anomaly," the Guardian said.

"These 'privileges' are such a rip-off," Zach complained. "It doesn't even do what it's supposed to properly."

"I'm sorry," the Guardian said, sounding honestly apologetic. "He's a very frustrating anomaly."

'And thank the gods for that,' Zorian thought.

He wasn't panicking, strangely enough. He didn't know why. Maybe because he already faced a very dire situation today and was rather emotionally drained at the moment, but finding out he was going to be deleted at the end of the month only brought a dull mixture of dread and determination to his mind.

So what if Silverlake had betrayed them? So what if Panaxeth was actively working against him? So what if he would get erased at the end of the month? Hadn't they already planned to make an escape attempt in this restart?

They just had to make sure it worked.

He looked over at Zach, who had stopped arguing with the Guardian and was instead looking at Zorian like he was a dead man.

A mixture of horror and guilt was etched clearly into his face.

"Don't beat yourself over this," Zorian told Zach. His voice was so calm and even that even he was surprised how confident he sounded. "There was nothing else we could have done. You heard what the Guardian said – the moment we presented the Key to him, I was marked for erasure. It was always a given that we would do that the moment we gathered all the pieces. We should be grateful it was so difficult and took us that long to do it, or else we would have ended up in this situation at a much earlier and far less favorable restart."

"But, Zorian!" Zach protested. "You, you..."

"This just means I need to get out of here before this month ends. It's the same situation the rest of the group is laboring under, really," Zorian said. "Don't tell me you've already given up?"

"N-No... no..." Zach said slowly, taking a few deep breaths. "Damn it. I really hate this."

"Ask the Guardian if the Key still works. Can you unbar the gate again?"

He could, it turned out.

"Do you want to do it now?" the Guardian asked.

"No!" Zach shouted at it. "No. Do nothing until I tell you, you useless thing."

"As you wish," the Guardian said peacefully, completely oblivious to their emotional turmoil.

There was a few seconds of silence as neither Zach nor Zorian said anything.

"Well..." said Zorian finally. "We should probably end this for now. We need to come here later to ask more questions, but I don't think either of us is in the right frame of mind to do so at the moment."

"Yeah, I guess," Zach gloomily agreed. "I just—"

Suddenly, the Guardian started convulsing again.

"Oh, not this shit again!" Zach protested in an exasperated tone.

Zorian made no moves to exit the Sovereign Gate this time. He probably couldn't even if he wanted to, but this time he actually wanted to have a talk with Panaxeth, so he didn't even try. Interestingly, Panaxeth did not bother to separate Zach from Zorian this time around and simply possessed the convulsing Guardian in front of them both. The glowing humanoid erupted into a forest of blood-red branches and tentacles before shuddering and contracting into a more human-like mass. It then quickly shapeshifted into the same female form that it had chosen for Zorian the last time they spoke. It did so far quicker than last time, apparently having gotten more proficient with the process.

It took a step forward, seemingly intending to walk over to them, before pausing and stopping in place.

"Hello Zorian," Panaxeth said in a pleasant female voice. "We meet again."

"I thought you said you would not bother talking to me again," Zorian immediately pointed out. "That it was a one-time offer."

"Bah, I told you it was just playing hard to get," Zach stated.

"Getting past the safeguards on this mechanism is not an easy thing to do," Panaxeth said. "It is not easy for me to appear before you like this. I meant what I said last time, but I decided you are more interesting than I first realized."

"Last time you didn't even dare show your face in front of me," Zach said loudly in a challenging tone, folding his hands over his chest.

"As the Controller, you are especially well protected from any tampering," Panaxeth said, shifting its attention towards Zach for a moment. "And you can leave at any time. You do not require my help, nor am I able to stop you from leaving. You are of no use to me."

"But here you are, showing yourself in front of me anyway," Zach pointed out.

"I need to conserve my power," Panaxeth said. "Isolating you in a separate space is costly and unnecessary. I do not care if you hear us."

The female form Panaxeth was wearing turned its attention back to Zorian, staring at him intently.

"You still have a chance to survive this," Panaxeth said. "I have managed to stop the Guardian from rescinding all your Controller privileges. Wreck the Controller's mind as much as you're able, use the key to unbar the gate, and I will incarnate you in the outside world. I do not even ask that you make a contract with me. Grievously sabotaging the Controller and preventing him from exiting the time loop will be payment enough for your salvation."

Zach actually floated a few steps back when he heard that.

"You don't want me as an agent?" Zorian asked, frowning.

"I already have two of them. That's more than enough," Panaxeth said. "If I can ensure that the Controller dies here when the time loop collapses upon itself, it will be far more valuable to me than any additional number of agents."

Neither Zach nor Zorian said anything for a few seconds, but Zorian was furiously thinking about things. If Panaxeth was so desperate to take Zach out of the picture... that probably meant this entire time loop had been made specifically to help him find a reliable way to stop Panaxeth's release. Even if Zach could not remember so, the two of them were mortal enemies.

"Before I helped Zach gather all the pieces of the Key, you were already winning," Zorian realized. "You had already sent one of the temporary loopers out as your agent, and Zach had mostly forgotten his mission to stop you. He only had vague feelings to guide him in what he must do. Even if he figured out how to come here, the gate was barred and he couldn't leave."

"Yes. It would have been better for me if the Key had never been found," Panaxeth admitted readily. "However, I am the very embodiment of adaptability. I do not blame you for looking out for your best interests. I simply recruited one of you as my agent, thinking that was the best way to make use of the situation. It was only later that I found out how capable you are at mind invasion, and how the original plan could still be salvaged."

"You didn't know that before?" Zorian asked.

"I'm always watching," Panaxeth said. "Everything, everywhere. But my consciousness is a lot like yours, in that I can't pay attention to every little detail I see. When you observe an anthill, you perceive a lot, but can you really remember what one particular ant does at any point of time? But I remember it all with perfect clarity, and I can review it all later as I wish. Just like *you* can remember things with perfect clarity when you want to. See? We're a lot more alike than you might think, Zorian."

The female shape Panaxeth was using as his avatar smiled. It was a bright, sunny smile that was probably meant to put him at ease but which Zorian found inexplicably terrifying.

"We're both trapped in this cage, doing anything we can, even distasteful things, in order to get out," Panaxeth continued. "Do you think I want to destroy your city? Its destruction is simply an unfortunate consequence of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I never asked your kind to build a city around me. Just like you are willing to kill your outside self to live, I am willing to obliterate everything around me to get free. It is not my fault my fatality count is higher than yours."

"I will die if I don't get out of here in time," Zorian pointed out. "You won't."

"The cage that binds me is torture you can barely imagine," Panaxeth countered. "Imagine being entombed alive for centuries, alive, but starving and thirsting, and unable to move a finger. If



that was your fate, would you not do anything in your power to get free?"

That... was a good argument, actually. Zorian had nothing to say to that.

"And then there is him," said Panaxeth, suddenly pointing towards Zach.

"Me?" Zach protested. "I'm just sitting here quietly, listening to you two talk. What about me?"

"I am heavily restricted in regards to the Controller and cannot speak about things freely, but I can tell you this – no matter what you think about that person, no matter how friendly he seems, you are ultimately enemies. In the end, one has to kill the other."

"That's... That's bullshit!" Zach exploded. "What the hell do you mean by that!?"

"He is good at pretending," Panaxeth said, not even bothering to look at him. "However, you should have noticed the signs by now. Don't let your emotions overpower your reason."

Angry and ignored, Zach tried to ram himself into Panaxeth's form, even though he knew no fighting was possible here and that this was probably a bad idea.

Panaxeth's form simply blurred for a moment, causing Zach to harmlessly pass through it.

"I have said all I that needs to be said," Panaxeth said. "Make the right choice, Zorian. You have until the end of the restart to make a decision. I will be waiting."

Then they were outside, back in their real bodies. They hadn't even activated the exit function in their marker – it was another thing that the primordial could apparently do on its own initiative.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" Zach raged, throwing around everything in the vicinity to vent his frustration. Zorian winced when one of the sensitive instruments that the facility staff user to study the Sovereign Gate impacted the nearby wall and broke apart.

That was going to be a real bitch to explain to Krantin. "Damn it all to hell! Why is everything suddenly going so *wrong*!?"

"Zach, you really need to work on your temper," Zorian said, thrusting his hand towards another device Zach just threw across the room. It immediately ceased flying through the air, stopping just before it hit one of the cabinets.

Zach paced around the room angrily for a while, not saying anything but thankfully no longer destroying expensive equipment either. After a while he marched up to Zorian with heavy, purposeful steps and grasped him by the shoulders with both of his hands.

"Zorian," he began, "you don't really believe that nonsense Panaxeth was spouting there at the end, do you?"

Zorian stared at him, stony-faced, for several seconds.

He knew that there was something to Panaxeth's accusations. Zach's mind... it clearly had been tampered with somehow. Maybe by Red Robe. Maybe by the angels, when they had given him his task. Maybe by both. Everything pointed towards that conclusion. Even if Zach was genuinely friendly and wished him nothing but good, there could be all sorts of restrictions, compulsions or contingencies placed in there, just waiting for some trigger to activate them. Perhaps once they were out of the time loop, the smiling boy in front of him would suddenly turn hostile and try to kill him for no reason. He still remembered how quickly Princess switched from seeing them as mortal enemies to following one of them like an overgrown puppy, just because they managed to scratch her a little with her control dagger.

However, he also knew it would be a mistake to say that out loud. For one thing, Zach just listened to Panaxeth telling Zorian to scramble his mind in exchange for a ticket to outside. In light of that, any argument Zorian might use to convince Zach to let him rummage inside his mind would seem *very* suspect.

"No," Zorian said. "I don't believe that at all."

Zach stared at him for a second before finally letting go of his shoulders and straightening himself a little.

"Good," he said, patting Zorian on the shoulder in a friendly manner. "That's good. We can't let that thing divide us like that. We need to trust each other, now most of all."

"Right," Zorian said. He actually agreed with that. "And by the way? *You're* the one explaining to Krantin why you totally trashed the room like that."

Zach froze for a second and then looked around him, assessing damage.

"I guess you're right," he said with a groan. "I really do need to work on my temper."



## A PATH PAID IN BLOOD

"This isn't going to work."

Zorian stopped staring at the pile of blueprints and notebooks in front of him and looked at the speaker. It was Xvim. He and Alanic had snuck up to him while his attention was absorbed into his task and were currently staring at him expectantly.

Zorian tapped his pen on the table a couple of times before throwing it aside and leaning back in his chair. Perhaps it would be a good idea to take a break. His work had stalled for a while now.

"I'm not sure I understand," he told his old mentor.

"We can't keep going like this," Xvim clarified. "This path we're on... it's not going to work. When we planned this out, we were counting on having Silverlake on our side. Now we don't, and no amount of increased enthusiasm and minor adjustments is going to make up for it. I know you're still under the impression of what Panaxeth told you, but something has to change. At this rate we're simply blundering into an obvious failure."

Zorian stared at Xvim for a second before glancing at Alanic. However, the scarred battle priest was silent, simply staring back at him without saying a word. Clearly he agreed with Xvim's words,

then. They had probably discussed things between each other before approaching him.

He looked around the room instead of immediately answering. It gave him a way to stall and gather his thoughts, but he was also curious about people's reactions to the conversation. They were inside one of the Noveda estate's rooms, and there were quite a few people gathered here. Most of them pretended to be absorbed into their own work, but Zorian could tell that all of them were paying close attention to what was happening.

Well, except for Zach. His fellow time traveler was sitting cross-legged on the floor with his eyes closed, trying to sense the divine energies of his divine blessing and Controller marker. Zorian was not sure why he was doing that, to be honest. Both he and Zach had already succeeded at perceiving these divine energies, and it was unlikely he would develop the skill much in what little time they had left before the end of the restart. On top of that, they had basically given up on trying to modify the temporary markers. There was little point to that now.

He took a deep breath but resisted the urge to sigh. They had informed the whole group about their second encounter with Panaxeth and what it meant for Zorian. Strangely, the group took another bout of bad news in stride. In fact, the knowledge that Zorian now shared fates with them seemed to significantly improve the mood of the group. He was one of them now, and the fact that he didn't panic and break down after finding out this was his last chance to live seemed to inspire them somewhat and calm their fears. They worked harder, grumbled less, and were less dubious about his motives and logic.

For a while, he thought that would be enough... that with some renewed enthusiasm and some clever workaround they would be able to make up for Silverlake's absence and proceed as planned. However, Xvim and Alanic were right. This wasn't

going to work.

They needed a new plan.

"What are you suggesting?" Zorian asked them.

"First of all, we should tell Krantin and his team that we're time travelers," Xvim said.

Zorian cocked his head to the side curiously. Not really what he was expecting to hear.

"Wouldn't that be rather counterproductive?" Zorian asked. "Krantin and his team have been remarkably cooperative with us, all things considered. If they knew the truth, I imagine their enthusiasm for helping us could only plummet as a response."

"I said we should tell them we're time travelers, not the full and total truth," Xvim said. "Truthfully, they already suspect this. The documents we are providing them with are too similar to their own existing work for that to escape their notice. They have been talking amongst themselves about our identity for a while now, and the most common theory is that we're literally from the future. It isn't that far from the truth, really."

"They actually hit upon such a crazy theory as the most likely one?" Zorian asked, surprised.

"They're working in a time magic research facility," Xvim said. "Even though actual time travel is said to be impossible, the topic is likely to come up with some regularity among the staff. They are being paid to push the boundaries of time magic as much as they can, after all."

Zorian stayed quiet for a few seconds, mulling things over. He supposed the idea was workable, all things considered, and it might eliminate some of the inefficiencies they'd encountered when working with Krantin and his team. However...

"Although this would be useful, I'm not really sure it would do that much," Zorian said finally. "The facility staff is already working hard on the project of turning the imperial orb into a Black

Room. Even with their limited information, they seem appreciative enough for the funding and opportunities we've given them. I doubt we could drive them to work harder with this."

"No, probably not," Xvim agreed, propping his elbows on the table and folding his fingers into a triangle shape in front of him. "This is merely an attempt to make them fine with the second step of the plan."

"Which is?" Zorian prompted, feeling just a little bit apprehensive all of a sudden.

"Kidnapping everyone skilled and possibly useful and forcing them to work for us," Xvim stated calmly, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Must resist the urge to sigh. Must resist the urge to sigh. Must resist...

Zorian rubbed his chin in a frustrated manner before focusing back on the two people in front of him. Alanic was still not saying anything. They were both staring at him and waiting for a response.

"And just how—" Zorian began.

"Through any means necessary," Xvim said, cutting him off. "Blackmail. Threats of death and bodily harm. Rampant use of mind magic."

"My mind magic is not that capable," Zorian said, frowning. "The kind of work we need from them has never been done before. They would need to work with us to invent entirely new spells and rituals."

"I know," Xvim said.

"I can't force someone to perform creative work for me with mind magic," Zorian pointed out. "I don't think anyone can. At best we'd get a bunch of dazed zombies."

"They don't know that, though," Xvim said. "Mind magic is terrifying, even for mages, and few people are experienced enough



to guess your limits. Ignoring that, what you can do is already terrifying enough for most people. If you demonstrated your memory manipulation abilities, most people would be very intimidated. Even I'm afraid of you sometimes, and I'm both familiar with your limitations and relatively certain you will not target me with your abilities. Finally, even if someone is not intimidated by your ability, you can always use your memory modification abilities as a limited retry button for convincing people. You've used your powers in that manner before, I am told."

"But only on enemies," stressed Zorian.

"And I'm very grateful you retain that sense of morality and restraint in regards to your powers," Xvim said patiently. "But we're running out of time and desperate times call for desperate measures. Don't think we're just selfishly asking you to discard your ideals. This is a burden we're all willing to take upon our shoulders."

Zorian gave him a surprised look.

"Somebody will need to keep this mass of resentful, forcibly recruited mages in line and focused on their duties instead of plotting our downfall," Xvim said. "That's going to be our job. Your job is simply to gather the people we need and intimidate them into cooperating with us, however reluctantly."

Zorian stared at the man for a while, considering what he had been told. Xvim was essentially saying that all or most of the other temporary loopers already agreed that this was an acceptable course of action. That they were just going to... kidnap random people and force them into working for them. And here Zorian was thinking he was being too carefree about reaching for the darker, unethical methods to tackle their problems.

"Well," he said. "I see we're turning into a proper villainous organization. All we need now is a mystical artifact that will allow us to remake the world in our image and we're set to go."

Xvim's lips twitched slightly.

"If you really think about it," he said, "a large group of people armed with knowledge of things to come and all the things we've gathered in the time loop would be more than enough to—"

"Please don't," Zorian implored him. "Just... tell me once again how this is supposed to work."

"Alright," Xvim said, reaching into his bag and handing him a map with a bunch of locations marked on it. Colorful paper notes densely filled with text were pinned next to each of the indicated locations.

"Our main problem right now is that we don't have enough time," Xvim continued after Zorian had a chance to glance at the map. "The only way we're going to get that is by pushing our Black Room modification project to its utter limit. Therefore, we should drop virtually everything and focus on that. However, the biggest problem the project has is the lack of qualified mages to work on it. Most of us are not really qualified to help with it. However, this facility is not the only one of its kind. There are other facilities in other countries, and though they have not gotten as far as the one in Eldemar, their staff is no less qualified than Krantin and his researchers – they just suffer from a lack of funding and opportunities."

The places on the map marked with blue upturned triangles were locations of all known Black Room projects in Altazia, Zorian realized. He knew about these, of course. They had been making use of their facilities for quite some time now. Not just in the sense that they were using them to extend their time in the restarts, either. They had long ago raided these places for any information about time magic, as well as handed them collected research notes from other facilities to see if they would come up with something novel when presented with such information. Although these initiatives were moderately successful, they had stopped yielding re-

sults by now, and so they no longer bothered with them. They simply made use of the facilities in each restart and then left them alone.

Although these places were much smaller than the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria, there was a fair number of them. If they forcibly took all their staff, that would be a lot of people. Plus, there might be some useful equipment there, now that he was thinking about it.

If they were raiding these places for people, they might as well take everything that wasn't nailed down as well.

"So we just raid those places, taking everything and everyone in sight," Zorian said, clacking his tongue. "What about those who just won't cooperate, no matter what carrot and stick we use? Kill them?"

"Push them through a portal to Blantyrre and strand them in the jungle for a while," Xvim said. "I think most will reconsider after a few days, but if not, they can just spend the rest of the month there."

And probably get eaten by a flying snake or something, Zorian thought, though he did not say it out loud.

"In any case, with this sudden influx of new people and with Krantin's hopeful acceptance of our time traveler story, we can then move on to the next step," said Xvim, handing him another map.

This one was a very detailed map of the underworld beneath Cyoria, centered around the time magic research facility. However, the facility in the map Xvim gave him was larger than the one that currently existed beneath their feet. Much, much larger. It was a huge, sprawling complex that circled the Hole like a giant torus and then extended into the surrounding land through a spider web of rooms and corridors.

Zorian gave Xvim a dubious look.

"There is no way this kind of development can be hidden from the city," Zorian said dubiously. "Never mind Krantin and his reaction, this would bring the Eldemar military on our heads. Do we really have enough influence to make the city authorities overlook this sort of thing?"

"Yes, that... that is certainly a problem," Xvim tapped his fingers together and looked away uneasily for a second. "We think we have a solution for that, though."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Zorian asked rhetorically. "Can it really be worse than the whole 'mass kidnapping' thing?"

"We should work with the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon and its leaders," Xvim told him.

Zorian scowled at the suggestion. He had nothing but disgust and contempt for the Cult of the Dragon Below. At least Ibasans had a relatively understandable goal of sabotaging their national enemies. The cultists were traitors and seemed to operate purely on a mixture of delusion and insatiable greed for power. Most of the lower-level members didn't even know what exactly they were fighting for. Plus, he could never quite forget the sight of the shifter children they sacrificed in order to crack open Panaxeth's prison.

He did not like the idea of cooperating with these people in the slightest.

"You can't be serious," Zorian told him, voice tinged with annoyance.

"I really am serious... and not just because they can help us make the city authorities look the other way while we rearrange the local underworld in our favor. With the loss of Silverlake, we have lost our expert on the primordials and their cages. Aside from Silverlake, the cult's leaders are probably the people most qualified to help us understand Panaxeth's prison... and how to exploit it to get out of the time loop," Xvim explained.

"We already took everything they had," Zorian pointed out.

In fact, they had been exceptionally thorough in raiding the cult for every secret they had. Zorian may have compunctions about delving into the minds of random people to steal their secrets, but he had no such compunctions about the cultists. He could not claim to have gotten every scrap of knowledge they had, since he could only look for things if he knew what to look for, but he was quite sure he got everything truly important out of them.

"What they already have, yes," Xvim said. "But not what they could have, if we teach them all we know and give them a chance to look at the problem with increased skills and perspective."

Zorian's eyes widened in realization.

"You want to teach them!?" he asked, aghast at the idea.

"Everything, yes," Xvim confirmed, nodding. "We would not inform them about the time loop, of course, but other than that? We will bring them into our improved Black Room and teach them everything we can about divination, about dimensionalism and about the structure of the primordial prison in the Hole. We will then let them analyze the structure and either ask them to answer our questions or you can just rip the answers straight out of their minds. It depends on how cooperative they are and what is more convenient."

Zorian remained silent for a while. On one hand, he really didn't like the idea of teaching these people anything, especially since that would involve them being close by for several months – plenty of time for things to go seriously wrong. On the other hand, he found the idea of the cultists unknowingly helping them get out of the time loop so they could sabotage their plans in the real world to be rather amusing. And Xvim was right that, other than Silverlake, these people were the ones most familiar with the primordial's prison. They had been studying it for quite a while now in their attempt to open it, after all.

There was, of course, a small matter of why in the world would the cult leaders agree to work with them on this. However, they were already considering kidnapping people and using blackmail and intimidation to make them cooperate, so this was probably not as difficult of an issue as it appeared. They just had to point out that the invasion could not possibly succeed unless Zach and Zorian *allowed it* to happen, and then prove their words with a demonstration of their power.

He looked at Alanic, who had still not said anything up until now.

"I'm surprised you're willing to entertain this idea," Zorian told him.

"I was willing to work with Silverlake, wasn't I?" Alanic said. "She may not have done anything particularly heinous in front of you, but I assure you she has done plenty of odious deeds in the past. I understand the necessity. It would be playing with fire, but it isn't like this is the first time we're doing that. Isn't it?"

"Indeed," Zorian said quietly. He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

Alanic never really talked about his past with Silverlake, or of his time before he became a priest. Zorian had long figured out by now that the scarred battle-priest had been a very different man back then, and did a lot of things he later regretted, so he refrained from pushing the man on the topic. Alanic had been incredibly helpful towards him throughout all these restarts, and Zorian felt it would be ungrateful of him to dredge up painful memories and old grudges unless he really had to.

If Alanic had some information about Silverlake that he felt was important, he would have told them about it by now.

After a while, Zorian picked up a pen and threw it at Zach's head. Though he had his eyes firmly closed, Zach immediately raised his hand and caught the pen out of the air before opening

his eyes.

"How much did you hear?" Zorian asked him.

"Most of it," Zach admitted.

"And?" Zorian prompted. "What do you think?"

"I don't have any better idea," Zach said with a shrug.

Neither did Zorian, in all honesty.

Well, that wasn't *entirely* true...

"Alright," said Zorian, rising from his seat. "I guess we're doing this, then. However, I think a slight modification is in order."

"Slight, huh?" Zach said with a grin.

"If we're going to get the maximum amount of time out of the modified Black Room, the extra manpower is not enough," said Zorian. "We need a dimensionalism mage of the highest caliber if we're going to get truly spectacular results."

"So? Those don't exactly grow on trees," Zach pointed out, throwing the pen back at him. "Where are we going to find one of *those*?"

Zorian caught the pen flying at him with practiced ease.

"How attached are you to that crown we took from Quatach-Ichl?" Zorian asked Zach with a knowing smile.

Zach's expression immediately fell.

"Oh, you can't be serious..." Zach complained.

Oh, but he was. He really was.

"Come on," Zorian told him, motioning him to get up from the floor. "Let's go talk to our favorite lich."



Somewhere in Eldemar, a field was burning.

Two masked teenagers were engaged in a vicious fight against an ancient Ibasan lich, and the landscape around them was devastated in their passing. Once this had been a wheat field in full

bloom, but it was now just an ashen land covered in craters. Broken remains of undead servants and golems littered the ground, and strange rock formations rose out of the ground in places where the two sides tried to entomb each other in solid stone.

Somewhere out there, Zorian mused, a farmer was going to be very devastated when he saw what had happened to his harvest.

This was the third time he and Zach had clashed with the lich like this in the last few days. However, this was fine as far as Zorian was concerned. He considered this to be simply a part of their negotiation with Quatach-Ichl, rather than as a waste of time. They were proving to the lich that they were legitimate threats and that he should take them seriously. Earlier, when they had taken the crown from him in this restart, they had done it through an ambush and by employing something that could be dismissed as a mere trick. Through these fights, they were showing Quatach-Ichl there was more to them than that.

Quatach-Ichl had never stopped looking for them all this time, of course. He had no idea it was Zach and Zorian who had stolen his crown, since they had worn disguises when they had ambushed him and covered their tracks extremely well, but he had somehow managed to find out about the existence of their group in general. He seemed to have identified Xvim, Alanic, Ilsa and Kyron as the leaders of the group, possibly because they interacted with the authorities relatively often. He had tried to target them by ransacking their homes and such, but this hadn't been very effective. All temporary loopers had vacated their usual homes by now, and were not that easy to catch. Plus, he couldn't be too brazen about wrecking things or he would put his own invasion plans into danger.

This sort of situation must have been rather frustrating for the ancient lich, because he had attacked them immediately when they had shown up in front of him again. He hadn't even given them a chance to speak! Rude.



A giant, scintillating ball of red light screamed through the air towards Zorian. He thrust his hand at it, causing a conical wave of barely visible rainbow light to wash over it. It unraveled instantly, revealing a dimmer, but much more dangerous arrow of green energies hurtling at his chest.

The simulacrum standing beside him immediately thrust his arm into the path of the arrow, sacrificing it to shield Zorian from the blow. The arm exploded at the mere touch of the magical projectile, negating the attack but showering Zorian with a rain of metal shrapnel. Zorian didn't try to defend himself against the flying metal pieces, opting to keep casting his counterattack instead. The shrapnel was stopped by his shield, a faint honeycomb pattern momentarily becoming visible around him as it absorbed the attack, and then Zorian finished his spell.

Nothing visibly happened, but this was because his projectiles were utterly invisible – a pair of circular discs of severing force made their way towards the lich, who was currently busy dodging massive boulders and fireballs that Zach was sending his way.

Beside them, Princess released a loud roar into the air with six of her many heads, the last two being busy chewing through the throat of a giant eagle she managed to snatch straight out of the air. The great bird hung limply from her jaws, its riders nowhere to be seen. The fight had been going on for long enough that an Eldemarian response group had reached them and tried to involve themselves into the fight. Unfortunately for them, neither group had appreciated their interference. Their eagle riders had lost at least half of their numbers – one could see the charred husks of their eagles and mages mixed among the wreckage of the battlefield if one looked closely enough. The remaining eagles now circled uneasily in the sky above, keeping their distance and simply observing things.

Several sites in the distance were also smoking. These were

the places where Eldemarian forces had tried to set up artillery positions to pick them off from a distance. Quatach-Ichl hadn't liked that idea, though, and after he had finished wiping them all out, they did not bother trying a second attempt at it.

Zach shouted an order at Princess, and she roughly threw the dead eagle aside and disappeared. Well, teleported to be more exact. She reappeared instantly at Quatach-Ichl's side, where she instantly tried biting and trampling him. Even the ancient lich had trouble putting down such a large, regenerating beast... especially when Zach and Zorian were there keeping him from being able to focus solely on dealing with her.

Distracted as he was by the hydra and Zach, Quatach-Ichl did not notice the severing discs until it was too late and ended up losing one of his arms. This, in turn, placed him on an even bigger disadvantage and forced him to burn through a lot of his mana reserves to fend them off and stabilize himself. Now that he had no imperial crown on him, his mana reserves were no longer quite as ridiculous as they once were. He could no longer just outlast them by default. Now Zach proudly wore the crown to battle, which meant it was Quatach-Ichl who had to worry about a war of attrition.

The battle continued on for another five minutes before eventually slowing down. Eventually, the two sides found themselves staring at each other over an expanse of barren land, waiting for the other to make a move. Zach and Zorian could press their advantage, of course, but that would only cause the lich to flee. There was no point to that, really.

The seconds slowly ticked by with nothing to show for it. The only sounds were occasional screeching of giant eagles circling overhead and Princess hissing at them and at Quatach-Ichl in response.

"Hey," Zach finally said, his voice magically distorted and his

face hidden behind a blank white mask. He pulled the imperial crown off his head and twirled it around his finger playfully. "Are you looking for this?"

Quatach-Ichl's response was to fire one of his signature red disintegration beams at him. However, Zach did not move a finger to dodge or block it. The beam just curved unnaturally around him and missed.

"We might be willing to give it back," Zorian pointed out, his voice also distorted.

Quatach-Ichl cocked his head to the side curiously, saying nothing.

"Or we can just continue this for another couple of days, I guess," Zach added. "I don't know about you, but I kind of enjoy these clashes between us. A bit of excitement to spice up the day, you know?"

"So. You want to talk, huh?" Quatach-Ichl observed. He looked up at the Eldemar eagle riders circling above. "This probably isn't the best place to do it, though."

"Pick a time and place, then," Zach said. "Just don't keep us waiting for too long. We're on a bit of a time limit here. You drag your feet too much and we'll just keep the crown and be done with it."

Quatach-Ichl didn't bother answering him. He simply picked up a rock from the ground and squeezed it in his skeletal hand. Bright orange lines burned themselves into the surface of the rock before fading away. The lich then threw the rock at their feet and then teleported away.

Zorian picked the rock up. It was still warm, and there was a time and address carved into it.

Plus a single sentence at the end.

'Don't be late.'



Zorian had no intention of telling Quatach-Ichl about the time loop or trying to talk him into helping them get out. That would obviously just blow up in their faces. The ancient lich had no motivation to sabotage the plans of his original self by helping them escape into the real world. The last time he'd realized he was just a copy in a duplicate world, he'd had no compunctions whatsoever about sacrificing himself to advance the cause of his original by crippling them. A person like that wouldn't help them just to save his own hide, and they had nothing to really offer him.

But they did not have to tell him about the time loop. They did not have to ask him to help them to escape. What they needed at the moment was more time, and to get that they needed their Black Room project to succeed.

And with Quatach-Ichl's help, it could very well succeed *spec-tacularly*.

At the moment, they were in a private room in one of Cyoria's many restaurants, discussing this idea with the Ibasan leader. Quatach-Ichl was in his human disguise, and Zach and Zorian had agreed to come unmasked as a show of trust.

"So let me get this straight," Quatach-Ichl said, playing around with his glass. "You want me to help you improve Eldemar's time dilation room to a completely ridiculous rate of dilation—"

"Specifically, we need another five months," Zach said, cutting into his speech.

"—and in exchange you are going to give me my own crown back?" finished Quatach-Ichl, pretending he didn't hear him. "Doesn't that strike you as incredibly brazen and a foolish thing to ask for? I mean, I *will* get that crown back. It's just a matter of time."

"See, that's where you're wrong," said Zach. "Zorian, do your thing."

Zorian nodded and started casting the gate spell. Quatach-Ichl was instantly on guard, but he only tensed imperceptibly and did not attack them or voice any protest. He watched curiously as Zorian finished casting the spell and opened a miniature dimensional gate just above his palm.

If one looked closely, they could see a featureless patch of water by looking through the gate.

"Well... done?" Quatach-Ichl said dubiously. "You can cast the gate spell. Not something many people can brag about but—"

"Scan it," Zach told him. "See where it leads."

Frowning, Quatach-Ichl did just that, casting a bunch of divinations to determine the location of the other side of the portal. After a full two minutes of tinkering, he leaned back in his chair and gave Zach a strange look.

"It's just a random patch of the ocean, as far as I can see. Very far away from any land," he said.

"Precisely," Zach said, grinning from ear to ear. "Now... what do you think would happen if we just chucked this crown through that portal and closed it?"

Quatach-Ichl's eyes widened in shock and realization. The truth was that the deep sea was utterly unreachable from the perspective of humanity. Even the most powerful of mages would have no hopes of finding something that had been thrown away into the middle of the ocean. Even a lich like Quatach-Ichl, who had no need to breathe and potentially lived forever, would balk at the idea of searching through the ocean floor for a needle in a haystack.

If Zach and Zorian really did pick a random spot in the ocean, far away from any land, and threw the crown there... it would be scarcely different from destroying it utterly.

"You wouldn't," Quatach-Ichl said severely. "The value of that crown—"

"If we can't get this Black Room to work, we're dead," Zach said, leaning forward towards the lich. "There, I said it. We're desperate and our lives literally depend on this working. So if we fail, this crown is utterly useless to us. Why keep it around, then? Anyone we give it to would just become a target for you. Better to throw it into the sea so you can't have it."

"You..." said Quatach-Ichl, speechless for a moment. He shook his head. "I see. So I either get the crown back from you now or I lose it forever. Is that what you're saying?"

"That is what we're saying," Zach said, leaning back into his chair with a bright smile.

"Besides, don't pretend you aren't interested in the Black Rooms and that helping us with this is just a chore for you," Zorian pointed out. "We know for a fact that you have been interested in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria for quite some time. Black Room projects require a great deal of funding and manpower to be developed, and Ulquaen Ibasia is probably not very abundant in either. This is a bit unfortunate since, as a place full of undead, you are the nation most able to exploit this sort of thing to its full potential. No need to worry about lifespan limits if you don't age. And you definitely need every advantage you can get, if you are to really compete with Eldemar and other Altazian powers. Am I right?"

"Hm. Maybe," said Quatach-Ichl after a short pause. "You're saying I would get all the information regarding the Eldemarian Black Room project?"

"How else can we expect you to help us improve it?" Zorian asked. "However, you're thinking too small. It's not just the Eldemarian project that you would have access to. It's also the Sulamnon project, and the Falkrinean projects, and everyone's project.

Every Black Room project on the continent.”

He took out a bright red folder out of his bag and handed it to Quatach-Ichl. It did not hold any comprehensive notes, of course, but it held enough to make it clear what kind of information Zach and Zorian had at their disposal.

Quatach-Ichl leafed through the folder, slowly at first but picking up as he saw more and more. His eyebrows also got higher and higher as he got closer to the end.

”This... how did you even get this?” he asked them. He sounded honestly impressed.

”We raided every Black Room facility on the continent and stole their notes and research data,” Zorian said.

”Hmm,” Quatach-Ichl hummed lightly. ”I guess this really is very important to you...”

They spent the next fifteen minutes discussing the details of the proposed agreement. Though Quatach-Ichl never really agreed to anything and did his best to look uninterested, Zorian could tell they were gradually winning him over.

”So, there is one thing I’m really concerned about here,” the ancient lich finally said. ”If I agree to this and help you as we agreed... what motive do you have to honor your part of the deal in the end? Yes, I will admit a certain amount of interest in the information you have about Black Rooms, but the crown you stole from me is the real issue. What guarantee do I have that you’ll actually hand it over to me at the end?”

”If you agree to help us, we will hand you the crown right now,” Zorian said.

Quatach-Ichl raised his eyebrow at them. He had been doing that a lot in this conversation.

”Yes, really,” Zorian confirmed.

Zach had already used the Key to unbar the gate. Now the only value of the imperial items was in their basic abilities, and while the

crown was extremely useful... they needed Quatach-Ichl's help far more at the moment.

They could always steal the crown the original was wearing when they got to the real world.

"What makes you think I won't just take the crown and walk away laughing?" Quatach-Ichl asked curiously.

"You *could* do that, yes," Zach said. "We don't think you will, though. You are an honorable kind of undead."

"Huh. I don't know whether to feel pleased my reputation is so good or look down on you for being so foolish," the lich said.

"Does that mean you agree to the deal?" Zach asked him.

"Let me ask you a question," the Ibasan leader said. "What actually made you think you could work with me on this? I mean, yes, you clearly looked into me for quite some time before making your move. You even did that without me becoming aware that someone was plotting against me, and some part of me cannot help but be impressed by that. However, it still seems very strange you feel confident enough to propose this deal. Seems very risky."

"We live a very risky life," Zach said, grinning.

"Yet you're still alive," the lich noted with a more subdued smile of his own. "Clearly it is not just a matter of overconfidence, then."

"If we answer this question for you, will you answer one of ours?" Zorian asked him.

"Sure," Quatach-Ichl said, waving his hand in front of him carelessly. "Ask away."

"Why are you working with the Cult of the Dragon Below to release the primordial trapped in Cyoria?" Zorian asked. "I refuse to believe someone like you would be ignorant of what exactly you are tangling with. This is not some fancy summon that will go away in a few hours, nor is it just a powerful monster. This is a creature that even the gods had trouble killing. Why would you



set that thing loose on the world? I can see a regular rogue mage not caring about the consequences much, but surely you do. You have a homeland you care deeply for, and you probably intend to be alive for a very long time from now."

"Forever," Quatach-Ichl said. "I intend to live forever."

"Then why?" Zorian asked. "Why release a godlike entity that could very well destroy everything in a few centuries?"

The lich looked at him for a few seconds, looking amused.

"Ha ha!" the lich laughed. "So. You do know about the whole invasion business I'm a part of."

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "We do."

"As I expected," Quatach-Ichl responded. "I guess that kind of answers my question, doesn't it? If you know about the invasion plot, you already know I'm willing to enter into highly risky and insane deals if the benefits are big enough. But anyway, about your question... the thing is, I don't think the primordial is going to be allowed to run free that long. Never mind centuries, I don't think it is going to last two weeks!"

"Why?" Zach asked, frowning.

"Because I have faith in the angels," the lich said.

What?

"Sounds strange to have someone like me say that, doesn't it?" Quatach-Ichl said, smiling knowingly. "It's true, though. The gods may be gone, but the angels are still around and I have no doubt they would do everything in their power to either reseal or kill the primordial. Their restrictions limit their ability to meddle in the physical world, so it's easy to underestimate them, but they have some truly awe-inspiring beings and weapons on their side. I should know; I saw them personally fighting a few times. One primordial should not be impossible for them to handle."

"So you want to free the primordial, knowing the angels would take care of it long before it becomes your problem..." Zorian said.

"Yes," the lich confirmed. "Frankly, my main worry is not that the angels will not be able to handle it... my main worry is that they will take care of it too quickly and that the damage from its release and subsequent rampage will be too limited in scope. I ordered all the temples razed to the ground at the very beginning of the invasion, but I fear it may not be enough. The angels can be surprisingly subtle and underhanded when they want to be. For all I know, they may be working against me even now."

He had no idea.

"We are actually really fortunate," Quatach-Ichl continued, sounding very smug. "It is likely that the ability of the angels to interfere with our plans is even more limited due to the recent... hmm, *complications* in the spiritual spheres."

"You mean the fact all communications with the spiritual world have been severed lately?" Zorian asked.

"Hmm. Very well informed, indeed," Quatach-Ichl mumbled quietly. "Yes, that. It's rather unplanned, but not unwelcome. You could say the very heavens are helping me, ha ha!"

A small silence descended on the scene.

"So," Zach said. "Do we have a deal or not?"

"I suppose we do," the lich said. "I must be going senile in my old age, but I'll give you a chance."

"Oh yeah, one more thing," Zorian said. "We kind of also approached the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon about this and some other things. Unfortunately, they have been more unreasonable about this than you have so we have kind of ended up kidnapping them."

He threw a small painting on the table. It was very realistic, depicting a group of bound and gagged men. There was no proof that the picture was real, of course, but Quatach-Ichl frowned when he saw it and stayed silent.

"Since we're working together now, we were hoping you could help us convince them to cooperate," Zorian said. "At the very least, we need their help to make this deal between us actually work. Otherwise, I fear we'll be forced to subject them to our... intense cooperation techniques."

"Hmph. Of course the incompetent idiots got captured," Quatach-Ichl muttered.

He threw the picture onto the table before giving them a more cautious, speculative look. He then thrust his hand towards them, palm pointing upwards.

"The crown," he demanded, shaking his hand.

With a sigh, Zach reached towards one of his pockets and pulled out the imperial crown. He gave it a look of sad longing before slowly and carefully placing it in Quatach-Ichl's palm.

The lich immediately placed the crown on the top of his head, a web of geometric lines immediately lighting up all over his skin and flashing dangerously. For a moment his disguise dropped and his black skeletal form became plainly visible, but then he was back to 'normal' and his human guise was intact.

The crown was no longer visible, hidden under whatever magic Quatach-Ichl used to keep himself looking like a living being.

"Right," he said. "Take me to those clowns and I'll talk to them. They'll cooperate."



Things developed very quickly after that.

Zorian was honestly surprised how well things turned out. He was afraid the kidnapped mages would refuse to work or drag their feet whenever possible. He was afraid Quatach-Ichl would just

take the crown and just leave them to their devices while laughing at their stupidity. He was afraid the cult leaders would sabotage everything out of spite, resentful that they had been basically arm-twisted into agreeing with their plans.

None of these things happened. The kidnapped researchers mostly chose to work with them instead of being defiant. A surprising number of them were even enthusiastic about the project, once they realized what they had been recruited to work on. It probably helped that Zach and Zorian promised them they could take all the documentation related to the project back home with them when they were finished. Though somewhat skeptical about that, the sheer scale of the project seemed to put people at ease. There was no way they would kill so many people just to shut everyone up, right?

Quatach-Ichl was a skeleton of his word. Just like he had never tried to cheat them after agreeing to teach them his magical skills, he did not attempt to get out of helping with the project once he committed to it. Which was great, because his help was insanely helpful and they would never have gotten as far as they did without him. He was more than just a replacement for Silverlake – he was vastly better than her and Zorian was honestly kind of sorry they couldn't recruit him to work on the time loop exit project as well. With his help, their odds would have improved immensely.

Alas, the idea of informing him about the time loop was still as foolish as it always had been.

"Even if Red Robe had left the time loop thanks to a deal with Panaxeth, he still had to find a way to make his temporary marker last past the six month time limit," Zorian told Zach when they were discussing the topic at one point.

"You think it wasn't Panaxeth who helped him modify that?" Zach asked.

"Maybe it did, but I doubt the primordial actually did any mod-

ification itself. It may have given Red Robe clues and instructions, but he still needed to find someone to do that for him."

"And you think that someone was Quatach-Ichl," Zach guessed.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Yet, if Quatach-Ichl helped Red Robe acquire a permanent marker, why would he not acquire one himself?"

"Perhaps he couldn't," offer Zach. "I mean, the fact that temporary markers do not work on people for six restarts after the previous temporary marker runs out clearly indicates it's not the marker that does the counting. It's the Sovereign Gate and the Guardian of the Threshold."

"So?" Zorian asked.

"So that means modifying a temporary marker has to be done before the Sovereign Gate processes it in some way. In all likelihood, that means any change to them must be made before the restart in which they gained the marker ends. We know from your example that the Guardian can only do certain things at the end of the restart, and this is probably one of them. This would also explain why we never managed to figure out a way to modify them that worked. The moment that first restart ended the chance was lost, and we never even realized it."

"Ah," Zorian said. That did make a lot of sense... "So you think Quatach-Ichl was already a temporary looper for a while before Red Robe entered?"

"I don't know. I'm just throwing the idea out there, I guess," Zach said with a shrug. "What do you think happened?"

"I think maybe Quatach-Ichl didn't even want to leave the time loop, even if he found out about it," Zorian said. "I mean, definitely not through a method Red Robe and Silverlake used. Entering into a death pact with a primordial? Not a chance. And physically leaving on your own is very hard. I don't think even Quatach-Ichl

could have pulled it off, considering the amount of effort we had to put into it. Perhaps he simply made a deal with Red Robe, similar to what I have with Xvim, Kael and the others. Once he gets out, he gives Quatach-Ichl a mountain of notes and other information, and in exchange he helps modify Red Robe's marker."

"He could have still demanded a temporary marker of his own and modified that," Zach pointed out. "Just in case, you know."

"Yeah, I guess," Zorian said after a while. "I don't know. Maybe it's as you say, and he just couldn't. I could see Panaxeth giving Red Robe a very specific solution tailored for him alone. It probably doesn't want anyone getting out without making a deal with him."

Their interaction with the Cult of the Dragon Below was very adversarial at first. For one thing, they had kidnapped them and blackmailed them into working with them, so it was inevitable they were not too enthusiastic about cooperating. It also didn't help that Zorian evacuated all the shifters out of the city and informed the cult leadership that no child sacrifice would be allowed in their attempt to free Panaxeth from his prison. That led to a lot of shouting and even a brief exchange of combat spells.

However, the cult leaders would ultimately see the light when Zach and Zorian showed them the Sovereign Gate. They did not explain to the cultists what the object exactly did, but they did tell them it was a divine artifact that contained some of the essence of Panaxeth itself... and could thus be used as a key to open Panaxeth's prison. A much better key than the shifter blood essence they originally planned to use for the purpose, too.

Though their description was deceptive, the basic facts were entirely true – within the reality of the time loop, the Sovereign Gate could very much be used as a key to open Panaxeth's prison. In fact, using the Sovereign Gate was the key part of their plan to exit the time loop. This had been true while they had Silverlake's cooperation and it was true now.

Zorian had been a little worried that the cultists would figure out too much if given access to the Sovereign Gate, but thankfully that never happened. They were overjoyed with it, but only because it was a better, fancier key to releasing Panaxeth out of its prison. They never realized what was truly going on inside of it.

Considering it was a divine artifact, and that those were notoriously hard to figure out, Zorian probably shouldn't have been surprised at that.

In any case, their plans went off flawlessly. Better than they could have hoped, even. They had dug up a massive underground facility, reshaped the entire local geomantic web to fuel its creation, and then surrounded the imperial orb with layers upon layers of complicated wards and barriers made out of extremely expensive materials. The cost of the whole project was enough to bankrupt a small country and would give even a major nation like Eldemar and Falkrineia pause if they had to pay for it. By the end of it, even Quatach-Ichl seemed to be getting a little uneasy at the amount of resources and effort being put into this thing.

It didn't matter though, because he stayed true to his word and the project was finished on time. Six days before the end of the restart, the improved Black Room was done. A large throng of people – time loopers, cult leaders and the more enthusiastic of the kidnapped researchers – piled on into the imperial orb and then the time dilation was activated.

They would spend the next five months inside the imperial orb. Outside, a single day would pass.

Quatach-Ichl did not join them in the orb, despite helping them make it. This was smart of him, because Zach and Zorian would have killed him the moment the orb was isolated from the outside world and stolen his crown again. Zorian wasn't sure whether Quatach-Ichl could have escaped back to his phylactery if he was killed inside the palace orb, but even if he could they

wouldn't care. The important thing was that he could not escape when overpowered inside the orb, and that having him inside for the full five months was too much of a risk. The cult leaders were... manageable. Someone like Quatach-Ichl wasn't.

In any case, the next five months would consist of improving everyone's skills so they could help with the final exit plan, manufacturing the necessary ward stones and blueprints to prepare the terrain, and so on. It would be a bit of a challenge to hide the true meaning of all the preparations from the cult leaders and the like, but Zorian was not opposed to simply killing them if they ended up revealing too much to them, so whatever.

Zorian had another thing he wanted to do, though. Something he wanted to keep hidden from most people... including Zach.

Thus, he gathered most of the aranea loopers, plus Xvim and Daimen, and brought them to one of the isolated corners of the orb dimension for a talk.

"What a strange group you have gathered," Xvim remarked. "It seems you are still not satisfied with your mind magic skills, if I am reading the situation correctly."

"Seriously?" Daimen complained. "Aren't you good enough at that, already?"

"You can never get good enough at mind magic," one of the aranea responded.

"Indeed," Zorian said. "It's my best skill, and it's good to keep working on those. However, I didn't bring you here to work on my general mind magic skills. What I want... is to figure out a way to get past the Mind Blank spell and target a person with mind magic anyway."

A look of realization entered everyone's eyes. Even the aranea – their body language was a little hard to read but Zorian had gotten a feeling for it by now.

Then they all got to work.





The escape attempt had to happen at the end of the month, on the day of the Summer Festival. The reasoning for this was identical to the one the Ibasans and the cultists used to launch their invasion at that particular moment in time – this was the peak of the planetary alignment, when dimensionalism magic was at its strongest.

When the group left the imperial orb, only five days remained until the deadline. This was not much, but it was enough to make the necessary preparations. The time magic research facility was completely repurposed into a part of the exit ritual. Large sections of the Hole were covered in carved spell formula and embedded with strange metallic ward stones. The cultists they had spent five months training in dimensionalism and divinations had analyzed Panaxeth's prison and shared their results with the group. They seemed honestly grateful to Zach and Zorian for the 'help' they had given them, which made Zorian feel just a little bit guilty about intending to utterly betray them in the end. Not enough for him to do anything differently, but still.

Sadly, the final plan they had agreed upon had some unfortunate details. The original plan was to use Panaxeth's prison as a bridge, opening a dimensional gate that would connect a spot in the time loop with the same spot in the real world. That plan was now largely unworkable. Silverlake had been the only one who knew how to interact with the primordial's prison with sufficient finesse to make that possible. Despite their best efforts in trying to develop that skill in some of their people, they had failed to duplicate her feats. It did not help that they obviously could not experiment on the primordial prison itself while inside the imperial orb – they could only work on their general dimensionalism skills and try to guess what was necessary to interact with it properly.

Still, while the original plan was no longer possible, they did have an alternative. It was just that this plan required them to crack open Panaxeth's prison and then sacrifice the imperial orb to serve as a bridge they needed to connect the two realities.

There were two problems with this. The first was that it required them to destabilize the primordial's prison and make a crack in it – something that usually triggered a premature end to the restart and would allow Panaxeth to extend its influence outside the prison while they attempted to form the bridge. This would be solved by enclosing the area with multiple layers of dimensional membranes, so that even after breaching its prison, Panaxeth would not be truly 'free'. They weren't totally sure it would work, but it was the best idea they had and the theory was sound. Even if it worked, though, it would only stop the restart from ending immediately – it would do nothing to stop Panaxeth from rampaging about.

The other was that using the imperial orb that way meant they couldn't take it with them to the real world. It would have to stay behind to form a path for them, which would sharply limit the amount of things they could bring with them from the time loop as well as result in the total loss of all of the research notes and blueprints Zorian had stored in its memory bank.

That was... painful, to say the least. There was no other choice, however. The imperial orb was the only pocket dimension reinforced with divine power that they knew of. It was the only thing they knew of that could withstand the dimensional stresses involved in the procedure. Everything else would break in seconds.

Deciding what to bring with them and what to leave behind was stressful and led to a lot of arguments, but somehow they managed to cut their possessions down to a manageable level.

Days passed in a flash, until there was no more time. The Sum-

mer Festival was upon them, and the invasion was about to begin. Zach and Zorian had meant to kill all the cult leaders the day before, to make sure they wouldn't interfere with their work, but their unlikely allies surprised them by graciously agreeing to step aside of their own free will. The official reason was that they had 'figured out' that their group planned to release the primordial too, and that thus there was no need for them to get involved. Zorian did not believe that for a second, of course. The leadership of the cult wanted to *control* the primordial, not just release it. Moreover, Quatach-Ichl was never very far from the cult leaders these days, making direct moves against them impossible.

Reluctantly, they decided to let the matter drop. Hopefully the lich and the cultists would be too busy fighting the city to try and sabotage their operation. They had done their best to covertly prepare the city and its defenders for the upcoming invasion so the attackers should have their hands full in that regard. They simply made the last round of preparations and then settled down to wait.

Everything was ready.

Zorian turned to Zach.

"If this fails, I'm dead," he told him.

Zach shifted uncomfortably.

"The Guardian may have been lying for some reason," he said. "Perhaps you will wake up at the start of the next restart and—"

"Maybe," said Zorian, cutting him off. He really doubted it, though. "However, it's best to plan for things not being so convenient. Anyway, if everything fails and we all die, it's all up to you. You're our last and only hope."

"I... I guess," Zach sighed, looking really pained at the idea of him getting out of this thing alone. "Look, I know this probably sounds hollow... but if anything happens to you, I promise I will take care of your original self, alright?"

"That actually does make me feel somewhat better," Zorian said. "Come on. It's starting."

The ritual was taking place inside the Hole, on a floating platform. There was a raised dais in the center, on which the Sovereign Gate stood. It struck Zorian that this was a very similar setup to the one the cult had used for their ritual. They really had ended up supplanting their role in a way, hadn't they?

Of course, the real setup their group was using was much more extensive than what the cultists had used in the past. Though the main ritual grounds consisted of this one floating platform, the supporting mechanisms actually extended throughout the entire local underworld. Additionally, the entire space around them was enclosed in several layers of dimensional membranes that isolated the place from the outside world as much as possible. There would be no plucky trio of mages simply flying up to them in a sphere of white force to disrupt the whole thing from within, like Zach and Zorian had done to the cultists in one of the previous restarts.

The entire group arranged itself into a series of three concentric circles. Zach, Zorian, Daimen and Xvim were at the very center, surrounding the Sovereign Gate. They were the people most skilled in dimensionalism, and thus the most crucial for the effort. Around them were dozens of people who had enough skills to contribute, but not enough to take on the heavy burden that the main four were responsible for. Finally, there was the rest of the group who couldn't really help the procedure work, and could only stay back and pray for everyone's success. They were here only because once the area had been enclosed in dimensional membranes, no one could get in without disrupting everything and causing the ritual to fail. Thus, if they wanted to get them outside, they had to be present inside while the ritual took place.

After some shouting and pushing, everyone was in their assigned position and (hopefully) knew what to do. They started

casting.

For the first five minutes, nothing much happened. The air above the platform warped and twisted like hot summer air, but nothing more than that occurred. The group had to be exceptionally careful about their spell work and timing, and that meant work was bound to be slow. Still, everything was proceeding well so f–

The walls of the Hole shook, sending dust and pebbles everywhere and causing the inscribed spell formula in the walls to flare and flicker with an ominous blue light. A deep rumbling sound emanated from somewhere in the distance, like a growl of a titanic beast.

Crp. What the hell was going on outside? What were Quatach-Ichl and the cultists doing?

"Stay focused!" Xvim warned. "We are at a critical–"

Another tremor, this one even stronger, shook the entire place and everything suddenly went to hell. The shimmering, controlled breach they were working towards quickly spun out of control, and a pitch black, irregular crack suddenly manifested itself in the air around them.

"Shit!" Zach swore. "Suppress it! Suppress it!"

But it was too late. A swarm of dark brown tentacles, ropelike and covered in thorns, rushed out of the crack and sent everyone scattering out of their positions.

The crack widened, revealing a giant, three-lobed, inhuman eye lurking behind the dimensional barrier, and more tentacles rushed out to confront them. These were thicker, and had rather human-like hands attached at the end.

Though things had gone badly, all was not lost. They had made the ritual with certain tolerances, and this was still a manageable outcome. Quickly, many of the people standing around in the third circle of the ritual rushed forwards and started fighting the tentacles. People like Kyron and Taiven had no skills with which to

help the ritual itself, but they had plenty of combat power and no other duties to distract them. They fearlessly charged into the invading primordial mass, recklessly burning through their mana to keep it away from the Zorian and the others.

As for Zach and Zorian, they were busy suppressing the breach and could offer very little help. Should their attention lapse for even a second, Panaxeth would overwhelm them before they could blink. They frantically dodged the flailing tentacles, shaping and stabilizing the breach into something manageable.

Dimly, Zorian was aware that one of the 'hands' that got severed in half by Taiven suddenly grew legs and claws and flung itself at her. Taiven ended up tackled at the ground, unable to cast much of anything. Kyron managed to blast the thing off of her, but she had to be dragged off to the side, effectively out of the fight.

She was also bleeding heavily, leaving a thick trail of blood as she was dragged to the edge of the platform. Zorian had no idea if she was going to live, and couldn't really afford to check at the moment.

Not far from there, one of the aranea tried to block one of the thin, thorny tentacles with a force shield but found her defenses to be lacking. The tentacle punched through her shield and swiftly wrapped itself around her torso several times. That's when they found out that the thorns weren't just very sharp, but were also thin and bladed like a razor. The high-pitched scream of the aranea cut off quickly as the thorns effortlessly sliced through her exoskeleton and turned her into a mutilated corpse.

The tentacle then picked up the corpse and started waving it around like a bloody flail, sending blood and viscera everywhere. Some of the mages panicked or flinched when the aranean blood splattered all over them, even if no actual damage was done, and their efforts to keep the breach in check started to fail.

"Damn it," swore Zorian, reaching into his jacket pocket and

removing a handful of steel spheres densely covered in spell formula. He had been hoping to save these for later. He *needed* them later. But if he didn't use this now, they were done for.

He flung the spheres at the rift above and they spontaneously aligned themselves around it in a quickly a rotating ring before starting to glow. The primordial's tentacles reacted quickly, switching directions and trying to tear the sphere formation apart, but thankfully the rest of the group immediately realized they could not let that happen. A swarm of multi-colored rays, bullets, and more exotic projectiles intercepted the tentacles, halting their charge for a moment.

A moment was enough. The spheres erupted into blinding white light, blinding everyone for a moment, and then the rift abruptly shrunk. Some of the tentacles, cut off from the source of their mass by the shrinkage, fell from the sky, crashing onto the platform with a large thud.

Their relief was short-lived, however, since the tentacles soon started twitching and bubbling like boiling water, before starting to merge into an ovoid, chrysalis-like mass.

Alanic was the first to act, sending streams of white-hot flames at the forming cocoon, and then everyone joined in. However, the structure seemed to have developed some kind of resistance to the spells they had used on the tentacles thus far, because it was stubbornly resisting attempts to eradicate it.

Deep within it, some horrible shape rapidly began to form.

And the Sovereign Gate spontaneously started glowing white, a silhouette of the familiar form of the Guardian of the Threshold forming right above it.

"Shit..." Zorian couldn't help but mumble.

"Use the orb," Xvim said.

"But—" Daimen protested.

"We have no choice," Xvim interrupted. "We have no time. It has to be now."

After a moment of indecision, Daimen reached to his side and threw the imperial orb at the crack. Zach, Daimen, Zorian and Xvim quickly started casting layers upon layers of spells on it, trying to integrate it into Panaxeth's prison like they had intended.

It wasn't going well enough, so Zorian reached for more of the items he prepared for this – a collection of metal tablets, several staves made out of alchemically-treated wood, and a box of several hundred marbles, each of which contained a three-dimensional spell formula made out of metal wire. He sacrificed it all in succession and even burned some of his life force to make his spells hit harder. He was fairly sure he noticed Zach, Xvim and Daimen doing the same, burning their life to make sure the fusion worked.

They succeeded. The imperial orb pulsed three times with translucent waves of rainbow light before pulling the pitch black rift into itself. The crack in the sky disappeared, but the orb seemed to pull in the space around it still. The air warped and rippled, forming a pitch black sphere above the orb, its surface rippling like water. Around it, a smoky grey torus burst into existence, crackling with multicolored energies. Then another, and then another, until three grey tori revolved around the pitch black sphere that had suddenly grown perfectly still and featureless.

The exit. It was ready!

Unfortunately, that's when the glowing form of the Guardian of the Threshold finished materializing. It did not speak a word, simply raising its hand at the group and releasing a thick, blinding beam of white energy at them.

The beam did not even cross half of the distance towards them before it suddenly split into more than a hundred thinner, but equally bright beams.

Zach and Zorian's simulacrams, previously held in reserve,



sprang into action. So did the combat golems Zorian made for the occasion. But the beams were fast and each one swerved and pivoted in the air like a living thing, tracking its chosen target. Hastily erected defenses did nothing to stop them, and Zorian was pained to see Ilsa, Nora, and two of the aranea killed on the spot when the beams hit them.

The exit was right there, open and ready, yet four people had died so close to their salvation.

Some people fired a counter-attack at the spectral form of the Guardian, but the entity did not attempt to dodge or shield itself from the attacks in any way. Every attack that reached it simply sank into its glowing form and disappeared. There was no indication that the Guardian had suffered any damage from the attacks, or even that it had noticed them.

Damn it, they needed to start the evacuation now! Zorian started directing his simulacrum to start the preparations, but that's when the primordial chrysalis from before suddenly exploded, a large, vaguely humanoid beast bursting out of it. It had four arms. A three-eyed, skeletal head stood attached to its shoulders through a long, flexible neck. Its tail was extremely long and thin, and ended with a hand-like appendage. Glossy, chitinous carapace covered it, studded with thin, razor-like spikes.

It roared horribly, its sound incredibly loud and grating... and then it dropped on all six of its main limbs and charged straight at the center of the platform, where Zorian and the others were located. Anyone who tried to get in its way was flung aside like a rag doll and every spell that hit it was resisted with little to show for it.

The glowing form of the Guardian raised its hand again, another beam sparkling on its fingers.

And then, to add a final insult to it all, the entire area rocked and shook as a series of loud booms erupted from somewhere

above.

Zorian's heart sank. There was no mistaking it. Someone was attacking their ritual grounds from the outside.

Probably Quatach-Ichl and the cultists.

Damn it! How did they—

No. No, that was a silly thing to ask. He had to focus on the now. He had to—

The Guardian fired another white beam of death. It once again flowered into hundreds of smaller beams, and this time they were not capable of minimizing the effects. Zorian joined his simulacrum in blocking as many as he could, but it was not enough. He watched, horrified, as Kael tried to shield his little daughter from one of the beams with his body. The beam drilled straight through them, killing them both on the spot.

Kyron managed to block the beam, but that made him too distracted to deal with the primordial beast running up to him from behind. Its massive, clawed hand swiped across him, shattering through his hastily erected shield and cleaving him in half before continuing its relentless advance.

Another series of explosions sounded from just outside the ritual grounds and the spell formula that stabilized the exit to the time loop flickered dangerously.

A small, almost imperceptible crack appeared on the imperial orb floating just beneath the exit. It could no longer handle the strain of maintaining the bridge to the real world.

Somewhere on the edge of the platform, Zorian could feel Taiven's soul suddenly wink out. She probably bled to death while everyone was too busy fighting for their life to tend to her wounds.

Suddenly, it dawned to Zorian that they were all going to die here. They were so close, they had practically won, and yet—

"Truthfully, I think I'd always known it would end this way," Daimen suddenly said with a small sigh.

He took a knife out of his pocket and ruthlessly slashed at his wrists.

"Daimen! What are you doing!?" Zorian screeched at him.

"You have to live," Daimen told him, his hands trembling as he went through a complicated series of gestures with them, his wrists heavily dripping blood. "It's fine if I die, but you have to live. Don't let it all be in vain. It *can't*!"

Suddenly, he thrust his bloody hands towards the collapsing exit in the air, pouring every shred of his life force into the stabilization wards. The cracks on the imperial orb stopped spreading, the black surface of the exit calmed down into its smooth, peaceful state, and the spell formula lining the walls stopped fluctuating for the moment.

Xvim watched the scene for a moment before focusing on Zorian.

"Go," he said. "Zach and I will keep the exit stable while you pass through."

"Zach doesn't need this, but you—" Zorian protested.

"Go!" Xvim shouted at him. "Zach cannot keep this stable by himself. Go now!"

He... could do that, yes. He could go through by himself, abandoning everyone to their fate. But that...

He glanced at the others, desperately fighting to keep the primordial beast away from them and keeping the Guardian of the Threshold busy with other targets. They knew the exit was there. They could have just dropped everything and made a mad dash at the exit in hopes that some of them would make it. Wouldn't that be the smartest choice, individually?

Yet none of them had made that choice.

Steeling his heart, Zorian stopped focusing on the maintenance of the exit, handing over his part of the burden to Xvim and Zach, who visibly struggled under the increased strain. He then crouched and jumped, casting a quick flight spell and rushing straight at the exit.

The primordial beast screeched in anger, increasing its pace. The Guardian suddenly teleported in front of Zorian, blocking his path and forcing him to evade and block another series of white beams that chased after him, pivoting in the air and curving their trajectories to keep him in their sights. Some of the other loopers helped him out, ignoring their own safety to block some of the beams with their own spells. The ceiling shook again, this time more severely than before, but Daimen's final sacrifice had allowed things to keep working for now.

He was only inches from the exit when the primordial beast suddenly opened its massive bestial mouth and fired some kind of serrated bony spike straight at his chest.

He was practically a spent force by this point, and could do nothing to stop the spike from slamming straight into his back and passing straight through his chest.

An explosion of blood and viscera erupted out of him, his whole chest a ruined mess. Perhaps it was just him losing all sensation as death took him, but it felt to him that everything suddenly went quiet for a moment as his flight spell failed and his body began to fall to the ground, trailing blood behind it.

His wound was too serious. He was dead for sure.

Closing his eyes, he initiated the final contingency, separating his soul from his body. A complicated soul spell he had always kept running in the background suddenly activated, allowing him to maintain consciousness in soul form. Without hesitation, he abandoned his dying form and rushed straight into the exit in front of him.

Before either the primordial beast or the Guardian of the Threshold could stop him, he was already through, following invisible paths that would lead him to the real world.

As a soul, his ability to perceive the real world was highly limited. He followed invisible lines of space and time, racing through a tunnel he could dimly perceive in front of him. Most of his ability to navigate in this place came from the fact he had absorbed the dimensional perception of the tunneler toad and gained a considerable amount of proficiency with it in the five months he had spent in the imperial orb.

Yet, that same ability was also threatening to undo everything he had accomplished. He had bound that ability to his mana reserves and his body, but his body was no more. One of the very pillars that were supposed to anchor the ability to him was gone, and his mana reserves shuddered and churned, threatening to destabilize. Should that happen, he would lose all ability to cast spells or even direct his mana. Everything would still fail in the end. He had to hold on for a little while longer. He focused tightly on keeping control over his mana reserves, even as he tried to navigate to the exit in the real world.

Dimly, he felt the tunnel start to collapse behind him. Apparently Xvim and Zach had finally lost their struggle to keep the passage open. Nobody except Zorian had gone through, as far as he could tell.

He drove himself to travel faster.

Finally he was out! He could feel the space open up around him, the tunnel ending. For a while he was disoriented, confused about what he had to do. His mind was fuzzy – he had never spent this much time in soul form, especially not with destabilizing mana reserves. However, he eventually remembered what he had to do. He had to track down his old body.

Fortunately, that was not so difficult. He had no idea where

the exit had deposited him, exactly, but he and his original body shared a certain bond with each other.

It was hard to cast much as a pure soul, but Zorian could do enough to craft himself a set of ghostly hands. From that point, everything became easy. A couple of divinations to lock down on the location of his old self, a couple of quick teleports to enter his room and he was there.

His old self was sleeping, blissfully unaware of the invasion. Soul Zorian did not hesitate. His soul form plunged straight into his old self's chest, causing the boy to gasp before all his body locked up as the two souls started to fight for the ownership of the body.

Maybe it was quick. Maybe it was slow. Zorian had never fought a soul battle or possessed someone's body before. What he did know was that his old self never had a chance. From the moment he attacked, the ultimate outcome was never in question.

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling of his room.

His room. Yes. Definitely his room.

He rose into a sitting position and looked around. It was night. He thought he would maybe wake up when Kirielle came to jump on top of him, but then he remembered that the time loop technically began much earlier than that.

He placed his right palm in front of him. A ghostly orb of white light bobbed up and down just above it.

The soul of his old self.

He stared at it for a full five minutes, trying to decide what to do with it. He had considered the issue before, of course, but now that he was actually here...

After a while, he closed his palm around the soul, causing it to fade away and move on to the afterlife.

To do anything else, seemed... cruel.

Then he jumped out of bed, took a look around his dark, silent room and cracked his knuckles.

It was time to get to work.





## THE SCRAMBLE

In the months leading up to their disastrous exit from the time loop, Zorian and the other members of the group had entertained many different outcomes and how each of them would reflect on what they would have to do immediately after crossing over into the real world. This included the possibility of having to cross over in soul form, much like Zorian had ended up doing in the end. Theoretically, this meant that Zorian already knew what to do and how to arrange his priorities.

In practice, things weren't so simple. While he had succeeded in leaving the time loop and possessing his old body, the process had a critical flaw.

Their theorizing had assumed that, if Zorian executed everything correctly, he would be at his top form upon seizing his body. After all, he would possess a body that was flawlessly matched to his soul, so there shouldn't be any rejection issues that usually plagued possession attempts. Having crossed over as a soul meant losing all the physical resources and information storage they had planned to bring, but at least his magic would be fully intact.

In reality, he didn't even have *that*.

The problem was the dimensional ability of the tunneler toad he had anchored to himself in the time loop. His body may have

been perfectly matched to his soul, but it wasn't the body to which he had anchored the ability to. Without the life force portion of the anchor, the part located in his mana reserves couldn't persist for long, either. He was fortunate he had managed to prevent its collapse before successfully possessing his old body, or else he'd be dead right now and all the sacrifices the others had made would have been for nothing. However, once he established full control of his body, the ability anchor in his mana reserves finally gave out and unraveled completely.

Unraveling a permanent enhancement like that was not a small matter. It caused him no pain, and he would not be permanently crippled by any means, but his mana reserves would be in utter turmoil for the next four to five days.

An eternity, considering time was of the essence.

Standing completely still in the darkness of his room, Zorian closed his eyes and sensed his mana again with a more critical eye. It was bad... but not unmanageable. A regular mage would have been completely crippled by the chaotic, unruly nature of his current mana reserves, but Zorian had honed his shaping skills to virtual perfection. Plus, he had experienced something similar before, when Quatach-Ichl had inflicted grievous soul damage, so he had experience in how to handle these sorts of things.

Slowly and carefully, he waved his hands in the air in front of him, softly muttering a spell chant. After some time, a single flawless simulacrum materialized in front of him.

The simulacrum did not speak or wait for Zorian to give him a command. He knew what was asked from it. He simply walked back to the bed, lied down, closed his eyes, and focused completely on calming down the raging mana reserves they both shared.

Zorian breathed a sigh of relief as he felt his mana reserves immediately stabilize into a more manageable form. Good. So long as one of his simulacrums focused all their attention on stabilizing

them, his mana reserves would remain usable. It wasn't the same as him being in top form, but it would do for now.

His spellcasting restored to a usable condition, he immediately threw himself into the next task before him: confirming that Zach had left the time loop and waking him up before Red Robe had a chance to assassinate him in his sleep. A critical task that would normally require him to drop everything else and rush to Cyoria, but which might be achievable through faster and cheaper methods.

Quickly rummaging through his old school supplies for alchemical reagents and deconstructing a bunch of old items scattered around his room for necessary materials, Zorian constructed a simple ritual circle on the floor of his room. He then spent almost a minute performing a special long-range ritual spell... one that tapped into his marker. The same marker that he had shared with Zach.

There was no guarantee that Zach still had the marker on his soul, of course, even if he had successfully left the time loop. Unlike Zorian, Zach was supposed to leave the time loop the normal way for a Controller. That is to say, the Guardian of the Threshold would perform the transfer. For all Zorian knew, this process may have involved erasing the marker, since it was no longer necessary.

However, Zorian had a suspicion that the marker was definitely going to stay embedded in Zach's soul. A suspicion that turned out to be correct when the ritual finished, and the information from it rushed into Zorian's mind. He could feel the existence of the second marker in the direction of Cyoria, shining like a star in the darkness.

He breathed a sigh of relief. He had made it out. There was no reason why he wouldn't have, but so many things had gone wrong that Zorian did not dare take anything for granted.

He then reached out to Zach over the faint connection pro-

vided by the ritual and their identical markers. His mana reserves dropped like a stone. Bridging the vast distances between Cirin and Cyoria was hard and costly, even for such a small thing. Without the two identical markers connecting them, it would have been entirely impossible.

Just before he was about to run out of mana, he succeeded in touching Zach's soul. It was just a light brush, but it was enough. A sharp spiritual jolt shook his soul, shocking him awake.

After observing things for a second to make sure he had really succeeded, Zorian broke the connection and stood up. He couldn't actually talk to Zach through a spell like that, so there was no point in burning through his mana to keep the link going. They would talk more once they actually met.

He waited for a while till his mana reserves recovered and then cast the simulacrum spell three more times. Like the first simulacrums, these ones did not bother speaking either. There was no point. Zorian's connection with his simulacrum was very strong, intertwining them on both mental and spiritual levels. Though they still had their own individual minds, they were constantly exchanging thoughts with Zorian and each other, much of it on a purely unconscious level with no need to expend effort or concentration to make it happen.

Four simulacrums. This was the most he could manage at the moment while still remaining effective. He would be casting a lot of magic in the near future, so he had to keep his mana regeneration rate at acceptable levels.

He considered what to do next for a moment, mentally bouncing ideas back and forth between his simulacrums. While they talked, they silently wandered around the house and rummaged through his belongings, gathering materials. They didn't have too much time to spend on making equipment, but some basic spell aids and disguises were a must.

The chance that Red Robe and Silverlake would target his family immediately after exiting the time loop was low, in his opinion. Those two had more pressing issues to tackle for now, and Cirin was far from Cyoria. Red Robe might not even know about Zorian and where he lived, or else he would have knocked Zorian out of the loop before leaving it. Silverlake obviously did know, but she and Red Robe presumably did not know each other before now and would struggle to establish trust.

Nonetheless, Zorian knew he couldn't just leave his family undefended. He had to either move them to a secure place or leave a simulacrum behind to protect them.

Gathering them up and moving them to some distant area was the safest option. The most responsible option. However, that would be a lengthy and mana expensive task, and many critical tasks would have to be postponed until it was done. He couldn't make that choice. Xvim... Alanic... all the temporary loopers that had died to keep the exit open instead of trying to save their own lives... they had made that choice because they trusted him to look after everyone's interests once outside. He couldn't just blow everything off in order to make sure his family was perfectly protected.

Plus, he was ultimately a bit selfish. Evacuating the house would require him to inform his parents about what was happening or use mental compulsions on them. He didn't want to do either. He wanted some semblance of normalcy to remain between them for now. If possible, he wanted to just wait for them to leave for Koth as they normally did. In just a few days, his parents would be on a ship at sea and all but unreachable. The problem of their safety was ultimately self-solving.

It was unreasonable, perhaps, but he still held on to a tiny sliver of hope that all this could be solved without informing the whole world.

He shook his head, forcibly banishing his idle thoughts and fears for the future. It wasn't the time. Just as it wasn't the time to be shaken by the death of people that had been working with him on this project for more than a year. He'd worry about that later.

A little while later, all the preparations were finished and he was back in his room. He glanced at the simulacrum to his left and his copy silently nodded at him before wandering off to secure the house. Cirin was not a magically potent area, and the materials he had at his disposal left a lot to be desired, but it should be enough. He would have to appropriate a fair portion of the family silverware, though...

For a second, Zorian stared at the two remaining simulacrams in front of him. Four simulacrams, but he could really only use two of them. So inefficient. Still, one had to work with what they had, not what they wished they had. He silently told the two to get ready, and then all three of them started to cast a powerful teleportation spell. Moments afterward, they were enveloped by a ripple in space and disappeared.

Lying on the bed, the first simulacrum did not even twitch at their departure. He was wholly consumed in his task, knowing that if his attention lapsed even slightly over the next couple of hours, it could spell disaster for everything they were trying to accomplish. Having their mana reserves suddenly turn chaotic in the middle of a critical moment could kill the original or dispel one of his fellow simulacrams before they could accomplish their goals. Fortunately, Zorian's research into mental enhancements had taught him how to assume some very useful states of mind, or else he likely wouldn't have been able to maintain focus over such long periods of time.

The final iteration of the month had not started auspiciously, but Zorian and his simulacrams were determined to make it work anyway.



Cyoria was fairly easy to teleport to, since there was a teleport beacon placed in the middle of the city. Though the real purpose of the construction was to redirect all incoming teleportation into one specific area, so that they could be more easily monitored and policed, it also acted as a sort of lighthouse for teleportation magic. This meant that while Red Robe and Silverlake would find it very inconvenient and mana expensive to travel to a small rural town like Cirin, it was relatively easy and cheap for Zorian to teleport himself towards Cyoria.

The moment he and his two simulacrum had arrived into the city, they each split off to pursue their own tasks. For simulacrum number three, that meant checking up on Veyers. After all, there was a good chance that Red Robe was actually Veyers, in which case he would probably try to get his old self out of the line of fire as soon as possible. Probably. Whatever the case, visiting Jornak's place to see what was happening there was of very high importance in Zorian's mind.

The simulacrum moved rapidly through the streets of Cyoria, using his own two feet to move around instead of wasting mana on teleportation. He wore a featureless white mask over his face and his other features were hidden with heavy clothing and layers of privacy wards. The original and the other simulacrums similarly hid their identity. It was likely they would come face-to-face with Red Robe at some point, and there was no point in making things easy for him by openly identifying themselves as Zorian Kazinski. Silverlake knew who Zorian was, of course, but she was also an untrusting bitch, and it might take a while for her and Red Robe to set aside their differences and start working together. If Zorian could keep his identity secret for a few extra hours with his disguise, he would not consider this a wasted effort.

As he approached Jornak's house, the simulacrum grew more cautious. He slowed his pace, circling the house wearily. He knew how to bypass the house wards, of course. He'd done it dozens of times, by now. However, if Red Robe was really here, he had likely modified or upgraded those just in case. It's what Zorian himself would have done and there was no reason to assume Red Robe had been any less cautious.

His paranoia soon proved itself well-warranted. As he studied the house wards, he noticed they had been subtly changed. He was lucky, or maybe unlucky, because this was pretty damning proof of Red Robe's activity.

Five minutes later, the simulacrum managed to get past the defenses and entered the house. What greeted him was eerie silence. The house was dark and abandoned, and it only took a few moments for the simulacrum to realize that both Veyers and Jornak were gone. Walking around the place, the simulacrum could see numerous signs of frantic activity scattered around the place: closets and cabinets flung open, drawers ripped out of their sockets, piles of clothes and small items scattered all over the floor...

It wasn't just that Veyers and Jornak were gone – they had gathered up anything of real worth from the house before leaving. This was an evacuation, not a kidnapping.

The simulacrum cast a number of divination spells, trying to see if he could get some clues about where the two had gone, but failed to find anything. That was to be expected, though – it would have been shockingly incompetent of Red Robe to leave a trail behind him as he evacuated the place.

The simulacrum stood in the living room of the abandoned house, fiddling with a small white statuette of a dragon that he found on the floor, lost in thought for a while. Did this prove that Veyers was Red Robe? Well, not exactly... but it did prove that he was connected to him somehow. Jornak was also gone, which



could mean a lot of things. Maybe the lawyer was the real Red Robe. Admittedly, the Red Robe that Zorian met in the past was roughly his own height and thus a poor match for Jornak, who was a fully grown man, but that could be accomplished easily through shapeshifting. Or maybe the time-looping Veyers just appreciated what the older man had done for his old self and so had taken him to safety as well. Whatever the case, they were all gone now, and there was little point in staying here when there were so many other things to be done.

He thought about torching the whole place out of spite, but it was better not to escalate things for now. Red Robe clearly cared a lot for these two, so burning down Jornak's place might genuinely anger him. Sure, they were already irreconcilable enemies, but doing this would make things personal. He might go after Zorian's friends and family sooner than he otherwise would have.

Before he moved on, the simulacrum quickly contacted the original and the other copy to find out what was happening on their end. They were both currently fighting and couldn't talk much. Should he go help them? No... the whole point of creating so many simulacrums was to pursue many different goals simultaneously. He would just have to trust the other two would be able to complete their task on their own.

Instead he went north, towards Knyazov Dveri.

It was time to see what Silverlake was up to.



While simulacrum number three was checking out Jornak's house, number four had rushed into the tunnels beneath Cyoria to contact the aranea living beneath the city.

Once, the Cyorian web had been his closest allies. They had taught him how to control his telepathic abilities, helped him make

sense of the invasion, and provided a semblance of companionship in a world where most things were painfully short-lived. Spear of Resolve, the aranean matriarch, had intended to betray him in the end... but he was still devastated when they were all erased out of the time loop.

Part of his desire to see them as soon as possible was definitely emotional. Everything he knew about the time loop suggested they would be alive and well out here in the real world, but he had to see that with his own eyes. In his mind, he couldn't help but draw parallels between the aranea and the temporary loopers that had sacrificed themselves so that he could cross over into the real world. He needed some good news right now.

However, there was also a practical side to his visit. Zach and Zorian were quite capable of dismantling the entire invasion in a matter of days, halting it in its tracks... but that was without Red Robe's interference. Plus, who could forget Silverlake was also working against them? Thus, the idea of just quickly shutting down the invasion was untenable. However, this did not mean they would just sit back and do nothing about them. If they wanted to do serious damage to the invaders, the best time to do so was right now, at the very beginning of the month, before Red Robe and Silverlake had a chance to warn all their allies about the danger.

They had to move quickly, and that meant recruiting helpers... and the Cyorian aranea were one of the few powerful groups that Zorian felt they could win over to their side very quickly.

Apparently Red Robe agreed with his assessment, because when simulacrum number four arrived on the outskirts of the aranean settlement he found them locked in a desperate battle against Red Robe.

The battle had clearly been raging for quite some time. Mutilated aranean bodies and arachnoid viscera lay scattered every-

where, and several of the caves and tunnels had been collapsed by both sides in an attempt to get rid of the other. A choking cloud of dust lingered in the air, reducing visibility.

Red Robe was just as Zorian remembered him. A bright red robe covered him completely, hiding most of his features, and a patch of magical darkness obscured his face. His movements were unhurried and methodical, though instead of painlessly and instantly 'killing' the aranea in front of him he mostly relied on various force spells to crush them and cut them apart. The sight of him fearlessly advancing forward like an invincible juggernaut and killing aranea in very brutal and bloody ways was probably very intimidating to the spiders. Zorian suspected Red Robe was trying to crush their will to fight and scatter them before he ran out of mana.

Simulacrum number four quickly realized that Red Robe in front of him was a simulacrum, just like him. It made sense, really. Much like Zorian had created a bunch of copies to perform several tasks simultaneously, Red Robe had likely done the same.

He immediately rushed into the battle, firing a powerful incineration ray at Red Robe's back. The other simulacrum did not show any signs of surprise, as if he had fully expected the interruption. He simply turned to the side in a smooth, practiced motion, blocking both Zorian's spell and one from a nearby aranea.

Simulacrum number four did not speak, and neither did his opponent. They simply circled each other and kept launching probing spells at one another, testing each other's skills and spell selection. The simulacrum was a bit disappointed at Red Robe's silence. Based on his previous experiences with the third time looper, he had expected Red Robe to try and strike up a conversation or start monologuing. That could have given Zorian an opportunity to figure something out about his opponent and his goals.

Probably why he was staying silent. Oh well.

The aranea did not interfere in their fight much. Some of the angrier ones, who had lost friends and family members to the assault, kept trying to launch surprise attacks at Red Robe whenever they spotted an opening. Many of those ended up dying, since their attacks exposed them to Red Robe's retaliation. Zorian tried to keep Red Robe too occupied to focus on the aranea much, but there was only so much he could do. Thankfully, most of the aranea had had the common sense to pull back deeper into their settlement to regroup and recover their strength.

After a while of this sort of spell exchange, Red Robe suddenly stopped. He appeared indecisive for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, but he eventually just shook his head minutely and reached for a short spell rod on his belt. Zorian tensed and prepared for the fight to escalate, but it turned out he had misjudged the situation. The rod was a simple recall spell. The moment Red Robe touched it, his body blurred for a second and then he was gone.

Zorian's simulacrum did not try to pursue. He was here to save the aranea and recruit them as allies, not to take out a disposable pawn that Red Robe could recreate in a couple of minutes. This was already a victory.

He relaxed and waited for the aranea to approach him, reasoning that trying to be proactive wouldn't be a good idea at the moment. He may have saved them, but the aranea were still obviously tense and might lash out if they felt pressured.

Thankfully, he did not have to wait long. It took less than two minutes for the aranea to assemble a welcoming party that cautiously approached him. They were visibly surprised when he responded to their greetings with telepathy and fumbled in indecision when he asked to talk to Spear of Resolve. The matriarch was true to her name, however. She quickly interrupted the talks and announced she would be arriving to talk to him personally,

brushing aside the outraged protests of her subordinates.

Soon he was standing in front of her again, the two guards she brought along standing behind her and giving him their best menacing looks. To most people, she would doubtlessly look like any other aranea – a giant black jumping spider, same as any other. For the simulacrum, though, the sight brought back a flood of memories rushing to his mind.

He wanted to punch her right in that big-eyed, manipulative face... but also hug her and tell her he was glad to see her. This was probably similar to how Zach had felt upon seeing him on Cyoria's train station, so long ago.

Except that he had much better impulse control than Zach and wasn't going to punch her.

Or hug her, for that matter.

[Greetings, friend,] Spear of Resolve said politely. [I am grateful for the help you provided us in our hour of need. We are not ungrateful people and will surely find something to reward you with, but I sense there is more to this visit than just this.]

[True,] the simulacrum sent back. [We have many things to talk about.]

The matriarch tapped her front legs against the ground curiously.

[Curious. There was a curious note of nostalgia bleeding over into your messages,] she pointed out.

[Ah. Sorry about that,] he said, wincing slightly. [I can't help it. You don't remember this, but we knew each other.]

[Oh? I find that very hard to believe,] the matriarch said.

[It's true,] the copy insisted. [We worked quite closely in the past.]

The matriarch sent him a note of patronized amusement.

[I have a very good memory when it comes to people, and you seem like a very noteworthy person. I would surely remember if

I'd had the fortune to meet a mage of your caliber,] she said. [In particular, the level of control you have over your Gift would immediately make you stand out in the sea of people I have met over the years.]

An entirely reasonable argument. Sadly, the simulacrum didn't have time to take things slowly and delicately guide the matriarch to the correct conclusion. He decided to take a risk and be totally blunt.

[I come from the future,] he told her.

The matriarch was silent for a moment. Several other aranea in the vicinity shifted in place from either amusement or incredulousness. They were clearly listening in on their conversations through their link with the matriarch. Nothing out of Zorian's expectations, really.

[That's... quite a claim you're making, friend,] the matriarch said. She seemed more intrigued than dismissive, which surprised Zorian a little. He supposed that, even if she did not take his claim seriously, she wanted to hear his clarification.

[Zorian Kazinski,] said the simulacrum, taking off his mask as a show of trust. If this worked, he would be working closely with these people anyway. [You can just call me Zorian.]

[Zorian, then,] the matriarch agreed. [Zorian, you surely realize that great claims like that require great proof to be taken seriously?]

Zorian no longer had the matriarch's memory packets, which meant that the method he used to employ to get her cooperation in the past was no longer possible. However, that was okay. He had other means of catching her attention.

[Of course I do,] the simulacrum said. [I can even show you my memories of the timeline I came from.]

[Come now, Zorian,] the matriarch scolded. [Any memory you show me could be fabricated entirely. That proves nothing.]

[Not quite,] the copy responded, a small grin on his face. [If I showed you some random scene with little relation to you, then yes, it could easily be a forgery. But what if I showed you a detailed map of your inner settlement, including the insides of your secret research room and your treasury? What if I demonstrated detailed knowledge about your secret research and your trading networks – the sort of things only your most respected elders have access to? What if I told you the names of every aranea that makes up your web, described what the insides of your private rooms look like, and demonstrated I could mimic the speech patterns and personality traits of a great many of your subordinates? Such things do not necessarily prove I come from the future, but certainly prove *something*, no? How could I possibly know that?]

The matriarch's legs began to twitch uncontrollably.

A small commotion broke out among the aranea surrounding them. The simulacrum could tell there was a heated discussion going on in the background.

"Enough," Spear of Resolve suddenly said, speaking up verbally for the first time since the meeting began. Obviously she wanted the simulacrum to hear this too.

"But honored matriarch!" one of the guards protested.

"I've decided!" she said firmly, spinning around in place to stare down the guard, who shrank back at her admonishment. She then turned back towards the simulacrum.

[I'll open my mind to you,] the matriarch said telepathically. [Show me these 'memories' of yours.]

Zorian's copy did just that. He tapped into the stored memories inside his head, reproducing them as best as he was able. For several hours the aranea watched in uncomfortable silence as the simulacrum laid their closely guarded secrets bare to them. He showed them his conversations with Spear of Resolve, Novelty and the various guards and ambassadors he had interacted with in the past.

By the time he was finally done, the matriarch was clearly disturbed at the amount of information he possessed. It was as the simulacrum had said - it wasn't ironclad proof that he was from the future, but it did mean he had access to just about everything about them at some point. That was disturbing enough on its own.

[This... how could you possibly know all of this?] the matriarch asked hesitantly. She usually tried to project an air of certainty and confidence when interacting with him, even when she was secretly bothered behind the façade. There was none of that now, however. [Even if you're from the future, even if we worked together in this future, I would *never*-]

[You died,] Zorian's copy told her bluntly, cutting her off. [You all died. That cloaked man that just attacked you earlier? In the future I know... I was not strong enough.]

[Oh,] the matriarch said, deflating.

[You were supposedly allied with us, but you searched our city for anything of value the moment we died,] one of the aranea elder interjected, accusation clear in her voice.

[You would have done the same in my place,] he said, wholly unrepentant.

The aranea said nothing to that.

[I am curious,] the matriarch eventually said, picking her words carefully. [If I were to just tell you to go away and refuse to have anything to do with you... what would you do, oh mighty time traveler?]

[I would respect your decision,] the simulacrum shrugged.

[Truly?] the matriarch asked, sounding very skeptical.

[Why not? I would just go to one of the other aranean webs in the area,] Zorian's copy said. [It's not like you're the only aranean web that I worked with.]

Every aranea in the room suddenly became very quiet and still.



And simulacrum number four could not help but smile smugly, for he knew he had them.



While the two simulacrums pursued their own tasks elsewhere in the city, the original had what was arguably the most important task of all – he had to check up on Zach and help him if he was in danger. He wouldn't put it past Red Robe and Silverlake to focus on killing him as their very first priority.

It's what Zorian would have done in their place, after all.

His fears turned out to have been only half-right. When he arrived at the Noveda estate, he found the place on fire and wracked with explosions. Destructive beams punched straight through the thick, warded walls of the building, triggering various alarms and countermeasures. Clearly an attack on Zach was already in progress. It was good that he had woken up his fellow time traveler with that ritual, or else Zach would have probably met a quick and ignoble end at the hand of his attackers.

Well... attacker, singular. When he reached the sight of the battle itself, he only found Red Robe fighting Zach. Silverlake was nowhere to be seen.

Very curious. Even if she was wary of Red Robe, she should have at least cooperated with him on this.

In any case, this Red Robe was the same as the one that had attacked the aranea in the tunnels below. It was just a simulacrum.

Once Zorian joined the fight, this second simulacrum seemed to realize the attack had failed and that persisting would just waste mana, so it just... dismissed itself.

What an underwhelming outcome. What was Red Robe doing, if he was so wary of really committing himself anywhere? He didn't like this. He *really* didn't like this...

He turned towards Zach and winced. He hadn't noticed it while he had been fighting Red Robe's simulacrum, but the other boy had a large bleeding gash across the chest.

"H-Hey..." Zach panted. "Thanks for the wakeup call back there. If you had been just a moment late, I would have probably never woken up. I, a-ah..."

His knees gave out suddenly, causing him to tip over. Zorian quickly rushed forward and caught him just before he was going to slam head-first into the floor.

"Shit..." Zorian swore, inspecting the wound. His medical magic was a joke, but he could at least assess the severity of an open wound like this one. "You lost so much blood there. How were you even standing for so long?"

"It's not the f-first time..." Zach gasped, pressing his trembling fingers over the wound. The bleeding immediately lessened somewhat. "I'll live."

Zorian sighed. He would live, sure... but he would be pretty much incapacitated for the next day or two, even with the best medical care in the country. This was terrible news.

"I'm glad you made it out," Zach said with a trembling voice.

[Don't speak,] Zorian told him telepathically, picking him up like a baby. Well, he tried to, at least. Picking up another person was a little bit too much for him, so he first had to cast some spells to lighten the load, but he managed it in the end. He then immediately set off in the direction of the nearest hospital. [You're going to aggravate your wound. Also, damn you're heavy.]

[I'm doing you a favor,] Zach responded back. [Didn't you say you wanted to work out more when we get out?]

[Not like this, you asshole,] Zorian grumbled.

[Wait...] Zach suddenly frowned. [You... you're wounded too!]

Zorian gave him an incredulous look. What... oh.

[Ah, no,] Zorian said. [My mana is in chaos because the tunneler toad's dimensional perception ability unraveled when I abandoned my body back in the time loop.]

It was scary how perceptive Zach was sometimes. Zorian didn't even think he was showing any signs of mana instability on the outside, but clearly he was wrong.

[Oh yeah,] Zach said, immediately calming down. [Still, doesn't that mean-]

[I'll be held back in what I can do for at least a couple of days, yes,] Zorian confirmed.

[Damn it! Nothing ever goes right about this!] Zach raged.

[I wouldn't say that,] Zorian said. He tracked down the nearest potion store and teleported them both towards it. It was closed at this time of day, but breaking in was a simple matter. He idly wondered whether a medical emergency like this counted as a valid reason to perform a burglary, but then decided he didn't care. He would anonymously pay the shopkeeper back for the damages he caused. [I'm sure Red Robe is feeling pretty aggrieved right now. He almost had you, but he failed in the end. Plus, my simulacrum just stopped him from getting rid of the aranea beneath the city.]

He quickly picked up the most powerful wound closing and blood replenishing potions in the store and fed them to Zach, who immediately showed a positive reaction. His skin got back some of its color and the wound seemingly closed, though Zorian knew it was still very much present beneath the surface.

Zach immediately tried to get up on his own two feet, the idiot. He collapsed back immediately, having aggravated his wound.

"Let's... just get you to the nearest hospital, alright?" Zorian said, face-palming at the sight.

"Zorian, listen," Zach said. "When you left through the exit and the time loop reset itself, I lingered behind for a bit. Just to

see what would happen to you and Silverlake over the next few restarts, you know?"

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him. "And?"

"You were back," Zach said. "Both of you. You didn't remember anything about the time loop but you were walking and talking as normal. You were just like any other person stuck in the time loop, unaware of the passage of time past the summer festival. Man, talking to your old self was freaky, I tell you. I all but forgot how unfriendly and sensitive you were back then. Did I tell you I'm really glad you made it out in the end?"

"You did," Zorian confirmed.

"Oh yeah... what did you do with the—" Zach started to ask, before being cut off by Zorian.

"I killed him," Zorian said curtly. "Sent his soul to the afterlife."

"I... umm... shit," Zach fumbled. "That's kind of... brutal?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Zorian asked, uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "I don't know how to make a new body for him. Maybe I never will. I'd have to either keep him in stasis for years and years before finally releasing him into an alien world where a stranger has usurped his life... or having him accompany me as a powerless ghost looking over my shoulder, constantly getting his face rubbed in at the fact I'm so much better than him at everything. Isn't that a cruel and horrifying fate to inflict on someone?"

"I... don't know," Zach admitted after a while.

"I know I'm not the same person as him by this point," Zorian said quietly, "but I would hate that with every fiber of my being. I... don't think I'd ever get over it. Maybe I'm just a selfish monster trying to justify my crimes, but I think I'm doing him a favor. Alanic says the afterlife is still a thing, even after the gods stopped talking to people. For all his faults, I don't think the old Zorian had done anything truly heinous in his life... there should be a good

outcome waiting for him there. Something he'd never get back here with us."

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds, and then Zorian cracked his knuckles before picking Zach up again. Thank the gods for lightening spells.

"I don't want to talk about this," Zorian admitted. "Let just get you to a hospital and call it a day. We'll just have to leave the rest to our simulacrums. Now that I think about it, maybe Red Robe is onto something by only sending simulacrums to tackle problems and never appearing in person. Sure, it makes him more likely to fail and get beaten back, but it also makes every failure more inconsequential..."

He babbled about all sorts of things as he walked through the city. He was mostly out of mana by this point, since pretty much all his simulacrums had been tapping into them for their own purposes, so he couldn't simply teleport to the hospital. However, it was fine – Zach had stopped bleeding by this point, so he wasn't going to die any time soon. He should make use of this breather to make some golem simulacrums and replace the current ectoplasmic ones with them. Of course, the golem simulacrums were expensive so he would have to raid some of the Ibasan caches for money and materials. Plus, he needed a proper workshop and–

He suddenly stopped and sighed internally. So many things to do. So little time and mana to play with. The only thing that made him feel better was that Red Robe and Silverlake were probably faced with choices just as difficult as theirs.

Hopefully they had chosen their priorities better than their opponents.



When simulacrum number three arrived at the spot of Silverlake's hideout, he found no signs of fighting or forced entry in the

vicinity. However, that did not actually tell him much. For all he knew, Silverlake had some kind of secret entrance into her pocket dimension, and could simply walk in any time she pleased, wards be damned. Hell, perhaps the old Silverlake had simply *let* her in. It was hardly a given that the two would fight to the death once they met.

It all depended on whether the time looper Silverlake wanted to kill her old self to take her life and belongings back, or if she wanted to recruit her into her plans.

Or maybe she intended to simply ignore her old self entirely. After all, simply coming here was highly dangerous, since Zach and Zorian knew about this place, and it was an obvious place to set up an ambush for her.

Anyway, the first task simulacrum three currently faced was checking if the old Silverlake was still alive and inside. If she was, then he needed to know if the time looper Silverlake had already visited her and tried to recruit her.

To find that out, he could rely on slowly using exotic divination on her hideout while carefully avoiding being found out... but that would take a lot of time and mana and he didn't want to bother. Instead he simply made an unearthly racket just out of her pocket dimension, screaming obscenities at the treacherous old witch until she decided to come out to confront him.

Which she did. She stomped out of the pocket dimension, visibly fuming and glaring at him.

The simulacrum immediately decided she probably hadn't been visited by her time looper self. She had approached him too carelessly, like she had no idea what he was capable of. She would have been far more cautious if the other Silverlake had warned her about him.

Still, he had to make sure.

"Boy, what the hell are you shouting for!?" Silverlake shouted,

stopping some distance away from him. "Coming here in the dead of the night, at three in the morning, shouting all these obscenities at a poor old woman like me... what is the world coming to these days!? Haven't your parents taught you to respect your elders!? Bow down and apologize or I'm going to poison your whole family, you hear me!?"

"I just wanted to get your attention," the simulacrum told her honestly.

That only made her angrier.

"Listen, I'm kind of in a hurry... did you perhaps get visited lately by an ugly old crone that looks *just* like you?"

Silverlake raised her hand and fired a weak lightning bolt. Well, relatively speaking, since that spell could have inflicted serious damage to a normal person.

Zorian's simulacrum, though? He simply copied his mentor Xvim and backhanded the lightning bolt to the side. Rather than char his hand, the bolt was deflected harmlessly into the nearby ground, creating a small crater in the forest soil.

Silverlake's posture instantly changed, becoming warier and more alert.

"No, seriously... did someone who looks just like you visit you recently and try to kill you or recruit you? Someone who knows all your secrets and abilities?" he again asked.

"Who are you?" Silverlake said, her eyes narrowing suspiciously and her hands twitching with half-formed spells.

The simulacrum clacked his tongue. She was totally ignorant of everything, he was sure of it. Time looper Silverlake had not visited this place.

But why? Did she really not care about her old self, or was she just being paranoid? He hadn't arrived here particularly quickly – if Silverlake wanted to travel here from Cyoria, she would have ar-

rived way before he did. In all likelihood, she would have finished up before he had a chance to get here and intercept her.

"Hey! Are you deaf or something?" Silverlake shouted, kicking a nearby stone in his direction. It was surprisingly accurate, flying straight at his forehead. She had a pretty good kick. Of course, Zorian just dodged the stone with practiced ease, so it ultimately amounted to nothing.

He could kill her, he realized. Even if time looper Silverlake wanted her dead, there was no guarantee that old Silverlake would be grateful to them once they saved her. She was an incredibly cynical person, and would simply see two young fools she could exploit to her advantage. She might work with them out of a sense of self-preservation, but she would be constantly looking for an angle to exploit and probably wouldn't want to do anything that placed her into significant danger.

What was the point of such an ally?

"Here. Catch," he said, throwing a small stone disc at her. She did not bother catching it, simply stepping back and letting it hit the ground. She then used a nearby fallen branch to suspiciously poke at it.

The simulacrum rolled his eyes at her.

"What the hell is this thing?" she asked.

"It's an illusion stone," the simulacrum said. "I recorded a rather interesting scene in it. You can study it later in the privacy of your own abode. Oh, and by the way? You should probably change your warding scheme as soon as possible. You should also collapse any secret entrances into your place, even if you think you're the only one who knows about them."

He turned to leave.

"Now wait just a moment here, you little brat! You're just going to leave without explaining any of the crap you just unloaded into my lap?" Silverlake demanded.



"Yes," Zorian's copy nodded. "I decided not to kill you. Don't make me regret it, alright?"

Before she could respond, he teleported away.

He didn't want to linger around Silverlake's place. While setting up an ambush around her hideout might have seemed like a good way to get the time looping version of her, Zorian felt something wasn't right there.

He had to make sure Alanic, Kael and Lukav were fine. Silverlake could wait.



While Zorian and the other simulacrum were teleporting around and wracking their heads to figure out what the enemy was planning, simulacrum number two was bored. His job was to secure the house and watch out for Red Robe or Silverlake staging an attack on his family. However, he had already done all he could to secure the house and no attack was happening.

The hours passed, and eventually he found himself in front of Kirielle's room. Hmm... the morning was already here, wasn't it? Didn't that mean it was about time for Kirielle to wake up?

He rubbed his hands sinisterly, an evil grin on his face. It had been so long since he had a chance to wake up Kirielle. He liked to sleep in, and the time loop never really changed that, so it was usually her that woke him up.

He entered her room and crouched next to her bed. She was covered up to her neck in a blanket, with only her face visible. She was blissfully unaware of Zorian crouching next to her, a look of peace and contentment on her face.

The simulacrum considered how he should go about doing this. Jumping on her, like she liked to do to him, had an air of poetic justice on it. However, it didn't feel right. He was too big and heavy, and it would be a bit too much for a prank.

Dropping a bucket of water on her like she had when she had thought he was a shapeshifter?

No, that would get the bed wet and mother would freak out on him.

Hmm...

Oh well, he'd just go with the classic.

"Good morning, sister!" he suddenly shouted in her ear. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!*"

She woke up screaming and flailing, and eventually fell out of the bed.

He laughed at her. Ah, he needed that...

"Zorian, you jerk!" she shouted at him, flailing her little arms at him like a windmill. She was like a little angry kitten, though, so it just made him laugh harder.

She eventually kicked him out of the room so she could switch out of her pajamas. Once she was out, she gave him a curious look.

"How come you're awake?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep," the simulacrum said.

"Oh," she said. She looked at him hopefully. "Hey, can you show me some magic? Please?"

He spent the next half an hour entertaining Kirielle, casting various spells for her amusement, until the original contacted him and told him to stop wasting mana on frivolities like that. What a jerk. The mana drain on those illusions was totally negligible!

He watched Kirielle deflate when he told her he had to go pack and couldn't play with her anymore. She looked like she wanted to ask him something but eventually just chickened out, staring at the floor like a kicked puppy instead.

He sighed internally. He knew what she wanted to ask, of course. She wanted him to take her to Cyoria with him. But doing that would be... irresponsible.

Short-sighted.

Stupid.

He watched Kirielle for a few more seconds, remembering all the promises he made to his little sister over the many restarts he shared with her. He promised he wouldn't forget her. He promised he would teach her magic.

He promised he would bring her with him to Cyoria.

Just as she was about to run off, Zorian placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her to halt in her tracks and look at him in surprise. Her lip quivered slightly.

"Hey, Kirielle..." he told her with a mischievous smile. "Do you want to come with me to Cyoria?"

Simulacrum number two could practically imagine Zorian screaming at him in the near future, explaining in great detail what an idiot he was being.

He didn't care, though.

The smile on her face when he asked her that question made it all worth it.



## SHELTER IN THE STORM

Sometimes he could be so stupid, Zorian lamented. He had *known* that his simulacrum tended to be more impulsive and whimsical than himself. It seemed to be an intrinsic trait of every one of his copies, no matter how carefully he made them or how closely they were connected to him. They may be very much like him, but they *weren't* him. The moment they realized they were just a simulacrum that would not live past a few hours or days, their perspective on long-term consequences would get subtly skewed compared to his own. After all, more likely than not it wouldn't be them who would have to deal with those when the time finally came.

He also knew that giving his simulacrum unpleasant or boring tasks had a good chance of coming back to bite him in the ass. His simulacrum did not mind dying for him, but they were not at all afraid of inconveniencing him. In fact, they often seemed to relish the idea.

Zorian wondered what it said about him that his simulacrum behaved that way, but that was a thought for another time. The point was that, despite knowing all of that, he had still left his simulacrum in charge of dashing Kirielle's hopes of going to Cyoria. He should have known that was going to be a problem, but he thought

it would be a simple matter of the simulacrum refusing Mother's offer while Kirielle remained quiet on the sidelines. This was, after all, what usually happened when *Zorian* didn't want to bring Kirielle with him. All the simulacrum had to do was just retread his steps and be on his merry way! Instead his copy got bored and actively sought Kirielle out to hang out with, wasting their precious mana on frivolous entertainment, and then got all emotional when it was time to say goodbye...

Ugh. Just like the offending simulacrum predicted, *Zorian* had been furious. It was a stupid, short-sighted decision! Yes, sending her off to Koth with their parents would be a massive disappointment for her, but at least she'd be out of danger! That was more important than making her momentarily happy!

The simulacrum was completely unapologetic about it, too.

"What's done is done," his copy told him over their telepathic link. "I already gave her my word I'm taking her with me. If you have a problem with that, you can come over here and personally inform her that you've changed your mind and won't be taking her with you after all..."

"You bastard!" *Zorian* fumed at him. "I should dismiss you for that!"

"That would leave Kirielle and the rest of the family completely defenseless until you sent a replacement," the simulacrum pointed out. "Besides, do you really think I care about that? From my very first moment, I knew my time was fleeting."

Sadly, true. Since his simulacrums were willing to die and sacrifice themselves for his sake, the thought of dying did not bother them much. Thus, threatening to unmake them was largely ineffective.

"I just don't understand why you did that," *Zorian* complained. "We could have just taken Kirielle to Cyoria in a month or two, once the whole situation has hopefully been resolved and she's

back from Koth. There is no need to take her there *now*, when the situation there is at its most dangerous!"

"When, if not now?" the simulacrum disagreed. "Even if we can resolve everything and save the city, the consequences are bound to be immense. Even a failed invasion will make our parents perceive Cyoria as a place of unspeakable danger. You think they will let her live in the city after that? Even for a few days? Come on. This is probably the last time we can plausibly take Kirielle to Cyoria without literally kidnapping her."

Zorian frowned. He hadn't really thought of that. It was true that no matter how the situation with the invasion was resolved, it was bound to complicate things. Plus, now that he thought about it a little, Kirielle would have to go back to school at some point soon. It wasn't like she could visit a different city for several weeks at the time, then. Come to think of it, that was probably the reason why she was so excited to make this trip with him now. She knew this was one of her last chances to experience something like this in the near future...

He sighed internally. For all of its blessings, he sometimes worried that the time loop had damaged his thinking. For more than a decade, anything that did not resolve itself within the span of a month was largely irrelevant. He did consider the future a lot, but that was all highly theoretical and often directed at the far future rather than something only a few months later.

Still. Even with all of that in mind, bringing Kirielle to the epicenter of their clash with Red Robe and Silverlake was simply a terrible idea.

"Besides," his copy continued, "by bringing Kirielle along we actually have a legitimate excuse to rent a room at Imaya's place. Kael is much more willing to trust us if we come along with Kirielle. And it's not like we don't have a plan to evacuate—"

"Those are just excuses you thought up afterwards to justify

your decision," Zorian told him.

"Well... yes," the simulacrum admitted after a short pause. "Yes, I admit that. It's still true, though, and I'm not going to go back on my word. *Our* word. You promised you're not going to just forget her once we're out there in the real world. Now you want to just stick her on a ship to Koth and put her out of your mind while you do your stuff?"

"That 'stuff' is a matter of life and death and getting her out of danger doesn't mean I'm going to simply forget about her afterwards!" Zorian snapped. "I just want her to be safe. She's a prime target and I'm just a *little* bit busy at the moment. It's not the time for this!"

"Forget it," his copy sighed. "I just... I won't do it, okay? I already said it. What's done is done. I'm not going to turn around and tell her it was all a mistake and that I changed my mind. It would kill her. If you think this is such a huge mistake, come over and do it yourself. Go tell her that her dream trip is canceled, I dare you."

The simulacrum then terminated their connection, signaling it considered the conversation over.

After taking several deep breaths and calming down somewhat, Zorian decided that the simulacrum was right about one thing: he should definitely be dealing with this problem personally. As he noted in his earlier lament, it was stupid of him to assign a task like this to a simulacrum to begin with, and only he could truly fix it. Or at least stop the problem from getting worse.

Besides, there was no need for him to stay at Cyoria at the moment. Previously, he had been worried that his simulacrum would get dispelled in the fighting and that he would need to constantly replace them... but that was far less of a concern, now. The first golem simulacrums had been placed into service by now, replacing two of his ectoplasmic simulacrums with a more mana efficient



and resilient group. Golem simulacrum were very difficult to neutralize – even punching a hole through the chest or blowing off a limb would not be enough to put them down for good. That extreme resilience, all by itself, should allow his copies to clash with the invaders and Red Robe's simulacrum without fear.

Additionally, he couldn't really afford to start anything big while Zach was still incapacitated and vulnerable. Taking some time off to figure out what to do about his family and friends was... doable.

Thus, not long after his argument with his simulacrum, Zorian found himself back in Cirin. He told the simulacrum to make himself scarce for a while and then seamlessly took over his place.

Well, *mostly* seamlessly.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Kirielle asked him suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at him. "You... you aren't thinking on going back on your word, are you?"

She didn't seem panicked, more outraged at the idea. She placed her hands on her hips and pouted at him in a way that was probably supposed to look angry but looked more like she had an upset stomach or something.

"No take-backs!" she declared, pointing her finger at him. "Mom says that's not allowed! You said you're taking me with you, and I'm going!"

Zorian clacked his tongue in distaste. All he did was stare at her a little, and she immediately started jumping at this one specific conclusion... how judgmental. Never mind that she was essentially correct here, was his old self so bad that this was a legitimate first conclusion she came up to?

...okay, yeah, he could kind of see her reasoning here.

"I didn't say anything about not taking you," Zorian said slowly.

"Then what?" she asked curiously.

"I'm missing some of my school books," Zorian told her. "I'd appreciate it if whoever took them returned them to me before we leave the house."

"Err, yeah, I will— I mean, I'm sure they'll turn up in your room by the time I finish packing," Kirielle fumbled, punctuating her statement with a nervous laugh.

She then gave him one final suspicious look before running off upstairs to finish her packing.

The simulacrum he had displaced had been watching the whole exchange through his senses. His copy did not comment on his actions in any way, but Zorian could *feel* the simulacrum's amusement at how things turned out.

"Shut up, idiot," Zorian whispered under his breath. "This is all your fault, anyway."

He did not need to speak up verbally, of course, but it made him feel slightly better to do so. Why hadn't he dismissed his stupid copy, again?

Oh, right. He didn't want to waste mana and he had a task for him later.

In any case, nothing of real note happened until Ilsa knocked on their door, just like she always did at the start of the month, and Zorian volunteered to check up on that.

Sure enough, he found Ilsa waiting for him behind the door. After an appraising glance, she adjusted her glasses and guessed his identity.

"Zorian Kazinski?" she asked.

"That's me," Zorian confirmed. "Come in, Miss Zileti."

"Oh, you know me?" she asked in mild surprise, stepping into the house.

"Err, kind of," Zorian said. "Someone pointed you out to me. You're a teacher from the academy, right?"

"That's right," Ilsa said. "I didn't know I'm that famous. Hopefully you heard only nice things about me, yes?"

She gave him a small smile, and Zorian awkwardly returned it.

She didn't remember anything. That is, *of course* she didn't remember anything. He and Zach had already done a check of the various temporary loopers to see if any of them made it out in soul form like Zorian. The results were as expected as they were disappointing. They were all alone in this. Nobody else had made it out.

It was strange and more than a little painful for Zorian to see Ilsa like this. He had worked with her for nearly a year, and she had been one of the people he had been relatively close to. Now that Ilsa was dead, the new one had no idea who he was.

The same was true for Alanic, Taiven, Kael, Xvim, and so many others. They were alive again, but they were not people he had spent all those months working with. He could rebuild these relationships, but without the common goal of escaping the time loop and the limited ability to interact with people outside the group, the nature of those relationships would completely differ. In the meantime, he had to interact with all these people while constantly walking on eggshells because he subconsciously viewed them as friends and allies, and had a year worth of habits and instincts to reinforce that... while they just viewed him as some stupid teenage kid acting a little weird around them.

He'd manage. He totally would.

But damn was this making him depressed..

"Mister Kazinski? Are you alright?" Ilsa asked him, breaking him out of his self-pity.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Just... thinking about some things. It's nothing important."

He turned the scroll in his hands a few times before casually directing his mana to flow along the sides of the seal, causing it to

pop off without resistance. He then glanced at the certificate inside for the sake of appearances and set it aside.

"That's pretty impressive," Ilsa noted. "Although you held onto the scroll for a while, I could tell you spent most of that time distracted with other thoughts. Once you actually focused on the task of removing the seal, you did it quickly and easily. I see someone is continuing in Daimen's footsteps."

Once, the comparison to Daimen would see him bristling inside at the slight. Now it was just a mildly exasperating statement. He would likely never be totally okay with being compared to his oldest brother like that, but these comparisons no longer had the same sting they once did.

"Only in very general terms," Zorian told her. "My brother and I are very different people."

"Of course," Ilsa smoothly agreed. "Everyone is their own person. I simply meant that you also show signs of great talent."

Their discussion proceeded in very predictable fashion. Once she heard he was taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria, she brought up the possibility of renting a room at Imaya's place, which Zorian accepted. She also informed him that he wouldn't get to choose his mentor like he was supposed to, and that he was simply assigned to Xvim Chao instead. Zorian pretended he knew nothing about the man and Ilsa pretended he was simply a normal, if slightly demanding teacher. He also chose his electives. They were the exact same ones he had chosen the first time he had done all this, except this time the entire process took less than a minute, since he simply told Ilsa his choices the moment she brought the topic up.

It was all so routine and familiar that he found himself quickly slipping into a sort of practiced 'role' he had learned to play over the many restarts during which he had done this. It felt comforting and frightening at the same time. Comforting, because this was probably the first time since he had gotten out of the time loop

that he felt certain he was making the right choices. Frightening, because he suddenly felt like he was in the time loop all over again. Like everything around him was unreal and illusionary. Unbidden, the notion that he was still trapped in that ever-repeating month popped into his mind and refused to go away.

He imagined himself living through this month, winning against his foes, befriending people he knew from the time loop, changing things for the better and getting emotionally invested in it all... only for the whole thing to turn to smoke in the end when the time loop inevitably reset itself and he woke up in his room in Cirin, just like he always did. It was horrifying.

It was also stupid. He was definitely out of the time loop. The aranea and the mercenaries that had been knocked out of the time loop by Red Robe were back, and Red Robe himself was again active in the world. The spirit world was also once again accessible – he and Zach had checked that already. All evidence pointed at them being out for real.

But the fear remained. Ilsa had finished her explanations and left, but Zorian's mind remained trapped in this ominous scenario for quite a while afterwards.

Sometimes he could be so stupid, Zorian lamented.



The long train ride from Cirin to Cyoria was even more boring than it usually was. This was mostly because Zorian was not doing anything of critical importance, and thus had to refrain from tapping into his mana reserves too much. That mana was best reserved for his simulacrum, who were out there acquiring funds, making magic items, teleporting around, and fighting their enemies. Frivolous uses of magic like entertaining Kirielle on the train with illusions were simply inexcusable. He had scolded his simulacrum over these sorts of things many times in the past, so now

that he was in their position it was important that he set an example for them and show them how things should be done.

Additionally, this was no longer the time loop, and he would have to deal with consequences that went beyond just this one month. It was best for him to at least pretend to be a normal student mage in front of a little tattletale like Kirielle. That meant no spellcasting at all for the moment, since students could not bypass the wards on the train.

After an hour or so, he kind of began to understand why his simulacrum were so prone to breaking the 'no frivolous magics' rule.

Still, in the end he found ways to amuse himself and Kirielle without magic. He told her stories of some of his time looping adventures, using true stories with altered names and a few tweaks here and there. Kirielle complained the stories were too fantastical and ridiculous after a while, so they started a drawing competition instead. Zorian had actually learned how to draw reasonably well over the long course of the time loop, but he was nowhere near good enough to match Kirielle, so she always won.

His sister did not mind, though. Even though it was an unfair competition right from the start, she always wanted to keep going for another round. The little imp never got tired of winning.

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

A few things happened in quick succession then. First, Ibery wandered in and peeked into the compartment to see if it was free. Zorian, being kind of bored with Kirielle's antics, invited her in. Ibery seemed a little taken aback by his friendliness, but seeing Kirielle put her at ease, and she did claim a seat beside them after a moment of hesitation. Then Byrn, a guy he had met way back at the beginning of his time looping experience, also wandered in

and asked if a seat was free in their compartment. Zorian happily invited him in, too.

Suddenly, the compartment had become a lot livelier than it used to be. Ibery was shy and quiet, and had immediately chosen to bury her nose in a book when she came in, but Byrn was friendly and talkative and immediately tried to strike up a conversation with them. Kirielle immediately started peppering him with questions about magic and the academy.

"I'm Kirielle Kazinski," Kirielle said, "and that's my brother Zorian. Are you a student like Zorian? Can you do magic? What year are you? Is it true that you have to fight a giant spider in order to get admitted as a student? Zorian says that's a requirement, but I think he's lying..."

"Ha ha, umm... I don't think I would have gotten in, if that were the case," Byrn laughed. "I don't think I could win a fight against the other students, never mind a giant spider."

"Lots of types of giant spiders," Zorian noted. "There's a whole bunch of them that you could easily club to death with a mundane weapon, so long as you keep your cool and don't panic."

"Oh? You sound pretty knowledgeable about that. Did you ever fight one for real?" Byrn asked curiously.

"Yes, though not as an admission test, of course," Zorian said. "I told that to Kirielle just to mess with her a little."

"I knew it," Kirielle pouted, folding her hands over her chest and giving him a grumpy look.

"Ah, so, I hate to shift the subject, but that last name..." Byrn tried.

"Yes, Daimen Kazinski is our brother," Zorian said with a shrug. "We have very little contact with him, though. He mostly does his own thing and rarely visits."

The conversation continued for a while after that, meandering from topic to topic. Even Ibery joined in after figuring out from

Bryn's question that they were Fortov's siblings. She did not actually bring up Fortov, however, which was probably for the best. Zorian would have been diplomatic, of course, but Kirielle disliked their middle brother as much as he did and would likely not have anything nice to say about that topic. In any case, the conversation eventually turned towards a particularly shocking event that occurred in Cyoria recently. Namely, the fact that Zach's place had gotten utterly trashed during his fight with Red Robe, and that he himself had gone missing for several hours while people frantically searched for him all over the city.

"What? Someone actually attacked the Noveda Mansion like that? I didn't know that," Ibery said, surprised.

"Yes, it happened really recently. The attack happened very early in the morning, just a few hours ago," Byrn said, nodding self-indulgently. He was clearly pleased to have acquired this news so soon after it occurred. Man, news sure does spread fast these days. "I hear the fighting was really fierce. Some of the support columns were damaged, and several walls got breached. I heard repairs will take weeks! It must have been a really powerful force that launched the attack – the newspapers were saying only a fully equipped mage regiment could have done so much damage so quickly."

"But that place is right there in one of the better parts of the city... and aren't Noveda an old, influential Noble House?" Ibery asked. "How could a force of that size come and go just like that? Where were the guards during all this?"

"Well, someone was clearly fighting the attackers and fought them off in the end, so presumably the guards were not useless," Byrn shrugged. "Besides, I hear the Noveda are not the same force they once were. My father says they're a mere shadow of their former selves. It's still crazy that something like this can happen."

"You know, Zach Noveda is one of my classmates," Zorian said suddenly.



"Really?" Byrn said, perking up. "I don't suppose you heard more about this, then?"

"I just know Zach is fine," Zorian said, shaking his head. "He wasn't present in the mansion when the attack occurred. He was out drinking and dancing throughout the entire night."

Or at least that was the excuse Zach had picked for himself as an explanation as to what had happened. They modified the memory of the healer that had patched him up (after leaving him a sizeable 'anonymous tip' for his services), so no one should be able to contradict his story. Zorian did suggest to Zach that he should pick some other excuse, since saying he had spent the entire night getting drunk and gods know what else was somewhat embarrassing, but Zach insisted this was fine.

Sure enough, Ibery responded to Zorian's explanation by wrinking her nose in distaste, while Bryn simply laughed awkwardly.

"I did hear rumors about the Noveda heir," Ibery said. "They say he's not exactly a model student, if you know what I mean."

"There is nothing wrong with his magic skills," Zorian quickly said, feeling compelled to defend his friend. "He's just a little... reckless."

"Are you friends with this Zach?" Kirielle asked curiously. "How come I don't know anything about this?"

"Why would I say something like this to a little tattletale like you?" Zorian asked rhetorically. "You'd run off to tell Mother the moment my back was turned."

"I would not!" she huffed, swinging her legs in an attempt to hit his knees. He shifted his legs out of the way a few times and she eventually gave up on the idea.

By the time the train arrived in Cyoria, the whole group was so absorbed in their conversation that they kept together and continued conversing even when it was time to disembark. When the train began to approach Cyoria, the whole group left the compart-

ment and went to stand by the exit... along with so many others. Usually Zorian led Kirielle with him to the exit early enough to seize a place right next to the exit, but he had lost track of time this time, and they ended up in the middle of a literal throng. Somewhat tired from socializing and put off by the throng of people pushing and shoving all around him, Zorian leaned on the nearby window and simply observed the people around them.

It had been a while since he had been stuck in a crowd like this. With his great magical skills and ability to simply teleport from place to place, he usually had no need to use normal transportation methods to get to places. A confusing, erratic mess of emotions and mental signals washed against his mind sense, but he was far too good at controlling his psychic powers these days to be bothered by that. His mind was like a rock in the sea, battered by the winds and violent waves, but solid and unmoving.

"Hey, you! You're one of the upperclassmen, aren't you?"

Zorian looked at the girl talking to him, curious as to what she wanted from him. She was part of the group of first years next to him, and had completely ignored him up until now. Her whole group was kind of amusing, talking excitedly amongst themselves about how they were going to start learning magic, and become famous mages, and similar stuff. He kind of wished he could see their faces when they realized the first year was all about theory and repetitive mana exercises.

"I am," he confirmed. "So?"

"Can you show us any magic?" she asked eagerly.

Wait... this sounded kind of familiar...

"He can't!" Kirielle, who had apparently been listening in on their conversation, piped in. "The train has a magic field that stops people from doing magic."

"It's because some of the students would set fire to the seats or etch their names and crude drawings into the walls of the train,"

Zorian confirmed.

"Oh," the girl said, clearly disappointed.

"I know," Kirielle agreed with, sadly. "It sucks. Some jerk always has to ruin it for the rest of us."

Yeah, this whole situation was really familiar to him for some reason.

Oh well, it probably wasn't anything important.



Zorian became a little concerned about things after the group disembarked at Cyoria's main train station. This was because Bryn had a habit of following after them, and Zorian had plans that would be rather inconvenienced by that. He was just debating whether it was justified to use mind magic to nudge his thoughts in the 'right' direction, when Bryn regretfully informed them that he had to stay behind at the station for a while. Apparently his parents were disturbed enough by the recent attack on the Noveda Mansion that they had asked a friend of theirs that lived in the city to pick Bryn up from the station and escort him to his dorm. Thus, Bryn would have to stay behind and wait for the man to show up.

Zorian found it curious that Red Robe's attack on Zach had such far-reaching consequences. Bryn wasn't even from Cyoria, yet the attack changed the way he went through the month so quickly and radically. Zach and Zorian knew that Tesen and the city authorities would have a strong reaction to the Noveda Mansion being suddenly attacked like that, but he didn't expect the ordinary people to care so much.

In any case, Zorian simply said goodbye to Bryn and Ibery and was on his merry way with Kirielle in tow. He did exchange contact methods with Bryn and Ibery in case they wanted to get in touch later, but he wasn't sure if anything would come out of that.

Neither of them had been particularly inclined to seek him out when they had done similar things in the time loop. With the world lasting longer than a month, though, perhaps that would change. Only time would tell.

Zorian didn't take Kirielle immediately towards Imaya's place, though. Instead, he took her to a familiar bridge in one of the city parks. There, a small black-haired girl was crying her eyes out over a bicycle that had fallen into the creek below.

Kirielle watched quietly from the sidelines as Zorian slowly calmed Nochka down and got her to explain why she was crying. This done, he placed his hand over the bridge and telekinetically lifted the bike out of the water. He also casually cleaned it up a little, ignoring the chorus of complaints from his simulacrum that he was being 'frivolous' in his mana use. The jerks had been on the lookout for something like this for a while now, most likely.

"It isn't frivolous," he told them telepathically. "What did you expect me to do, exactly?"

"You could have waded in through the muddy water on foot," a simulacrum helpfully explained.

"It's just getting a little wet, there's no harm in that," another one added.

"All it would take is a bit more time. Gods, why are you so impatient?" a third one scolded.

"All of you, shut up and mind your own business!" Zorian told them grumpily.

He had the worst simulacrum.

"There," Zorian told Nochka. "Your bike is clean, intact, and out of the creek. You can stop crying now, okay?"

"Okay," she sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "Um. Thank you."

"Well, if that's that, I guess we should get going now," Zorian said. "Though... I think it's going to rain soon. Do you have an umbrella?"

"N-No..." She said, shaking her head. "But, um, I'm going to be fine..."

"We should help her get home," Kirielle suddenly said. She quickly got into Nochka's personal space and introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Kirielle! Kirielle Kazinski, and that's my brother Zorian. What's your name?"

After some back and forth, Nochka agreed to have them accompany her home. The walk was a short one, but Zorian paid close attention to everything around him along the way. He found no evidence of cranium rats or other invader agents along the way. Even the cranium rat swarm he usually encountered while traveling through this part of the city was not here this time – he had chosen the path that led to Nochka on purpose, not because he was trying to avoid the rats. The aranea were fighting a pretty intense war with the cranium rats at the moment, so this turn of events wasn't particularly surprising. They were too busy to spy on people much, and could no longer move freely through most of the city.

Still, while Rea and her family seemed free of invader schemes at the moment, he knew that wouldn't last forever. Assuming Red Robe did not find some kind of alternative method of unlocking Panaxeth's prison, shifter children like Nochka remained a critical component of primordial's release plans. Thus, evacuating them out of the city through means fair or foul was probably the most certain way of sabotaging the ritual at Zach and Zorian's disposal. Shifters were not that numerous and there were only so many shifters available in the area.

Though, if he were going to be honest with himself, wanting to befriend Rea and her family wasn't purely because of pragmatism. Rea had no special influence over her fellow shifters and would be of limited help if he wanted to talk them into going along with the evacuation. He just had a soft spot for the little girl that

had befriended his little sister and the sight of her stripped naked and waiting to be drained of all blood for some messed up blood ritual was vividly burned into his mind. He had promised to himself that he would make sure Nochka survived the month out there in the real world, and he still meant that. He meant to save all the shifter children, of course, but making sure Nochka was safe had a personal dimension for him.

Since he had already thrown away his good sense and taken Kirielle to the death trap that was Cyoria, he may as well introduce her to her former and future friend. At least if they started hanging around each other, he could more easily protect the both of them without spreading himself thin.

The actual conversation with Rea was pretty mundane. Nochka's mother was pretty friendly, and Zorian did not confront her with any heavy topics. They simply talked about who he and Kirielle were, how they had met Nochka, and where they were staying. Kirielle almost ratted out Nochka on dropping her bike in the stream, which caused the little cat shifter to panic and hurriedly shut her up... by manifesting her claws and clamping down on Kirielle's arm. This caused Rea to freak out because Nochka 'almost' ruined their secret and hurt a guest, but the situation was thankfully resolved in the end, and Zorian pretended not to have noticed anything strange about the incident.

Interestingly, Rea also brought up the news of Zach's place being attacked, just like Bryn did. She didn't have any new information for Zorian, but it did emphasize how notable the attack was for people. Zorian wondered if Red Robe even realized how eye-catching the whole thing would end up being.

"You are classmates with the Noveda heir?" Rea asked. "My, I seemed to have met an important person today."

"Not... really?" Zorian said dubiously.

"Come now, Mister Kazinski. You have a famous brother, you

attend a prestigious magical academy, and one of your classmates is a scion of a Noble House,” Rea pointed out.

“Two, actually,” said Zorian. There was also Tinami. “I don’t think any of that makes *me* important.”

Rea hummed loudly at him, clearly not agreeing.

“Have it your way,” she shrugged. She rose from her seat and took a look at the weather outside. Things didn’t look good of course. The rain was pouring in thick sheets while the wind was blowing madly in all directions, and Zorian knew from the time loop that the storm wouldn’t be ending any time soon.

This was the main reason Zorian was less impatient about leaving Rea’s place this time around. He couldn’t just teleport to Imaya’s place or create a rain shield around himself and Kirielle. No, he would have to use an umbrella like a normal person, and they would end up wet and miserable by the time they actually reached their destination. He was in no hurry to experience that.

“What horrid weather,” Rea said, frowning. “I think you’re going to have to remain here over the night.”

“We can’t impose on you like that,” Zorian said hurriedly, shaking his head. “We’ll just slowly make our way through the storm. A little rain won’t kill us.”

“You can’t be serious,” Rea said, giving him an annoyed look. “I know teenage boys can be a little reckless, and I would not have said anything if it was just you being stupid... but you’re taking your little sister along and you have to take this into account. Are you seriously thinking of taking her out there into *that* with just an umbrella?”

Zorian stared at Rea for a few seconds before looking at Kirielle, who was sitting on the floor with Nochka. They were both whispering something to each other and pretending they weren’t listening in on their conversation.

"Kirielle," Zorian asked her slowly. "What do you think about going?"

"Umm..." she fumbled, rubbing her hands awkwardly. "It's raining pretty hard."

Zorian sighed, taking off his glasses and massaging the bridge of his nose. After a few seconds he gave Rea an embarrassed look. He was just about to speak up but she put a hand on his shoulder to stop him and simply nodded her head knowingly.

"I'll go get some blankets," she said, before wandering off to do just that.

In the corner of his eye, he could see Nochka and Kirielle excitedly whisper to each other. They, at least, seemed pleased with this outcome.

After a few seconds, Zorian clacked his tongue and decided to just roll with the situation. It was embarrassing, but there was no real harm in it.

He looked through the window, silently observing the storm for a while. After a while, Rea wandered in and placed a steaming cup of tea on the window sill beside him. Zorian gave her a curious look.

"A cup of tea is necessary for proper rain watching," Rea explained to him.

"Ah. Thank you," Zorian said quietly. "Sorry for the imposition. I could tell it was going to rain, but--"

"Do I look that mean and selfish to you?" Rea asked, raising her eyebrow at him. "Hospitality had always been important to my people."

"Your people?" Zorian asked her curiously, feigning ignorance.

"Your acting skills are decent, but I know you saw the claws on Nochka's fingers. You probably know what we are," Rea said, sipping slowly from her own cup of tea while standing beside him.

"Yeah," Zorian admitted with a shrug. "It doesn't bother me."



"Good," Rea said simply. She then dropped the subject and no longer pursued the matter. "I don't know if this is really the issue, or if there is something deeper going on, but it's pointless to get angry or frustrated at a storm. It's a force of nature; there is no fighting that. You just take shelter and wait until it ends."

"Right," said Zorian quietly, taking a sip of the tea Rea had made for him.

Sadly, some storms couldn't be dodged that easily.



While Zorian had been escorting Kirielle, his simulacrum had been very busy. They, along with Zach's simulacrum, constantly attacked known cult leaders and invader bases, raiding them for funds and trying to decapitate their organizations. Sadly, this hadn't been nearly as effective as they had hoped. Red Robe had clearly been very busy and most of their targets had been forewarned they were coming. Warding schemes were changed, the guards were on alert, and some people were just outright evacuated to safety. They had managed to acquire a lot of money and resources, since many of the secret caches had been protected mainly by their secrecy, and it wasn't easy to strip a base of everything that was worth money in a hurry, but Zorian doubted they had managed to deal any kind of decisive strike to their enemies.

Below the city, the fighting was also intense. It was mostly the aranea fighting the cranium rats, but Zorian's simulacrum sometimes helped the aranean side... and since Zorian's uncontested presence would have meant a decisive victory for the aranea, Red Robe's simulacrum was always there to stop the cranium rats from getting wiped out. Neither Zorian nor Red Robe were fighting seriously, wary of showing the enemy too much and wasting their

mana reserves, but the fact Zorian's simulacrum had a much more resilient golem body meant that he was slowly getting an upper hand in these skirmishes. It remained to be seen what Red Robe would do in response to that. Zorian doubted he would let the cranium rats just die, since they were a critical asset for the invasion forces.

The simulacrums were also negotiating with various aranean webs in the region, trying to bring in additional support for the fight. Of particular importance were the negotiations with the Silent Doorway Adepts, since they needed their help to open a connection to Koth. Zorian did not doubt for a second the negotiations were going to succeed; they had lots of things they could tempt Silent Doorway Adepts with. The Bakora gate addresses in particular were bound to have irresistible allure for the web. However, the issue was that these negotiations would still end up taking time, and they had to keep the web protected from enemy machinations while they were in progress. Silverlake knew exactly how important this was to them, so an attack at Silent Doorway Adepts was worryingly plausible.

Some things were also moved forward a little. Kael and his daughter had been contacted by Zach's simulacrum disguised as a school official, who teleported them directly to Imaya's place. This was mostly because Zach and Zorian were worried that Silverlake, whose movements were still a mystery to them, was going to target them. Kael and his daughter were too easy of a target to be left alone for long. Thankfully, Kael did not suspect a thing and even praised the academy for their thoughtfulness. Zorian intended to evacuate Kael to Koth once he opened the gate link there, but for now he was safest at Imaya's house, since that way he would be living under the same roof as Zorian and Kirielle.

Meanwhile, the simulacrum that got Zorian in the whole trouble with Kirielle got a task to get his parents away from the

house as soon as possible. Thus, less than an hour after Zorian and Kirielle had boarded the train to Cyoria, the simulacrum rounded up Mother and Father and teleported them to the port city of Luja. Their memory was modified to make them believe this was perfectly normal. It would create some discrepancies in dates; that could be a problem later. For now, though, Zorian was just glad they would soon be out in the open ocean and out of danger. He'd deal with potential consequences of his decision later.

The simulacrum in his room that was focusing on stabilizing his mana reserves was also evacuated out of the house, leaving it completely empty. Even if Red Robe decided to visit the place now, the most he could do was burn it down in frustration.

Which would still be devastating for Mother and Father, but Zorian was quite sure they wouldn't want to die to protect it.

Overall, things had been going... decently. There was still no sign of Silverlake, and Red Robe was passively responding to their moves while focusing most of his energies into something they couldn't see.

It made no sense to Zorian. The way he saw it, he and Zach had an absolute advantage in this conflict. Even if everything else failed, they could always inform the Eldemarian government about the invasion and it would be instant loss for Red Robe and Silverlake. Any chance of successfully invading the city or freeing Panaxeth would be gone. No matter how personally powerful they were or what clever plans they had, they could never take on the central government head-on and win. Thus, Red Robe and Silverlake should have taken a far more aggressive stance against them by now.

But there was nothing Zorian could do about that. All he and Zach could do was wait. Hopefully, by the time they recovered their full strength, they would uncover what their enemies were

planning.

## GHOSTS

The next morning, Zorian and Kirielle bid Rea and her family goodbye and went to Imaya's place. Once there, they found out that Imaya had only been slightly worried for them – she had guessed from the severity of the last night's storm that they had taken shelter somewhere overnight.

He also officially met Kael and his daughter. The morlock boy was a bit more leery about him than Zorian remembered, but he supposed that was to be expected. He usually greeted Kael at Cyoria's train station and charmed him with practiced gestures and conversation right from the start... none of which had happened this time. Since the circumstances of their meeting differed, so did Kael's reaction to him.

It was a minor matter, really. Zorian was confident that the morlock boy would warm up to him eventually. If anything, the fact Kael was currently so distant may very well be a good thing. Much like Zorian's interaction with Ilsa earlier in the resta-

He froze suddenly, fiercely knocking his head with his fist a couple of times. No. Not 'restart'! There was no time loop anymore. It was the real thing. He had to get this into his head as soon as possible...

His strange actions prompted strange looks from Imaya, who asked him if he was alright.

Once Kirielle had settled in and he cleared up some things with Imaya, Zorian left a simulacrum to guard the place and left to find Zach. He eventually found him sitting on the edge of the academy fountain, idly running his hand through the water while lost in thought.

"It's weird," Zach told him when he approached. "The fountain hadn't worked for years, and it was only recently that it got fixed and repainted... but to me, it looks perfectly normal as it is right now. In fact, I don't think I actually remember what the fountain looked like before this month."

"Makes sense," Zorian shrugged. "It's been decades since you've last seen it."

Even Zorian struggled to remember details like that, and his stay in the time loop had been far shorter than Zach's. He had the ability to flawlessly preserve important memories inside his memory packets, of course, but that only worked for select things he consciously deemed important. Most of his memories went through the exact same process as any other person's.

Zach didn't say anything to that. Instead he simply got up from his sitting spot and then motioned for Zorian to follow him.

"I'm a bit hungry," Zach said. "Let's go to the cafeteria and see what they have to offer. It's been so long since I've been there I've already forgotten what the food there tastes like."

"So did I," Zorian admitted. "Still, we stopped going there for a reason. The cafeteria food is nothing special, I assure you of *that*. What's this all about, really?"

"I don't know. It's just something that has been on my mind lately," Zach said with a shrug. "Say, did you ever figure out what you would do after this month?"

Zorian hesitated for a few seconds.

"There are so many uncertainties surrounding this month that it almost seems foolish to have any long-term plans until it's over," he said cautiously. "Even if we both survive and Cyoria isn't a ruined wreck by the end of it, the invasion may very well leave us on the run or trigger another round of Splinter Wars. Ignoring that, though, I think I'll just gather some funds..."

Zach gave him a knowing look.

"Well, okay, a *lot* of funds," Zorian admitted. "And then I'll open a research facility to study the nature of mana. Maybe I'll be able to figure out how to duplicate that mana-increasing stabilization frame that you and Quatach-Ichl have attached to your soul. Or maybe I'll discover how to store mana in outside containers, assimilate mana more quickly and efficiently, or some other revolutionary improvement. That had kind of been my dream when I was younger – to invent something that would completely revolutionize the way magic is done. I eventually discarded that as a childish fantasy that I had no power to realize... but maybe it's not so impossible anymore."

"Still very difficult," Zach noted. "If a talented mage with plenty of money was enough to revolutionize magic, it would happen way more often than it does."

"It doesn't matter," Zorian said. "It's fine if I fail. I have no interest in hoarding money or in political maneuvering, so what else would I do with my time and money?"

"Never say never," said Zach with a grin. "Once you get married, you may find your wife is not nearly as divorced from material concerns as you are."

"You're not even married yourself, so how would you know anything about that?" Zorian huffed. "Don't talk like an old man."

"But I *am* an old man," Zach protested. "At least from a certain perspective. Anyway, I hope you realize that this sort of thing you're describing is something the time loop would have been ab-

solutely perfect for, right?"

"Yes, but I didn't have time to focus on such peripheral, highly theoretical projects back in the time loop. Kind of funny, but true. Life is amusing like that sometimes," Zorian shrugged. He paused for a moment, thinking about something. "Of course, before I can throw myself into big projects like that, I first need to pay back all the people that helped me inside the time loop. Doing that without drawing any attention and revealing my identity is bound to be a... tricky undertaking."

"Can you even do that at this point?" Zach asked. "We lost most of the notebooks and research notes when the physical exit strategy failed."

"I saved the most crucial work in my head, and the rest can be reconstructed with some effort," Zorian said. "It may take years but I'm sure I can do it."

He was deliberately being a little more optimistic about things than he really felt. So many things had been lost at the end of the time loop... it pained Zorian to even think of it. Zorian had used memory packets to preserve their most important information, designs, and notebooks before the group had made their exit attempt... just in case... but this was still just a small part of the whole. It couldn't substitute for the vast body of knowledge and invention that the group had managed to gather in the end.

Rebuilding that massive library and then handing down portions of it to various people without causing a massive stir that led straight back to him would be a difficult problem.

"Does that mean you've already given Kael his notes?" Zach asked curiously.

"No, not yet," said Zorian, shaking his head. He actually had fairly complete version of Kael's notes. He prioritized preserving his research, mostly due to them being old friends, so he didn't have to reconstruct much in that regard. "The situation is very



weird right now. I don't want to involve him in this mess until I have to, and I can't just hand him those research notes and leave him to his own devices."

"Do you even want to tell him about the time loop?" Zach asked.

"Ideally, I'd like to keep everyone except Xvim, Alanic, and the Cyorian web in the dark about the time loop," Zorian said. "I'm not sure how possible that is, though. We are already planning to evacuate everyone we know to Koth at some point. We're going to need an explanation of some sort for that. At the very least, informing Daimen about things may be necessary to get his cooperation."

"Daimen would also be useful for his magical prowess and possibly his connections," Zach pointed out. "Speaking of Koth, how are the negotiations with the Silent Doorway Adepts going?"

"Reasonably well," Zorian said. "We haven't reached an agreement, but that's normal. I don't think we need to tell them anything about time travel. Gate keys for another continent are tempting enough on their own. We should have a way to Koth in a few of days."

"Good. I'll feel a lot better with Princess by my side," Zach said. "With her support, not even Quatach-Ichl can force us to withdraw. I'd put my hand in the fire that Red Robe is trying to broker some kind of alliance with Quatach-Ichl as quickly as he can."

"Probably," Zorian agreed.

"I really don't like this," Zach said. "You at least are in constant contact with your simulacrum, but I don't have that luxury. I have no idea what's happening out there until my simulacrum deign to send me a report, so all I can do is wait. I feel useless and stupid."

"The simulacrum are doing fine," Zorian assured him. "I'm concerned that we can't find any solid clues as to what Red Robe

is really doing, but us being active along with our simulacrum would not have helped with that anyway."

"You may be right, but I'm sick of waiting," Zach told him. "It just isn't my style, you know? Once we get our hands on the imperial orb and have Princess on our side we'll be able to *really* go on the offensive. It doesn't matter what Red Robe's is planning then – we'll just come straight at him and crush him in battle. If we demolish the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria and shut down the gate they use to transport their troops, the invasion is over. We'll see if he'll still hide behind simulacrum when that happens."

"Hey! Zorian! Hey! Over here!"

They had barely stepped foot inside the cafeteria when a familiar voice started calling for him. It was Benisek – the chubby, cheerful, girl-obsessed boy that Zorian used to regularly interact with. Sadly, the time loop had not been kind to their friendship. Benisek could be really annoying and shallow, and the time loop had only made that worse. Eventually, Zorian stopped interacting with him at all.

He kind of felt bad about that. Benisek had his faults, but so did his old self. He couldn't really ignore the boy's invitation without looking like a colossal jerk, so he reluctantly walked over. Zach followed after him, inviting himself along.

"Hello, Ben," Zorian said, as he fetched a nearby chair and sat down next to him. Zach gave Ben a friendly wave and a smile before copying his action. "You sound happy. Eager to start a new school year?"

"You bet!" Benisek said, grinning wildly. "We're upperclassmen now! Our dating prospects have entered a whole new level!"

"Hell yeah!" Zach agreed, fist pumping in the air. "For girls!"

"For girls!" Benisek agreed, returning the fist pump with one of his own.

"For gods' sake, you two... we're in a public setting," Zorian

complained, trying to ignore the way people around them were staring at them.

"So. You two are hanging out together, now?" Benisek asked curiously. "When did that happen?"

"In the last couple of days," Zorian told him. "Don't ask. It's a long story involving a series of misunderstandings, me getting punched in the face at the train station, and Zach getting attacked by my little sister in retaliation."

"That sounds super interesting, though," he protested. "You can't tell me something like that and then just leave me hanging, man."

He suddenly frowned a little, giving Zorian a weird look.

"Wait... are you saying you brought your annoying little sister along to Cyoria?" he asked.

"Yup," Zorian confirmed with a decisive nod.

"Ouch," Benisek said with an exaggerated wince. "My condolences. See, I told you that being so serious and responsible would eventually bite you in the ass... my family would never even *think* of letting me take care of my younger sisters! You should be more like me, Zorian!"

"The mere idea is horrifying," Zorian told him bluntly.

"Bah, you don't know what's good for you," Benisek said. He gave Zach a speculative look. "Though, if you keep hanging out with our dear friend Zach, that may change after a while. I hear your recent life has been somewhat... exciting."

"Oh yeah, downright explosive," agreed Zach.

"So that attack I was hearing about...?" Benisek asked.

"It's all true, but I was out drinking and dancing that night so it ended up missing me," Zach said with a careless shrug.

"Ha ha, now *that's* the proper way to evade death!" Benisek said, leaning forward to punch Zach in the shoulder. Zach blocked it, which Benisek took in stride. He leaned back in his chair, his ex-

pression becoming more solemn all of a sudden. "But man, I got to say, this is one messed up week. First the attack on Noveda Mansion, and now that thing with the villages in Holakor... what is the world coming to? I really, really hope this isn't a prelude to war, you know? It's kind of selfish, but I want my academy days to be peaceful and fun."

Zach and Zorian shared a confused look with each other.

"What do you mean 'villages in Holakor'?" Zorian asked him. "We don't know anything about that."

"Ah? No?" Benisek said, surprised. "You two need to pay more attention to recent events, then. I know Eldemarian newspapers haven't reported much on it, but you two should keep an eye on continental news. One of you is the heir of a Noble House and the other... well, I know Zorian doesn't like hearing about his brother, but—"

"Just tell us already," Zorian told him with a heavy sigh.

"Fine, but you have to tell me that long story you teased me with earlier," Benisek blackmailed.

"Deal," Zorian immediately agreed. He would make something up later.

"Alright," Benisek grinned. "I'll hold you to that. Anyway, word is going around that a number of villages in Holakor – that's the big neighboring country to the west of Eldemar, you know – have been hit by some sort of attack recently. A weirdly brutal attack. Rumors are saying it was a total bloodbath, with *hundreds* of people killed."

Zorian's mood immediately plummeted.

He supposed they finally got a clue as to what Red Robe had been doing all this time.



Later that day, Zorian returned to Imaya's place, his thoughts still on what Benisek had told them. He and Zach had immediately dispatched a pair of simulacrams to Holakor to check up on this situation, but it would take a while for them to reach the villages in question and investigate things. In the meantime, they could only speculate what Red Robe had been doing there and for what purpose.

He didn't have a lot of time to dedicate to his musings, though, because he was soon interrupted by Taiven, who sought him out for recruitment.

Zorian didn't want to tell her about the time loop. Like Kael and a lot of other people that once made up their group of temporary loopers, she couldn't actually help them in any way and telling her about the invasion would just expose her to danger. Well, more danger than she was already in.

Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn't be easier to just tell everyone about the time loop and point the central government at Red Robe and the invaders right from the very start. However, when they had discussed that scenario back in the time loop, even the temporary loopers agreed this was a very unhappy solution to the problem. The central government was notoriously corrupt and power-hungry, and the current king favored a highly aggressive stance towards any internal threats. Once Eldemar's forces were done dealing with Red Robe and the Ibasans, they were almost certainly going to turn on them.

And anyone who knew about the time loop and the invasion would likely suffer along with them.

Calling in the military was pretty much a guaranteed win... for Cyoria and its citizens. However, they, and people close to them, might end up paying the price for this good deed. This was not a choice they wanted to make. They were not selfless angels, after all. Thus, it was decided to only make the report once they were

reasonably sure it couldn't be tracked down to them. That would take a while to set up, but it wouldn't take the entire month to do so. That was the main reason why Zorian was fine with Red Robe's stalling for time. Unless Red Robe blindsided them with something, Zach and Zorian were guaranteed to win.

Of course, if Red Robe's schemes *did* blindside them, they would rather unmask themselves than allow the city to be destroyed and watch as an ancient godlike monster is released into the world. That was why it was important to keep most of the former temporary loopers in the dark for now. If the army suddenly stormed into the city and started asking questions, the less they knew about what was going on, the better.

Still, he couldn't just refuse Taiven's offer and send her off into the tunnels beneath the city to die. Thus, he let her in on some of his secrets.

"What?" Taiven complained. "Why are you staring at me like that? Is there something on my face?"

She ran her hand over her face to check things and even glanced behind her to check if there was someone standing over her shoulder. Zorian didn't know whether she was faking it in order to make fun of him or if she honestly believed these were legitimate possibilities... but he supposed he *had* been staring at her for a little too long.

"Taiven, this job of yours is a total setup," he eventually told her. "You should stay away from this one."

"Huh? What do you mean?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "It's just a simple find and retrieve in the tunnels below the city. Fight some giant spiders, find the lost thingy, get out."

"The giant spiders are aranea," Zorian told her. "They're giant, intelligent, *telepathic* spiders. Unless you know what you're doing and come prepared, they can blast you into unconsciousness before you can blink."

Taiven took a step back at the description, her eyes widening at the description.

"Shit," she swore. "Roach, how do you—"

"And that man isn't some innocent wanderer that lost his expensive trinket down there," Zorian continued. "He had been spying on the aranea and got caught in the act. That ward breaker device is currently safely stored in the aranea treasury, not carelessly dropped in some dusty tunnel and free for the taking."

"Roach, how do you know this!?" Taiven asked, a little more forcefully this time.

"Huh. I'm surprised you didn't just accuse me of lying," he told her slowly.

"This is too serious," she said, frowning. "I don't think you'd joke around with something like that. And you're not really the joking type, either. Now tell."

"Well, I know about this because I'm friendly with the aranea," Zorian told her. "They're teaching me how to control my telepathic powers, after all."

"Your... telepathic powers?" she repeated slowly. "As in... mind reading?"

[Among other things, yes,] he sent her telepathically.

She flinched back and gave him a frightened look afterward. For a moment Zorian thought she would bolt out of his room right then and there but instead she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and forcibly calmed herself down.

"Damn, Roach," she said, massaging her forehead. "You really know how to drop a secret on someone."

"I had to make sure you take this seriously," Zorian said.

"Well, you succeeded," she responded unhappily. She gave him a suspicious look. "You didn't read my mind without permission, did you? How long has this been going on, anyway?"

"I didn't," Zorian assured her. "I only found out about my innate mental powers recently."

"Well good," Taiven said. "Though I'm not too happy you're keeping secrets like that. Especially something that sounds so... shady. I never knew there was a colony of sapient spiders living beneath the city. They're not here legally, are they? And you're just hanging around them and learning mind magic from them like it's nothing? What else are you hiding from me?"

"You're just mad I didn't invite you along for this 'shady' adventure," Zorian said, deflecting her worries.

"Yes, dammit!" she said, swinging her fist at his shoulder.

He flawlessly deflected her half-hearted punch to the side, causing her to stop and blink at him in surprise. His move wasn't really all that amazing, but he suddenly realized he never used to do that sort of thing before the time loop. Oops.

"You know I'm right, though," she said, ignoring the incident in favor of crossing her arms in front of her chest and staring down at him. "It's crazy dangerous what you're doing, and you should have at least taken a bodyguard when going down there."

"You?" Zorian 'guessed'.

"Who else do you know that is an amazing battlemage?" she asked rhetorically, straightening her pose proudly.

"Well, I've been hanging out with Zach Noveda lately, and he's pretty good at combat magic," Zorian told her.

"The Noveda heir? Isn't he one of your classmates?" Taiven asked dubiously.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"A third year student being able to compare with me? Please," Taiven scoffed. "You're looking down way too much on me Zorian. Looks like I'll have to challenge you to a proper fight soon, just to broaden your horizons and let you get some perspective on things."



Zorian couldn't help it. He stopped himself from laughing out loud at her, but there was a wide smile stuck on his face that just wouldn't go away.

"What?" she demanded. "What the hell is so amusing about what I said? You want to fight right now!?"

He couldn't help it and simply burst into laughter at her.

Later on, Zorian reflected that Imaya was probably starting to think of him as some major weirdo. First it was that incident of him punching himself in the head earlier, and now there was a girl chasing him around the house and demanding that he 'takes it like a man' and whatnot.

Zorian wasn't sure how his friendship with Taiven was going to fare in the future, considering that he could not possibly hide the full extent of his skills forever... but at least her current visit had brightened his day somewhat.



Red Robe had chosen his targets well. Although situated on the border of Eldemar and relatively close to Cyoria, Holakor was pretty difficult to access. It had rather unfriendly relations with Eldemar – not an unusual situation in regards to states bordering their country – and it was a mountainous country with poor transport infrastructure and plenty of isolated mountain villages. Reaching their destination was quite mana expensive, requiring lots of teleportation and other magic, and orienting themselves was a chore. The whole region was swarming with Holakorian soldiers searching for the culprits and trying to control the flow of news and people in and out of the place. Additionally, Holakor's cartographers had apparently not done a very good job, because some of the villages hit by the attacks weren't even marked in publicly available maps and records.

Still, Zach and Zorian were resourceful people, and their simulacrums inherited their skills. Thus, it took them less than two days to reach the villages Benisek had told them about and investigate the situation.

The results of the investigation were grim. Benisek had said the worst of the rumors mentioned hundreds of casualties... but it only took one glance at the first village they visited to realize this estimate was, if anything, severely understated. The village was the scene of a total bloodbath – of the 300 or so inhabitants, most of them had been killed. Only a young couple that sneaked away from the village during the night and an old hunter that decided to sleep over in the wilderness had survived the slaughter. The attackers hadn't even bothered to loot the place – the objective appeared to have been simple, indiscriminate killing.

The other villages they visited were pretty much the same. A sudden, overwhelming attack that aimed to kill as many as possible. Accounts of the attackers were hard to come by, since most people who got caught up in it died, but it was clear the attacker was a sizeable armed group. A group that contained war trolls, various monsters, and scores of undead. A group that seemed capable of teleporting themselves all over the place, because they had hit over ten villages in the span of a single night, before seemingly disappearing into thin air.

Adding everything together, Zach and Zorian estimated the death toll reached easily into thousands. Holakorian authorities had walled off the area from the rest of the country, fearing mass panic and unrest if the true scope of the slaughter became known, which was why the reaction to the attack was rather muted at the moment. Still, those kinds of measures were just stalling for time. Zorian would be surprised if they could keep it a secret for more than a week.

At first, neither Zach nor Zorian could understand this move.

What was Red Robe trying to accomplish by killing Holakorian villagers like that? Was this some sort of large-scale sacrifice? Zorian wouldn't call himself an expert on blood magic, but he didn't think so. The killing was too quick and disorganized, and the villages hit by the attacks weren't arranged into discernible pattern.

In the end they went to Alanic for help. Alanic was one of the people they had decided to inform about the existence of the time loop and the invasion no matter what, since he was highly competent and already in huge danger from the invaders no matter what. Thus far he still wasn't convinced they were telling the truth about the whole time travel business, but the information they had brought him was pretty convincing on its own. After all, the little notebook that Zorian duplicated from his memory packets was written by Alanic himself, and listed all sorts of criminal groups and hideouts they had found over the restarts. Even if Alanic thought they were lying or delusional about being time travelers, he was still holding a book written in his own handwriting, mentioning things only he should know about and listing a variety of things whose truthfulness was easy to check.

Alanic took one look at the information they had compiled about the attack on Holakorian villages and dismissed the idea it was some kind of massive demon summoning or some other piece of blood magic.

"Blood magic fueled summonings are disturbingly easy, but not this easy," Alanic said, shaking his head. "The victims would have to be herded into a central location. Their life force would have to be carefully mixed and funneled into a massive spell formula circle. The preparations would not be small and would be easily noticed and stopped. Holakor's authorities would not miss such a thing, and you would have seen evidence of it even if they had."

"Then what is this about?" asked Zach, sounding frustrated.

"Why are they killing all these people? It's not simply bloodthirstiness, I'm sure of that. This was clearly done with the full cooperation of Quatach-Ichl and his forces. There is no way he would have agreed to this unless there was some kind of clear benefit to this."

Alanic looked at the papers in silence, shuffling them around while frowning deeply. This went on for a full minute, with Zach and Zorian quietly waiting to hear what he had to say.

"I almost want to say this is a soul-gathering operation," Alanic eventually told them. "Except... gathering souls is not such a simple business, either. In order to gather the souls of thousands of people, the attackers would need thousands of soul containers. Even if they could afford to build that many, the sheer logistics of shuffling those soul containers around to the right place and the right time and casting the necessary spells to capture the soul before it moved on to the afterlife—"

Zach and Zorian's faces became uglier the longer Alanic continued to speak.

"Shit," Zach swore.

"What?" Alanic said, frowning. He was frowning a lot at the moment, clearly upset by the information the two of them just brought him.

"They don't have to go through all that trouble because they have Sudomir's Well of Souls," Zorian explained to him.

"Well of Souls?" Alanic slowly repeated. He glanced at the little book on the side of the table. "Is that inside the notebook you gave me?"

"It is," Zorian confirmed. "You must not have reached that part."

Alanic quickly flipped through it until he reached the relevant part. Zach and Zorian waited for him to finish, discussing things quietly amongst themselves.

"Well," Alanic eventually said, snapping the book in his hands shut. "Not only am I now certain this was *indeed* a soul gathering operation... I think I even know what they need all those souls for."

"Yes. And so do we," Zach told him grimly. "It's pretty obvious at this point."

"Sudomir is making his wraith bomb in advance," Zorian finished for them.



Despite recent developments, Zach and Zorian decided to attend the first day of classes at the academy. There were three reasons for that. The first one was that Zach and Zorian wanted to scout out Iasku Mansion to see what they were dealing with before they committed themselves to anything substantial. The second one was that they should get access to Koth soon, which will greatly expand their capabilities and was well worth waiting for.

And the third one was that showing up to class today was probably their last chance to do such a thing for the rest of the month. After today, it was unlikely they would have time to mess around with schoolwork and attending classes. They might as well take this opportunity to reunite with their classmates for a moment, finish recovering, and mentally prepare themselves for the trials ahead.

"You're late."

Zorian looked at Akoja, dutifully standing in front of the door with a clipboard in her hands and taking note of incoming students. She stared at him coolly, tapping her foot impatiently against the ground.

He simply smiled at her in response, causing her to suddenly lose her cool and look away uncomfortably.

"Sorry," Zorian told her. "Things are a little hectic these days, at least for me."

"Well... just don't let it happen in the future, okay?" she told him seriously, quickly recovering her confidence.

"Sadly, I don't think that's possible," Zorian shook his head. "I'm probably going to be absent from classes a lot in the near future."

"It's not a good idea to miss the start of the school year like that," she told him with a small frown.

"I disagree. The start of the school year is the *best* time to miss," Zorian told her. "It's all just repetition of things we've already learned in previous years and very easy study material. I'll make up for it in a flash, you'll see."

"Just get inside already," she told him with a long suffering sigh.

Zorian gave her a thumbs up and did as he was told, humming happily as he entered the classroom and picked a seat for himself. Zach was already inside, Akoja not having paid too much attention to him. Zorian greeted a few of the classmates he remembered being slightly more friendly with before the time loop, turning some heads due to how uncharacteristically happy he seemed, before going towards the front of the classroom.

He picked a familiar spot next to Briam and his fire drake, with Zach right behind him.

Just like he expected, the small fire drake in Briam's lap immediately started hissing at him when he approached. Briam quickly enclosed the orange-red lizard with both hands and started whispering soothingly at his familiar. The drake calmed down a little but still kept both of his eyes on Zorian, alert and nervous.

Zorian ignored the spectacle, simply plopping down on his seat and calmly watching the scene. He still didn't understand what exactly the fire drake found so upsetting about him in particular. He had once even peered into the fire drake's mind to find the answer, but that didn't help. The fire drake was not actually a sapient being. He was a creature of instinct, and something deep inside of

him told him that Zorian was uniquely dangerous out of all people gathered in the classroom. The fire drake did not understand why, but it trusted its instincts.

Did the drake sense Zorian's mental powers, despite not being psychic himself? Did Zorian have some ability he had no idea about? It was a mystery. From what Briam had told him, he wasn't unique in this regard. Fire drakes could be very strange, temperamental creatures, and he wasn't the first person that his familiar had picked out for some reason. Eventually, the influence of the mage they were bonded with tended to temper these kinds of aggressive urges, and mature fire drake familiars were apparently far more placid and reliable in dealing with strangers.

"Sorry about that," Briam said. "He's still a little uneasy around strangers."

"Don't worry about it," Zorian said, waving the apology away. "Congratulations on getting your own familiar, I guess. Must be a milestone for you."

"Yeah," Briam said happily, patting the drake like some kind of scaly cat. The drake reacted to that sort of like a cat, too. "It's great."

He spent some time talking to Briam and waiting for the class to start. Though it was premature to worry about that now, he couldn't help but wonder how to deal with school life in the future. His classmates were nice and all... some of them he'd be happy to befriend if possible... but he was so much more capable than them magic-wise that it wasn't even funny. Plus, the classes themselves are bound to be mind-numbingly boring. Could he really pretend to be just a normal student for two years straight? Was it actually possible for someone like him – a guy with archmage-level skills and a decade of additional memories and experience under his belt – to befriend one of these people?

Perhaps time loop Taiven was right and his attempt to connect

to his former friends and classmates was ultimately kind of hollow and patronizing...

Thankfully, his somewhat depressing thoughts were soon interrupted by Ilsa's arrival to class. She did her practiced speech at the beginning of the class and then started the lesson. Zorian was already preparing himself for a boring but relaxing class the likes of which he had heard dozens of times inside the time loop when the classroom door suddenly burst open, and a teenage boy his own age swaggered inside.

He was tall, with messy blond hair and rumpled clothes that looked like they had seen better days. The door had been opened so forcefully that Zorian suspected the boy had kicked it open with his foot instead of using the handle. It rebounded against the wall with a loud bang and promptly closed itself behind him.

As he marched forward towards the front of the class, the boy swept the whole class with his gaze. For a moment, Zorian met his eyes and found himself staring at vividly orange eyes, their slitted pupils burning with barely contained anger and aggression.

Veyers Boranova had arrived to class.



## BETRAYER

Veyers was a frustrating part of the time loop mystery for Zorian. The fact that he had been deliberately erased from Zach's mind and that he started each restart dead made him a strong suspect for the real identity for Red Robe. However, that raised the question of how Veyers had managed to become a permanent looper. It couldn't have been through the method Zorian had used – everything he and Zach knew indicated that had been pure luck, and that deliberately replicating it would be both hard and dangerous. Zorian's conversation with Panaxeth had fully convinced Zorian that Zach was the original Controller of the loop, so Red Robe must have come later. That meant he had probably become a looper through the temporary marker given by the imperial crown... which meant that he had only had six months to figure out a way to permanently join the time loop.

Did Veyers really possess the skills necessary to pull that off? He was just an inexperienced teenager. He had a crippling condition that made his magic and personality unstable. He was not considered a social genius or a magic prodigy, even before his botched ignition ritual. There was no way he could have developed his magic sufficiently to pull it off in mere six months, and organiz-

ing a group that could have done so in his stead would have taken considerable amount of social shrewdness.

Not to mention that Veyers would have had to do all this while keeping Zach in the dark about everything. Zach wasn't very paranoid, and was probably even less so in the past, but that couldn't have been easy regardless.

Still, Zorian could see how it could have worked. Perhaps Zach had really come to like Veyers for some reason and had done most of the work himself. Perhaps he had brought the other boy into the time loop again and again, figured out a way to stabilize his magic, and helped him advance his skills in the fastest and convenient manner possible. Perhaps there had even been a time when Zach had gone through the trouble of recruiting Quatach-Ichl and other soul magic experts in order to figure out a way to crack the secrets of the temporary marker... so that he could bring his best pal Veyers permanently into the time loop.

In order to be Red Robe, Veyers didn't have to be a resourceful mastermind that achieved what he and Zach could not in just six months... he could have simply been an opportunistic, heartless traitor who stabbed Zach in the back after his fellow time looper had given him everything he could.

It was all pure speculation, of course. Concrete answers about Veyers were basically impossible to find inside the time loop. Veyers himself obviously couldn't be questioned, people he was related to knew nothing useful, Zach did not remember anything about the boy, and Red Robe had left the time loop. If there were answers regarding Veyers, they would have to wait until Zorian had left the time loop.

Once he had done so, however, things remained stubbornly unclear. He found out that Red Robe had gone through the trouble of evacuating Veyers and his lawyer friend immediately after crossing over to the real world. That greatly increased the chance

that Veyers really was Red Robe in his mind. However, he was then informed by Zach that, in the restarts following his departure, both Zorian and Silverlake were very much alive. Devoid of any memories of the time loop, but alive. This was very much unlike Veyers, who was dead and soulless at the beginning of every restart. Didn't that basically confirm that Veyers was knocked out of the time loop by the imperial dagger and couldn't possibly be Red Robe?

Now, all of those questions had a chance of being answered, because Veyers was finally in front of them. They didn't even have to search for him – he had just shown up in class, alone and defenseless.

Zorian had to admit, he had been caught completely off-guard by the boy's arrival. If this was Red Robe, why would he do this? If this was the original Veyers, why would Red Robe allow this? Why, for the love of all that was holy, had Veyers suddenly come here?

Based on the reactions of everyone around him, Zorian could see that no one, not even Ilisa, knew the answer to that question.

After briefly staring down everyone, Veyers picked an empty spot not far from Zorian and Briam and sat down. He ignored everyone staring at him and started to unpack his books and writing supplies out of his bag, slamming them loudly on the table in front of them in a clear attempt to provoke some kind of reaction.

"Mister Boranova, what do you think you are doing here?" Ilisa finally asked him.

"What?" he challenged. "I'm attending the class I paid for. Is there a problem?"

"You are no longer a student of this institution," Ilisa told him, taking a deep breath and clearly suppressing a sigh. Her voice was tinged with annoyance and she gripped the teaching rod in her hand a little more tightly in her grip. "You know this."

"I know no such thing," Veyers said immediately, shaking his head and making exaggerated faces at her. "My tuition has been paid in full, I passed my first circle certification with flying colors, and I received no notification about any changes in my attendance status. How can I no longer be a student?"

"You attacked people on your disciplinary hearing, mister Boranova," Ilsa told him. "As a result, you were expelled from the academy. You know this, I'm sure of this. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"That's a lie. I didn't attack anyone," Veyers said stubbornly. "I lost control over my magic and burned down some furniture. It happens, sometimes. You know this, I'm sure of this. Your institution had no problem taking my money back in the past, even though they were warned this would be the case. I was assured that so long no one was hurt and I paid for any damages, I would be allowed to attend. You have no right to expel me over that incident!"

"It wasn't me who made the decision, so I don't understand why you're telling me this," Ilsa told him. She didn't look particularly sympathetic towards him, and probably didn't really believe him much either. "Make a complaint to the academy's legal department if you feel you were wronged."

"Well, I will!" Veyers exclaimed. "And in the meantime, I will continue to attend the classes I paid for!"

Zorian looked in disbelief as Veyers continued to argue with Ilsa over his expulsion and right to attend classes. He found the entire situation surreal. It was obvious this Veyers wasn't Red Robe. He paid no special attention to Zach and Zorian, his mind and soul were largely unprotected, and his awful, confrontational attitude was exactly as Zorian remembered it. This was the original Veyers, untouched by the time loop... for better or for worse.

Why would Red Robe allow this? He had specifically evacu-

ated the original Veyers from his friend's house at the start of the restart. Zorian had fully expected Veyers to have been taken to some secure place, far away from danger. Why would Red Robe go through all that trouble and then just let the original Veyers come to class and make a scene. It didn't make sense!

Zorian could try to search for answers by digging around in Veyers's mind... but the boy did have some basic protection from mental tampering. He was wearing a pendant with a big green marble embedded in it – it was projecting a mental shield around Veyers's mind and would start screeching and glowing if that barrier was broken or tampered with.

Zorian had seen such pendants before. The shield they created was easy to break, but the alarm on them was sufficiently trigger-happy that he couldn't bypass it quietly. He would cause a scene almost as big as Veyers's if he mentally assaulted him in the middle of class while he was wearing that.

Not that this would stop Zorian for long, of course. He just needed to pick the right moment and everything would be over in seconds. The only thing that worried him was that he suspected Veyers to be some kind of trap by Red Robe. Did the boy have some kind of trap placed inside his mind, waiting to be triggered by a careless mind reader? Was there someone spying on Veyers, ready to report them to the authorities when they were caught attacking him?

He started covertly scouting their surroundings while watching Veyers get increasingly agitated as he argued with Ilsa. The rest of the classmates were also starting to get restless, muttering to each other in increasingly loud voices. Few of them saw Veyers's actions in positive light, which no doubt made him even angrier.

"...must give me back the money I paid for this!" Veyers shouted, banging his hand against the desk for emphasis. "It's disgusting and shameless in the extreme that you're trying to

claim my tuition after expelling me! How brazen and corrupt can you be!?"

"I could say the same thing about you, mister Boranova – how shameless do you have to be to make this kind of display here and disrupt my class like this?" Ilsa said in a tone that was calmer and more dignified than Veyers's, but still noticeably heated. "If you have complaints about money, go speak to the headmaster or the accounting office. I am not in charge of handling student money and I'm not familiar with the particulars of your case. All I know is that you have been expelled and that you are wasting everyone's time here with your antics. Please leave."

"Make me," Veyers challenged. His orange eyes light up with a fiery glow and a notebook he placed on the table ignited and burst into flames.

Evidently Red Robe didn't bother to fix his botched ignition ritual.

"Make me," he repeated angrily. "I'll burn this whole place down, I swear!"

"Veyers..." Ilsa said, pushing her glasses upwards to massage her eyes in frustration. This was the first time she was calling him by his first name. "Why must you do this? Don't you realize you're just shooting yourself in the foot? If you really plan to take the academy to court over this, behaving like this will only give them more ammunition."

"Trogmar, no!" Briam suddenly yelled.

It was useless. Trogmar, his fire drake familiar, had been completely infuriated by Veyers for some time already. Now that Veyers had lost control over his powers and started burning things, the fire drake decided it was done passively waiting for this threat to come to him and his master.

With a fearsome battle screech, the fire drake ripped itself away from Briam's desperate attempts to hold him back and leapt

over the tables. It crashed into Veyers's table, scattering books in all directions, and hissed menacingly at the orange-eyed boy.

Swearing loudly, Veyers hurriedly pushed himself from his desk, fell on his ass in his hurry to evade the fire drake, and then erupted into a short-ranged fireball centered on himself.

Undaunted, the fire drake took the flames head-on and added his own fire breath to the blaze.

The entire class started screaming and scrambled to get out of the classroom and away from the burning battlefield.

Well, Zach and Zorian remained calm and collected. They each picked one end of the classroom and subtly protected their classmates from harm by channeling the flames away from them through invisible force fields and chilling spells. Aside from them, only Briam and Ilisa did not try to escape the place. Briam was desperately trying to rein his familiar in and drag him off from the fight, while Ilisa did her best to keep the fire contained and tried to restrain Veyers and the fire drake in order to stop the fight.

Ilisa would have normally realized that Zach and Zorian had something to do with the surprising tendency of the flames to swerve away from the students or lose power before they reached them, but Zorian was using some light mind magic to draw her attention away from that. It wasn't particularly difficult, since there was a big, eye-catching battle in progress, and that attracted most of her attention anyway.

Of course, the fact Veyers and Briam's fire drake were throwing fire everywhere and that everyone was making a huge racket in their attempt to vacate the classroom meant this was a perfect opportunity for Zorian to covertly disable Veyers's pendant and invade his mind.

He shared a silent look with Zach, who simply nodded at him. In the next moment, they both struck. Zach wrapped the pendant in an illusion that made it appear inert no matter what was happen-

ing while Zorian pierced the mental barrier it created and started reading Veyers's mind and subverting his will.

Eventually, Ilsa managed to separate the two combatants, aided in no small part by Zorian mentally forcing them both to back down. Briam immediately dragged off his familiar away from Veyers, calming the fire drake down and inspecting him to see if he got hurt in the fight. As for Veyers, he simply collapsed unconscious all of a sudden. Zorian found it easier to memory search people when they were not mentally struggling against him all the time, and he had already gotten everything he could have out of his surface thoughts alone.

He was just about to convince Ilsa to let him and Zach carry Veyers off to a hospital or something when she suddenly spoke up.

"You two... have you been here all this time?" she asked, glancing towards Zach and Zorian.

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "We know some basic spells, so we stayed to see if we could help somehow."

"A bit reckless, but commendable," Ilsa said. "Unfortunately, no good deed goes unpunished in this world. I need some uninformed witnesses when I speak to the headmaster about this, and since you were here from start to finish, you fit the bill perfectly. You'll be coming with me after I clean up the classroom."

Zach and Zorian shared a look before lightly shrugging at each other. This was perfect, really – they got to stay close to Veyers for quite a while, giving Zorian plenty of time to rummage through his memories, and they didn't even have to make up some contrived excuse to do so.

"Okay," Zorian agreed easily.

Ilsa nodded at them, pleased they had no intention of trying to weasel out of it. She conjured a disc of force and levitated Veyers on top of it, before turning towards Briam.



Zach took the chance when her back was turned and telekinetically crushed Veyers's mind shield pendant into scrap. It gave off one final ear-piercing screech and a flash of light, invisible and inaudible through the illusion Zach placed on it earlier, and then went completely inert.

"Briam, you and your familiar are coming along as well," she told him.

"This... Teacher, I don't know what came into him! I—" stammered Briam, clutching the fire drake in his arms tighter to his chest. Trogmar had largely calmed down at this point, increasingly aware that his master was not happy with what he had done.

"I understand," Ilsa sighed. "I don't think you will receive a serious punishment... especially since Veyers is the other involved party. You really need to keep a better grip on your fire drake, however. Veyers started things, but this isn't a good look for you, either."

"Yes," he nodded quickly.

"Let's go, then," Ilsa said, gesturing towards the door.

She strode off towards the Headmaster's office, followed by Zach and Zorian, Briam and his fire drake, and unconscious Veyers on a floating ectoplasmic disc. She found Akoja and a number of other students waiting outside the classroom door, curious to see the resolution of the incident, and promptly recruited some of them as additional witnesses before telling the rest the class was canceled for the day and that they were free to go.

Zorian handed off his body to the mind of a distant simulacrum before focusing all of his attention on the memories locked inside Veyers's head...



"So... were you the one who pushed Briam's drake into doing that?" Zach asked him later.

"No, that was completely spontaneous," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I had nothing to do with it."

The questioning had lasted for hours, and Veyers had managed to wake up by the end of it. Without any memories of mental tampering, of course. He then yelled out all sorts of threats to everyone in the room and stormed off angrily, thus marking the end of that particular meeting.

Zach and Zorian decided to retreat to Noveda Mansion to discuss what happened.

"What did you get out of Veyers, then?" Zach asked. "You don't look very excited, so I'm guessing very little."

"Sort of," Zorian admitted. "As you might expect, he doesn't know who Red Robe is. He doesn't even remember what happened when he and his lawyer friend were evacuated at the beginning of the restart – that part of his memories was thoroughly erased, and I can't find out anything about it."

"Of course," Zach scoffed. "If he knew Red Robe's plans or identity, no way would Red Robe send him to class like this. What was even the point of that, I wonder? This was way too petty to be a legitimate part of Red Robe's master plan."

"I don't think this is something Red Robe thought up," Zorian said. "From what I could glean in Veyers's mind, our *former* classmate has had this on his mind for quite a while. Long before this month began."

"Wait, so this is *his* idea?" Zach said incredulously.

"If you could remember Veyers, you'd know this is exactly the sort of thing he would do," Zorian said. "He thought his expulsion was unfair and decided to do something about it. I doubt he saw the situation developing as it did, but he definitely came to class with the goal of making a stand against the academy and drawing attention to his case."

"So this had nothing to do with Red Robe?" Zach asked, frowning.

"No, this was just Veyers being Veyers," Zorian answered. "In fact, I suspect this was the reason Red Robe wiped out your memories of Veyers when he took a sledgehammer to your mind."

"What?" asked Zach, giving him a shocked look. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Veyers probably did this in every single restart while he was still alive," Zorian said.

"Come to our first class and start a fight with Briam's fire drake, you mean?" Zach asked.

"Yeah," Zorian nodded. "We always wondered why Red Robe bothered to erase your memories of Veyers, considering you wouldn't normally even interact with him..."

"...but if he normally showed up for class to make a scene, it would be very strange for him to suddenly stop coming," Zach said, eyes lighting up in realization. "If Red Robe is Veyers, he probably didn't want to go through this at the beginning of every restart just to keep up a charade. It's a waste of time, and he probably cringed inside at the thought of what an idiot he used to be. However, him being absent from class would immediately tip me off that something is wrong with him... unless I no longer remember him."

"That still begs the question, though... why would Red Robe allow Veyers to expose himself like this after going to the trouble of saving him at the start of the month?" Zorian asked.

"We didn't kill him," Zach pointed out.

"Yes, but how would Red Robe know for sure what we would or would not do to Veyers?" Zorian countered. "He was playing with Veyers's life by letting him come here. Plus, even if he scrubbed his memories clean of any sensitive information, he can't know for sure that he didn't leave anything of importance behind. It's just a pointless risk. If I was in Red Robe's place, I'd

never let this happen. I'd trap Veyers in a dungeon and sedate him if I had to. Does Red Robe even care about the welfare of original Veyers?"

"I don't know if that logic really holds," Zach told him dubiously. "You also brought your little sister here, even though you knew this placed her in greater danger. You cared more about fulfilling her wishes than making her perfectly safe."

Zorian made a sour face at that. He hated when Zach was right like that...

"Anyway, even if Red Robe doesn't know what you would do, he does know *me*... well, presumably. I would never just kill Veyers for no reason, even if he does have some tenuous connection to our opponent. None of this is his fault, really. Does he even have any connection to the Cult or the Ibasans?"

"No, that's all Jornak," said Zorian, shaking his head. "And Veyers doesn't know about that, either."

"Right. So there is no reason for us to go after original Veyers," Zach said. "He's just a dumb kid with no way to threaten us. Killing him would be really petty. We didn't even kill the original Silverlake, even though she could be a real headache if time looper Silverlake manages to recruit her to her side."

"I guess," Zorian said, not really convinced yet. "I still think it's very weird. I thought him showing up was maybe some kind of trap, but it doesn't appear this is correct..."

"I put a tracker on him before he left," Zach said. "If he goes back to Red Robe..."

"He won't," Zorian said, shaking his head. "This is Red Robe cutting him off and letting him sink or swim on his own. He'll go either back to his family or maybe to his lawyer friend. Assuming Jornak goes back to his home, that is."

They talked about the issue for some time before Zorian decided it was time to leave. Sadly, another thing cropped up before

he had a chance to set off.

Placed on the doorstep of Noveda Mansion was a simple white envelope addressed to 'Zach Noveda and Zorian Kazinski'. After thoroughly analyzing it for traps, the two of them opened it and found a letter waiting for them inside.

It was just a sheet of normal, non-magical paper with a few words scrawled on it in fancy, formal handwriting.

*Thank you for showing mercy.*

*Perhaps we can come to an agreement after all.*

*Let's talk.*

*You can pick a time and place for the meeting.*

*You know how to contact me.*

There was no return address, signature, or name of the sender on the letter... but it was obvious who sent it.

Just as it was obvious that they couldn't refuse the invitation.



It was already late in the evening and Zorian was slowly making his way to Imaya's place. He wasn't in a hurry. His thoughts were still stuck on the letter they received back at the Noveda estate. A meeting with Red Robe... what could the third time traveler want to talk to them about? As far as Zorian could see, they were completely and unavoidably opposed to each other. There was very little they could agree upon, and they couldn't really trust each other to stick to any such agreement anyway.

Especially since Zorian strongly suspected Red Robe got into the time loop by backstabbing Zach. A person like that couldn't be trusted at all...

As he was passing through one of the many Cyoria city parks, he suddenly stopped and turned towards the small fountain in the center. He had detected a familiar mental and soul signature in that direction.

There was a young woman sitting there, on the edge of the fountain. She was roughly 20 years of age, tall and beautiful, with long black hair and a feminine figure – the sort of beauty that made men turn around as they walked and remained stuck in their head for a while. Also, she was completely unfamiliar to Zorian. He had never seen this woman before in his entire life, he was sure. And yet...

She grinned at him cheekily, patting at the spot next to her, as if inviting him to join her. Some of the men around him cast him dark, jealous glances in response.

Zorian ignored the invitation for a second, directing his attention to the roof of a nearby building, where a large raven was inconspicuously sitting and observing the scene below.

Zorian cautiously approached the smiling woman, his expression darkening. When he was closer to her, he stopped. He could feel a ward field spring into existence around them, but he did nothing to stop it. He could immediately recognize it as a basic privacy ward, meant to stop people from listening in on them.

"Hell, Silverlake," he said. "You look much better than you did the last time we talked."

"Ha ha, you flatterer!" she told him. "I *feel* better! My mind is clearer, my bones do not ache, and I no longer get tired as easily. Being young again is everything I hoped for, and more!"

"Is this really what you looked like when you were younger, though?" Zorian asked her curiously.

"I have no idea," she said with a shrug. "I don't have any paintings of myself when I was younger, but I do remember being quite a looker in my younger days. Anyone who could legitimately call me out on this little bit of vanity is long dead, so who cares?"

"Little bit of vanity..." Zorian repeated quietly.

"Yes, just a little bit," Silverlake said, pretending to adjust her hair while smiling at him brightly. "You know, you should try not

to frown so much. It will give you wrinkles."

"You were surprisingly quiet so far," Zorian pointed out. "What's up with that?"

"Ah, you know... there's always something," she said dismissively. "An emergency here, an emergency there, and you suddenly lost two days with nothing to show for it. It's frustrating, but that's life."

"Indeed," said Zorian, glancing to the nearby roof where the raven was intently watching them. "I see you got yourself a new familiar. What happened to your old raven?"

Silverlake stopped smiling at him.

"I guess Panaxeth couldn't get him out of the time loop along with you," Zorian continued. "That must have hurt. I heard it's not healthy to lose a soul-bonded familiar like that. Especially for witches like yourself. Witches are known for having well-developed familiar-related magic, which probably translates into an even deeper link to their partner animals. Your soul must have suffered considerable damage when you were incarnated into that pretty new body of yours..."

"You know, you have been unusually passive yourself," Silverlake remarked. "I would have expected you to move faster and bolder than this. I'm guessing your arrival here has not been very smooth either."

"I guess you could say that," Zorian said. "I'm mostly recovered by now, though."

"What a coincidence. So am I," said Silverlake with a happy laugh. She suddenly gave him a serious look. "Besides, we both know it isn't my spellwork that really worries you and your 'friend'. It's the knowledge I possess about your skills, resources, contacts, and tactics."

Zorian frowned at her weird emphasis on the word 'friend', but in the end decided not to pursue that for the moment.

"Why are you here, Silverlake?" Zorian asked her seriously. "Aren't you afraid I'll kill you on the spot?"

"Ha ha! What, you'll attack me in the middle of a crowded park?" she said, sweeping her hand to point at the various people milling around them. Some of them were even curiously observing them, unable to hear what they're saying but clearly speculating what two mages like them could be discussing like this.

"It might be worth it to take down a traitor like you," Zorian told her.

"Ha. You know, I never told Red Robe most of the information about you that I possess," she said.

Zorian frowned at the statement.

"If I die here, however, the dead man's switch I made will activate and everything I know will fall into his lap," she said with a triumphant grin. She crossed her legs one over another and threw her head back in a self-satisfied pose. "Killing me here would be a very serious mistake. You're a smart, sensible kid, so I know you'll make the right choice."

After a few seconds, Zorian decided she was probably telling the truth. The way Red Robe had been behaving these past few days, it was obvious he lacked the sort of deep knowledge about Zach and Zorian that he should have had if Silverlake had simply spilled everything immediately.

"Alright. I guess you have a point there," Zorian admitted. "That still leaves the question of why you came here. You were clearly waiting for me. What do you want?"

"What? Not going to thank me for keeping your secrets?" Silverlake complained.

"Whatever your reason for doing that, I'm sure it's purely selfish and aimed squarely on maximizing your gains in this. I'm guessing you were trying to pressure Red Robe into making some sort of concession by not handing all the information over to him im-



mediately, but it ultimately doesn't matter. All that matters is that any benefit we get out of this is purely incidental. What is there to thank you for?" Zorian challenged.

"So judgmental," Silverlake sighed dramatically. "It's because I'm a witch, isn't it? It's always like this... we're only good for making potions and doing people's dirty work, and then it's back to the woods with you..."

"I don't have time for this," Zorian told her, turning to leave. "I think I'm going to practice my aim on that raven over there and then go home."

"There's still time for you to join me, you know?" Silverlake called out, not a trace of panic or annoyance in her voice.

Zorian's back remained turned away from her, but he did turn his head towards her to give her an incredulous look.

"I know I sound stupid to say that..." she began.

"Yeah, you do," Zorian confirmed.

"...but I really think you should hear me out," she continued. "Remember when we were talking about your 'friend' and how weird I made the word sound?"

"Yes?" Zorian confirmed, finally turning around to properly face her.

"That was your cue to ask me what I mean by that, silly boy. Must I draw a picture for you or something? Zach is no friend of people like us?"

"People like us?" Zorian asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I'm sure you know by now that I have entered into a bit of a contract with the primordial trapped in Cyoria," Silverlake said.

"A death pact to release it by the end of the month or die trying," Zorian said.

"Yes, more or less," Silverlake agreed. "But I'm not the only one who made a death pact. Your 'friend' has also made a death pact."

What?

"That's bullshit," Zorian said. "Zach could leave the time loop at any time. Why would he need to make a deal with Panaxeth?"

"Not with the primordial, you numbskull," Silverlake rolled her eyes at him. "With the angels! He made a death pact with the angels to stop the release of the primordial... while making sure no one could find out about the existence of the time loop. Even if he prevents Panaxeth's release, so long as there is even a single person who knows about the time loop by the end of the month, he is going to die. Never mind people who literally originate from the time loop like me and you... even people you tell about the time loop must either die or have their memory erased, or he will not survive this month."

Zorian froze momentarily, his brain stuttering for a second. He fully expected Zach to have some sort of compulsion embedded inside his mind, but this...

"How do you know this?" Zorian asked her quietly. "Did Panaxeth tell you this?"

"The primordial cannot directly discuss this," Silverlake said. "He hinted at it, and Red Robe explained the details of it to me later. I don't know how he knows so much about it, but presumably Zach told him that personally while he still remembered."

"He could be lying," Zorian pointed out.

"Yes, but I don't think he is," Silverlake said. She gave him a knowing look. "And you probably don't think so either."

Zorian said nothing.

"Don't think for a second that Zach doesn't know about this, either," Silverlake said. "As someone who is laboring under this sort of contract, I can tell you right now that deals with primordials are

not that easy to get out of. I already tried to erase my memories to void the contract, and it didn't work. The pact is branded directly into my soul, and I am constantly aware of its terms. I can forget the details of how I got it, but not the core contents of it. Zach is the same. Remember how he 'mysteriously' knew he had to find a way to beat the invasion? And how he – seemingly foolishly – insisted on trying to take it on all on his lonesome?"

Zorian still said nothing, though his posture slumped a little in response.

In retrospect, there were a number of things about Zach that fit this idea. His strong insistence that he would never use the temporary looper markers, for instance, which always seemed a little strange to his eyes... until he suddenly changed his mind about that.

Or the fact that Zach was clearly a very proactive and social person before he started working with Zorian, but became increasingly passive and even slightly fatalistic once they started working together.

"I understand what you're getting at, but I think you've badly misjudged the situation," Zorian told Silverlake. "I don't think Zach is out to kill me. And I don't think he would have been out to kill you if you had kept your trust in us and helped us make an exit for ourselves. With your help, we could have physically left the loop, laden with knowledge and resources of the time loop. Was it really worth it to give that up just for a chance of a younger body that you would have gotten eventually, anyway?"

"In the end, aren't you and Zach the only ones who successfully left that place?" Silverlake challenged, a defiant look on her face. "How do you know my presence would have made a difference? You don't. If I stayed, I would have faced extremely low chances of success while working for a person that needs to kill me once we got outside. You can hate me all you want, but I think I made the

right choice.”

”Hmph,” Zorian scoffed, turning back to leave again.

”Do you seriously think you can trust Zach, knowing all you do now?” Silverlake called out.

”More than I can trust you,” Zorian responded without turning back.

The raven on the nearby roof suddenly took flight and disappeared into the horizon.

Behind him, Silverlake shapeshifted into a raven before flying off herself, this time in the opposite direction her familiar went.

Well, Zorian actually strongly suspected that the Silverlake he spoke to *was* her raven familiar, whereas the raven on the roof had been the real Silverlake. As much as she tried to pretend she didn’t fear him attacking her, he felt she wouldn’t risk herself so easily.

He sped up his pace, putting some distance between himself and the people that were commenting on the spectacle of an attractive woman suddenly shapeshifting into a bird and flying off, before deliberately entering a dark, isolated alley devoid of people.

He kept walking for a while before suddenly stopping and turning around.

”Are you really going to keep following me all the way to Imaya’s place like this?” he asked.

Only silence greeted him. The alley was dark and still, and there was no trace of anyone here beside him. He was stubborn, however, and kept staring at one particular patch of darkness without making any moves.

After a full minute of this, he was just about to start throwing magic missiles at the spot when the familiar figure of Zach stepped out of the shadows.

”Took you long enough,” Zorian said, relaxing a little. But only a little. ”You’ve been following me ever since I left the Noveda estate, didn’t you?”

"Err, yes," Zach admitted. "Sorry. I just... I don't know. I had a bad feeling and decided to shadow you in secret. I figured that if I was right, I get to save the day, and if I was just being paranoid, you'd never even know. I guess I overestimated my stealth skills a little."

"Honestly, if Silverlake didn't put me on guard, it's entirely possible I could have missed you," Zorian admitted. He paused for a second. "You heard my conversation with her, didn't you?"

Zach's shoulders slumped a little.

"So it's true," Zorian said, getting a little angry. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know the details," Zach said defensively. "I didn't know I'd made a deal with angels, or even that it *was* a deal. All I knew was that I have these... instincts... that tell me things. I can't really talk about them..."

"Can't or won't?" Zorian asked.

"Can't," Zach said. "I get tongue-tied whenever I try."

"And if I read your mind to find out?" Zorian asked.

"I will have to kill you," Zach told him seriously.

"Oh," Zorian said, swallowing heavily. He didn't think he had any chance against Zach, even now. He did have that one trump card that nobody except him knew about, but he needed proper timing to use that, and Zach would probably kill him before he could set it up... "Err, good thing I never tried to forcibly read your mind while you were sleeping or something..."

"Yes, very good thing," Zach agreed.

A short, uncomfortable silence descended on the scene.

"You already decided to die at the end of the month, didn't you?" Zorian asked him. "That's why you had gotten so weird and philosophical lately..."

"I don't intend to murder you once this is all done, if that's what you're asking," Zach told him. "Silverlake is just a black-hearted

witch with no understanding of things like basic human decency and personal integrity. If I wanted to survive at all costs, I would have gotten rid of you while we were still in the time loop."

"I can't believe this..." Zorian muttered. "If I had known about this earlier, maybe we could have—"

"It's divine magic," Zach said. "We wouldn't have been able to do shit. Just like Silverlake can't get rid of her death pact no matter how hard she tries. She's a witch. They're known for being skilled with geas. You just know she used every trick in the book to try and get out of contract, but she still failed."

"So you're okay with just dying at the end of the month?" Zorian asked.

"Of course I'm not fine with it!" Zach said. "It's just... if I have to murder my friends to survive, then what's the point of all this power and knowledge? It's not... it's not how I want to live my life, okay? Damn it... what the hell was my old self thinking to agree to this?"

Zach slumped against the nearby alley and lightly thumped his head against the wall.

What a horrible, convoluted mess, Zorian thought.

As if outmaneuvering Red Robe and Silverlake was not enough, he now had to figure out how to keep Zach alive when the end of the month came calling.

Sometimes, he thought the gods were still out there, watching him and laughing at his misfortune.

## CONTRACT

Before the time loop, Zorian had never frequented the taverns, restaurants and other establishments that were so common in Cyoria. They were a waste of time and money in his opinion, and it wasn't like he had any real friends to go drinking with. It didn't help that he had seen more than one of his classmates succumb to the lure of big city life in his two years of education. Rural teenagers like him were especially vulnerable, since they had little to no parental supervision and were unaccustomed to the luxuries and opportunities that existed in Cyoria. Zorian did not want to follow their example, especially after it became obvious that his brother Fortov had fallen into the exact same trap as they had.

Amusingly, the time loop had pretty much made him worse in this regard, and he was now familiar with virtually every alcohol-serving establishment in Cyoria. This was mostly Zach's fault – his fellow time traveler loved drinking and despised the static nature of the time loop, which meant he dragged off Zorian to a different place every time they had to meet or talk.

The situation was similar at the moment. Once they'd both had a chance to gather their thoughts, Zorian tried to pursue the topic of Zach's angelic contract and the restrictions he was laboring under, only for his fellow time traveler to insist he needed a drink.

Zorian himself had never understood the appeal of alcohol, but he also knew it was pointless to argue about things like that with Zach. He just let his friend lead him to a small but lively tavern, where they claimed a table and erected simple privacy wards to ensure some privacy. Still not the safest location for this kind of thing, but it would do.

"Ahh..." said Zach in satisfaction, slamming a beer glass on the table before wiping his mouth on his sleeve. Zorian's mouth twitched at the sight, but he said nothing. He was already used to that kind of behavior from Zach, really. "I really needed that."

"So. Can I spoil the mood now and dig a little more into this whole angelic contract thing?" Zorian asked him, folding his fingers together in a thoughtful gesture.

"I guess," Zach shrugged. "Though I really don't think I'll be able to tell you much."

"I just need some things confirmed," Zorian said. "You said you can't talk about the contract thing... that it physically stops you from saying the words... but would it stop me from picking it up from your thoughts through telepathy?"

Zach looked uncomfortable for a moment, his eyebrows twisted into a thoughtful frown.

"It shouldn't," he eventually decided. "I mean, we communicated through telepathy quite a few times in the past. You read my surface thoughts more than once, and I never felt any urge to attack you. Let's try it."

Zorian felt Zach lowering his mental barriers and immediately started looking through his surface thoughts. Which... appeared to be completely empty.

Blank, even.

"Are you thinking about the angel contract at the moment?" Zorian asked, frowning.



"I'm thinking of the 'mysterious rules' that I'm laboring under," Zach told him. "If that's really a death pact with the angels like Silverlake was saying, then yes, I'm thinking about it. Why?"

"I can't read anything from you," Zorian admitted. "It's like you have no thoughts at all."

It didn't work. No matter what trick or method they used, Zorian could not get anything about a contract from Zach's surface thoughts. It wasn't that he could not read the boy at all – he could interpret Zach's thoughts just fine when he was thinking about mundane things, like how his hand itched or how cute the passing waitress was, but every thought that involved the 'mysterious rules', as Zach called them, was invisible to Zorian.

The effect was both subtle and sophisticated. There was no indication that Zach's thoughts were being magically blanked out, and it looked mostly like Zach was deliberately blanking his thoughts or just plain not thinking of anything. If Zach tried to embed a few relevant thoughts in a larger stream of consciousness, the restriction would not only unerringly pick out the offending parts, it would do its best to quietly erase them without leaving any suspicious pauses or other evidence of tampering. Unless someone spent a lot of time scrutinizing Zach's thoughts or already knew what to look for, it would be very easy to overlook the fact that some of the thoughts had been tampered with.

How was the contract even doing that? Zorian had no idea how something like that could get accomplished without the contract itself being sapient in some fashion. But that couldn't really be true, right?

"What if I tried to read your memories?" Zorian asked.

"No!" Zach immediately and reflexively protested. He stared at him for a second before shaking his head, seemingly reasserting control over himself in that one moment. "No. Bad idea."

Zorian nodded slowly, making a placating gesture.

"Alright," he said carefully. "But you know, someone has already read your mind once. As well as erased a bunch of things in it..."

"Red Robe," Zach nodded.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Doesn't that... make you murderous, I guess?"

"Well, it kind of did," Zach said, scratching his hand. "Remember when we first met and I told you I had a confrontation with Red Robe for the first couple of restarts after he disabled me and read my mind? I made it seem like he was the aggressor all the time and I was just an innocent victim, but... I may have been simplifying things just a *little* bit. I basically made it my life's goal to destroy him for a while there. I hounded him relentlessly for at least two restarts. It may have been one of the reasons why he decided to leave the time loop entirely after a while."

"Oh," said Zorian. That... made a lot of sense, actually. "But you were both time travelers. What would you even do to him if you managed to catch him?"

"You don't need to be a master mind mage to erase the victim's entire mind," Zach told him. "Or scramble it beyond all repair. There are spells for that, and I got ahold of all kinds of illegal spells while looping."

"You got me there," Zorian admitted. The sort of effect Zach was describing did not take much skill and sophistication; just power. "I notice you aren't frothing at the mouth right now at the thought of Red Robe being present again, though. Does the effect run out or something?"

"Yeah, I calmed down after a while, since I could no longer find him," Zach said with a shrug. "Even after I left the time loop and saw Red Robe again, it didn't start up again. I guess the angels didn't want me to become useless if someone read my mind and then fled beyond my reach."

"So I should have just forcibly read your mind and then spent a few restarts running away from you?" Zorian mused.

Zach scowled at him.

"What? You have to admit that's a reasonable interpretation of what is happening," Zorian said.

Except that he was not at all sure he could have successfully evaded Zach for several restarts. His fellow time traveler had vastly more endurance than Zorian did, and knew most of the places and escape routes Zorian could come up with. Zorian might have still been able to avoid any permanent consequences of being caught if he forced a restart every time he was forced into a corner, but doing so would rapidly burn through their remaining restarts.

"Anyway, what about the *first* time Red Robe messed with your mind?" Zorian asked. "You know, the one where he erased Veyers out of your mind and gods know what else?"

"I don't know," Zach said, frowning. "I don't recall going on that kind of hunt for someone before we met. I guess since I had no idea who mind raped me, and perhaps didn't even know there was a specific person behind my amnesia, the effect never kicked in."

"Hmm," Zorian mused. "So if I never find out that you had your memory read or never see your attacker—"

"It won't work. I'm no longer the same person I was back then. I *will* know I had my mind tampered with, and I'll know it was you," Zach warned him. "And not just because you just stupidly clued me in that you're considering it, either. I mean, who else but you could pull it off? Even if I had absolutely no proof, my first instinct would be to blame you."

"And then you'd try to kill me," Zorian guessed.

"That, or erase your relevant memories," Zach said. "But we both know how impractical that option is on a mind mage like yourself. In practice... yes, I'd have to kill you."

So. The contract could mask Zach's surface thoughts to eliminate any mention of itself, but it couldn't do the same for his long-term memories for some reason. Thus, anyone who looked deep into Zach's memories had to be... silenced.

In whatever manner was practical.

"Who determines who has to be memory wiped and who has to die?" Zorian asked.

"What do you mean?" Zach asked.

"What if Ilsa read your memories?" Zorian clarified with an example. "Would you memory wipe her or kill her?"

"Memory wipe her," Zach said immediately.

"Really? But she has some pretty advanced knowledge of mind magic under her belt," Zorian pointed out. "She's possibly even better than Xvim in that regard."

"Really?" Zach said, surprised. "Huh. I would have never guessed. Damn... I guess I would have to kill her in that case."

Zorian stared at Zach for a second.

He lied. Ilsa had no advanced knowledge of mind magic. She knew how to cast telepathy spells, and that was it.

Guess that answered his question – Zach was the one that made the decision. The contract may force him to act in certain ways, but it was Zach's *perception* that determined things...

"What?" Zach asked.

"Nothing," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Let's forget that, then. There is something else I've been wondering. Silverlake said you have to make sure the time loop stays a secret or you die, right?"

"Right," Zach sighed. "She did say that, didn't she? Of course, I can't really confirm or deny anything..."

"But it's pretty much true," Zorian surmised. "However, back in the time loop, I recall that you tried to convince pretty much everyone who would listen that the time loop was real. Or at least

you told me you did so. Plus, you never had any issue with helping me convince people that the time loop was real.”

”Well yeah, I’m not *compelled* to keep it a secret,” Zach shrugged. ”I can’t talk to people about the ’mysterious rules’ that bind me, but everything else is fair game. I can tell people about the time loop just fine, I just have to keep in mind the potential consequences. And... while the time loop was still going on, those consequences were a non-issue, you know?”

”Right. You only die if the knowledge of the time loop isn’t contained in the real world, when it actually matters. It doesn’t matter how many people you tell inside the time loop, because they’ll never get out of there anyway,” Zorian guessed. ”Or at least that was the idea, probably.”

”Keep in mind, I had no idea how the time loop worked back then,” Zach said. ”I didn’t know there was a real world and the time loop world, or any other details that we figured out later. I wasn’t lying to you when I said I don’t remember how I got in the time loop and how it functions.”

Right. That was pretty terrible design by the angels. If they could make sure that the contract they made with Zach was impossible to forget by any means, why didn’t they include some basic information there as well?

Alanic apparently wasn’t kidding when he said angels worked in mysterious ways.

”If you didn’t know how the time loop works, how did you know when telling people about the time loop matters and when it doesn’t?” Zorian asked.

Zach couldn’t answer him, of course. That would mean he would reveal some of the information about his contract thing, and that was forbidden.

”Well, we have no real choice here,” Zorian said. ”If you can’t discuss these mysterious rules you are laboring under, and you

don't even have a solid idea what they mean, we'll have to summon the angels for a talk."

Zach gave him a surprised look.

"But you..." he began.

"I'm not supposed to be here, outside the time loop, yes," Zorian said, nodding.

This was the primary reason they had been hesitating about contacting the angelic hierarchy, even though they had already suspected the angels were involved in the time loop. It was entirely possible that summoning an angel would just draw their attention to Zorian's existence and give them a chance to finish what the Guardian of the Threshold had already tried and failed to do.

"We'd be risking a lot," Zach said, frowning.

"No, *I'm* risking a lot," countered Zorian. "And I'm willing to take the risk. We need to see if this contract of yours can be renegotiated, or at least find out what it actually entails."

Zach gave it a brief thought, tapping his fingers against the beer glass in his hand.

"Well... it's not like I was looking forward to dying," Zach finally said. "Though if the angels immediately smite you dead upon sight, don't come crying to me that I didn't warn you."

"I won't be doing anything at that point, being dead and all," Zorian blandly pointed out. "Anyway, Silverlake said you made a contract to stop Panaxeth from being released at the end of the month. If true, that suggests the angels care a lot about keeping Panaxeth in his prison. Killing me would interfere with that. Plus, silencing all the extra witnesses is impossible so long as Red Robe lives. Hopefully that will give them pause."

Well, that all made perfect sense to Zorian, but it was obvious that the logic of angels was not the same as the logic of men. It wouldn't be too surprising if the summoned angel just ignored everything Zorian said and tried to kill him anyway.

Would it be considered disrespectful if he sent a simulacrum instead of participating in the summoning personally?

"You really think there is a chance to renegotiate... this?" Zach asked, waving vaguely over his chest.

It was unlikely. But hey, it was worth a try, right?

"The contract is probably divine magic, right?" Zorian asked, ignoring the question for now.

"I... don't actually know," Zach said uncertainly. "It has to be. I mean, otherwise I would have managed to find it by now, right? The only piece of mortal magic I ever found embedded in my soul is the marker..."

Zorian shook his head. He was pretty sure the marker did not include any divine energies or 'mysterious rules' in it.. because if it did, Zorian himself would have probably inherited them from Zach when he acquired his marker.

"It's probably a part of the soul stabilization frame that boosts your mana reserves," Zorian pointed out. "The divine blessing and divine contract probably came together as a package deal."

Zach winced slightly.

"Yes, I kind of guessed that too," he admitted. "But that whole frame is incredibly complicated... it's hard to figure out where the blessing ends and the contract starts."

Yes, that was pretty much how Zorian expected it to be. The blessing and contract were probably intertwined in a way that made it impossible to remove one and not the other. That way, even if Zach found a way to remove the contract, he would have to give up the mana boost that came along with it.

An extra layer of security that would make just about anyone hesitate to tamper with the whole thing. After all, who would be willing to lose something as amazing as a divine blessing that doubles your mana reserves?

"Even if the angels agree to renegotiate, you'd probably have to give up your divine blessing," Zorian eventually said.

Zach looked horrified at the thought, but also a little bit resigned. He seemed to have expected something like that to be true.

"Aw, man..." he whined, finishing his entire beer glass in one desperate gulp before ordering another from a nearby waitress.

"It's better than being dead," Zorian consoled him.

"I don't know, man... how would you react if you had to give up half of your mana reserves tomorrow?" Zach asked him sullenly.

Zorian blinked rapidly in surprise. That's right... Zach didn't even know his mana reserves were a result of a divine blessing until relatively recently. The current situation had persisted as far as he could remember. His mana reserves felt *normal* as they were right now, and reducing them probably felt no different than a crippling injury...

"I'd be absolutely devastated, but it's still better than dying," he finally said, a little quieter this time.

Zach gave him a cranky grunt and said nothing else in response.

"How are we going to summon an angel, anyway?" Zach eventually asked, calming down a little when he got his second glass of beer delivered to their table. "Alanic?"

"Alanic can't summon an angel," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Only a few priests are capable of that, and he is not one of them. However, I happen to know someone in this very city who *is* capable of summoning angels, so it shouldn't be a problem. Though we might want to invite Alanic with us, anyway."

"Oh? Who is it?" Zach asked curiously. "I don't remember anyone like that."

"You wouldn't know her. I haven't really interacted with her ever since we teamed up," Zorian noted. "It's Kylae Kuosi, a priestess in one of the semi-abandoned temples here in Cyoria. She a



bit of an obscure figure, but she's a capable mage and she knows quite a bit of interesting magic. For instance, she is one of the 'experts' when it comes to forecasting the future through divinations... and she also knows how to establish contact with the angels. It didn't matter much in the time loop, since contact with the spiritual planes had been blocked there, but now..."

"Alright," Zach said after a second of thought. "Let's see what the heavenly bastards have to say."



It took them three days to arrange for the summoning to occur. It wasn't particularly difficult, but Kylae was understandably very suspicious about a couple of teenagers showing up on her doorstep and asking for her to summon an angel so they could talk to it. The fact Zach and Zorian were in a hurry and were pushing for her to set up the ritual quickly did not help matters. Thankfully, after bringing in Alanic to vouch for them and explaining several times that Zach had been given some kind of mission by the angels that he had forgot made her reluctantly agree to their request.

While this was going on, their other preparations continued. The Silent Doorway Adepts had finally agreed to open a passage to Koth, and Zach and Zorian used it to quickly claim the imperial orb. They did not establish contact with Daimen for the moment. The original plan was to evacuate everyone to Koth the moment a gate there was established, but that plan was now looking a lot less practical than it used to be. Talking everyone into cooperating with their plan while keeping them ignorant about the time loop was... impractical, to say the least.

Zorian was still a little pissed off that Zach had never tried to stop him when they had been discussing doing that, even though he *knew* this was practically suicide on his part. But then again...

the situation *was* kind of hopeless. How would they ever be able to contain the knowledge of the time loop when they had no control over Red Robe and he had very little reason to keep things a total secret? Not to mention the problem of Zorian himself..

Princess was claimed as normal and bound to Zorian. Zach's situation was deemed too unstable to have Princess depend on him. They had no idea how the bond with Princess would interact with his 'mysterious rules', and whether its presence would make it more complicated to adjust the contract he had with the angels. Plus, if Zach was compelled to go to a rampage or something, it was best he didn't also have a loyal hydra at his disposal as well. His current skills were a headache enough.

Xvim also joined their little group of time loop aware individuals. They had already started talking to him before Zorian found out about the contract, so it was pointless to back off from him *now*... plus, they could really use his help.

Finally, the scheduled day of the summoning had arrived. Zach, Zorian, Alanic, and Xvim came together to Kylae's temple, where they were greeted by Batak, the friendly green-haired priest that Zorian had met so long ago. Even though Zach and Zorian had been kind of rude and impatient these last few days, the young priest had never lost his temper around them and remained polite and helpful to the very end. He led them to the interior of the temple, which had been dramatically rearranged in the preparation for the summoning ritual.

The chairs and furniture had all been shoved to the walls to make space in the center, and a complicated circular spell formula had been inscribed on the floor in blue paint. Kylae was not the only priest present inside – eight more lower-ranking attendant priests had been brought in from elsewhere, and were currently scurrying around the modified main hall, double-checking the spell formula circle and making last-minute corrections. Addi-

tionally, there was a tall, male priest observing the proceedings with a cool, detached look on his face. His fancy blue robes, decorated in gold and silver, meant that he was someone pretty high in the Triumvirate Church hierarchy. He gave them a chilly, unfriendly look when they entered the hall, and then purposely ignored them.

"This is more involved than I thought it would be," Zorian whispered to Batak.

"Ah-ha... I don't think you really realize the sort of thing you started," Batak told him with a quiet, nervous chuckle. "Even in the Triumvirate Church, it is not every day you get to summon an angel for a talk. This is a big deal. It's especially a big deal when someone pulls as many strings as you did and does it all on such short notice. This has lot of people sitting up and taking notice, I hear."

Pulling strings? Zorian didn't remember doing that...

He looked at Alanic, who noticed his look and gave him a small shrug.

"You said it was important," Alanic said unrepentantly. "I agreed with you."

They eventually retreated to the side and let Kylae and her fellow priests finish things. The preparations were lengthy, however, and Zorian couldn't help but wonder if all of this was really necessary. There were lots of chanting and arcane rituals being performed, such as burning of incense and ritualistic bell ringing. Very little of it resembled structured magic as Zorian understood it. That was interesting because as far as he knew, angels could be summoned through any old summoning spell; it was just a matter of knowing how to contact them properly and them actually deigning to answer the summons.

Did all these little rituals count as proper contact procedure or was this just empty tradition that the Triumvirate Church insisted

on following?

He didn't actually ask that question, though. He had antagonized them enough recently with his request, and he knew from Alanic that the Triumvirate Church had some very scary resources to call upon when someone angered them enough. He wasn't in the time loop anymore.

After what felt like an hour, the actual spellcasting began. Neither Zach nor Zorian had much experience with summoning spells, as they were useless and impossible to train inside the time loop, so the whole process was largely a mystery to them. All they saw was the circular spell formula on the floor lightning up with a soft glow and the air above it rippling like hot summer air.

"We've decided to summon a low-ranking angel to start with," Batak explained to them in a low voice. He wasn't involved in the summoning and seemed to have assigned as their guide and minder instead. "Even if it cannot help you, it will inform its superiors about the issue and they'll decide what to do about it from there."

"That's fine," Zorian said. Low-ranking was fine. Less chance of it completely overpowering them that way.

"...servant of the Highest Ones, I implore you to grace us with your presence," Kylae intoned solemnly. "We, the lowly children of the dust, have a need for your infinite wisdom and guid- urk!"

Uh oh. This doesn't sound too good...

"What's happening?" Zach and Batak asked out-loud at the same time.

"The summoning is getting hijacked!" the blue robed priest said in a panicky voice. "I don't understand! We preformed all the rites correctly! The demons shouldn't be able to--"

"It's not the demons," Kylae said firmly. She was calmer than the blue robed priest, but her voice still trembled a little. "It's being hijacked by another angel. Someone high up in the angelic hierarchy has used their rights of seniority to substitute themselves with

the angel we are trying to summon.”

She then winced and stumbled in place. The other priests followed her action soon after, some of them falling on their knees.

“It’s... it’s too much,” one of the attendant priests gasped. “We can’t supply enough mana for this...”

In the center of the summoning circle, a vague fuzzy outline flickered in and out of existence. Every summoning spell had to incarnate the spirit being summoned into something. A shell, a vessel that would allow them exist in and interact with the material world. The more powerful the spirit, the fancier the vessel had to be to contain them and let them manifest their power... and thus, the more mana one had to pay to create an ectoplasmic shell suitable for them.

The angel that had substituted itself into their summoning ritual was apparently *very* mana hungry to summon.

Before anyone could say anything, Zach pushed Batak aside and stepped up to the summoning circle. He observed the whole thing for a few seconds and then started pouring his vast mana reserved into the ritual. He may not have been familiar with summoning magic, but simply supplying power to the whole thing was not too difficult to figure out.

Zorian, Alanic and Xvim followed his example immediately afterwards. A few seconds later, Batak woke up from his initial daze and hurriedly joined them in trying to power the summoning.

Zorian’s mana reserves dipped dangerously low almost as soon as he started pouring mana into the summoning ritual. It wasn’t by choice – the angel on the other side of the ritual was aggressively pulling on every available mana source to fuel its descent on the material plane. No wonder the priests had reacted like they did. Having one’s mana reserves forcibly drained in such fashion wasn’t lethal, but it wasn’t a pleasant experience either.

Finally, after everyone in the room had run dry of mana, the

fuzzy ectoplasmic form in the center of the summoning circle condensed itself into glowing white ball and then erupted into an explosion of fire.

A brief moment of panic surged in Zorian's heart when he realized there was a wall of flames coming at them and that he was entirely out of mana and practically defenseless. Thankfully, the explosion of flames suddenly reversed itself before it reached them and collapsed into a writing ball of fiery ectoplasm before suddenly sprouting black branches and metallic surfaces.

Eventually the angel's form stabilized and Zorian finally got his first look at an angel.

It wasn't human-looking in the slightest. Most old, powerful spirits weren't, but somehow Zorian didn't expect an angel to look so... strange.

The angel was shaped like a black, floating, cross-shaped tree with four sets of branches and no roots. Or maybe it would be more accurate to imagine four trees that had their lower half cut off and were then glued together through their trunk into a cross-shaped pattern. The branches were leafless, and burning orange eyes grew on them instead. The eyes were animated, constantly moving and taking in everything around the angel. Translucent orange flames enveloped the branches, coiling around them like a multitude of snakes and releasing crackling sounds reminiscent of real branches burning in flames.

Floating behind the tree of eyes was a gently spinning ring of silvery metal. The ring was densely covered in tiny golden characters that Zorian didn't recognize, and which seemed entirely alien to his eyes, unlike anything he had ever seen. Behind it, several ghostly ribbons of multicolored light extended in all directions from the angel, straining Zorian's eyes and blurring the angel's form. If one squinted and tilted their head the right way, they kind of looked like six pairs of wings.

Zorian felt some of the eyes swivel in his direction, and he suddenly felt naked and exposed. It was as if the angel's eyes had seen right through him and peered straight into the depths of his soul, observing, analyzing, judging...

Zorian instinctively took a step back from the angel, and then suddenly realized the entire hall was unnaturally quiet and still.

Only he, Zach and the angel remained in the hall. Everyone else was just... gone.

Zorian was getting uncomfortable flashbacks to his first meeting with Panaxeth.

**"Do not be afraid,"** the angel said. Its voice was booming, and resonated painfully in Zorian's ears and chest. **"I have come to help."**

"What... where is everyone?" Zach asked in confusion.

**"They should not hear this,"** the angel responded.

"So you just... shunted us off to some private space?" Zach frowned. "Also, can't you talk a little more quietly?"

**"My time here is limited,"** the angel cautioned. It made no attempt to lower its voice for them. It was still uncomfortably loud and resonant, and Zorian thought he could faintly hear additional voices repeating its words whenever it spoke. **"You must not waste time."**

Zorian supposed the angel had a point there. Even though it had taken all their mana, a spirit of this level probably couldn't stay manifested on the material plan for very long. They had to make the most of it.

"Did Zach enter into a contract with you?" Zorian asked.

**"Yes,"** the angel immediately confirmed.

Zorian waited for a second, but the angel seemed disinclined to clarify more than that.

Ugh.

"My enemies made me completely forget about that," Zach said with a frown.

**"They did not,"** the angel countered.

Zach made a strange face.

"Yes they did," he said, laughing in a frustrated manner. "Why would I lie about it to you of all people?"

**"They did not make you forget because you never even knew you had made a contract with us,"** the angel said. **"If they do know that you have made a contract with us, it is because they have guessed correctly."**

"Zach... never knew he'd made a contract with you?" Zorian asked incredulously. "How would that work?"

**"We went through a great deal of effort to mask our involvement,"** the angel said. **"Our current interference... is already overstepping certain boundaries that we would rather not cross. It would have been best for everyone if nobody had realized our involvement."**

"But how would I make a contract with you without realizing it?" Zach insisted. "That doesn't make any sense!"

**"We contacted you through a dream,"** the angel told him. **"You had no idea who was making the offer when you accepted the contract."**

Zach's face went through several different expressions as he processed that.

Zorian just buried his face into his palms and took a deep breath.

Zach...

"That's... that's slander!" Zach protested. "I'd never do something stupid like that! Even I know it's dumb as hell to accept spiritual contracts from mysterious people that contact you in your dreams!"



**"You being foolish enough to take the offer was one of the reasons we chose you as our champion,"** the angel told him bluntly.

"Well, uh..." Zach fumbled. "You know what? Forget it. Even if what you say it's true, I still ended up mind wiped of critical information inside the time loop. I didn't even know how to return to the real world! You included so many thing in this... contract I made with you, so why didn't you include some basic information like that in there as well?"

**"We did,"** the angel responded. **"You simply never satisfied the conditions necessary to access the information."**

What?

"What?" demanded Zach. "What do you mean by that?"

**"You had a goal, did you not?"** the angel challenged. **"You had to stop the invasion without informing anyone about the time loop. Had you ever succeeded at that, the contract would have given you information about the time loop and how to leave it."**

"You never explained to him how the time loop worked to begin with," Zorian realized. "Giving him the exit method right from the start would mean he could leave at any point he wished, even before he was capable of stopping Panaxeth's release the way you wanted him to."

**"The hearts of men are weak and fall easily to temptation,"** the angel confirmed. **"If he could not handle the relentless weathering of time and become the savior we need, it would have been better for him to never emerge from the Sovereign Gate at all."**

"You..." Zach began.

**"You chose this,"** the angel reminded him, completely unrepentant. **"And with that in mind, I would like an explanation. What happened in there?"**

"You don't know?" Zorian asked curiously.

**"Would I be asking if I did?" the angel asked rhetorically. "The inner workings of the Sovereign Gate are opaque to us. Much like the Black Rooms you are familiar with, the Sovereign Gate is completely isolated from the rest of the world once activated. We have inferred some things, but we would like an unambiguous answer."**

Zach and Zorian gave the angel a quick summary of what had occurred inside the time loop, taking pains to emphasize Panaxeth's interference with the normal operation of the time loop and how Red Robe's and Silverlake's presence in the real world made the entire task of stopping the invasion very difficult. Finally, they explained Zorian's situation and how his presence made the idea of eliminating all knowledge of the time loop outside of Zach basically impossible.

**"A disappointing result," the angel concluded. "The task we gave you was not that difficult. Why did you allow things to get so complicated?"**

"Not that difficult!?" Zach repeated incredulously. "Do you know how difficult it is to stop an army on your lonesome, without being able to explain to people where your skills come from or how you know things?"

**"Even though we initiated the Sovereign Gate prematurely, you still had hundreds of chances to get things right," the angel said. "I suspect you have a skewed perspective on the difficulty of the problem. In the original scenario, you would have been tackling an unaware force oblivious to your shifting schemes. Even with our restrictions, it should not have been difficult to figure out a solution when you have infinite attempts and your enemy never learns from your mistakes. Instead, you have been competing against a rival time looper. Regardless of how it happened,**

**that is your own failing. Not ours."**

Zach looked like he was about to start yelling at the angel, but eventually restrained himself. He scoffed disdainfully at the spirit, and then folded his hands over his chest in silence.

They didn't actually know how Red Robe got included as a time looper, so it was difficult to counter the angel's claims there.

"So you deliberately activated the Sovereign Gate a month before the invasion," Zorian noted. "You could tell what was going to happen a month in advance?"

**"The future is hazy and constantly changing, but some things are more certain than others,"** the angel said. **"Unless something was done, Panaxeth's release was practically set in stone."**

"Why not just inform the Triumvirate Church and let them handle it?" Zorian asked.

**"Strange as this may sound to you, that would have been far worse than what we ended up doing,"** the angel responded. **"We are not supposed to meddle in mortal conflicts."**

"Why me?" Zach suddenly asked. "If you have such an accurate way of predicting the future, surely you knew I wasn't a good choice."

**"On the contrary,"** the angel disagreed. **"You were the best choice. That is why we settled on you in the end."**

"Best how?" Zach asked suspiciously.

**"It is a secret,"** the angel responded. **"There were considerable restrictions in regards to candidates. They had to begin the month in Cyoria. They needed to have a certain potential and mentality. They needed to have considerable freedom of movement and association. They needed to satisfy the ethical guidelines. And so much more. I cannot tell you the details."**

"If Zorian began the month in Cyoria, would he also be a candidate?" Zach asked.

Zorian gave him a strange look. Why would he ask that?

**"Heavens no," the angel said. "He fails just about every criteria, especially in regards to mentality. I am surprised he was even willing to risk his life in this manner, based on his previous actions and attitudes."**

Annoyingly, Zach seemed really pleased to hear that response.

Zorian folded his arms over his chest in dissatisfaction. Jerks, the both of them.

"What is my status at the moment, then?" Zorian asked. "I defied the laws of the time loop and got out into the real world, but I notice you are not making a move against me. Are you fine with my presence, then?"

The angel's burning eyes focused on him more closely, studying him in great detail for a couple of seconds. Zorian squirmed uncomfortably under its gaze, but stood his ground and stubbornly kept staring back at the angel without flinching.

**"You are a forbidden existence, and you have committed grave sins to be where you are right now," the angel judged. "However, we are not without mercy and understanding. So long as the primordial's release is stopped in the end, we are willing to overlook some things."**

"So... I'm safe from your wrath?" Zorian summarized.

**"If the primordial remains chained by the end of the month," the angel stressed. "If not, then we will be forced to directly intervene in the material world. At that point, it costs us nothing to be extra thorough and eliminate all possible complications. You understand, yes?"**

"Of course," Zorian confirmed.

Even though he had made no contract with the angels, his life also depended on the outcome of the invasion. If he and Zach failed

to stop Red Robe and Silverlake from releasing Panaxeth, the angels would take care of him all the same.

"If you're fine with Zorian, does that mean that my contract can be renegotiated now?" Zach asked hopefully. "Because the way things are now..."

**"We cannot renegotiate the contract,"** the angel said. **"It simply cannot be done."**

"But you're the one who made it," Zach protested. "Why wouldn't you be able to change it?"

**"It is divine magic,"** the angel pointed out. **"We obviously didn't make it."**

Of course. No one could cast divine magic in the current age, not even the angels. Only the gods themselves were capable of that. Everyone else, including their spiritual servants, were just tapping into artifacts and resources left behind when the gods went silent.

"How about just removing it?" Zorian tried.

**"Also not possible,"** the angel responded. **"It is deliberately designed to be next to impossible to remove once placed. I am afraid there is nothing we can do about it."**

"But the way things are going, I'll die at the end of the month, even if I stop the primordial from getting out," Zach pointed out. "Isn't that just a little unfair? It's obvious the situation has changed from the time I agreed to the contract... and even you admitted the way you got me to agree to it was kind of dodgy and inappropriate."

**"We cannot absolve you of fulfilling your part of the bargain,"** the angel stubbornly said. **"It simply is not within our power to do so. The only thing I can promise you is that if you find the way to remove or evade the contract in some fashion, we will not seek to punish you for it."**

Zach's eyes widened at the statement.

"You will not seek to... you're saying if I found a way to trick the contract on my own, you would have gone after me for it?" he

asked incredulously.

**"We are not the primordials,"** the angel told him. **"Though our actions are restricted, we are far from powerless in regards to the material world. Even if you could trick the spell left by the gods, it would do you no good if we were also not willing to look the other way and accept this outcome. You made a solemn pact with us, and we have done our side of the bargain. We have every right to be harsh and demand that you fulfill your obligation to the letter... but as I said to your friend, we are not without mercy and understanding. So long as the primordial's release is stopped in the end, we are willing to overlook some things."**

"So I still have to do the impossible," complained Zach. "It's just that, if I succeed at that, you won't come after me in response."

**"You can view it that way, I suppose,"** the angel responded. The spirit froze for a moment, its eyes staring off somewhere into the distance, as if listening to some distant words that neither Zach nor Zorian could hear. **"My time here grows short. If you have anything else you need of me, say it quickly."**

"Give me the actual contents of the contract Zach signed with you," Zorian demanded. "Zach can't tell me what it says and I need to know."

For a while, the angel said nothing. Then, it's branches swayed on unseen winds for a few seconds, and a ray of burning orange light erupted from without warning and struck Zach in the chest. Rather than harming him, however, the ray harmlessly sank into his chest and was absorbed without a trace.

Before either Zach or Zorian could ask what the hell that was about, a series of burning letters started materializing in the air in front of Zach.

And kept going...

...and going...

...and going.

Pages and pages of text, going on and on and on about what was expected of Zach. Zorian expected the contract to be a couple of concise sentences, since that was what a geas spell would look like... but apparently he was wrong. The contract instead consisted of a massive legal document, complete with that peculiar legal word choice that made official documents hard to understand even if you speak the language.

It was good that he could flawlessly memorize everything he could see, because there was no way he could understand this thing without a few hours to pore over it. And possibly some actual legal help.

"For heaven's sake, Zach..." Zorian sighed. "How the hell could you agree to this? There is no way you actually read all this and understood its implications."

"I don't remember any of it!" Zach protested. "It was my stupid younger self, okay? Gods know *your* younger self was just as stupid in his own way!"

Well, he got him there... but still. This was something else.

**"He did not actually read the contract,"** the angel added in helpfully. **"Still, we had summarized the relevant parts to him. He has to stop the invasion of Cyoria from achieving its goal or he will die at the end of the month. He cannot let anyone know about the existence of the time loop or he'll die at the end of the month. He cannot kill a ruler of any nation, or otherwise directly cause a nation to collapse into anarchy or he'll die at the end of the month. Restrictions were placed on what kind of mind and soul magic he can learn, because the ethical committee would not approve the project otherwise. He is also completely forbidden from talking about the specifics of the contract he signed. Anyone who forcibly sees the contents of the contract, such as**

**through a deep memory scan, must be neutralized in whatever manner is practical. Finally, the contract is completely dissolved at the end of the month, allowing him to live his life freely from that point afterwards."**

"Can you tell me how you defined 'knows about the time loop'?" Zorian asked.

**"It is all in the contract,"** the angel responded, one of its branches casually waving towards Zach. **"I know you memorized it."**

The angel once again stilled for a moment, seemingly listening to something in the distance.

**"I must go,"** it said. **"You have one more question."**

"If the primordial becomes free, is it the end of the world as we know it?" Zach immediately asked, giving no chance for Zorian to think about this last chance to question the spirit.

**"Probably not,"** the angel admitted. **"Nevertheless, you still would not want this to happen... and not just because of the dire consequences for you personally. The Highest Ones had placed a great many... triggers... into the core that governs this world. If conditions satisfying a trigger are detected, automatic countermeasures are initiated. A primordial gaining access to the material plane would activate several of them. You do not want that to happen. No one wants that to happen. Much of our duties involve making sure none of the triggers can be activated, for the sake of both the spirit world and the material one. Most of the triggers look out for things the Highest Ones had considered existential threats... and they had a very 'scorched earth' policy when dealing with existential threats."**

Having said that, the angel suddenly swooped down towards the ground, and one of its branches lightly reached towards the stone floor beneath them. Even though its branches looked thin



and fragile, they scooped out a chunk of stone out of the floor like it was nothing but wet clay... and then started shaping it just as easily.

Black branches twisted and tapped the stone like hundreds of tiny fingers, chipping off pieces in a flurry of rapid movement. In less than three seconds, the chunk of rock became a smooth, glossy cube that was then thrust directly into Zorian's hands.

It was the weirdest thing, because it didn't look like magic – instead it looked as if the angel physically shaped the chunk of stone through a combination of inhuman strength, speed, and precision.

**"Take this,"** the angel said. **"Use it to summon me for the final battle."**

"How do you know there will be a final battle?" asked Zorian.

**"The future is hazy and constantly changing, but some things are more certain than others,"** the angel said, echoing one of its earlier statements.

And then it was gone, and the temple hall was once again loud and full of people. Alanic, Xvim, Batak, Kylae, and the other priests quickly surrounded them, demanding to know what had occurred. From their perspective they just suddenly disappeared for a while and now they were mysterious back.

Zach and Zorian ignored them for a moment, focusing on the cube in Zorian's hands.

It wasn't as smooth as Zorian originally thought it was. It was densely covered with strange writing; the same kind of writing that covered the silver ring that floated behind the angel. There was nothing obviously magical about it, but the cube had a strange sheen to it when the light hit it just right and the characters did seem to have some kind of pattern to them...

In the end he carefully pocketed the cube and put it out of his mind for the moment. Before he dived into the specifics of Zach's

contract and studied the cube, they had one more meeting to go through.

Red Robe had invited them for a talk...



As Red Robe had noted in his brief letting to them, Zach and Zorian already knew how to contact him with information about the meeting. Their simulacrum's clashed all the time, and it was no problem to just throw a letter on the ground during one of those confrontations and then just walk away.

Using that method, Zach and Zorian eventually arranged for a meeting with Red Robe on the roof of one of the academy buildings. It was a sufficiently public location that neither side could really prepare a trap for the other there. Plus, the academy wards were actually pretty good now that Zach and Zorian covertly talked them into changing their ward keys. Even Zach and Zorian had to be a little careful around them, since the new security voided their knowledge as much as it did Red Robe's.

The meeting was arranged at midnight, and everyone arrived exactly on time. One side consisted of Zach, Zorian, Xvim, and Alanic. The other had Red Robe, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl.

Red Robe was wearing his usual red robe as a disguise, his face hidden in a patch of darkness behind the hood. Silverlake was as Zorian last saw her – a young, attractive woman wearing a form-fitting dress. She seemed very happy and pleased with herself, grinning from ear to ear as she looked at them... a fact that made Zach obviously fume at her. It just made her grin wider.

And then there was Quatach-Ichl. He was not in his skeletal form for this meeting, opting to come in his human guise instead. He looked calm, composed, and confident. He greeted them politely with a small bow before turning silent and just observing things.

Zorian sighed inwardly. He knew it was a futile dream, but he had been hoping Red Robe and Silverlake hadn't initiated the old lich into their deep secrets. This made everything so much harder...

"Ha ha!" Silverlake cackled. "See, I told you they would bring those two with them and none other. Pay up!"

"We never actually agreed to any bets," Red Robe protested.

"Bah! You're supposed to play along for appearances sake!" Silverlake said, scowling at him. "Whatever. Zorian, did you reconsider my offer? It still stands, you know?"

"Shut up," Red Robe snapped at her. "Everyone, I'd like to apologize for her actions recently. I know you probably think I sent her to sow dissent into your group, but that was entirely her own idea. She seems to think there is a genuine chance of convincing mister Kazinski to join us in freeing the primordial, but we all know that is just a fantasy."

Yeah, as if Zorian was going to believe that. He fully believed that Silverlake being there was an attempt to make Zorian and Zach fight amongst each other. He also suspected it was an attempt by Red Robe and Silverlake to reduce the number of enemies lined up against them, since Zorian was far less likely to keep telling people about the time loop if he knew that would get Zach killed. Which was what ended up happening in the end.

One thing he didn't believe for a moment was the idea that Silverlake actually made an honest offer for him to join her. Her natural instinct was to exploit others, not work with them.

"As if your plan is any better," Silverlake complained. "Why do you think—"

"I thought we agreed I'll be doing the talking?" Red Robe protested with a sigh.

Silverlake clacked her tongue dismissively and then conjured herself a chair to sit on.

Quatach-Ichl did not react at all to his companion's antics, opting to study Zorian and his group instead.

A short and very uncomfortably silence descended on the scene. Everyone involved was tense and seemed to be ready to attack at a moment's notice. Even Silverlake, who was sitting on a conjured chair and tried to give off an impression of being bored and inattentive, was clearly twitching whenever someone made an unexpected move.

"What is this all about?" Zach finally asked. "You're the one who invited us here, so why are you silent all of a sudden? Don't waste our time."

"Ah... even after all this time, you still haven't changed. Still so impatient..." Red Robe said softly, as if reminiscing about something.

Zach frowned at him, clearly considering the merits of just starting a battle here and now.

"I see you came here unmasked," Red Robe commented.

"You already know who we are," Zach shrugged. "Is there any point in hiding our faces?"

"True," Red Robe nodded. "Well, I guess there's no point in hiding my identity any longer, either."

He pulled his hood down, and the path of darkness that hid his face suddenly disappeared.

It was Veyers. The same face, the same blonde hair, the same orange, slitted eyes. The main difference was that his hair was well-groomed, his eyes lacked some of that ferocity and violence he had seen in Veyers recently, and his entire attitude was calm and more assured.

"I'm guessing this isn't much of a surprise to you," Red Robe said. Without the voice masking spells embedded into the hood of his robe, even his voice was recognizably that of Veyers. Just calmer and quieter. "Still, I hope you take this gesture of good will

as just that. I'm not a monster you think I am, and I really thing we can come to a sort of agreement here."

Zorian studied the boy in front of him for a few seconds before shaking his head.

"You say it's a gesture of good will and you show us a fake face and identity," Zorian told him. "How do you expect us to agree to anything when you opened the talks with such a brazen deception?"

Veyers looked honestly taken aback at the accusation.

"You're overthinking things," Silverlake said, rolling her eyes at him. "It's really him. Who else could it be, really?"

"No, he's not Veyers," Zorian insisted. "It never made sense and still doesn't."

Zach sent Zorian an almost imperceptible frown. He clearly didn't understand why Zorian was so certain, but didn't want to call him on it.

Zorian didn't blame him. He had long had his suspicions, but it was only when he saw the true form of Zach's angelic contract that he became completely certain...

"Are you asking me to *prove* that I'm Veyers?" Red Robe said with an amused laugh. "What would even satisfy you?"

"Every student has to give their mana signature to the academy for identification purposes," Xvim suddenly said, reaching into his jacket pocket and retrieving an inconspicuous looking ball out of it. He displayed it for everyone to see. "Proving whether or not you're Veyers... should be an extremely simple matter."

Red Robe stared at the ball for a few seconds before bursting into short, barking laughter.

"Oh hell..." he said, chuckling to himself. "I can't believe I overlooked something as simple as that..."

Silverlake gave him a shocked look.

"Feeling dumb, now?" Red Robe said, giving her a contemptuous look. "You spent all these days interacting with me and never suspected a thing, but mister Kazinski here saw though it immediately. Maybe you should have asked to join him instead."

He then ignored her and turned to face Zorian fully.

"I guess you also know who I really am?" he asked, tilting his head to the side with a self-indulgent smile.

"You're Jornak, Veyers's lawyer friend," Zorian said. "I'm guessing Veyers introduced you to Zach, and you hit it off with each other since you have both been cheated out of your inheritance and empathized with each other because of it. He didn't realize you have ties to the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon until it was too late."

"The Cult of the Dragon is nothing to me," Red Robe said. He still continued wearing Veyers's face. "I was never seriously loyal to them, even before the time loop."

"So why..." Zach asked him, looking at him with confused eyes. "If Zorian could trick the time loop into letting him leave, then you—"

"You don't understand," Red Robe said, shaking his head sadly. "You just wouldn't understand, no matter how I tried to convince you. This knowledge... this power... it's just *begging* to be used. Shutur-Tarana changed the world entirely when he left the time loop. Why can't I? Why couldn't *we*?"

Zach seemed taken aback at the question.

"Have you two ever tried to look into what our country has been doing these past few years?" Red Robe said, looking at Zorian. "I just wanted to figure out how to ensure justice for me and Zach at first. However, I couldn't stop myself from looking... and the more I looked, the more awful things I found. The prosperity we enjoy right now is all built atop of mountain of lies, theft, unspeakable corruption and even straight up murder. Even if I got justice for

myself and Zach, it's all just a drop in the bucket."

"The other countries are no better," Alanic pointed out.

"Yes! Yes, I know that!" Red Robe said, agreeing vigorously. "I've looked into them as well, and it was just as disgusting. And... even if one wanted to shut their eyes and ignore all the violations, the current state of peace is just a fragile illusion. Another round of Splinter Wars will occur soon, with all the pain and suffering that entails. Something had to be done. *I* had to do something. But Zach wouldn't hear any of it. He just wanted to stop the invasion, get the money his caretaker had taken from him and look away from the ugliness of the world. We had this incredible opportunity to change things for the better, and he was fine letting it slip through his fingers."

"I hate to break it to you, but you're trying to raze an entire city of half a million people to the ground and feed their souls to a wraith creation machine," Zach told him. "If that's your vision of 'changing things for the better', I'm not surprised my forgotten self would have none of it."

"Things wouldn't have been so drastic if you had agreed to work with me on this," Red Robe said. "Though yes, some unpleasantness would still have to get done. Things have to get worse before they get better."

There was a short pause as everyone processed Red Robe's... Jornak's statements. Jornak decided to take this chance to drop his disguise and assume his real form. He took a deep breath and then suddenly became taller, his facial structure shifting and changing. A few seconds later, Veyers was gone – in his place was a perfect copy of Jornak as Zorian remembered him...

...except that there was a spark of intensity in this Jornak's eyes which simply hadn't existed in him the last time they had spoken. The Jornak that Zorian had known was a nervous, risk-averse man that harbored no desire to change the world or enact some grand

scheme. Zorian knew this because he had read his thoughts and memories several times, and had seen nothing particularly suspicious about them.

Then again, wasn't Zorian the same? This was just one more proof that the time loop was capable of radically changing a person. For better or for worse.

Of course, this *could* all just be another disguise... but Zorian rather doubted it. He was pretty sure Red Robe really was Jornak. That's why Veyers had to be soul killed in the time loop and erased out of Zach's mind... because Veyers would know if Jornak was acting inconsistently from restart to restart, and Veyers always crashed their first classes of the year and could thus interact with Zach at any time. If Zach regularly spoke to Veyers over the course of many restarts, the other boy would surely mention how his best friend Jornak was missing from his house or doing strange things that differed radically from restart to restart. In order for Jornak to drop off Zach's perception, Veyers had to go away.

"You know what? Why don't you just tell us why you invited us here?" Zach suddenly told Jornak. "Surely it isn't to get us to join you, right?"

"No, I know this is impossible," Jornak said. "In the end, neither of you are willing to dirty your hands with this, even if doing so would prevent far more suffering in the end. No, I invited you here to arrange for a truce."

"A truce?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"Yes. I want us to stop fighting until the day of the summer festival," Jornak clarified. "We'll decide a winner and loser among us in one massive battle at the end of the month, just like it was always meant to be. In the meantime, you'll stop making raids on our forces and we'll make no moves against you."

"That seems like a deal that completely favors *you*," Zorian pointed out. "Why would we shoot ourselves in the foot by agree-



ing to this?"

Jornak smiled at the question and took out brown stone with a crudely carved flame symbol on it. It didn't seem magical in the slightest and Zorian did not recognize it, but Zach immediately paled upon sighting it.

"Because I have wraith bombs scattered throughout the major cities on the continent, ready to activate at my command. Because I know exactly who to assassinate and how in order to immediately trigger a new continental war. And," he shook his stone token as he said this, "because I got Oganj and his group to work with me. Your choice."



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