

Domagoj Kurmaic

MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc III - Part 2

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Chapter Sixty-Nine

RUIN

Zorian could tell right away that the hydra in front of them was not normal. First of all, it was too big. He was no expert on hydras, but he knew that even the largest ones didn't grow more than 10 meters in length. This one seemed to be at least twice that size, if the size of its heads was of any indication. Then there was the matter of how suddenly it had appeared on his senses. There was no way he could miss something like that with even casual inspection, nevermind the detailed sweep he had done on the cenote. The mind he was currently sensing was one of the most distinctive things he had ever witnessed through his mind sense, and it should have drawn his attention immediately. The hydra seemed to have nine minds – one for each head, and a ninth one that served as a kind of... overmind, for the lack of a better term. The individual heads seemed to be somehow suborned to the main mind of the hydra, which was probably in charge of coordinating the heads towards an overarching goal. It was kind of fascinating.

Then the hydra pointed all eight of its heads at them and roared. If they were dealing with a normal hydra, this would just be a cheap intimidation tactic. Instead, the roar was infused with potent wind magic, battering the whole group with a powerful gust of wind. Zach and Zorian simply glued their feet to the

ground with non-structured magic, and Daimen protected most of his team with an impressively quick force wall spell. Sadly, that still left four people at the mercy of the incoming wind attack. Of those four, one was Chassanah, who simply stabbed his staff into the ground and held on to it with pure physical strength. Zorian was impressed – the old man looked kind of gaunt, but there seemed to be surprising strength hidden under his wiry frame. As for the other three, they were not as quick on their feet and merely released a chorus of short cries and screams as they were blown off their feet and sent tumbling into the distance. They didn't die, but they wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

Zach was the one who handled the surprise attack the best. While everyone else, even Zorian, was scrambling to withstand the roar somehow, Zach was already casting some kind of complex spell in retaliation. He transformed the entire area in front of him into a field of roughly-hewn stone blades before the wind-storm even had time to die down, all of them wreathed in ominous red light. Then he slammed both of his hands into the earth before him, sending them all hurtling towards the hydra.

The monster took one look at the approaching cloud of stony death, its many eyes widening in surprise and fear, then immediately cut its roar short and withdrew all of its heads back into the cenote. The chameleon drakes, still arranged around the cenote, were not as quick. The rain of blades slammed into the area around the cenote, burying themselves deep into the jungle soil and impaling through any chameleon drakes that were unfortunate enough to be in the way. The lucky ones were slain on the spot by the stone shards. The less fortunate ones wailed like wounded pigs as the red light that infused the blades spread throughout their bodies and started liquefying their insides.

The surviving chameleon drakes lost any semblance of group cohesion and simply scattered in all directions, abandoning their

former home, the pained cries of their dying brethren motivating them to keep going until they had left the range of Zorian's mind sense entirely.

Zach wasn't really paying attention to the chameleon drakes, though. They were just collateral damage. The moment he had launched the rain of flesh-dissolving blades at the hydra, before he had even known whether it would hit its target or not, he was already casting another spell. Thus, the moment the hydra withdrew back into the cenote, Zach sent a pair of pale blue balls of magical energy after it.

Zorian would later find out that the projectiles were meant to freeze the water at the bottom of the cenote, hopefully imprisoning the hydra in a block of ice. Unfortunately for that idea, the hydra didn't retreat back into the water. It simply ducked out of the path of Zach's attack and then decided to jump out of the cenote and charge at the group.

Seeing the giant hydra jump out of the cenote with the same ease a housecat jumps onto the kitchen table really drove in the point that they were dealing with something entirely out of the ordinary. Normal hydras were 'just' highly venomous and capable of impressive tissue regeneration, especially in regards to their heads. They were not known to be especially fast or agile out of the water.

The charge of the hydra was unstoppable. Daimen and his team launched a constant stream of different attack spells at the hydra, all in vain. Every projectile they launched was intercepted by the hydra's many heads before it could hit its main body, inflicting damage that was soon undone by the hydra's natural regeneration ability. A hydra's regeneration was most potent in regards to its heads, even capable of overcoming fire damage and other things that usually foiled regenerators, but its main body was a lot more vulnerable. Daimen's group clearly knew this, and thus aimed for the main body with every attack they made, but the hydra was too

quick and canny for this to work.

Zorian refrained from joining in on the attack. If Daimen's whole group couldn't break through, his addition would likely be a meaningless waste of mana. He simply focused on figuring out how its mind works, conserved his mana and repositioned his golems so he could respond in time upon spotting an appropriate opening. Fortunately, the hydra seemed focused primarily on Zach, having identified him as its biggest threat.

Well, perhaps it was a bit callous of Zorian to say that... but in his defense, Zach looked quite happy at the fact that he had attracted the hydra's ire with his earlier spell. Seemingly ignoring the massive hydra thundering towards him, Zach cast two lengthy spells. The first created a large ball of soft white light that just hung there above his head, seemingly doing nothing at all. The other produced no visible effects, but Zorian's magic perception was pretty good by now and he could sense eight magical constructs suddenly springing into existence around Zach.

Soon, the hydra was close enough to Zach to attack. At that moment, all eight heads struck, surging towards Zach like coiled springs. Somewhere behind him, Zorian could hear some member of Daimen's team scream out a warning to Zach, as if that was going to do him any good now. At the same time, though, the eight concealed spell constructs surrounding Zach also sprang into motion, surging forward to meet the hydra's heads. Eight spectral shark jaws faded into existence, already in the process of biting down towards the attacking heads. The hydra, suddenly realizing it had blundered into a trap, tried to abort its attack.

It was too late. It was too big and had too much momentum. Whatever magic gave it such abnormal speed and agility had its limits. The spectral jaws slammed shut, slicing through hydra scale and muscle alike with ridiculous ease. Panicked, the hydra seemed to dip into some secret reserves of strength that allowed it

to quickly extricate most of its heads before they were bitten off.

Most, but not all. One of the spectral jaws caught its target particularly well and then kept biting down. With a loud crunch, the jaws bit right through the hydra head's spine, separating it from the main body.

The hydra's remaining seven heads roared in pain and anger, the headless neck of its eighth head flailing around madly and spraying blood everywhere around it. This wasn't a wound its regeneration could fix – the head wasn't damaged, it was just plain *gone*. It would regrow in time, but this process would happen too slowly to have any influence on the outcome of this battle.

Zorian expected that Zach would now use the mysterious ball of white light floating above his head, but the spell remained inert. Instead, he once again created a field of stone blades in front of him. Before he could launch it at the hydra, however, it suddenly retracted its heads closer to its main body and wrapped itself into something resembling a scaly, fleshy sphere. Then it disappeared into thin air.

When it appeared again, it was suddenly next to Daimen and his group.

"Of course it can teleport as well," Zorian mumbled to himself.

It should have been more surprising. Teleportation magic was usually very impractical for large creatures, because the costs increased explosively with the volume of the thing being teleported. Instead, it almost seemed appropriate. Zorian by now strongly suspected that they were dealing with some kind of ancient guardian from Awan-Temti's time, back when gods still meddled in mortal affairs and granted potent powers to those that caught their fancy. It was to be expected that something like this would be equipped with strange and potent abilities.

He pointed at the air in front of him and a large, semi-transparent disc of force materialized in the air before him.

Zorian hopped onto it and flew off in the direction of the hydra. He was fine with letting Zach face the hydra on his own, but Daimen and the people around him would probably need his help to stay alive.

Chassanah, who was still near Zorian by this point, copied his trick and followed after him on a force disc of his own.

The sudden teleportation, while very impressive from a creature that big, seemed to take a lot out of the hydra. Instead of striking immediately, it took a few seconds to uncoil and catch its breath before attacking again. This blunted some of the shock among Daimen's group and allowed them to organize themselves somewhat before it struck.

When it did strike, however, it was devastating. A layer of shields was erected in front of the group, but it was smashed into rapidly fading smoke and motes of light in under a second. Desperate to keep the hydra away from himself and his men, Daimen conjured a giant ectoplasmic version of himself, which then physically tackled the hydra. The giant ghostly Daimen snatched two of the hydra's heads with its ghostly hands and tried to wrestle it to the ground. This didn't quite work, but it did keep three of the hydra's heads too busy to attack anyone else and stopped it from moving freely on the battlefield, so it wasn't really a failure either.

Kirma fired a swarm of drill-like projectiles at the hydra, each of them unerringly homing in on the hydra's sensitive points – eyes, mouth, ears, nostrils. This was rather remarkable, as most homing spells were not nearly that precise in their aiming. Especially since the miniature drills were moving with incredible speeds, which would further complicate homing functions of most spells. Zorian could only imagine the lotus machine she carried was somehow responsible for that feat.

Zorian would have thought Orissa would be entirely useless in this kind of fight, since the hydra was unlikely to even notice bee

stings. However, she surprised him. Her bees suddenly became encased in an orange aura that caused the air around them to ripple from the intense heat emanating off them. From that point on, they flew faster and burned all that they touched, like a thousand tiny flying furnaces. Occasionally she would make a quick gesture, causing some of the bees to detonate, creating tiny but intense explosions that charred the hydra's tough, scaly skin wherever they touched it. And because the bees were so tiny, they could simply fly past the more durable, regenerating heads and strike at the hydra's main body.

Zorian also added some pressure on the hydra himself, launching a force lance, an incinerating beam and two severing discs at the hydra as he flew towards the battle site. He didn't really think he would inflict real damage with that, but every second the hydra spent on dealing with those attacks was a second it couldn't spare on dealing with Daimen and the others.

Despite all of these efforts, the hydra still had seven heads left, and it was hard to keep them all constantly busy. Zorian had to sacrifice one of his golems to save Orissa from having her head bitten off when the hydra finally figured out where the annoying burning, exploding bees were coming from. Torun also sacrificed one of his larger eyes to survive an attack, causing the eye in question to burst into a copious amount of translucent slime that formed a thin, rubbery dome around him. The head that was targeting him bit down on the dome and, despite its apparent flimsiness, failed to punch through. The dome bent and stretched, but did not break.

Unfortunately, not everyone targeted by the hydra had such a life-saving method prepared. One of the mages was bitten nearly in half before anyone could do anything about it, dying on the spot. The other had his arm pumped full of venom when the hydra grazed it with its jaws. Daimen immediately cut off the limb in question and then directed one of the mages to teleport him and

all the other wounded away from the battlefield.

Additionally, one of the men tried to circle the hydra and attack it from behind, only to have his legs shattered in response when the hydra revealed that its tail was also a potent weapon, able to strike at things with great force and speed. Zorian didn't begrudge the man his agonized screaming – he still remembered how much it had hurt when the grey hunter had done the same to him.

Finally, Daimen found a good moment to spring his trap. The hydra managed to get through some of the defensive spells and sent one of its heads towards Daimen, who threw a mundane-looking red projectile at it. Sensing no great danger, the hydra simply bit down on the projectile to make it go away... shattering the potion bottle hidden inside the projectile right inside its mouth.

The hydra as a whole flinched back as it sensed the alchemical mixture pour down its throat, stopping all of its attacks. The affected head released an agonizing scream as it rapidly began to transform into glittering white crystal. Its natural regeneration was unable to halt the process and it seemed inevitable that the entire hydra would rapidly crystalize and turn into a lifeless, glittering statue.

Without hesitation, one of the hydra's other heads bit down on the neck of the rapidly crystalizing head and tore it off in a shower of blood and gore. Now down to six heads, but safe from the crystallization poison, the hydra gave Daimen a murderous look and prepared for another charge.

Unfortunately for the hydra, this was when Zach, Zorian and Chassanah reached the battlefield and the tide shifted. Chassanah circled the battlefield, casting barrier after barrier and preventing anyone else from being killed or seriously wounded by the hydra's multitude of attacks. Zorian had figured out enough of its mind to start messing with its aim and timing, and occasionally launched combat spells at it as well when he spotted a good opening.

Then there was Zach. Unlike Zorian and Chassanah, he didn't bother with a force disc – when the hydra teleported away from him, he simply jumped into the air and flew off towards the new battlefield like it was the most normal thing in the world, his eight spectral jaws in tow. The mysterious white orb was still floating over his head, too. As he traveled, another three identical orbs joined the one he made earlier, equally passive for now. When he finally reached the hydra, the spectral jaws that trailed behind him surged forward, biting towards it, and it was instantly put on the defensive.

Naturally, this was when the hydra pulled another one of its surprise abilities. It roared again, breathing clouds of bright green gas in every direction. Everyone was forced to temporarily retreat from what was likely some kind of poison mist, giving the hydra some much needed respite.

The battle continued. The hydra lost another head, then two. The hydra managed to rob Zach of all of his spectral jaws and wounded another one of Daimen's men. Zorian managed to hit the hydra's main body with a shredder sphere, inflicting a lasting wound on it. All of his golems ended up being reduced to scrap, however. Daimen's ectoplasmic giant was dispersed, but Daimen managed to slice off its tail in response. At first glance, it seemed like they were winning and that victory was only a matter of time... but the truth was that they were steadily running out of mana. The hydra might be on the verge of collapse, but so were they. Even Zach's seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves were starting to run out.

They didn't want to retreat. At least one person was dead, many had suffered serious injuries, and they had used a lot of expensive resources during the course of the battle. On top of that, while the hydra was grievously wounded, it would recover quickly if it was left alone. Far faster than their group would. If they fled

and came back later, it would probably be back in top health, with all of its heads back.

The hydra didn't want to retreat either. It had only three of its heads left, but it knew it could recover from this setback very quickly. Its enemies were visibly weakening, it just had to keep going and outlast them. Besides, turning its back to such dangerous enemies was lunacy – all of its instincts were telling it that doing so would be a mistake. Better to risk fighting to the bitter end than be cut down from the back as it fled.

In the end, though, they had all underestimated Zach again. Sometime during the fighting, Zach had created another white ball to join the four he had prepared earlier. He then spent the rest of the battle arranging the five balls around the battlefield and trying to maneuver the hydra into the center of their formation. Although no one except Zach knew what they were supposed to do, his performance was impressive enough that everyone did their best to help him with this. The hydra was wary of the balls in the beginning, but as time passed and they remained little more than glowing ornaments, it began to mostly ignore them.

Eventually, Daimen instructed his men to feign a panicked rout and the hydra recklessly followed after them, stepping right in the middle of the resulting formation. In that very moment, Zach made a strange hand sign and the balls activated. A web of brightly shining threads unfolded out of them, reaching across empty space to intertwine with each other and trap the hydra under a dome of delicate-looking threads.

The hydra experimentally brushed against the dome of threads and hissed in pain as they lacerated its flesh like a thousand interlocking razors.

And then the dome began to shrink.

Everyone watched, exhausted, as the giant hydra futilely fought to break out of the dome of razor threads closing in on

it. It bellowed in rage again and again, defiant to the very end. Finally, with its entire body mangled and only one head left intact, it once again curled into a ball and teleported out of the sphere.

Unlike the first teleport, this one did not take it very far. In fact, the hydra appeared right next to the rapidly shrinking sphere, having transported itself just far enough to escape immediate death. It swayed on its feet as it unrolled, looking as if was going to keel over dead at any moment. However, before that could happen, it lifted its head one last time and gave Daimen a bitter, murderous look. Though it was actually Zach that was responsible for its current predicament, it had been chasing after Daimen and his men when it blundered into the trap, and it viewed him as the primary culprit of its current predicament.

Through his magic perception, Zorian suddenly detected a massive buildup of magic in the hydra. In fact, virtually everyone seemed to have detected it, considering how they flinched in surprise. Before anyone could do anything, the hydra opened its last remaining mouth and fired a beam of pitch black energy straight at Daimen.

Eyes widening, Daimen reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, unassuming mirror, thrusting it in front of himself as some kind of shield.

The beam hit. The mirror shattered as if hit by a bomb, the sound of its destruction reverberating throughout the surroundings with unnatural loudness. Daimen himself was blown back like a rag doll, the arm that held the mirror clearly broken. The black beam was gone, however, as if it had never existed in the first place.

For a full second, the hydra seemed to stare at the scene. Then, it shuddered for a moment and collapsed to the side, dead.

The battle was over.



The immediate aftermath of the fight was, in many ways, more nerve-racking for Zorian than the actual fight had been. After checking up on everyone, it turned out that only one person had actually died in the fighting – Goliri Ardat, the guy that got bitten in half by the hydra near the start of the fighting. However, Goliri was best friends with one of the other men in the group, Alachi Gotrum. Alachi was devastated and furious that his friend had died, and he felt the primary person responsible for his death was Zorian. It had been Zorian who had insisted that they had to gain access to the deepest cave in the cenote, after all. The man had kept hurling insults at Zorian for over five minutes, and even tried to attack him physically before Zach intervened.

Unfortunately, that's when two more members of Daimen's team spoke up in support of Alachi. The guy who had lost his arm due to the hydra's poison and the man who'd had his legs shattered by its tail were also very unhappy. They were essentially crippled, and they likewise blamed Zorian for it. Likely Zach as well, but they were too intimidated by his combat prowess to piss him off. Zorian, on the other hand, looked like an easier target.

During all of that, Daimen tried to play peacemaker and calm his men down, but he never expressed any support for Zorian. This pissed off Zorian more than it probably should have. He knew that this was his team and that he couldn't just categorically side with Zorian just because he was his brother, but it left a bitter taste in his mouth that Daimen hadn't said so much as a single word in his defense. Instead, it was Chassanah who eventually sided with him. The old man seemed to have taken a liking to Zorian.

This started another round of accusations concerning Zorian's obvious proficiency in mind magic, with Alachi claiming Zorian

was clearly mind controlling people and that police should get involved.

The moment police involvement was mentioned, Daimen seemed to shift tracks in his methods of resolving the conflict. He stopped the discussion, dragged Alachi to the side and erected a privacy ward around the two of them. Zorian had no idea what was said between them, but Alachi no longer bothered him after this.

As for the two crippled mages, Daimen told them that their wounds weren't necessarily unrecoverable with the right treatments and promised to pay as much as he had to in order to get them back in top shape. This seemed to mellow them out a lot, and they no longer made any fuss either.

With that particular crisis somewhat resolved, they could finally inspect their gains. They dropped off most of the wounded at the nearest hospital (Daimen decided to just put his broken arm in a cast and return to the field) and gated back to the site of the battle.

The first gain was actually the dead hydra. Daimen and his team were quite excited about its potential worth. The sums involved weren't much to Zorian, but that was just the time loop messing with his sense of proportion when it came to money. If they could really find an appropriate buyer for this thing, the hydra could get Daimen and his team enough money to turn a lot of heads.

The dead chameleon drakes would also be gathered and sold, although their value was far less than that of a hydra. Especially since Zach's spells had really made a mess out of a lot of them, making many of the corpses borderline useless.

As they walked around, inspecting chameleon drake corpses, Zorian heard Daimen complaining to Orissa about his broken mirror. Apparently it was a divine artifact that Daimen had found on

one of his expeditions and decided to keep. It was supposed to be utterly indestructible, and had saved Daimen's life many times in the past, and now it was gone. He was thoroughly heartbroken over that, and Orissa pointing out that at least he was alive thanks to its sacrifice didn't seem to cheer him up much.

"Ready, little Kazinski?" Torun said, slapping Zorian on the back a little harder than was necessary. "Let's go get that orb that you're so sure is down there, eh?"

Zorian said nothing. Before descending into the depths of the cenote, the group carefully checked the place again in order to see if there were any more giant magical hydras or worse things lurking nearby. They found no evidence of such, but they also failed to figure out how they had missed the hydra in the first place, which was worrying. The water at the bottom was frozen as a result of the two projectiles that Zach had sent down here at the start of the fight, but there was no evidence of any kind of underwater cave the hydra could have hidden itself in. It was like the hydra simply popped into existence out of nowhere when the chameleon drakes called for it.

When they finally entered the cave Zorian had pointed out, the orb was nowhere to be found. Zorian expected as much, though, and wasn't really worried.

"Can you still sense it?" Daimen asked anxiously. He was probably a bit desperate to get some tangible results from gaining access to this place, so that he could justify the losses he suffered to get here... both to himself and to others.

"I can," Zorian confirmed. He walked towards the far end of the cave and jabbed his finger at the empty air in front of him. "It's here. It's at this exact spot, even."

He waved his hand through the air where he sensed the orb and it passed through it without resistance.

"Yet I can't actually see it, or even touch it," Zorian added.

"How curious."

Everyone who had even the slightest amount of expertise in divinations, or detection magic in general, immediately gathered around the spot, poking, staring and casting magic at it. After ten minutes of that, Daimen finally got a result.

"I can't believe this," Daimen said, running his hand through his hair in annoyance.

"You have something?" Kirma asked hopefully.

"It's a hidden world," Daimen said.

"A what?" Zorian asked, having never encountered that term before.

"A pocket dimension, like the one you think Silverlake is hiding in," Zach told him. "They are normally almost impossible to find unless you know exactly what to look for. Thus, some people call them hidden worlds."

"So this spot that little Kazinski has pointed out...?" Torun asked hesitantly.

"An entrance to the... pocket dimension where the orb resides," Daimen said, giving Zorian a complex look. "Damnit. All of Awan-Temti's other belongings are probably there too. No wonder we hadn't found any trace of his group in all this time. We would have never found this without Zorian, even if we had spent years combing this place."

"But we did have him, and thus the expedition is saved," Torun said with a careless shrug. "What are you being so gloomy about?"

"What indeed," Daimen mumbled.

"Anyway, now we just have to figure out how to break through this invisible door thing and we'll be free to loot Awan-Temti's tomb to our hearts' content, yes?" Torun asked.

"Yes, but I'd like to point out that this is probably where the giant magical hydra had come from," Chassanah butted in. "What

if there are more of them inside? What if there are worse things waiting for us there? We shouldn't be reckless."

"Yes, Chassanah is right," Daimen nodded. "We lost too much here as it is. I want to hire more fighters before we try to set foot there."

"I'd like to stay here for a while and study the entrance point for a bit," Zorian said, frowning. "Something doesn't feel right about this."

"Fine," Daimen sighed. "But don't do anything before consulting me! Look, but don't touch."

Zorian nodded. Over the next two hours he scrutinized the pocket dimension entrance point while paying attention to the way his marker reacted to it. He also asked Daimen to teach him whatever spells he had used to confirm the presence of a pocket dimension. Daimen mumbled something about how he would normally charge an arm and a leg for a confidential magic like that, but taught him the spells anyway.

After two hours had passed, he was finally certain of his conclusions. He called Daimen over and asked him for permission to 'do something'.

"Something?" Daimen said warily.

"Something," Zorian nodded.

"And if I refuse, you and Zach are going to come back here when my back is turned and do it anyway," he surmised.

"Well..." Zorian hesitated.

"Absolutely, yeah," Zach immediately confirmed.

Zorian gave him an annoyed glance. Not that he disagreed with his fellow time traveler, far from it, but he could have been more diplomatic about it.

Daimen cupped his face in his hand for a moment. Perhaps he was imagining things, but Zorian thought he heard a brief prayer for patience directed to one of the silent divinities.

"Just tell me what you want to do, okay?" Daimen finally said.

"I want to think we've misread the situation," Zorian said. "It's not that the orb of the first emperor is hidden away in a pocket dimension. The pocket dimension *is* the orb of the first emperor."

Daimen gave him a blank look. Zorian took this as an indication he should keep going.

"I agree with you that we're dealing with a pocket dimension," Zorian said. "But my marker is quite insistent that the dimensional anchor we're looking at is not just an entrance to a pocket dimension. It is the very orb we're looking for. This may sound a little crazy but—"

"You think the orb is a portable hidden realm," Daimen surmised.

"Yes," Zorian nodded. "I think this entrance we're looking at is simply how the orb looks when it is... deployed."

"I see," Daimen said speculatively. "And you think you can collapse it back into an actual orb?"

"I'm willing to try, at least," Zorian said. "Though you should probably get yourself and your team out of the cenote before I make the attempt. Just in case."

After a few seconds, Daimen turned towards his team, who had been silently listening to the conversation, and told them to establish a defensive perimeter around the pocket dimension entrance and a fallback point outside the cave. It seemed he had no intention of letting him and Zach try this on their own.

Zorian clacked his tongue unhappily. If things went south again, he had no doubt that most of these people would blame him for everything again. Well to hell with them, he was still doing this.

The moment Daimen announced that everything was prepared and that he could begin, he cupped his hand below the invisible dimensional anchor and tried to connect to the orb with

his marker. It took some tries, but he eventually succeeded – the surrounding space rippled like hot summer air for a moment after which something resembling a glass globe materialized in the air and plopped down onto Zorian's waiting palm.

Orb of the first emperors: obtained.

After a second of shocked silence, everyone rushed forward, uncomfortably crowding Zorian's personal space in order to take a look at the artifact.

The orb in Zorian's hand looked... interesting. The orb was a perfect sphere of crystal-clear glass, completely unmarred by the passage of time. Running his fingers over it, Zorian could not feel even the slightest scratch on its surface. Seemingly encased inside the glass was a ruined palace, partially destroyed and overgrown with trees, vines and other vegetation. The palace and the trees were extremely detailed and lifelike, to the point that Zorian could count the individual leaves on the trees if he focused on them long enough. It reminded Zorian of one of those novelty snow globes that Cyorian merchants liked to sell, the ones that had high-quality models of famous buildings encased in the glass.

Eventually Zorian handed the orb to Zach, if only so people would crowd around him instead of Zorian in order to get a good look at the orb.

"That palace... it's not just a model, is it?" Zach said, sounding fascinated. "It's a real thing, contained inside the orb."

"Obviously," Orissa said. "Why would it be a ruin otherwise?"

"So Shutur-Tarana made himself a portable palace to carry around with him at all times?" Zach asked rhetorically. "I like it."

"Yes, now imagine just how much stuff there could be stored there," Torun said happily. "Ah, little Kazinski, I forgive you for everything. You're the best thing to have happened to this team."

Although Zorian was dying to study the orb in more detail, he had reluctantly decided to leave the orb in Daimen's hands for

now. Trying to take it away would probably spark another fight and it wasn't like he had enough time to truly devote himself to its study right now. The attack on the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria was fast approaching, which meant that both Zach and Zorian would be forced to devote the majority of their energies into that for the next couple of days.

"I have to say this whole thing makes me feel very conflicted," Zach said as they left the group.

"Why?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Well, on one hand, we only found the orb so quickly because Daimen pointed us at the right spot to start at," Zach said. "So if we ever get out of the time loop, the right thing to do would probably be tell him how to get it as a thanks for his help."

"But?" Zorian prompted.

"I really like the idea of having my own portable palace," Zach said with a dreamy grin.

Zorian snorted derisively. "You shouldn't get excited just yet. For all we know the ruins really are full of slumbering giant hydras or something."

"That just makes me more excited," Zach said. "That thing was a great opponent. Clearing a whole nest of them would be amazing."

Oh, right. For a moment he had forgotten who he was talking with.

They spent the rest of the way home arguing about what the best setup for a modern portable palace would look like. The main point of contention was that Zach wanted to make an arena full of actual monsters to fight with, whereas Zorian argued that sophisticated training dummies were better because they were less likely to break out of their containment and rampage throughout the entire place.

"It's just not the same," Zach complained, shaking his head sadly.

In the end they had to agree to disagree on the issue.



All the preparations were complete. Soldiers were recruited, human mercenaries and aranea hired, golems made, wild monsters dominated into serving as combat support, additional equipment bought and several limited combat exercises performed. The scale of the operation was sufficiently big that the authorities had sent a team to investigate what was happening, requiring some quick mind magic and forged documents to avert disaster. It helped that many Houses had small (or not so small, in some cases) private armies to protect their interests, and that many of these Houses had estates in or around Cyoria, which made their group stand out a lot less than it might otherwise.

All that was left to do now was to wait for Quatach-Ichl to leave for Ulquaan Ibaso so they could make their move. There was some worry about that, as Quatach-Ichl didn't seem to be getting ready to leave. Xvim had raised the issue that they might have tipped Quatach-Ichl off somehow, and a fierce discussion sprung up about whether to go ahead with the assault anyway if that was the case. Thankfully, the question turned out to be irrelevant in the end – Quatach-Ichl still left on schedule, and the mission could proceed.

The first task was simple: kidnap Sudomir, hopefully neutralizing the entire Iasku Mansion in the process. In order to do that, though, they had to lure the man out of his high-unassailable home.

Thus, Zach and Zorian stole a pair of fancy red robes from the Cult of the Dragon Below and teleported to Knyazov Dveri, where

they proceeded to smash up store fronts, set several warehouses on fire and used alteration to call out Sudomir as a 'traitor to the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon'. Zorian also used his mind magic to guide a herd of wild boars directly into the town square, after which he released his control over them and let them run amok as they pleased.

The city guard tried to stop them, of course. They were actually pretty brutal about it, going so far as to have snipers try to pick them off from the rooftops, despite the fact that Zach and Zorian clearly avoided killing anyone themselves. Still, they were barely a challenge. Zach and Zorian simply knocked them out or otherwise incapacitated them, and then continued with their extended provocation.

After a while they stopped with the attack and left. This was partially because they were afraid Sudomir might opt not to show up if he thought the danger had not yet passed, but it was also because there was a chance the city authorities would call in Elde-mar's military if things went on long enough.

It took nearly five hours for Sudomir to show up in the city, upon which he was greeted by irate shop owners and city officials, demanding an explanation and some kind of compensation. Not even the twelve dangerous-looking, grim-faced body guards that followed after him everywhere could make them pause.

Zach and Zorian observed for a while and then struck like a lightning bolt. Sudomir himself got incapacitated early in the fight and the twelve bodyguards he had brought with him turned out to be decidedly average and unable to deal with them. Especially since they weren't trying not to kill anyone this time.

"I'm glad the kidnapping went off without a problem," Alanic told them when they dragged Sudomir back to their base, "but did you really have to cut off his arms?"

"Don't look at me," Zach protested. "It was Zorian's idea."

"He's a dangerous necromancer," Zorian defended himself. "I couldn't risk him hitting us with some nasty piece of soul magic in the middle of the battle and this was the quickest way I knew of stopping that from happening. He said he was hard to kill so I figured that he wouldn't die from blood loss."

"I can't believe my previous selves thought you weren't brutal enough," Alanic mumbled under his breath. "And why is he not unconscious? I thought we agreed you'd knock him out before bringing him here?"

"We couldn't knock him out," Zach admitted. "We tried five different drugs on him, and none of them worked."

"Though he did pretend to be unconscious after we hit him with the fifth one," Zorian pointed out. "Zach wanted to try knocking him out 'the old fashioned way' by hitting him in the head with a rock, but I vetoed that. So we just glued his mouth shut, tied his legs together, put a bag over his head and brought him over."

"I see," Alanic said, looking in the direction of Sudomir's brand new prison cell with a frown. "I wonder what he did to himself to get such resilience."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to find out," Zach shrugged. "Later, though. We should be starting the assault on the gate now, yes?"

"Not yet, no," Alanic said, shaking his head. "Let's ask Sudomir a few questions concerning the Ibasan base. He might know some crucial detail about its defenses or some such."

Both Zach and Zorian were anxious to launch the assault as soon as possible, both because that would give the researchers more time to study the gate if they succeeded and because the longer they waited, the bigger the chance the Ibasans would realize what was coming and raise the alarm. However, Alanic's suggestion made a lot of sense and he knew more about these sort of mass engagements than they did. If he thought a few more

hours spent interrogating Sudomir wouldn't doom the operation, he was probably right.



The interrogation turned out to be fairly mundane and unexciting. Sudomir was surprisingly calm and polite for someone who had been brutally attacked in broad daylight, de-armed and then carried off for mind magic assisted interrogation. It didn't even take all that much mind magic to make him tell the truth. However, he also did not seem to know anything terribly useful about the layout and defenses of the Ibasan base. Sudomir and the Ibasans may have been cooperating closely with each other, but neither side fully trusted the other, and a lot of things were kept secret between them.

Eventually the three of them ran out of questions to ask, much sooner than they expected they would. Well, they ran out of questions related to the Ibasan base, anyway. Rather than stop, Alanic simply decided to expand the scope of the questioning beyond that topic. This wasn't exactly what they agreed on, but Zorian said nothing for now. He could sense that Alanic's questions were all building up to something. Some question that Alanic desperately wanted answered.

"Why are you gathering so many souls in your mansion?" Alanic eventually asked Sudomir. "What on earth do you need half a million souls for?"

Ah, so that was what was bothering him...

"W-What?" asked Sudomir, sounding shocked for the first time since the questioning began. "How do you know that?"

Alanic gestured towards Zorian, who immediately launched a mental assault on Sudomir's mind, forcing him to answer the question.

"Ghhhk!" Sudomir grunted, grinding his teeth as he fought against the compulsion. "Damn it, that's not... It's... I need it..."

"For what?" Alanic pushed.

"For the wraith bombs," Sudomir ground out eventually.

"Wraith bombs?" Zach asked curiously. "As in, you pack a wraith into a bomb and throw it at people?"

"Ha ha, yes! Yes!" Sudomir said, suddenly breaking into hysterical laughter. He was no longer fighting against Zorian's mental compulsion for some reason, as if he realized there was no way he could win there and decided to just give them exactly what they want. "Not just one wraith though! Hundreds! Thousands even! And you don't throw them at people. No, no... you throw them at *cities*."

"What?" Zach asked, frowning.

"Wraiths can multiply," Alanic said quietly. "Give a wraith some time and lots of victims, and it will make another wraith out of every human whose soul it consumes."

"Yes, exactly!" Sudomir said, nodding furiously. "Just think of what would happen if you dumped thousands of these things in the middle of a major city. Unless the outbreak is contained immediately, the whole city would be overwhelmed in a matter of hours! Only the Triumvirate Church has enough experts in ghost fighting to counter a wraith outbreak after it gathers some steam, and they were *decimated* in the Weeping. If I had enough wraith bombs in my possession, Eldemar would *have to* appease me. They'd have to..."

There was a brief silence during which Sudomir seemed to get lost in his own world and everyone else was processing what he just said.

"You'd have to use this wraith bomb of yours on at least one city before anyone took your threat seriously," Zorian eventually pointed out.

"Yes, of course," Sudomir said, giving him a patient look, as if he was asked something obvious by a small child. "That goes without saying. I was thinking of targeting Sulamnon first. That would immediately spark another round of Splinter Wars. Sulamnon wouldn't care about any excuses from Eldemar's government. Not if it was obvious that the wraith bomb came from Eldemar. With another continental conflict under way, Eldemar would have no forces to spare on suppressing me. In fact, they would surely be tempted to make use of my... *assets* to help them win the war. I..."

For a moment, Sudomir looked like he was about to continue with his explanation, but then he suddenly froze up and some of the mania that had taken over him seemed to drain out of him.

Only for a moment, though. Almost immediately, the spark of madness returned to his eyes once again, except this time it was slightly different. There was violence and aggression lurking there now, and his face twisted into an outraged snarl.

Sudomir's flesh suddenly turned green and his body started to swell in size. He grew a tail and horns, his eyes became slitted and his teeth sharpened to dagger-like points. Zorian, who had actually seen Sudomir transformed into a giant monster once before, realized what he was looking at and started to shout out a warning to Zach and Alanic.

Alanic was already reacting, though. The moment Sudomir started to transform, he rushed up to him and slammed his palm against his chest. A multitude of yellow ribbons covered in some sort of religious writing sprang into existence around Sudomir. They circled around the captured necromancer once before sinking into his flesh, causing the transformation to stop and Sudomir to be instantly wrenched back to his human form.

Sudomir stared at Alanic in shock for a full second, at a loss for words.

"Oh..." he finally said. "Well. That didn't work out as well as I

hoped.”

Alanic made a slashing motion with his left hand and then lightly poked Sudomir on the forehead with his index finger. This caused Sudomir to suddenly become wreathed in dark red light and then collapse into unconsciousness.

”Let’s go,” Alanic said, motioned for Zach and Zorian to follow him out of the cell. ”We’ll continue this interrogation later. For now, we have an Ibasan base to capture.”

Chapter Seventy

CARRIED AWAY

Deep beneath Cyoria, in a recently excavated cavern separated from the main tunnel network, an army was being assembled. It consisted of about 200 people, about 120 of which had been gathered by Alanic through various means while the rest were mercenaries Zorian had hired for considerable amounts of money. Of course, this number did not include the many non-combat experts that would be responsible for figuring out how the Ibasan gate functioned. Nor did it take into account the many golems that Zorian had made for the occasion, about 80 of which were scattered through the area, or the 40 aranean mercenaries that were hired from the three different webs recommended by the Silent Doorway Adepts.

As far as armies went, this wasn't much. But it was still a sizeable group, and getting it past Ibasan patrols without them noticing their passage was... difficult.

For ordinary mages, that is. Zorian could just send his simulacrum to sneak past these patrols and then just open a Gate to let the assembled forces through unmolested and unnoticed.

There was something very amusing about using dimensional gates to bypass Ibasan patrols, establishing a temporary staging

ground deep in their territory, and then launching a surprise attack at their base.

Zorian was just in the process of attaching small metal cylinders to his belt, each one filled with potent alchemical mixtures, when he sensed Zach approaching him.

"You look worried," Zach told him.

Zorian frowned. He didn't notice it before Zach pointed it out, but yeah. He kind of was.

"A little," Zorian admitted, continuing his preparations. "I mean, we're risking another confrontation with Quatach-Ichl here. He's one of the few people who has the ability to do us lasting harm. Every time we tangle with him, we're taking a big risk."

"Eh, it'll be fine," Zach said dismissively, giving him a strong pat on the back that had Zorian swaying in place for a second. He gave Zach a glare for that, but his fellow time traveler just grinned at him in response. "Besides, the annoying pile of bones isn't nearly as dangerous as you think. I've fought him plenty of times, and I'm still standing. He doesn't like to use necromancy in battle for some reason."

Alanic, who was staring at the map of the Ibasan base along with Xvim, decided this merited a response from him.

"Most necromantic spells aren't well suited for battle," Alanic said, not taking his eyes off the map. "They take too much concentration and they need to overcome the target's magic resistance to work. It's faster and cheaper to just burn people to a crisp or cut them to pieces. The terrible necromantic spells that are sometimes bandied about in textbooks are torture spells meant to be inflicted on a subdued victim, not something you use in an even fight."

There was a long pause as Zach and Zorian digested this. One of these days, Zorian decided, he really had to ask Alanic about his past. The old battle priest would likely refuse to talk about it at first,

but maybe if he picked a right moment and was really persistent?

Well, whatever. It was a thought for some other time. He considered pointing out that a fight between them and Quatach-Ichl wasn't exactly an even one, since the difference in power and skill between the ancient lich and any one of them was still a yawning chasm rather than anything resembling a close match-up, but he figured that would be missing the point. Alanic's point was that Quatach-Ichl likely didn't go for necromantic magic in a fight because it was suboptimal, and that was probably true – getting into a habit of toying with your opponents was quite stupid, and the ancient lich had been shrewd enough to survive for more than a thousand years now.

Truth be told, Zorian found those jagged disintegration beams that Quatach-Ichl liked to use to be plenty terrifying in their own way.

"You know," Zorian suddenly said. "My past self would be horrified if he saw me right now."

"Why?" Zach asked, arching his eyebrow in askance.

"This attack is pretty... *audacious*," said Zorian. "There is no way my past self would ever consider this a reasonable risk to take. A part of me scoffs at this, dismissing it as simple cowardice, but there is another part of me that can't help but wonder whether the time loop had eroded away my ability to recognize what is and is not appropriately cautious behavior. What if we manage to leave the time loop and deal with Red Robe, only to die two months later because we did something completely stupid out of sheer habit?"

To Zorian's surprise, Zach actually seemed to give the question some serious thought. Zorian expected him to either dismiss his concerns or question how Zorian could possibly know what his past self would have thought of their current situation. Instead, Zach seemed to consider the issue in his head for well over a minute before responding.

"I doubt that's going to happen," he eventually said, his tone and mannerisms somewhat subdued. "I have... things I need to do after we get out. Social things. It will be at least a year or two before I can start picking fights with dragons or whatnot, and I don't think you'll start looking for trouble without me prodding you. A couple of years should be enough to let us adjust to a world without restarts, right?"

Zorian simply gave Zach a non-committal hum in response. Zach had a pretty rosy picture of Zorian in his head if he thought there was no way he could get himself into trouble on his own. Zorian still wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life if... *when* they got out of the time loop, but he would probably need a lot of money and rare resources. He could easily imagine getting into trouble in the process of acquiring these, or once he amassed enough that people start to take notice or once he told people what he was actually doing with all these acquisitions.

Zach's inordinate fondness for picking fights with giant monsters was definitely dangerous, but Zorian suspected his personal ambitions could be even more dangerous than that. A mage of Zach's caliber can usually flee from giant monsters if they find themselves overmatched against it. Make a human organization interested enough in you, though, and they will hound you till the day you die.

He shook his head and steeled himself. Now was not the time to contemplate those topics too deeply. The opening moves of this attack were about to begin and Zorian had a crucial role to play in them. If they wanted to stop Quatach-Ichl from being alerted and summoned back to the base, someone had to sneak into the base and either assassinate or disable as many Ibasan leaders as possible before the main force of the attack hit. That someone was, of course, Zorian. Him and the aranean mercenaries he had hired for the occasion, that is.

Cloaking one's presence thoroughly enough to avoid dedicated scrutiny was quite hard. In a contest between two equally skilled mages, one of which was trying to hide and one of which was seeking for the hidden one, the seeker would almost always come out on top. If your opponent could manipulate your very mind, however, dictating what you see, hear and remember... then even the most sophisticated detection spell could not help you find them.

Well, that was the theory, at least. Zorian was quite sure the Ibasans would catch on to their presence relatively soon. Mind magic was not exactly unknown among mages, even if few of them could manifest it as stealthily and flexibly as Zorian and his new aranean minions could. Still. They didn't have to stay undetected forever – just long enough to track down and remove anyone who knew how to contact Quatach-Ichl.

"I'm going," Zorian said out loud, speaking to himself as much as he was to the people around him.

"Leave a simulacrum with us," warned Alanic.

Zorian hesitated for a moment. He had dismissed all his simulacrums before the operation began so that they wouldn't be a drain on his mana reserves. It was annoying, because it meant he would have to rely on Daimen again to re-establish a link with Koth, but he felt this operation deserved his full focus. That said, Zorian shouldn't be doing anything too mana intensive during the initial infiltration, so maybe leaving a simulacrum behind in the command room wouldn't be a bad idea.

He executed a complex series of chants and gestures and then cupped his hands in front of him, causing a milky white sphere of ectoplasm to materialize in front of him. He felt the spell reach towards his soul, connecting it to the ball of ectoplasm in front of him. The moment he felt the connection snap into place, he plunged his right arm straight into the ball of ectoplasm and imposed upon it an image of himself, causing it to squirm and writhe

like a living thing.

"That always looks so freaky," Zach commented off to the side.

Zorian ignored him. This was the most sensitive part of the spell, since the caster had to keep their image firmly in mind as they manipulated the ectoplasm. If they faltered even for a second, the spell would either fail or produce a hopelessly false copy. This was because, although the spell was tapping into the caster's soul to create the copy, it was tapping into something that described a creature of flesh and blood and trying to translate it into a form made out of magical fields and ectoplasm. A multitude of little and not-so-little sacrifices and compromises had to be made during this process, and a non-sapient spell couldn't be trusted to prioritize things properly. The first time Zorian succeeded in producing a simulacrum, for example, he got a nearly-mindless wreck that nonetheless contained a vividly detailed internal bone structure. The spell sacrificed nearly everything else to get that one thing just right.

Of course, Zorian was now too well versed with the spell to fail like that, even with Zach distracting him with inane comments. The writhing sphere swelled in size and erupted into thin, rope-like pseudopods that formed a rough outline of a human being...

Two minutes later, a flawless-looking replica of Zorian opened its eyes and looked around. One would think that simulacrums would come into existence already aware of everything and ready to spring into action on a moment's notice, but in practice they always seemed a little confused after being created and took about 30 seconds to gather their bearings and calm down.

"There," Zorian said. "Anything else?"

"No," Alanic said, shaking his head. "Go. Try not to get yourself killed, I guess."

"I guess?" Zorian mumbled under his breath. "Thank you,

Alanic, you really know how to make a motivational speech.”

And then he left. The attack on the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria had begun.



The initial stages of the infiltration went very well. Zorian used a combination of a floating invisibility sphere and clouding the minds of the Ibasan guards to smuggle himself and the aranea into the base, after which they split up into small groups to cover more ground in as little time as possible.

There were some complications. For one thing, there were some pretty insidious and powerful wards scattered around the base, arranged in no pattern that Zorian could decipher. These hadn't been there when Zorian invaded the base in the previous restarts, which implied that Ibasans normally took those down before executing the invasion of Cyoria. Zorian was kind of baffled as to why they would tear down their own wards like that, though, even if they did intend to abandon the base after the invasion. For a moment he actually worried that they had been betrayed by some of their mercenaries, despite their precautions, and that the base security had been upgraded in response. However, the wards in question were arranged so haphazardly, the entire warding layout so full of holes, that Zorian eventually ruled out that idea. If the Ibasans had been expecting them, they would have done a better job of warding the place than this. As it was, the warding setup looked almost like a collection of individual wards, each of which had been erected by a different person without bothering to consult anyone else about what they were doing. In at least two places the wards clashed with each other so severely that they created 'dead zones' in the areas where they overlapped, canceling each other out.

Zorian had a rather silly urge to write a letter to Quatach-Ichl, criticizing him for not teaching his minions how to make a proper warding scheme. This sort of thing reflected badly on him too, you know, he ought to think of his reputation...

Anyway. Another problem was the Ibasans had these brown dogs that could smell the aranea coming, no matter how well cloaked, and wouldn't stop barking. And they were either naturally mind blanked or had been made so artificially, because Zorian couldn't detect or connect to their minds at all. He had been forced to kill and replace them with motionless ectoplasmic replicas, which took an annoying amount of time and mana on his part.

After that, everything went perfectly for a while. Numerous Ibasan leaders were eliminated, and though the base was starting to wake up to the fact something funny was going on in their base, they were still not aware of the extent of the problem on their hands. However, there was something that Zorian had not taken into account...

The Ibasans had fought against aranea before. Before the time loop – and even during the time loop, before Red Robe erased them from the time loop – the Cyorian web had been a huge obstacle to their operations. As such, they had a multitude of counter-measures and defenses aimed specifically against the aranea. Many of these were abandoned when the local aranea mysteriously disappeared, experts in charge of manning them re-assigned to other, more productive duties... but some of them remained intact. Just in case.

When the aranea moved near the center of the base they seemed to cross some invisible line that immediately triggered a base-wide alarm. It was loud, shrill, and everyone in the base seemed to immediately realize what it meant because they immediately started layering mental protection spells on themselves

and grabbing their weapons.

[Oops?] the aranea closest to Zorian said hesitantly.

[I don't even understand what got us,] another complained. [Human magic is such bullshit...]

Zorian snorted derisively. Well, it wasn't like this was completely unexpected. He reached out with his mind, connecting himself with the network of telepathic relays that had been densely distributed across this entire section of the underworld, and ordered the miniature monster horde he had gathered to attack the base from all directions.

From one of the tunnels, a huge red centipede surged forwards, hordes of hook goblins and cave drakes following after it. The Ibasans concentrated their fire at the centipede first, trying to bring down the biggest threat, only to see most of their spells fizzle out due to the many wards Zorian had attached to it. From another tunnel, a swarm of floating, jellyfish-like monsters came pouring in. They looked slow and weak, but when Ibasans tried to bring them down they discovered that the jellyfish had an innate shielding magic that blocked their projectiles. Worse, the jellyfish could somehow interface with one another and merge their shields into a stronger, unified barrier. From the third tunnel, a horde of phalanx toads came rushing into the base. The Ibasans killed many of them, but there were five more for each they killed and they acted with unusual organization and discipline, spontaneously forming into coherent groups and sweeping everything before them with their spear-like tongues.

Finally, the fourth group of monsters didn't bother moving through any of the existing tunnels – the rock worms Zorian subverted simply burst into the base from down below, having dug out their own entrance into the base.

The whole plan had a high chance of falling apart at this moment, Zorian knew. Although he and the aranea had gutted a lot of

their leadership, they hadn't gotten everyone that could summon Quatach-Ichl. If the Ibasans wanted to call the ancient lich for help, they could. However, Zorian had noticed in the past that Ibasans were generally reluctant to call upon their leader. Quatach-Ichl hated getting called to deal with 'trivial things'. He didn't usually kill people for disappointing him in such a manner, but he *was* rather prone of relieving them of their positions or reducing their salary – which were horrifying enough consequences for most people.

Zorian was hoping that the Ibasans, faced with what appeared to be an aranean attack, would decide to try and tackle things on their own, rather than immediately call Quatach-Ichl to help them.

Well, he seemed to have been right about that. The Ibasans chose to fight the monster invasion on their own. The trouble is, they were *winning*. The centipede was intercepted by trolls and bludgeoned to death with sheer force of numbers, the jelly-fish shield was visibly weakening and the phalanx toads were being pushed back with a liberal application of fire. As for the rock worms, well... the Ibasans had rock worms of their own. Zorian had counted on the monster horde getting defeated, but not this fast. He wasn't done killing the leadership yet, dammit!

He suddenly got a message from his simulacrum that Zach wanted to help out with the assassination.

Well. The plan was already failing, so he supposed there was no harm in letting Zach wreck things for a bit before they abort the whole thing.

As quickly as possible, he synchronized with his simulacrum and opened a gate between the command room and the Ibasan base, letting Zach pass through.

Zach took a rather long look at them battlefield, taking in how the battles were progressing first-hand, and then turned to Zorian.

"Do you know where those leaders are at the moment?"

"Err, sort of?" Zorian said. "I mostly had the aranea pinpointing their location for me, but they're kind of busy directing the monster horde at the moment."

"But you know the general area they're in, right?" Zach prodded.

"Oh yeah," Zorian nodded. He pointed at a big, solidly-constructed building not far from them. "Most of the surviving ones are in that building over there. The wards are pretty tricky so it will take me some time to—"

Before Zorian could finish speaking, Zach had already fired some kind of projectile at the building. It was seemingly tiny, more of a faint red pinprick of light than a proper-looking offensive spell, but its flight path was followed with a piercing scream so loud it made Zorian's ears hurt.

The projectile slammed into the wall of the building and then burst into crescent spatial distortions that sliced through everything in the vicinity with no visible resistance. The whole heavily warded building fell apart like an apple thrown into an industrial blender machine, burying everyone in it under several tons of rubble.

"One problem solved," said Zach, lowering his hand. "What about the others?"

"Well," said Zorian, a little sourly. Only a little, though – truthfully, he had been expecting something like this when he agreed to involve Zach into this. "If the Ibasans didn't already know they're under attack by more than just aranea, they certainly do now. Let's see if we can kill them before they realize just how disgustingly powerful you are and call Quatach-Ichl in panic."

"Let's," Zach agreed.

Deciding there was no point in pretending this attack was just a minor aranean offensive anymore, Zorian sent a telepathic message to Xvim and Alanic to start the assault in earnest.

He received a confirmation almost immediately. It seemed Zach wasn't the only one who was spoiling for a fight.

Zorian understood. They had all spent so much time and resources into organizing this attack, it would be almost a crime to call it off now.

It was time for Ibasans to see what it's like to be suddenly invaded.



Beneath the city of Cyoria, a vicious battle was underway. The small army that Alanic had assembled, bolstered by the various mercenaries, Zorian's golems and what was left of the dominated monster horde, advanced deep into the disorganized Ibasan ranks. However, the Ibasans weren't just passive victims. Despite having their entire high-ranking leadership gutted by Zach and Zorian, despite the huge losses they suffered in the initial attack from the monster horde, despite the shock they must have felt at the appearance of another human army, the Ibasans still resisted the attack with considerable might. Their top leadership may have fallen, but local commanders quickly assumed control of the remaining forces and did their best to link up and coordinate their movements. Huge war golems charged into rapidly-forming defense groups, aiming to break them up, only to be met with screaming hordes of war trolls barring their way. The aranea led the remaining monsters into suicidal offensives, only to be countered with equally suicidal delaying actions from the Ibasans' own war beasts. Zach and Zorian converged on any local commander that seemed to be especially good at their job, aided by a couple of Alanic's men that seemed to be really accurate with a rifle and fond of headshots, but there was always someone willing and capable of replacing them once they moved on to other targets.

Currently, Zorian's simulacrum was standing in the vicinity of the dimensional gate at the center of the Ibasan settlement, where Xvim and Alanic had moved shortly after the attack began. Unfortunately, the gate had been shut down by the Ibasans when they realized they were going to lose it – another thing that didn't go according to plan. Even if they managed to win this, a powered down gate stabilization frame was much less useful as an object of study than a working dimensional gate.

"We should have brought more monsters," Alanic said suddenly, standing not far from the simulacrum and observing the battlefield. "We should have brought more everything, really, but I don't think we could have realistically recruited more people. We're doing very well compared to the numbers arrayed against us, but it's not enough. There are simply too few of us compared to the number of Ibasans gathered here."

"We were afraid that if we sent too many monsters, it would spook them into calling Quatach-Ichl immediately," the simulacrum pointed out. "Though considering how successful they were against the horde, I agree we were probably too conservative with them."

"Speaking of which, did Zach and Zorian manage to eliminate the Ibasan leaders before they contacted Quatach-Ichl for help or not?" Xvim asked.

The simulacrum quickly contacted the original and asked him that same question. Ten seconds later he turned back to Xvim.

"It's doubtful," he said, shaking his head. "They had trouble locating the last two leaders. They're dead now, but they had plenty of time to realize how dire the situation is and call for help."

Xvim said nothing for a second, looking thoughtfully at the powered-down gate next to them.

"We shouldn't have taken the gate from them so quickly," Xvim said. "We should have left it in their hands for a while to

give them an avenue of retreat. I think they would have tried to fall back into that undead mansion instead of fighting a lost battle if they had a choice."

"Or they might have found a way to commandeer some of Sudomir's undead minions if given enough time, making our current issue even worse," the simulacrum said with a shrug.

"We'll analyze what we did wrong later," said Alanic firmly. "What we need now is solutions. How do we salvage this situation?"

"Shouldn't we just retreat?" asked Xvim curiously. "Even if we take the base in the end, it will take us many hours to do so and cost many lives. On top of that, there is a high chance that Quatach-Ichl will come back before we are done and tip the balance in Ibasan favor."

Alanic said nothing for a few seconds, clearly discontent with that idea.

"I have an idea," the simulacrum eventually said. "Why don't we just rip the gate stabilization frame out of the ground, pedestal and all, and carry it off to the surface for study. I mean, the original reason why we wanted to secure the base and do our research here was because moving an active dimensional gate was impossible. But we don't have an active gate. We have an inert stabilization frame, so what stops us from simply carrying it off somewhere else before trying to figure it out?"

Xvim and Alanic gave him surprised looks.

"What?" the simulacrum asked defensively. "The idea has merit!"

"It does," Alanic agreed. "I was just surprised to see *you* make such a suggestion. Sometimes I forget simulacrums like you are more than just extensions of Zorian and can have ideas of your own."

"Same," Xvim agreed.

The simulacrum scowled. Stupid flesh-and-blood people and their prejudices.

Soon, Xvim and Alanic ordered their forces to fall back a little and threw themselves into the task of cutting the gate stabilization frame free of the ground without damaging something crucial. The pedestal the frame was affixed to had some kind of root-like structure that extended into the rock beneath it, meaning that a surprisingly large chunk of the ground had to be taken along with the gate itself.

None of the problems were in any way insurmountable, though, and the whole thing was soon floated into the air and slowly pushed towards one of the base exits.

The movement did not go unnoticed, however, and when the Ibasans saw what they were doing they went completely berserk. Apparently they really hated the idea of the gate stabilization frame being carried away like that. From that moment on, the whole battle shifted in tone – instead of trying to minimize their losses and stalling for time, the Ibasans suddenly surged forward and tried to recover the stolen gate at all costs. Alanic's forces shifted from trying to put pressure on the Ibasans to a strictly defensive posture, trying to keep the Ibasans away from the retreating gate with equal zeal.

The situation only grew more dire soon after that, as Ibasans realized that recovering the gate is a lost cause and started trying to destroy it instead.

"Why are they so upset about us taking the gate!?" Zach shouted while creating a thick prismatic wall in between the floating gate stabilization frame and the approaching Ibasan war party.

He was just in time. The moment the barrier snapped into place, three different projectiles slammed into it – a thin blue javelin of force that crackled with some kind of magical energy,

an animated serpent made out of green fire and a large white sphere that had smaller red spheres orbiting around it. The wall flickered, cycling through different colors, and for a moment it seemed it would hold... but then the three projectiles combined together to release some kind of combined pulse that disrupted the barrier and it fell apart into multi-colored smoke.

The fire serpent, the only survivor of this clash of spells, surged madly towards the floating gate, seeking to detonate itself against its surface. It never reached it. A milky white sphere soon hit it in the flank, courtesy of Zorian, causing it to fall apart into rapidly fading clusters of green fire.

"They're afraid of what Quatach-Ichl will do to them when he finds out they let someone acquire a sample of his work," Zorian said. The simulacrum suspected the original had taken said information straight from the minds of nearby Ibasans. "He doesn't even let his allies examine it. How do you think he would feel about this?"

The battle raged on. The simulacrum watched, rather discontent, as people fought all around him to either destroy or preserve the floating gate. He couldn't do much himself, as any significant mana use would cripple the original's ability to fight, so he was reduced to a role of observer for the most part. He watched the battle carefully, scrutinizing every detail in hopes of spotting something that required his attention.

The Ibasans charged forward again and again, supported by long-range spells from their allies in the back ranks, only to be repulsed. Zorian's golems slowly dwindled in number, the volume of spell fire too much even for their heavy wards to handle. When they grew too damaged to be of much use, Zorian strapped alchemical bombs all over them and sent them into suicide charges to halt particularly troublesome offensives. Zach's spells reaped a bloody toll on Ibasan forces, but not even his mana reserves were endless

and the time he spent in recovery gradually increased as the battle grew more heated. One of the Ibasan mages decided to sacrifice his life for the cause – as he finished casting his last spell, he removed a ritual dagger from his belt and slit his own throat, using some blood magic to pour every shred of his life-force into it. The resulting spell produced an incandescent meteor that punched through every single obstacle in front of it, and would have no doubt reduced the floating gate into molten rubble if Xvim hadn't used a series of dimensional gates to redirect it back at the Ibasans.

Finally, the simulacrum noticed something he felt merited his attention. On the edges of the main battlefield, a small group of friendly soldiers was being overwhelmed. Of the original fifteen, most were already dead. Only six still lived, and only three of those six could walk and fight properly. The simulacrum telepathically alerted the original to the situation, but was told everyone was currently busy and that sacrifices have to be made in situations like these.

The simulacrum then pointed out to him that one of the survivors was Taiven. The original immediately changed his mind and told the simulacrum to go and help them.

The simulacrum wouldn't have actually obeyed an order to leave Taiven to her fate, but it was nice that he and the original were still on the same page in this regard. He teleported next to the group and immediately intercepted an incoming fireball with a well-placed dispelling wave. Taiven's shocked face was kind of priceless.

"What are you waiting for?" the simulacrum asked the group. One of the Ibasans tried to sneak up on them by kicking up a cloud of dust with a 'misaimed' spell and using it as a cover for his approach. He received a force lance to the face for his trouble. "This position is lost. Why haven't you regrouped elsewhere?"

"We can't leave them!" Taiven protested, pointing at the three

wounded soldiers next to her.

"I told you to leave us here," one of the wounded soldiers said. "Just go. We'll stall them to buy you some time."

"We're not leaving anyone behind!" Taiven insisted.

The other two healthy soldiers said nothing, but the simulacrum could see on their faces that they didn't want to leave the wounded soldiers behind either. They were probably friends.

"How about this – you go and take these people to safety, and *I'll* hold the Ibasans at bay?" the simulacrum offered.

"Zorian..." Taiven started, sounding both a little annoyed and a little worried.

The simulacrum wasn't listening to her anymore, though. He could feel the Ibasans moving towards the group again so he conjured two large severing discs above his palms and launched them forward in front of him. The first wave of Ibasans literally fell apart before the discs, screaming horribly as they were effortlessly sliced apart by the two buzzing spell constructs. The commander of the Ibasan group tried to restore order to his unit, shouting orders and threats so loudly the entire base must have heard him. He fell silent when his own bodyguard slammed a knife in his eye socket, killing him instantly. The apparent betrayal (which was actually the result of Zorian puppeteering the man's body, not genuine betrayal) further sowed chaos in the Ibasan group, stalling the attack.

The simulacrum then shifted his attention back to Taiven and her group, only to find the soldiers gone but Taiven still present.

"Let me guess," the simulacrum sighed. "You sent the rest of them to safety but decided to stay behind with me?"

"I told you," she said. "We're not leaving anyone behind."

In retrospect, he really should have made it clear he was a simulacrum right from the start.

"Listen," he started. "I'm actually–"

[Stupid simulacrum!] the original's voice thundered in his mind. [What the hell are you doing down there!? The rest of the soldiers are back but you and Taiven aren't? Stop fooling around and spending all our mana, dammit! I need that to defend the gate!]

The simulacrum winced at the angry tirade in his head. The interruption left him confused for a second, unable to remember what he was doing right before the original contacted him.

He was further distracted when another volley of spells erupted towards the two of them, roughly half of it directed at him and the other half at Taiven. Taiven blocked her share of projectiles easily enough, and the simulacrum was just about to do the same for himself when he felt his mana reserves rapidly drain away. Apparently the original had decided to blow his entire mana reserves on something, leaving them both defenseless for a while.

"Damn it, original," the simulacrum quietly grumbled.

Then the spell volley hit him, tearing straight into him and blowing his ectoplasmic form into rapidly fading pieces.

As his tattered remains started to unravel, he spared one last look at Taiven, who was looking at him with an absolutely horrified look on her face.

Only then did he remember what he had been trying to tell her before the original contacted him.

His last fading thought was that he really, *really* should have made it clear that he was just a simulacrum right from the start...



In the end, they managed to extract the gate stabilization frame out of the Ibasan base safe and intact. The frenzied attempts of the Ibasan forces to stop them had petered out after a while, the

surviving soldiers retreating back to their base and allowing them to withdraw in peace. The forces assembled by Alanic and Zorian had paid a heavy price for this success, however, being cut nearly in half by the end.

Only time would tell if the researchers Xvim gathered would find out anything useful about the recovered gate stabilization frame.

As they suspected, Quatach-Ichl showed up not long after they finished their retreat, having received a call for help at some point in the fight. Zach and Zorian had been on edge for a few days after this, expecting the Ibasans to launch a premature invasion of Cyoria, much like they had in that one restart where Zorian prodded Eldemar into attacking Iasku Mansion... but what happened instead is that the remaining Ibasans started to withdraw from Cyoria entirely.

The invasion, it seemed, was being canceled.

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

After the attack on the Ibasan base had been concluded and it became obvious that no immediate invasion would result from it, Zorian proceeded to re-establish his link to Koth. Since he had dismissed his simulacrum in Koth before the attack, he had to rely on Daimen's help for the second time in the restart. Although it kind of bothered him that he was forced to rely on Daimen so much, he had to admit his help made things a lot easier than they would have otherwise been.

He didn't expect any problems to crop up and, in a way, there really hadn't been any. The dimensional gate opened just fine, after all. The problem was that it opened directly inside the Taramatula estate. Instead of finding some out-of-the-way location in the jungle, like they had agreed on beforehand, Daimen had decided to simply open the gate inside a heavily warded room meant for receiving teleporting visitors. While a dozen or so Taramatula family members stood around the edges of the room and watched.

Zorian, who had stepped through the gate first, was so shocked at the sight that he immediately halted in his tracks. This caused Zach, who was coming right behind him, to crash into him. Thankfully, they managed to keep their balance instead of falling to the floor in a tangle of limbs. That would have been awkward.

"Hey, why did you sto— Oh. That's a lot bigger reception than I was expecting," Zach said, looking around.

Zorian didn't bother responding to Zach's feeble attempt at humor. Instead, he zeroed in on his older brother and gave him an outraged glare. "Daimen, what the hell were you thinking!?"

To his credit, Daimen actually winced at the question, looking properly guilty.

"I'm sorry," he said, waving his hands in front of him in a placating gesture. "I didn't have a choice, okay? I can't leave the Taramatula estate anymore and I couldn't just open a dimensional gate in their home without their knowledge or consent. It was either this or aborting the whole thing entirely."

Zach and Zorian were quiet for a second, processing that statement.

"Why can't you leave the Taramatula estate?" Zach finally asked. "Are you a prisoner or something?"

"It's complicated," Daimen said with a heavy sigh. "Let's go find somewhere quiet to talk."

Before either Zach or Zorian could say anything, one of the gathered Taramatula decided to cut in and make a suggestion. It was Ulanna, the woman who had greeted them the first time they had visited the estate.

"I know just the place," Ulanna said. "For a family of our stature, not having an appropriate meeting room for occasions such as these would be quite an embarrassment. Please wait a minute while I make some arrangements and then we can go."

Zorian gave Ulanna a thoughtful look. Though her words made it seem she was just trying to be a good host, he could understand the underlying message easily enough: the Taramatula were an involved party in all this, and they wanted to be present during the talk.

Ulanna raised an eyebrow at his look, as if daring him to object. He didn't.

"That's quite all right," he simply said. "Me and Zach will go collapse the gate while you deal with things on your end."

Zorian had no idea what Daimen had told the Taramatula about the gate. Hopefully he hadn't been foolish enough to reveal that he and Zorian were opening passages between two different continents, in which case it was imperative that they close the gate quickly, before they could puzzle out the truth for themselves.

As he and Zach worked to collapse the gate, he could hear Ulanna conversing with some of the other Taramatula in the room. His grasp on the local language was still very poor, so the only thing he understood was that she ordered food and drink to be made and brought to them. Zorian was in no mood for either, but he figured out it would be impolite to try and stop her.

A little while later, they were all ushered into a relatively small but luxurious room. There were five of them present: Ulanna, Daimen, Orissa, Zach and Zorian. Despite the presence of Ulanna and Orissa, though, it was Daimen that provided most of the explanation for what was happening. Apparently, one or more members of Daimen's team had talked to outsiders about the orb they had found, and the story had blown up *very* quickly. Within hours, everyone and their mother wanted to speak to Daimen to find out what he intended to do with the orb and to try and influence him to sell it to whatever group they represented.

Caught off guard by the sudden flood of interested buyers and aware that not everyone was willing to take their refusal to sell the orb in good grace, Daimen and his team retreated to the Taramatula estate and barricaded themselves there until further notice.

"The people after us can't afford to be too brazen with the Taramatula, so we're safe while we remain inside the estate," Daimen concluded. "But the moment we step out we'll be ambushed by

dozens of different groups. They know we're in here. They have the estate heavily monitored. Everyone and everything going in or out of the estate is closely tracked. I couldn't possibly leave the estate to open the gate elsewhere."

"Maybe I'm just stupid, but why don't the Taramatula simply tell all these people to back off? They're supposed to be the main political force here, no?" Zach asked.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," Ulanna said. "There are too many powerful groups making their moves here, quite a few of them from outside our sphere of influence. Though they cannot afford to take us lightly, the same is true for us as well. This is a sensitive situation and we have to move carefully. Rest assured, though, that we are taking note of every slight against us for when the time is right."

"Another issue is that some elements of the local government are discussing the possibility of simply confiscating the orb from us by force," Daimen said. "The Taramatula have to spend a lot of their influence on making sure that the initiative doesn't get anywhere. Damn it, I knew it was important to keep this find a secret but I had no idea it would inspire *this* sort of greed..."

"It's a portable pocket dimension of massive size," Orissa pointed out. "On top of that, it contains ruins from the Age of Gods, and probably the remains of Awan-Temti's wealth. There could be divine artifacts in there, plants and animals that have gone extinct in the rest of the world, anything. Of course it inspires so much greed. You're fortunate you have the Taramatula family to shield you from all this while we figure out what to do."

"Yes, yes, I get it," Daimen said patiently. "I'm lucky to have you, dear."

"Have you made any trips to the pocket dimension yet?" Zach asked curiously.

"We haven't even discovered how to deploy the orb," Daimen

said, shaking his head. "We don't have a command marker like Zorian does, so we have to do things the hard way."

"Meaning?" Zach prodded for details.

"We have to reverse-engineer the control spells that are used for operating the orb," Daimen said. "A generational treasure like this one would definitely have a method of controlling the orb without a command marker, as a safety measure if nothing else. We just have to find it. Unfortunately, that could take a while."

Daimen gave Zorian a meaningful look. Though Zorian didn't know for sure what he was trying to tell him, he could guess. While finding a way to operate the orb without a marker was not a priority for him and Zach, it would mean a lot for Daimen. He was probably well aware that Zorian had no intention whatsoever of revealing his abilities to Daimen outside the time loop, which would make those control spells absolutely crucial to his mission. Without them, even removing the orb from its resting place would be impossible, greatly complicating everything.

"Even if we had the means of operating the orb, we would still refrain from sending an expedition to its interior at this time," Orissa noted. "The possibility of further guardian beasts, like that god-touched hydra, is too high. Months of preparation would be required to mount a proper expedition, and the current political situation makes such preparations impossible."

"Yes, exactly," Daimen quickly agreed. He turned to Zach and Zorian. "And because I'm stuck here all the time, I can't really hire the experts I need to figure out how to operate the orb, either. The truth is that I have very little to do here. I was thinking it might be a good idea for me to disappear for a few days. Get the orb away from covetous eyes and talk to some old friends about my options."

"This again," Orissa said with an unhappy frown.

This sparked a brief argument between Orissa and Daimen, since Daimen didn't want to explain what exactly he was up to

and Orissa insisted that she had every right to know the details. In all honesty, Zorian thought Orissa's position was quite reasonable and empathized with her frustration at Daimen's evasiveness. However, he also couldn't fault Daimen for this, since it wasn't like he could just openly say that—

"If you want us to take you back to Cyoria with us when we reopen the gate, you should just say so," Zach said.

Everyone sent him a shocked look. Well, everyone except Zorian — he just buried his face in his hands and tried to take deep breaths.

"Damn it, Zach..." he mumbled into his hands.

"What?" Zach protested, giving Zorian an exasperated look. "Any story you and Daimen cook up wouldn't last a day and you know it. They're not *stupid*. They'd figure it out soon enough."

"Thank you, mister Noveda," Ulanna told him. "I'm glad that at least one man here respects our reasoning skills."

Zach gave her a thumbs-up and a sunny grin.

"You're saying you opened a dimensional passage here all the way from Eldemar?" Orissa asked, sounding just a little bit incredulous.

"We do a lot of crazy stuff," Zach said with a careless shrug.

It turned out that neither Ulanna nor Orissa were very familiar with the details of how the gate spell works. This wasn't very surprising, as the spell was extremely rare, but somehow Zorian kept forgetting little details like that.

After Zorian gave them a brief explanation of how the gate spell functioned, Orissa gave him a strange look.

"What?" Zorian asked, feeling somewhat self-conscious.

"This method you use to ignore distance limitations requires another person helping you on the other side, yes?" she asked. Zorian nodded wordlessly. "Then how can you open a gate back to Eldemar? Can the third Kazinski brother cast the gate spell, too?"

"What, Fortov? Please," Zorian scoffed. "He'll be lucky not to flunk out of the academy."

"Zorian!" Daimen protested. He never liked it when Zorian badmouthed the rest of the family.

"No, we'll be using the simulacrum I left back in Cyoria," Zorian said, completely ignoring Daimen's outburst. "Since I can cast the gate spell, my simulacrum can obviously do the same."

"Oh, so you can create a simulacrum too?" Ulanna asked casually, not sounding particularly surprised. Zorian had to hand it to her, she was *very* good at projecting an aura of serene confidence. Orissa seemed to be trying to mimic that attitude, but she was nowhere near good enough to pull it off. One could see that these kind of reveals bothered her and put her somewhat off-balance.

"We do a lot of crazy stuff," Zorian said. He thought about mimicking Zach completely and giving her a thumbs-up and a cheeky smile, but quickly dropped the idea. That sort of thing was something only Zach could pull off without looking like a total idiot.

In the end, they managed to hammer out an agreement. Daimen would return to Cyoria with Zach and Zorian and would take the orb of the first emperor along with him. Zorian would leave a simulacrum in the Taramatula estate so that they could return via gate spell in exactly four days.

Zorian thought this would be the end of it, but his hopes were ruthlessly squashed when Daimen told him he still had to explain to his team that he would be away for a while.

For a moment, Zorian felt the urge to make an overdramatic gesture to the uncaring heavens. And here he'd thought this would just be a short visit to Koth, consisting of little more than replacing his lost simulacrum and asking Daimen if he had found out anything new about the orb.

Sometimes he just couldn't win.



It was a massive relief to Zorian when the three of them finally stepped through the gate and returned to Cyoria. Both the Taramatula and Daimen's team were on edge right now, and thus rather exasperating to deal with. He kind of felt bad for his simulacrum, who would be stuck with them for the next several days. Oh well, at least he had Kirma and Torun to talk to – those two were fairly interesting and he suspected he might be able to broker some kind of trade with at least one of them.

Regardless, he was back and could devote himself to other matters. Xvim's efforts to convince various experts to trade their secrets with him had been reasonably successful, Sudomir had to be properly interrogated, the efforts of the researchers to understand the Ibasan gate stabilization frame were starting to bear fruit and the Silent Doorway Adepts were hinting that they were willing to send a group over to Koth to acquire a gate key. Sadly, recent events concerning Daimen and the orb had probably made that last idea a dead end in this restart. His simulacrum couldn't possibly leave the Taramatula estate without a hundred pairs of eyes following his every move. Unfortunate. He could really use an alternate entrance to Koth that didn't rely on Daimen right now. He would have to assign a high priority to this idea in future restarts.

Daimen had agreed to hand over the orb to him and Zach while he was in Cyoria. Partially because he figured they could find out far more about it than he could, due to possessing a marker that could actually operate it, and partially because he wasn't entirely sure the orb would be safe in his possession. News traveled faster than people. By all rights, his little trip to Cyoria should have gone undetected by his pursuers, but he couldn't be completely sure.

Thus, he felt it was for the best if he didn't have the orb on him unless absolutely necessary.

Zorian expected that he would be the only one that could tinker with the orb to discover its secrets, since Zach didn't have the necessary personal soul awareness to control his marker. He was very much wrong. Apparently, Zach didn't *need* to have conscious control over his marker to take command of the orb. After an hour or so of tinkering with the orb, Zach managed to connect to it instinctively.

And after that one success, he no longer needed an hour of tinkering to connect to again. Simply touching the orb would be enough to re-establish contact. Zach didn't even have to concentrate on it to pull it off – a touch and a stray thought were enough.

Zorian was a little sour about that. The orb certainly never reacted that way to him, no matter how many hours he spent interacting with it. No, he had to spend months going through that hellish soul awareness training and then more time painstakingly studying the way the marker worked to get as far as he did. This sort of stuff really made it obvious that his marker was some kind of inferior version of the one on Zach.

It had been only a day since they were back in Cyoria when Daimen surprised him again. He wanted to talk to Kirielle and Fortov.

This was a bit of a problem. Both of their siblings knew for a fact that Daimen shouldn't be in Cyoria. Mother and Father had gone to Koth to meet with him. How on earth did he intend to explain his presence here? But Daimen insisted that he needed to do this, and Zorian didn't feel like arguing with him. There was probably no great harm in it, and he was pretty sure that Daimen would go and have those conversations behind his back if he was too stubborn.

Amusingly, Daimen wanted to talk to Kirielle and Fortov

alone, without anyone else being present. Zorian was almost certain that meant he wanted to ask them specifically about Zorian. Hah! Fortov didn't know anything about Zorian, and Kirielle was a little tattletale and would no doubt tell Zorian everything that she and Daimen talked about. But he told Daimen none of that and simply wished him luck before sending him on his way.

The next day, Daimen came back to talk to him, looking lost and confused.

"They didn't even want to talk to me..." he complained, sounding quite dejected. It actually made Zorian feel bad for him somewhat.

"Come on, it's not that bad," Zorian comforted him. "I don't know about Fortov, but I'm pretty sure Kirielle wouldn't have snubbed you like that. Ima ya tells me you spent an entire hour with her."

"Yeah, but that's all I did with her," Daimen complained. "She spent the entire hour fidgeting and looking uncomfortable. She barely spoke, and only when I specifically prodded her. I'm not entirely sure, but I think she was actually a little scared of me. That's..."

Daimen waved his hands in the air, as if trying to convey some kind of unpronounceable concept through silent gesticulation.

"Sad?" Zorian offered.

"Sure, let's go with that," Daimen said. "Also worrying. And upsetting. And a whole host of other things. Especially when coupled with what happened with Fortov. Do you know what happened when I knocked on his door?"

"Not really, no," Zorian told him. He had actually known about Daimen's 'talk' with Kirielle, since she had told him all about it when he had come to Ima ya's place in the evening, but he honestly had no idea how Daimen's talk with Fortov had gone. Not well,

obviously, but it would be interesting to hear *why*. "What did he do?"

"He was just really abrasive to me right from the start," Daimen said. "He refused to even let me in, eventually started shouting at me and then slammed the door in my face and ignored me."

Huh. Interesting.

Daimen looked at Zorian, silently asking him for an explanation. Zorian said nothing, though, and Daimen grew visibly frustrated as seconds ticked by. He ran both of his hands through his hair and clutched it tightly in his fists, as if wanting to tear it off.

"You're going to go prematurely bald if you keep doing that," Zorian commented lightly.

Daimen gave him an unamused glare.

But he did remove his hands from his head.

"I don't understand!" Daimen protested loudly. "Am I... Am I such a horrible older brother? I knew *you* didn't like me, but even Fortov? Even little Kirielle?! Why?! What did I *do*!?"

Zorian clacked his tongue and considered things for a second. On one hand, he felt that Daimen was getting exactly what he deserved. On the other hand, the fact that Daimen was so upset over this meant that his mental image of him was little... unfair. He decided to be a little nice to his older brother for a change.

"In regards to Kirielle, the answer is simple, my dear eldest brother," Zorian told him. "You're practically a stranger to her. By the time she was old enough to interact with people, you were practically never at home. When was the last time you talked with her? Disregarding yesterday's meeting, of course."

"Uhh..." Daimen fumbled.

"You can't even remember," Zorian stated, shaking his head. "Anyway, all she had of you were stories she heard of you. Most of which came either from Mother... or from me. After all, I'm one of the people who interacted with her the most over the years."

"Oh, heavens help me," Daimen lamented. "What exactly did you tell her about me?"

"The truth," Zorian shrugged.

"You mean *your* truth," Daimen accused.

"Of course," Zorian responded, completely unmoved by the accusation. "But don't worry, I kept quiet about your worst excesses. Truth be told, I never liked talking about you to *anyone*, and that included Kirielle. And besides, Mother never failed to take your side in everything. If it were just the matter of stories, Kirielle would be more ambivalent to you. The thing is, she needs help... and she knows she'll never get it from you. She just *might* get it from me, though, which is why she doesn't want to sabotage her relations with me by getting cozy with you. She knows you kind of piss me off."

"What do you mean 'she needs help'?" Daimen frowned. "And why are you so sure she'd never get it from me?"

"Because it would require standing up to Mother," Zorian said.

Over the next hour or so, Zorian tried to familiarize Daimen with Kirielle's situation. The arranged marriage their parents had prepared for her. Her desire to learn magic like the rest of them. He tried to keep the explanations brief, worried that telling this to Daimen constituted some kind of betrayal towards Kirielle, who had told him these things in confidence. He said enough for Daimen to form a rudimentary picture of what was happening with Kirielle behind the scenes, though.

"I can't believe I never heard of this," Daimen said, his eyes somewhat unfocused as he seemed to recall something in his head. "I speak to Mother and Father often and they never mentioned this."

"Did you ever actually ask them about Kirielle?" Zorian asked. Daimen was quiet for a few moments.

"...no," he eventually admitted.

"Well, there you go," Zorian shrugged.

Daimen exhaled heavily and then corrected his posture, sitting a little straighter in his chair.

"Okay, I admit I haven't been very fair to our little sister. I guess I kind of deserved such a chilly reception from her," Daimen said. "What about Fortov, then? What's his deal?"

"How would I know?" Zorian protested. "Do you honestly think I speak to Fortov about you?"

Daimen gave him an annoyed huff. "Yes, I get it, I get it – you never talk about me to anyone if you can help it. But surely you have some inkling about how Fortov thinks and what bothers him. You've been interacting with him for six years now."

Zorian made a weird face, momentarily struck speechless by this statement.

"What?" Zorian laughed. "Whatever gave you *that* idea? Why would I be interacting with Fortov?"

"Are... Are you serious?" Daimen asked incredulously. Zorian stared at him. "He's your brother. You live in the same city. You can visit him anytime you want."

"So?" Zorian asked, inclining his head uncomprehendingly.

"Are you honestly telling me that in all these years, you haven't seriously talked to our brother even once?" Daimen asked. His tone was pleading, as if begging Zorian to tell him he's wrong.

"That's what I'm saying, yes," Zorian nodded. "Why would Daimen expect anything else from him?"

"Doesn't the restart end in a massive invasion?" Daimen frowned. Zorian nodded again. "What does Fortov do during the invasion?"

"Presumably he reaches the academy shelters and spends the night there, along with the other students," Zorian shrugged.

Admittedly, the shelters hadn't been very safe during the one occasion he had actually experienced them, but that was when Red

Robe had actively been helping the invaders by feeding them information. Without his help, the shelters were actually pretty safe.

"Presumably? You never checked?" Daimen asked. Zorian shook his head in denial. "Zorian, for heaven's sake..."

"I don't see why you're so surprised by this," Zorian told him honestly. "Fortov is my second least-favorite person in the whole family, right after Father. Of course I never bothered to check up on him."

Daimen opened his mouth, as if he wanted to continue that argument, but then just shook his head and gave up.

"Nevermind," Daimen sighed. "Did you have *any* interactions with him during all this time?"

"Actually, yes," Zorian said. "He pushes this one girl into a purple creeper patch near the end of every restart and then comes to me to beg for a healing salve. I used to just avoid being home whenever he comes, but these days it's not even necessary. He never comes to find me if I stay at Imaya's place."

"He pushes this girl into a purple creeper patch regardless of what you change in a restart?" Daimen said, frowning.

"As far as I can tell, yes," Zorian confirmed. "The girl has a huge crush on him, if that means anything to you."

Daimen made a thoughtful hum. "It's better than nothing, I guess. But really Zorian, must you be so petty and callous? I know you and Fortov didn't get along as kids, but this sort of attitude is a little too much. You nurse your grudges way too deeply."

"It's easy for you to call for peace and understanding," Zorian said, folding his arms over his chest defiantly. "It's not you who had to deal with Fortov's crappy attitude over the years."

"All I'm saying is that maybe you should give him a chance," Daimen said. "Like you did with Kirielle when you decided to take her with you to Cyoria. If you were wrong about her, who's to say you weren't wrong about Fortov as well?"

"But I wasn't really wrong about her," Zorian pointed out. "I didn't want her around because I felt she was a selfish little blabbermouth that would distract me from my studies and tattle on me when she returns to Mother. That's all still true, it's just that I no longer care about that. Provided I actually manage to find a way out of this time loop, my future is set. I can afford a distraction or two, and Kirielle running off and revealing my plans and activities to Mother is irrelevant because our parents can't stop me anymore. I'm so skilled and powerful that I can do whatever I want, Mother and Father be damned."

Somewhat surprisingly, Daimen didn't grow even more frustrated at this response, like Zorian thought he would. Instead he just gave him a sad smile and shook his head ruefully.

"Mother and Father are so concerned about me making a mistake that they're rushing over to Koth even as we speak to talk me out of my marriage to Orissa, but they fail to notice a crisis developing right in front of them," he said. "We really are one messed up family, aren't we? And the terrifying thing in all this is that I will forget all about this very soon, won't I? After the summer festival, it will be as if none of this ever happened. That's so unfair. How the hell can I fix a problem if I have no memory of its existence?"

"I don't think you could fix our family, even if you had all the time in the world," Zorian told him. "But yes, the reality of the time loop is rather soul crushing if one really thinks about it. You're dealing with this pretty well, all things considered."

"It's mostly because I have avoided thinking about it too deeply, I think," Daimen said. "Now that we're getting closer to the time limit, I find my thoughts wandering towards it more and more. Especially since I've done so much in these last few weeks. I've realized so many things. Important things. It's frightening and infuriating to realize I must lose it all."

"Well, I'm sure you've heard about the notebooks I'm trans-

ferring between restarts for various people," Zorian noted. "If it's really so important, you can just write it down and hand it to me for safekeeping."

"Oh?" Daimen smiled. "So I actually qualify for that prestigious service? I must say, the way you've been talking about our family, I was starting to get a little worried. What if you intended to just forget about me in all future restarts? You already know how to find the orb, after all, and I know you aren't exactly a big fan of me..."

Zorian gave him a mildly uncomfortable look. He *had* been thinking of something like that. Though his eldest brother would surely be useful in tracking down and recovering the rest of the pieces of the Key, it bothered Zorian a great deal to rely on Daimen for anything. It just... *felt* wrong. Convincing Daimen to help them was a time consuming task, too, so was it really worth the time to include him in their efforts?

In the end he realized he was just looking for excuses. They needed the help that Daimen could provide. If nothing else, it wasn't very fair to Zach to sabotage their chances of getting out of the time loop just because he had a problem with Daimen.

Plus, the truth was...

"I was wrong about you, okay?" Zorian said with a heavy sigh. "I still think you're very annoying, but... you're not as bad as the Daimen that lived inside my head."

It hurt him to say it, but it was the truth. Maybe Daimen had changed after he had moved out of the house and stopped interacting with Zorian or maybe Zorian's image of him had never been all that reliable to begin with. Whatever the truth, this Daimen was more helpful and reasonable than the dark giant that had loomed over him in the past.

"I'm not sure if I'd call it wrong, exactly. Regardless of their reasons, the other two siblings don't like me much either. I'm clearly

an abject failure as an older brother. It's a sobering realization," Daimen mused. After a second of silence, he shook his head as if to clear it up. "But enough of depressing topics like that. You mentioned the notebooks you're carrying across restarts for Xvim and the others. As it happens, I've taken the time to talk with Xvim yesterday. He told me about the trade deals you two are trying to set up with various experts."

"Yes, it's honestly one of my better ideas," Zorian nodded. "It's already showing results and there is every indication we can do even better in future restarts. I don't think every single one of those experts will agree to a trade in the end, but quite a few are clearly open to the idea if approached by someone they actually respect. Are you thinking of helping Xvim convince people?"

"No," Daimen shook his head. "I'll be pleased to help if Xvim asks for it, but my involvement could easily turn the initiative into an unmitigated disaster. You probably think of my fame as purely beneficial, but the truth is it causes many mages to view me as a threat. A lot of them would never trade anything with me. Why do you think I never learned how to cast the Gate spell before you came along?"

"I see," Zorian said thoughtfully. "If not that, though, why *did* you mention Xvim's efforts?"

"Well..." began Daimen. "Gathering secret knowledge from Altazia's many experts is a commendable initiative, but it is hard work and it will likely only provide incremental improvement to your capabilities."

"True," Zorian said. "But what's the alternative? All the low-hanging fruit has already been plucked."

"Not necessarily," Daimen said with a grin. "What is and is not low-hanging fruit depends on a person's abilities, and you have something that few other people do – an ability to traverse between continents with ease."

Zorian thought about it for a second and then motioned for Daimen to continue. He didn't quite see what he was getting at.

"What I'm saying is that Koth would be a good place to extend your magic gathering initiative," Daimen continued. "Unlike Xlotic, which is relatively well-connected to Altazia due to the existence of the teleport network, Koth is quite remote. Despite that, they use the same basic magic system that we do, unlike Hsan. This makes them a great place to find unexpected spell combinations and novel alchemy. Who knows what kind of... low-hanging fruit can be obtained by combining our magical traditions with those of Koth?"

Zorian raised his eyebrow at his eldest brother. Daimen looked quite animated as he spoke of the idea.

"And I suppose you're volunteering to run this sort of initiative?" Zorian asked.

"Ha ha..." Daimen laughed nervously. "To be perfectly honest, doing this was one of my objectives in coming to Koth. I was in the process of laying the groundwork for it even before the time loop started."

"Well... that's great then," Zorian told him honestly. "I don't see an issue with the idea, then."

"Great!" Daimen said, giving him a sunny smile reminiscent of Zach. "It's just that this time loop came too soon and not all of the preparations were complete. I may need a tiny, tiny loan from my dearest brother to start things up..."



A few days later, Daimen was returned to Koth. The orb was left in Cyoria, since Daimen figured it was safer that way and because Zach had really taken a liking to it. Busy as he was with other things, Zorian decided to delegate all orb-related tinkering to Zach.

Considering how much more strongly the orb reacted to him, Zach may be in a better position to uncover its secrets anyway.

Today, though, Zorian had received a somewhat unusual request: Taiven wanted to talk to him. In private.

Normally such a request wouldn't be particularly notable, but Zorian had actually not seen or heard from Taiven at all ever since their attack on the Ibasan base. If it were not for Alanic's assurances that she had survived the battle in perfect health, Zorian would have been honestly worried for her. As it was, it was obvious she had been avoiding him for some reason. He had actually thought about tracking her down to ask what was happening, but the end of the restart was approaching and so many things were vying for his time and attention...

No matter. Since she'd reached out to him all of a sudden, he would presumably find out what was bothering her quite soon.

When they met he offered to teleport them to some empty, quiet place, but she would have none of that. Apparently when she said she wanted to talk in private, she meant she would bring him to her family training hall – the same one where they sometimes sparred against one another in previous restarts. She seemed to find the place calming and reassuring.

"So what's this about?" he asked her.

"I'm worried," she said. She sounded worried, too.

Zorian waited for a few seconds for a clarification of what exactly she was worried about, but Taiven seemed to have trouble finding the words. She paced around the training hall like a caged tiger, scowling and shaking her head.

"No, seriously, what is this about?" Zorian asked.

She still didn't say anything.

"Is it time loop related?" he added after a bit of thought.

"Of course it's time loop related!" she burst out at him. She looked like she was going to snap at him but quickly managed to

reign herself in. She shook her head sadly. "And, in a way, it isn't. I don't even know why I called you here. It's stupid. I should just—"

"Don't even dare try to send me away now," Zorian warned her.

"I won't, I won't," she assured him. "I'm just... I just realized I probably lost you as a friend."

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

"And why would you think *that*?" Zorian asked her curiously.

"Because this time loop has changed you," she told him. "You already feel like a stranger to me. You're so hard to read these days, and so very capable. Everything I can do, you can do better. And that's only going to get worse as you spend time in here. By the time you get out, why would you need me anymore? By the time this is all resolved, I will probably no longer have a friend."

"Eh, you're being overdramatic," Zorian told her. He knew he was probably sounding a little dismissive, but he honestly didn't know what else to tell her. "I know you don't remember this, but I spend a lot of time interacting with you in various restarts. There is zero chance that I'm just going to forget you."

"Well yes, I'm sure that you won't just *forget me*," she huffed. "But any concern you have for me will be of the... well, patronizing kind. You'll be so above me it isn't even funny. We won't be equals, you know? It'll be you, a secret archmage, keeping an eye on his old friend for old-time's sake. It's very depressing."

"Ah," said Zorian slowly.

There was a lot of truth in what she was saying. There was really no way their friendship would be the same as it had been before the time loop. However, that was not necessarily a bad thing. His past self was... somewhat bitter with Taiven. He had not considered them to be close friends, something that Taiven seemed rather oblivious to. Much like she was oblivious to his past crush on her, really.

So yes, their relationship would never be the same. But was that a bad thing? While Taiven might lament the loss of their earlier friendship, Zorian couldn't help but wonder whether there would have even *been* a friendship if he hadn't got stuck in this time loop. Would he have eventually overcome the hurt of having his love confession laughed at and reestablished close bonds with her? Probably. But it would have taken quite some time and he wasn't sure Taiven would have stuck around him for long enough to see that happen.

"Why did you ever decide to become friends with me, anyway?" Zorian asked her curiously. "This will sound a little self-deprecating, but I don't think I was that good of a friend."

"Ha ha!" she laughed, her mood brightening a little. "Well, it's good that you're so honest. That's the one change I like about the new you."

She picked up a practice doll from a nearby bench and started making minute corrections to it. Zorian couldn't see what they were meant to do, so he assumed she was just stalling for time and giving herself something to do.

"Since you were willing to be a little self-deprecating, I will follow your example," Taiven eventually said. "I wasn't a very good friend either. Either to you or to anyone else. I'm too blunt and impulsive and I can't judge the situation and people very well. Most people actually find me pretty insulting and aggravating."

Zorian was going to say something to cheer her up, but then he remembered that her nickname for him was 'Roach'. He still remembered the argument he'd had with her when she had tried to convince him that being compared to cockroaches was a compliment because they were amazing animals, famed for their adaptability and resilience. Eventually he caved in and (reluctantly) let her call him that, but he could see why some people would be deathly insulted if she were to pull that kind of stunt on them.

"I actually have very few friends aside from you," she continued. "Aside from you, only my two teammates seem to like me. But Urik and Oran... they're old friends. I'll never be anything other than the third wheel if I hang out around them."

"But I didn't have any other friends," Zorian surmised.

"Yeah," Taiven told him. "You annoyed me, I annoyed you, but we got along with each other anyway. Maybe you weren't a good friend, but I wasn't much better, so it didn't matter. But now you're getting better, and I... I can't."

She hugged the practice doll like a little girl trying to comfort herself with a favorite toy. It was a somewhat weird sight, since the practice doll was the size of an adult human and creepily featureless.

Zorian stared at her, wondering how to handle this. He didn't see how he could convince Taiven that the nature of their friendship wouldn't change once he got out of the time loop. It would be an obvious lie. Of course, Zorian did not consider this change to be a bad thing, but to explain why he felt that way he would have to...

...eh, why not. If he was really honest with himself, he always had wanted to do this. He just hadn't had the courage to go through with it.

"I had a crush on you once," he told her.

"Eh!?" she exclaimed, jerking in surprise and dropping the practice doll. It clattered to the floor, leaving deafening silence in its wake. For a moment, anyway. "What do you mean, you had a crush on me!? When!? How!?"

"Do you remember that time I asked you out on a date?" he asked her.

"What? Are we... are we talking about that time..." she fumbled. Zorian nodded anyway. He had only ever asked her to a date

once in the time they knew each other, so she couldn't be thinking of anything else. "But, uh, isn't that when I... laughed at you?"

Zorian gave her a long-suffering look.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Yes, it is. It wasn't a joke, Taiven. I was dead serious about it."

"Ah ha ha..." she laughed nervously. "Wow, that's... really something."

She buried her face into her hands for a moment.

"Gods above, I'm so stupid sometimes," she mumbled into her hands.

Then she punched him in the shoulder.

"Hey!" he protested in mild outrage. He'd normally be more bothered about the sudden physical violence, but eh. It was Taiven. He expected that sort of thing from her. "What the hell!?"

"And you're stupid too!" she told him. "Why the hell would you just accept me laughing at you like that if you were being serious!?"

"Well what the hell was I supposed to do!?" Zorian protested.

"Tell me I was wrong! Ask me out again! Get angry before storming off!" Taiven shouted. "Anything! Not just pretend everything was fine and retreat with a tail between your legs like a wounded puppy. I mean... I kept joking about that long afterwards and you *still* didn't say anything. At least if I knew I wouldn't have been rubbing salt into your wounds like that!"

"It doesn't matter," Zorian grunted. "In the end I still got an answer to my question. You clearly weren't interested in me that way. You found the very idea laughable, even."

"Oh come on!" she whined. "That's not fair. I wasn't laughing because the idea of me dating you was so ridiculous. I was laughing because I gave you love advice urging you to ask people out and you followed it by immediately asking *me* out. It just... seemed to

me like you were making a joke. In retrospect, I was being stupid, but... You should have said something, damn it!"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as the two of them refused to look at each other and sat there in silence.

"We're going out on a date," Taiven suddenly declared.

Zorian gave her a weird look.

"But I'm over you," he pointed out. "That's why I said I 'had' a crush on you. It's all in the past for me."

"Yeah, I figured," she said. "It doesn't matter. We're still having a date."

"Don't I get any say in this?" Zorian asked, an amused smile on his face.

"What are you talking about," Taiven sniffed disdainfully. "You're the one who asked me to a date. I'm just accepting your invitation... with a bit of a delay."

Zorian laughed at the uniquely Taiven logic.

"A bit of a delay, she says... You really are something," he said, shaking his head. "Fine. Have it your way."

"Good," she said simply, then looked away, as if too shy to meet his eyes.

Zorian smiled. He had been telling the truth, and he really didn't have a crush for her any longer. Any romantic feeling he'd had for her had petered out during his long stay in the time loop.

But he'd be lying if he said he wasn't kind of glad about this.

CROSSROADS

He never really realized how beautiful Cyoria could be in the evening.

That was Zorian's thought as he and Taiven wandered around Cyoria, checking up street stands and discussing casual topics. Most settlements grew dark and quiet as evening approached, giving off a dangerous and sinister atmosphere, but Cyoria was a major metropolis and this was the week before the summer festival. The streets were lively and well-illuminated, with lots of people wandering around and lots of street vendors setting up stands and trying to convince these people to part with their money for sweets, trinkets and so on.

Zorian would never have guessed that he would enjoy this kind of atmosphere. In the past, he had found occasions like this to be rather aggravating and avoided them whenever possible. Of course, in the past, Zorian would get headaches just from being in a crowd and he didn't have a pretty girl to keep him company.

He gave a sideways glance to Taiven, who was walking beside him. Even though this was just a 'friendly' date and not anything romantic, he couldn't help but treat it fairly seriously. He had chosen to wear a fairly formal outfit for the evening, took her to an expensive restaurant and even invited her for a round of dance. He

was initially worried he was taking things too far, but considering Taiven came to the date wearing a very expensive-looking dress and had kept her usual cheery disposition throughout the entire evening, he seemed to have made a good choice.

"I've got to say, this went a lot better than I thought it would," Taiven suddenly said. Zorian raised an eyebrow at her. "Wait, that came out kind of wrong. What I mean is... considering how bad both of us are at the social side of things... umm..."

Zorian gave her a faint smile and decided to save her from further awkwardness.

"It's fine," he said. "I get your point. I'm also pleasantly surprised at how well this turned out. I guess we're better at this than we thought."

"Well, in my case it's mostly trial and error, so I can't feel *too* proud about myself," Taiven laughed lightly. "I went to quite a few dates in the past. Plenty of guys get attracted to me for my looks and don't quite comprehend what they're getting into until they experience it firsthand. Trust me, my first date was a real disaster."

"Oh? You'll have to tell me that story sometime," Zorian teased.

"No way," she said, giving him a playful shove and causing him to stumble to the side a little. He nearly crashed into an elderly couple walking past them, but managed to correct himself in time. "The less people know that story, the better. Hell, sometimes I wish I could forget that memory myself. But then I'd probably make the same mistakes all over again, so I guess it's a good thing I can't forget."

She frowned suddenly, staring at the night sky for a moment before giving him a curious look.

"What?" he prodded.

"What about you? Do you do this often?" she asked him.

"Do what often? Go on a date with you?" Zorian asked, amused.

"Well not with me," she said, rolling her eyes. "I mean in general. You've been in this time loop for years. Surely you've gone on a few dates in all that time."

"A few," Zorian admitted.

"Ha!" she said, pointing her finger at him triumphantly. "I knew it!"

Zorian opened his mouth to respond but Taiven immediately stopped him.

"Don't you try and bewitch me with your honeyed words," she said in mock outrage. "I bet you tell them to every girl you pursue."

"But I haven't even said anything yet," Zorian pointed out. "Really, I have no intention of justifying myself to you. Based on what you just told me about your dating experiences, you went to a lot more dates than I have. You heartbreaker."

They kept talking and meandering through the streets for a while longer, until eventually the conversation wound down and they both seemed to reach an unspoken agreement that it was getting late and that it was time for the date to end. Zorian couldn't help but get progressively quieter and more contemplative as the date grew to a close.

They had been walking in silence for several minutes when Taiven decided to speak up again.

"What's wrong?" Taiven asked. "Why did you get so depressed all of a sudden? Was it something I said?"

"Hm?" Zorian said, broken out of his reverie. "No, no. It's not you. I'm just thinking. It's... well, it's probably for the best if I don't tell you."

"Zorian, don't make me hit you," she said warningly.

"Fine, if you insist..." Zorian said, giving her an awkward chuckle. "I was just thinking how utterly depressing it is that

you will not remember anything that happened tonight in future restarts. We cleared the air between us, enjoyed a wonderful evening... and none of that will matter when the loop resets again. You will revert to the same suspicious, borderline hostile Taiven that I get at the start of every restart. It takes half of each restart just to convince you the time loop is real and that I haven't been lying to you since I met you or been replaced by an imposter, nevermind anything else."

Taiven winced, looking away guiltily.

"No, don't feel guilty," Zorian told her, shaking his head. "It's a perfectly reasonable reaction. It's one thing for old, experienced mages like Xvim, Alanic and Daimen to believe in the time loop. They've dealt with many complicated situations in their life and experienced plenty of strange magic. People like you and me? Well... did you know I spent the first six restarts going to classes like everything was just fine, hoping everything would return to normal if I just kept my head down and behaved like usual?"

Taiven gave him a surprised look.

"Yes, I know," Zorian nodded. "It's kind of stupid, but that's what I did. Your reaction is pretty good, all things considered. It's just that I really like how this turned out, and yet... I realize this will probably forever remain an empty memory in my head. I can't replicate the chain of events that led to this in the real world. I'm not even sure I can replicate it in future restarts. So I guess I'm just trying to figure out what I should do about this in the future."

A short, awkward silence descended on the scene, causing Zorian to wince a little inside at his own poor timing. *Why* did he insist on telling her this now? He just couldn't let things end on a positive note, could he?

"Sorry," he said quietly.

He suddenly felt like he could understand some of Zach's attitude towards people around them. Was this why Zach no longer

bothered to actively befriend any of their classmates or friendly strangers, even though he clearly used to do so extensively in the past? The way Zorian was feeling this evening... perhaps this was how Zach felt all the time during his earlier years? Making friends and experiencing life changing moments with them over and over again, only for the other party to forget all about it in the next restart...

"Don't be sorry," Taiven said. "What are friends for if they can't even listen to you whine from time to time? Besides, it was a fun evening. One moment of depressing seriousness isn't going to ruin it."

Eventually they reached a crossroads where their paths separated and stopped. Zorian wracked his head for a moment, trying to figure out what was the appropriate way to end the date. They weren't actually romantically involved, after all.

"So... I guess this is it," he eventually said lamely.

"I guess it is," Taiven agreed, equally lamely.

After a second of hesitation, with neither of them making a move to leave, Taiven spoke up again.

"Hey," she suddenly said. "So, I know you said you were totally over me... and I totally respect that! But just in case you ever change your mind about that, you should really work on your body a little."

"What?" Zorian asked, surprised.

"You know. Start running and exercising. Pick up some kind of physically intensive outdoor hobby. Put on some muscle," she said. "I'm not saying you stand no chance otherwise, but..."

Zorian huffed at her, torn between amusement and exasperation. "But it would do wonders to make you see me as relationship material, right?" he surmised. Taiven nodded. "Fair enough. I'll keep that in mind."

Well. Taiven's preferences in men aside, he *had* been rather annoyed with his lack of endurance lately. It made things more difficult than they needed to be and forced him to constantly drink potions just to keep up with Zach and others. It wasn't a huge issue in the time loop, but such an extensive use of potions was inadvisable in the long term. Once he was out of the time loop, he'd probably end up working on his physique on his own initiative, just so he could maintain the sort of pace he was used to by now...

In any case, this was the end of their evening together. After saying their goodbyes, both of them went their separate ways.

Zorian deliberately took the scenic route back to Imaya's place, consumed in his own thoughts and in no hurry to get back to sleep.



Simulacrum number two, stationed in Koth, was pretty pleased with how things were going.

Being stationed in Koth was usually a rather boring task, since it meant being stranded in an alien land whose language and writing he did not understand. He couldn't read any of the local books, he couldn't engage in casual conversations with people and he couldn't cast any spells without good reason.

This time, however, he was living in the Taramatula estate. The Taramatula knew very well he was just a simulacrum, but this didn't seem to bother them much. They treated him just as well as they did the real Zorian – they gave him a room to sleep in, a teacher to help him master the local language, and access to things like paper and building materials for his research.

Plus, there was Torun and Kirma, Daimen's two teammates who were currently trapped in the Taramatula estate. Perhaps because they currently had nothing better to do and were bored out of their minds, or maybe because the original really left an impres-

sion on them, but both of them proved very receptive to the simulacrum's offer of magic exchange.

Kirma was the more conventional of the two. Although Zorian had never seen divinations being used in such a way before he'd met her, she claimed she was using pretty standard magic that could be acquired from 'practically anywhere'. Even her flower-shaped divination aid was simply something she had commissioned from a professional artificer, not something she had made herself. Thus, she didn't feel much need to keep her methods secret. In exchange for the many rare and exotic spells that Zorian had acquired in the time loop, she was entirely willing to show him some tricks of her trade and give him guidance on how best to develop his divination skills.

In addition, she gave him a list of people to talk to in case he wanted to pursue a career in the field, completely unprompted by the simulacrum. He suspected she had some kind of deal with these people to send young talents their way, but he decided to give them a visit in one of the future restarts anyway.

As for Torun, he was pursuing a very rare and exotic field of magic that involved extracting and preserving organs of magical creatures and then using specialized control spells to turn them into something of an extension of the caster. It was not a popular field of study, both due to having been created relatively recently and because it existed in something of a legal limbo in most places, so Torun was actually ecstatic when the simulacrum showed an interest in it. Most people considered his magic to be somewhat creepy and off-putting.

The simulacrum very much doubted the original would dive particularly deeply into the field. It would take a lot of time to get anywhere with it and it didn't provide anything they desperately needed. However, some of the spells and techniques Torun used to control and make use of his eyes could potentially be used

to improve coordination between Zorian and his golems, or even Zorian and his simulacrum.

Of course, such developments were too general to be the cause of the simulacrum's current happiness with his situation. The truth was, he had recently dodged a huge bullet!

Mother and Father were coming to Koth, and someone had to pick them up and 'smuggle' them into the Taramatula estate. That someone was, of course, Daimen... but Daimen also insisted that Zorian accompany him in this task. He wouldn't budge on this in the slightest, stubbornly insisting it was Zorian's family duty to accompany him to pick up their parents.

Sometimes it was good to be just a simulacrum. While the original had to explain to Mother and Father what he was doing in Koth, he was told instead to stay hidden from them at all times in order to minimize the amount of necessary explanations. An order he was only too happy to obey.

He was currently safely sequestered in the corner of the Taramatula library (of course the estate had its own library), humming a discordant tune to himself and reading a children's book in an attempt to hone his ability to read the local writing. Sadly, language skills were one of those things that were almost impossible for him to transfer to the original in any meaningful manner, so this was something done more for his own amusement than any long-term gain.

As some point Orissa had also entered the room, but he paid little heed to that, giving her a short greeting and then getting back to his book. He had monopolized one of the three tables in the room, stacking it full of books that he judged to be relatively easy to understand, but that still left plenty of space for her to work with. He didn't react even when she looked over his shoulder to see what he was reading. He wasn't ashamed of his choice of reading in the slightest.

Everybody had to start somewhere. Plus, the book had pretty pictures.

However, Orissa didn't just pick up a book from the library and leave, like the simulacrum expected her to. Instead she fetched a chair from a nearby empty table and sat down next to him.

"Yes?" he asked, curious. It was unusual for Orissa to deliberately seek him out like this, to say the least. Aside from that one time when she invited the original for a discussion via Daimen, she had been quite reserved.

"I'm worried," she said simply. "Daimen and your... other self should be back in a few hours."

"Ah," the simulacrum said, suddenly understanding what this was about. "You're worried about Mother and Father coming here."

"Yes," she confirmed. "I know I'm being rude here, but I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your parents."

"Me?" the simulacrum asked incredulously.

"I was told simulacrums retain most of the memory of the original," Orissa said blandly.

"You know that wasn't my point," the simulacrum complained. Orissa smiled faintly at him. "I mean, the original doesn't exactly have the best relationship with the rest of his family. What could I possibly tell you that Daimen hadn't already?"

"Daimen got really evasive about his parents once it became obvious they don't approve of our marriage," Orissa said, shaking her head. "He says I shouldn't worry, that he'll handle it, but how can I possibly not worry? He clearly thinks the world of them and here they are, coming all the way to another continent to talk him out of marrying me."

"This will probably sound a little flippant, but there's probably no need for you to worry so much over this," the simulacrum told

her. "He's their darling genius son. Whatever he wants, he's going to get it. It's been that way since forever."

"It would still mean a lot to me if you could tell me a little about them before they arrive," Orissa insisted.

Simulacrum number two gave her a contemplative look. Truthfully, he wasn't sure if telling her about Mother and Father would be a good idea. His depiction of them would no doubt be really negative, and might end up worsening tensions between his parents and Orissa as a result. That probably wasn't in anyone's interest, least of all Orissa's.

"You're basically asking me to stick my hand into the fire, here," the simulacrum said.

"I guess I am," she admitted.

"Then let me ask you something first," the simulacrum said. "Are you interested in Daimen only because of his mind magic bloodline thingy?"

He expected Orissa to be either shocked at the question or explode with outrage. He did not expect her to laugh at him.

"What, are you worried I'm taking advantage of your big brother?" she asked with a grin.

"Just a little," the simulacrum admitted. "He's an empath, so he should be hard to fool... but you're a talented mind mage from a family specializing in mind magic. Anything is possible."

"And here Daimen thinks you hate him," Orissa said with a sigh. "To answer your question... it's definitely not irrelevant. I love him, but if he didn't have this innate mind magic affinity of his, I probably would not choose to marry him. I love my family too, and I need to keep their interests in mind. However, do you honestly think your brother is marrying me purely for love?"

The simulacrum gave her a surprised look.

"By marrying me, he is marrying into nobility and wealth. It's not his only concern, but it's hardly irrelevant. If I was a poor or-

phan, or even just a well-to-do middle-class girl, he would have never agreed to marry me. So no, I don't think I'm taking advantage of him. We both have our ambitions. It's just fortunate that we can fulfil them with someone we actually like."

"Huh," the simulacrum said thoughtfully.

After a few seconds of silence, Orissa spoke up again.

"So can I get an answer to *my* question, then?" she asked.

"Sure," the simulacrum shrugged. "So, the first thing you should know about our parents is that they're very driven and ambitious people. Our father, Andir Kazinski, was the fourth son of a wealthy farmer. Our mother, Cikan Kazinski, was the only daughter of one of the few remaining witches, who raised her alone after her husband left her. Father knew that as a fourth son, he would never inherit anything. Thus, when he was 15 years old, he managed to procure a small loan from his father and left home to open his own business. He married our mother less than a year later. Over the years, they had turned that small initial business into a local power that has made them quite wealthy and respected. Well, not by your standards, but..."

"It's impressive," Orissa nodded. "They reached surprising heights from such humble roots. That must have taken a lot of work."

"They did work very hard to get where they are," the simulacrum agreed. He had his disagreements with Mother and Father, but they had very much earned their wealth and status. Of course, their success involved just as much scheming as it did hard work, but he was pretty sure Orissa understood that part without him having to spell it out. "But while such attitude brought them success, it does have some consequences. Bluntly put, they view almost everything through the prism of how it will reflect on the family reputation and finances. This marriage between you and Daimen... even if Mother and Father thought this was a good thing

for Daimen—”

”That’s it! That’s what I’ve been missing all this time! They don’t see the benefit for the family as a whole!” Orissa exclaimed suddenly. ”Of course. After putting so much money and effort into Daimen, they naturally expect to see some kind of return for their trouble. Ah... we’ll continue this later, okay? I need to make some arrangements.”

The simulacrum watched, surprised and amused, as Orissa hurriedly left the library. He wasn’t entirely sure what happened there, but it would seem that Orissa didn’t actually perceive his parents’ attitude as wrong. Considering the sort of background she comes from and her explanation about how her marriage with Daimen came to be... he probably shouldn’t be surprised.

”Well, at least now I know why Daimen likes her so much,” simulacrum mused quietly to himself. ”She’s like a younger version of Mother! Sometimes life really is a comedy.”



In normal circumstances, picking up Mother and Father from Jasuka harbor and bringing them to the Taramatula estate would have been a simple matter. Now that Daimen was under such intense scrutiny, however, this became a huge, complicated endeavor. The Taramatula mobilized a large portion of their manpower to disrupt and distract surveillance operations that kept an eye on Daimen’s movements. When Daimen and Zorian finally left the estate, five other decoy teams, shapeshifted in their likeness, also left at the same time to muddy the water further. Then, all six teams started teleporting around randomly for a while, before each of them made their way to a completely different city.

Despite all these preparations, the whole plan would have surely failed if Daimen had really gone to pick up Mother and

Father during this trip. In reality, the whole operation was simply a giant distraction. Its main purpose was to mask the fact that Zorian had created a third simulacrum while they were teleporting around randomly through Koth and then sent it away to hide while they drew everyone's attention. When Daimen and Zorian returned to the Taramatula estate, Zorian's brand new simulacrum slowly made his way to Jasuka and then opened a hidden gate between the city and the estate, allowing Daimen to enter and leave the city too quickly for anyone to really intercept him.

Naturally, this meant that Zorian's involvement was absolutely crucial for the operation's success. If it weren't for that, Zorian would have never agreed to take part in it, no matter how much Daimen begged and threatened. How the hell was he supposed to explain his presence in Koth to Mother and Father? No matter how poor their knowledge of magic was, they would surely recognize dimensional gates and simulacrums as high-level magic that should be way beyond him.

"Even if you hadn't come with me, they would have still realized you were in Koth," Daimen told him. "You are too well known among the Taramatula by now. Someone would have surely let them know about you, whether intentionally or accidentally."

"Maybe, but that wouldn't have been *my* problem," Zorian countered. "I'd be back in Cyoria, and it would be your job to figure out an explanation that made sense and deal with their attitude."

Daimen scowled at him, saying nothing.

In any case, the initial meeting was much calmer and more subdued than Zorian expected. The steam ship that carried their parents languidly entered Jasuka harbor and then disgorged an endless stream of passengers and cargo, temporarily creating a miniature pandemonium as the throng of disembarking people and dock-

workers shouted and pushed at one another. By the time Daimen and Zorian had found Mother and Father, they already looked absolutely exhausted and were in no mood to start a fight. They were surprised to see Zorian in Koth, of course, but mostly they were glad to have an extra person help out with the luggage and what-not.

"Aren't you supposed to watch Kirielle?" Mother asked him, frowning.

"I am," Zorian said. "I'm just here to pick you up. I'll be back in Cyoria before nightfall."

"How?" Father asked. "I thought no one could teleport over such distances. And teleportation is supposed to be advanced magic, anyway."

"It's a secret," Zorian simply said.

Father made an indecipherable hum and said nothing further.

"Whatever it is, I hope you can use the same method to send us home when the time comes," Mother said, sounding worn and tired. "Ship travel doesn't agree with me. I think I lost a whole year of my life getting here. It would be great if we could avoid boarding a ship for the return trip."

And that was it. Nothing more was spoken about Zorian's presence. Especially since, when the group had finally stepped through the dimensional gate and entered the Taramatula estate, they were greeted by Orissa and the rest of the Taramatula delegation. At that point, the mystery of Zorian's presence on another continent was the furthest thing from their minds.

Naturally, Mother and Father were full of smiles and compliments. The tiredness they displayed before Daimen and Zorian seemed to instantly disappear and they busied themselves with handing out very expensive gifts and endlessly praising the thoughtfulness and generosity of their hosts. If Zorian hadn't known in advance what their purpose for coming here was, he

would have never guessed they disapproved of the marriage.

Two days passed. Mother and Father slowly settled into the Taramatula estate. Zorian tried to stay away from the place as much as possible, not wanting to get tangled into Daimen's mess too much, and the simulacrum he had left in the estate did the same. As such, he didn't really know how their attempts to talk Daimen out of the marriage were progressing. He had his own things to worry about. Now that he had a simulacrum outside the Taramatula estate, he hurriedly arranged for a group of Silent Doorway Adepts to be transported to Koth, next to one of the local Bakora Gates.

Happily, the operation to acquire the gate key was a full success. Both Zorian and the Silent Doorway Adepts were ecstatic about this. For the aranea, this gate key represented access to a virgin territory awash with opportunities. For Zorian, it was a way to ensuring easy access to Koth without having to rely on Daimen. Plus, he suspected that having this key would make it much, *much* easier to convince the Silent Doorway Adepts to cooperate with him in future restarts.

Now, however, Zorian was back in the Taramatula estate. His parents had specifically called for him to come see them. In all honesty, Zorian had totally expected this to happen. They had taken his presence in Koth in stride when they had first come, but now that they had time to rest, talk with people and think about things, they no doubt realized there was something very much off about him. The only thing he hadn't been certain of was whether the restart would have come to an end before this happened.

He was currently standing in one of Taramatula meeting rooms, Father and Mother standing in front of him. Originally, Daimen had wanted to be present for the talk as well, but they had shooed him away, insisting this was a 'private talk'. That had been kind of amusing. It was not often that they treated their favorite

son in such fashion. Apparently, whatever 'arrangements' Orissa did were insufficient, and they still opposed the marriage. And since Daimen stubbornly refused to give up on the idea, they were currently not terribly fond of him.

"We spoke with Daimen about you," Mother said suddenly.

She had a complex, worried look on her face, as if she was having trouble deciding how to handle this. Father, on the other hand, stayed silent and stony-faced, his emotions indecipherable.

"Yes?" Zorian responded blandly.

"He tells us you're incredibly powerful and competent. Far more than you let on," she said.

"True," Zorian admitted. He didn't see the point of hiding it. They already knew he could move across continents in a quick, reliable manner.

"But why would you keep something like that hidden from us?" Mother asked imploringly. "Having another genius in the family is a joyous thing. Surely you don't think we would have stood in your way?"

"Ah, you mean... like you're not standing in the way of Daimen's marriage?" Zorian asked innocently.

"That's something completely different!" Mother said, scowling at him. She quickly reined herself in, however. "And besides, we're *not* standing in Daimen's way. We're simply... trying to pull him back for taking a wrong turn. If he stubbornly refuses to heed our advice, we will reluctantly accept it, not sabotage his life in revenge."

"What she's saying," Father suddenly spoke up, "is that we already disagree with what you're doing with your life, so what's one disagreement more? You can just throw one of your juvenile hissy fits, just like you always do, and we'll grit our teeth and bear it because at the end of the day you're still our son. Just like we always do."

Zorian stretched his mouth into a thin line and gave Father a narrowed stare, but said nothing. Father simply stared back at him, as if daring him to say anything.

"Andir, honey, I thought we agreed I would be the one to talk," Mother sighed.

Father raised both of his hands in a gesture of surrender. He also gave her an exasperated look, but she had already turned back towards Zorian, ignoring him.

"What are you planning, Zorian?" Mother asked him bluntly.

"Nothing much," Zorian said. "I'm going to move out of the house immediately after I graduate. Maybe sooner. Open my own business, buy myself a house, things like that."

"You think running a business is easy?" Father challenged. Well, that didn't take long.

"I'm an amazing mage," Zorian said immodestly. "Even if I had the worst business sense in the world, I'd still be able to make enough for a living."

"But the family business—" Mother began.

"Not for all the money in the world," Zorian said, cutting her off.

A brief silence descended upon the scene as Mother and Father shared a long look between them.

"Oh!" Zorian said, suddenly remembering something. "I'll also take care of Kirielle."

This statement naturally caused both of them to give Zorian a look of surprise.

"What do you mean you'll take care of Kirielle?" Mother asked slowly. "Why would she need someone to take care of her?"

"Well, someone needs to teach her magic and nullify that stupid arranged marriage you prepared for her," Zorian said casually.

A look of intense, shocked outrage appeared on Mother's face. For a moment she seemed unable to process what she just heard, but then she outright exploded at him.

"You little brat!" she snapped at him agitatedly. "You have no idea what you're talking about!"

Weirdly, Father just laughed at the scene, shaking his head at nobody in particular. Zorian was mystified by this reaction, but decided to ignore it for now.

"The situation seems simple enough to my eyes," Zorian countered, unperturbed by her outrage.

"In regards to living your life, we can humor you, but you have *no* right, no right at all to tell me how to raise my daughter!" Mother shouted angrily at him, stomping threateningly straight into his personal space. "You are way out of line! Andir, you tell him!"

"What, me?" Father said with a look of exaggerated surprise. "I thought we agreed you would be the one to talk to him?"

Mother gave him an angry, venomous look that promised later retribution, but didn't press him further.

"You have no idea what's in Kirielle's best interest, Zorian," Mother told him warningly. "Don't stick your nose where it does not belong!"

"I'm afraid that, if I don't get an actual explanation, I'm still going to go through with my idea," Zorian told her.

"You can't take a child from her parents, even if you're her brother," Mother told him angrily. "We can call the police!"

"But would you actually do so?" Zorian challenged. She shrank back a little. They both knew she wouldn't. "Besides, I bet that marriage is of questionable legality to begin with."

"The marriage is... negotiable," Mother said, pacing around the room in agitation. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill. It's just an informal agreement, not a legally binding document. It's

not like we'd force Kirielle to go through it at all costs. But magic is *absolutely* off the table! She can never, under any circumstances be taught magic!"

"Why?" Zorian frowned.

"I'm trying to do her a favor!" Mother shouted, turning to face him again. "Don't you know what her roots are? What my mother was?"

Zorian gave her an uncomprehending look. Her *mother*? What did her mother have to do with anything? He knew they didn't get along well, but he never really heard anything too shocking about her. Besides, she had been dead for a while now.

"Wait," he said. "Are you talking about—"

"She was a witch!" Mother said, preempting his conclusion. "She was a witch and she was so damned proud of that fact. She never let anyone forget it! Once, she even threatened she was going to poison the town well when a bunch of customer tried to get out of paying her for the potions she made them. You know, just like the witches of old were said to do when someone wronged them!"

Zorian winced.

"You have no idea what it's like to be the daughter of a witch," Mother continued. "A son is fine. Witches didn't care about male children. Everyone knows this. They firmly believed that magic was transferred to the child through the womb, so only a daughter can continue the lineage."

Zorian raised an eyebrow at her. Why would they—

"I don't know why they believed what they did!" Mother said, as if reading his mind. "I never cared to know. I just wished she would shut up about witches and let me live some semblance of a normal life. But she never did, so everyone around me saw me as a soul-stealing, mind-ensnaring, poison-wielding witch-in-waiting. And if Kirielle learns magic, she'll suffer the same fate."

"Mother..." Zorian sighed.

"I was really lucky to marry your father," Mother said.

"Well, you were a pretty fine catch yourself," Father said, grinning. He had been silent while Mother ranted about her childhood frustrations, but apparently he now felt it was safe to throw in a comment or two.

Mother ignored him, though. She was probably still angry about his earlier quip about her being the designated speaker.

"My daughter won't have to fear for her future and rely on luck to find a good husband. She won't have people cross to the other side of the road when they see her or spreading vile slander about her completely unprovoked," Mother continued. "Unlike my mother, I've done everything I can to distance myself from our family legacy. So long as she takes my example and stays well away from anything magic related, anyone that tries to start something will end up looking petty and paranoid. But if she starts learning magic, then everything will be *ruined!*"

"You don't know that," Zorian pointed out.

"Why take the risk?" Mother challenged. "Maybe if she married early, to a wealthy and respected husband... but you already said you are opposed to that, didn't you? So where does that leave us?"

Zorian stared at her. This was the side of Mother that he had never really known before. Was this why she was so obsessed with family reputation and social position?

He looked at Father, but the man was uncharacteristically skittish. He just looked away, refusing to meet his eyes.

Though he didn't actually say anything, Zorian understood the message: he was on his own here. Kirielle was Mother's project, and he wasn't going to stick his nose in it unless he had to.

"What if Kirielle doesn't want to go along with your plan?" Zorian asked slowly.

"She's nine," Mother said. "She doesn't know what she wants."

"She's not always going to be nine, though," Zorian pointed out.

"Yes, well, we can continue this conversation when she gets older," she told him firmly. "You didn't start learning magic when you were nine, either."

She had a point there. In all honesty, he wasn't willing to push this matter further than this. He mostly just raised the issue to gauge her reaction to it. He hadn't expected this sort of response. On top of that, while Kirielle said she wanted to learn magic, she was also rather impatient and flighty. Who knew whether she was even capable of the discipline required to become a mage.

Besides, the most important thing was that the arranged marriage was apparently just an informal thing and not something his parents would push for at all costs. He couldn't claim with certainty that it would be a good idea to teach Kirielle magic, but he knew for a fact that she hated the arranged marriage thing.

"Right," Zorian said finally. "I'm not informed enough to make a decision here, so I'll withdraw for now."

"You're damn right you're going to withdraw!" she told him. She still sounded outraged but the anger was visibly draining out of her now that he was no longer challenging her. "What the hell made you think you have the right to give me parenting advice? Not even your father dares to tell me how to raise my daughter and you, an immature brat that has never even been with a woman, think you can tell me what to do. Why don't you make a daughter of your own if you think—"

This was going to take quite a while, wasn't it?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Father staring at the scene and smiling faintly in *schadenfreude*.

Zorian sighed. Yes, this would *definitely* take a while.



"So, I discovered a new function of the orb," Zach said.

Zorian stopped working on the metal, flower-shaped construct on his bench and gave Zach a curious look.

"What do you mean you found a new function?" Zorian asked.

"I mean, one completely unrelated to its role as a mobile palace," Zach said, waving the orb in front of him. "Look. Take the orb and try this..."

It took a while for Zach to convey to Zorian what he had to do to activate this new function he discovered. After all, the way Zorian interacted with the orb was completely different from the way Zach did. Zach's way was more instinctive, almost automatic, whereas Zorian had to take the initiative and actively grope around for a way to interface with it.

Eventually, though, he succeeded. He connected with the orb in the new manner that Zach found and immediately found himself connected to... something. Some kind of empty space, maybe?

"Weird," Zorian eventually said.

"Yeah," Zach said. "I have no idea what this does, though."

"Neither do I," said Zorian after some tinkering. He handed the orb back to Zach. "Keep tinkering with it. You'll probably have more luck with it than I would."

Besides, Zach had far more free time to tinker with the orb than Zorian did. The restart was nearing its end and there were so many things that needed to be done...



The restart was almost over. Overall, Zorian would have described it as a highly productive one.

The study of the gate stabilization frame they had stolen from the Ibasan base yielded a lot more results than Zorian expected.

He now knew that some very unconventional methods had been used while making the gate – instead of carving the spell formula necessary for the operation of the frame, the Ibasans had embedded them directly into the frame in the form of numerous magic threads. The frame literally had to be peeled away, layer by layer, in order for researchers to record the layout of the threads and attempt to decipher it. Sadly, though they had invited many capable researchers on the project, they had failed to make sense of how the frame worked. Perhaps if the gate frame was still actively maintaining a dimensional passage, but as it was? Not a chance...

Still, it was a start. A lot of important groundwork had been done, and future analysis of the gate should go much faster. It was probably good that they didn't manage to take an active gate in this restart – if they did, they would no doubt shy away from simply taking it apart like they ended up doing here, and several crucial insights would never have been made.

The interrogation of Sudomir was also a success. Granted, the man knew so many important things that he and Alanic had already agreed to keep kidnapping him in future restarts as well, but even his current gains were considerable. For instance, Zorian had finally found out what the deal was behind his strange transformations.

While Sudomir was an extremely talented warder and soul mage, and dabbled in lots of other magics as well, he was not terribly impressive as a fighter. Sudomir was well aware of this, and thus decided to close that vulnerability by becoming a shifter.

But he was overconfident and reached far beyond his grasp. Rather than picking one specific magical creature to fuse his soul with, he decided to splice up several magical creatures into some kind of unholy abomination that *theoretically* combined the best features of all of them... and then fused with that.

According to Alanic, it was incredible that the ritual didn't end

up turning him utterly insane or a quivering mass of unstable flesh right from the get go. As it was, the shifter ritual he designed was only a partial failure – the transformation was almost uncontrollable, forcing him to keep it suppressed at all times. But whenever he was under a lot of stress or in emotionally charged situations, his control inevitably started to slip, warping his mind...

Still, while the shifter ritual was a failure in many ways, it did give him his signature resilience. One of the creatures he used in crafting his initial abomination was a troll, and the other a dragon. The other three were similarly hard to kill. Zorian shuddered to think what would happen if he were allowed to completely transform into his composite form.

Another thing they found out from Sudomir was that there were some people related to the Cult of the Dragon Below that they had missed thus far when investigating the invaders. This was because they technically weren't cultists. In fact, they were purposely kept separated from known cultists as much as possible, so they would look as clean as possible in case somebody investigated them. This included a fair number of lawyers, low-level politicians and even a respected judge. There was no time left to really check these people out, and Zorian suspected they weren't too important for understanding the invasion, but he made a mental note to investigate them anyway. Just for the sake of being thorough.

Eventually the day of the summer festival came... and no attack occurred. The Ibasans continued evacuating, the Cult of the Dragon Below never made a move, and the primordial trapped in the Hole was never released.

But the restart ended right on schedule anyway, and Zorian woke up in Cirin, with Kirielle wishing him a good morning...

PLODDING AHEAD

Deep in the jungles of Koth, there was a large, circular hole in the ground that led to a narrow vertical shaft and a pool of greenish water at the bottom. Although the place was quite beautiful, very few people could come here to admire it. It was, after all, absolutely teeming with chameleon drakes.

Naturally, this was the cenote where they had recovered the orb of first emperors in the previous restart. Zach and Zorian stood on the edge of the cenote, observing the chameleon drakes milling around the place and discussing how to go about recovering the orb this time around. Occasionally a group of chameleon drakes wandered past them or scrutinized their location, but between their cloaking spells and Zorian's ability to reach into their minds and edit their senses and memories, there was little chance of them being discovered.

"So how are we doing this?" Zach asked. "Do you think you can sneak us in?"

Zorian stared at the cenote for a second before shaking his head. The drakes inside the cenote tended to clump together in groups of five or more, and the orb cave seemed to be the place that held the largest group.

"It's hard enough to keep the drakes from noticing us when it's just one or two," Zorian said sadly. "Those four independently moving eyes make their senses quite unlike humans. Figuring out how to fool their senses from moment to moment is too tiresome for me to do it on large groups."

Zach didn't seem surprised by this. He seemed to be getting more familiar with the limitations of Zorian's mind magic. "Then we should just go in, spells blazing, then?" he offered. "I mean, why complicate things? We can take them, I'm sure of it."

"I'd rather not fight a swarm of chameleon drakes today," Zorian said. "How about this? You move back from the cenote a little and attack them. If their previous reaction is any indication, they should all swarm out to deal with you. When they do, I will teleport into the orb cave, claim it, then teleport out. Even if they leave behind a few guards, these will be no match for me."

"And what if your attempts to claim the orb cause the hydra to appear?" Zach said with a frown. "I don't want to be mean, but your fighting skills..."

"I'm no match for that thing, I know," Zorian said, nodding. "I don't have to actually fight it, though. I can always just flee if it appears. I'm good enough to survive its assault for the few seconds it takes to cast the teleport spell. Besides, I suspect the hydra can't actually exit the pocket dimension inside the orb cave itself. It's just too big. The last time it emerged from the lake at the bottom of the cenote, and I suspect this time it will be no different."

"But if you snatch the orb and leave the cave, won't the hydra have plenty of space near you to teleport itself in?" Zach asked.

Uhh... damn. He hadn't thought of that.

"And even if the hydra doesn't react immediately, simply having it inside makes the orb into a massive time bomb. The monster can clearly exit the orb whenever it wishes. What if we bring the orb to Cyoria and the hydra decides to enter the city while we're

sleeping or otherwise distracted? Imagine the damage it could do. If it decides not to react when we claim the orb, it might be a good idea to deliberately lure it out before we bring the orb to a populated area.”

They decided to try Zorian’s idea anyway. The execution turned out to be a little more complicated than Zorian had thought it would be. Apparently Zach alone was not threatening enough to whip the entire group of chameleon drakes into a frenzy and make them leave their lair. After all, he was just one man. He might have been ungodly powerful, but that wasn’t something that could be gleaned at first sight. Thus, the drakes initially simply sent a group of five young drakes at him to deal with him. Of course, when Zach effortlessly slaughtered those five, the entire cenote grew more agitated... but not agitated enough to rush out and swarm him. They felt pretty safe in their cenote base, so they just massed themselves together and decided to wait and see if Zach would actually dare attack them in their home. Inconveniently for Zorian, they picked the orb cave as their rallying point.

Thankfully, when Zach started to launch artillery spells at the cenote, they decided they couldn’t afford to turtle up like that. They rushed out to try and stop him, leaving only a handful of guards behind. Zorian quickly teleported in, claimed the orb and teleported out.

Mission accomplished. As for the hydra, it never showed up. Not when Zorian claimed the orb and not when Zach and Zorian waited for several hours in the middle of the jungle to see if it would eventually decide to emerge. Zorian didn’t know what to think about that. On one hand, this meant they didn’t have to fight a giant, teleporting, godtouched hydra. On the other hand, it was just like Zach said earlier – this meant that said hydra could pop out of the orb when they least expected it and ruin the entire restart.

"We really need to figure out how to actually enter the damn orb," Zach said unhappily, turning the orb idly in his hands.

"We need to consider the possibility that the orb simply doesn't have that kind of ability built into it," Zorian told him, staring at the orb in Zach's hands in a speculative manner. "Teleportation magic is tricky to make into magic items. There are recall rods that can teleport a person to a pre-determined point and teleport platforms that can allow teleportation between fixed points, but anything more sophisticated requires a living caster. It might be that the previous owners of the orb used some kind of specialized spell to enter and leave the orb dimension."

"Lovely," Zach said, throwing the orb into the air and triggering its deployment mechanism. The orb distorted and then collapsed inward with a soft whooshing sound. In a flash it was gone, no visible trace of its presence anywhere. "That means either searching for an obscure teleportation spell or creating one from scratch. That could take forever. As if we didn't have enough time sinks already..."

He reclaimed the orb, causing it to pop back to existence again, and then deployed it again immediately afterwards.

"If you are right, though, then this is really poor design," Zach continued. "Why the hell would you not include a way in when making something like this? It shouldn't be that hard to place a teleport platform, recall stone or something similar inside. Then, when the owner of the orb commands it to, it pulls the person inside and deposits them there. That's a viable method, no?"

He reclaimed and then deployed the orb again.

"It is," Zorian agreed. "And maybe there really was such a place inside the orb, once. But teleport platforms and recall stones don't last all that long without regular maintenance. Not for centuries, at least. And there is a chance that something inside actively broke the mechanism. Say, a giant rampaging hydra..."

"I didn't think of that," Zach scowled, reclaiming the orb again. "We just don't—"

When Zach deployed the orb the fourth time, there was a much louder whooshing sound than usual and the two of them suddenly found themselves standing next to a gigantic pissed-off hydra. It immediately pounced on them with an unearthly roar.

Needless to say, the next few minutes were... somewhat hectic.



Defeating the hydra took longer than it had the last time they fought, but the fact they didn't have to worry about Daimen and his men dying actually made the battle easier. Things were a little hairy in the beginning, when the hydra had caught them off-guard, but after that they just kept themselves out of the hydra's reach and kept hammering away at it until it decided the situation was hopeless and fled into the jungle. That took hours to do, though, because Zach had already reclaimed the orb by that point and the hydra really didn't like that. It didn't help that Zorian was interested in how its multi-part mind worked and thus spent most of the battle studying it instead of fighting it for real.

They didn't chase after it to finish it off. Having it out of the orb was enough for them. They did spend a lot of time discussing what happened, though, and came to a conclusion that it was no accident that the hydra had only emerged after Zach had deployed the orb. It was likely that the hydra couldn't exit the orb while it was in its portable form and had to wait for Zach to deploy the orb before it could make the attempt. That, in turn, suggested that perhaps entering the orb without deploying it was similarly impossible... which would make their previous method of studying the orb while holding it in their hands a somewhat wrong-headed method of finding the entrance.

Regardless, after claiming the orb and chasing off the hydra that emerged from it, Zach and Zorian returned to their current base in Koth – the small aranean base that the Silent Doorway Adepts had established around the local Bakora gate.

Zorian's previous suspicion that the Silent Doorway Adepts would get friendlier and more open to his arguments if he brought them a functional gate address to Koth turned out to be true beyond his wildest dreams. The aranea went absolutely crazy once they tried it out and confirmed it worked. It took little more than four days for him to convince them that the time loop was real and that they should work with him, which was less than half of what it was before. He still sent a simulacrum on a slow journey to Koth, though, both because he didn't want to put all his eggs in one basket and because he needed it to establish a telepathic relay link to Koth by physically placing relay stones along the way.

Still, he was extremely pleased that he managed to get this deal with the Silent Doorway Adepts working. It wasn't absolutely crucial for reaching Koth, but it would be absolutely necessary when they decided to retrieve the piece of the key that was lost in Blantyrre. Blantyrre didn't have any notable human civilizations, meaning that ships traveling there were extremely rare. There was no convenient archipelago to serve as a bridge between continents and allow island hopping, so teleporting there was out of the question. The seas and coasts were wild and untamed, full of dangerous monsters and natural danger zones. Zorian had spoken to Daimen about it, and the conclusion was that it was theoretically possible for them to reach Blantyrre within the span of a month... but only just. They would have to fully dedicate an entire restart for the task, and they would be left with a measly handful of days to explore Blantyrre before the restart ended.

Thankfully, Blantyrre was seeded full of Bakora Gates. In fact, they were seeded much more densely there, as if whatever power

that had made the gates originated from that continent. This was curious because, as far as anyone knew, humanity had never really lived there in the past. Scholars often quarreled about what this meant, but Zorian didn't really care about those arguments – all he cared about was that the Bakora gate network was pretty much the only viable method he had of reaching Blantyrre in a timely manner. The fact that one of the imperial artifacts was lost in Blantyrre was one of the major worries he had about their chances to collect the entire Key. Now that he knew he could potentially reach the continent in as little as four days if he acquired the correct gate address, it was like a giant rock was lifted off his shoulders. Maybe they really had a chance of doing this...

"What about your brother?" Zach suddenly asked. "Didn't you hand him a notebook full of descriptions from our previous restart? Surely he left himself information about where the orb is."

"He did, but I already told him we would be claiming it for ourselves," Zorian said.

"Ha. He must have loved *that*," Zach said, smiling at Zorian slightly.

"Yeah, he wasn't happy about that," Zorian nodded. "He wasn't *too* bitter, though. He knows he can't handle the hydra without our help. He'd need more than a month just to find, vet and organize the extra mercenaries he'd have to hire to successfully retrieve the orb. He did make me promise I would let him have the orb once we were out of the time loop, though."

"I guess that's fair," Zach shrugged. "I mean, I've really taken a liking to this thing, but he does sort of have a legitimate claim on it, and he's your brother to boot. You owe me, though."

"I owe you?" Zorian said, raising his eyebrow at him. "Owe you what?"

"Another portable palace like this, of course," said Zach, wav-

ing the orb in front of Zorian's face. "You'll be trying to get crazy good at pocket dimensions soon, no? Surely, a measly little pocket dimension like this is no big deal."

'Measly', he says. Information about pocket dimension creation was scarce, but what Zorian had found suggested that this orb was near the top end of what was possible to achieve. There were examples of bigger hidden worlds, but not many.

"Correction," Zorian said blandly. "We'll be trying to get crazy good at pocket dimensions soon. Are you seriously telling me you'll pass by the opportunity to learn how to create one?"

"I'd never pass up the opportunity to learn something so useful," Zach said with a grin. "But you're the one who's good at creating things, while I am more the kind of guy that breaks them. Plus, we've already established that you owe me. I've magnanimously decided to let your brother claim the orb outside the time loop as a favor to you. As recompense, you need to make another portable palace for me when we finally get out."

"We'll talk about that later, when we find out how feasible the idea actually is," Zorian told him lightly. "However, I can tell you right now that you're never getting an actual palace."

"Whaaat?" Zach whined. "Why not?"

"Because pocket dimensions don't create matter," Zorian told him. He pointed at the orb in Zach's hands. "If you want them to contain a piece of land like that one does, you basically have to 'steal' it by enclosing an actual place into it during the creation process. So if you want a portable palace... well, you first need to *build* the palace in question. Putting aside the actual costs of such a project, which are bound to be astronomical, I just don't have the necessary skills to design and build a palace."

"Oh," Zach said. "Yeah, that makes sense, I guess."

"Now, if you want a tastefully hollowed out rock or a nice wooden cottage... that I can definitely help you with," Zorian told

him. "Hell, I might even be able to fit in some actual glass windows if you want me to be extravagant!"

That triggered a lengthy argument about what kind of building would be possible for a single mage to build on his own, using only natural materials. The argument eventually culminated into a building competition where both Zach and Zorian did their best to construct the most luxurious residence they could with the materials they had on hand.

If any jungle explorer were to stumble upon the site several hours later, they would probably be baffled by the series of towers, ziggurats and blocky houses scattered throughout the entire region. Alas, this part of the jungle was very remote and no such explorer would ever come before the restart ended.

The bats and other animals that moved into the buildings after a few days definitely appreciated their new accommodations, though.



Zach and Zorian floated in the black void. The black sky that surrounded them was omnidirectional and featureless, containing only one point of interest – a roughly humanoid entity with softly glowing eyes. The Guardian of the Threshold.

It had been a while since they visited this place. They tried not to interact with the Guardian too much, lest they accidentally trigger some kind of safeguard and it realized there were two Controllers inside the time loop and that it should do something about that. However, now that they'd gotten their hands on a piece of the Key, it only made sense for them to come and visit the Sovereign Gate to see how it would react.

"Welcome, Controller," the Guardian said, its voice just as soft and devoid of emotion as Zorian remembered it to be. The entity gave no indication it remembered their last visit to this place.

"We have questions for you," Zach told the Guardian bluntly.

"I will do my best to answer them," the Guardian agreed placidly.

They didn't ask it about the orb immediately. Instead, they first confirmed the number of restarts they had until the time loop collapsed, just in case. They had 42 left, exactly as it should be. After that Zorian summoned a list of questions the two of them had prepared for the Guardian over the previous restarts, concerning Red Robe, the mechanics of the time loop and so on.

They didn't get anywhere with that, of course. The Guardian either didn't know how to help them or flat out refused to do so when they asked things they weren't 'authorized' to know. They had expected that, but it was still frustrating to be foiled so thoroughly. In any case, once they had exhausted their prepared list of questions, they finally moved onto to the main purpose of this visit.

"Guardian, can you tell us more about the Key now?" Zorian asked.

"To find out about the Key, please bring me the Key for inspection," the Guardian told him.

"Yes, yes... in order to find out about the Key, we must first have the Key. A perfectly logical requirement," Zach said, rolling his eyes. "But we're not here for that. Our question is this: if we bring you a single piece of the Key, does that count for something? Do we get to ask you questions about it?"

"Having only one piece of the Key will result in information about that part only," the Guardian noted.

"That's fine," Zach said dismissively. "We brought you one of the pieces, so why don't you take a look?"

"I do not see it," the Guardian told him immediately. "Are you sure you have connected it to the control room properly?"

"Wait, we have to do *what*?" Zach asked incredulously.

As it turned out, simply having the pieces of the Key on them when they connected to the Sovereign Gate wasn't enough. The Guardian neither knew nor cared what they had on their person when they entered this void it inhabited. Instead, it was up to Zach and Zorian to connect the orb to the Sovereign Gate so the Guardian could inspect it and confirm its authenticity.

How were they supposed to do that? The Guardian was naturally of no help whatsoever. It took them two hours of frustrated tinkering before they realized they had to use their marker as a sort of bridge, simultaneously connecting it to both the Sovereign Gate and the orb. Only then did the Guardian recognize it.

"This is indeed a legitimate piece of the Key," the Guardian decided.

"Finally," Zach huffed. "So what does this get us?"

"Nothing on its own," the Guardian responded. "You need the entire key to unlock higher authorization than you have now. However, you can now ask me for information about it like you wanted earlier. Keep in mind that I have no knowledge of the object's mundane functions. I can only give you information about it as it relates to the time loop."

"So if we asked you about the pocket dimension contained in the orb..." began Zorian.

"I couldn't help you," the Guardian said. "I didn't even know there was a pocket dimension encapsulated within the Key piece until you told me."

There was a second of silence as both Zach and Zorian frowned at the information. This was not completely unexpected. It had been very obvious during their previous visit that the Guardian did not perceive the world in the same way humans did and often just plain disregarded things not related to its job. Still, this was disappointing to hear.

"Alright," said Zach eventually. "So what can you tell us about

the orb, then? What are its capabilities as it relates to the time loop?"

"It contains a memory bank that the Controller can use to store and organize their important memories across restarts," the Guardian said.

Wait, what? Zach and Zorian shared a shocked glance, not having expected this at all.

"A memory bank..." Zorian repeated slowly.

"Yes," the Guardian confirmed. "You should be able to sense an empty space inside if you focus on the Key piece correctly. Simply focus on the memories you want to store in the bank and push them inside. Once inside, they will persist from restart to restart and be available for viewing at any time, unless you choose to delete them at some point. Keep in mind that this ability only exists inside the time loop – once you leave and this reality permanently collapses, all of the memories you stored inside the Key piece will be similarly destroyed. Make sure to refresh on anything important you placed there before you leave."

There was a brief silence as the two of them digested this information.

"I guess we now know what that mysterious empty space inside the orb was," Zorian finally said.

"Yeah," Zach said distractedly, lost in thought for a second. He then took a deep breath and turned to Zorian again. "It sounds very convenient."

"Yes," Zorian agreed. The ability was a little redundant to him, what with his ability to create memory packets, but he could imagine that an average Controller would find the ability absolutely invaluable. It was almost like having a notebook that carried over from restart to restart, only better. "Guardian, is there any limit on the amount of memories this bank can hold?"

"There are limits to everything," the Guardian told him. "But

you are highly unlikely to ever reach these particular ones. Even if you found a way to store your entire memory and did so in every single restart, you would not come even close to filling the available space inside the memory bank."

Good to know. This gave him some very nice ideas... after all, if he could unload most of the notebooks had he kept in his head into the orb, he could really go wild in recruiting experts and having them continue their work across restarts.

"Do you think the other imperial artifacts have similar abilities?" Zorian asked Zach.

"Probably," agreed Zach. "Hey, Guardian! What about the other pieces? Do they all give us an ability related to the time loop?"

"To find out about the other pieces of the Key, please bring them to me for inspection," the Guardian answered.

Zorian snorted in amusement.

"Yeah, dumb question, I guess," Zach said, clacking his tongue. "But I think they probably do all give an ability. No reason for the orb to be the only one. Now I'm even more anxious to get my hands on these things..."

"No wonder we haven't been able to find a way to place temporary markers or remove people from the time loop," said Zorian after some thought. "No doubt those two abilities are also tied to imperial artifacts. Probably the crown Quatach-Ichl is wearing and that dagger that is in Eldemar's royal treasury."

Zach gave it some thought.

"You may be right," he eventually said. "Which do you think gives what?"

"Well, purely thematically speaking, I'd guess that the knife is what removes people from the time loop," said Zorian. "Which would leave the crown as the artifact that allows for the placement of temporary markers."

"Hm. It does make sense if you think of the temporary markers as subordinate to the main one," Zach mused. "The main marker is the ruler, and the ruler needs a crown."

The Guardian of the Threshold remained silent during this conversation, giving no indication it had heard anything. Pity. Zorian had hoped it might react a bit and therefore indicate how close they were hitting to the truth. He really wondered how that thing was made. It appeared to be a mindless automaton, but some of its responses were sufficiently lifelike that he had trouble treating it as a purely mindless thing.

"Guardian, will you remember that we've already brought you this piece the next time we visit or do we need to bring all five pieces simultaneously to get higher authorization?" Zorian asked.

"You must bring the entire Key if you want higher authorization," the Guardian said.

"Damn," Zach swore.

"We suspected it would be like this," Zorian sighed.

They spent another hour pestering the Guardian about the orb and the memory bank it contained. They didn't find out anything terribly important though, so they eventually disconnected themselves from the Sovereign Gate.

Unlike the first time they had gone here, this time they'd made much more thorough, sophisticated preparations. As such, they didn't find their bodies 'catastrophically damaged' by the time they were ready to leave. Quite the contrary, the researchers left them well enough alone with no mind magic necessary. This was partially because they'd brought much more intimidating forgeries of their credentials and partially because they were trailed by two massive 'bodyguards' that kept watch while they were communicating with the Guardian. The bodyguards were, of course, just particularly lifelike golems that Zorian had made for the occasion. They were actually pretty terrible as far as

golems went, but they looked human enough to fool casual inspection and that was the only thing that mattered. Their only job was to follow them around in utter silence, looking all grim and intimidating.

They didn't immediately leave the time magic research facility. They had come here not just to have a chat with the Guardian of the Threshold, but also because they wanted to make use of the Black Room for the restart.

However, they had made a mistake this time – they decided to bring the orb of the first emperor with them into the Black Room.

It was a tempting idea. If they could bring a portable palace with them into the temporal acceleration area, then it didn't matter much that space was so limited – they could bring everything they needed, even people, inside the orb. The main limitation of the Black Room would be broken. Sure, they still didn't know how to actually enter the pocket dimension contained in the orb, but neither of them thought the procedure would forever elude them. And besides, they didn't need to be able to enter the orb to test the viability of the idea. All they had to do was bring the orb with them into the Black Room and see what would happen.

Well, what happened was that the Black Room shut itself down almost instantly after initiating temporal acceleration.

After an hour of analysis and heated discussion with nervous researchers, Zach and Zorian found out that the price of temporally accelerating an area of space was based on the volume of space being accelerated. By bringing a palace worth of space inside, even inside a pocket dimension, the two of them massively inflated the mana cost of the operation procedure. Not to mention that the facility itself was not designed to handle that kind of strain. As such, the Black Room ran out of mana in less than a second and immediately shut itself down. The researchers, though still somewhat intimidated by them, gave them a severe tongue-lashing for even

trying the idea without consulting them about it beforehand.

Oh, and they were really interested in studying the orb. Zorian actually considered letting them do so, just to see what a group of dedicated researchers like this could tell them about the artifact, but refused their request for the moment. He had to set things up very carefully before giving them the orb, or else he would simply be handing it to the Eldemarian authorities and starting a manhunt for the two of them.

"I wonder if this is true for the time loop as well," Zach mused later, when they were out of the facility. "If we create our own pocket dimensions here, aren't we also increasing the volume that needs to be temporally accelerated and thus creating a strain on the system?"

"Probably," Zorian said. "But the time loop reality is so huge that even if we increased its internal volume a bit by opening additional pocket dimensions, the added power drain should be pretty miniscule. The problem with the Black Room is that it's pretty tiny. The space inside the orb is actually many times larger than the Black Room itself. As such, bringing the orb into the Black Room is like trying to transport an elephant inside a tiny, one-man boat. No matter what clever method you use to make it fit, it still weighs so much it would sink the whole setup. I fear this idea is dead in the water."

"Shame," said Zach. "The orb does a pretty good job of isolating the space inside from the rest of reality, though. That's kind of what the Black Room is meant to accomplish, only better. What if, instead of trying to bring the orb inside the Black Room, we simply ditched the Black Room altogether and retooled the entire facility to apply its temporal acceleration effect on the orb itself? I know the space inside the orb is much more massive than the Black Room, but maybe the effects of a better dimensional boundary overshadow that? And really, even if it produces less drastic

acceleration, I'd rather spend half a month inside a palace than a full month inside a tiny cramped room..."

"An interesting idea," Zorian admitted. "We'd need to get willing cooperation from the staff of the facility to pull something of that scale, though. No way could we pull this off ourselves, especially not on a super-secret research facility financed by the Elde-marian government."

Zorian still made a mental note to revisit the idea later. Perhaps it wasn't very feasible at the moment, but they needed every advantage they could get.



On one unremarkable Sunday morning, Zorian woke up to find Imaya's house under siege.

Well, not a *literal* siege, but the throng of people gathered around the entrance was impressively large and thoroughly blocked anyone's ability to get in or out of the house. Zorian was quite mystified by this, since he couldn't think of anything he had done that would cause such an occurrence.

Zorian joined the other inhabitants of the house, who had awoken far sooner than him, in staring warily through the window at the mass of people surrounding the house. They seemed to be quite a diverse bunch, ranging from simple curious neighbors that had gathered to see what was happening to groups of healers, mages, various guild recruiters and newspaper reporters.

"Dare I ask what this is about?" Zorian asked Imaya, who was nervously wringing her hands as she eyed the gathered crowd with a wary eye.

"It's my fault," Kael spoke up in an embarrassed voice. "I'm sorry."

"What do you mean it's your fault?" Zorian asked curiously. "What did you do exactly?"

"Well, you know how I keep working on better medicines? And how I've been recruiting other alchemists and healers in my work? Well, the results of that effort are getting... kind of impressive. Impressive enough to cause a stir. Especially when they come from someone as young as me with no real backer," Kael explained. He shuffled in place uncomfortably and Kana squeezed herself closer to him, disturbed by the fearful, awkward atmosphere in the room. "I'm really sorry. I hadn't considered this possibility at all."

Zorian shook his head, not really angry at the boy. Part of the blame rested on him too – he should have paid closer attention to what Kael was doing and what kind of attention it was garnering. Though in all honesty, this was just a mild inconvenience for him. He could teleport in and out of the house at will.

"They were initially much more aggressive about trying to get in," Imaya told him. "But those wards you placed on the house stopped them cold so they've been more restrained since then. The wards themselves drew some people here, though. I'm not sure, but I think some people from the Mage Guild are here to talk to you about that..."

It was only then that Zorian remembered that raising heavy wards around a residence required a special permit from the city's mage guild. A permit that Zorian didn't have. He had been warding places so often these days, with zero regard for local laws and customs, that he had almost forgotten that this sort of thing was regulated in most places.

Okay, maybe this was more than just a mild inconvenience...



In the mountains of southern Altazia, there was a fairly famous cave system that surrounded an ancient volcano. The

volcano hadn't been active in over a century, but the caves still held spacious caverns and winding corridors full of lava that never cooled. This was a magically powerful place heavily aligned with fire, and it was absolutely teeming with fire elementals.

And one of those elementals was Kilnfather, the elder fire elemental that Zach and Zorian were currently visiting.

Kilnfather wasn't the oldest of the elder elementals living in this place, but he was the only one even remotely interested in talking with humans. The others lived deep in the lava fields of the volcano cavern system – simply reaching their strongholds would be a monumental task, considering the incredible heat and the omnipresent poisonous fumes of their home environment, and convincing a taciturn elemental to talk with you was a notoriously futile endeavor. So Kilnfather it was.

They met Kilnfather in a wide, spacious cavern of black basalt stone. Steam and poisonous fumes billowed up from the cracks in the floor and walls, but the air was entirely breathable with the aid of the right air filtering spells. As for the temperature, well... it was hot, but not unhealthily so. They could endure it for the few hours the talks would last.

The only thing Zach and Zorian really had to watch for was not to hurt any of the Kilnfather's 'children'...

Kilnfather looked like a giant gecko made out of cooling lava. He was black, with cracked skin that pulsed with inner fire, dimming and brightening in a regular rhythm. His eyes were big, yellow, slitted and shining. Surrounding him was a small throng of smaller black geckos that looked like tiny copies of him. If one looked at the smaller geckos closely enough, however, they would notice they were not elementals like Kilnfather. They were actual living beings.

The black geckoes had been, as far as anyone could tell, just regular animals until Kilnfather had implanted some of his ele-

mental spirit into them, causing them to swell in size and develop powerful fire-based magic. Kilnfather loved his creations with all his heart, to the point where he styled his entire appearance after them, and some people speculated he was trying to shape them into a legitimate sapient species as time went by. He did not tolerate any violence towards his 'beloved children' and would immediately start hostilities with anyone who hurt so much as a scale on their back... and call the rest of the domain's fire elementals for help if he thought he was outmatched.

The trouble was, sometimes these children started hostilities, forcing people to defend themselves... but the Kilnfather didn't care. No matter the circumstances, his children were always in the right.

"Welcome, guests," Kilnfather said, his voice deep and resonant. "Come closer, come closer. Mind my children, please. They can sometimes get a little... overzealous in their welcome, but they always mean well."

"Kilnfather is as welcoming as stories say," Zorian said politely. "Hopefully these two guests will be found worthy of your hospitality. Please accept our gifts."

They directed the floating field of force that carried a small basalt chest towards Kilnfather, forcing it to stop at a respectful distance from the elemental. It opened on its own, revealing a plethora of rare stones and materials that were said to be attractive to fire elementals.

"Oh my, you shouldn't have, you shouldn't have," Kilnfather said, his large, bright yellow tongue darting out his mouth to lick his eyes one by one. "But it would be impolite of me to refuse a gift. What was it that you said you came here for?"

"Well..." began Zorian. "We were wondering if you ever heard of any of the locations where the primordials were imprisoned..."



House Letova was a fairly important House in Falkrinea. They were a new House, having achieved their status due to their knowledge of certain unique potions that nobody else could figure out how to make, but their future looked rather promising. Their potion business was booming, giving them plenty of money to throw around to make themselves heard and boost their political influence in Falkrinea and elsewhere.

Naturally, they guarded the secrets of their alchemy very, very closely. They invested a great deal of their newfound wealth into security, well aware that if their competitors managed to get their hands on their secrets their ascent to greatness would be greatly jeopardized.

Today, Zach and Zorian were trying to break into House Letova's alchemy repository. They weren't doing it because they honestly wanted to steal their alchemical secrets, though Zorian *would* take a look at their records if they succeeded, simply to satisfy his curiosity. No, they were doing it because they wanted to practice their ability to break into secure areas.

The problem was simple. They needed to get the imperial dagger that was stored in the Eldemarian royal palace. However, the palace was way out of their league at the moment. They just didn't have enough experience in breaking into places like that. Thus, Zorian had hit upon the idea of targeting 'minor' Houses, gradually tackling greater and greater challenges until they gathered enough expertise in infiltration to tackle their real goal.

They had already tried their hand at breaking into some wealthy estates, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. House Letova would be their biggest challenge yet.

"You know," Zach had told him before they launched the mission, "I am amused by the fact that you have qualms about stealing

people's secrets by rooting through their minds, but have no problems at all about physically rooting through their stuff."

"It's not the same," Zorian protested.

"I know," Zach said. "And don't get me wrong, it actually sets me at ease that you have some standards about your mind magic usage. I can't help but find it a bit amusing, though."

"You don't seem to have any problems going along with this," Zorian remarked.

"Nah, I've done things like this all the time when I was alone," Zach said dismissively. "Only with less sneaking in and more blasting the door off its hinges and powering through the wards. One of these days we'll have to do these raids my way. It's a rush. I bet you'd love it."

Zorian snorted. "I bet I wouldn't," he countered. "Though maybe you're on to something. Somehow I feel less conflicted about taking people's notebooks, research documentation and the like than I do about taking their thoughts and memories. Mind magic is... something I can do on a whim. It's easy, it's convenient and I don't think I'm a good enough person to resist the temptation to use it all the time if I get into the habit of using it lightly. But this kind of thing... it's terrifying and stressful and takes effort to organize and pull off. I'll probably never feel casual about it."

"Hmm," hummed Zach. "I wouldn't be so sure. Almost anything gets pretty mundane if you do it long enough. But it is true that raids like this aren't something you do on impulse alone. Anyway, we came here to steal alchemical recipes, not to talk philosophy. Are we doing this or not?"

"We're doing it," responded Zorian. "Let's go."



Nine restarts had passed since the restart in which Zach and Zorian had found where the orb of the first emperor was located.

The two of them had worked on their skills, sought out experts and raided places for practice and critical secrets. They expanded their research initiatives massively, making use of the orb's memory bank to store all the research notes that resulted from this, and then found new sources of money and materials to pay for all this. Sudomir was completely interrogated several times and his knowledge of the invasion and soul magic made full use of. They worked with Daimen to get in touch with his friends and colleagues, narrowing down the location for the piece of the Key that was lost in the Xlotic desert. They worked hard to understand and reverse-engineer the Ibasan gate and tried to figure out a faster, easier way to activate the Bakora Gates.

They managed to enter the orb near the end of this period. They had been forced to design a specialized teleportation spell to do so, which took multiple restarts due to the rarity of pocket dimension magic and the corresponding difficulty of finding the right experts and manuals. When they had finally managed to get in, they found that the pocket dimension did contain a teleport platform that served as an in-built entrance... but the platform had broken down a long time ago due to lack of maintenance. Once the platform was fixed, the spell was no longer necessary... but since they were in the time loop, this repair was undone at the end of every restart. Zach and Zorian eventually stopped bothering to repair the platform and just used the spell to enter and leave as they wish. The spell was the superior option anyway, since it allowed them to enter and leave the orb in any location they wished.

As for the contents of the orb... well, they hadn't found any more giant hydras inside, much to Zach's disappointment. They had found a lot of dangerous plants and animals, though, so it was hardly peaceful. They also found a great deal of potions, magical equipment, secret grimoires and valuable materials... virtually all of which had expired, rotted, broken down or were hopelessly

outdated. They had high hopes that there was something good buried in all that trash and rubble, and were still stubbornly combing through it.

Mercifully, the general decay of the place also extended to palace defenses. It was clear the palace had once sported impressive wards and a frankly ridiculous number of traps (giant boulders rolling down the corridors... seriously?), but most of them had broken down over the centuries.

Currently, Zorian was sitting on the grass in the middle of an isolated meadow. Not far from him was a simulacrum absorbed in assembling a magical rifle, tirelessly pondering design improvements and occasionally testing out prototypes on a distant rock. Zorian didn't want to disturb him, but made a mental note to himself to add better sound dampening wards on the final design – those magical rifles he had been building were painfully loud. Though considering how large some of the latest designs were getting, that was to be expected. He had told the simulacrum to design a better rifle, not a portable cannon, dammit!

In any case, Zorian himself was controlling a group of golems against a group consisting of Zach, Alanic, Xvim and Taiven. His four opponents were holding back a lot, or else the golems wouldn't last very long, but that was okay. This wasn't a test of his golem making skills – it was a combat exercise meant to test different tactics and figure out the most effective method of controlling and deploying his golems.

He took advantage of a short pause in the battle to quickly check up on his simulacrum in Koth. These days he no longer needed a long chain of telepathic relays to do so – the soul magic knowledge he got from Sudomir had allowed him to devise a method of establishing telepathic contact with his simulacrums through the soul they all shared. He found out that the simulacrum was busy arranging some kind of trade deal along with

Daimen and left him to his devices.

Eventually the combat exercise ended and the other four joined Zorian in relaxing on the grass.

Well, they *were* relaxing until the simulacrum fired its prototype cannon again and startled them all with another devastating boom.

"Gods, Zorian," Taiven complained. "That thing your copy is building is like a miniature siege engine and you're *still* not satisfied? What on earth do you need a gun like that for?"

Zorian smiled at her.

"We're going to kill a giant spider," he told her. "And then we're going to visit an annoying old woman with its remains..."

THE RETURN

Simulacrum number four was worried. He really shouldn't be, considering what he was and how many times the original had fought the grey hunter by now. If anything, he should be feeling excited – he had a good feeling about this attempt. Their skills had grown, they had become intimately familiar with the grey hunter's capabilities and they had brought a number of surprises designed specifically to counter it. This could work. This could actually work, unlike so many previous attempts they'd made.

Maybe that was it. In their previous attempts, Zorian – and, by extension, simulacrum number four – had always felt the attempt was a long shot. Even if they failed, it was to be expected. This time he actually felt good about their chances, making him more emotionally invested in the outcome.

Then again, they actually had a pressing need for the grey hunter's eggs this time. They could contact Silverlake without them, but talking to Silverlake was going to be much harder and much more annoying if they couldn't bring her something she desperately wanted.

He unconsciously clutched the rifle closer to his chest, the sensation of it dispelling his current stream of thought. He remembered practicing with it over and over, but it still felt a bit alien

to his mind... and so did the arms that held it. He was a brand new type of simulacrum that the original had thought up recently – instead of being embodied into an ectoplasmic shell like a regular simulacrum, he had been attached to a real matter golem body designed to mimic the original. This was a step up from the base spell in just about every regard, granting him vastly increased durability and halving his maintenance cost at the same time. It allowed Zorian to maintain twice the usual number of simulacrums and ensured that they wouldn't be destroyed by relatively minor damage. The only downside was that making the golem bodies was very time consuming, and that the materials were expensive as hell. Or at least that was the idea, anyway. The simulacrum actually felt significantly stiffer and more restricted in his movements than he was used to, a clear sign that his joints weren't working quite as well as the original had hoped they would. No doubt the original would find a way to fix or mitigate these issues as time went by, but that would make no difference for him personally. He really hoped he wouldn't lock up or miss in the actual battle because of this.

Alas, the time for contemplation was over. A short message rippled out of his soul and into his consciousness, informing him (and the other three simulacrums gathered around the area) that the original was about to start the fight. He quickly checked up on his rifle one final time and then sent a confirmation that he was ready through the exact same method, using their shared soul as a conduit for communication. Very convenient, that. The original was already working on further upgrades, based on their studies of the hydra and the cranium rat collective, but that was still in the initial stages and nowhere near ready for field use. For now, 'normal' soul conduit communication would have to suffice.

And then it began. The grey hunter leapt out of its cave and immediately moved to attack Zach and Zorian, completely ignoring

the simulacrum scattered around the area. A swarm of projectiles answered its charge, Zach and Zorian doing their best to keep it pressured without wasting too much of their mana reserves. Zach launched powerful beams of force at it, forcing it to keep dodging and breaking up its momentum. Zorian, on the other hand, borrowed Kirma's trick – holding a greyish metal cube as a spell focus, he launched swarms of smaller, cheaper projectiles that homed in unerringly on the grey hunter's weak points. He timed his attack to coincide with Zach's, forcing the grey hunter to take at least a few hits from every barrage. Although individually weak and unable to truly threaten the grey hunter, they were apparently doing *something* because the spider was clearly getting angrier and more agitated as seconds ticked by.

Simulacrum number four trailed the grey hunter with the scope of his rifle, but did not shoot. The grey hunter was currently ignoring the simulacrum because it did not perceive them as a threat, but that wouldn't last very long if they started blindly firing into the battle zone. No, if he and his duplicate brethren wanted to help Zach and the original, they needed to pick their moment carefully.

The problem with using the gun on the grey hunter wasn't in whether or not it could dodge the bullet. It couldn't. To Zorian's knowledge, nothing was fast enough to dodge a projectile that moved faster than sound itself. The problem was that the spider never sat still long enough to get a good shot on it. Bullets didn't track their target and using magic to make them do so was incredibly difficult. The most Zorian could do was curve their trajectories slightly towards where he wanted them to hit. And the simulacrum didn't just have to hit the grey hunter – they had to hit it in a way that left the egg sack unharmed.

Basically, they needed the grey hunter to stay still for a second. A tall order, but the simulacrum was confident that Zach and the

original could pull it off.

The grey hunter lunged towards Zorian. Zach was a bigger threat, but Zorian was more annoying and probably looked more vulnerable to its senses. If it could get rid of the annoying weakling first, it could then focus its full attention on the true threat and its victory would be assured. But looks could be deceptive. The grey hunter smashed straight into Zorian's shield at full force and was stopped cold. The thick barrier of force that surrounded Zorian was a marvel of spell engineering, a custom spell that Zorian had designed with the help of a dozen professional spell crafters to make maximum use of Zorian's exceptional shaping skills. The softly glowing threads, woven through every inch of the thick sphere of force, lit up like blazing lamps, distributing the incoming force away from the impact points and into the shield as a whole, lessening the strain on any individual point in the shield.

The grey hunter attacked the shield again and again in quick succession, and it finally gave way... but rather than the whole shield shattering, three small hexagons of force broke down instead, leaving the main structure unharmed. Before the grey hunter could take advantage of that the entire shield shifted and automatically rearranged itself, nearby hexagons sliding into place to close the gap.

Suddenly aware that Zorian was no easy target to be brought down quickly, the grey hunter tried to back off, but it was too late. Zach had positioned himself carefully while the grey hunter had been trying to batter down Zorian's shield, and now launched a barrage of three hyper-dense stone spheres at the spider. The grey hunter spun around like an acrobat, deflecting the spheres away from itself with measured kicks, but Zorian took advantage of its predicament to launch a pair of metal cylinders at it. The grey hunter, accustomed to weathering Zorian's annoying but weak attacks and not seeing any great concentration of mana in the cylin-

ders, chose to ignore them in favor of the much more threatening stone spheres.

Just before they were going to impact the grey hunter, the cylinders detonated into a cacophony of sound, bright light, magical disturbances and aromatic smoke – all of it specifically optimized for grey hunter senses.

Dazed and disoriented by the flashbang grenades, the grey hunter stumbled and stopped. Just for a moment.

Simulacrum number four pulled the trigger.

Another deafening blast sounded out, closely followed by two more. Simulacrum number two didn't fire, as he was positioned very inconveniently and there was a danger he could hit the egg sack if he fired. Of the three bullets, one missed the grey hunter completely – simulacrum number one had apparently aimed his shot so poorly that not even the trajectory correcting magics the original placed on the bullet could help. It didn't matter, though – both he and number three had hit the grey hunter straight into its cephalothorax, the bullets had successfully breaking through its carapace.

It was a testament to the grey hunter's toughness that, mere moments following this, it shook off the stun effect and retreated at top speed, as if it hadn't just been shot twice in the head with high-caliber armor-piercing bullets. But it didn't matter. It was living on borrowed time – from the moment those bullets sank into its flesh, its fate was sealed. The bullets were filled with the distilled essence of the crystal ooze – a magical creature every bit as powerful as the grey hunter, whose touch turned all flesh into inert crystal. The crystallization bullets, as Zorian called them, were already turning the grey hunter's organs into lifeless crystal, and there was nothing the spider could do about it.

They grey hunter seemed to realize it too. It went berserk, lunging at Zach and Zorian with even greater zeal, and then tried

to flee. They couldn't allow that, of course. If it escaped, it would doubtlessly retreat into the deep dungeon and hide before dying, and other denizens of the dungeon might eat the egg sack before they could track down its corpse. Thus, walls of stone and force sprang up to bar its path, ectoplasmic threads and tentacles sought to entangle it and dimensional gates barred the path to its lair.

Eventually, the internal crystallization process advanced too far for the grey hunter to keep functioning and it started to visibly slow and then stop. Simulacrum number four and his fellow duplicates were then sent in to hack it apart and claim the egg sack, because the original was too much of a coward to do it himself. Then again, the grey hunter did mangle one of the simulacrums beyond repair as its last act before dying, so maybe he shouldn't judge.

But anyway... the grey hunter was dead... and the egg sack was still intact.

It was time to visit Silverlake again. After some thought, simulacrum number four wandered off from the grey hunter's corpse and sought out the original to talk to him about visiting the old witch. He was so looking forward to seeing her reaction when she realized what they had done, and it wasn't fair that he wouldn't get to see it just because he was a simulacrum! He was the one that shot the grey hunter! Well, he and number three, but number three ended up being killed by the grey hunter's last hurrah.

He totally earned this and was not taking no for an answer.



After securing the corpse of the grey hunter, Zorian and his simulacrums went about carefully removing the egg sack attached to its underbelly without damaging it – a task far harder than Zorian would initially have assumed it would be. Then again, the egg

sack had stayed attached to the grey hunter while it was doing all sorts of sharp movements and acrobatics, so it was a bit silly of him to assume he could just peel it off the spider as he wished. Still, it was nothing that Zorian and his duplicates couldn't solve with a bit of time and analysis. After an hour or so, they finally managed to separate the egg sack from the corpse without ruining it.

They immediately set off to see Silverlake. They had no idea what it took to keep the eggs alive in the long term, after all, so it was better to deliver them to Silverlake as soon as possible. They also kept the grey hunter's corpse, stashing it in the orb of the first emperor. Much of its value was ruined when its insides crystalized, but there should still be enough of it for a potion or two.

After some reasoned and totally calm discussion, Zorian also decided to take simulacrum number four with him to see Silverlake. Being accompanied by a simulacrum might help him convince her that he wasn't just a precocious teenage mage and that she should actually take him seriously.

In any case, tracking down Silverlake's home wasn't hard this time around. She may have hidden it in a pocket dimension, but Zorian knew the general area it was in and had specialized divinations that could find such things. They didn't try to break into the pocket dimension, though. That would have been threatening and rude. Instead, they got her attention in a more civilized manner – by taking the grey hunter's corpse out of the orb and parading it around the pocket dimension entrance while chanting her name.

It didn't take long before she decided to come out to meet them. She gave the dead grey hunter a quick, intrigued look before seemingly ignoring it in favor of focusing on them instead. She remained standing next to the entrance to her pocket dimension, though, a long iron rod clutched tightly in her bony fingers.

"Hello," Zach said, giving her a sunny smile and a casual wave of his hand.

"What a curious bunch of visitors you are," Silverlake said, unmoved by his friendliness. "It's not every day that two baby mages manage to track me down to this place... and is that a simulacrum attached to a golem frame? My, aren't you a clever sort."

"Well, you're a pretty clever sort yourself," Zorian noted. "You figured out what my simulacrum is without casting any obvious analysis spells."

He really meant that, too. Certainly he couldn't pull off something like that. He'd have to spend several minutes casting analytical divinations before he could work out what he was dealing with. Granted, she may have done that before she stepped out of her pocket dimension, but it was still impressive.

"Well? Out with it," Silverlake demanded. "Why are you bothering this old woman in the middle of her afternoon nap, making all this racket?"

"We have come to trade!" Zach said in an equally cheery tone, undaunted by her wariness.

"We have killed the grey hunter and retrieved its eggs fully intact," Zorian said without preamble, waving his hand at the corpse of the giant spider on the ground next to them. His simulacrum, meanwhile, casually extracted the grey hunter's eggs from the box he was carrying, letting Silverlake see them. Her eyes immediately lit up with greed and excitement. She hid it quite quickly, but it was there. "We thought you might be interested in them."

"Oh? And why did you think that?" Silverlake asked him, inclining her head to the side, like a bird that spotted something interesting.

"Because you told me so in the past," Zorian said blandly.

"Because I told you so in the past," Silverlake repeated slowly, looking at him like he was stupid. "What a curious thing to say. Old I may be, but my memory is still going strong... and I don't remember ever talking to you."

Zach and Zorian had discussed extensively what to tell Silverlake before coming to this place. Telling her the truth about the time loop was dangerous, because she was likely proficient in both soul and mind magic. She was a highly capable witch, after all, and they were famous for dabbling in both of those fields. However, convincing her to help them through lies and manipulations would take a long time... and time was, amusingly enough, something they had a chronic shortage of. Thus, they had unanimously decided to just tell the annoying old witch the truth and see how she reacted. Even if she was hostile, they could *probably* handle it.

Probably.

"You don't remember because the world we live in is constantly repeating itself. On the night of the summer festival, the world ends. Everything reverts to how it was the month before, and then carries on as if nothing was wrong. Like an endlessly repeating music box, you repeat your actions over and over in month-long intervals... constantly forgetting, constantly starting over," Zorian explained, being deliberately a little melodramatic and mysterious.

Silverlake listened to his explanation with an arched eyebrow, looking surprised and amused in equal measure.

"My word, you came all this way just to deliver this kind of tall tale to me?" Silverlake said, chuckling lightly. "I suppose I can understand where you're coming from. I have been told, on occasion, that I am rather repetitive in my arguments."

"It's not just you," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Everyone is reliving this month over and over. Only me and Zach here are immune."

"Oh, but of course!" Silverlake said, slapping herself in the forehead. "Of course it's like that! No doubt I too can get this kind of immunity at very favorable prices, thus saving myself from this awful, awful fate of... repeating myself for all eternity? I must say, the scammers these days are getting really inventive."

"Actually, there is nothing we can do to help you retain awareness of previous restarts," Zach said, clacking his tongue unhappily. "Kind of depressing, but there you go. We're not here for that. As I have noted earlier, we're here to trade – the grey hunter's eggs in exchange for magical help."

Silverlake stayed silent for a second.

"Ah, I see," she finally said. "This is just you answering my question. I asked how you knew I needed the grey hunter's eggs and you gave me an answer. I supposed if I asked you for an actual explanation...?"

"This is an actual explanation," Zorian said. "It's not my fault you don't believe me."

"Hmph," Silverlake scoffed. "Out of curiosity, during this conversation that I have no memory of, did I ever actually tell you what I needed the grey hunter's eggs *for*?"

"No, you did not," Zorian admitted. "To be honest, I was rather angry with you back then and didn't inquire too deeply. I came to you for help with a pressing problem and you sent me on all sorts of tasks, all of which I did without complaint. But my only reward was to be told to go after the grey hunter for its eggs. I was a lot weaker back then, so that basically amounted to sending me on an impossible task in order to get rid of me."

"That does sound like something I would do," Silverlake nodded sagely. "Which brings me to my next point – why are you so certain that I actually desire these eggs? Maybe I just sent you on a fool's errand to waste your time, and didn't actually care about the outcome."

Well, the truth was that Zorian didn't know this for certain. He was making an educated guess, based on things like her clearly having tried to acquire the eggs herself in the past. But she didn't have to know that.

"I'm an empath," he told her. "So I am certain you *do* want these

eggs very, very much."

Silverlake scowled at him.

"A mind mage," she spat out in disgust. "I have the most rotten luck, I swear. I only like mind magic when I'm the one using it on others! Fine, fine, I admit it, I do want the grey hunter's eggs... but they're not as valuable as you might hope!"

"Meaning?" Zorian asked calmly.

"I have an important project that requires them, but it's only one of the two critical components that I lack. If you had brought both of them, I would really be desperate to make a deal with you. But it's a shame, a shame, for without the other critical component, the eggs are merely... *interesting*."

Zach rolled his eyes at her.

"You're just like Zorian described you," he said. "Every time one of your tasks is accomplished, you come up with another one."

"Well that's not very fair," she said reasonably. "I don't remember ever giving you a task, after all. But that aside, I never said I will not trade for the eggs. I just said you better not hope to swindle something actually good from me in exchange for something that minor."

'Minor', she says. Right.

"Out of curiosity, what is this other critical component?" Zorian asked.

"Bones and certain organs of a giant brown salamander that has grown past a certain size," Silverlake said.

"That's it?" Zach asked incredulously. "Those things are everywhere around here!"

"It's not as simple as it sounds," Silverlake said. "Yes, there are plenty of them to be found in the rivers and creeks around us, but they simply aren't big enough... not *mature* enough. Giant brown salamanders never die of old age, you see. They simply get bigger. But they are a fairly weak type of magical creature, and they grow

really slowly past a certain point, so almost none of them reach the size I need them to be. I need a salamander that has survived for at least one hundred years, and that's incredibly rare."

"They can't be bred in captivity?" Zach asked.

Silverlake looked at him like he just asked the dumbest thing ever.

"Who would be willing to wait a hundred years for a creature to grow up?" she asked. "Nobody has that much time, boy. Besides, they'd probably all get sick and die before the hundred years are up. I have no idea how to go about raising giant salamanders."

Zorian couldn't help but remember how his first meeting with Silverlake had gone. If he remembered correctly, he had just been attacked by a particularly large giant brown salamander and had killed it in self-defense. This was the catalyst that had caused Silverlake to finally reveal herself to him. Back then he had blithely given her the salamander corpse, not even realizing how valuable it was... and Silverlake, after receiving something so apparently valuable from him, *still* decided to send him on a bunch of fool's errands without even hearing him out.

That withered old *bitch*!

"Let's stop dancing around the issue for a moment," Zorian said, swallowing down his annoyance in favor of actually accomplishing something. "This is our offer: the grey hunter's egg sack in exchange for a month's worth of instruction in pocket dimension creation. What do you say?"

"Oh? Pocket dimension creation?" Silverlake said contemplatively, tapping her chin with her index finger. "So that's what you're after. That's a pretty exotic and high-level skill. Are you sure you're even capable of learning it?"

Oh, good – she didn't deny she possessed the skill in question. Zorian had kind of been afraid that her hideout was just something she had found through luck and that she wasn't actually capable

of creating pocket dimensions herself. It would have been a pain trying to find someone else who had that kind of expertise.

In any case, Zorian didn't try to convince Silverlake with words – instead, he simply opened a dimensional gateway straight to Koth right then and there. Silverlake was instantly on guard when he started casting a spell, but didn't try to stop him. About half-way through, she seemed to realize what he was doing and relaxed. Instead, she got an intrigued look on her face, especially when the dimensional passage itself sprang into existence beside Zorian.

She circled the gate a few times, peering intently at it, before turning to Zorian again.

"Well, you are full of surprises. I don't think I've ever seen such a stable, well-crafted dimensional passage," Silverlake reluctantly admitted.

Zorian smiled. That was only natural. After all, Zorian's gate creation skills were a fusion of more orthodox gate creation skills that Xvim had taught him, as well as the insights Zorian had made from studying the Ibasan permanent gates and seeing the Bakora Gates in action. He doubted many people had had the opportunity to study so many different gate creation methods.

"As you can see, I'm quite good at dimensionalism," Zorian said. "And so is my friend Zach, here. You don't have to worry about us not being able to follow your instructions."

"Well that's good," Silverlake said with a wide, happy grin. "Then that just leaves the question of payment. You see... I don't think the grey hunter's eggs will be enough to pay for this."

Zorian didn't bat an eye at this. He'd fully expected Silverlake to discard their initial offer and reach out for more. Someone as greedy and insatiable as she was would never agree to a person's first offer.

It was good then, that he had many more things to offer.

"I could dispute that, but I am feeling generous today," said Zorian. He motioned for Zach to take out the orb of the first emperor, which he promptly did. "What my friend is holding is a portable pocket dimension holding an ancient ruin. It's a lost artifact from the Age of Gods, probably impossible to reproduce in modern times. If you agree to this deal, we will allow you to study the artifact for the duration of our lessons. I'm sure you can imagine how beneficial this could be for your own pocket dimension creation skills."

Silverlake clearly could imagine, because she stared at the orb with such intensity that Zorian was afraid she would attack them both on the spot and try to take it from them. But after a few seconds, she shook her head and tore her eyes away from the orb.

"Throw in that modified Gate spell of yours and we have a deal," Silverlake said.

"Ah, no, I can't agree to that," said Zorian with fake sadness. "Still, that spell isn't completely out of the question... if you agree to some additional concessions."

Silverlake scowled at him, but Zorian completely ignored her displeasure. If she could be greedy, so could he. He could tell she really wanted that Gate spell, so why not get everything he could out of it?

"I suppose you have something specific in mind?" she asked him.

"I want to acquire the ability of soul perception," Zorian said. "And unfortunately, the potion made out of dirge moth chrysalises is not an option."

"Yes, that potion doesn't keep well at all," Silverlake confirmed. "It can last six months at most, and even that's pushing it. But really, why are you bothering me with such a minor request? Just go kill some people. That's how nearly all necromancers get that ability these days. Even if you have no talent whatsoever at soul magic,

you should be able to get it after twenty or so sacrifices.”

“That isn’t an option,” Zorian said, glaring at her lightly. “At all. If I have to ritually murder people to get the ability, I’d rather give up on the idea.”

“Bah,” Silverlake spat. “What’s a touchy-feely, squeamish kid like you trying to get soul perception for, then? You’ll never achieve anything worth a damn in soul magic with *that* attitude.”

“I may need it to save my life,” Zorian told her. “It’s not something you need to worry about. The question is: can you do it? Can you make me a potion that can grant me soul perception in less than a month’s time?”

“Hmph,” Silverlake scoffed. “Do you even know how difficult it is to acquire soul perception through a mere potion?”

“Yes,” Zorian said decisively. “I really do. That’s why I came to you for help.”

Truthfully, most of what Zorian knew about that came from Sudomir, who had been extensively interrogated for his knowledge in previous restarts. Alanic contributed some, but the scarred battle priest was cagey about his knowledge of necromancy and outright admitted to be inferior to Sudomir in that regard. Anyway... apparently, all souls had some measure of soul perception in them by default, but it was tightly locked and unavailable for use. Alanic’s explanation for this was that soul perception was something the gods intended to be only activated after death, to help guide the soul to its destination, and that its premature activation on the material plane was ‘dangerously tempting’. Thus, the gods sealed it away until death, lest it lead people to heresy and sin. Sudomir’s explanation was that this ability was something inherent to souls themselves, and that the gods had selfishly sealed it away because they were afraid of humanity’s power and ingenuity. Considering necromancers tended to be wildly immoral, Zorian was kind of leaning towards Alanic’s side of the argument.

It didn't matter, though. Even Alanic admitted that soul perception wasn't evil by itself. The Triumvirate Church urged people not to deliberately seek it out, but at the same time they encouraged its use among their priesthood. Every high-ranking priest and quite a few lower-ranking ones had some measure of soul perception. With the disappearance of the gods, the Triumvirate Church had to find a way to make up for their loss of divinely-granted powers... and granting soul perception abilities to their priesthood on a mass scale was one of the methods used. It was the Triumvirate Church who developed and perfected the dirge moth potion – the most affordable and reliable alchemical method of gaining soul perception to date. It was just that the recipe for the potion was so simple and distributed so widely that it eventually leaked outside the Church hierarchy and became wildly employed in necromantic circles.

Zorian once felt it was strange that a potion only available in 23-year intervals would be so attractive to people... but then he found a fragmentary recipe for an alternative potion in Sudomir's memories and immediately realized why. The ingredients required absolutely couldn't be acquired either in stores or on the black market. These were the sort of things one needed to personally seek out in the wild and dangerous corners of the world... and most of the ingredients came attached to creatures possessing some method of attacking the soul. Even for Zach and Zorian those things were a major danger. In order to make a potion outlined in Sudomir's memories, one would have to possess top-notch connections or a great deal of time to track down all the ingredients, have enough power to claim them, and then find someone with enough alchemical skill to make a complicated potion they had probably never made in their life and succeed on their first try.

On top of that, all such potions were based on the same basic

principle – they brought the imbibor on the very brink of death, only to pull them back at the very last moment. Very much like that ‘special training’ Alanic had put him through, only even more extreme. Needless to say, if you made that kind of potion incorrectly, you were highly likely to die on the spot after drinking it. Dirge moths may only come every twenty-three years, but they were rather abundant when they did show up, thus allowing alchemists to actually practice with the ingredients.

Of course, there were other methods of getting soul perception. They just weren’t very useful for him.

For instance, one could simply be born with it. Some people had innate soul sight, called ‘ghost eyes’ by the scholars, much like he had been born innately empathic and capable of instinctive mind magic. He obviously wasn’t one of these. Some people, after almost dying, unlocked the ability by accident. But this was something that couldn’t be counted on, since nobody knew how that really worked. Finally, there was a really simple, accessible method involving a sacrificial ritual. All one needed to do was forge a temporary soul bond with a person and then kill them. Slowly. While keeping them conscious, because of course it wouldn’t work otherwise. This was the method Sudomir used, and the method that most budding necromancers used, since it was cheap and easy to set up.

Having experienced what the procedure entailed from Sudomir’s memories, Zorian knew he didn’t have what it took to go through that. He was, as Silverlake said, way too squeamish to basically torture a dozen people to death.

“If you know how difficult those potions are, then surely you understand that making one of those in a month is nonsense, even for me. Just gathering the ingredients alone–”

“Whatever ingredients you need, we will procure for you,” said Zach, cutting her off. “You only need to put them together into

something that works.”

“Hmm,” Silverlake said, humming to herself thoughtfully. “You did kill the grey hunter while not damaging its egg sack in the slightest. That speaks well of your combat skills. Still, gathering ingredients for an old-fashioned soul perception potion will require you to have at least elementary soul defenses.”

“We have those,” Zach told her.

“You do?” she asked, sounding surprised. “Well fine then. So long as you take care of ingredient collection, I guess I can make you a potion of soul perception. But only that! I will not give you the recipe or allow you to watch the creation process itself.”

“Acceptable,” Zorian nodded. He waited for a few seconds, but it did not seem like she would say anything else. “So, do we have a deal then? In exchange for the grey hunter’s eggs, research access to the portable pocket dimension in our possession and my expertise with the Gate spell, you agree to teach us pocket dimension creation and make us a potion of soul perception.”

Silverlake stood silently, mulling the deal in her head. She frowned and grimaced to herself, occasionally breaking into indecipherable muttering and strange gestures. Zorian watched her suspiciously, worried that she was trying to slip in some stealthy spellcasting in all that nonsense, but it all seemed to be completely innocuous. Well, as innocuous as that kind of unstable behavior could be, anyway.

“I have a question,” she finally said. Zorian motioned her to continue. “Earlier, you told me that wild story about this month endlessly repeating itself and how I lose all memory of it while you don’t. Wouldn’t that mean that everything I gain in this deal is illusory, while everything *you* gain from it will actually stay with you?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in that,” Zorian remarked.

"Let's pretend I do for a moment," Silverlake said without batting an eye. "Am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong," Zorian shook his head. "In the grand scheme of things, this deal heavily favors us. Everything you gain will be gone at the end of this month, while the knowledge we gain and the unlocking of my soul perception will stay with us for future use."

"Then... don't you think it's stupid to tell me that?" Silverlake asked him curiously. She didn't seem to be actually angry, merely interested in the logic he used to arrive to his decision. "I mean, I don't actually believe that nonsense you're spouting, but if I did, it would make me totally unwilling to accept this deal of yours."

"I'm thinking towards the future," Zorian told her calmly. "It's not possible for me to absorb your pocket dimension creation skills in less than a month. We both know this. I will be coming over here with this same deal again and again, and I'll need to continue from where we left off in the previous restart. I might be able to fool you at first with lies of having learned the basics from someone else, but that will quickly get untenable. At some point, I will have to explain how I know skills that are obviously yours... even though you don't remember teaching me."

"Well, that's all good but... how does this help you *right now*?" Silverlake asked expectantly.

"Right now would be a good time to discover something I can use to convince the future you I am telling the truth," Zorian said. "You might not believe me, exactly, but you're clearly willing to entertain the idea for a time... as your current line of questioning amply proves."

She scowled at him, but he ignored her displeasure.

"Basically, I am hoping you will eventually tell me something that I can show off to your future self in order to convince her that the time loop is real and we really have met before... even if she

has no memory of it.”

Silverlake stared at him for a moment before breaking into cackling laughter.

Zorian sighed. He really didn't see what was so funny about that.

“Boy, you are madder than I am!” She finally wheezed out, punching herself in the chest a couple of times to get her laughing under control. “Anyway, I *accept* your deal! And since I'm in a good mood right now, I'll throw in a reward for you! You want a secret? I'll give you a good one. The reason I need those grey hunter's eggs and the body of a hundred-year-old giant salamander is because I'm working on a potion of youth.”

“You're trying to stave off death from old age?” Zach asked, surprised. “Wow. That's an incredibly advanced skill. I heard from Zorian you were a master alchemist, but I didn't know you were *that* good.”

“Silly boy,” Silverlake chuckled. “I'm not trying to stave off old age. I already have *that*.”

They were both struck speechless at the admission. An immortal!?

“Ha ha!” Silverlake cackled. “Surprised, aren't you? Yes, I could persist like this indefinitely. Don't get fooled by my dashing good looks – I'm positively ancient.”

“How ancient?” Zach asked cautiously.

“It's impolite to inquire about a lady's age,” she said with mock bashfulness. “But it's a three digit number, I can tell you that much. Anyway, I did a fine job of stopping time from ravaging my body, but this isn't good enough for me. I want my youth back. And with those spider eggs you brought me, I'm only one step away from that goal.”

A short silence descended on the scene, Zach and Zorian being at a loss what to say about that.

"Pretty good secret, isn't it?" Silverlake said.

She told them all this just so she could brag about how amazing she was, didn't she?

"Yes," Zorian coughed. "Yes, it is. Anyway, about this trade..."

"Come back here two days from now," Silverlake said dismissively. "You came here completely unannounced, so you've caught me completely unprepared. My house is a total mess right now, completely unsuitable for entertaining guests. I need to get some extra chairs out of the basement, dust off the furniture and maybe prepare some refreshments. I think I still have some of that mushroom cake I experimented with a few years back. I know that sounds a little dodgy, but it keeps really well and it gives you such wonderful dreams..."

"The eggs stay with us until we meet again, then," Zorian warned her, completely ignoring her banter.

"Hmph," Silverlake scoffed. "Fine, be that way. Paranoid brats. Make sure to stash them in a dry, dark place with plenty of ambient mana around or they'll get ruined and the deal will be off!"

"I'll keep that in mind," Zorian nodded. The eggs were a lot simpler to preserve than he feared, then. "Just to make sure, this thing is safe, right? The eggs won't hatch in a few hours and release a bunch of tough little spider monsters everywhere, right?"

"No, no, no... well, they *shouldn't*..." Silverlake said, hesitating slightly.

"We're stashing them well away from any populated areas," Zach said decisively. "And when we go to retrieve it, we're sending one of your simulacrums in first."

"Hey!" the simulacrum currently present protested.

"Stop that," Silverlake snapped at them. "It will be fine. Trust me."

All three of them gave Silverlake an unamused look, clearly telling her how they felt about her reliability and trustworthiness.

"Kids these days, no respect for their elders..." she muttered angrily. "Well, off with you then! Go away. This has been such a pleasant meeting thus far, it's best to end things on a high note. Don't forget to bring gifts the next time we meet! Honestly, I can't believe you two came to visit someone and didn't even bring them a bottle of brandy or something. Don't you know that gift-giving is an important tradition? No, don't answer that, I was just lecturing you, not actually asking you for your opinion. Go. Shoo!"

And thus their meeting with Silverlake ended – with her shooing them away like a bunch of naughty cats loitering around her backyard. Still, they'd largely achieved what they came for, so Zorian was happy.

He just hoped she was actually going to keep to her end of the bargain.



When Zach and Zorian came to visit Silverlake again, she was standing next to a humble cottage, messily butchering a pair of giant brown salamanders. These were smaller specimens, incomparable to the giant that had tried to eat Zorian so long ago, so Zorian assumed they were not the sort she needed to complete her potion of youth... but apparently she still had some use for even younger salamanders. In any case, she welcomed them with a wide smile and an immediate demand to hand over the spider eggs. They did so, patiently waiting as she ignored them entirely for over a minute in favor of inspecting the eggs for damage and whatever else she was looking for. She ushered them into her cottage, which proved to be less of an actual cottage and more of a disguise for the entrance to her pocket dimension.

Well, the *inner layer* of her pocket dimension. The cottage itself was also hidden in its own pocket dimension, which is why

Zorian couldn't find it by just wandering the forest. But the cottage dimension was just the outer layer of her hidden world, one that could be deployed (thereby becoming actually accessible to visitors) and compressed (seemingly disappearing from the world entirely) on a whim. Nested inside this cottage dimension was another, bigger pocket dimension, which served as Silverlake's actual home and base of operations.

In Silverlake's own words, the cottage was 'just a front to fool idiot visitors'.

As for the contents of the inner layer, it consisted of three things: a nice, luxurious two-story house, an expansive herb garden full of rare magical plants and a heavily warded alchemical workshop where she did most of her work.

Yes, a powerful witch that was clearly very proud of her traditions and made distinctions between alchemy and 'potion making' had a fully equipped alchemical workshop that would be familiar to any conventional alchemist out in the major cities. Zorian couldn't help but find that a little amusing.

It had been five days since then, and thus far Silverlake was keeping to her side of the deal. Zorian was afraid she would try to shirk her duties as an instructor, giving them inscrutable training regimens that weren't certain to work before disappearing into her workshop for the rest of the day, but this didn't happen. Probably because they were deep inside her home base and there was a real danger that they could torch her home and herb garden if they felt cheated by her. Or maybe because she really wanted the Gate spell modifications and knew that the level of cooperation she could expect out of Zach and Zorian in regards to that would directly correlate to the level of dedication she showed when teaching them how to make pocket dimensions. Whatever her reasons, Silverlake actually gave them long, exhaustive explanations and even created a few fist-sized pocket spaces in front of them as a demonstration.

Creating a pocket dimension was deceptively simple. The basic idea was to stretch and fold a chosen volume of space into a miniature spatial bottle and sort of... cap it. This 'cap' was called the anchor point and it prevented the folded space from snapping back into its natural form the moment it was no longer being forced into shape, as space was naturally wont to do. After that, the pocket dimension could be gradually inflated to the maximum size the anchor point could bear.

Obviously, the creation of an anchor point was the most important part of pocket dimension creation. It was the place where the dimension was connected to the main reality, and served as both an entrance and as a foundation upon which the stability of the dimension ultimately rested. Its size, power and sophistication determined how big and stable a pocket dimension could be. If it was ever destroyed, the dimension attached to it would quickly meet the same fate.

Neither Zach nor Zorian had yet managed to successfully create a stable anchor point, no matter how minor. The process was every bit as hard as learning how to cast the Gate spell, except it required even more mana and attention to detail. Zorian was somewhat annoyed to realize that Zach would probably get the grasp of the ability far sooner than he would, simply because he had far more mana to burn on training than Zorian did.

It didn't help that Zorian had heavily stunted his ability to recover mana by maintaining six different simulacrum. Funny how he invented a brand new method of using simulacrum, halving the maintenance cost of each one... and then promptly doubled the amount of simulacrum he kept going at any particular time.

Currently, Zorian was sitting on the ground in the Silverlake's pocket dimension, reviewing reports from his simulacrum while he waited for his mana reserves to recover. One of the simulacrum was in Koth, brainstorming how to get to the other

pieces of the Key with Daimen. Another was raiding the academy library for restricted theory books on advanced dimensionalism. The third one was arranging a trade deal with one of the minor experts they were approaching for work. The fourth and fifth ones were working on upgrades to the simulacrum's golem frames. Not quite something he'd invest so heavily in normally, but he had little choice – all simulacrums went on a strike until he agreed to permanently station two of the copies on that particular task.

Finally, the sixth and last simulacrum was working on something very delicate and possibly dangerous – mental enhancements.

It was pretty low-key for now. He didn't want an insane copy of him rampaging around, or worse, going after him. Additionally, the simulacrums were still essentially him, which meant they were not at all okay with thoughtlessly risking their minds. Taking into account the possible risks to his own safety, and the disturbing possibility that his own simulacrums might mutiny if he pushed things too far in this direction, Zorian had ordered the last simulacrum to limit himself to self-inflicted illusions for now. Things like figuring out how to block out noise and other distractions, add highlights and reminders to his perception, and so on. It was a very orthodox, very *safe* sub-field of mental enhancements. Because it only modified the caster's senses, not their thoughts and emotions, there was only so much one could mess up, and little of it was unfixable. Human mages had done quite a lot of work in this regard, mostly because they had been trying to make divinations that could display their output through illusions projected on the caster's senses. Of course, Zorian also consulted the various aranean webs too. The Luminous Advocates and Perfect Phantasm Crafters were the two webs most helpful to this project, though he had also received notable help from several otherwise minor webs such as Band of Fog and Dreaming Refuge.

"Boy, I told you to keep an eye on that cauldron," Silverlake snapped at him, breaking him out of his thoughts. "It's going to boil over if you keep daydreaming like that. Quit it. It's unprofessional."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted unhappily, throwing a glance at the huge iron cauldron to his left. Silverlake did basically rope him into helping her with her alchemy – sorry, *potion making* – while he recovered. However it was only supposed to be for 10 minutes and she had only come back now to take over, after at least half an hour had passed.

"We never agreed I would be your personal assistant when we made the trade. I should start charging you for these things," Zorian muttered, just loud enough for her to hear him. She pretended he didn't say anything. He raised his voice at her. "What is that cauldron even doing? If you're going to recruit me in your projects, you should at least tell me what's going on."

"It's an experiment," Silverlake said distractedly, too busy cleaning some kind of carrot-like wild root to look him in the eye while speaking. "I'm sure you noticed me chopping up those runty salamanders in the last few days. I'm trying to artificially concentrate the salamander's regenerative essence to see if I can create a workable substitute for the hundred-year-old salamander that I lack. Probably won't work, but eh. It's worth a try."

"Regenerative essence?" Zorian said, frowning. "Is that what the giant salamander is for?"

"Of course," Silverlake said. "They can regrow anything, repair any damage. If you carve them carefully enough, both halves will regrow into fully healthy, functional copies. Useful thing, that. Most healing magic simply enhances and accelerates the body's natural healing abilities, so it doesn't work well on some wounds. The salamander's regenerative essence, if concentrated enough and combined with some other ingredients... why, it

might even turn back the clock and undo the effect of old age!"

"Hmm," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. Okay, so this was slightly more interesting than he assumed. Still.. "So why are you doing it like this, doing the procedure under the open sky, in a simple iron cauldron? You have an alchemy workshop that nearly every professional alchemist would be envious of. Why not use it?"

"Hmph. Shows what you know," Silverlake said. "I'm doing it this way because this is the superior option. It's good enough for the job. Doing this with a complicated alchemical setup wouldn't get stuff done any faster or give better results – it would just inflict wear and tear on delicate equipment and be a nightmare to clean up afterwards."

Zorian had nothing to say to that. Her argument did make a lot of sense, after all.

They both stayed silent for a while. Eventually Silverlake finally finished preparing the wild roots and unceremoniously dumped them into the boiling cauldron. She watched the liquid bubble for a few seconds, before nodding sagely to herself and adding a couple of wooden planks to the fire.

"Do you know what the difference between alchemy and potion making is, boy?" Silverlake asked suddenly, glancing at him with narrowed eyes.

Zorian was tempted to tell her that potion making was just a subset of alchemy, but he knew she would consider that a wrong answer.

She was asking about potion making in the sense that ancient witches understood it, not in the sense that was currently taught in schools.

"Potion making focuses on using a cauldron, and nothing else, to make their wares," Zorian said.

"Yes," Silverlake agreed. "Sounds very foolish, doesn't it? A

botched potion can release clouds of poisonous or mutagenic gas, explode in your face or splash all over you and melt your skin. Hell, a correctly made potion can be just as bad! Very often, old witches carried a mark of their minor failures in the form of scars, strange odors and skin diseases from the years of exposure to magical fumes and concoctions. Modern alchemy is so much safer, so much more *precise*. Why, then, do you think the old witches do things in the way they did?"

Zorian cocked his head to the side, trying to figure out what she was getting at. What's that got to do with anything?

"Because it was... cheaper?" he tried.

"Ha. Close," Silverlake said. "It's because alchemy, in its current form, requires an entire society built to enable it. Somebody has to build all the vials, containers, heaters, and other equipment. Somebody needs to grow, gather and track down the ingredients used in it. Somebody needs to transport and distribute it to those that need it... or have the right connections to use it. Somebody needs to guard the workshops full of valuable equipment from thieves and various miscreants. The old witches had access to none of that, so they had to make do with chucking things into a big iron cauldron and eyeballing things. It is, as you said, cheaper. Cheaper in terms of money and also cheaper in terms of social infrastructure needed to support it."

"I see," Zorian said after a while.

"These days there are virtually no witches that do not use alchemy in some form, in addition to their traditional cauldron-based skills," Silverlake continued. "The ancient covens would have considered us all heretics, I bet. But the ancient covens have all died out to my knowledge, and that's hardly an accident. Times change. The covens didn't and paid the price for it. Alchemy has its place... as does potion making. Don't be so quick to look down on it."

"You made that entire long-winded speech just to deliver that little lecture at the end of it, didn't you?" Zorian huffed in annoyance.

"You're going to remember it better this way," Silverlake cackled. She prodded the bubbling liquid in the cauldron with an iron ladle she used to mix it. "Well, whatever, I think we can leave this be for a few hours. You recovered yet, boy? I say, you sure take your time with your rest – it's a miracle you got this far with such an awful work ethic. Why, when I was your age, we..."

Zorian sighed and got up, doing his best to drown out her moralizing. He sent a quick message through his soul to the simulacrum working on implementing sensory filters, telling it to work quickly. He was going to need those skills as soon as possible.

SOUL STEALER

The great wilderness that existed in the north of Altazia was a place that contained many rare and valuable things. Exotic natural resources, interesting locations, magical plants and animals extinct in the south... all of those and more could be located if one was willing to spend time searching for them and was strong enough to survive deep in the untamed mountains and forests. This wasn't because the northern wilderness was particularly blessed in natural resources and magical hot-spots, of course, but simply because most of it had never been settled and systematically exploited by human societies. The southern areas had once had these kinds of things as well, but the spread of civilization and rising number of mages had caused many of them to disappear. Mines were depleted, forests chopped down and turned into farmlands, Dungeon openings sealed away or turned into carefully-regulated mana wells, delicate areas destroyed through war or short-term greed and dangerous plants and animals deliberately hunted to extinction. After all, nobody wanted to live next to a man-eating magical tiger or a walking tree that periodically planted itself in your field and ruined the crops, no matter how valuable they were to some mage in the neighboring country.

Such was the case with the plant that Zach and Zorian were currently after. The soulseizer chrysanthemum, as it was called, was one of the rare entities that ate souls. Since nobody wanted a soul-eating flower growing in their garden – or anywhere near them, really – the plant rapidly went extinct any time humans moved into an area. Thus, if Zach and Zorian wanted to find one, they had to go to the wild areas untouched by most of humanity.

Currently, the two of them were hiding under a globe of invisibility, warily watching a huge black bear amble past them. Though the bear wasn't truly a life-threatening danger to them, they were in no mood to pick a fight with it. It was a resilient monster, and no part of its body was particularly valuable on the general market. Considering they had been trudging through the dense foliage of the Great Northern Forest for most of the day, they really just wanted to find where the soulseizer chrysanthemum was hiding and go home.

Thankfully, the bear did not appear to be hunting and paid little attention to its surroundings. It simply walked past them and soon disappeared from sight.

Zach dispelled the globe of invisibility that hid them from sight and then cautiously scanned the area for further dangers. Although not as dangerous as the deeper layers of the Dungeon and the like, Altazia's northern forests were not a place for the unwary. This deep in the wilderness, there lurked threats that posed a danger even to Zach and Zorian working together, should they be caught by surprise.

"Gathering all these ingredients on Silverlake's list is surprisingly hard," Zach said, relaxing slightly upon detecting nothing of note. "They're rare, dangerous, or both, and Silverlake never gave us a single clue where we could find any of them... and yet, the task is still clearly doable, so we can't really complain about being given a completely impossible task. The old witch really has a knack for

this stuff.”

”I’m half-convinced that most of these are not necessary for the potion at all,” Zorian said, sighing lightly. He spent a few seconds reorienting himself and then set off in the northwestern direction. Zach followed him without complaint. ”She probably added quite a few of these because she personally needs them for something, not because the potion we ordered demands it. The trouble is—”

”We have no idea which ingredients are essential and which are not,” Zach finished for him. ”She never lets us see the actual recipe. We can only speculate and try to call her bluff, but we’re more pressed for time than she is and she knows it. She wouldn’t relent, even if we guessed correctly, and might even up the price out of spite.”

”Yes,” Zorian nodded. ”Whatever. It’s doable, that’s all that matters. Let her have her little victory if it pleases her.”

”True,” Zach agreed. ”Say, are you really sure we’re in the right place? We’ve been looking for more than two hours and the flower doesn’t appear to be here. Maybe the yeti tribe we spoke to lied to us. Relations between them and humans are not exactly the best.”

”The tribe’s shaman didn’t lie,” Zorian said, shaking his head. ”He thinks we’re cocky idiots that will get our souls eaten by the soulseizer chrysanthemum, so he told us the truth as he saw it. He gets the payment we promised him and two humans end up dead. It’s a win-win as far as he was concerned. It’s just that yetis don’t really have any concept of maps or precise coordinates, so all I have is a set of vague directions regarding the local landmarks. Just be a little patient.”

”But this is so *boring*,” Zach whined childishly.

”Tough luck,” Zorian told him pitilessly.

Zach was quiet for a few seconds before he started talking again.

"You know, the idea of fighting a flower is kind of funny. And embarrassing," he said.

"I don't know," Zorian said. "I think fighting those rabbits a few days back was way more embarrassing. Especially since both of us ended up getting bitten before we managed to bring them down."

"Ugh. Don't remind me," Zach grouched. "Those have got to be one of those fake ingredients Silverlake added to the list. I mean, how are a bunch of rabbits like that related to a potion of soul perception?"

"I think those red gems embedded in their foreheads were some kind of sensors," Zorian speculated. "They did see through our every attempt to sneak up on them."

The two of them spent the next half an hour discussing which of the ingredients were likely to be fake, only to realize that none of them were obvious imposters. They could all potentially be valid, which meant that either Zorian was too paranoid or Silverlake was very clever when picking her additions. Zorian was leaning towards the second option.

"I know we already talked about this before visiting Silverlake, but are you really sure this is even necessary?" Zach eventually asked. Seeing Zorian's confused look, he moved to clarify. "Acquiring soul sight, I mean. Are you really sure you need it?"

"Of course I'm not sure," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Maybe once we get the whole key, everything will be neatly resolved, and me getting soul sight will end up being a pointless diversion. The thing is, even if the Guardian of the Threshold overlooks the fact there are two of us and places our souls back into our bodies, there is a problem..."

"Your original body still has its old soul," Zach said.

"Well, it would be more accurate to say that the body I hope to inhabit was never truly mine to begin with," Zorian said. "But

yes, that's the core issue. If I want out, I need to steal my real world body somehow. I guess this could be done by convincing the Guardian to switch my soul with that of the original, but... the Guardian has made it clear that this goes against the very nature of his job. I'm skeptical that acquiring the Key will let us ignore this."

"I get that," Zach said. "But maybe you don't have to literally *steal* the body, you know? Maybe you can kind of, you know... coexist with your old self?"

"An interesting idea," Zorian said. "I don't know enough about soul magic to say if that would be possible, but... that kind of thing would still require me to acquire soul perception first."

"Yeah, I guess," Zach sighed.

They walked through the forest in silence for a few seconds, Zorian keeping an eye out for that funny-shaped rock outcropping that the old yeti had told him about. It should be around here...

"What's really on your mind?" Zorian eventually asked.

"You know I'm not really sure that I'm the real Controller of this time loop," Zach said. "And if I'm not... I could be facing the same choice you are."

"Ah," Zorian said, nodding. Personally, he felt Zach's fears were unfounded, but he knew by now it was useless to tell him that. "I see."

"Do you think I should try to acquire soul perception too?" Zach asked. "I'm not nearly as comfortable as you are in killing my old self, but I have to admit... if I have to choose between myself and him..."

"It would be the safe thing to do," Zorian told him. Concerns about not being the true Controller aside, he didn't see any particular downsides about Zach acquiring soul perception. "But best not to try that in this particular restart. We have no idea how the safety triggers on your marker are going to react to a potion like that. I

mean, they did terminate the restart when you tried to undergo Alanic's training, remember?"

"I remember," Zach scowled. "If it weren't for that, I would have had simulacrum of my own by now."

"Right. They could easily trigger this time too, since the potion works on similar principles," Zorian remarked. "It's best if we wait for a less interesting restart before testing this."

"Yeah, I'm in no hurry," Zach said. He glanced around the area they were traveling in. "How long do you think it will take you to find this soul-eating flower? Maybe we should stop for now and come back tomorrow?"

"Actually..." Zorian began, his eyes zeroing in on a bunch of seemingly unremarkable trees, "we're here."

He pointed at the base of one of the trees, where a beautiful white flower proudly sprouted from the forest floor.

There was nothing overtly supernatural or sinister about the soulseizer chrysanthemum. It was a large plant, but not monstrously huge. Its leaves and stalk were the most mundane of green, easily blending into the rest of the nearby vegetation. A single white flower the size of Zorian's head crowned the otherwise unremarkable plant, its numerous rows of petals folded inwards into a sort of flowery hemisphere.

This sort of peaceful, unremarkable appearance was merely a trap, though. Since the soulseizer chrysanthemum was immobile, most of the time it behaved as inconspicuously as possible to lure its victims near. The moment Zach or Zorian stepped close enough, the flower would reveal its true nature.

"You know how I said earlier that the idea of fighting a flower is kind of funny?" Zach asked.

"Yeah?" Zorian prompted.

"I take it back," Zach said. "There is nothing funny about a dangerous creature that hides itself so thoroughly. I looked straight at

it and I still can't see any sign of danger. If we hadn't been clued in advance about its true nature and where exactly it can be found, we'd never have noticed it."

"Mm," Zorian hummed in agreement. "If you really think about it, this is one of the most dangerous enemies we could possibly face. Stuff like the grey hunter could kill us, but the time loop makes that just an inconvenience. But this flower? If we stumbled upon it by accident, without being mentally ready or applying some kind of soul ward beforehand, there is a good chance we'd really end up with our souls devoured by it."

"Well, you would," Zach pointed out cheekily. "The safeguards on my marker would probably kick in the moment my soul was torn away from my body. You, on the other hand, would be thoroughly doomed. You know what soul devouring entities do, right?"

"They flay the outer layers of the soul for nourishment and keep the indestructible core as a sort of mana battery," Zorian said. "Or in the case of wraiths, they use the core to make more of their kind. I don't know how fast this process is, but even if it takes a while, I'd probably end up with my soul severely damaged by the time the restart ended. I would probably spend every single restart thereafter in a deep coma and stay that way until the time loop collapsed."

They both stared at the seemingly peaceful flower for about a minute, both of them lost in their own thoughts.

"Alright, enough dawdling," Zach suddenly said, clapping his hands loudly to wake up Zorian from his reverie. "Let's get this thing uprooted and chopped up into ingredients!"

After discussing it for a few minutes, they decided it would be best if only one of them confronted the chrysanthemum. The other would stay back and be ready to extract them if something went wrong. This, however, led to the issue of who would be stay-

ing back and who should advance upon the dangerous plant.

The argument was surprisingly charged, with both of them arguing that they should be the ones attacking. Zorian argued that his soul defenses were better than Zach's by far and that they couldn't afford to get into the habit of triggering premature restarts. Zach, on the other hand, argued this was dumb and that he should definitely be the one making the attempt. Zorian might have much better soul defenses, but if they proved to be insufficient, he could wind up permanently dead in all future restarts. In light of that sort of risk, who cares about a single interrupted restart?

"This is beyond stupid," Zach told him. "You don't even like fighting!"

"But I fight when I have to," Zorian countered. "Besides, I think you're exaggerating the level of danger I would be in. If you see me slump dead, immediately kill yourself. That will trigger a restart and get my soul out of its stomach. I doubt the chrysanthemum can mutilate my soul in such a short time."

Zach scowled at him. "Any plan that involves me committing suicide is a bad plan. I swear, I still can't believe you were wearing a bomb around your neck before getting control of your restart trigger..."

"Actually, I *still* carry a bomb around my neck," Zorian told him, showing Zach the plain-looking golden chain he usually kept tucked into his shirt. His spell formula skills had advanced to such an extent by now that the chain was no longer obviously a magic item – unless one specifically decided to inspect it with analytic spells, it would look just like a mundane accessory. "Having more contingencies is always useful, after all. Still, I guess you have a point... I don't think I'd fail here, but the worst scenario is worrying. Tell you what – I will agree to back off here, but if you fail and end up cutting the restart short, I get to confront the chrysanthemum."

mum the next time around. Deal?”

“Deal,” Zach nodded. “If I can’t do it now, I probably won’t be able to do it on the second or third attempts either. I guess it is kind of unreasonable of me to cut restart after restart short like that. I still feel an urge to hit myself when I think of all the restarts I frittered away by doing just that..”

Then Zach started walking towards the flower, and all their arguments were revealed to have been moot. The soulseizer chrysanthemum twisted itself to face them both, the flower stalk moving with the speed and fluidity alien to normal plants, and a barely perceptible ripple emanated from it, covering a spherical area easily large enough to cover them both.

They had been within its striking range all along. It just chose not to attack them immediately.

Fast and omnidirectional, the ethereal ripple released by the chrysanthemum was impossible to dodge. Zorian, caught off guard by the attack, could do nothing except take it head on. Zach, having expected some kind of response from the flower, had successfully erected a shield around himself before it hit. It didn’t matter, though – the ripple passed through the shield like it wasn’t there at all. It slammed into both of them at almost the same time, sending them reeling.

Zorian felt sick in a way he had never experienced before in his life. His vision swam, assailed by numberless fleeting illusions and flashing lights, and his ears felt like a bomb had gone off right next to him. His sense of balance went completely haywire, his skin stung all over and his stomach churned like something was trying to tear itself out of him. It took a monumental act of will not to vomit all over himself and collapse on the ground. It was some kind of stun attack, Zorian realized. An incredibly complex stun attack, weaving together physical, mental and spiritual aspects into one unified whole.

Zorian reached into his own mind and forcibly shattered the mental aspect of the stun. The whole structure of the attack immediately became unbalanced, allowing Zorian to stabilize his condition somewhat. His vision cleared up a bit, and he saw Zach collapse to his knees, hands shaking, and vomit all over the forest floor. That... wasn't much of a surprise, to be honest. Zach was not as adept as Zorian in defending either his mind or his soul, and he was closer to the chrysanthemum when it attacked.

Before Zorian could do anything, the soulseizer chrysanthemum turned towards him. Perhaps because he had weathered its stun effect better than Zach, or because he was closer to the border of its attack radius and it worried he would flee, but the flower chose to deal with him first. Its multitude of petals erupted with ghostly blue flame and unfolded like a mouth full of teeth, revealing a pitch black area in the middle of the flower.

Zorian's soul immediately started vibrating in his body, sending waves of pain throughout his very being. Normally, this level of soul attack would never be able to seriously threaten Zorian... but with the aftereffect of the stun still lingering, resisting the pull of the flower was proving difficult. And the effect wasn't stopping. Instead, the suction only seemed to get stronger as time went by and the flower searched for a firmer grip on his soul.

Despite that, Zorian was not worried. Before it attacked, the flower felt just like any other plant in the forest. It had no discernible mind, and thus nothing that Zorian could target with his mind magic. Now, however, he could very much feel a thinking mind behind the chrysanthemum.

He gathered all of his concentration and then launched a massive telepathic attack at the plant's mind. This time, it was the flower's turn to reel back in shock. Its attack on Zorian's soul immediately ceased as it silently shook and waved around, trying to stabilize itself.

Zorian wasn't going to let it have the time. Even though he still hadn't entirely recovered from the initial attack, he poured all of his energies into launching one mental attack after another. The flower resisted fiercely. It was clearly a complete amateur when it came to mental combat, but it possessed an instinctive ability to form mental barriers and was armed with a powerful magic resistance that made it difficult and mana expensive for Zorian to target it.

After a while, Zach recovered enough to make his own move. He summoned a massive ghostly blade and sent it chopping down at the stem of the plant. In all honestly, it looked like compete overkill and Zorian worried he was going to ruin the chrysanthemum's value as an alchemical component. They needed it fairly intact, after all.

The flower was undaunted, though. Threatened by the incoming blade, it spat a stream of glittering stars out of the black hole in the center of the flower. The glittering motes of light immediately arranged themselves into a dome-like construct that stopped the blade cold with barely a flicker.

They were soul cores of creatures the chrysanthemum had devoured in the past, Zorian realized. Somehow, it could control them and shape them into defensive constructs.

Well, not *just* defensive constructs, it turned out. After Zach and Zorian kept hammering its defenses for a while, it realized that at the rate things were going, it was going to lose. Its shield was going to get battered down sooner or later, and Zorian's strategically launched mental attacks were disrupting its attempts to launch further soul attacks at them. Upon realizing this, the chrysanthemum reshaped the soul cores into a series of long, hair-like whips and started flailing them around. Zorian at first thought the chrysanthemum intended to attack them with those, but it turned out he had once again underestimated the plant. It quickly wrapped the

whips around the nearby branches and uprooted itself right out of the ground before turning to flee.

Zorian had to admit, seeing an uprooted flower swing about from branch to branch, like some kind of weird monkey, was a unique experience.

Sadly for the soulseizer chrysanthemum, such desperate measures would not save it. It launched another stunning pulse at them in an attempt to lose them, and this did slow them down quite a bit, but in the end it was chased down and killed.

"We have been outsmarted and nearly killed by a flower," Zach said, still keeping a wary distance from the chrysanthemum's remains. "We are never speaking about this again."

Zorian readily agreed to this request.



The Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, known to most people as the Cult of the Dragon Below, was more than just a weird religion. It was an entire support organization that helped its members advance forward in life. They vouched for their fellow members when skills and trustworthiness were questioned, they helped them get the jobs and mentorships they needed to advance in their careers, offered their members loans under favorable conditions, granted free access to spell libraries that would be too restricted or expensive for members to otherwise get and they provided legal aid if members got into trouble with the mage guild. The higher ranking one had in the Cult, the more pronounced these advantages got.

This was the main reason why the Cult got so powerful and widespread. The sort of large-scale, highly treasonous plot that the Cult was currently participating in was not really something that they usually did. It was actually very, very atypical. For the

vast majority of their existence, they had simply been a mystery cult crossed with a mutual aid society – kind of shady and disreputable, but nothing that the authorities would go too crazy over. Their biggest enemy was the Triumvirate Church and their faithful, which considered the Cult's beliefs to be a direct affront to their dogma.

In any case, an expansive organization like that had more than just direct members of their secret club to draw upon. They also had a multitude of outside associates and other experts that sporadically worked with them. Some of these were true faithful that deliberately maintained distance from the main organization so that outsiders could not easily puzzle out the connections between them, others were just mercenaries that sporadically took missions from the Cult and some simply didn't know who exactly they were working with. Zorian had largely ignored these people during his investigation into the Cult's activities, since tracking them all down was an incredibly time-consuming and difficult task. He had better things to do with his time.

Then Alanic interrogated Sudomir a bunch of times and they discovered that the crazy mayor of Knyazov Dveri had detailed knowledge of these people. Sudomir appeared to have gone out of his way to gather as much information about the Cult as possible, worried that they might move against him at some point. The relations between him and Cult leadership hadn't been the best since they realized he intended to publically advocate for the legalization of necromancy, something they regarded as lunacy.

Zorian still wasn't terribly interested in spending time to investigate all these people. He didn't think that would result in anything substantial. But Alanic was, and he didn't have too many other things vying for his time. Thus, he wholeheartedly threw himself into the investigation, making full use of the time loop to comb through every lead and scrap of evidence Zorian could

wrench from Sudomir's mind.

And today, that effort seemed to have borne some kind of fruit. Alanic had notified Zach and Zorian that he had uncovered something important and told them to meet him next to an unassuming house in one Cyoria's richer neighborhoods.

When they arrived, they found the place cordoned off by the mage guild personnel, but they had been notified that the two of them were coming and let them through on Alanic's orders. Once again Zorian wondered just what position Alanic occupied that he could command people like this, but Alanic stubbornly refused to answer such questions and Zorian respected the man's help too much to go prying into his thoughts.

"You called, we came," Zach said, waving his hand at Alanic to get his attention. "What do you have for us?"

"I don't claim to understand every detail of the... situation you have found yourselves in," Alanic said, choosing his words carefully due to the presence of other people in the room, "but I believe you've indicated the name 'Veyers Boranova' is important to you, yes?"

Zorian looked at him in shock.

"What? What does Veyers have to do with this? Is he here?" Zach asked.

"In a matter of speaking," Alanic said evenly. He motioned them to follow him and led them down the stairs and into the basement beneath the house. "This is the house of one of the lawyers deeply associated with the Cult of the Dragon Below. He is not a member, but he has helped on a number of occasions and is known to be sympathetic to their organization. I managed to get authorization to conduct a search of his house and... well, this is what I found when I opened the icebox in his basement."

Alanic stopped next to one of the three iceboxes lined up next to the basement wall and unceremoniously lifted the lid up. Inside

was a frozen body of a teenage male, a peaceful expression on his frosted face.

It was unmistakably Veyers Boranova.

Zach and Zorian stared at the body for nearly half a minute, not saying anything.

"He's... dead?" Zach asked lamely.

"Indeed," Alanic said. "I hear neither of you really got along with him well, so I will not offer you condolences."

"So the owner of this house..." Zorian began uncertainly.

"Jornak Dokochin," Alanic told him.

"Yes, this Jornak... did he kill Veyers?" Zorian asked. "When did this happen?"

"He is adamant that he did not kill the boy," Alanic said. "He claims the boy died of unknown causes while sleeping. One day he was fine, if a little surly, and the next day Jornak went into his room to check up on him and found him dead in his bed. I'd normally scoff at that explanation, but the timing..."

"He died on the first day of the restart, didn't he?" Zach guessed.

"Yes," Alanic nodded. "The frost damage and the sheer passage of time make it difficult to tell for certain, but I'm pretty sure this is the same situation like those aranea beneath Cyoria and the mercenaries that were found mysteriously dead in their homes."

"Doesn't that mean Veyers was soulkilled?" Zach frowned. "He *isn't* Red Robe?"

"We can't say that just from this," Zorian said, shaking his head. "We have no idea how exactly he entered the time loop, or what would happen if he left it. For all we know this could be the natural result of his leaving the time loop."

"Ugh," Zach grumbled. "So we found Veyers and yet learned nothing of value. I hate things like this."

"Well, anyway... I guess Veyers being frozen in the basement of a heavily warded house does explain why we never managed to

find him when we searched for him in the previous restarts. What was he doing here, anyway?"

"Jornak has been disinclined to cooperate with us in this regard," Alanic told them. "He refuses to discuss details with me. He is a lawyer so he is harder to shake up and interrogate than most people I deal with. That's why I told you to come here immediately. If you want to get anything out of him, we need to talk to him now. I'm afraid House Boranova has already heard of the news and is going to descend here sooner or later."

Alanic then led them to the second floor of the house, where Jornak was currently under house arrest with a couple of guards posted next to him. When they arrived they found Jornak pacing around his room like a caged tiger, angry and agitated. He deliberately ignored their entrance, not giving them so much as a glance.

Zorian observed the man and the room itself. Jornak was younger than he thought he would be, probably in his mid-twenties and with a very handsome, boyish face. He was immaculately dressed in expensive but conservative clothes, and the room he was in seemed to be designed to maximize his image as a cultured, well-read intellectual. The walls were lined with filled-out book shelves and small works of art laid scattered around the place to give it a bit of artistic flair.

Zorian's parents had a similar room back in Cirin. Much like them, Jornak had probably never even read most of the books lining the bookshelves.

"So mister Dokochin," Alanic began. "I'm back. Don't mind my two helpers here, they're just here as support. Now that you've had a chance to calm down a little, are you willing to discuss things like a civilized person?"

Zorian gave Alanic a mildly questioning glance. Was he deliberately pissing the guy off? Jornak did not look calm at all. Alanic did not react to his silent question though, so Zorian simply trusted

him to know what he was doing. He supposed that with him here, it hardly mattered whether Jornak wanted to talk or not.

Jornak finally deigned to look at them, giving Zach and Zorian a brief, contemptuous glance before dismissing them as unimportant.

"Your church really likes them young, doesn't it, priest?" Jornak said, grimacing at Alanic unhappily. "I know my rights, mister Zosk. I will not talk to anyone until Mage Guild representatives and my lawyer arrive. Until then, I will patiently wait here and I'd appreciate it if you stopped wasting my time."

"Curious that a lawyer would want someone else to defend them," Alanic said.

"A surgeon would be foolish to try to operate on himself, and a lawyer is ill advised to represent himself in court," Jornak said dismissively. "I would not expect a Church dog to understand these things. People like you always think you're above the law, anyway."

"Hmm," Alanic hummed, completely unaffected by Jornak's caustic comments. "I'll be honest and say I expected as much. Zorian?"

Zorian did not ask Alanic what he wanted. He already knew. He reached out mentally towards Jornak. The young lawyer actually had rudimentary mental defenses, but this was not something that could stop Zorian. He punched through those defenses as if they were paper and pressed down on the man's mind.

Jornak's eyes widened like saucers as he realized what was happening.

"Answer the questions," Zorian commanded.

"N-no!" Jornak protested. "This... this is illegal! I'll... damn it. Damn it!"

"Did you kill Veyers?" Zorian asked, just to be sure.

"I didn't kill him! I didn't kill anyone! I already said I just found him dead one day! It's the truth!"

"What was he doing in your home?" Zorian asked.

"That's... we were friends," Jornak said, gritting his teeth.

"A friendship between a 15-year-old-boy and a 25-year-old man like you?" Alanic commented lightly. "Who is it that likes them young, again?"

"You people..." Jornak hissed angrily at him. He took a deep breath and forcibly calmed himself down. "Look... I promise to tell you the whole story. Just... release me from your mental compulsion. It's hard to think with this thing muddying my thoughts."

Zorian gave Alanic a questioning glance. Alanic nodded for him to do as Jornak said, apparently willing to give the man a chance. Fair enough. He supposed they could always repeat the procedure if Jornak became uncooperative later on.

"I'm still keeping an eye on your surface thoughts," Zorian told him as he released the compulsion to make him talk. "So don't try to lie to us."

"I don't have to lie!" Jornak snapped at him. "This whole thing is just... damn it, Veyers! Even when dead, he still makes trouble for me."

"Yeah, he has that effect on people," Zach said with a sagely nod.

Jornak ignored that comment, gathering his thoughts for a moment.

"Alright," Jornak said. "So, I met Veyers almost a year ago when he came to talk to me about his legal options in regards to his... situation... in his House. I empathized with him then. What happened to him reminded me a little of myself. I too have had my birthright stolen from me."

"Really?" Zach asked curiously.

"I don't want to talk about it and I ask you to be merciful and not force me," Jornak said. "It has nothing to do with this, and you can find out most of it through public documents. It's not like I've ever hid my grievances, after all."

"Just give us the short version," Alanic said.

Jornak gave him a hateful look, but after glancing at Zorian for a second he decided to humor the scarred battle-priest anyway.

"In short, I was a relative of a small House that went extinct some time ago. Although not a true member of the House, I was the closest thing to a descendant and I was supposed to inherit their wealth and properties... but then a new claimant suddenly appeared, completely out of nowhere, claiming even closer relations. His proof of his lineage was painfully fake and all the documents obvious forgeries, but he was better connected than me and in the end, courts assigned everything to him and left me with nothing."

"I see," Alanic said. "And so you saw young Veyers coming to you for help and felt touched by this young man that was seeing his legacy usurped from him by branch members of his House."

"Yes, precisely," Jornak said. "In truth, I couldn't help him much. Formal Houses like his own are given a lot of leeway in how they govern themselves internally, and general law is only somewhat applicable to his situation. Still, the boy seemed to appreciate my advice, and the fact that I *cared*... which not many people around him did, if he was to be believed."

"And him coming to live inside your home...?" Zorian prompted.

"That... you know he was expelled from his school?" Jornak said, frowning. "Well, he didn't want to go back to his family after that. After wandering all over the city to cool down, he came over to my house and *begged me* to house him for a few days. He said he needed a place to hide for a while and think about what to do about things. How could I refuse?"

"That's very generous of you, and I mean that sincerely," Zorian said. "But how does that lead to his body being stuffed into your icebox?"

"That... I didn't know what to do, okay!?" Jornak said, becoming agitated. "I just came into his guest room one morning to see why he missed breakfast and found him dead. I didn't know what to do! Despite all his problems, he was still a noble and House Boranova would never take this lying down. He died in my home and the wards didn't register any intruder at all. How would I possibly explain this? I empathize with the boy, but I don't want to ruin my life for him! Haven't I suffered enough!?"

Jornak gritted his teeth and started pulling at his hair in frustration. With a sharp turn, he started pacing around the room again, gesticulating to himself and muttering under his breath.

It wasn't an act, as far as Zorian could tell. Jornak had never bothered to reform his mental barriers after Zorian destroyed them, leaving his thoughts completely unguarded. Everything he said was truth as he saw it, and he was honestly panicking and unsure what to do.

"So, this could be a dumb question, but why keep Veyers' body in the icebox in your basement?" Zach asked suddenly.

"I didn't know what else to do," Jornak said, still pacing around the room. "If I took it out of the house to dump somewhere, the trackers hired by House Boranova would find me the moment I stepped out of my house's privacy wards. As for destroying it... well, I've never destroyed a body before! I mean, obviously I didn't! How would I know how to do that? So I put the body on ice while trying to think up a solution..."

They didn't find out much from Jornak after that. Although Zorian personally found the man's choices to be rather questionable, he was ultimately just a man who found a dead teenager in his guest room and panicked. If Jornak hadn't knowingly helped

the Cult of the Dragon Below so many times in the past, Zorian would have even felt sorry for the man.

About fifteen minutes after Zach and Zorian left Jornak's room, another group of Mage Guild personnel arrived, accompanied by several representatives from Noble House Boranova, and took over the scene. Alanic informed Zach and Zorian that this marked the end of his involvement with the case... and thus the end of their ability to examine the house or question the man.

It was just as well, though. The restart was coming to a close, so there was not much time for a detailed examination. Additionally, it would have been better if they arrived in the man's house at the start of the restart, before he had a chance to stuff Veyers' body in an icebox. And in the next restart, they would do just that.

Until then, Zach and Zorian agreed to keep speculation about what this meant about Red Robe to a minimum.



Despite numerous issues that had cropped up in their search, in the end Zach and Zorian managed to gather all the ingredients Silverlake needed (or at least *claimed* she needed) for a soul perception potion. It took them most of the remaining time to do so, however, and by then the end of the restart was looming close. Thus, they were somewhat anxious as they waited for Silverlake to finish making the potion.

"It should work," Silverlake told them. "I mean, I've never actually made that specific potion in my life and the old witch recipe that describes it is not nearly as clear and precise as the modern recipes you two are familiar with... but since it's me making the attempt, it will probably work out fine."

"Yes, yes, we get it – you're awesome," Zach said with a tired nod.

"And don't you forget it," Silverlake said shamelessly. "It shouldn't take long. Gathering the ingredients is the time-consuming part; the actual potion making could be done in as little as two hours. You two go play outside while I work. You can practice your pocket dimension creation skills or something."

"You have a real gift for finding exceptionally infuriating teachers, Zorian," Zach told him after they got out of Silverlake's earshot.

"Yes, but they tend to be exceptionally capable ones, too," Zorian countered. He took out a small box from his jacket pocket and flipped it upside down, allowing a stream of marbles to pour out of the box and into his waiting palm. A moderately perceptive person would quickly realize that there was no way all these marbles could fit into such a small box.

"Only 28 marbles?" Zach smirked. "Amateur. I managed to cram 32 of them inside a box like that."

Zorian gave Zach a suspicious look, but it didn't seem like his fellow time traveler was lying about that.

"Damn it," Zorian grumbled. "All those specialized shaping exercises and I still can't advance faster in this field than you do."

"I have six times more mana than you do and you're further hampered by the number of simulacrum you keep around you at all times," Zach said with a careless shrug. "It's hard to make up for such a disadvantage."

He was right, of course. Truthfully, it was amazing he was able to keep up with Zach's learning rate at all. It still made him feel a little annoyed that he lost their informal competition about who would advance faster in the field of pocket dimension creation.

Oh well – there was still time to catch up. They would be chipping away at the topic for quite a few restarts after this, and he was confident he had more patience than Zach did...

It ended up taking Silverlake nearly four hours to finish the

potion, despite her claim that it could be done in as little as two hours. She claimed she had merely been waiting for the concoction to cool down to a comfortable drinking temperature before bringing it over, but Zorian suspected it had more to do with the process being harder than she'd thought it would be rather than anything considerate like that.

"You should drink the potion soon," Silverlake told him. "The instructions were a little fuzzy about its shelf life and there was a bit of unplanned excitement involved in making it, so I had to add in a little something to forcibly stabilize it. It should retain its potency for about a week, after which there is a small but non-trivial chance it might explode in your face. Best not to take that chance, hmm?"

"Unplanned excitement', you say," Zach dead-panned. "That doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

"I'm 97.3% sure it will work as expected," Silverlake said firmly.

There was a small silence as Silverlake looked at them expectantly, no doubt hoping one of them would ask her why it was 97.3 instead of 99 or something like that. She would be sorely disappointed. They both knew better than to humor her like that.

"I'm 97.3% sure you pulled that number out of your ass," Zorian told her bluntly. "But it doesn't matter. This month is approaching its end and time will soon reset itself. I'm going to drink this right away."

"Ah yes, the great time reset," Silverlake said. "You're still going on about that, huh? Well, did I ever tell you about—"

But Zorian wasn't listening anymore. He uncapped the potion bottle Silverlake handed to him and immediately drank the entire potion. The thick green liquid was bitter as hell, but otherwise unremarkable. For a few seconds, nothing happened...

...and then he experienced a sensation reminiscent of the soul-stealing move he had experienced when fighting the soulseizer

chrysanthemum and his senses rapidly began to dim.

He lost consciousness.



When Zorian woke up, he found out two days had gone by. They had expected as much, though. According to what they knew, the process of gaining soul perception through this method always took at least a day, and could take as many as five. Some unfortunate souls, ignorant of this little detail, had been known to die of dehydration after drinking a potion like this in secret.

In regards to what had happened while he was unconscious, Zorian had only the fuzziest of recollections. He had periodically regained awareness throughout the process, but it was like trying to remember a dream. He remembered a series of senseless, disjointed images: a sea of suns connected by glowing threads, a massive volcano in the middle of an eruption, a carpet of smoke crawling across desolate lands...

Just like his usual dreams, in other words. He put it out of his mind, and focused on the important stuff... like whether he had successfully acquired soul sight or not.

The answer was that he had. It wasn't as instinctive as Zorian's mind magic, but Zorian had found a sufficient amount of instructions in Sudomir's mind to figure out what he had to do. So long as he poured mana into his soul in very specific ways, he could 'see' the souls of other people. It wasn't really sight as such, so much as a whole new sense that gave him headaches when he tried to process what it was really telling him, but that would improve with time and practice.

Overall, Zorian considered the whole thing to be a massive success. The only problem with the whole thing was that he had forgotten to mention to Imaya and Kirielle that he would be absent

from home for several days, so Zach had to take the brunt of their ire and convince them not to report his disappearance to the police. Now all three were kind of annoyed with him...

Currently, Zorian was sort of hiding from them in Silverlake's pocket dimension. Of course, he did have a valid reason for being there, beside that – he was trying to find something that would convince her future self that the time loop is real. Silverlake did have a penchant for telling him little personal stories from time to time, but it was hard to discern which ones were fake and which ones real, so he doubted that would help him convince her in the future.

"Did you know I was considered a dangerous radical in my youth?" Silverlake asked him. Zorian didn't and told her so. "Oh yes. When I was born, the covens had already been on their last legs – Ikosian magic had shown itself to be mostly superior to our own spellcasting traditions. After all, most of *our* spells are long rituals involving lots of chanting and standing still for hours on end, or relied upon invoking the spirits of the land – who are notoriously fickle things if you ask me, you can never rely on them to aid you when you need them the most. The one thing we had going for us – our potion making – the Ikosians simply copied and then improved upon. I saw all this, and I decided to commit a huge heresy – I decided to study Ikosian methods in addition to traditional education I received from my mother. My coven exiled me for it when they found out."

"Tragic," Zorian said. "But that wasn't quite what I was looking for. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't really be surprised if I revealed I knew this little tidbit of your past."

"No, of course not," Silverlake said. "I'm sure you could find out that and more if you really decided to investigate my history. If you came to me and started narrating my past, I'd just think you did your homework before coming to see me."

"Right," Zorian nodded. "So I'd really prefer if you gave me something more substantial. Surely you have some kind of private password that you could easily tell me without truly inconveniencing yourself. You can change it immediately after you tell me, so it's not like there is any danger I'll abuse it."

"Not during this month, no," Silverlake scoffed. "But what if you're right? I have no assurance you'll only use such a secret to convince my future self of your crazy tale – you could use it just as easily to rob her blind!"

"But you don't believe in the time loop?" Zorian tried.

"If I'm going to entertain a stupid hypothetical, I'm not going to do a half-assed job," Silverlake said, her tone brooking no argument. "But... hmm. I think I have it. Do you remember how you came in front of my home and made all that racket to draw my attention?"

"Of course," Zorian nodded. "It's one of the best moments of this month."

Silverlake took a sudden swipe at him with her bony, withered hand, but Zorian successfully dodged her strike.

"Brat. I should refuse to say anything now, but I don't want you pestering me about this further," Silverlake grumbled. "Anyway, at some point I actually considered the possibility of someone finding my abode and trying to catch my attention. I was thinking of what would be the proper, *polite* way of doing that, and I realized I would probably have to install some kind of doorbell or something. And that would be kind of incompatible with the whole hidden nature of this place, no?"

"Right," Zorian agreed. "So the doorbell would have to be hidden too, accessible only to people who have been told about it in advance."

"Exactly!" Silverlake said. "Now, in the end, I just scrapped the whole idea. I didn't want people visiting the place too casu-

ally. However, I did implement part of the system before I gave up. There is a stone in this place that emits shrill whistles when a special keystone is activated right outside the entrance to this dimension. These keystones were never actually made, so the whistle stone just sits there, uselessly gathering dust. I guess there is no harm in showing you how to create a matching keystone...”

”And that would convince you there’s something funny going on?” Zorian asked.

”Well yes, I guess it would,” Silverlake said. ”I mean, I never actually made a single keystone, let alone distributed them to people. How could you possibly create one that matches perfectly with the whistle stone in my dimension? If you showed up holding one of those, that would catch my attention for sure.”

Zorian grinned. He had a feeling their chances of convincing Silverlake in the future had just dramatically improved...



One of the more unexpected things about this restart was that Daimen had made a surprise decision to stay in Cyoria for the last few days of the restart. Zorian was not sure what exactly triggered this decision. Perhaps it was because Zorian had asked to borrow his divine artifice mirror for a little research or because his eldest brother had joined them in exploring the ruined palace inside the orb this time, but he suddenly decided he absolutely *must* see the invasion that occurs on the night of the summer festival.

Zorian thought nothing of it at first. Even when Daimen came to Cyoria a few days before the actual day of the invasion, making a mysterious claim that he had ’something he needed to do’, Zorian just dismissed it as him wanting to talk with his old friends or whatever. Then Daimen came to him for help and Zorian realized he probably should have inquired deeper into what Daimen was doing while back home in Eldemar.

"No, Daimen," Zorian told him firmly. "I am not going to set up a meeting between you and Fortov."

"Come on, Zorian, this is our family at stake here," Daimen pleaded.

"Oh please," Zorian protested. "You and Fortov not getting along with each other is not a crisis. That's par for the course in our family. Stop being so melodramatic."

"Crisis or no, this time loop is perfect for solving things like this, and it will take so little effort, too! Show some compassion for your big brother and do me a favor, eh?" Daimen insisted. "Haven't I let you borrow my mirror when you asked, despite my better judgment? And let's not forget about that secret room full of treasure that I found in the ruined palace – it would have taken you months to find that without me, if you ever did."

Zorian made a sour face. Yes, Daimen was rather more helpful in this restart than he usually was. That secret room in particular... they were still sorting through the contents, but it would seem there were some very nice things hidden there. One of the daggers appeared to be a genuine divine artifact! They had no idea what it did yet, but even if it turned out to be underwhelming, it would be extremely valuable as a research subject and priceless trade good.

"Look," Zorian said. "Using me as a lure so you can basically ambush Fortov out there in the open really doesn't sit well with me. Don't you think that's kind of a jerk thing to do?"

"I thought you hated Fortov?" Daimen challenged, raising his eyebrow at him.

"I don't like him, but this sort of manipulative maneuver doesn't sit well with me," Zorian said. "Just go confront him directly, okay? I'm sure he'll relent if you keep pestering him."

"No, he won't," Daimen said slowly. "Do you think I'd suggest this if that worked? Besides, you're looking at this the wrong way. You don't have to trick him or anything. You said he always seeks

you out at the end of the restart, so long as you don't avoid him. Something about the cure for the purple creeper rash, yes?"

"Yes," Zorian reluctantly admitted. "So you want me to just go somewhere where he can easily reach and wait for him to show up on his own?"

"Yes," Daimen nodded. "Since you haven't asked him to meet with you, he has no right to complain when it turns out I was in the vicinity."

"Well... alright," Zorian sighed. "Though if you have been pestering him these past few days, he might decide to deviate from his usual pattern. It's amazing as it is that he *always* ends up pushing Ibery into that purple creeper patch. That has got to be a deliberate move on his part..."

"Mm," Daimen agreed. "I should ask about that too, I guess."

The final plan was very simple. Zorian would spend the evening walking around the city, occasionally casting divinations to see if Fortov was approaching. If he was, he would quickly seek shelter in one of the many coffee shops scattered around Cyoria, under the theory that Fortov was slightly less likely to start yelling at Daimen in the middle of a crowded coffee shop than in the middle of the street or whatever. Once Fortov sat down, Daimen would show up to crash the event.

Daimen's little plot worked perfectly. Fortov did show up, looking for Zorian's help in procuring an 'anti-rash potion'. Zorian had already made the necessary salve before coming here, so he just handed the little jar full of salve to Fortov and sat back to finish the cup of tea he ordered.

Fortov looked down at the cure jar in his hand, fingering it awkwardly, and frowned at him.

"You just... happened to have that very specific cure lying around in your pocket?" Fortov asked Zorian incredulously. "What the hell, Zorian? Do you carry a whole apothecary with

you at all times or something?"

Well, the way his pocket dimension creation skills were advancing, that might actually be a possibility in the future.

"I knew you'd be looking for that," Zorian said. "I spoke to Ibery, after all."

Fortov's face twisted in surprise.

"She *spoke* to you!?" he asked, shocked. "Oh man... why me? Look, I... thank you for this, but—"

"You pushed her into that purple creeper patch deliberately, didn't you," Zorian said, not really asking so much as making an observation.

"It's not that simple, okay?" Fortov said defensively. "You don't know what she's like. I know she looks quiet and all, but she was being really aggressive and wouldn't take no for an answer and she kept trying to kiss me and... I guess I went a little overboard."

"And a purple creeper patch just happened to be nearby?" Zorian asked. Fortov's explanation was great and all, but how did that explain Ibery ending up in in that bush every single time?

"I deliberately took the purple creeper related task when they were distributing class assignments, because people usually avoid them like a plague. But that didn't deter her this time. I guess in retrospect it would have been smarter to take something where lots of other people would be nearby. At least that would stop her from trying to get physical with me..."

Zorian was going to inquire more about this, but this was the moment that Daimen finally showed up to crash the meeting. Strange... he actually kind of wished Daimen had taken longer to arrive. The story was just getting interesting...

"You again!" Fortov hissed, giving Daimen an angry glare. "Why can't you take the hint!? And how the hell are you even here? I thought you were supposed to be in Koth!"

"Please, I just wanted to talk, okay? Why are you being so..."

Zorian leaned back in his chair, taking another sip of his tea, and mentally toned down the volume of the shouting going around him. So much for the idea that Fortov would hold back because they were in a public location. But it didn't matter because this was Daimen's stage now and there was no need for him to get involved.

Well, there *wasn't* any need for it until both of them decided to pull him into their argument just because he was there. And because his 'smug attitude' pissed them off, apparently.

Sometimes he just couldn't win.

CRITICAL BLUNDER

The evening was a pleasant one, with cool winds blowing through the streets of Cyoria and the moon shining brightly in the sky. Zorian took it all in, feeling somewhat invigorated by the evening chill, and thought about life. It was interesting, Zorian mused, that even after all these years spent in the time loop, some simple experiences had eluded him until now.

Getting thrown out of a coffee shop for disturbing the other customers, for instance, was an entirely novel experience.

He glanced to the side, where Daimen and Fortov were currently having a tense face-off, staring at each other with serious expressions. He wasn't even angry, in all honesty. Yes, being ejected out of the building was mildly embarrassing, but it didn't bother him all that much. What *did* bother him was that even after causing such a commotion, they still failed to even establish what the problem was. Honestly, these two...

"Fortov, look..." Zorian began cautiously, "I understand you being mad at Daimen but you're only shooting yourself in the foot here. The reason Daimen sought you out is because he wants to know why you're angry with him. If you want to get rid of him, just tell him what your problem with him is and he'll go away. Well, probably."

"Don't you start," Fortov said, giving him a suspicious frown. "You helped him set this up, didn't you?"

"I didn't ask you to seek me out," Zorian pointed out calmly. "You decided that on your own. And nobody forced you to stay around and argue with Daimen, either. You already have the salve you came for, no? You could have just picked yourself up and left the moment Daimen showed up. That's what I'd have done in your place. The fact that you stayed around means you *do* want Daimen to know why you're angry after all."

For a second, Fortov just stared at him, a stony expression on his face. It was a somewhat alien look on the normally amiable Fortov.

"I so want to punch you in the face right now, you smug asshole," Fortov eventually said. "But I suppose there is something to that logic, so I'll restrain myself."

"Finally," Daimen mumbled, just loud enough for both of them to hear him. "All this dancing around and refusing to say what's bothering you, I almost thought you had turned into a woman while I wasn't looking."

Fortov glared furiously at him, to which Daimen reacted only by rolling his eyes. Thankfully, the shouting didn't start up again. It seemed that Fortov had gotten his anger out of his system a bit.

"Right, now, just before the nice waitress asked us to leave the premises, I believe you were saying something about your problems with the academy being Daimen's fault?" Zorian prompted. It was in his best interest to help Daimen get his answer now, or else the man would no doubt make more annoying plots like this one in upcoming restarts.

"Which is ridiculous," Daimen butted in. "We barely even interacted with each other by the time Fortov started attending the Academy in Cyoria."

"Yes!" Fortov said, pointing his index finger at Daimen with a

stabbing motion. Then he repeated the gesture for emphasis. "Yes, that's exactly my problem! We barely interacted at all!"

"What?" Daimen asked uncomprehendingly.

"You don't even know what I'm talking about," Fortov said, more as a statement of fact than a question. "I think that's what pisses me off the most about this. You don't even remember! You've completely forgotten all about your promise!"

"Wha- What promise?" Daimen fumbled.

"You were supposed to help me!" Fortov burst out, pointing at Daimen again and then hitting himself in the chest with a closed fist to indicate himself. "Remember? I came to you before enrolling here and asked you if I could count on you to support me when I run into troubles at the Academy, and you said *yes*... you said I could always come to you for help if I needed it and that it's no issue, no issue at all..."

Daimen visibly winced at those words.

"Oh," he said weakly. "*That*."

"Yes, *that*," Fortov said sullenly. "I was such a fool to actually trust you on that. What good is a promise like that when you're always busy with something, always unreachable and brushing me off when you're not? You probably forgot about that promise the moment you made it... if you ever took it seriously at all."

"I made that promise in good faith," Daimen protested. "It's just that I had some professional opportunities come up afterwards that were too good to let go. Don't you think it's kind of unreasonable of you to expect me to sabotage my career just to help you with schoolwork? I mean, you could have always just asked Zorian for help instead and..."

Both Fortov and Zorian gave him a glare for that. Daimen considered his words for a moment and then mumbled something that was either a quick prayer to the gods or a colorful curse before dropping the idea and moving on.

"Anyway, moving on," Daimen said, coughing into his fist. "I guess I kind of did fail you there. I do admit that. However, to say that makes me responsible for your academy problems, that's still rubbish. Let's be honest here Fortov... me helping you out every once in a while wouldn't have made much of a difference in the grand scheme of things."

"It wasn't supposed to be 'every once in a while', you jerk..." Fortov protested.

Zorian stood off to the side, shaking his head as the two continued to argue. As minutes ticked by, it became obvious that this promise thing meant completely different things to Fortov than it did to Daimen. Fortov, it turned out, had understood Daimen's promise as a commitment to a much heavier form of support. Though Fortov did not phrase things that way, Zorian understood his middle brother's explanations for what they were: an admission that he expected to be carried along throughout his entire education on Daimen's coattails. Daimen, on the other hand, probably made that promise without much thought put into it, thinking it a mere formality. He evidently expected that Fortov would come seek him out once every few months to ask a question or two and talk about girls and life and stuff.

Amusingly enough, he ended up not even getting *that* in the end...

"Can't you see you're being completely unreasonable?" Daimen said, gesticulating wildly. "Do you even hear what you're saying? You basically expected me to do half of your work for you. That's completely ridiculous!"

"He's right, it is," added Zorian, nodding sagely.

"I was just describing an ideal case, I would have been happy with even a fraction of it," Fortov shot back. "And it doesn't matter because in the end I got *nothing at all*! You gave me a promise and then you forgot you'd ever made it. That's a jerk thing to do, no

matter how you try to spin it.”

“He’s right, it is,” added Zorian, nodding sagely.

“Shut up, Zorian!” they both said in perfect synchronization.

Zorian pretended to stagger back from the outburst and mimicked clamping his mouth shut.

As for Daimen and Fortov, the two of them shared an uncertain look between each other before quietly deciding to calm down a little and take a step back. Zorian would have liked to claim that this was his plan all along, but truthfully he was just messing with them for his own amusement.

“But seriously, you’re being kind of crazy here,” Daimen said to Fortov again, a little more sedately this time. “I get that you’re having problems with your studies, but—”

“Man, you just don’t understand,” Fortov complained, cutting him off. “This city, this academy... it’s out of my league. I know this. I’ve *always* known this. I know my limits. I’m not as smart as you and Zorian...”

“You’re plenty smart, Fortov,” Zorian cut in. “You’re just lazy.”

Fortov didn’t even try to refute him, but Daimen gave him a sidelong glance.

“I thought you were going to keep quiet?” Daimen asked.

“I lied,” Zorian said with a careless shrug.

“Whatever,” Fortov said, exhaling heavily. “I’m not as *good* as you two. Happy now?” Zorian made a circular motion with his hand, signaling him to keep going. “Anyway, my point was that I only agreed to enroll here because Daimen said he would support me. If I had known I would have to do this alone, I would have told Mother and Father to enroll me somewhere else. Somewhere less... prestigious. But they pushed hard for this, saying what an opportunity this is and I thought... well, at least I’ll have my genius older brother there to help me sort things out...”

Zorian didn't say anything after that, quietly waiting by the side and letting the two of them talk. He didn't feel much compassion for Fortov's plight. Daimen may have a cause for feeling a little guilty about how things turned out, but all Zorian saw was the same old Fortov he'd known from his childhood – a lazy, shallow asshole constantly looking for ways to shift his own responsibilities onto people around him. He was darkly amused when the two of them eventually decided to just take a step back and have another meeting in a week or so... something that would never happen, and Daimen damn well knew so.

Oh well, it wasn't really Zorian's problem. That is, until Fortov left the scene and Daimen tried to *make it* his problem...

"No, Daimen, I am not going to delve into the hows and whys of Fortov's failures and assemble a tutoring program for him," Zorian bluntly told him.

"Why not? You do for Kirielle and even that female friend of yours," Daimen said. "He's your *brother*, Zorian."

"Sorry, but you can't guilt-trip me into doing this. Mother's antics have made me completely immune to guilt-trips," Zorian said dispassionately. "I am sick and tired of having to pick up after Fortov's failures time and time again. How about you do it for once in your life? You're the one who made a promise that you failed to keep, no? Don't you think it's in poor taste to try fobbing this off on me so quickly after your little heart-to-heart with Fortov?"

"The restart is just about to end, when else am I going to talk to you about this if not now?" Daimen protested. "And I don't retain memories over the restarts like you do, that's why I can't do it."

"But you can leave yourself notes at the end of each restart and work on the problem that way," Zorian countered. "You are doing that very thing in order to figure out how to get Mother and Father to accept your marriage to Orissa, so I don't see why you can't apply it here too."

Daimen frowned, either because he did not like the idea or because he was reminded of how utterly he had failed in his task of convincing them thus far.

"He's your *brother*, Daimen," Zorian said, flinging his words back at him.

"Ugh," Daimen grumbled. "You can be such a little shit sometimes... Fine, you win. I guess it has to be me. But I'll need you to do me a small favor..."



One restart ended and a new one began. At the start of the new restart, Zach and Zorian immediately invaded Jornak's home, knocking him out, kidnapping him and searching his home. They found Veyers dead in the guest room, just like Jornak's story in the previous restart suggested they would. Using his brand new soul perception and a couple of soul magic forensic spells he had stolen from Sudomir's mind (unsurprisingly, necromancers had a very developed tradition of analytic spells meant to be used on corpses), Zorian determined that Veyers was in a virtually identical situation as the soul-killed aranea beneath Cyoria.

Normally, when one's soul was ripped out of their body, there would be subtle signs left etched into the flesh of the deceased, and these could be used to infer the method of extraction used. Neither the aranea nor Veyers showed such traces, though – it was as if they were merely flesh puppets that had never held any life to begin with.

They had expected such a result, but it was nice to have things confirmed so clearly.

After examining Veyers' body, they moved on to Jornak. Zorian had expected the young lawyer to be absolutely livid at them, but the way they just barged into his home and brutally subdued

him must have clued him in to the fact they weren't here on behalf of regular law enforcement. Or maybe it was their age – Zorian sometimes forgot to account for that little detail, as he felt pretty old these days, but he and Zach still looked like teenagers. Jornak was thus a lot more subdued this time around, too terrified about what they wanted to do with him to put up much of a resistance. Sadly, interrogating him with the aid of truth potions and mind magic yielded very little of note. Everything was mostly as Jornak had said in the previous restart, except that Veyers was also something of an informant for the young lawyer in addition to being a 'friend' – he basically reported anything interesting that occurred in his House to Jornak, who then forwarded the information to the Cult of the Dragon Below. Thus, Veyers was something of an unwitting low-level spy for the Cult.

Finally, Zach and Zorian sat down one day to discuss their findings and what they meant regarding the identity of Red Robe.

"So," Zach began, "we've confirmed that Veyers is either Red Robe or connected to him in some fashion. His body is clearly just a meat puppet that never held a soul to begin with, just like the bodies of your aranean friends beneath the city. Either he was somehow connected to Red Robe and the man decided to use soulkill on him, or he *is* Red Robe and this is what happens to a controller's body when they leave the time loop. Is that about right?"

"It is," Zorian confirmed. "Additionally, the fact Red Robe saw fit to delete your memories of Veyers reinforces his importance. We haven't been able to find anyone else whose entire presence had been scoured from your mind, so whatever link he has to Red Robe isn't small."

"He also has a reason to be bitter at the city and a link to the Invasion, however tenuous," Zach added. "Yeah, he could totally be Red Robe. Even his height and build matches what I remember of him when he attacked me at the start of that one restart..."

"Sadly, that is not real proof of anything," Zorian said, shaking his head. "At the level of skill we are working at, that sort of thing is trivially easy to fake. All it takes is a quick transformation spell and you could radically change your height and build."

"Well, he did attack me at the very start of the restart when he was undoubtedly in a hurry and didn't have much time to make detailed preparations. Maybe it slipped his mind? You have a better memory than I do and you saw him up close... how does the Red Robe in your mind compare to Veyers?"

Zorian considered it carefully. After a while he decided that Zach was right – Veyers did have the appropriate height and build to be the Red Robe in his memories.

"It is as you say," Zorian said slowly. "He does kind of fit under that robe. But really, in order to get to the bottom of this, we need to find out what happens when a controller leaves the time loop. This should tell us whether Veyers is just a soulkilled victim or the very mastermind we are looking for."

"And how are we supposed to do *that*?" Zach complained. "That stupid Guardian of the Threshold thing refuses to entertain hypotheticals like that. We already asked it what happens in this scenario, remember? It simply insisted that no such thing could transpire. Besides, we still don't know what method Red Robe used to leave. If he's a later addition to the time loop like you assume he is, he couldn't have used the normal method to do so. He would have run into the problem of his original already having a soul, which should have led to the Guardian refusing to cooperate. Depending on what method Red Robe used to leave the time loop, the answer to the question of what would happen to his body might radically change..."

"Not necessarily," Zorian said. "One thing that always stuck with me about Red Robe is that he honestly seemed concerned about the possibility of there being a large number of other time

travelers involved in the time loop. That means that he knew of a very easy and reliable way of inducing people in the time loop and thought it was entirely plausible that someone was using it on a mass scale."

"He did seem quite certain that there were a lot of other time travelers lurking around," Zach said, frowning. "My memory of that time is not the best, but that did appear to be the main thing he sought answers about when he probed my mind that night..."

"Right," Zorian said. "And this method couldn't have been the same as what I went through, because what happened to me is highly dangerous to the marker donor and probably doesn't give consistent results. It also couldn't have been something that is hard to set up, or else Red Robe wouldn't have accepted it happening so readily and on such a large scale..."

"So what is it then?" Zach asked impatiently. "I'm guessing you have some sort of answer, or else you wouldn't be mentioning it. Don't try to re-enact those cheap detective novels with me, please. I always found the long reveals in those books to be really annoying..."

"Fine, I'll be blunt," Zorian sighed. Killjoy. "I think Red Robe was simply using a modified temporary marker to persist in the time loop. Sure, they're supposed to last only six months, but that's probably just an extra restriction rather than something inherent in the marker itself. And my own marker demonstrates quite clearly that these markers can be damaged. Perhaps *selectively* damaged, allowing people to remove some of the functions."

"There have to be some protections against that," Zach frowned. "I doubt that the makers of the system would just allow people to tinker with their work like that."

"Possibly," Zorian conceded. "Not having seen any temporary marker yet, I can offer little except baseless speculation. But still, this seems to me like the most likely and straightforward way for

Red Robe to enter the time loop.”

Zach considered his words for a while before giving it a care-less shrug and focusing his attention back to Zorian.

“Well... alright,” Zach shrugged. “Let’s assume you’re right. So what? How does that relate to what we were talking about?”

“Well, the temporary markers are supposed to be *temporary*,” Zorian said. “There is probably a clear course of action meant to be done when they run out and the person they were supporting... disappears. And this course of action will probably be performed even if the person disappears prematurely through some other method.”

“Oh!” Zach said, slapping himself in the forehead. “Of course! So if Red Robe entered the time loop through a ‘selectively damaged’ temporary marker, all we have to do to find out what would happen after he leaves... is place a temporary marker on someone and see what happens after it runs out.”

“Exactly,” Zorian nodded.

A brief silence descended on the scene.

“You know,” Zach began after a while, “I’m pretty sure we already know the answer to that question. It probably just recreates a person from its usual template, as if they were never a temporary looper to begin with. I have no proof of this, but it intuitively makes sense to me.”

“You are probably correct,” Zorian nodded. “I also have no proof, but it is consistent with the intent of the time loop as the training simulation to set things up in that fashion.”

“Which would mean that Veyers isn’t Red Robe,” Zach continued with that line of thought. “Red Robe should have ended up as a normal person with no memory of his time looping self, not a soulless corpse.”

“If he really did enter the time loop via a modified temporary marker, that is probably the case,” Zorian nodded.

"Hmm," Zach hummed thoughtfully, tapping his fingers against his chin. "So let's assume for a moment that Veyers is just a broken link. I still think he's the most likely candidate for Red Robe, but whatever – your theory does sound rather plausible. Who is Veyers linked to? Jornak? Is *he* Red Robe?"

"He could be, I guess," Zorian said uncertainly. "I mean, I see no real evidence for that, and the man is not very impressive..."

"We weren't very impressive before the time loop happened to us, either," Zach pointed out.

"True," Zorian said. "I'm not saying it's impossible for Jornak to be Red Robe, just that I see no real evidence *for* the idea."

"Did Veyers have any other friends and associates other than Jornak?" Zach asked.

"I think he did, but Jornak did not know who these people were," Zorian said. "Veyers didn't like to talk about his personal life and Jornak didn't pry into it too much. The fact that Veyers chose to take shelter in Jornak's place might be artificially skewing our perception of how close they were – they weren't really *that* close. Jornak was actually quite surprised when Veyers came knocking on his door with a plea to let him stay for a while, and even contemplated refusing."

They discussed things for another hour or so before deciding to shelve the discussion for now. They would be interrogating Jornak in more detail in upcoming days, which would hopefully shed more light on the issue. They also intended to use pieces of Veyers' body as divination tools to try and track his movement while he was alive. They would have to do this very, very carefully though, lest they get tracked down themselves by the Boranova House investigators.

Eventually the two of them retired into one of the quieter, less frequented taverns on the outskirts of the city and sat down to have a drink and talk about less serious topics. The waitress gave Zorian

a really weird look when he ordered fruit juice instead of anything alcoholic and Zach mocked him for it, but Zorian wasn't really bothered about that. Instead he decided to make use of this opportunity to complain about the family drama that Daimen forced him to participate in near the end of the previous restart.

"Oh man, your family is such a train wreck," Zach laughed. "It's not even funny, except it kind of is. Though I have to admit, I kind of get the urge to defend Fortov when you explain his situation like that. I mean, I understand why you feel the way you do, but us fuck-ups need to look out for each other, you know?"

"What do you— Oh yeah, you were kind of doing badly in the Academy yourself, weren't you?" Zorian suddenly realized. He winced. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"No, it's fine," Zach said, shaking his head. "I'm not insulted. Much like Fortov, I too had excuses for my poor performance. But I understand now that they were just that: excuses. Perhaps Fortov will eventually learn his lesson as well, eh?"

"Perhaps," Zorian agreed diplomatically.

Zach responded by taking a deep sip out of his beer keg and then leaned back in his chair in contentment.

"You know, every time I think about what my future would have been like if I never got pulled into this time loop thing, I get both furious and horrified," Zach said, staring at the ceiling of the tavern with unfocused eyes. "It's been so long but I remember what it was like so very vividly... How I lived in an empty, half-abandoned house, constantly hearing about how I was expected to rebuild my entire House from scratch and feeling utterly lost as to how I can accomplish it. How I eventually decided it was a hopeless task and began to coast by on the least amount of effort I could get away with and just tried to keep myself happy. But hey, it was fine! I had plenty of money! I mean, that was why Tesen fired all the servants and sold off all our properties, right? So it doesn't matter

if I don't do too well at the academy and have no real professional skills. Everything will work out... just... *fine!*"

Zach suddenly finished off his beer keg and then slammed it violently onto the cheap wooden table. The tavern workers all turned towards them, and for a moment Zorian thought he would be thrown out of a building for the second time in two restarts, but in the end they just shook their heads slightly and went about their work. Evidently this was not a rare occurrence around here.

"I'm getting angry again," Zach explained unnecessarily. "I shouldn't be talking about this while drinking."

Zorian scratched his cheek awkwardly, not sure how to respond to that. He was really regretting starting the topic about Fortov now...

"You know what the problem with teaming up with you is?" Zach asked him suddenly, staring intently into his eyes. He didn't wait for his answer. "I can't start a restart by beating Tesen into a bloody pulp anymore. I used to do that every once in a while to work out my frustrations."

Zorian remembered that. It used to occur quite frequently, leading up to a lot of speculation about Zach and his reasons for doing that...

"It's probably for the best you stopped doing that," Zorian told him. "You might develop unhealthy habits and end up becoming a fugitive for no good reason once we're out of the time loop. That would be a pretty sad way for all this to end, no?"

"I guess," Zach said. "But it was *so* satisfying..."

Zach eyed his keg for a couple of seconds, as if considering if he should get himself another, before sighing and pushing it to the side. Good. He'd rather not deal with a drunk Zach right now.

"What do you intend to do about Tesen, anyway?" Zorian asked. "When we get out of the time loop, I mean."

"What else? I'm going to sue him into oblivion," Zach said. "He may be powerful and well connected, but I still have some friends in high places and he was pretty brazen in his actions. He broke the law when he robbed me of my inheritance and I'll do my best to make him pay for it through official channels. If that doesn't work... well, I hope it doesn't get to that."

"I see," Zorian said. "I didn't see you do any research on the topic thus far..."

"I've already done all the preparations a long time ago," Zach said. "I have all the evidence I need, I know how to blindside him when putting things into motion and I can afford to hire the best damn lawyers in the country to represent me. There is nothing more that can be done within the confines of the restart. These kind of legal cases take years of legal wrangling, not weeks. Still, a strong start does count for a lot and all the lawyers I spoke with tell me I have a good chance of winning."

"That's good," Zorian nodded slowly. "Though I have a suspicion Tesen and his faction won't limit themselves to mere legal wrangling in their attempts to deal with you."

"I know," Zach grinned. "But you know me. I don't shy away from danger. Let them come. It will just give me a stronger case when it turns up what they've been up to."

"Anything I can do to help?" Zorian asked.

"Probably not, actually," Zach said, shaking his head. "This is mostly a job for lawyers, not for the likes of us. Once I put things into motion, I just need to keep the money flowing and ward off any assassination attempts and the like. But we'll see. Rest assured I will not be too shy to ask for help from my fellow time traveler."

The conversation wound down after that, and they each went their separate ways for the day. The upcoming days were going to be somewhat busy ones, involving a great deal of preparations and planning.

It was time to visit Silverlake again... and this time they planned to seriously try and convince her that the time loop is real.



When Zach and Zorian showed at Silverlake's hidden base, they came carrying the grey hunter's egg sack and the ancient giant salamander that Silverlake was looking for. The eggs were acquired in the exact same way they had been in the previous restart. As for the salamander, they just went to the same place Zorian had found it in the past and then started their search from there. Eventually, after two whole days of searching up and down the river and examining nearby hiding places, they found the giant salamander buried in the mud of one of the flooded caverns, almost undetectable if one didn't know what to look for. Without an appropriate starting point, it would have taken them forever to track it down.

But no matter, the point was that they had both of the ingredients that Silverlake wanted so badly for her youth potion, and Zorian had created the keystone that Silverlake had shown him how to make in the previous restart. They also loaded up a bunch of combat golems into the portable palace orb, ready to be taken out at a moment's notice, just in case Silverlake reacted badly to their approach... something that was entirely possible, but unavoidable. They didn't have the time to take things slowly anymore.

"I'm ready," Zach said, twirling a combat staff in his fingers to pass the time. "Go ahead and ring the bell."

Zorian nodded and activated the keystone in his hands. Nothing visible happened, but Zorian was sure he had performed the action correctly. Now they could only wait.

They had to wait a surprisingly long time, longer than they had to the last time they had come here. Zorian suspected this was

because Silverlake was studying them from inside before deciding to come out, and this time they had come more heavily armed and visibly dangerous. Eventually, however, she decided to greet them anyway. The fact that Zach had gotten bored at some point and started building a giant statue of himself via alteration spells right outside her home might have motivated her to hurry up.

"How the hell did you activate that old piece of junk?" She immediately demanded, squinting at each of them suspiciously. "I never gave anyone a matching keystone. Hell, I never even *made* any matching keystones. Suspicious. Very, very suspicious. Who are you two?"

"To answer your last question, I am Zach Noveda and this is Zorian Kazinski. We are but humble academy students coming here to pay our respects to a living legend," Zach flattered shamelessly. Silverlake snorted derisively at him, saying nothing. "And also to arrange for a trade, I guess. Or should I say... re-negotiate our existing one? After all, this is the second time we're meeting like this."

"I don't think so?" Silverlake said curiously. "I don't remember you. I may be old, but I'm pretty sure I'd never forget a couple of brats as brazen as you two. I mean, I kind of like that kind of attitude, but only when it's directed at other people..."

"That's just because your memory of our meeting has been wiped clean from your mind," Zorian said in a carefree manner. "Nothing to worry about. Anyway, here is a gift."

Zorian reached into his backpack and withdrew a bottle of brandy and a box of sweets from it, which he then handed to a surprised Silverlake. She made no move to claim them, looking at both objects like they were poisonous vipers.

"A gift?" she asked emotionlessly.

"It is customary to bring gifts when visiting someone," Zorian said sagely. "It's an important tradition."

Silverlake made a sour face at that explanation. She spent a few more seconds scrutinizing the two objects before finally deciding they were probably harmless. She took them both from his hands and immediately stuffed them into one of her jacket pockets. Even though the heavy bottle and the large box of sweets shouldn't have possibly been able to fit into that tiny jacket pocket, they somehow did.

What a casual use of pocket dimension creation... Zorian couldn't help but feel a little jealous. He wouldn't be able to duplicate that feat, and in fact didn't even know how to go about achieving it. He could only extend the space of rigid containers right now, and had no idea how to use something as flexible as a pocket as a base for a pocket dimension. He knew it was unreasonable to expect to be as good as Silverlake after only a month of instruction, but this was a pretty stark reminder of how far he had to go to match the old witch's expertise in that regard.

Silverlake grinned at him in triumph, savoring this little victory for all it was worth.

"Let's back up a bit, shall we?" she asked, a little more confident this time. "You said something about my memory being wiped?"

"Yes," Zach nodded. "You see, about a month ago we came to you with a certain offer..."

And Zach started giving Silverlake the summarized version of what happened in the previous restart, though they took pains to temporarily omit any mention of the time loop itself. They figured it would immediately make Silverlake disbelieve anything else they had to say if they started with that. Instead they just narrated the general terms of their deal and the way she had instructed them in the art of pocket dimension creation and occasionally sent them on random errands.

And they used plenty of props in their explanation. When they spoke of how they offered the previous version of Silverlake grey

hunter's eggs, they took the eggs they obtained in this restart out of the portable palace orb and showed them to her. When they spoke of how Silverlake told them she also needed an ancient giant salamander to complete her youth potion, they took out the living salamander they captured and showed it off as well.

Silverlake's eyes shone brightly when she saw the two alchemical ingredients she wanted the most laid out in front of her, but she remained silent and motionless as she listened to their story in a rapt manner.

When it came time to move the story into Silverlake's home dimension, though, her expression fell and turned grave. This was because Zorian started using illusionary scenes from his memory to illustrate his points. Normally these kinds of illusory images weren't worth much as a proof. After all, nothing stopped the illusionist from fabricating things, and people's memories tended to be kind of fuzzy in even the best of cases. However, Zorian had the ability to remember a scene down to the tiniest detail and it wasn't like one could randomly invent a detailed layout of Silverlake's dimension and be correct. He could replicate the image of her favorite cauldron down to the tiniest scratch and replicate the exact number of dried onions and mushrooms hanging from the hooks on her wall. It was a pretty damning proof that he had at least been there at some point, even if he wasn't telling the truth about anything else, and Silverlake clearly knew it.

"Stop, stop," she suddenly told him, waving her hand in a forceful manner. She looked honestly shaken at the sight of these images. "I... I need to check something."

Zach and Zorian stood by the side while Silverlake started casting one diagnostic spell after another on herself. Occasionally she would stop and mutter to herself in some alien Khusky tongue that neither Zach nor Zorian had ever encountered, before shaking her head and continuing with her self-diagnostics.

After that she started examining the entrance to her dimension before wordlessly disappearing inside. Zach and Zorian still waited patiently, not saying anything. She returned twenty minutes later, looking more disturbed than ever.

"It doesn't make sense," she loudly proclaimed. "*None* of this makes sense. My memory is fine. It hasn't been tampered with. I *know* it hasn't, because there are always, *always* traces left when one does so and my mind doesn't have any. But you've clearly been inside my home long enough to dig up that old stone and puzzle out a matching keystone for it, long enough to memorize every corner of it down to the smallest detail. Except there is no trace of illegal entry, not even the faintest whiff of it, and there is no way in all the hells and all the heavens I'd ever forget letting someone like you inside. And your story! What a bunch of rubbish! You say you sold me grey hunter's eggs a whole month ago, yet I see no evidence I've ever processed them! And now you come here with a new sack of grey hunter's eggs, as if those can be acquired just by going into your neighborhood store or something. Who are you people and what is happening here!?"

She punctuated her statement by making a sweeping hand gesture, causing two huge, hulking humanoids of earth to suddenly coalesce out of the soil around them.

Earth elementals, and not minor ones either. However...

"Should we...?" Zach mouthed.

Zorian quietly nodded and made a sweeping gesture of his own, though his one was mostly for show, not because he actually needed to make it. Then again, maybe it was the same for Silverlake. In any case, he made use of the time needed to make the gesture to reach out into the ever-useful orb, causing a bunch of equally huge and hulking war golems to pop into existence next to them.

"We don't want to fight," Zorian said. "But if you really insist

on it, I guarantee you it won't end in your favor."

Rather than answer him, Silverlake stomped her foot on the ground, causing a set of heavy, potent wards to radiate out of the entrance to her pocket dimensions. The warding scheme quickly enclosed the entire area, shutting down their teleportation, filling the area with fog, inhibiting their shaping skills, disturbing their souls...

Even as Silverlake was making her move, though, Zorian was doing the same. He quickly reached into his backpack again and retrieved from it a truncated pyramid made out of glittering blue stone. He threw it in front of him, and it promptly righted itself in the air and began to hover there, golden lines and glyphs suddenly appearing on its surface. In a blink of an eye, it had enclosed Zach, Zorian and their war golems under a dome of yellow light.

Silverlake's wards crashed into the dome... and were immediately halted in their tracks. The old witch was way better than Zorian in a number of fields, but her skill at setting up wards wasn't one of them. Not to mention that wards were always more effective as a means of defense than they were as an offensive tool.

There was a tense silence as the two sides stared at each other from behind their respective barriers. After about a minute of this, Silverlake suddenly sighed and commanded the earth elementals to merge back into the earth and the wards to retreat back into her pocket dimension. After a second of hesitation, Zach and Zorian similarly put away their own defenses.

"Well..." Silverlake said, sounding surprisingly chirpy and relaxed. She chuckled at their wary postures and serious faces. "I really suffered a loss this time, didn't I? I guess this is what I get for trying to escalate things into combat. I was never that much of a fighter, truth be told. I don't suppose we could all forget this ever happened, hmm?"

"Sure, let's," Zach said, giving her a friendly grin. "It's probably

for the best if this never happens again, though. I only ever give people two chances."

"Oh?" Silverlake said, cocking her head sideways like a curious bird. "Oh, I see. Everything I've been met with thus far is your friend's work, but he isn't actually the combat specialist. *You* are. And you never even made a move thus far..." She shook her head, speaking to herself self-depreciatingly. "Silly old girl, making such blunders at your age... it's just as they say: you learn all your life and still die a fool. Though there should hopefully be no dying for me just yet..."

"In any case," said Zorian, coughing into his fist to attract her attention, "I believe I have an answer for the concerns you expressed just before this... unpleasantness. You were wondering how this was all possible, yes?"

"Yes," she bluntly confirmed. "I'm *very* curious as to how this could happen."

"It's like this," said Zorian, creating another illusory scene, this one depicting the planet they lived on, spinning placidly in the air. "There is an artifact from the Age of Gods that can take our entire world, take a snapshot of every single thing in existence and create a flawless copy of it in a giant pocket dimension..."

Surprisingly, after Zorian had gotten about halfway into the story, Silverlake suddenly started to ask a series of rapid-fire questions about the Sovereign Gate, the Guardian of the Threshold, the exact mechanics of the time loop itself, and so on.

"Alright, you can stop now," she eventually said, tapping her leg with her bony fingers. "I think I know what's going on now. Well, somewhat. And if I'm right, then there is a very easy way to check if you're telling the truth or not."

Zach and Zorian perked up at her words.

"Oh?" Zach asked excitedly.

Silverlake grinned, obviously enjoying the fact that she knew

something they didn't. Or at least thought she did – Zorian wasn't going to get excited before he heard what she actually had to say. For all he knew, she was just trying to patch up her wounded pride.

"Tell me," she said, "have you two ever heard about the primordials?"

TESTING

Primordials were strange, enigmatic creatures. They were supposedly first-born children of the primordial dragon from which the world was fashioned, ancient and powerful. In life, their abilities had rivaled those of the gods themselves. In death, they had spawned a multitude of lesser primordials to continue their struggle. One would think that such fearsome beings and everything related to them would be vividly remembered by history, but this was not the case. In his search for primordial prisons outside Cyoria, Zorian had consulted many church documents, historical records and elementals, largely in vain. Primordials may have been powerful and frightening in their heyday, but they had been sealed away thousands of years ago. That was a lot of time for information to be forgotten, especially since the gods had actively tried to limit knowledge of them and their prisons while they had still been active in the world. Thus, finding any substantial information on them was quite hard.

Moreover, even when such information was found, it was hard to gauge how much of it was reliable and how much of it was pure fabrication. A lot of the stories that bothered going into the details of the nature of primordials were mutually contradictory,

and there was no way to test any of them to see which one was closer to the truth than the others.

"In other words, you know virtually nothing about primordials except that they exist and that one of them is imprisoned in Cyoria," Silverlake concluded after hearing their explanation.

"Yeah, pretty much," Zach confirmed. Although they were searching for the locations of other primordial prisons in their free time, that hadn't produced much in the way of actual results. "What does this have to do about confirming the truth of our story, though?"

"Patience, boy, patience," Silverlake urged smugly. "A house must be built from the foundation up. In order to answer that question, I must first show you the truth about primordials and the way they were imprisoned..."

Oh? She could actually answer those questions? Zorian was torn between excitement and a healthy dose of caution. On one hand, this was a powerful witch that has lived through more than a century – surely she wouldn't be making claims like that without a good reason to be confident? On the other hand... well, it *was* Silverlake.

After some thought, he decided to voice his concerns to the old witch in front of him.

"Ignorant brat," she complained. "Do you think I'd be joking about something this serious!?"

Zach and Zorian shared a knowing look between each other.

"Well... *yeah*," Zach said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Now that you mention it, that does sound like something I would derive dark amusement from," Silverlake mused, rubbing her chin with her hand as she stared at the tree branches above her.

"Not exactly something you should be proud of," Zorian pointed out unhappily.

"Anyway, do you want to hear what I have to say or not?" Silverlake asked loudly, abandoning her musing pose in favor of folding her hands over her chest and looking at them both defiantly.

"Sure we do," Zorian said. As annoying as the old witch was, she had some very unique skills and insights that were almost impossible to find elsewhere. "Let's hear it."

Silverlake stayed silent for a few seconds. Before either Zach or Zorian could say anything about that, the entrance to her secret hideout flared into life again and another Silverlake stepped out of it, carrying a large brown book in her hands.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at this. Silverlake having some kind of duplicate was not that surprising. There were lots of spells that duplicated the appearance of a caster in some way, after all. Even if it was an actual simulacrum, Zorian still wouldn't find it unusual, since Silverlake was clearly proficient in soul magic. The really interesting question was which Silverlake was the real thing: the one they've been talking to all this time or the one that had just walked out of her dimensional hideout?

He activated his newly-acquired soul perception and took a look.

It was not easy for Zorian to use his soul perception. Training it had been slow and frustrating thus far, though he had been told by Alanic that he was doing just fine by normal standards. He'd had the ability for less than a month, so it was to be expected that his control over it was crude and that he had trouble interpreting what it was telling him. Zorian imagined this was how non-psychics felt when they tried to train their non-structured mind magic into something usable.

Still, identifying whether something in front of him had a soul or not was well within his modest capabilities. With that in mind,

he focused his soul perception on Silverlake and immediately realized that she indeed had a soul. She wasn't an illusion, a remote-controlled puppet or a simulacrum, then. So they *had* actually been talking to the real Silverlake up till now; that was nice to know. Just to be thorough, he shifted his soul perception to the approaching book-carrying Silverlake and...

She had a soul too. What?

Zorian shifted his attention between one Silverlake and the other repeatedly, trying to work out what was happening here. It was no use, though – his soul perception simply wasn't sophisticated enough to unravel this mystery and he didn't want to start casting analytical divinations at the old witch and her weird clone. Blatantly scanning someone without their explicit permission was widely considered to be rather rude and insulting behavior.

The other Silverlake soon reached the one Zach and Zorian had been talking to and gave her the book she was carrying. The first Silverlake glanced at the book, nodded slightly and then snapped her fingers.

The other Silverlake seemingly imploded, badly startling both Zach and Zorian, her form collapsing into a smoky black ball. The ball existed for only a moment before reforming itself into a large black bird, which promptly hopped onto Silverlake's shoulder. It was a raven, Zorian realized.

'Of course!' Zorian thought, slapping himself in the forehead. Silverlake had a raven familiar! The link between a mage and their familiar allowed both of them to assume the form of one another really easily, provided that the mage knew the proper spells.

And Silverlake no doubt knew the proper spells, because familiar magic was one of the things that witches were known to be really fond of. Hell, she'd even found the way to shield the raven's mind from scrutiny, preventing Zorian from easily identifying it as a shapeshifted animal.

Zorian opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted when Silverlake tried to blow away the layer of dust on the cover of the book and ended up sending herself into a coughing fit due to all the dust suddenly flying into her face.

The raven cawed indignantly at this, flapping his wings a couple of times for emphasis.

"Shut up," Silverlake said to the raven in between her coughing and wheezing. She glanced towards Zach and Zorian. "And why are you two just standing around like that!? Come closer and take this blasted thing away already! Who do you think I brought it for? Do you think I wanted to refresh my memory or something?"

Zorian stepped closer and Silverlake immediately pushed the large leather-bound tome into his hands. He grunted softly and took a step back, caught off-guard by her sudden movement and the book's considerable weight. Damn, this thing was heavy...

"Read this and everything will become clear," Silverlake said, finally getting her breathing under control.

Zorian eyed the heavy leather book in his hands suspiciously. The cover was brown and non-descript, with a title that proclaimed, in plain white letters, that this was a collection of cookie recipes. Flipping the random pages of the book seemed to reinforce this claim.

He glanced at Silverlake and saw that both she and the raven perched on her shoulder were eying him closely, waiting for his reaction.

With a small sigh, Zorian swiped his hand across the book and cast an appropriate dispel, shredding the illusion covering the book into pieces. Following that, he was confronted with a lot less innocuous title: *Unspeakable Cults, Volume Four*.

"You just can't resist pulling these kinds of tricks all the time, can you?" Zorian asked rhetorically.

"You made a lot of tall claims today," Silverlake shrugged. "It's

only natural for me to test them every now and then in small ways. If you two are really a bunch of old time travelers like you claim to be, a simple illusion wouldn't have posed a problem for you. Besides, I can't exactly leave a book like this out in the open without disguising it somehow..."

"What do you mean?" Zach frowned.

"*Unspeakable Cults* is one of the most widely banned series of books circulating around Altazia and Xlotic," Zorian explained, idly leafing through the book. All sorts of ghastly drawings and descriptions immediately assaulted his eyes. "It was written by an anonymous author that had a penchant for infiltrating secretive cults and mage organizations so he could observe their ceremonies and activities. No one is quite sure how he did it, but considering the furor the books created, it's clear he didn't make it all up. Anyway, after infiltrating all these cults and watching them for gods know how long, he wrote a series of eight books that go into great detail about what he had seen. Every debauchery he had seen, every messed up sacrifice or morally-bankrupt experiment is described in great detail, and he even illustrated some scenes with drawings and diagrams. Although the books contain no actual spells or ritual setups, they have been banned almost everywhere as blasphemous, degenerate filth."

He closed the book, eying it in great distaste. He really didn't want to read this stuff...

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me what page I should be looking at?" Zorian asked Silverlake, staring at her pleadingly.

Silverlake just grinned at him nastily. Damn witch...

Zorian glanced towards Zach speculatively, but the boy immediately shook his head at him before he could even open his mouth.

"No, no, no," Zach said quickly, extending his arms in front of him in a warding gesture. "Sorry Zorian, but this definitely sounds like a job for you. You have a lot higher tolerance for this kind of

stuff than I do.”

Ugh. As much as Zorian hated to admit this, his fellow time traveler kind of had a point. Reading the minds of high-ranking cultists, Sudomir, Ibasan invaders and others had shown him enough of the dark side of humanity that he had been numbed to the horror of it all to a large extent.

He still didn’t want to wade into a book like this one, though, so he decided to get a little creative. He started casting divination after divination spell at the book, trying to divine the section of the book that Silverlake wanted him to read. This was harder than it sounded, because the book was heavily warded against divinations and did not ever mention primordials by name, but Zorian was very good at divinations by now. Especially these kinds of divinations. He’d had his simulacrum in charge of researching mountains of documentation for obscure clues for quite a while now, so a task like this was pure routine by this point.

After five minutes or so he found the section that seemed right and flipped the book open. Both Silverlake and Zach peered over his shoulder to look at the page he had picked.

”You’re no fun, boy,” Silverlake said, scowling at him.

Zorian took that as an admission that he had indeed found the right page to start at and began to read.

The chapter in question described a small cult of mages, ‘somewhere in Xlotic’, which worshipped an entity imprisoned behind some kind of ‘dimensional veil’. They did this by capturing unwary travelers, implanting some sort of magical worms into their brain and then forcibly establishing contact between their mind and the mind of the imprisoned entity. Normally, mental contact with the entity resulted in quick insanity as one’s mind was overwhelmed by the flood of incomprehensible thoughts and images, but the chemicals released by the worms as they fed on the victim’s brain tissue somehow allowed them to last longer under this assault. Drugged

out of their minds to keep them talking and half-insane, the victims would then spend the next couple of hours screaming, pleading, cursing and babbling gibberish while the cultists diligently wrote down their feverish ravings for later study.

After repeating this process gods know how many times, the cultists eventually assembled a fair amount of information about this entity, which the cultists called 'the Golden-Feathered Worm'. To Zorian's eyes, it appeared clear that this Golden-Feathered Worm was actually an imprisoned primordial, even if the book never actually identified it as such.

Because of the relatively unpleasant nature of the text, the somewhat archaic language the book was written in and the unhinged nature of the 'insights' obtained by the cultists, it was tempting to just dismiss all of their findings as delusional gibberish. However, after re-reading the chapter a handful of times and thinking of it in some detail, he felt there was some actual insight hidden amidst the insanity. The victim's mutterings of 'eyes between spaces', 'time that moves in braids and spirals', 'bones that stretched inside and outside' and other such nonsense all hinted at the idea that the Golden-Feathered Worm was a very dimensionally complex being.

'The path of the Golden-Feathered Worm is the path of the self as the universe,' the book said. 'Indeed, the rest of his kind is also as such: each one a world unto itself, their flesh but a thin, porous cloak to hide the depths beneath.'

That was interesting, to say the least. The book was basically saying that primordials were not really creatures in the way Zorian commonly understood it, but more like living miniature universes. He... didn't know what to think about that. It sounded crazy, and considering where it had come from, Zorian would normally dismiss the idea without a second thought.

He handed the book to Zach, who had given up on trying to

read over his shoulder a while ago, but would probably still want to see what the book had to say. Zorian couldn't wait to see his face when he got to the lovingly illustrated description of the worm implantation procedure.

"So?" Silverlake asked, not bothering to wait for Zach to read the book too. "What do you think?"

"I presume you're referring to the idea of primordials being living universes masquerading as flesh-and-blood beings?" Zorian asked.

"Wait, really?" Zach asked incredulously, slowly leafing through the book. He was going through it too fast so Zorian assumed he was only skimming the text instead of meticulously poring over it like Zorian had done. "How does that work?"

"Read the book and you might get your answer," Silverlake said blandly. What a lie. Zorian had read that chapter several times over and he still had no idea how that could possibly work. "But yes, that is what I was getting at."

"Great," Zach said. "But what does that-"

"I think we are living inside a primordial," Silverlake said.

There was a brief pause as they both digested this statement.

"I think you're going to have to explain that a little," Zach said slowly, letting the book hang by his side for the moment so he can focus on her better.

"Well, provided that what you are saying is at all reliable," Silverlake said. "You are saying that this Sovereign Gate thing can copy the entire world and create its very own miniature universe to house it all. Oh, and run the whole thing at absurd temporal dilation levels. That is *not* the level of power you get from a divine artifact. The gods may have been able to build such things, I don't know, but I have never heard of them handing out something on this level of power. Surely such a device would require an absolutely titanic expenditure of divine energy to produce, no?"

Sounds like a lot of effort just to give a mortal a new toy to play with. On the other hand, if the Sovereign Gate is 'just' a modified, mutilated primordial... well, suddenly the whole thing becomes a lot more plausible. Turning one of their ancient enemies into an item like that and handing it down to a measly mortal to use and abuse sounds exactly like something the gods of old would do. Especially if the primordial in question had irritated them particularly badly by primordial standards..."

A long silence descended upon the scene as Zach and Zorian considered the plausibility of the story. Silverlake waited calmly for their reaction, hands clasped behind her back. She appeared to be trying to project an air of serenity and unshakable confidence with her stance and expression, but the effect was ruined by the fact she couldn't stop herself from nervously tapping her foot against the ground as she waited.

Silverlake could be onto something, Zorian decided. It had always seemed to him that the Sovereign Gate was ridiculously powerful, even for a divine artifact, and this was as good an explanation as any as to why this was the case. He suddenly remembered the Ikosian myth of how the entire world they lived on had been fashioned by the gods out of the body of a defeated primordial dragon. He'd never taken the old myth very seriously, but maybe there was something to that story...

"You said there might be a very easy way to check if we're telling the truth or not," Zach said cautiously. "Is this related to that? Are you saying it's somehow possible to check whether we are inside a primordial or not?"

"Well, perhaps," Silverlake said, humming softly to herself. "You see, I have known about the primordial sealed away in Cyoria for quite a while, and have been carefully, *carefully* studying its prison from time to time. It was never the focus of my studies, but I reckon I know it quite well. If my speculation is correct, I

should be able to notice some kind of change in the prison when I study it again. I refuse to believe that being recreated in the body of another primordial will not have a noticeable effect on it. Well, truthfully, my first instinct is to say that such an item couldn't possibly affect beings on the level of primordials, even if they are sealed away... but from what you say about Panaxeth, I am completely wrong there, so whatever. Anyway, let's go check!"

"Now?" Zorian asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Is there any point in waiting?" Silverlake challenged.

"I guess not," Zorian admitted. "I'm just a little surprised at your... decisiveness."

"I've just found out I could be trapped inside a body of primordial god-like monster that probably hates all humanity," Silverlake said, looking like he was an idiot. "Of course I want to confirm or deny this as soon as I can! Don't you?"

"A *copy* trapped inside a body of a primordial god-like monster," Zorian corrected her.

"And you were preceded by countless other copies that lived out their short lives in vain, all their thoughts and accomplishments undone at the end of the month," Zach added.

"A bunch of brats, both of you," Silverlake told them. "Let's just take a look at that primordial prison in Cyoria for now. You two know how to teleport, right?"

"We do, but there is no need for that," Zorian said. "I have a much better way for us to get there quickly."



After the three of them returned to Cyoria (via Zorian's dimensional gate spell, of course), they immediately proceeded towards the place the primordial was imprisoned in – the massive circular abyss around which the city of Cyoria was built, known simply as the Hole.

Fortunately, accessing the Hole was not terribly hard. Although the incomprehensible amounts of mana gushing out of it were the foundation upon which the city rested, the Hole itself was not monitored very closely. The biggest concern the city had about it was that it was rather popular for people to commit suicide by throwing themselves into its depths, which meant they had to put a token patrol here and there to try and curb this behavior. These patrols were not very good and only checked the most obvious approaches to the Hole. So long as they didn't bring too many people and avoided making a spectacle out of themselves, they could linger inside as long as they wished.

As they descended into the Hole's depths, Zach and Zorian questioned Silverlake about her interest in primordials. Silverlake claimed it was not something she had ever been overly concerned with, it was just that she had been alive for a long time and even casual study could build up to something substantial when you keep chipping at the problem over several decades. She also claimed that, like them, she did not know of any primordial prisons other than the one in Cyoria.

Zorian wasn't sure he believed her, to be honest. She knew Panaxeth's prison well enough to give her confidence that she could detect changes in its dimensional boundary, but she'd only studied it casually? Zach and Zorian could only faintly detect the presence of the prison and little else, and it wasn't like their attainments in the field of dimensionalism and divination were low. Furthermore, while their search for other sites of primordial imprisonment had yet to bear fruit, they did have no less than three promising leads already... and that was with them casually directing some efforts at the problem, rather than dropping everything to pursue the issue. He was supposed to believe that Silverlake couldn't manage to find even one additional prison after spending gods know how many decades of interest in the

topic? He had a feeling Silverlake was seriously underselling both her level of interest in this and her attainments in it. He even suspected that her incredible level of skill in the field of pocket dimension creation might come from pursuing this line of research.

He did not voice his suspicions, though. He could tell that, although Silverlake was putting forth a confident façade in front of them, the things they had said had deeply disturbed her and made her uneasy. If he was too pushy she might feel backed into a corner and lash out. Frankly, she had never struck him as the most stable of individuals to begin with.

They didn't have to descend far into the Hole to get access to Panaxeth's prison. Unlike the palace orb and other pocket dimensions that Zorian was familiar with, primordial prisons seemed to have larger and more complex anchors to the main reality that extended over quite a large area. In fact, considering that Zorian had once witnessed Panaxeth breaking out of his prison in the sky above Cyoria, he suspected that the anchor extended well outside the Hole itself... it was just that those parts of the anchor were too subtle for Zach and Zorian to detect them. In any case, once they had reached sufficient depth, Silverlake asked them to shut up and let her examine the prison in peace. So they did just that, sitting down on a couple of nearby rocks in silence while Silverlake did her thing.

Zorian paid close attention to the spells Silverlake was casting. Though one couldn't learn a spell just from watching someone cast it, they could get a pretty good idea of what the spell was supposed to do if they were experienced or familiar with the relevant theory. Zorian was both, so there was a lot he could tell by watching Silverlake analyze Panaxeth's prison. She used dozens of individual spells in her investigation, each one of them a lengthy and complex thing that seemed narrowly specialized for one specific

function. Such unoptimized, hyperspecialized spells were probably something she had made herself, specifically to tackle the problem of analyzing a primordial's prison. Furthermore, she cast these rather unwieldy spells with practiced ease, making no mistakes whatsoever, strongly suggesting she had done them often enough for it to become rote.

'Casual interest', sure...

As time went by, Silverlake's face started to frown more often and her casting became more feverish, but she remained completely silent and focused on her task. She didn't even mutter to herself, as she was often prone to do. Finally, after more than two hours of casting, pondering and intense staring at the empty patch of air in front of her (what was that even supposed to do?), Silverlake let her arms drop to her sides, sighed and then turned towards them.

"Alright," she said. "You win. I provisionally believe your crazy story."

"Provisionally?" Zach asked curiously.

"We're clearly in a different world than we were up until a few months ago," said Silverlake. "It does not necessarily mean your specific version of events is what is happening, but I have no better explanation at the moment. So for now, I'm accepting your story as valid."

"Just to confirm, you actually detected a noticeable difference between Panaxeth's prison as it was a few months back and as it is now?" Zorian asked.

"I suppose you could say that," Silverlake said, a note of discomfort creeping into her voice.

"Why the glum face?" Zach asked, picking up on her mood. "Didn't you expect to find just that?"

"I expected to either find that the prison is some kind of poor man's knockoff of a real primordial's prison or that it was thor-

oughly unchanged from how it was before and that you were trying to feed me a pack of lies,” Silverlake said.

”But?” Zorian prodded.

”But it’s the same prison as it has always been... just seen from a different perspective,” Silverlake said, lost in thought for a second. She scowled when she refocused back on them and saw them looking blankly at her. She clacked her tongue. ”Bah! I can’t believe I have to explain myself to a bunch of amateurs like you... Well, let’s try it like this: you know how a dimensional gate looks like it’s composed out of two discrete portals but is actually just one dimensional construct with two ends? The prison in front of us is like that. I can sense the changes in it, but a closer look reveals they are clearly superficial. It’s the exact same object, just seen through a different lens. Panaxeth’s prison exists simultaneously in both the real world and... whatever the hell this place really ends up being. This Sovereign Gate of yours couldn’t duplicate primordial prison grounds, but it could make them attach themselves to this world in addition to their original one... and it’s giving me a headache. I don’t know how this could possibly work and I don’t know *why* someone would bother with this. Why didn’t this divine toy just neglect the primordial prisons entirely instead of going to all this trouble to ensure access to them even in a recreation of a real world? Argh...!”

She pulled at her hair for a second (not very hard, mind you, she seemed to do this just for dramatic emphasis) and then turned back towards the gaping abyss in front of them, staring at it in deep thought.

After a few moments of silence Zach asked the obvious question that Zorian was pondering as well.

”If the primordial prisons are objects that exist both in the real world and the time loop reality, doesn’t that make them a sort of a... bridge, for the lack of a better term?” Zach asked Zorian quietly. ”If

so, it might be possible to use them as a sort of conduit for opening a passage between this world and the real one. Hell, releasing one of them from their prisons might not even be necessary!”

“I wouldn’t place my hopes too high on such an idea,” Silverlake suddenly said. Apparently she wasn’t so deep in her thought that she couldn’t eavesdrop on their conversation. “Primordial prisons are hard to perceive, nevermind interact with. It would take vastly more skill to use them as a spell conduit than—”

She suddenly stopped and turned around to face them, an incredulous look on her face.

“Wait, what was that about releasing one of them?”



After convincing Silverlake that something funny was going on with the world at large and that their time loop explanation was at least a little bit plausible (and smoothing out some unfortunate misunderstandings), Silverlake reluctantly agreed to continue teaching them pocket dimension creation. In addition, Zorian had managed to talk her into selling them the analysis spells she used to study Panaxeth’s prison in exchange for both of the ingredients for her potion of youth. As much as she complained that such a trade was ‘profoundly unfair’ due to the mechanics of the time loop, she just couldn’t resist getting her hands on *both* of the ingredients she needed to complete her potion of youth.

Unfortunately, convincing Silverlake that they were onto something had one major unfortunate side-effect: she was suddenly extremely interested in them. She wanted to know everything about them – where they came from, who their family was, where their allegiances lay, what their skillset was, how much money they had at their disposal, *everything*. And when they had refused to cooperate with that, she started to spy on them.

And then mobilized some of her contacts (apparently she wasn't as much of a total hermit as it appeared at first glance) to gather information on them when it turned out they were too good at evading and foiling scrying attempts and other magic-oriented methods of spying. This would be very annoying even at the best of times, but what made this especially problematic was that Zach and Zorian were already doing all sorts of eye-catching things, arranging all kinds of high-value trades and throwing around ridiculous amounts of cash. This worked just fine as long as nobody was focusing on them, but the moment a bunch of nosy people were told to specifically look into what Zach Noveda and Zorian Kazinski were doing... well, suddenly they had a lot bigger reasons to be interested than one witch's curiosity. Even if Silverlake backtracked and told these people that she changed her mind and no longer cared for the information, they wouldn't stop their investigation now.

Ugh.

Caught off guard by this change in their routine and forced to temporarily lay low, Zach and Zorian turned to other things to amuse themselves with. In Zorian's case, that something was the study of divine artifacts.

Sitting around in a secret, warded house, Zorian stared at the small collection of items in front of him. There were seven of them in total: a small silver pyramid, a dark brown wooden staff, a golden bell, a pitch black disc covered in seemingly random scratches, a large green gem with several light motes trapped within, a large bronze compass and a plain-looking iron dagger. The dagger had been recovered from the ruins inside the portal palace orb, while the others had been shamelessly stolen from private collections and treasuries of small countries. Although it looked unremarkable, this pile of items would likely inspire greed in even the richest of individuals living on the continent.

"You know that it's almost impossible to find something useful by studying divine artifacts, right?" Daimen said, staring intently at the gathered items. Zorian had reluctantly invited Daimen to join him in this task, seeing how he had much more experience with this sort of thing than he did. "Entire groups have dedicated their lives to studying one specific divine item and came out empty-handed in the end."

"Yes, I know," said Zorian, picking up the dagger they had found in the orb and flipping it in his hand. They still had no idea what it did, other than being supernaturally sharp. Divine artifacts were immune to divination magics so the only way to discover their uses was to either use trial and error or search through historical records to see if there are any descriptions of the item's powers in ancient texts. "But I have something most of those groups don't – a willingness to destructively study the item in question for any clues and have it come back intact at the end of each month."

Daimen made a sour face at him.

"This feels so wrong," he said uneasily. "These are priceless, irreplaceable relics. It's *sacrilege*."

"Yet you agreed to come here and participate in it," Zorian noted lightly.

"Well... I can't say I was never tempted to do something like this," Daimen sighed. "Are you sure they'll be back to normal?"

"I'm sure," Zorian confirmed, pointing at the dagger in his hands. "I already dismantled this dagger in the previous restart and it's back to normal now. However mysterious divine abilities are, the Sovereign Gate clearly has no issues in duplicating these items over and over again."

"That's both reassuring and terrifying," Daimen noted.

Zorian wondered what his brother would say if he told him that they were currently stuck inside some kind of weird primordial thing that may or may not be alive and just waiting for a chance

to devour them all. Alas, as funny as it was to fantasize about his reaction to that, it wasn't worth the drama to actually go through with telling him about it.

"So, before we begin, I'm kind of curious..." Zorian began. "How did Fortov react to that illusion disc I made for you?"

The disc was something the Daimen of the previous restart had come up with. In order to help him convince Fortov to open up and talk to him, Daimen came up with the idea of a disc that would, when activated, project an illusionary scene of their talk in the previous restart. Zorian was skeptical of the idea; why would seeing such an illusion convince Fortov of anything? But Daimen insisted it would work so Zorian humored him. He tapped into his memory of the evening and constructed the most realistic illusion of the event he could before binding it to a disc that he left in Fortov's mail. Strictly speaking, that was the end of his obligations in regards to the matter, but he kind of wanted to hear what the outcome of that stunt turned out to be.

"Well, you could say it sort of worked," Daimen said with a small grin.

"Oh?" Zorian asked with a raised eyebrow.

"He's talking to me, at least," Daimen shrugged. "That's all I really wanted out of that disc, so I have no reason to complain."

"How did you explain the contents of the disc?" Zorian asked curiously.

"I didn't," Daimen grinned. "I used the mystery as an incentive to talk to me. I said I would explain everything in a month."

Zorian rolled his eyes at him.

"Anyway, I also have something to talk about before we dive into all this," Daimen said, sweeping his hands over the gathered divine artifacts. "I'm pretty sure I have narrowed down the location of the Key piece that was lost in Xlotic."

"You have?" Zorian asked, leaning forwards with anticipation. He had to say, his brother's help was proving itself invaluable when it came to jobs like this one. If Zach and Zorian had to locate all the missing pieces of the Key all by themselves it would have taken them much, much longer than this. "Where is it? Is it the Tower of Hylos-Na? I hope it's—"

"It's the Ziggurat of the Sun," Daimen interrupted him.

Zorian leaned back into his chair with a groan. Out of all the possible options, the Ziggurat of the Sun was definitely the worst one. It was situated deep into the interior of northern Miasina, in an area that was once lush grassland, but was now located deep within the Xlotic desert. There were no major human settlements nearby, just an endless expanse of desert. Simply approaching the ziggurat required a lengthy, difficult trek through these parched, desolate lands.

And any expedition that reached the ziggurat itself would be faced with the tiny issue of the ziggurat's current inhabitants: sulrothum, a species of giant sapient desert wasps that had taken over the structure when the deserts had claimed the whole area. Sulrothum were almost three meters long, possessed incredible strength and toughness and there were hundreds of them living within the ziggurat. As for their friendliness, well... 'sulrothum' was a local human word roughly translating to 'devil wasp'. Zorian kind of doubted they would allow them to peacefully search their base for ancient magical artifacts.

"Sorry," Daimen said. "I know how you feel, but I'm pretty sure I got it right. The imperial ring is there, provided the sulrothum haven't already found it and taken it elsewhere."

"Which is a distinct possibility," Zorian noted.

"At least you have that in-built Key detector, so we'll know if the ring is no longer there before we waste too much time on securing the place," Daimen shrugged.

"Of course the damn ring has to be in the most difficult location possible," Zorian grunted unhappily. "Just getting there will be an issue."

"Actually, I think I have a solution to both that and how to reach Blantyrre in a reasonable time frame," Daimen grinned before throwing a rolled up poster at him. "Have a look and tell me what you think."

Zorian caught the poster before it had time to hit his face, gave Daimen an unamused look because he was pretty sure his brother deliberately aimed the object at his head, and then unrolled it to take a look.

It was a propaganda poster, basically. It showed a pretty picture of a weird-looking wooden ship that was apparently commissioned by the king of Aranhal, one of the larger nations in Xlotic. It was an airship, Zorian realized.

An expensive, experimental airship designed by some of the best artificers in Aranhal as part of some kind of national vanity project. It was mostly done, the construction crew was just putting finishing touches on it currently and it was planned it would undergo a test flight in a few weeks.

"So?" Daimen said with a knowing smile on his face. "What do you think?"

Zorian stared at the poster for a second before looking Daimen straight in the eye.

"I think we have ourselves an airship to steal."

GRINDING STONE

Airships were not held in very high regard among people who cared about such things. The idea of a flying vessel was something that had captivated mankind since time immemorial, of course, but every concrete design for such a vessel had been disappointing. After all, although magic could make a ship fly easily enough, doing so on a long-term basis was very expensive in terms of mana. Moreover, this cost increased massively if one wanted to not just fly, but fly fast and retain a healthy amount of maneuverability in the process, too. This was why very few mages employed magical flight without a pressing reason to do so, even though flight magic wasn't that complicated and many mages were capable of it.

As a result of this fundamental issue, most airships couldn't actually fly around as they pleased, but instead had to follow fixed paths that took them through mana-rich areas that could sustain them in the air. And even so, airship designers still had to ruthlessly keep the vessel's weight down during construction. This made the resulting product relatively fragile and greatly limited the vessel's usefulness. They also tended to be rather expensive to build and maintain, as the materials which went into them tended to be on the pricier side and the design of the vessel itself was something that required a whole team of skilled professionals. It also

didn't help that there was no standard airship design available to the public, meaning that most airship construction teams started their projects from scratch and were often the only ones who could truly fix or modify the vessel.

Finally, there was a tiny, yet very important issue of how incredibly lethal an airship crash was compared to, say, the sinking of a sea-going ship. If anything went wrong, it was all too easy for everyone on board to die. There had been a number of high-profile airship accidents over the years, including a rather spectacular one where the Tetran airship *Gepid* plunged straight into the sea not long after starting its maiden flight. And even if one ignored the possibility of a simple malfunction, there was still the matter of the many flying magical beasts that could easily crash the airship if encountered at an inopportune time.

In light of all that, it was not hard to see why airships weren't in more widespread use. They were not economically viable for private interests and state militaries generally found flying magical creatures to be more effective as an aerial combat force. Despite that, people stubbornly kept trying to make them viable. There was something about a flying vessel that people found irresistibly captivating.

There were considerable differences between regions, however. The states of northern Miasina, for instance, were the leaders when it came to investment into airship research. Due to the vast stretches of desert that surrounded them, the nations of Xlotic saw more potential in airships than Altazian ones. Building roads and railways in the inhospitable interior of northern Miasina was exceptionally difficult, and there were few population centers big enough to justify an expensive teleport platform. A free-flying, economically-viable airship that could traverse the Xlotic desert would be a huge boon to whoever made it.

Pearl of Aranzhal, the airship Zorian wanted to steal, definitely

hadn't been designed with economic viability in mind. No expenses have been spared in its construction. Although Zorian had not been able to find concrete numbers anywhere, the final price tag was rumored to be positively astronomical. The airship's capabilities, however, were said to be appropriately impressive for something that had so much money sunk into it. It was fast, maneuverable and surprisingly robust for an airship. Most importantly for Zorian, though, it boasted an experimental power core that allowed it to operate independently of ambient mana for long periods of time.

After some discussion with Zach, they decided not to make a move on the airship in this particular restart, however. Half of the restart had already passed and they were already committed on many other fronts. Besides, due to Silverlake's earlier inquiries, people were still paying close attention to them. Zorian still decided to look around a little to get a feel for what they were dealing with.

Unsurprisingly, the airship was under significant protection. Not so much against thieves, since the idea of someone outright stealing the airship was kind of ridiculous, but against spies and saboteurs. The defenses were tight enough to thwart Zorian's casual probing, but he was confident he could get through them in time. It might take several restarts, but it would happen. The bigger problem, in his opinion, was that the *Pearl of Aranhall* required a crew of ten in order to take off and land, which made the idea of two people stealing it somewhat problematic. He would probably have to wait for Zach to be able to cast the simulacrum spell before they could make the attempt. Another problem, though a comparatively smaller one, was that some small but critical pieces of the airship hadn't been installed, and possibly not even made yet. Zorian was confident he could manufacture and install these components himself, but he would need access to the relevant blueprints

first...

'Once upon a time, one of my ambitions was to examine a train to see how its engines work,' Zorian thought to himself nostalgically. 'Now I'm casually planning how to steal and analyze an experimental airship in my free time. Even taking the time loop into account, it's still amazing how far I've come since then. I wonder what my old self would have said to something like that...'

That, of course, was something impossible to answer. He shook his head and focused on more immediate matters. Currently, he was going to meet someone he hadn't spoken to for a very, very long time – Zenomir Olgai, the old language expert he had once sought out to help him figure out what happened to him. Back then, he had been murdered by the invaders not long after talking to him, so he had reflexively avoided the man ever since, suspecting him a spy. However, none of his investigations of Ibasan collaborators and cultists pointed to Zenomir being one of them. Thus, when Zenomir's name popped up while seeking out a translator that could help him with some of the documents he had acquired in Aranhal, he decided to pay him a visit. He even intended to drop some hints about the invasion while he was there, just to see if someone would try to murder him again because of it. Who knew, maybe Zenomir was part of some super-secret section of the invaders that other members didn't normally know about.

As he approached Zenomir's office, though, he suddenly stopped when he felt a familiar presence.

A bunch of cranium rats were lingering in the area, hidden inside the walls. The swarm quickly withdrew their telepathic probe when they noticed his mind was well shielded, but Zorian was practiced enough at mental shielding that even the faintest of mental attacks could not escape his notice.

He frowned. If cranium rats had been loitering around

Zenomir's office back when he had visited the man, it was no wonder that Zorian had ended up being a target. That only raised another questions though: why were the cranium rats paying attention to Zenomir? The man was somewhat famous as an incredible polyglot and language expert, but that shouldn't be of much interest to the invaders.

After some thought, he decided to leave the cranium rats alone for now. He knocked on Zenomir's office door and waited.

He waited for nearly fifteen minutes. Apparently he had arrived at a somewhat bad time, since the old teacher was talking to someone already. Another student, Zorian eventually realized. He took a quick peek at the student's mind to make sure he was not connected to the cranium rats and found out that he wasn't. He was just a student that had picked Zenomir as his mentor and was now arguing with him over something. Zorian didn't linger inside his mind long enough to find out what, as he disliked invading other people's privacy with his mental powers unless it was truly necessary.

Eventually the meeting ended and Zenomir called him in. Zorian gracefully accepted the man's offer to sit down and went right to business.

"I'm here because I was told you could help me translate a highly technical document written in Aranhall Ikosian," Zorian told him. "Or at least point me towards someone who is up to the task."

"Ah yes, Aranhall," Zenomir said sagely. "They do speak a particularly distinct form of our tongue, don't they? Can you show me the sample of what you're working with?"

Zorian took out a few pages of technical writing out of his school bag and handed them to the old language expert. He wasn't worried about Zenomir recognizing them as illegally acquired. Unless he was inexplicably connected to Aranhall's airship construc-

tion team in addition to his apparent link to invaders, the text should mean little to him.

Zenomir carefully put on a pair of reading glasses and glanced through the papers in silence.

"Lots of unknown technical jargon, I see. Airship construction materials? My, what an interesting topic..." Zenomir mused, before giving Zorian a good-natured smile. "I can see why you were referred my way, though it somewhat saddens me that a student of our fine academy did not think to seek me out right away. At the very least I'd give you my initial opinion free of charge, which is probably more than you got out of whoever sent you here."

Zorian could tell that the man wasn't really angry with him for this oversight, merely giving him a friendly warning that he had failed to take advantage of his academy membership to its fullest extent. Sadly, while Zenomir was both friendly and polite, the events that transpired after Zorian had talked to him the last time around and the cranium rats lurking in the walls had made it impossible for Zorian to really trust him. So he just nodded sagely at Zenomir's reminder and moved on.

"Let me ask you something first," Zenomir began. "Is this document that you want translated an isolated thing or are you planning on collaborating with someone from Aranhal on something?"

"The project I'm working on does involve a fair bit of interaction with Aranhal natives," Zorian reluctantly admitted.

Thankfully, Zenomir seemed to think nothing of Zorian's admission that he was going to interact heavily with people on another continent. Zorian would think this sort of thing would raise some eyebrows, but apparently not.

They spent the next ten minutes discussing what the translation job would entail. Zenomir asked him a couple of questions about the exact nature of this 'project' he was working on, but thankfully he backed off when Zorian told him it was confiden-

tial. He confirmed that this sort of translation job was well within his capabilities, though it would take a couple of days and wouldn't be exactly cheap. None of this was a problem for Zorian, though, and he told the old teacher as much before the man raised another idea.

"I'm going to be a little bold here, but perhaps simply hiring a person to translate this document might not be the best course of action," Zenomir said. "I think you should invest some time in learning the language itself. You'd be amazed how many layers of communication you lose by relying on external translation and I guarantee your partners will respect you a lot more if you can communicate with them directly."

"I'm unlikely to interact with people from Aranhal after this project is done, though," Zorian said, frowning. Plus, he was pretty sure there wouldn't be too many respectful exchanges between him and the Aranhal airship construction team, language barriers or no. "That's a lot of wasted effort for one job."

"Learning a language is never a wasted effort, young man," Zenomir lectured him. "It develops your mind and expands your horizons! Besides, it's not as if you're starting completely from scratch. Aranhal Ikosian is different from standard Ikosian, but not unintelligible."

"That's true," Zorian admitted. It was more like a heavily divergent dialect with a lot of words borrowed from the native language spoken by the people before Ikosian conquest. Much like many of the local versions of Ikosian on Altazia, really. "It would still be a lot of work for someone who isn't naturally inclined towards languages like you are, though. No offense, Professor Olgai."

"Hmph. Wait here for a minute," Zenomir said, quickly springing up from his chair without waiting for his answer, and then entered a nearby side-room in his office and closed the door.

He stayed there for over ten minutes. Judging by the quiet

sounds emanating from behind the closed door, the man was shifting around boxes and searching through stacks of paper and books in search of something. Zorian sighed. This was taking way longer than he thought it would..

Finally, the old teacher returned to his office, carrying a tall stack of books, folders and loose sheets of paper. He was carrying so much that he had to use his elbows to manipulate the door handle, which he did with the practiced grace of someone who does things like that all the time. He dumped the pile on the table in front of Zorian and pointed at it.

"Tell you what, young man," Zenomir said. "This here is a small selection of dictionaries, translation guides and random notes regarding Aranhal Ikosian that I had in my store room—"

"You just happened to have Aranhal-related stuff in your store room?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"Oh, I have all sorts of things gathering dust in there," said Zenomir dismissively. "Some of the teachers are rarely in their offices, but I pretty much do most of my work here. So it's handy to have most of my resources close by. Anyway, why don't you take this and see how much of that document of yours you can translate yourself using this as a guide. If you impress me with your work, I promise I'll help you translate the rest of your project for free."

Zorian opened his mouth to point out that he'd rather just pay for translation but Zenomir wouldn't hear it.

"Free!" Zenomir repeated. "Do you hate money, young man? Don't be in such a hurry to part with it. I'm not very demanding, don't worry. Just do your best and I'm sure you'll do fine. Who knows, maybe you'll even discover you have a previously undiscovered passion for languages, eh?"

Zorian seriously doubted that, but he could see there was no use in arguing with Zenomir about this. Besides, now that he thought about it a little, it might actually be useful to get some

elementary proficiency in Aranhall Ikosian. He might need to interrogate the airship construction crew at some point, and that was going to be really difficult if their language was completely opaque to him. Not even mind reading helped in that case, since people's thoughts were heavily shaped by the language they spoke.

"Very well, I'll give it a try," Zorian relented.

"Excellent!" Zenomir said, beaming at him happily.

"Still, is it really okay for you to just give me all this?" Zorian pointed at the pile in front of him. "Some of this stuff looks... irreplaceable."

"It's fine," said Zenomir, waving him off. "You look like a serious young man. I'm sure you'll return it all in one piece."

Zorian didn't say anything to that. He just stared at the pile of books and paper in front of him, lost in thought, for a few seconds.

"Well," Zenomir suddenly said, clapping his hands. "Is there anything else you wanted to ask? If not—"

"Actually, yes," Zorian said. "Are you a member of the Cult of the Dragon Below?"

Zenomir eyebrows shot up at the question.

"I'm sorry, *what?*" he asked.

"They officially call themselves the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon," Zorian said. "They are one of the newer religious organizations, one dedicated to the worship of the entity that is commonly thought to reside in the center of the world. They have a rather large presence here in Cyoria. Are you a member of the Order?"

"Ah, I think I have heard something about them once," Zenomir mused, tapping his long white beard with his hand. "But no, I am not a member. Why do you ask?"

"Are you an agent of Ulquaana Ibasa?" Zorian asked, completely ignoring the old teacher's question.

"Now wait just a minute here," Zenomir said, finally getting somewhat angry. "What kind of question is that!?"

Hmm. He was being completely honest. He was not knowingly associated with either the Ibasans of the Cult of the Dragon Below.

With a small sigh, Zorian reached deeper into Zenomir's mind, casually brushing aside the old teacher's rudimentary mental defenses, and modified his short-term memory to erase this conversation out of his mind. The whole process only lasted less than a minute, due to the relatively trivial nature of the memory edit, after which Zorian withdrew from Zenomir's mind.

The old teacher blinked a few times, gradually shrugging off the mental daze that Zorian placed on him so he could work in peace, before giving Zorian a surprised look.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Uh, you kind of dozed off for several seconds there," Zorian said, pretending awkwardness.

"Ah. I guess old age is finally catching up to me," Zenomir said ruefully, shaking his head. "Where were we, again?"

"Actually, I think we're kind of done here," Zorian said. "But first, let me ask you a somewhat strange question. Do you have any idea why someone would want to spy on you?"

"Spy on me?" Zenomir asked incredulously. "Why no, I have no idea why someone would want that. Frankly, I wish more people would be interested in my work. If someone wanted to know more about what I do, why, all they have to do is ask!"

"I'll cut straight to the chase, then," Zorian said. "Due to some exotic inborn abilities that I have, I happen to know that there are rats lurking in the walls around your office. And not normal rats either."

"Ah, now that... is quite concerning," said Zenomir. He sat down in his chair and frowned. He tapped on his beard a few more

times, deep in thought. "Hmm. Rats in the walls..."

After a minute or so, Zenomir slapped his palm against the table, scaring Zorian back into attention.

"Aha!" Zenomir said triumphantly. "I've got it, I think. I don't think these rats, if they are indeed spies as you suspect, are here for me. As it happens, the headmaster's office is very close to mine. The headmaster is rarely in it, but a lot of visitors and academy documentation passes through the place."

Zorian had to agree this did make a great deal of sense. As a place of such importance, the headmaster's office was probably protected by heavier and more sophisticated wards and other defenses... but the corridors approaching it might have been overlooked due to cost-cutting and such. He would have to take a walk through the academy to see if there were other places that cranium rats linger as they did here.

"Of course, this will have to be reported," Zenomir's shoulders suddenly sagged. "I can already sense a headache coming. So much paperwork..."

"I don't suppose you could exclude me from the report?" Zorian asked. He would mindwipe him again if he had to, but he would rather avoid doing that.

"I might as well," Zenomir sighed. He apparently didn't have a single suspicious bone in his body. "No reason for both of us to suffer. Though I have to ask you to keep quiet about this, or else the academy might go after you for ruining its reputation."

Zorian assured him that he had no intention of spreading this around, picked up the stack of books and papers the man had given him and then left. Instead of exiting the academy immediately, though, he took the extended route that saw him passing next to the headmaster's office a couple of times.

It turned out that, yes, *all* approaches to the headmaster's office had cranium rats lurking in the walls. It seemed that Zenomir's

theory was very much correct.

Well. That was one mystery solved! It had been a while since he had solved one of those without raising at least one new question in return.

Somehow, it made him feel like he was finally getting close to a solution for all this.



In an unremarkable, out-of-the-way cave system situated a healthy distance away from Cyoria, Zach, Zorian and two aranea were training their magical skills.

Zach was tinkering with a large wooden chest, practicing his pocket dimension creation. His ability in this area was slowly but surely overtaking Zorian, despite him dismissing some of his simulacrum and focusing more of his energies on the issue. As far as Zorian could tell, this was purely due to Zach's massive mana reserves and the resulting ability to sustain the mana-intensive training longer than Zorian ever could. Zorian wasn't any more talented or hard-working than Zach was, after all, and every advantage and training method he had was also something Zach had access to as well. It made perfect sense that Zach was pulling away from him in this regard, but that didn't stop Zorian from feeling kind of jealous and annoyed with the situation. A petty part of him was tempted to start hiding some of the relevant shaping exercises and tricks he had found while combing through the various spellbooks and training manuals in order to close the gap somewhat, but he resisted the impulse. That would be stupid and self-defeating. Zach getting better was a good thing.

That aside, neither Zach nor Zorian had really progressed far in terms of pocket dimension expertise. The chest that Zach was fiddling with still functioned on essentially the same principles as

the marble-storing boxes they had practiced with previously. It was the simplest form of pocket dimension, which involved expanding the available space inside a container. Essentially, it allowed a mage to produce an enclosed space that was larger on the inside than it was on the outside.

There were a lot of limitations involved with this procedure. The pocket dimension required mana to keep existing, so such an item could only be stored in areas where ambient mana was abundant enough to sustain them. Or be provided with an in-built power source of some sort. A complicated, fiddly spell formula had to be embedded into the walls of the container, or else the space expansion would expire after less than a day, just like any other spell. Finally, the weight of the object inside did not disappear, so a chest with several tons of rock inside would still weigh several tons, no matter how small it looked.

Of course, weight concerns aside, cramming too much stuff into your pocket dimension container isn't a good idea to begin with. If the container is damaged, the pocket dimension anchored to its interior would immediately fall apart, forcing the contents back into mundane space. Typically, this meant the pocket dimension would explode, showering everything around it with high-speed shrapnel of its former contents. For this reason, it was also a good idea to make the container as sturdy and damage-resistant as possible. Zach and Zorian learned that very quickly after cramming too many marbles into a box whose bottom could not handle the weight, thus creating their very own marble-flinging cluster bomb.

The more time the two of them sank into studying pocket dimensions, the more Zorian realized how incredible the portable palace orb they recovered in Koth was. It had some kind of internal power source that could sustain it indefinitely and made it completely self-sufficient from its surroundings, it weighed no more

than a regular glass orb of its size would and it contained an incredible amount of space and matter inside. Zorian was tempted to dismiss all of this as evidence of divine tampering, except that Silverlake stubbornly insisted that all of this was potentially achievable through familiar mortal magic. Yes, even the power source thing. Somehow.

Then again, she did maintain a rather large pocket dimension with some pretty potent defensive wards in an area that really shouldn't be able to support such. How was she doing that, anyway?

Well, it wasn't something that could be figured out by idle contemplation. He put the matter out of his mind for now and focused his attention to the two aranea next to him. Both of them had been sent here by the Silent Doorway Adepts at Zorian's request. Ever since he had become capable of giving them a large list of novel gate addresses and a sizeable amount of strategic information about their local region, they became much more willing to cooperate with him and humor his requests. In this case they allowed him to recruit two of their best 'retrievers'. Thieves, basically. Zorian called them Ghost and Veil, though these were only shortened versions of their real names.

Ghost and Veil were originally meant to show him how to use his mental powers to infiltrate guarded sites more easily, but he found them to be surprisingly friendly and curious for a pair of thieves and spies. They fulfilled their part of the bargain without any reservations, and were even willing to go beyond what was originally agreed upon... provided he traded some instruction and secrets of his own to them in return.

As such, they were currently gleefully practicing some of the magic he had given them on each other, steadily refining the somewhat clunky spells that had been converted from the human spell-casting system into an aranean one and thus suffered from a fair

bit of inefficiencies. Zorian left them alone to their work for the most part, only involving himself if he saw them making an obvious mistake, but he made sure to survey the results of their work at the end of each day. When he finally found a way for him and Zach to leave this time loop, he intended to bundle up little improvements like this into one giant package and then gift them to the various aranean webs that had helped him over the years.

As for Zorian, he was tackling something that he had wanted to obtain for quite a while now. He was learning the aranean skill of 'going dark' – the psychic equivalent of the mind blank spell.

The skill was pretty hard to obtain, since the aranea saw it as inherently shady, meaning that most of them weren't even willing to admit they knew how to perform it, much less trade it to someone who could very well be hostile. It was only after a lot of prodding and some high-value trades that Ghost and Veil agreed to teach it to him. Even then, they made him promise in the strongest possible terms that he would use it sparingly.

They need not have worried. Zorian had heard enough horror stories about the mage equivalent of the skill to know he had to be careful about this. Mind blank was well known to be insanity-inducing if used on a long-term basis. Mages that left it active for too long became increasingly paranoid, becoming obsessed with imaginary plots and threats. They would inevitably begin to view everyone around them as a threat, alien and untrustworthy, and withdraw from society as much as possible to pursue their own inscrutable goals. There was a highly-publicized case a few years back where a very rich mage went down this path and eventually turned his isolated estate into a foreboding death-trap filled with layers upon layers of traps, golems, powerful wards and vicious guard beasts. His children were not very amused when they realized he had blown all of his wealth on that and that they wouldn't be inheriting any of the money that they had been counting on.

This 'going dark' was harder than he thought it would be, though. He knew that mind blank was a difficult, high-level spell, but he had naively thought that being psychic would negate that somehow. It was a mind-related thing, after all, so why wouldn't his innate talent work on it? But no. If anything, that only made things harder. Even mundane mages felt a surge of wrongness upon cutting their minds off from the world, suffering from vertigo, illusionary static noise and headaches before fully mastering the spell. For psychics like Zorian, though, it was a little like plucking out your own eyeballs because you knew you could grow them back later. Even though one *knew* that no permanent loss would occur, the very idea just felt wrong on a deep-seated, visceral level. It wasn't easy to make yourself do this to yourself.

He was stalling, he realized. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm himself for another attempt. Okay. The 27 time was the charm...

He sank his awareness inward, carefully mapped out the borders of his consciousness and then sort of... folded his mind upon itself.

It was horrible. It can be scarcely described in words alone, but he felt like his whole world had gone dark and confined, pressing down on him. He almost dropped the attempt right there, just like he had so many times before, but he gritted his teeth and persisted.

As the borders of his consciousness contracted, getting smaller and smaller, he breathed deeper and deeper, a deep fear welling up from the depths of his soul and causing him to pause. He had an unreasonable, unexplainable feeling of being entombed alive, imprisoned in a cage made out of his own flesh and skin, and it took him an unknown amount of time to take that final step.

With one last, desperate push, his mind finally finished folding upon itself and stabilized. The sense of wrongness was still there, but muted and manageable.

Everything seemed so unnaturally quiet all of a sudden, even though nothing in his surroundings had really changed.

Well okay, that wasn't entirely true. Ghost and Veil had stopped casting spells at each other and were looking at him with interest.

"You did it!" Veil said excitedly. She was using a vocalization spell instead of resorting to telepathy, since Zorian's current status kind of prevented that. "Amazing! I thought it would take you at least another 30 tries!"

"It's not that amazing," Ghost said dourly. "It's a decidedly average progression for someone of his level of skill."

"He's a human, though," Veil objected. "I don't think it's fair to judge him by our standards."

"You're right. We should be even stricter," Ghost said. "After all, he's not nearly as reliant on his mental powers as we are."

"I'm right here," Zorian complained.

"Don't listen to this killjoy," Veil told him. "Just enjoy knowing that everything will be a lot easier from now on. The first time is always the hardest. Oh, and you should be extra careful about not shutting yourself from the Great Web for too long during these initial steps. The ability degrades the mind much faster if not done flawlessly, and your first handful of attempts probably won't be that good."

"Just like mind blank, then," Zach noted from the side, not taking his eyes off the chest he was working on. "Until you're sure you mastered the spell, it is recommended you keep it on for no more than half an hour maximum."

"Umm, sure. I'm not too familiar with human time measurements, but let's go with your friend's suggestion on that," Veil said.

Zorian nodded absent-mindedly. Frankly, he was tempted to end the effect immediately but he knew he had to acclimatize himself to it if he wanted to use it even remotely seriously. He was

just about to ask the two aranea if there was anything else he had to watch out when Zach suddenly jumped up and started laughing triumphantly.

"It works!" Zach said, swinging his chest around and then raising it above his head. It was actually mildly impressive, because Zorian knew for a fact that the chest was quite heavy and not something he personally could swing around like that. "It's finished and it totally works!"

"What were you working on, anyway?" Zorian asked. Clearly Zach hadn't been working on just another expanded chest, or else he wouldn't be so happy to succeed.

"This?" Zach asked rhetorically, shaking the chest held in his arms. "Why, it's an icebox of beer holding, of course! Not only can it hold a large number of beer bottles, it also keeps them at a nice, cold temperature for perfect consumption!"

"An icebox of... wait, you made all this fuss about a simple expanded chest with a chilling field added on top?" Zorian asked unhappily.

"Oh hush, you know it's a genius idea," Zach said. "Don't be so cranky. I think the mind blank is already affecting you."

Ugh. Zorian doubted this was true, but he immediately dismissed the effect anyway. Better to be safe than sorry.

There was plenty of time to work on this later.



Eventually, after an annoyingly long time, Silverlake agreed to meet with them again. By then, the investigators she had sent after them had thoroughly disrupted their plans and a lot of the restart had already passed, so they were not as enthusiastic about the whole thing as they might have been. Zorian really hoped this could be avoided in future restarts, somehow, because there was

no way they could tolerate these kinds of delays and disruptions on a persistent basis.

Surprisingly, she wanted to meet in some public space in Cyoria, not in her forest hideout. After some back-and-forth, they agreed to hold a meeting in one of Cyoria's less visited parks. There would be some minor danger of being overheard, but it was likely that anyone that did hear them would dismiss them as speaking nonsense.

"You've put me in a very unfavorable position," Silverlake told them the moment they met. "I think I believe you about this month endlessly repeating itself, as crazy as that sounds, but that means that I basically have no leverage against you whatsoever. You can promise to pay me back in all sorts of ways, but I have no means to enforce any of that. Even if I feed you truth potions and decide you sincerely mean to honor your promises, who's to say you won't ever change your minds in the future? If you decide to renege on your side of the deal, I will never know."

"So what's your decision, then?" Zorian asked. There was nothing he could say to make her feel better about that.

"What else?" she laughed. "I'll work with you and hope you're not planning to screw me over. What other choice do I have?"

"We were worried you'd ask to put us under a geas," Zach admitted.

It was a reasonable fear. Forced magical oaths were one of the things witches were infamous for using.

"Geas have limited usefulness these days," Silverlake said, shaking her head sadly. "They were feared once upon a time because mages were comparatively rare and often had a very limited selection of spells at their disposal. In those times, finding someone who could lift a geas placed on you was legitimately hard. These days you can just walk into your local mage guild branch and hire someone to get rid of it within a few days. Placing a geas on you

would just create resentment. No, I'm afraid I'll have to use the carrot and the poison strategy."

"Err, isn't that supposed to be the carrot and the *stick*?" Zorian tried.

"We just established that I don't have much of a stick when it comes to you two, no?" Silverlake said. "So I can't really counter-attack, but I *can* make myself a poisonous pill to swallow. Incidentally, I would like to point out that I have made myself immune to all truth potions I know of and that my mind has been rigged to collapse should my mental defenses ever be violently shattered. This is something I did long before I met you two, so even attacking me first thing in the restart won't negate it. Just an interesting tidbit, you know?"

"Yeah, we know," Zach said with exasperation. "Subduing you and trying to forcefully get your secrets out of your mind would be a total chore and take way too much time, so we better ask nicely."

"Exactly," Silverlake nodded happily.

"So what's the carrot part of the deal?" Zach asked curiously.

"I am an alchemist of incredible skill and I have lived for a very long time. I know how to make many wondrous potions and know incredible secrets... none of which I can be persuaded to share with you in less than a month's time. At the very least, I am confident that you'll seek me out eventually for my secret of how to stop aging and restore your youth. I know, I know, you're in the prime of your life now and old age seems distant... but when your body starts to fail and your mind dims, I am confident you'll become interested to discover what I know about the topic." She paused dramatically for a moment. "Of course, if you were really smart, you would strike while the iron is hot and come to me while you're still young and I haven't worked out how to get these blasted eggs on my own. That way I won't think you're desperate for a solution and you'll have lots of things that interest me. You'd be able to get

a much better deal that way..."

"How do you know we won't be able to figure out such a thing ourselves?" Zach asked.

"What, you think youth potions grow on trees or something?" she scoffed. "This is something that takes an absolute master of alchemy to accomplish. You may be decent enough in comparison to your average alchemist, but it takes a lot more than that to tackle this kind of problem. Besides, you seem to be paying other experts to do your alchemical research and complicated work for you. That says everything about your future alchemical expertise, really."

There was some truth in that. Zorian did have a healthy amount of interest in alchemy, but he liked spell formula better and it was impossible to focus on everything at once. Even in a time loop and with a small army of simulacrums running around.

"So I guess you're not really interested in refining your eternal youth potion over multiple restarts with our help, then?" Zorian asked.

"Good heavens no, why would I want to do that?" she asked incredulously. "That would just remove what little leverage I have over you, and for what? I'm confident I'll get it right eventually. I have time, even without the time loop. I've been working on this for a very long time, what's a couple of years more?"

"I see," Zorian said. "Well, I am glad you are at least willing to work with us on this. Though I do hope your future selves will not sabotage our work with spying and delay the meeting for most of the month like you have."

"I don't know about that," Silverlake said, not in the least bit apologetic. "Your story is very crazy and requires checking. It's hard to speed that up."

"Ha, well... don't be so sure about that," Zorian said, reaching into his backpack to retrieve a handful of Kael's notebooks that

the morlock boy had given him permission to share with others. "Let me tell you about the wonders of notebook transfers across restarts..."



With Silverlake's cooperation secured, the restart ended uneventfully, the only notable difference being the larger number of notebooks that Zorian was transferring into the next restart. Considering that the orb's memory bank was practically limitless in size, this was not a big deal.

The next several restarts were somewhat routine. They were learning pocket dimension expertise from Silverlake, looking deeper into Veyers' ties with the Cult of Dragon Below, figuring out the activation procedure of the Bakora Gates and the construction methods of the Ibasan ones, doing small preparations for the airship theft, experimenting with divine artifacts and sifting through the ruins inside the portable palace orb. Zorian was messing around with mental enhancements while Zach was steadily getting closer to being able to create his own simulacrum.

Their various other operations, such as hiring various experts to do research and development for them, also continued at a steady pace.

Just like that, another six restarts had gone by.

CRIME AND EVADING PUNISHMENT

Although Aranhal widely advertised their new airship to their own populace and neighboring countries, actually seeing the Pearl of Aranhal took a bit of effort. It was located next to an important industrial town, but wasn't actually in it. Instead, the construction site was placed outside the settlement itself, close enough to be supplied with relative ease but far enough to foil casual visitors.

The airship was currently grounded in an oval-shaped holding structure and surrounded by extensive scaffolding. Ringing that was a collection of storehouses, barracks, watchtowers and temporary housing for workers and overseers. Finally, the entire work camp was surrounded by a warded, alteration-made stone wall that stopped minor magical creatures or petty criminals from simply waltzing into the place. Neither this, nor any of the other, more subtle defenses could stop Zach and Zorian from infiltrating the place without being seen, of course. They were currently standing on one of the observation platforms attached to the ship, observing it.

Zorian had to say, the Pearl of Aranhal was a beautiful construct. Airships were often depicted as floating sea-going ships – an image that stemmed from the earliest known models, which really were simply modified sea-going ships. Ancient airship cre-

ators were working with a lower technological base and less developed economic infrastructure, forcing them to pick an already constructed vessel as a base for their project. Most modern airships, on the other hand, were built from the ground up as dedicated aerial vessels, so they rarely looked anything like a mundane ship. They tended to either have long cylindrical hulls covered in stabilizing fins or be some manner of a triangle. The Pearl of Aranhall bucked the trend there, in that it had a relatively flat, rhombus-like shape. It kind of gave Zorian an impression of a giant leaf. It certainly looked like it should be fast and maneuverable, but it made Zorian somewhat skeptical of the claim it was especially robust and durable by airship standards. Well, no matter. They wanted the ship because of its speed and flight endurance, not combat ability.

In any case, the airship's name seemed particularly fitting in light of its current coloration. Its hull was painted in dazzling, pure white, with no overt markings or identifying patterns. This was meant to be only temporary, however. Aranhall intended to decorate the ship further before unveiling it to the waiting public, but they had yet to settle down on what kind of color scheme and decorations to put there. The question seemed quite trivial to Zorian, but was apparently an intensely divisive political question that caused many bitter arguments in Aranhall's halls of power. The current overseer was continually kicking the can down the road in regards to the issue, fearful that whoever lost the dispute would try to cut the project's budget out of spite.

"What do you say?" Zach suddenly said, rocking in place on his heels. He looked quite bored. "It's about time, no?"

"Yeah, I guess," Zorian answered. He was a bit nervous, he realized, so he may have been stalling a little. "I'll go tell my copies to set the monkeys loose."

He reached to his simulacrums through his soul, his ability to use his soul as a telepathic conduit as natural as breathing by now,

and gave them a simple 'go' signal. They already knew what to do.

Golden triclopses were monkey-like magic creatures native to the area. They had bright yellow fur, two small horns on top of their heads and an extra eye in the middle of their forehead. Their third eyes gave them the ability to perceive magic in some strange, hard to understand way, which made them quite interested in magic items. Of course, being only as smart as regular animals and somewhat aggressive, their interest tended to be unhealthy for the magic items in question and the humans that owned them. Zach and Zorian had captured several groups of these beasts earlier to set loose as a distraction. They were particularly good for this because the construction team had already had a number of smaller clashes with the local triclops communities, and thus having a bunch of them making trouble in the base wasn't immediately suspicious. They had tried this already in the three previous restarts to test the waters, and they knew that the guards would first move to contain the situation before wondering if someone had sent this unusually large group of them here intentionally.

By then, of course, it would be too late.

After the golden triclopses were set loose upon the unsuspecting base, Zach and Zorian remained in their current spot for a while, waiting. It would take a while before the creatures were discovered, the severity of the problem became obvious, and before the majority of the base's guards were mobilized to deal with them. Zorian monitored the situation through his simulacrum, whose senses he could tap into with ease. His studies of the cranium rat swarms and the god-touched hydra living in the portable palace orb had done much to improve his ability to coordinate with his simulacrum. They weren't quite a single mind yet, but he probably didn't want that to begin with.

Zach also had simulacrum present in the base. He had only managed to get them working recently, so they tended to have far

more quirks and differences from the original than Zorian's own did. However, they needed those simulacrum if they wanted to steal the ship and it was pretty unlikely any of them would go insane and try to kill them, so whatever.

"There," Zorian eventually said. "Everyone who was going to get pulled to deal with the monkeys is gone. It's now or never."

"Finally," Zach said.

He didn't say anything else, instead opting to jump down from the platform. Zorian followed after him with a sigh, giving the simulacrum the signal to drop whatever they were doing and converge on the ship. Even Zach's simulacrum, since his fellow time traveler seemed to have forgotten about his copies in his hurry to get to the action. Or maybe he just expected Zorian to take care of that for him – it was actually easier for Zorian to coordinate Zach's simulacrum than it was for Zach himself, due to his lack of easy telepathy. Though, since Zach and his simulacrum were largely identical in mind, it should be quite possible for him to use telepathy to communicate with his copies with ease, even if he wasn't a natural mind mage like Zorian. He made a mental note to talk to Zach about that later...

Zach, Zorian and their simulacrum surged forward, pushing past the shocked technicians and civilian staff and disabling any armed resistance they encountered. Zach and his simulacrum broke down the scaffolding and the anchor beams that were holding the airship locked down while Zorian and *his* simulacrum went about installing the missing airship components and ejecting anyone that remained inside the ship.

It went... surprisingly well. Zorian was a little worried, since they were making this attempt only a few days into the restart and the preparations had been made in a considerable rush. He'd had to take a potion of vigilance and miss a night of sleep entirely in order to finish constructing everything in time, so he was technically

doing this while staying awake for more than 24 hours.

They only had two significant complications. One was that some of the soldiers inside the ship had barricaded themselves inside a storage room and placed high-level mental wards on themselves after they figured out how Zorian was overrunning the crew so easily. Since Zach and Zorian couldn't use anything too destructive for fear of damaging the ship, this made the resulting situation a bit of a chore to resolve in a timely manner. Thankfully, the golem bodies of Zorian's simulacrum were capable of taking considerable abuse, so Zorian simply sent them in to swarm the soldiers with no regards to countering attacks. The result were two simulacrum with seriously damaged torsos and one that was missing both of his legs, but the problem was solved and the damaged simulacrum could still crew the ship just fine... though the legless one kept whining to Zorian about his predicament.

The other was that once every simulacrum and missing part was in its place and they tried to take off, the airship wouldn't budge. It turned out that someone had installed an additional safeguard that none of the people Zorian had interrogated had been aware of, and Zorian was forced to frantically search for it while Zach repelled constant assaults on the ship from the reorganized Aranhali soldiers outside. Thankfully, Zorian eventually found the section the safeguard was in. Unfortunately, it was inside an engine regulation section, and integrated into it too deeply and too subtly for Zorian to remove it cleanly in the time they had left. Aranhali battlemages were no doubt going to start teleporting in any time soon, and then they'd be forced to abort the attempt. Thus, Zorian just torched the entire mechanism, allowing them to take off but permanently crippling some of the ship's engines.

Now the airship was in the air, rapidly distancing itself from the construction site as it flew in the direction of the Xlotic interior. However, it was considerably slower than it should have been and

there was another Aranhali airship chasing after them in pursuit. Zorian had no idea how that airship had gotten on the scene so quickly. Maybe it had just happened to be in the area when they made their attempt?

In any case, the two of them were currently in the main control room, trying to figure things out. While they had done their homework before coming here and had a rough idea of what operating the Pearl of Aranhali involved, it was one thing to have a theoretical knowledge of how something worked and quite another to actually put it into practice.

"You know, this thing is harder and less exciting to pilot than I thought it would be," Zach said idly, poking and prodding the various levers and buttons on the control panel in front of him.

"I do know," Zorian told him, a little grumpily. He was rapidly becoming aware of why Aranhali plans called for a dedicated navigator that would focus fully on charting a ship's course. He was so fobbing off this job to a simulacrum the next time they did this... "Just focus on keeping the flight engines running and be glad you're not in charge of navigation like I am."

"I'm not so sure your job is that much harder than mine, considering you wrecked half the ship in order to get us in the air," Zach remarked.

"It wasn't half of the ship!" Zorian protested.

Zach laughed at him.

"So easy to rile up," Zach said mirthfully. "Anyway, whoever designed this stuff should have really been pulled aside and told to cut down a little on the mysterious dials and counters. He should have put in some kind of magic panel or an illusion projector that would give you information in a more understandable form. Would that really be so hard?"

"I think you have a skewed image of how easy that kind of thing is," Zorian remarked. "That kind of thing is neither cheap nor easy,

and it would make it really inconvenient to fix things if something goes wrong. Dials and counters are simple to make and fix.”

”I guess,” Zach conceded. ”It’s still annoying that we’re not even able to see the Aranhali airship pursuing us. One would think that an option to see a pursuing enemy would be one of the core features put into a control room. I should be able to say... I don’t know, something like ‘on screen!’, and have an image of the enemy projected on these windows in front of us.”

He gestured towards the large, clear windows that offered a breathtaking view of the outside world. Currently they could see nothing except the clear sky and the distant horizon, which sounded a little useless but at least it assured them they were flying straight, weren’t going to ram into anything and that the weather was pleasant enough to fly in. Pretty much what these windows were intended for, Zorian was sure.

”That would be kind of useful, actually,” Zorian agreed. ”And while the airship itself isn’t nearly so convenient...”

He quickly performed three different divination spells, created a large illusionary screen in the air in front of them and then cast the final spell to integrate all of these into a semi-unified whole.

The illusionary screen rippled with prismatic colors for a second before settling into a three part screen. Two of them showed a scried image of the pursuing airship in different angles. The third one gave them a downward view from a vantage point high above the Pearl of Aranhali, allowing them to easily grasp the position of the enemy airship in relation to themselves.

”Nice,” Zach praised.

The other Aranhali airship was larger and more heavily-built than them. It had a more typical cylinder shape, and had a handful of cannons sticking out of its hull. The Pearl of Aranhali, on the other hand, was entirely unarmed. Even if they did have cannons of their own, they couldn’t use them, as they lacked the qualified

gunners to make use of them.

Zorian wasn't feeling very threatened, though. Despite the damage to its flight engines, the Pearl of Aranhall was still slightly faster than the other airship. The design was really proving its worth there. Gradually, minute after minute, hour after hour, they were pulling away from the other airship. Additionally, Zorian had diverted one of his simulacra to see if something could be done about the damage he had done to the ship's flight engines, and it seemed the answer was yes. In another two hours or so, their speed would shoot up and their pursuers would be left in the dust.

"Uh, not sure if you noticed it yet, but there is another airship in front of us," Zach said, pointing at a distant dot that had yet to enter into the range of their scrying screen but could be seen through the mundane window of the control room. "Do you think they're here by coincidence or...?"

Crap.

Some frantic divinations quickly revealed that the third airship was most certainly not there on accident. It was moving to intercept them, and both it and their old pursuer were making minor course adjustments in order to box them in better, apparently coordinating their moves. The strange thing was that the new airship wasn't even owned by Aranhall – it belonged to the neighboring country of Mezner. The two countries didn't exactly have the best relations with one another, so Zorian couldn't help but privately wonder what Aranhall had promised to the other side in order to get them to help out. A lot, probably.

They really, *really* didn't want to lose the Pearl of Aranhall, it seemed.



Previously, when Zach and Zorian were securing the Pearl of Aranhall and fleeing the scene with their ill-gotten gains, they had been trying to treat their enemies with as much mercy as possible. The Aranhall soldiers posted on the construction site were perfectly justified in being outraged at them, after all, so the two time travelers tried to disable their enemies non-lethally. To Zorian's knowledge, nobody had actually died during the theft itself, though some people did get seriously injured and the golden tri-clopes might have killed someone after they had left. They even left the pursuing airship be, preferring to flee rather than destroying them, as they very well could have.

However, having been caught between two airships like this meant they could no longer afford to treat the situation with such velvet gloves.

Guided by Zach's and Zorian's hands, the Pearl of Aranhall promptly turned around to confront the Aranhall airship that had been pursuing them. If they *had* to fight, it was better to tackle their enemies one by one than wait for them to catch up to them together.

The Aranhall airship did not fear a confrontation. It knew that the Pearl of Aranhall was unarmed, and that Zach and Zorian were running it on a skeleton crew. Thus, it simply continued onward towards them, silently accepting the challenge.

It did not fire its cannons at them, though. Instead, six holes opened up in its hull and released a dozen or so giant eagle riders towards them. The eagles were overloaded with passengers, visibly straining under the weight of men they had to carry, but they flew fast nonetheless.

Simulacrum number two stood on the outer hull of the Pearl of Aranhall, studying the scene dispassionately. His legs were glued onto the surface of the airship to keep the wind from sweeping him away, and his golem body was unbothered by the cold. Af-

ter sweeping through the incoming enemy forces once, he sent his memory over to the original for study and then put them out of his mind. They weren't his problem. There were other simulacrum in charge of dealing with defense. *His* job was a bit more... proactive.

He flexed his hands and shook a little, just to make sure the previous battles hadn't left some hidden injuries on him. The golem bodies that the original had made for them had been perfected to such a degree by now that they felt completely indistinguishable from their original form. However, the advantages of the golem bodies came with a hefty downside – if they were ever damaged, it was very hard to repair them, requiring a lengthy and expensive process. Poor simulacrum number four was still legless, for instance, though number two agreed with the original that his whining got really old after a while. If a normal simulacrum had had both of his legs blown off, he would have dispersed from the strain. The guy should be grateful he even still existed, not complaining about missing limbs.

His little checkup done, he calmed his mind and focused on the task at hand: counter-attacking the Aranhall airship.

They thought themselves safe because they thought their opponents had no weapons. But they were so very wrong...

Simulacrum number two teleported to the enemy ship. Teleporting from one moving target to another was tricky thing to pull off, and was beyond most teleporters... but it was entirely doable for Zorian, and therefore for his simulacrums as well. He couldn't teleport directly into the enemy airship, but he didn't have to – he teleported on top of the enemy airship's hull, disintegrated a few panels to create an opening for himself and then stepped inside.

He didn't even try to hide himself as he advanced through the corridors towards the airship's flight engines. He didn't have the time, and he had probably been discovered the moment he made a

hole in the hull, anyway.

Three armed crewmembers quickly found him.

"Halt! Stand d-"

He was ready for them. A severing whip cut them to pieces before they could so much as fire a shot. He didn't even slow down. He simply sped up, his divination spells having successfully mapped the interior, showing him where to go to reach his destination.

The severing whip trailed after him, attached to his arm, and when he came upon another group of people he used it to cut them down as well. It was a very efficient spell – the whip, once created, was pretty cheap to maintain – but one that was rarely used due to its short range and the possibility of the caster slicing their own limbs off if they didn't have complete control over it. A bit brutal, admittedly, but the culmination of his task here involved crashing the entire airship – most of these people would end up dead in the end, no matter how you sliced it.

A hail of bullets impacted his chest but he simply ignored it, not even bothering to shield against them. His golem body was tough, able to shrug off minor attacks like those with ease. Spending mana to defend against things like that would be a waste.

When a dazzling, spinning bolt of fire swerved around the corner to slam into him, though... *that* he shielded against. The explosion was massive, blowing off all nearby walls and setting the air ablaze. If simulacrum number two had to breathe, this would have been a pretty devastating opener. Even as it was, it knocked him a little off-balance... and the mage that cast that spell soon rounded the corner to finish him off, before the aftershocks had the chance to die down.

The man moved incredibly quickly, using some strange telekinetic magic to 'skate' across the floor at high speeds. He was big and muscular, sported an impressive mustache, and wielded a

large saber in his hand. Not a weapon Zorian was used to facing, as most mages avoided close-quarter fighting if they could help it.

The enemy mage immediately charged at the simulacrum using that strange skating movement magic, silent and grim. He swung the saber in his hands towards the simulacrum, its edge lighting up with an ominous red glow that made it clear he wasn't dealing with a simple steel blade.

Number two admitted he had been caught off guard a little... but only a little.

He performed a short-range teleport to get behind the man, avoiding his charge, and then fired a trio of attack spells at him. Instead of stopping and turning, however, the man skated along the walls and ceiling of the corridor, keeping all of his speed and momentum. He even used that strange saber of his to harmlessly dispel the first spell Zorian directed his way – a force lance that Zorian had sent at him in hopes of breaking his momentum by forcing him to shield. The simulacrum had to admit that was pretty impressive.

The second spell, however, was a soul magic attack – a short-range wave of ghostly force that minutely disturbed the connection of the soul with its body, causing a wave of nausea and vertigo in those affected. The spell was weak, and it could be greatly attenuated by just about any shield spell, but since the man trusted his saber over a classical defense spell he was hit by the wave at full blast. He stumbled for just a moment, but that moment of weakness was enough for Zorian to launch his third attack on him.

The severing whip struck like a viper, severing the man's head from his shoulders in one fell swoop.

Simulacrum number two stared at the dead body for a few seconds in total silence, before taking the man's saber for later examination and continuing on his way.

He still had an airship to crash.



The battle between the Pearl of Aranhali and the two opposing airships got increasingly heated as time went by. At first, the two attackers were aiming to recapture the ship mostly intact, and thus attempted to board them with soldiers and mages. However, when Zach and Zorian had sent their simulacrum to wreak havoc inside the enemy airships, trying to bring them down from the inside, and then repelled several boarding attempts despite their numerical disadvantage, that attitude began to change. They started firing their cannons at them, and then began lobbing increasingly deadly artillery spells their way, forcing Zach and Zorian to spend a lot of their mana on defense.

When it became obvious that Zorian's simulacrum inside their airship could not be stopped, the Aranhali airship tried to ram them out of spite before going down... sadly, they made the Pearl of Aranhali too well, allowing Zach and Zorian to maneuver out of their way long enough for simulacrum number two to destroy the enemy airship's flight cores and send it crashing into the ground below.

Finding itself alone against them, the Mezneri airship then chose to simply flee. Unlike their Aranhali 'allies', they had no reason to pursue this to the bitter end. Zach and Zorian let them run, and simply breathed a sigh of relief before continuing on their way. Keeping a massive vessel like the Pearl of Aranhali intact in the face of double aggression had strained even them, and the airship had not gotten out of battle unscathed. Thankfully, none of the damage was critical, and further pursuers wouldn't be able to catch up to them.

Indeed, for the next few days, they had been blissfully free of any enemy going after them. The fact that they were flying over the desolate, trackless desert that covered the interior of northern

Miasina probably had a lot to do with that. The only dangers were an occasional pair of desert drakes that got too curious for their own good and tried to fly closer to check them out. It gave them quite a scare, because they had initially mistaken them for dragons when they had spotted them in the distance, but they were easy to chase off otherwise.

A bigger problem turned out to be locating an accessible Bakora Gate. They wanted to find one before continuing towards the Ziggurat of the Sun, to make it easier to gain access to the ziggurat in future restarts. Unfortunately, the maps of known Bakora Gates in the area turned out to be really outdated and unreliable. This area had been hit hard by the Cataclysm, and almost no humans lived here anymore. Some of the gates were just gone, possibly destroyed in one of the many wars that had swept through the area as the desert spread northward. Or maybe they never existed, and the mapmakers had put them there based on faulty sources. Some were buried under the sand and gravel and thus unusable for their purposes. Some were there, but not quite in the area specified by the maps – the mapmakers had only known the general area where the gate was located and made an 'educated guess' about the exact location instead of going there to actually check things.

Apparently mapmakers had been less concerned about quality control in the past. *A lot less.*

Still, they managed to find a suitable Bakora Gate after five days of flying around the desert. The time wasn't entirely wasted, in any case – Zorian took advantage of his unrestricted access to the airship's internals to inspect it in detail. He also took some of the equipment apart to see how it worked before putting it back together again, although he was forced to stop when Zach complained he would 'break things even worse than he already had'.

In any case, once they had settled down on a Bakora Gate

to use, they grounded the Pearl of Aranhal in the area before re-establishing contact with Eldemar. Zach had left one of his simulacrums there, so he could open a dimensional passage for them the same way Zorian used to do... except that he couldn't contact his simulacrum telepathically through the soul, so they had to wait for a pre-arranged time of day instead of doing it on a whim.

There were a lot of things they had to do back in Eldemar. First of all, they had to secure the cooperation of the Silent Doorway Adepts in order to obtain the password of the Bakora Gate they had claimed. Their research into the method of operating the Bakora Gate had greatly improved the speed and reliability of the aranea opening ritual, but they still needed the web's cooperation in order to make use of them. Thankfully, convincing the Silent Doorway Adepts to ally with them was a lot easier these days – the perfected opening ritual and the many new gate passwords they had obtained over the restarts made their words carry considerable weight. It usually took only a few days before the Silent Doorway Adepts were ready to work with them.

Secondly, they had to organize an expedition towards the Zigurat of the Sun. Since the place was a Sulrothum stronghold, they couldn't just fly in there as they pleased. They had a brand new airship, but Sulrothum could all fly. They had to scout the area, see if they could get Alanic on board, repair the Pearl of Aranhal and Zorian's simulacrum-golems and then come up with a plan of approach after they had seen what they were working with.

Thus, Zach and Zorian reluctantly left their new airship out there in the desert, guarded only by a few simulacrums, while they went back to Eldemar to prepare things.

Hopefully nobody would try and take it while they were occupied elsewhere.



The room was packed. Everyone who was a part of their 'conspiracy', as Zach called it, was there: Kael, Taiven, Xvim, Alanic, Daimen... and Silverlake.

Silverlake had never taken part in these kinds of group meetings in the past. While they had managed to convince her the time loop was real and come to an agreement with her, she clearly didn't trust them very much. She instructed them in pocket dimension creation and she worked with them to decipher the nature of the primordial prisons and the manner in which they were connected to the time loop reality and the real world... but she also kept trying to covertly spy on them and she was leaving coded messages to her future iterations inside her notes. Zorian couldn't figure out what those coded messages were saying but he was sure they were there, even if Silverlake kept insisting he was just paranoid and making mountains out of molehills. She also stubbornly refused to make use of the time loop to work on her youth potion, but Zach and Zorian cared a lot less about that than she seemed to think.

In any case, the result of all this was that Zach and Zorian were both leery about trusting her too much and kept keeping her out of their greater plans and group meeting as such. However, that kind of thing couldn't go on forever and it was becoming obvious that waiting for Silverlake to find something encouraging in the notes of her predecessors was an idle dream. They could only hope that if they extended a little more trust towards her (even though she sure hadn't done anything to deserve that) she would eventually reciprocate.

Besides, their plans for the current restart were extensive and important enough that it didn't feel right to exclude anyone out of the planning sessions.

It was interesting, though... Zorian had expected Silverlake to make a remark about Kael, since the morlock boy had indicated they had some kind of prior knowledge of each other when he had sent Zorian to talk to her, but Silverlake didn't seem to notice him. It wasn't that she was deliberately ignoring him as far as Zorian could tell; she just didn't seem to perceive him as important or familiar. Perhaps she just didn't connect the person with the face in front of her? Kael had no doubt been a child when they had last met, and he was a teenager now...

Regardless, while Silverlake did not recognize Kael, she definitely recognized someone else: Alanic. What was more, Alanic clearly recognized her as well. They faced off against each other for a full five seconds after they saw one another, just... staring at each other. Not saying anything. Then they looked away and pretended nothing happened. Since they didn't say anything, Zorian pretended not to notice.

Currently, everyone was staring at Zach and Zorian with a complicated expression, momentarily struck speechless.

"That was you!?" Daimen exclaimed incredulously. "You're the ones who did that airship theft that all the newspapers are talking about!?"

"That's us, yup!" Zach said, nodding proudly. "We're awesome."

"That's..." Daimen said, grasping for words.

"Reckless," Xvim supplied.

"Stupid," Taiven offered.

"Your idea," Zorian said.

"Yeah, exact—" Daimen began, before registering what Zorian had said. "Wait, what?"

"Yup," Zorian nodded seriously. "Totally your idea."

"I assume you had a reason for doing that, then?" Alanic prompted.

"Of course," Zach laughed. "We had the *best* reason. Gather round, children, Grandpa Zach is going to tell you all a story..."

Over the next half an hour, Zach told everyone involved what the point behind the airship theft was. Zach being Zach, he focused more on describing the exciting parts of the airship battle than the strategic goal of the theft, or their reasoning, but he did eventually manage to get the point across. They needed the airship in order to locate all the Key pieces in time. Without the Pearl of Aranhall, travelling across the Xlotic desert to reach the Ziggurat of the Sun would probably require multiple restarts due to the hostile environment and a lack of human towns where they could hire teleporters at. Additionally, they eventually needed to reach Blantyrre to collect one of the pieces, and traversing the vast amount of ocean that separates Blantyrre from the nearest human landmass in less than a month would be nearly impossible through alternative methods.

"It's more than that, though," Zach continued. "Not only is the airship we stole absolutely critical in getting us out of this time looping reality, it is also important practice for another theft that needs to happen."

"More thefts, mister Noveda?" Xvim asked him, raising an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Well, yes," Zach said. "After all, the dagger is held inside Elde-mar's royal treasury..."

"Oh heavens..." Taiven groaned, burying her face in her hands. "Zorian, are you seriously going to break into the royal vaults?"

Kael, who was sitting next to her, chuckled quietly.

"He kind of has to, doesn't he?" he said, sounding a little amused.

"Since you're mentioning this now, I'm guessing you intend to make the attempt at the royal treasury in this very restart, then?" Alanic asked.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Additionally, we also intend to try and wrest the crown from Quatach-Ichl, the ancient lich fighting for the Ibasans. Potentially, we could gather all but one of the Key pieces in this very restart. I doubt we'll succeed in getting them all this time – hell, I wouldn't even be surprised if we fail to get *any* of them – but it's good practice and it should at least tell us what areas we're lacking in and what we need to work on to succeed next time."

"I see," Alanic sighed. "I will be frank – I am not very comfortable with condoning such an act of treason. Considering what is at stake here, I will not stand in your way... but you should not count on my help in this regard."

"Ha ha!" Silverlake suddenly cackled. "So righteous and serious! This is too funny! I still remember how you came to me back then, a budding little necromancer full of ambition and anger, asking for my help! It's really hard to reconcile that memory with what you ended up becoming. A necromancer and a thief became a fervent priest and a patriot, now I've really seen everything in the world..."

Alanic stiffened slightly at her words and then gave her an angry glare. Silverlake just grinned cheekily at him. Taking a deep breath, Alanic rose from his seat and gave Zach and Zorian a frosty look.

"I think it would be best for everyone if I did not participate in this meeting anymore... or any other meeting where you planned how to best rob Eldemar's royal family," Alanic said. "And while I realize more than anyone that desperation can make one do things they rather wouldn't, I have to warn you that you're making a mistake by working with this old ghoul. You're playing with fire. She will stab you in the back in a heartbeat if she thought it would benefit her."

"Ah, I love you too, my little necromancer," Silverlake said

sweetly.

Alanic did not bother to respond to her, or even look at her. He simply turned around and left the room. Not quite stormed off, but it wasn't quite far from it.

Zorian resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands. It always had to be something, didn't it?

A long, uncomfortable silence descended on the scene. Only Silverlake seemed entirely comfortable with the situation, humming happily to herself and idly examining one of the experimental potions Kael had made. The meeting was happening in one of the alchemical workshops Zorian had made for the white-haired boy, so there were quite a few of them lying around.

"So," Silverlake eventually began. "You were saying something about an ancient lich?"

ENEMIES

Although the Xlotic desert was usually depicted as an endless sea of sand, with only the occasionally broken up rocky outcroppings or secluded oases, its actual landscape was far more complex than that. There was plenty of sand, yes, but also vast fields of rock, barren hills and mountain ranges, remnants of dried-up lakes and riverbeds, and old Ikosian ruins scattered all over the place. And that was just the more mundane landmarks. Zorian had heard that there was a forest composed out of stony, seemingly fossilized trees in the deep desert, blooming with life and greenery during the rare times it rained in the area before reverting back to its seemingly lifeless appearance after a few weeks. Then there were the so-called 'water volcanos' – massive geysers of boiling water that occasionally erupted from the Dungeon in some regions, flooding the area around them for a brief while.

The area around the Ziggurat of the Sun wasn't as unusual as those two examples, but it was still an unusual place. First of all, this was once a famous temple complex of the Ikosian Empire, and a great many ruins were scattered around the area – ruins of temples, lesser ziggurats, military forts, private estates and so on. Many of these ruins had been claimed by the local sulrothum, but many more had been overrun by various desert-adapted monsters,

which had moved into them and had dug themselves in too thoroughly for anyone to dislodge them. Secondly, there was a seasonal river passing through the area – although it only persisted for part of a year, it was enough to make the area relatively vibrant compared to its immediate surroundings. Finally, the local underworld was particularly extensive and featured a large underground lake that no doubt contributed to making the land far livelier than it realistically should have been this deep in the Xlotic interior.

Zach and Zorian were currently traveling through this land on foot, warily observing their surroundings. Their journey had been relatively free of dangers thus far, but that could change in a flash if they weren't careful. The heat was also slowly starting to get to them. Their comfort spells had done a fine job of warding off sunstroke and the worst of the desert heat, but this sort of magic was not all-powerful and Xlotic was quite an extreme environment.

It made Zorian wish they had just arrived here in their pretty new airship. Unfortunately, that hadn't been an option. They were coming here to try and negotiate with the sulrothum for the right of passage, and the devil wasps would no doubt react badly to the sight of an incoming airship. Most likely they would just attack the vessel immediately, ruining any chance of successful negotiations.

Well, if Zorian was being honest with himself, the negotiations were not very likely to be successful anyway. Although sulrothum were known to have peaceful interactions with humans on occasion, they had a reputation of being an extremely fierce and violent species, and there was a long history of bloody conflict between them and humanity. On top of that, sulrothum were incapable of producing the necessary sounds to mimic human speech, and humans could not speak sulrothum either, making communication between the two species difficult.

Even though the odds of a peaceful outcome were low,

though, Zorian still felt they had to try. No doubt he and Zach could forcibly take the ziggurat from the sulrothum if they really applied themselves, but there were hundreds of these things living there and this was their home. This was where they kept their children, their food stockpiles and water reserves, their workshops and trade goods... they were not going to give the place up easily. They might even decide to fight to the death, which would force Zorian to deal with sulrothum children and non-combatants somehow. He'd rather avoid that headache if at all possible.

"This should be enough, no?" Zach suddenly said. He hopped onto a nearby rocky outcropping and quickly scanned their surroundings. "I think we're far enough into their territory. Any further and they might attack us on principle. Though really, I still think we're going about this the wrong way. Sulrothum are famed for their savagery, no? I bet smacking them around a bit until they're ready to talk would produce better results than just approaching them peacefully. Show them we're serious, you know?"

"You might yet get your wish," Zorian said, performing a brief sweep of the area with his mind sense, soul perception and his plain two eyes. There was some sort of snake hiding beneath a nearby patch of thorny bushes, but it was absolutely terrified of them and had no intention of attacking them, so Zorian ignored it. "If the wasps attack us immediately or refuse to even entertain our offer, we'll go with your plan."

"Ha. Great," Zach grinned, before retrieving a water bottle from his backpack and emptying it on top of his head. He sighed in relief. "Ahh, I needed that..."

After some thought, Zorian decided to follow his example and did the same.

It did make him feel a lot better, he had to admit.

A minute or so of comfortable silence ensued.

"Shall we?" Zorian eventually asked.

"Yes," Zach nodded. "Fire away."

Zorian performed one of the many spells that produced a signal flare in some fashion – in this case, a brilliant red star that released a high-pitched 'scream' as it flew through the air – and fired it straight into the sky above him, announcing their presence to everyone for miles around.

They didn't have to wait long. Not even fifteen minutes after Zorian had fired the flare, a trio of black dots appeared on the horizon. Their features were kind of hard to discern because they were approaching them from a direction that let the sun illuminate their backs, but Zorian was pretty sure he was looking at an incoming sulrothum patrol.

Soon, this suspicion was proven correct.

They were louder than Zorian thought they would be. The drone of their wings, beating several times a second to keep their large bodies aloft, was audible from a considerable distance. It kind of made Zorian wonder why they even bothered to try and mask their approach when anyone who wasn't deaf could hear them coming. Regardless, as the sulrothum patrol got closer, Zach and Zorian shifted their posture in preparation for a possible attack. They didn't think the sulrothum would just attack them with no provocation – if nothing else, they'd have brought more tribe members if they were going to be hostile right off the bat – but it was best to be prepared for everything.

Their landing was anything but graceful. Instead of gradually slowing down, the sulrothum dropped to the ground with reckless speed, impacting the gravel-covered earth in front of Zach and Zorian with considerable force and kicking up dust and loose stones in every direction. The shockwave even reached the place where Zach and Zorian were standing, though the weather shields they had protecting them simply deflected these stray irritants to the

side with no action required on their part.

Well. The meeting had barely even begun and already Zorian was starting to dislike the damn wasps.

In any case, with the sulrothum right in front of them, Zorian could finally take a good look at one. He had seen the descriptions and illustrations of them in the books, naturally, but that sort of thing really couldn't compare to seeing something in person. They were big – smaller than the three meter long giants that the books described, but not that much smaller – but also very spindly and fragile-looking. That impression was misleading, he knew – sulrothum were said to be strong enough to tear a man limb from limb with their bare hands and tough as coffin nails. Black, glossy chitin covered their wasp-like forms, and their faces were very much insect-like – alien and inscrutable. Their eyes, as black as their bodies and multifaceted like those of most insects, gave away nothing of their inner thoughts. They had a pair of short antennae on top of their heads, though, and these twitched madly in their general direction, revealing their agitation. Zorian had trouble interpreting their thoughts and emotions, alien as they were to his sensibilities, but he could tell that the trio was feeling twitchy and paranoid, ready to either attack them or flee at the slightest sign of aggression.

All three of them carried spears. They were appropriately sized for a creature of sulrothum size and strength, which meant they were pretty gigantic by human standards. The size and weight alone made those spears a significant danger, even though they looked somewhat crudely made. In addition to these close-quarters weapons, each sulrothum also carried a handful of smaller spears strapped to their backs. These were the notorious 'heavy javelins' that sulrothum used as their ranged attack method. Generally, every sulrothum raid opened with them hurling a storm of these javelins at their targets before closing in to clash

with their foes face-to-face. Sulrothum bodies were strong and durable, and they did not fear close-quarters combat... but even so, they did not balk at softening up their targets a little before closing in.

Somehow, the spears and javelins made the sulrothum trio far more threatening than they should appear. Objectively speaking, the three devil wasps in front of them did not pose a significant threat to Zach and Zorian, but seeing them clutching those spears in their hands was a stark reminder that they were dealing with creatures that were not just sapient, but *tool-users* as well. As a rule, sapient monsters did not employ tools much – other than lizardmen and a few other species, most of them basically lived like animals. Their innate abilities were potent enough that technology largely seemed pointless to them. Why use a spear when your claws are sharper? Why build a house when the cold and the rain hardly hurt you? Sulrothum, though, went to the trouble of creating tools and homes that made use of their natural advantages and made them more potent than they would otherwise be. They shouldn't take them too lightly.

"Hello," Zorian greeted with as much friendliness as he could manage, when standing in front of a trio of giant, sapient, aggressive wasps. "Do you understand me?"

He really hoped they did. Sulrothum tribes usually made sure they had at least a couple of members that could understand the local human language, but this tribe lived quite a distance away from any major human power so it was possible they felt no need to bother. If they were ignorant of any human tongue, or only understood a dialect that Zorian himself did not speak, they were in trouble. Telepathic communication between entities that did not speak a common language was a crude and often unpleasant thing, doubly so if the people involved were as different in their perception of the world as humans and sulrothum were.

The three sulrothum erupted into a storm of chattering, punctuated by an occasional buzz of their wings and mad flailing of their antennae. However, they did not bother to face each other to do so, their attention on Zach and Zorian never wavering and their spears pointed firmly in their direction. Finally, the sulrothum on the left stepped forth towards them before twirling his spear theatrically and stabbing into the ground. He thrust all four of his hands towards them, palms open, in a gesture that was probably supposed to prove that he really was unarmed.

Then he made a series of hand gestures before leaning back and expectantly waiting for a response.

Zorian frowned. Was this how the sulrothum usually communicated with humans? It would make sense, he supposed. Most mages weren't as proficient in mind magic as Zorian, and Ikosian spellcasting language already employed a lot of hand gestures so this method of communication wouldn't be totally alien for a lot of people. Plus, sulrothum hands were remarkably similar to human ones, despite being giant wasps.

"Well that's a bit of a problem," Zach commented lightly.

Zorian ignored him.

"I do not understand that," Zorian said, speaking loudly and slowly. "Please think your responses at me in human language. I will pick it up from your thoughts."

The sulrothum froze for a moment before flattening his antennae over his forehead and hissing at him, sounding remarkably like an angry housecat.

"I think you got him a little angry," Zach supplied helpfully from the side.

Yeah, thanks Zach. Real helpful of you.

The sulrothum reached to his side and grasped one of the several items tied to his waist – a small bundle of herbs and bones, wrapped in snake leather. All three had a couple of trinkets like

that hanging off their bodies, but until now Zorian had not put too much thought into that. In any case, the sulrothum proceeded to wave the bundle in front of him, as if trying to ward himself against Zorian's magic. Sadly for him, the bundle didn't really do anything as far as Zorian could tell.

Zorian was mystified at the action before it occurred to him that this might be the equivalent of one of those silly 'folk charms' that old grannies and street sellers sometimes peddled to children, travelers and the like.

"I mean you no harm. I really don't," Zorian said, as soothingly as he could manage. It didn't seem to help. The sulrothum in front of him just waved his little charm harder and the other two sulrothum were starting to get more agitated as well. "And really, your thoughts are safe! I can only see what you think in human terms, nothing else!"

This was effectively true. While Zorian could indeed see into the sulrothum mind, even their emotions were a pain to puzzle out, much less their surface thought. If he wanted to be able to read their minds, he would have to invest months or years of work to do so, much like he did with aranea. They didn't have time for that.

The sulrothum in front of him was silent for a few seconds. Then, seemingly realizing that his 'magic charm' was not being effective, he stashed it back on his belt and shifted his posture into a more confident stance.

[Speak,] the sulrothum 'said' in his mind.

"Fine," Zorian nodded. "First, let me introduce ourselves. I am Zorian and the person next to me is Zach. May I know who I'm talking to?"

[No,] the sulrothum replied.

Ugh.

[I will not give you my name, sorcerer,] the devil wasp clarified

after a few seconds. [Everyone knows that names have power and that your kind can use them against us.]

What? This was news to Zorian...

Well, whatever. He would just think of the sulrothum in front of him as 'Buzzkill' for now, then.

"We seek passage through your territory and wish to present gifts to your leaders," Zorian said. He didn't mention anything about searching the ziggurat yet, since simply getting inside would give them useful information. At the very least they would find out if the Key piece was actually there if they could get in, due to the detection ability of their markers.

[Out of the question,] Buzzkill said resolutely. [You are not of the tribe.]

"Do you not accept guests in your home?" Zorian frowned. "I know we are different, but surely there is some kind of tradition of hospitality in your tribe?"

Buzzkill's hands twitched into a beginning of a gesture, before he caught himself and laboriously started forming thought for Zorian to detect. The language he spoke was a strange dialect of Ikosian, possibly an archaic version of some local dialect, but Zorian had gotten relatively proficient in Xlotic dialects by now, and could puzzle out his meanings easily enough. It helped that they weren't having some particularly high-minded discussion here.

[A wise one does not simply let strangers walk into his home,] Buzzkill stated. [We would need to make sure you are friends of the tribe. Signs would have to be consulted and proper rituals observed.]

"I... see," Zorian said uncertainly. "And how long would that last?"

[Many days,] Buzzkill said. Zorian could be wrong, but he thought he detected a note of *schadenfreude* in his thoughts.

Zorian was silent for a while, considering the situation. A few more questions to Buzzkill regarding this whole process of 'consulting the signs' and whatnot did not yield anything except vague explanations and refusals to elaborate. It was all very secret and not to be spoken to with outsiders, apparently.

His questioning was eventually interrupted by an incoming telepathic message, however – one coming from Zach. He may not be psychic like Zorian was, but telepathy was not beyond the reach of normal mages – it was just rarely used because it required a great deal of training to use, even if one knew the relevant spells, and because of trust concerns. Now, thanks to the extensive training of his mental defenses over the last dozen or so restarts, Zach had lost some of his paranoia regarding mind magic, allowing them to silently exchange thoughts when the situation called for it.

Who knew, maybe one day Zach would actually let him perform a detailed examination of his mind to see if Red Robe had left any more surprises in there...

[I'm guessing things aren't going too well?] Zach asked.

[Hard to say,] Zorian said. [Strictly speaking, he didn't say no, just that it would require a lot of time and effort, and probably bribes, for us to be granted entry into their territory... but I don't know.]

[Huh. Alright,] Zach said.

"Hey, big guy!" Zach suddenly spoke out loud, causing all three sulrothum to turn their heads towards him. "Be honest. You don't *really* intend to let us meet your leaders, do you?

Buzzkill shook his wings a few times contemptuously, before laboriously forming words in his mind again.

[It is not my decision to decide that,] he said. [But I think not. We are wise to your ploys. Your kind is dangerous and scheming, and you forever lust after this place. It was once yours, and you have never come to terms with how it changed hands.]

Any further discussion was rendered obsolete when Zach and Zorian noticed a swarm of black dots on the horizon. There were at least 20 of them and they were coming straight towards them.

[I advise you to turn and leave this place,] Buzzkill said, sounding much more confident now. [You are not welcome here.]

Silently, Zach and Zorian seemed to have come to an agreement. They both immediately launched offensive spells at the sulrothum in front of them.

The three sulrothum reacted quickly, probably having expected hostilities to break out soon. Buzzkill wrenched his spear out of the ground and charged straight at them with a loud, screeching battle cry while the two sulrothum in the back reached towards the javelins strapped at their back. Neither of them accomplished their goal – a massive wave of telekinetic force and cutting wind erupted from Zach, smashing straight into them and sending them away like bowling pins. A human would have been reduced to bloody chunks if caught in that kind of attack head on, but the three sulrothum survived mostly intact.

Before they could reorganize, Zorian fired a pair of force javelins at them, each one carrying a different amount of damaging force in itself. The purpose of this battle wasn't so much to kill the three sulrothum – they could have done that in the initial salvo if they so wished – but rather to puzzle out the limits of their protective abilities and intimidate the tribe somewhat so that they were more likely to negotiate when they come in force later. With that in mind, Zach and Zorian proceeded to throw the three sulrothum around like rag dolls, breaking their wings and limbs in the process and making sure that the incoming sulrothum forces could see the overwhelming power they represented.

Eventually the incoming sulrothum swarm finally arrived at the scene and it was time to leave. Zach and Zorian tanked one of the javelin salvos from the group, just to show they could, and

then teleported away.

But they would be back, and they would bring an army with them next time.



"Alright, now that everyone is here, we can officially begin," Zorian said, giving everyone present a cursory look. "I know that some of you have certain... misgivings about some of the people present, but it means a lot to me and Zach that you were willing to come here regardless."

He gave Alanic and Silverlake a look while saying that, as they were pretty much the people this was directed at.

After Alanic had abruptly left the meeting last time, the meeting had been wrapped up soon afterwards. It felt wrong to just continue the discussion without someone as critical as Alanic being present, so they mostly spent the meeting bringing Silverlake up to speed in regards to their plans and activities.

"I don't know what you're talking about, brat. Personally, I though the last meeting was a fun little reunion," Silverlake said. "It's not my fault Alanic decided to be a baby for no reason. Really, one would think a grown man like him would be at peace with his own past by now. Not to mention—"

"Silverlake, please," Zorian interrupted her with a long-suffering sigh. "We're here to talk about Quatach-Ichl and how to tackle him, okay? Let's leave these kinds of personal discussions for some other time."

Preferably never. He shot Alanic a grateful look for not rising to her bait and sparking another confrontation. Alanic did not visibly react, simply pretending as if Silverlake did not exist.

"Indeed," Xvim said, tapping his finger at the table speculatively. "I assume you have some sort of a plan, already?"

"Only a basic outline," Zorian said. "We definitely need to surprise him, and it should preferably be done near the very end of the restart. Quatach-Ichl's movements become increasingly predictable as the date of the invasion approaches and most of the Ibasan resources are already committed somewhere by that point, meaning that Quatach-Ichl will have trouble marshaling most of his underlings to defend him or send them in pursuit of us if we can recover his crown. As for the actual execution of the ambush... well, we first wanted to try catching him with a soul-severing bullet, since that could end the fight immediately if it works."

"Soul-severing... that's the coin trick you used to disable him in the past, yes?" Xvim asked.

"I still can't believe that actually worked," Kael sighed. "I had to reread that part of your notes three times to make sure I caught that correctly. I don't know what my previous self was thinking, sending you against an ancient lich armed with that. It shouldn't have worked."

"It was a pretty lucky win," Zorian admitted. "It only worked because Quatach-Ichl did not see me as a threat and thus decided to catch an object thrown at him in his hand instead of simply deflecting it away or shielding against it. I doubt I could engineer such a situation artificially and there is no way a coin is getting through his defenses during combat circumstances."

"Yeah, no way," Zach agreed. "I've tried to nail him with items in the past. No chance of him overlooking something like that while you're fighting him. He often actually sends thrown items right back at you with a casual gesture. He is quite proficient with unstructured telekinesis."

"I'm not sure I understand how this maneuver is possible," Xvim admitted. "Unusual circumstances aside, you employed an elementary piece of soul magic to shut down a lich. Liches are famous for being fiendishly hard to deal with, so why did a

thousand-year-old one fall so easily?"

"Because it wasn't Kael's little spell that exiled the lich's soul back to his phylactery," Silverlake said. "It was his own soul defenses that did that. You may think that being vulnerable to a cheap trick like this is a weakness, but imagine for a moment what would happen if that coin the brat used was a fancy soul jar or the like."

"His soul would get captured and his phylactery would be useless," Xvim said. "I see. So liches like him make their defenses incredibly sensitive, so that even the slightest soul disturbance causes their souls to snap back to their phylactery."

"Precisely," Alanic said. "Losing a body and everything you had on your person is a blow to be sure, but it pales to the possibility of having your soul captured."

"Most people don't carry a one-of-a-kind divine artifact like the crown of the first emperor," Zach noted.

"I'm sure Quatach-Ichl feels he can recover the crown from whoever claimed it off his...err, corpse," Zorian said. "Considering his level of power, he's not too far from the truth."

"Besides, what good are awesome magical items like that if you're not allowed to make use of them for fear of losing them?" Silverlake said. "I'd wear a fancy magical crown too, if I had one. Always wanted to try playing a princess as a little girl..."

"Unsolicited childhood fantasies aside, I'd like to remind you two that all liches are automatically powerful soul mages, and can adjust their soul defenses quite easily and rapidly," said Alanic. "If you hope to banish Quatach-Ichl's soul back to his phylactery, you only have one attempt per restart to do so. After that the lich will be expecting such a ploy and will likely take necessary precautions against it."

"What about going one step further and making an actual soul jar in order to capture Quatach-Ichl's soul?" Kael asked. "I mean, the last time Zorian tried this, he only had me to help and I'm..."

kind of a beginner at this. With Alanic and Silverlake here... well, they're clearly both very capable soul mages, so perhaps they could make something more potent than that?"

Alanic and Silverlake shared a long, complex look before they both refocused on Kael again.

"No," Alanic sighed, shaking his head sadly. "You are drastically overestimating our skills. Aside from having your phylactery destroyed, the biggest danger to a lich is having your soul captured. They spend a great deal of their energies making sure that can't happen under any circumstances. An old, experienced lich like Quatach-Ichl..."

"The only realistic way of dealing with him is destroying his phylactery," Silverlake finished for him. "Nothing else would work."

"I see," Kael said in a subdued manner.

"There is a reason why so many mages aim for lich-hood," Silverlake noted. "As far as methods of immortality go, having your very own resurrection point is hard to beat."

"Being undead is no true immortality, merely a twisted reflection of one," Alanic stated.

Silverlake harrumphed at him, but said nothing. Instead, she turned towards Zach and Zorian and gave them a speculative look.

"What?" Zach asked.

"Did you two ever think about just... soukilling Quatach-Ichl? You know, that trick the third time traveler used on the aranea and such? It would neatly solve this problem, not just in this restart, but in all subsequent ones as well."

"We did," Zach nodded slowly. "The conclusion was that we have to be very careful with that. The headaches we had with Veyers had taught us that a person behind heavy wards is essentially untraceable. If we soukille Quatach-Ichl and it turns out he begins

the restart behind some heavy wards or a place that nobody knows about, the crown might become completely unrecoverable.”

“Hmm,” Silverlake hummed. “You should really try to track down his movements and bases some of these days...”

“I’m going to have to agree with her on this,” Alanic said. “I know you say you’re stretched enough as it is, but even a mere chance of ridding the world of such an ancient lich would be worth throwing some effort in that direction. This is probably the best chance of anyone tracking down his phylactery in the foreseeable future.”

“That’s easier to say than to actually put into practice,” Zach said, shaking his head.

A small silence descended at the scene, only broken up when Silverlake decided to clear her throat and attract everyone’s attention to herself.

“In any case, I’ve done some digging in my personal records after you’ve explained the situation to me... I think I have something that might help you take down Quatach-Ichl,” she said, pulling out a weathered old scroll out of her bag.

“Oh?” Zach said eagerly. “Do tell.”

“It’s a trap field that prevents souls from escaping out of the area,” Silverlake said, throwing the scroll in his direction. Zach caught it, fumbling slightly with the catch due to not expecting the move. “For undead like Quatach-Ichl, it stops them from leaving until they shut down the ward. If you can lure him into the field, it should give him trouble for a time at the very least. I heard he moves a lot around the battlefield and loves to retreat to come back later. This ward is not nearly as obvious as an anti-teleportation field, but effectively has the same effect as one on undead.”

Huh. That did sound very useful against Quatach-Ichl.

“Anyway, I would be of little use to you in the actual battle against a powerful lich like Quatach-Ichl, but I can help you set up

the battlefield beforehand," Silverlake continued. "Aside from the spell I just gave you, I also have a few other surprises, though none are as effective as that one. And while Zorian is arguably a better warder than I am, he doesn't have experience with these particular spells."

"I'm probably going to take you up on that offer," Zorian said. This restart was going to get pretty busy as their preparations approached completion, so any chance to offload some of his responsibilities on someone else was useful. "Every little bit of help is useful. As for Xvim and Alanic, I am hoping you two will help us battle Quatach-Ichl if the ambush fails."

"Which it probably will," Zach noted.

"Hush, child," Silverlake chided him. "Don't you know you will curse this whole endeavor with such talk?"

"Just being realistic," Zach shrugged. "I tangled with Quatach-Ichl the most out of anyone here, so I feel I have the right to be a little pessimistic. Anyway, I actually have a suggestion of my own. I think I have an idea about something we can do to better prepare for the eventual battle against Quatach-Ichl."

"And what would that be, mister Noveda?" Xvim asked.

"A practice fight!" Zach said with a cheerful grin. "I'll play the role of Quatach-Ichl and you will all cooperate and try to subdue me. Admittedly, I am not an ancient lich of unfathomable power and experience, but I did recently become capable of creating my own simulacrum, so there is no danger of me getting hurt in the fighting. You can think of me as a discount Quatach-Ichl, I guess."

Zorian flinched a little at his description. This was such a bad idea...

"Zach," he protested. "There is no warding scheme in existence that would be able to handle the level of destruction involved in such—"

"I think it's a great idea," Alanic suddenly said. Zorian gave him

an incredulous look. "I would like to also invite Silverlake to participate in these exercises. Even if she doesn't intend to participate in the actual battle, these sort of mock fights would surely help her get a better perspective on what she is dealing with and help her fine-tune her preparations..."

Oh come on!

"What's that supposed to mean?" Silverlake said, scowling at him.

This sparked a loud fight between them, the two of them slinging barbs and thinly-veiled insults at each other while Zorian's mood steadily worsened.

[I hope you're happy with yourself,] Zorian sent to Zach telepathically.

[It's going to be great, you'll see,] Zach sent him back, completely unapologetic.

Zorian looked at Alanic and Silverlake, who were still trying to out-talk each other, and then at Xvim, who looked like he wanted to attack both of them to make them shut up. Kael had decided to flat-out vacate the room at some point, which was probably smart of him. He was too weak to participate in the sort of 'practice fight' Zach was suggesting and staying behind might mean he would get pulled into the argument between Alanic and Silverlake.

"Yeah," Zorian muttered to himself. "Great."



In the end, despite Zorian cautioning against it, the group decided to hold the battle practice that Zach suggested. Alanic obviously supported the idea, and he managed to goad Silverlake into supporting it too in the end. Xvim, though annoyed with the way Alanic and Silverlake were acting, felt it was a sensible idea... and was probably curious about the level of magical skill that Zach and Zorian truly had, anyway.

Thankfully, the practice fight was not going to happen for a few more days, leaving Zorian time to tangle with other issues. Mainly, this meant making preparations for the attack on the Ziggurat of the Sun. Golems had to be made, terrain scouted and information on sulrothum gathered. Thankfully, Alanic had agreed to help them out during the fighting, despite his disagreements with them over the inclusion of Silverlake into the time looping 'conspiracy'. Fighting pagan monsters that had seized a religious monument of the faith, Alanic said, was a worthy task for a battle priest like him. Unfortunately, having him gather a small army and having them assist in the endeavor, like he had done in some of the previous restarts, was apparently not possible. Those people had been willing to participate in secret operations on Eldemarian soil, but bringing them to the deepest stretches of the Xlotic desert to fight the sulrothum was bound to backfire. They would demand explanations and refuse to cooperate.

No, if Zach and Zorian wanted to have real people assisting them in their attack on the ziggurat, they needed to hire mercenaries and factions in Xlotic itself – preferably in the region closest to the Ziggurat of the Sun. As a bonus, such locals likely had first-hand information about sulrothum and their battle tactics, having been fighting them for decades now.

At the moment, Zach and Zorian were sitting around an open air table in one of Cyoria's fancier taverns and discussing the issue. Zorian was slowly sipping his fruit juice, while Zach had ordered the biggest keg of beer that Zorian had ever seen served in this kind of establishment. Zorian had initially thought that the keg was undrinkable in any sort of reasonable time-frame, but Zach was making a valiant effort to prove him wrong on that account.

The contrast between the two probably looked quite funny, because the other patrons occasionally gave them funny glances and shook their heads in amusement.

"Anyway," Zorian said, "the idea of consulting and hiring the locals for the fight against the sulrothum is good, but I'm running into issues of language again. I acquired a decent grasp of various Xlotic dialects by now, and Daimen and his connections help substantially, but this just isn't enough when I'm trying to actually hire guides, scholars, mercenaries and whatnot. I think we may need to find an actual translator to help us out. I wonder if we can talk Zenomir into going on a trip to Xlotic with us..."

"Bah. Why bring an old man like that when we can bring a hot girl instead?" Zach asked. "Neolu is native to the region, and I bet she'd love to ditch school and go wander the world with us. Actually, I don't have to wonder – I *know* she'd like that because I used to do that sometimes. Just... tell her I'm a time traveler and bring her along with me as I wandered the continent. Sometimes I'd bring others along too, but most people aren't willing to accept the whole 'time traveler' explanation as readily as she..."

"Ah, I remember her," Zorian said. "And you say she's really easy to convince about time travel?"

"Yeah, definitely," Zach nodded. "She asks for proof, of course, but that's easy to give. I already know more than enough to convince her to join us. Though admittedly she might be a little more reluctant to run off with two boys than just one. I, uh... used to phrase my offer more like a romantic getaway than a business transaction."

Zorian sighed in exasperation. Then again, if he had been stuck in a time loop like Zach had been, with no obvious danger pressing down on him, wouldn't he do the same thing? He'd probably take advantage of the time loop to go after a girl or two...

"Why don't we first try to talk to her about this before we take it for granted that she'd want to go along with this," Zorian told him.

"At the very least she probably won't mind getting us in contact

with her family," Zach said with a shrug. "Her family is rich and in a bit of a political crisis right now, so it should be possible to acquire their cooperation in exchange for helping them out with a problem or two. Finding us a translator or two is the least they could do for us."

"A bit of a political crisis?" Zorian asked slowly.

"It's a long story," Zach said dismissively. He took a large gulp from his massive keg of beer and took a deep breath. He was going to get completely drunk again before this was all done, wasn't he? "I'll tell you later, if Neolu herself doesn't tell you."

"Hello there. Do you mind if I join you for a few minutes?" a voice suddenly asked from the side.

Zach and Zorian were very surprised to hear this request. They had set up a privacy ward around their table, which was a clear sign to everyone that they did not want to be disturbed. They turned their attention to the source of the request, which turned out to be an older man in an expensive-looking suit. He wasn't one of the tavern workers and neither Zach nor Zorian had ever seen him before, so it was unusual for him to approach them like this.

Despite this, Zorian did not think for a moment that the man was just a curious tavern patron.

After all, if the man was just your average person, he would be able to sense the man's mind. And he couldn't. The man was completely blank to his mind sense, as if he didn't exist at all.

Mind blank was not an easy spell to cast, and being under its effects immediately placed the man in the upper tier selection of mages.

Zorian silently communicated this to Zach through telepathy, after which they shared an uneasy look between themselves.

"Sure," Zach eventually said. "Have a seat."

The man smiled at them confidently, as if he had always known they would have accepted his request. He took an empty chair from a nearby table and dragged it off to join them around theirs.

Zorian scrutinized him, trying to see if something in his features would jog his memory. He was a pretty striking person, though, so it was unlikely he would have forgotten him if he had dealt with him in the past. He had very proud posture, like someone who had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and his clothes and immaculate appearance reinforced it. His skin was darker than was common in this corner of Altazia, suggesting southern origins. Perhaps he was someone from Xlotic whose attention they somehow attracted? It wouldn't be impossible for a powerful mage from Xlotic to eventually make their way to Eldemar.

"Thank you for your hospitality," the man said politely. "I guess I should introduce myself. I am Saruwata Merenptah and I'm afraid I'm here to discuss something a bit... unpleasant. You see, I have recently noticed that you have been gathering information about me and interfering with my activities, so I have decided to come here and see if there is any way we could discuss this in a civilized manner and maybe come to a peaceful solution. I do not consider myself an unreasonable man."

What an exotic name... it definitely sounded Xlotic, but he was pretty sure that kind of name was obscure even there. He definitely didn't remember about interacting with any person named like that, and he had a pretty good memory thanks to his mental powers. The rest of his story, though... what the hell was he talking about? He gave Zach a questioning look, but his fellow time traveler shook his head in the negative. Zorian turned back to the man and gave him a serious look.

"I'm afraid you made some kind of mistake, mister Merenptah,"

Zorian said.

"No, I don't think I have," Saruwata said confidently. "My name may be confusing you somewhat. I rarely use my old name when interacting with the public, so most people have forgotten it. Just the way I like it, to be honest."

Zorian frowned.

"How do you expect us to know who you are if you hide your identity like that?" Zach asked, his tone somewhat unfriendly.

Zorian didn't blame him; perhaps it was because of the man's unflinching confidence, appearing as if he was holding all the cards and the outcome of this meeting was already predetermined, or because of the mind blank he put on himself, but he was really starting to dislike this 'Saruwata Merenptah'. He also noticed that the man's soul was flawlessly stable, with not even the tiniest ripples marring its surface as they spoke, which meant he was a soul mage of the highest order. Not even Alanic could keep his soul so featureless.

"Ha ha!" the man abruptly laughed. His soul still remained completely calm, despite his obvious amusement. "So you're saying you're targeting so many people that telling you I'm one of your victims isn't enough to narrow things down? Interesting, interesting..."

Zach scowled. "Mister Merenptah, I'm starting to think you're asking for a beating."

"If I tell you I've been around for a while, will this help?" the man said, grinning from ear to ear.

Master mage. Incredibly proficient in soul magic. Xlotic in origin. Someone they were targeting. Very old... older than he looks? Fake appearance? Obscure name... possibly an archaic one? Old enough to go out of fashion?

Fuck...

Zorian swallowed heavily.

"Quatach-Ichl?" he asked.

The man's grin never wavered. Instead, a flash of sickly green light passed over his face for a moment, revealing a familiar pitch-black skull of a millennia-old lich. Then the moment passed and his face was the same flesh-and-blood mask he had been wearing up until now.

"I'm so pleased to deal with intelligent people," Quatach-Ichl said, leaning back in his chair. "It makes things so much easier. So... do you think you're ready to talk?"

A CIVIL CONVERSATION

The tavern was a bright, lively place. Not very crowded, which was why Zach and Zorian had chosen it, but there were plenty of people talking, drinking, eating and walking around. Some of them gave their table a glance from time to time, but that was just idle curiosity and they went about minding their own business soon afterwards. Nobody really paid attention to them, nor to the new arrival that had joined them at their table.

They didn't even realize they were in the presence of a millennia-old lich that was currently plotting to destroy the whole city.

Then again, that was to be expected. Quatach-Ichl's disguise was practically flawless. Even Zach and Zorian had been fooled until he had revealed himself, so how could a bunch of random bystanders notice something was wrong? Even now, with the lich within a hand's reach of Zorian, he was struggling to notice any obvious tells that the man in front of him was actually a walking skeleton instead of a real flesh-and-blood creature.

Seconds ticked by in total silence, the two sides silently staring at each other. Zorian would have liked to claim that he was furiously thinking about the implications of this sudden visit and devising the proper way to tackle it, but the truth was that he was

thoroughly shocked and was having trouble formulating any kind of coherent train of thought at the moment. He could hardly believe that Quatach-Ichl had casually walked up to them in a busy tavern and started talking to them like there was nothing wrong. What the hell was he even thinking!? This was surprisingly impulsive behavior for someone who was supposed to be more than a thousand years old.

Fortunately, Zach was more adept at retaining his presence of mind in these kinds of unexpected situations. The benefit of greater experience granted to him by the literal decades he had spent in the time loop, Zorian supposed.

"You look better than I would have expected you to look," Zach commented.

"How so?" Quatach-Ichl asked curiously. He made a couple of gestures at the passing waiter, ordering a something for himself. Zorian wasn't sure what, but the waiter seemed to have understood him and responded with a casual nod in return.

Why was a lich like Quatach-Ichl ordering drinks, even though he doesn't need to drink? Probably for the sake of appearances, but still. *Could* he even drink? Was his disguise good enough to allow that?

"You look surprisingly... fleshy," Zach clarified, taking a sip from the massive keg of beer in front of him.

"Ah, that," Quatach-Ichl said. "Truthfully, this is how I usually look. The skeleton form is something I reserve for battles and intimidation purposes."

Having spied on the lich a few times in the previous restarts, Zorian knew this wasn't quite true. Quatach-Ichl also habitually appeared as a skeleton when interacting with the Ibasan forces and other people involved in the invasion... though perhaps he counted that under 'intimidation'.

"It's pretty bold to just approach your enemies like this," Zach

commented.

"Are you going to attack me in the middle of this tavern?" Quatach-Ichl countered.

"I'm seriously considering it," Zach said, his face twisted into a small frown.

"No, you're not," Quatach-Ichl said, giving them a knowing smile. "Putting aside the morality of involving all these defenseless bystanders in our dispute, starting a fight here would be just as bad for you as it would be for me. The ruling powers of this country would be just as interested in your activities as they would be in my own – probably even more so, since you two would be easier to blackmail and take control of than me."

He was right, of course. The two of them had come here without disguises, in their real identities. If they were to fight the Ibasan lich here, the authorities would track them down within a matter of hours, and the level of skill they would be forced to show during the fight would intrigue and alarm just about everyone involved. Once they started to look into Zach and Zorian, all sort of interesting things would come out. Even if the two of them won the fight with Quatach-Ichl and somehow managed to avoid any dead bystanders or property damage along the way, the restart would be effectively over. At that point they could just as well end the restart and start over.

Well, the truth was that the smartest thing to do would probably be to just end the restart immediately. Having this 'conversation' with Quatach-Ichl was equivalent to playing with fire. Not even the ability to end the restart on a whim could perfectly guarantee their safety. Sudomir could detect when Zorian started messing with his soul marker, so Quatach-Ichl could doubtlessly do it too. With him so close to them, and having come here prepared for anything, it was entirely possible they might not be able to activate the marker in time before he made his move. Plus, an unscrupulous,

ancient mage like him would no doubt have a whole host of subtle tricks in his arsenal, and they would possibly not even realize they were being attacked until it was too late.

Despite that, Zorian had to admit he was curious. He wanted to take the risk and hear what Quatach-Ichl had to say. This was a potential disaster, but also a potential opportunity. It was the first time they'd had the chance to engage in any kind of meaningful conversation with Quatach-Ichl, and Zorian had a feeling this kind of thing was not an easy thing to replicate between restarts.

"What you say is true, but it seems to me that you'd still be the bigger loser if we fight," Zorian said. "If your actions become known to—"

"You could have easily made that happen by now," Quatach-Ichl said calmly, cutting him off. "I don't know how much knowledge you have about what I'm trying to do, but I'm guessing quite a bit. You could have easily made your findings public by now, but you didn't. Instead you limited yourselves to raiding our supply caches and striking at the more careless members of our little conspiracy."

Zorian frowned. He supposed this was what Quatach-Ichl had been referring to when he said they had been 'interfering with his activities'. However, the fact of the matter was that Zach and Zorian habitually did that kind of thing in every single restart, more in order to acquire additional funding than anything else, and it had never caused them to run afoul of Quatach-Ichl as a result. Minor complications like that didn't usually arouse his attention. So the true reason Quatach-Ichl had managed to find them must be located elsewhere, and Zorian could think of two main possibilities. For one thing, this was the first time they'd gone after Quatach-Ichl directly, and maybe the ancient lich could detect that somehow. The second possibility was that Silverlake had overestimated her ability again and tried to gather information on Quatach-Ichl

herself, with predictable results.

He was leaning towards the second possibility.

"So you saw we moved against your group and noticed we could have probably done even more damage if we really tried and thought to yourself: 'man, I really need to have a friendly chat with those guys?'" Zach asked.

"Why not?" Quatach-Ichl challenged. "We may be enemies, but so what? Enemies talk to each other all the time. Half of the world's diplomats would be out of jobs otherwise. Well, all of them, if you're a cynical old bastard like myself and see all international interactions as fundamentally hostile, but you know what I'm saying. The point is that you could have reported your findings to the authorities, but decided not to. And I could have easily gone after some of the people close to you in retaliation for the raids you've done on my allies, but chose to have this discussion with you instead."

Both Zach and Zorian glared at him lightly in response to that thinly-veiled threat at the end. Quatach-Ichl pretended not to notice the look.

"Anyway, what I'm saying is... we may be enemies, but we aren't *irreconcilable* enemies," Quatach-Ichl concluded. "Surely we can reach some kind of agreement here?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree with you there," Zach said. "You want to destroy Cyoria, gather the souls of everyone who dies and feed them all to wraiths, release a primordial to rampage around the region and trigger another round of Splinter Wars. Unless you're willing to drop this whole invasion thing and go back to your island, we pretty much *are* irreconcilable enemies. Don't mistake our current passivity for willingness to quietly watch by the sidelines while you execute your mad schemes."

"Aha. So I was right, you do know quite a lot..." Quatach-Ichl said slowly, neither alarmed nor angry at Zach's statement. "How-

ever, if you'll forgive me for being a little blunt... why do you care?"

Zach raised an eyebrow at him.

"I've looked into you a bit before coming here," the ancient lich continued. "Neither of you are all that closely connected to the city itself. You are a scion of a dead house that has been taken advantage of, and Zorian here is just a talented outsider attending school here. I'm really not sure why people of your caliber would waste time on basic magic classes like that, but there are all kinds of people in this world, I suppose. Personally, I'd have gone crazy in a matter of weeks if I had to impersonate a complete beginner at magic for several years but... eh, I'm getting a little off-track. The point is, each of you has only a handful of people here that you really care about. We could easily arrange for them to be outside on the day of the invasion. Do you really care that much, in your heart of hearts, about all the random people that are going to die?"

If Quatach-Ichl had asked Zorian that at the start of the time loop, before he had largely come to terms with his place in the world, got to know all the people around him and witnessed in excruciating detail just what the invasion of Cyoria actually looked like... maybe he really would have answered 'no' in his head, like Quatach-Ichl clearly expected him to.

But now...

He remembered the image of Nochka and the other shifter children, naked and in cages, reaching out to him and screaming for help. It was closely followed by the memories of all the people who helped him in all these restarts, and who would likely die in the invasion if he did nothing to stop it, as well as all the different scenes of slaughter and looting he had witnessed over the restarts. He decided that yes, he very much did care. And he was pretty sure Zach did too.

"Don't you?" Zorian challenged.

"Not really, no," Quatach-Ichl said seriously. "I come from

an age where it was quite normal to round up all the mages and combat-capable men in a conquered town and mount their severed heads on pikes just outside the city walls as a warning to all who would dare defy you. I find modern sentimentality in regards to war casualties insincere, hypocritical and faintly disgusting."

"Ah," said Zorian with distaste. He supposed this only made sense. Quatach-Ichl was more than a millennium old, and came from a different, more bloodthirsty time. For all that he was considered 'tough but fair' by his own soldiers, the army he once led against the Old Alliance was famed for their brutality towards the conquered populace. It was said to be one of the main reasons his side had lost the war against Eldemar.

"What's with that look on your face?" Quatach-Ichl said, rolling his eyes at him. "Be honest, now... if you were really such a moral and upstanding citizen, why would you go to so much trouble to hide your true level of power and all the various projects you seem to be financing? Why would you move against me on your own instead of coordinating your actions with the law enforcement and the military? Whomever you are connected to, it clearly isn't Eldemar's government. So I ask again: why do you care so much about what happens to Cyoria?"

Huh. That was interesting. It was obvious that Quatach-Ichl had come to them mostly to fish for information rather than because he truly believed he could come to some sort of agreement with them, but up until now Zorian didn't know what exactly he was after. Now, he was starting to suspect that Quatach-Ichl was mainly concerned with puzzling out the identity of the forces standing behind them.

In reality, Zach and Zorian were rogue agents, supported by no one... but there was no way Quatach-Ichl would think that. It would be virtually impossible for two teenagers like them to have reached the heights they did on their own, no matter how talented.

Since Quatach-Ichl had failed to find their backers when he investigated them, he could only conclude that they were very well hidden.

The existence of a secret faction that he had not been aware of was doubtlessly bothering the old lich, making him hesitate to move against them until he knew more.

Zorian quickly sent a telepathic message to Zach, warning him not to let it slip that there was nobody backing them up. Quatach-Ichl would probably not believe them even if they openly admitted their lack of support, but it was best not to push their luck like that.

"We already told you, you just don't want to listen: because of the many, *many* casualties that would result from your planned attack on the city," Zach said. "And that's just the start of the suffering. The wars that would no doubt follow in the wake of the attack would—"

"Oh come on, you can't blame me for that," Quatach-Ichl complained. "I mean, I can understand you blaming me for the destruction of the city, but another splinter war is *inevitable*. Surely you understand that? This peace we have right now? It's just a short breather so the countries involved can recover from the damage the Weeping did to their command structure. Well, I personally think every peace is just preparation for war, but this peace especially so. Another round of wars is going to happen soon, regardless of whether Cyoria is attacked or not – I'm just trying to nudge the whole thing in a direction that best suits the interests of Ulquaan Ibasa. Same as your own country of Eldemar and everyone else involved, really."

"I'm not entirely convinced that another war is inevitable," Zorian remarked. Although there was obviously a lot of truth in that, since he had heard that sentiment expressed by various people he had interacted with over the restarts. "But even if that is true, there is a big difference between you and most of those countries. Their

plans eventually end in something stable. You just want to keep everyone fighting forever so they cannot threaten your island."

"What? No, I don't. Who told you that?" Quatach-Ichl protested, actually sounding mildly incredulous.

"You don't?" Zorian asked curiously. Truthfully, he was being deliberately provocative. He had no idea what Quatach-Ichl really wanted, but what he said just now was one of the guesses discussed by his subordinates and various members of the Cult of the Dragon Below.

"It's a stupid idea," Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head in exasperation. "The leaders of your nations can be remarkably stupid sometimes, but they're not *that* stupid. If we keep stirring shit up time and time again, sooner or later they will all decide to set aside their differences for long enough to wipe us out before getting back to killing each other."

"Huh. So your actual goal is...?" Zorian tried.

"Heh. I guess it's not that big of a secret anyway," Quatach-Ichl said, smiling at him in a patronizing manner. "I want to mess up Eldemar and Sulamnon and make Falkrinea win the war."

What?

"What?" Zach protested. "Falkrinea? Why them?"

"Who else?" Quatach-Ichl asked, his tone making it clear it was a rhetorical question. "Eldemar and Sulamnon would never seriously entertain peace with us – anyone who thinks they would is either an idiot or a traitor. Falkrinea though... they are the weakest of the Big Three in terms of military, and their heartland is very far from Ulquaan Ibasa. If they win and subdue Eldemar and Sulamnon, they will doubtlessly be quite disinterested in some fool's campaign to deal with Ulquaan Ibasa. Keeping their former enemies suppressed should take most of Falkrinea's strength. They will have little power or inclination for other major undertakings."

Zorian was about to ask why he thought Sulamnon would

fail to take advantage of Eldemar's weakness instead when he remembered Sudomir's plan with wraith bombs. He had intended to make an example of Sulamnon to prove he was serious about using his wraith bombs on defenseless towns, wasn't he? Had Quatach-Ichl given him that idea? From the man's memories, he knew that Sudomir himself did not think so, but Zorian wouldn't put it past Quatach-Ichl to have subtly led the man onto the idea without him realizing it.

The conversation temporarily died down because the waiter had come to their table to deliver the drinks Quatach-Ichl had ordered. To Zorian's surprise, the lich had ordered three kegs of beer to be brought to the table instead of just one – one for each of them. Zorian simply pushed his keg to the side and ignored it, but Zach calmly poured the contents of the new, smaller keg into the giant one already in front of him, which had been steadily getting emptier as they talked. This was no time to get drunk, Zach...

As for Quatach-Ichl, he simply left his own keg untouched on the table in front of him. He didn't have so much as a sip out of it – Zorian suspected that despite looking like a flesh-and-blood person, he couldn't really drink and eat food like one. It was probably an ectoplasmic body of some sort, similar to the ones employed by the simulacrum spell.

Since nobody wanted to discuss the invasion of Cyoria and similar topics in front of the waiter, a brief silence descended upon the table. Zorian made use of it to consider their interaction with Quatach-Ichl thus far. Sadly, the only conclusion he had was that it was all very strange. He really couldn't see through the ancient lich's plots.

Zorian had been watching their adversary like a hawk, but Quatach-Ichl never tried anything underhanded or gave any indication he wanted to drug them or target them with some subtle soul magic spell or whatever. He also never got visibly angry

with them, even though this conversation probably wasn't going the way he wanted it to, and even after Zorian 'subtly' scanned the beer he had ordered to make sure it was safe.

No, their interaction with Quatach-Ichl had been entirely peaceful thus far. Aside from clearly fishing for information about them and throwing in a 'subtle' threat or two in his statements, he seemed to really want to just talk.

Hmm...

"Well, I can see this is not going anywhere, so let's put all that aside for now," Quatach-Ichl said after the waiter left and a couple of seconds passed. "Instead, let me raise another issue – you have been looking into me in these past few days."

"Big deal," Zach scoffed. "Clearly you have been looking into us, too."

"As a response to your own actions, yes," Quatach-Ichl said with a small smile. "But you misunderstand. I'm not being outraged at you trying to get to know your enemy – I'm just wondering if there is more to it than that. Sure, you could have been simply looking for a personal weakness or a more effective tactic of dealing with me, but maybe... you actually wanted something from me?"

"You think we were trying to establish contact with you?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"It happens all the time," Quatach-Ichl shrugged. "People regularly come to me for help."

"They come to a sinister bag of old bones like you, begging for help?" Zach asked incredulously.

"Of course," Quatach-Ichl said with a big grin, not the least bit insulted by Zach's choice of words. "I'm a millennia old archmage. I have survived several world shaking events, and even participated in some of them. People seek me out for all kinds of reasons. Some want lost or restricted magics that are almost impossible to

get otherwise, some want to borrow my strength and expertise, and some are simply curious historians trying to get first-hand accounts of bygone eras. I usually help the latter ones for free, being a man of culture and generosity that I am, but others have to make it worth my time. Don't let that intimidate you, though – I don't deal in souls or demand people's firstborn sons or whatever you read about liches in all those slanderous books your government keeps shoving down your throats. I'm an honorable lich, only ruthless to my enemies, and I pride myself on my fair and honest dealing with others."

"I see," Zach said, tapping his finger on the table thoughtfully. He then leaned forward conspiratorially and said, "As a matter of fact, we do have something we want from you."

"Oh?" said Quatach-Ichl, leaning forward as well. "Do tell."

Zach opened his mouth and then paused for a second, no doubt purely for the sake of drama.

"We want the crown you're wearing," he whispered in a low voice.

For the first time since the meeting had begun, Quatach-Ichl seemed genuinely surprised. Zorian didn't blame him. He was pretty shocked Zach had decided to bring that up, too. He didn't say anything, though. Hopefully his trust in his fellow time traveler wasn't misplaced and Zach actually knew what he was doing instead of simply being a little tipsy and ignoring the possible consequences.

In any case, the surprise on Quatach-Ichl's face didn't last long. He soon began laughing instead, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head.

"Oh, you two... I knew it was a good idea to come here," the lich eventually said, having managed to compose himself again. "You're not even joking, are you? I say, sometimes I wish I could go back to being as young and brash as this... do you even know

what this crown is?"

"Of course," Zach said. "It's one of the artifacts of the first Ikosian emperor."

"Good eye," Quatach-Ichl said, giving them a thoughtful look. "It's been quite a while since someone had recognized it for what it is. Most people think I'm just a megalomaniac for wearing a fancy crown all the time and leave it at that. How did you know? I thought you had never actually seen me before today, but I guess your investigation of me has been a lot more thorough than I suspected..."

"In truth, we knew you were in the possession of one of the imperial artifacts before we had even started investigating you," Zach said.

"Oh?" Quatach-Ichl asked in interest.

"It's because of this," said Zach, retrieving the portable palace orb from his jacket pocket.

He extended the orb towards Quatach-Ichl, letting him inspect it in detail.

The old lich stared at the orb for more than 20 seconds in total silence, gazing into it with a serious face.

"The imperial orb..." he finally said. "I thought it was lost."

"It was," Zach nodded, yanking the orb back and shoving it back into his pocket. "And now it has been found again."

"So it has," Quatach-Ichl agreed. "However, I don't understand how it is related to the crown I'm wearing. Unless you're saying the orb can detect the other imperial artifacts?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying," Zach nodded. "Well, to be more precise, the owner of *any* of the imperial artifacts can detect all the others. If one can access their hidden functions, that is."

What an impressive pack of lies. Not that Zorian cared too much about Zach lying to the murderous old lich in front of them, but it was kind of impressive that Zach could think up something

so misleading, yet technically true. After all, the Key pieces did have hidden functions, and if one could access them, then they clearly had a marker as well...

"Truly impressive," Quatach-Ichl praised. "I always knew there was more to the crown than I had managed to uncover, but the hidden abilities had always eluded me. I don't suppose the orb is for sale?"

"Is your crown for sale?" Zach replied, countering a question with a question.

"Not for all the money in the world," Quatach-Ichl said.

"Well then," Zach shrugged. "You have your answer, then, don't you?"

"And yet... I feel there is a reason you showed me that orb," Quatach-Ichl speculated.

"How about a trade?" Zach tried. "You tell us what your crown does and in return we tell you what the orb does. Very simple and innocuous, and we both get to satisfy our curiosity without having to part with our precious priceless artifacts. How about it?"

"Very simple and innocuous, indeed," Quatach-Ichl deadpanned. "But the thing is, I already know what the orb does. It's just a particularly large pocket dimension, no?"

"No, no," Zach said, shaking his head. "It does more than that."

"It does? I see..." Quatach-Ichl said thoughtfully. "I think I'm still going to refuse that offer, though. I have a feeling that I would still end as the loser in that exchange. Give me something more to work with. Say... the location of one of the other artifacts you uncovered?"

"Sure," Zach said, agreeing with the suggestion immediately. Of course he did. At the end of the day, the very nature of the time loop made this kind of information exchange inherently biased in their favor. Everything they said to Quatach-Ichl today, he would

forget when the time loop reset itself. "Shall we go first, or do you want the honor?"

"It might as well be me," Quatach-Ichl shrugged. He didn't seem terribly concerned about revealing such an important personal secret. "It's not such a big secret, anyway. I actually use it as a form of intimidation sometimes. You see... the crown is one massive mana battery."

There was a second a silence following that statement.

"What?" Zorian said incredulously. "That's it? Just a mana battery?"

"Ha!" Quatach-Ichl grinned. "I knew you'd react like that! It never gets old. However, when I say it's a mana battery, I don't mean it stockpiles ambient mana like the mana batteries modern mages make. I mean it stockpiles the personal mana of the wearer... and the mana inside it never gets un-attuned. It effectively makes my maximum mana reserves ten times larger than they naturally are."

"T-Ten times!?" Zorian couldn't help but blurt out. By the gods... and he thought *Zach* was a total mana monster.

Although Zach was more reserved, one could see on his face that he was also boggling at the utterly ridiculous amount of personal mana that Quatach-Ichl apparently had at his disposal.

The ancient lich seemed very pleased by their reaction.

"Of course, that is without considering the divine blessing I've received in the past, which doubled my already impressive mana reserves," Quatach-Ichl continued. "Measuring of one's mana reserves was in a rather primitive state at the time I had begun my mage career, so I don't really know what sort of magnitude I would have according to the standards of modern mages, but I think I was about... magnitude 25? Something along those lines, I believe. The divine blessing then doubled my maximum without hurting my shaping skills in the slightest, so my natural mana reserves

were huge even before I got ahold of this lovely little crown. So when I said my mana reserves are effectively ten times their normal size due to the crown? It's actually even more impressive than it sounds."

How... interesting. Zorian shared a long look with Zach. That explanation about the divine blessing that doubled his mana reserves... didn't that sound rather familiar?

"So..." Quatach-Ichl eventually said with a grin. "Do you still think making an enemy out of me is a good idea?"

"This blessing you spoke about..." Zorian tried.

"Aha, no," Quatach-Ichl said, raising his finger to stop him. "I honored my side of the bargain. Now it's time for you to honor yours."

"Fine, fine," Zach sighed. "Aside from being a massive portable pocket dimension, the imperial orb is also a high-infinite memory bank, capable of storing a massive amount of personal memories and mental blueprints inside it."

Quatach-Ichl considered it for a moment.

"Considering the scarcity of writing supplies in those times... yes, I can see how that kind of function would be invaluable. Not that impressive today, although the remaining records inside the orb, if any, would be incredibly valuable. To historians, if nothing else. How much did you find inside?"

"No comment," Zach immediately said. The memory bank was completely empty, of course, as it could only be used inside the time loop, but Quatach-Ichl didn't need to know that.

"Fair enough," Quatach-Ichl conceded.

"As for the location of one of the other imperial artifacts..." Zach said. "Well, you can find the dagger inside Eldemar's royal vault. You're already attacking the country in question, so you should have no qualms about breaking into its royal vaults as well."

"They have one of the imperial artifacts and they're letting it gather dust inside the treasury," Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head sadly. "How typical."

There was a brief and uncomfortable silence as both Zach and Zorian waited for the lich to say something more, but he never did. Instead he simply observed them silently, saying nothing.

"So, this blessing you spoke about..." Zorian tried again.

"It's going to cost you," Quatach-Ichl immediately warned.

"Well, what do you want?" Zorian asked him bluntly.

"Since you're asking questions about the divines, I think it would only be appropriate if you offered something divine yourself," Quatach-Ichl smiled.

Zorian thought about it for a second before pulling out the mysterious dagger they had found in the imperial orb and handing it to Quatach-Ichl. Giving the ancient lich a divine artifact of unknown powers in exchange for this kind of information would be monumentally stupid in any other circumstances, but he really wanted the proper answer to his question and the dagger would be back in his hands in the next restart anyway.

Quatach-Ichl gingerly accepted the dagger and immediately started casting spells on it, scaring Zorian quite a bit. This was the first time Quatach-Ichl had performed any sort of magic after approaching them, and Zorian watched him like a hawk to make sure he didn't slip in something unsavory between all those divination spells he was casting at the dagger.

"It's a divine artifact," Quatach-Ichl eventually concluded.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Divine for divine, no?"

"What does it do?" he asked.

Zorian was pleased that not even a millennia-old lich like him could just casually figure out divinely-bestowed powers.

"I don't know," he admitted to the lich. "It's just something we recovered from an old ruin."

"So it could be totally useless or amazingly powerful," Quatach-Ichl concluded, turning the dagger carefully in his hands and studying the lines and glyphs etched into its surface. Zorian knew he would find out nothing through that, though. They appeared to be purely decorative and said little about the dagger itself.

"No divine artifact is useless," Zorian insisted.

"You're wrong," Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head. "Gods were very impulsive, whimsical creatures. They made all sorts of pointless items purely as a joke back in their heyday, it's just that most of them broke down or got thrown away as the years went by."

"Divine artifacts can break down?" Zach asked curiously.

"Of course," Quatach-Ichl nodded seriously. "Most of the surviving divine artifacts are not unbreakable because this is some inherent trait of a divine artifact – they are unbreakable because they wouldn't have lasted for centuries if they weren't."

"Still, based on what you just said, the very fact this dagger lasted up until this day means it's probably at least a little bit useful," Zorian said.

"There is some truth to that," Quatach-Ichl acknowledged. He looked Zorian straight in the eye. "Are you sure you want to trade this, though? You could be losing a real treasure, you know?"

"I'm sure," Zorian said firmly. "Just make sure to give me an extra-detailed explanation if you're so worried about taking advantage of me."

"Ha! Decisive. I like that," Quatach-Ichl said. "Well, since you're not afraid to take a risk, I guess it would be pretty pathetic of me to shy away from it."

With a dramatic flourish, Quatach-Ichl twirled the dagger expertly in his hand, showing impressive manual dexterity, and then... pushed the dagger straight into his chest.

The dagger sank into him like he was made out of water, right through the clothes, and then it was gone like it never existed. Quatach-Ichl also looked completely unharmed by the action.

He folded his hands over his chest and smiled at them.

"What exactly did you want to know?" he asked.

"You said this divine blessing of yours doubled your maximum mana reserves," Zorian said. "Was that a typical size of increase for such blessings?"

"Hm?" Quatach-Ichl hummed, seemingly surprised at the question. "Well... that's an interesting question, but I'm afraid I can't answer that. People with divine blessings were rare, even in times when the gods still roamed the earth, and they tended not to advertise their identity and capabilities. If you think secrecy among top mages is bad today, you don't want to know what the ancient arch-mages were like. So many legacies got lost because the old fools refused to let anyone see their work... but I digress. I suspect that the sort of blessing I received is relatively typical of its sort. Making someone's mana reserves twice as big utterly dwarfs any sort of 'natural' increase one can obtain through other means, thus firmly cementing the god as actually godly, but it isn't completely over the top. Plus, doubling something is a nice, simple-to-understand change."

"Do you know how it actually works?" Zorian asked.

"In very general terms," the ancient lich said. "It's a sort of stabilization frame made out of divine energy, encircling the soul. Somehow, this allows the target to store and regenerate more mana without hurting their shaping skills. Nearly undetectable through classical magic, just like all divine works, but the fact it interacts with one's soul means that skilled necromancers can eventually learn how to perceive it through soul perception."

A stabilization frame? Was it perhaps... in the shape of an icosahedron? Did Quatach-Ichl design his gate stabilization frame

based on the faint outline of the soul stabilization frame that encircled his soul? Zorian thought about hinting at it somehow and observing the lich's reaction before deciding that was probably going too far.

"Is there any way to receive such a divine blessing other than getting it from a god?" Zach asked with a frown.

"Technically yes," Quatach-Ichl said. "The angels are said to be able to bestow such blessings to this very day. However, they are extremely stingy with them and are said to only bestow them upon their most pious and capable servants. I rather doubt they would be impressed with either of you two. So in reality, no, there really isn't any way for you to receive such a blessing. It's a privilege that only ancient monsters like me and a few fanatical dogs of the church can wield."

They asked a few more questions in regards to the soul stabilization frame and how it could be detected, probably rousing some of Quatach-Ichl's interest in the process, but eventually the old lich decided he'd had enough of their questions and turned to leave.

"Well," he said, rising from his seat. "I enjoyed this talk and you've given me a lot to think about, but I think this is a good time to stop."

"Yes," Zorian agreed. It was getting tiresome constantly being on his guard around the ancient lich, making sure he didn't say the wrong thing or miss some sinister plot unfolding in the background.

"If you want to talk more, feel free to contact me through this," Quatach-Ichl said, handing them a simple paper calling card, plain white and undecorated. The only thing on it was an address in Cyoria, typed in bold, black letters.

Zorian silently pocketed the calling card.

"I have a feeling we'll see each other again, soon," the old lich

said with a grin, before turning around and calmly walking out of the tavern.

A long silence followed in his wake, neither Zach nor Zorian saying anything for a full minute, just listening to background noise of the tavern and playing the entire encounter repeatedly in their heads.

"I guess the most pressing question now is: what do we do?" Zorian asked. "Do we do the smart thing and immediately end this ticking time bomb of a restart... or do we play with fire and try to take advantage of this somehow?"

"I don't know," Zach sighed, pushing away his giant keg to the side. In the end he never did manage to completely finish it, though Zorian felt that was more due to the circumstances than a literal inability to do so. "It's hard to think straight about this right now. I've got so many bad experiences with that damn bag of bones... I got trashed by him so many times, got so many of my plans ruined when he just swooped in and started wrecking the place... but if you forced me to give you an answer right now?"

Zorian sighed. He already knew what the answer was going to be.

"I always did like fire," Zach said with a grin.

ANCIENT CIRCLES

Aranhal, the unfortunate nation that had lost its airship prototype to Zach and Zorian, had been affected deeply by the theft. It was a huge blow to their prestige to lose their prized creation in such a dramatic manner, possibly more so than a mere technical failure would have been. If the design itself was flawed or the builders had assembled the vessel incorrectly and it crashed during its maiden flight, that would have been kind of embarrassing... but mostly for the project itself and the factions that supported it. Having a bunch of thieves break into the construction site and steal it away, though? That reflected badly on the whole country. It didn't help that Aranhal couldn't suppress the information that they had engaged the thieves in an airship battle and lost. The airship they had lost in the ensuing battle couldn't be simply swept under the rug, after all. Many people ended up losing their positions over this scandal, information gathering groups in the entire region were going crazy trying to figure out which group was responsible for the feat and rumors were flying that a massive audit of Aranhal's government agencies and armed forces was in the works...

Zach and Zorian, the causes of the entire furor, were only dimly aware of all this. They kept an eye on the news and reports coming from the region, but it didn't seem like Aranhal was

getting any closer to tracking them down, so they gradually lost interest. Zorian did find it kind of interesting how many otherwise obscure groups and individuals were roused into action as a result of their theft, though. Perhaps it would be a good idea to stir up some similarly great outrage back in Altazia, just to see if something particularly interesting would show itself in its wake...

That was a thought for some other time, though. At the moment, Zach and Zorian were simply relaxing on their new airship as it flew over the empty, sun-scorched desert. They weren't going anywhere in particular – they were just meandering from one random place to another, testing the ship's flight systems and enjoying the view. As an added bonus, aimlessly flying around the Xlotic desert was a pretty good way of foiling any attempt to eavesdrop on them. No matter what kind of exotic methods of tracking them down and spying on them Quatach-Ichl had at his disposal, they probably couldn't reach across continents and reach them here.

"Wow, the view from here is amazing! And look, those four tower-like rock formations over there? Those are Retam's Fangs, where the prince of Ixam and the rebel queen Hanfa swore an alliance to unite their forces and repel the Ikosian forces encroaching upon their land. Even though they failed in the end, I always thought their story of forbidden lovers fighting a doomed battle against insurmountable odds was *so* romantic..."

Zorian glanced to his side, where Neolu was leaning over the airship railing and animatedly babbling about anything that caught her eye. Bringing her along with them when they boarded the airship kind of interfered with the idea of maximum security, but Quatach-Ichl already had plenty of people to choose from if he wanted to kidnap someone to question about Zach and Zorian, so whatever. He was more amazed that she was willing to go along with them, to be honest. A couple of acquaintances come up to you one day and tell you that they're time travelers and want you to join

them for a joyride in their stolen airship and you just... accept the offer?

"I'm hardly an expert on ancient Ikosian history, but wasn't that alliance a matter of pure pragmatism? And didn't the prince of Ixam have his father's permission to broker a deal with the rebels?" Zorian asked curiously. "What exactly makes this a case of 'forbidden love'?"

Neolu gave him an unamused look.

"Err, never mind," Zorian said quickly. He didn't want to start an argument about a silly topic like that. "Forbidden love it is."

Neolu's expression brightened immediately, and she clapped her hands happily.

"We should come down and look around!" she said enthusiastically. "I hear nobody has been here for nearly a decade, since it's so deep in the desert now. I want to take a souvenir or two. Ooh, my sisters will be so jealous when I show them..."

Zorian really didn't understand her. She readily accepted their claims about the existence of the time loop – although she was indeed more wary of the story when it was both Zach and Zorian talking to her about it rather than just Zach – but the way she spoke and behaved made Zorian wonder how much she really believed them. She didn't seem to care at all about the impending end of the month that would rob her of everything she achieved here.

In any case, they had no reason to refuse her request. It wasn't like they were pressed for time, or even going anywhere in particular, so stopping by for some sightseeing and to pick up some pretty rocks was okay. Besides, Zorian believed that once Neolu experienced the scorching heat of the desert outside the airship, she would quickly decide to cut their visit short.

Two hours later, he realized he may have underestimated Neolu somewhat. Being a Xlotic native, she seemed to possess a much higher comfort threshold for hot, dry climates than he or Zach did.

She was also far more athletic than he had given her credit for, because she was jumping about and maneuvering herself across the rock landscape with far more grace than he would have expected from a teenage girl wearing a dress.

Maybe it was some kind of a bloodline? House Iljatir, like many magical Houses, was rather secretive about its family magic and special abilities, but they probably had them.

"Hey, Zach," Zorian called out. His fellow time traveler, who was just in the process of carving 'Zach was here' into one of the stone formations, turned to him with a questioning look. "What is House Iljatir's special thing?"

"I don't know," said Zach. "Something divination-based. Ne-olu got all apologetic when I asked and said she wasn't allowed to tell me and I didn't push. I didn't think it mattered."

"Something divination-based, huh?" Zorian mused thoughtfully. Hmm. Depending on what exactly that represented, maybe she had an actual reason for trusting them so easily...

"Yeah," confirmed Zach, either not realizing or not caring that Zorian was mostly talking to himself when he repeated his words. "Those three blue circles she has imprinted on her cheeks and forehead? They're supposed to represent eyes."

"Oh. I *was* kind of wondering about that," Zorian said.

"You could have just asked her," Zach said, shaking his head and turning back to finish his inscription. "She's a really easy person to talk to, you know? Even if you ask something she can't tell you, she probably won't get mad at you."

After mulling it over for a few seconds, Zorian decided to do just that. He approached the cheery girl that joined them on this trip and waved at her to get her attention. She seemed to be in the process of trying to capture one of the small blue lizards that made their home in this place, though, and was so focused on her task that she did not notice him. The little creatures were totally

harmless, but very fast after soaking in the sun for hours on end and quite tricky to catch.

"Neolu?" he asked.

She jumped a little in surprise at his sudden interruption, before refocusing on him. Her eyes, blue like the markings on her cheeks and forehead, stared at him uncomprehendingly for a second before an idea seemed to occur to her.

"Catch one for me!" she commanded, pointing at one of the distant blue lizards with her finger. The lizard instantly reacted to her sudden move, darting so fast into a nearby crevice that it looked like it teleported.

Zorian raised his eyes at her, his mouth stretching into an amused smile.

"Err, please?" she added with a nervous smile of her own.

"Fine," Zorian sighed. After a second of consideration, he decided to go for the simplest option – he reached into the mind of the nearest lizard and manipulated it into coming over on its own. Once it approached close enough, he simply scooped it up and handed it to the girl next to him, who immediately started to coo and fawn over it. Didn't girls usually find reptiles creepy and disgusting?

"Look at you, so gorgeously blue and gloriously spiky," Neolu said, turning the lizard over so she could see him from all sides. The lizard looked decidedly unamused with her manhandling, and would have started biting her fingers by now had Zorian not been constantly calming it down. Neolu gave him a curious look. "How did you do that?"

"Mind magic," he answered honestly. Using mind magic against animals was not illegal, and didn't typically scare people.

"Oh. That's kind of cheating," she frowned. She stared at the little lizard in her hand for a few seconds before sighing dramatically. "I kind of want to keep it, but... no, that would be wrong. I

don't have anywhere to keep it, I don't know what it eats, and it would probably be lonely without its fellows."

She lowered the lizard back to the ground and Zorian released his mental hold on it. Surprisingly, the little lizard didn't immediately run away after that. Instead, it opted to give them confused looks and it shuffled in place uncertainly.

"Go along little guy, you can go home now," Neolu said. "Don't forget me, okay?"

The lizard blinked at her in confusion, probably wondering why the big creature didn't eat it when it had the chance, before turning around and darting away into the distance.

"Sorry about that. I get a little weird sometimes," Neolu said, turning back towards him. "I guess you wanted to tell me something? Is it time to leave?"

"No, I was actually just going to ask you about something," Zorian said. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I'm kind of curious... how come you accepted our story so easily?"

"Shouldn't you already know the answer for this?" she said curiously. "You're the ancient time traveler who has seen it all, right?"

"I'm not that ancient, actually," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I spent about seven years in this time loop, not counting the time dilation rooms."

"Time dilation rooms?" Neolu asked curiously. "What are those?"

"It's a long story. Ask me some other time, okay?" Zorian said. "The point is that I have *not* seen it all – not even close. Truthfully, this is the first time I've had any significant interaction with you."

"Boo! Am I so boring?" she pouted.

"Not at all," Zorian said hastily. "It's just..."

"It's fine, it's fine..." said laughed. "I'm just teasing. Well, mostly. You say I accepted your story really easily, so that means

you tried to convince many other people thus far. Depending on how far down the list I am, I might actually be offended..."

"It was mostly Zach who tried to convince all our classmates and anyone who would listen, so that statement is based mostly around what he told me of his experiences," Zorian said. "He said most people reacted really badly to his claim of being trapped in an ever-repeating month. Especially in the beginning, before he honed his skills to downright implausible levels and memorized which secret and prediction this or that person found convincing. You though... you always accepted his story very easily. Even in this restart, where you know we stole an airship and both of us approached you instead of just Zach—"

"Why would it matter that you both approached me about this?" Neolu asked with a frown.

"Err..." Zorian fumbled.

"Oh. Oh! I get it," Neolu giggled. "I guess I can see it, he can be kind of cute..." She suddenly stopped and gave Zorian a panicked look. "I mean, not that you're not, but you're a bit too quiet and passive for my taste and— gods, I should have just pretended to be scandalized about this, shouldn't I? Okay, okay, shutting up now..."

"You know, you still haven't answered my question," Zorian pointed out, amused.

"What? Oh, about me being easy to convince..." Neolu said, giving him a short, nervous laugh. "Right, I don't really have an answer to that. I guess you're expecting some big mystery here but there isn't any. I'm just kind of foolish, I guess. We know each other, I could tell that you had no malicious intentions towards me and you provided all the proof I asked of you... even if you were delusional or lying, I probably wouldn't have been in any harm."

Zorian gave her a speculative look. The way she phrased her statement gave the impression she trusted a mere hunch about their good character to keep her safe, but the surety in her voice

made Zorian think there some something a lot more concrete involved there. Perhaps something... divination-based?

"And if I asked you how you were so sure we had no malicious intentions towards you?" he asked curiously.

"Woman's intuition," she said cheerfully, her voice sounding like she had been just waiting for a chance to use that response.

"Well, regardless of the reason, I thank you for your trust," Zorian said.

"No problem!" Neolu said, giving him an appreciative look for not pushing her on the issue. "Was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Yes, actually," Zorian said. "This may be too personal, but why did a girl from Xlotic decide to go all the way to Cyoria to attend a magic academy? It's a somewhat curious thing to do, you know?"

"Ah..." Neolu sighed, her good mood suddenly deflating somewhat. But only somewhat. "That. Well, my mother is actually from Eldemar. She used to tell me stories of her homeland when I was little, and I always wanted to visit the place. So I begged my father to let me come and he couldn't say no to me. That's the reason I usually tell people when they ask me that question. And, I mean, it's kind of true! I really did want to visit. And Cyoria is really interesting and I'm not really sorry for being there..."

"But?" Zorian prompted.

"But if it was for that, I probably wouldn't have gone so far as to sign up for school here," Neolu said. "I would have simply visited for a few months. The truth is my father has made some pretty serious enemies back in Nelentar, and there were concerns they would go after his family to get to him. Especially after me, because... um, father doesn't really trust my judgment much."

How... very surprising. Then again, most people would say that Zorian's parents were in the right and that Zorian was being

unreasonable when he clashed with them, so maybe he should be more open-minded about Neolu's reasons for acting the way she did.

"In the end, it was decided I would be sent to Eldemar," Neolu continued. "That way I would be out of danger, I get to fulfill my long-time wish to visit my mother's homeland and the whole thing can be explained back home as my father spoiling his daughter a little too much. Three birds with one stone, no?"

"Indeed," Zorian agreed. Though he personally found it sad that Neolu's father sent his daughter to Cyoria to keep her safe, only to have the city invaded by Ibasans in the end. That didn't exactly go according to plan...

"Anyway! I actually think the whole thing turned out really well in the end, so I have no regrets. You don't have to feel sorry about me," Neolu said. "Though to be honest, I'll probably be glad when I'm done with the academy and can come back home. I... kind of miss my family. You probably don't understand, being able to see yours any time you want and all."

"Err, yeah... you're probably right about that," Zorian said slowly. He didn't bother clarifying that it was not quite for the reasons she was thinking of.

They wandered the rocky landscape for a while after that, after which all three of them returned to the airship and continued their aimless wandering through the desert. Neolu somehow talked him into helping her take away a large green rock from the site, even though it was pretty much worthless as far as Zorian could tell, and he couldn't possibly fathom what she intended to do with it, and she was inordinately happy about that. She spent about half an hour humming to herself and inspecting the rock in great detail before eventually seeking him out again.

"Zorian, can I ask you something?" she asked him, then immediately continued with her follow-up question without waiting for

his answer. "This time loop of yours... it's going to end someday, right?"

"Yes?" Zorian said, unsure what she was getting at.

"So one day, this month will run its course as it always does... and I will live on and remember instead of endlessly forgetting?" she prompted further. "And you will remember this day and act accordingly?"

"I... that's the idea," Zorian said, faltering slightly. They never told her that there was a good chance they would be destroyed in the end, having failed to leave the time loop before it collapsed. He didn't really want to tell her about that if he didn't have to, either.

"What do you intend to do when that happens?" she asked, biting her lip. "About me, I mean."

"About you?" Zorian asked, caught a little off-guard by the direction this was going in. "Well, it depends on what you *want* us to do, I guess."

"I don't know what I want," she admitted. "I just know I had fun today and I don't want to forget it all."

Ah... and here he thought the realization she would lose everything at the end of the month hadn't affected her in the slightest. Maybe the implications of the time loop just hadn't hit her up until now? Unfortunately, there was very little he could do to comfort her in regards to that. Aside from lying, of course.

"But," she continued, "since that is not possible, I have a somewhat selfish request out of you and Zach: when we meet again at the end, don't pretend this never happened. You don't have to tell me about the time loop, but don't be a stranger. I know I'm probably not the most exciting person you've met over the years, but you're not allowed to forget me, okay?"

Zorian gave her a strange look.

"Well... okay," he said slowly.

"Yay! New friends!" she exclaimed, causing Zorian to sigh a little. She really reminded him of a little kid in some respects. Or Novelty.

He really missed that silly little spider sometimes...

"I hope you realize we won't be stealing this airship in the final version of this month," Zorian said. "So this particular memory is... probably never going to be recreated."

Neolu seemed to give it a serious thought.

"That's probably for the best," she eventually decided. "From what the papers are saying, you killed a lot of people when you destroyed that pursuing airship. That wasn't very nice."

"I... really don't understand you," Zorian admitted, shaking his head. "You know that, but you're still here. And you want to be friends with us."

"All those people will be alive when time resets again, so it's fine," Neolu said with small shrug. "But hey! Even without the airship, you can still open doors between continents, no? That's how we reached your airship in the first place. So you can take me to see all these places anyway!"

Zorian opened his mouth to point out that revealing they could perform intercontinental travel spells was still a huge deal, but in the end he just shut his mouth and remained quiet. Considering Neolu's peculiar personality, she was probably one of the few people who could handle such a revelation without totally freaking out.

"I guess you're right," he eventually conceded.

Besides, what was incredible cosmic power for if not for taking a girl out on a casual vacation into uninhabited desert filled with crumbling ruins and bloodthirsty monsters?

Maybe Zach was becoming a bad influence on him...



In the end, it was not hard at all to talk Neolu into helping them find the translators and contacts they needed to operate more freely in the Xlotic region. Most of these were going to be in her home country of Nelentar, since that was where she could wield her family influence the most and where her knowledge of local knowledge and customs was most pronounced, but that was still plenty useful. With such a solid starting point, it wouldn't be hard to extend their net wider throughout the region.

They ended up dropping her off in Nelentar with a pair of simulacrum while they returned back on the airship to discuss something else. Namely, the Quatach-Ichl situation.

"It's been a few days now," Zorian said. "We've both had time to calm down and think about it. Do you still think we should take a risk and try to broker some kind of deal with Quatach-Ichl?"

"Well yeah," Zach said. "I mean, what's not to like? It would be trivially simple to give him divine artifacts, or even pieces of the Key like the imperial orb, in exchange for rare magic and knowledge. Then we can do it again in the subsequent restart with him none the wiser. I feel a dark spark of joy at the very thought of such a scenario. If there is anyone that I don't feel the slightest bit guilty doing that to, it's him."

"I'm not sure how far we can take that, though," Zorian said nervously. "He's bound to notice something is wrong at some point. Especially if we trade for magical instructions – if Xvim and Alanic could notice when we were displaying their own techniques, Quatach-Ichl can surely do the same. And I'm fairly sure he would react far more violently to the idea of someone stealing his secrets."

"It doesn't matter," Zach said, shaking his head. "It just means we have to be smart about this. We ask him about pocket dimensions in one restart, then about soul magic in the next, then about dimensional gates and so forth. We try our best to get the most

we can out of each interaction, and only when we have exhausted a full list of topics do we consider revisiting some of them. If we're pursuing a different topic each time, he shouldn't be able to notice anything is wrong."

"Yes, I've considered that idea too," Zorian mused. "But that rests on the idea that the lich is actually trustworthy."

"He did come to talk to us instead of simply trying to assassinate us or kidnapping people we hang around with to blackmail us," Zach pointed out.

"It's hard to tell how much of that is his real attitude and how much he was simply afraid of rousing some kind of sleeping dragon, though," Zorian pointed out. "He clearly thinks there is some kind of secret force supporting us. If he knew we were on our own, I have a feeling he would have been much more domineering."

"Well, *that* problem has an obvious answer, at least," Zach laughed. "We just need to make sure he never finds out!"

Zorian supposed he was right about that. It didn't make Zorian feel any better about the idea, though.

Reaching into his pocket, Zorian retrieved a piece of paper and unfolded it. It held a simple address in Cyoria, transcribed from the calling card that Quatach-Ichl had given them. He had thrown the original into a public trash can an age ago, of course. Even though it looked perfectly normal and he couldn't actually find anything wrong with it, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"What are you thinking of?" Zach asked after a few seconds.

"I'm just wondering how much of Quatach-Ichl's attitude that day was real and how much of it was a carefully crafted mask," Zorian said. "He did come there in what was effectively an ectoplasmic disguise and maintained perfect control over his soul throughout the entire meeting. For all we know, every word and expression could have been carefully calculated to leave a specific impres-

sion.”

“Eh, I don’t think so,” Zach immediately said, shaking his head. “I did have short interactions with him from time to time in various restarts, you know. None as extensive as the one that day, but it adds up. And the Quatach-Ichl we met that day was very much like what I remember of him in the past. He had that same uncaring, informal manner of speech that looks so out of place on a terrifying old-as-dirt lich and the casual way he threatened us, more like he was stating facts than trying to be menacing... it sounded very much like what I was used to. No doubt there was some level of deception and social manipulation going there, but I don’t think he was faking most of it. Like that move with the dagger near the end of the meeting – plunging an unknown divine artifact into his ectoplasmic form may have been intended to send us some kind of message, though I struggle to figure out what it was, but more likely than not it was just him having a bit of a theatrical streak.”

“I did get the impression that he likes to brag, yeah,” Zorian agreed thoughtfully. “He seemed to delight in drawing attention to his abilities, great age and other advantages. Like his insane mana reserves, for instance.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Zach grumbled. “I guess now I know how people felt about me all this time. But yeah, I think he’s pretty much what he advertises himself as: an old, incredibly powerful lich with little concern about appearing humble or dignified. I think it’s partly because of his great age. I read once that, contrary to what most people think, ancient peoples tended to be a lot more rude and forthright than modern ones. A lot of immortals throughout history found it hard to keep up with changing social mores. For instance, not that long ago people had very little concept of privacy and thought nothing of having sex in the same room as their children. Public torture and executions were considered to be almost akin to a free entertainment show you could visit

rather than something horrifying. And you heard yourself what Quatach-Ichl thought about the proper treatment of conquered populace. In all likelihood, the way Quatach-Ichl behaves is a sort of compromise between what he feels is reasonable based on the ancient environment he was raised in and what he thinks he can get away with in the modern era.”

That was an interesting point. Zorian couldn’t help but remember that one time he decided to describe the process of butchering animals to some of his classmates in Cyoria who had never been outside the city. He was surprised and amused when he realized how horrified they were at his description of how the animals were killed and processed. It seemed so silly and hypocritical to him, since he was pretty sure they ate meat just fine and would continue to do so in the future.

And that was between people belonging to the same general age and culture. Quatach-Ichl probably experienced this sort of thing magnified a hundredfold. Perhaps when Zach and Zorian told him about how wrong it was to kill all these people in Cyoria, he thought of them the same way Zorian did about those squeamish kids that couldn’t handle how their meals were prepared behind the scenes.

”You know surprisingly much about the topic,” Zorian pointed.

”Back when I didn’t know when this time loop was going to end, I looked around for any information I thought might be applicable to my situation,” Zach shrugged. ”I was kind of going crazy from the endless repetitions and I thought maybe the books about immortals and their ilk would be of help. Unfortunately, it turned out our situations weren’t very comparable. It turns out most ageless people think the world is changing too much and too fast for their tastes, not that everything is too cyclical or boring or whatever.”

"I see," Zorian said, leaning back. "So, just so we're clear: we're really doing this?"

"I think we should," Zach confirmed. "It's dangerous, yeah, but the gains would be so very sweet. Doubly so because we're effectively stealing knowledge from that bag of old bones..."

"The situation in this restart is not very good for what we talked about, though," Zorian pointed out. "The restart is more than halfway done by this point. If we're going to try and get the most out of any individual topic within the span of a single restart, we should wait for the next one to start."

"I don't think it would be wise to just ignore Quatach-Ichl in this restart, though," Zach frowned. "He will probably decide to move against us if he thinks he cannot turn us to his side somehow."

"Yes, but I had another idea about that," Zorian said. "What if... we recruited his help in breaking into the Eldemar's royal vault?"

Zach gave him a surprised look.

"That's a pretty interesting idea, but how would we possibly divide the spoils?" Zach asked. "I mean, both sides will want to claim the dagger in the end..."

"Well, no doubt Quatach-Ichl will try to betray us in the end in order to claim the dagger for himself," Zorian said. "But..."

"But that's fine, because we *want* to fight him in the end," Zach surmised.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "After all... how else can we get ahold of his crown?"

He just wondered how they were going to explain all this to Alanic. If he hated the idea of them raiding Eldemar's royal vaults and working with Silverlake, he was going to be positively *thrilled* with their latest idea...



After a considerable amount of preparations, it was time for Zach and Zorian to assault the Ziggurat of the Sun and try to claim the imperial ring that was supposed to reside somewhere inside. Their forces for the task were relatively modest – aside from two of them and their simulacrum, they also had Alanic, about 20 mercenary mages from the Xlotic region and a small army of golems that Zorian had made specifically for the occasion.

They did not choose to arrive in the Pearl of Aranhall. The airship was ill suited to fight masses of flying opponents like sulrothum, and it would get immediately recognized for what it was by the mercenaries, which would cause all sort of issues down the line. They had enough trouble convincing these people to cooperate with them in this seemingly crazy operation as it was.

Instead, they brought the whole group to their destination – a sulrothum outpost not far from the ziggurat that Zorian's simulacrum had secretly infiltrated and taken over a few hours earlier – through the usage of dimensional gates. The display of such high-level magic did much to quell the mercenaries' concerns, which was a nice side-effect that neither Zach nor Zorian had really counted on. They would have to remember in the future that implausible displays of magic did not just alarm people, but could sometimes actually set them at ease.

After organizing themselves a little, the entire group was split into two. The first one, composed out of all of the mercenaries, most of the golems and one simulacrum of Zach and Zorian each, was ordered to march out of the sulrothum outpost and launch an obvious, frontal assault on the structure. This was, of course, little more than a distraction... but a distraction that the sulrothum probably wouldn't be able to ignore.

According to the military personnel and sulrothum experts Zach and Zorian had talked to in the past few days, humans usually dealt with sulrothum strongholds by bombarding them through artillery magic from extreme range. Unfortunately, neither Zach nor Zorian were all that proficient with artillery magic. It was a magical discipline designed for sieges and outright warfare, and typically involved titanic amounts of mana being shaped by multiple mages acting in concert with one another. Zach knew a bit about it, since his monstrous mana reserves allowed him to cast some simple ones all by himself if he really needed to, but Zorian only had a theoretical grasp of the field. Fortunately, the 20 mercenaries they hired *were* proficient with artillery spells and had experience in anti-sulrothum tactics to boot.

The devil wasps had no choice but to come out of their base and confront them. Even if they suspected the attack was a distraction, they had to assign at least some of their forces to disrupt the bombardment.

After a few minutes, three more pairs of simulacrum, each group holding a Zach and a Zorian, departed from outpost under magical cloak. Their job was to find their way into the ziggurat and find where the imperial ring was located.

Meanwhile, the original Zach and Zorian, Alanic and the two most powerful golems patiently waited for their moment...



Simulacrum number one nervously watched the cloud of giant black wasps on the horizon. It was his job – as well as the job of Zach’s simulacrum and the many golems the original made for this day – to defend the artillery mages from being harassed by the sulrothum so they could work in peace. In general, their whole group was supposed to make itself as threatening as possible so

the sulrothum would have to send the majority of their forces out of the ziggurat, thus leaving it open easy for infiltration by the simulacrum teams. He was fine with that. However, how was he supposed to do that when the damn devil wasps refused to attack and just kept flying back and forth out of their attack range?

"What the hell are they doing?" the simulacrum asked the Zach-simulacrum beside him. "They can clearly see that we're setting up an artillery magic position here. Do they think we're bluffing or something?"

"No, I think they're waiting for something," Zach-simulacrum said. "An order from their leaders, maybe? I think—"

A loud roar resounded in the distance and a huge serpentine form erupted out of the sand, directly beneath were the area the sulrothum swarm was flying in. No, not serpentine... worm-like. A huge brown sand worm raised its head towards the sky, its toothy maw unfolded like a hellish, fleshy flower. As for the devil wasps, they seemed to be... cheering?

"Damn it, they managed to tame a fully grown sandworm?" The leader of the mercenaries whined. "That's going to be a nightmare to fight."

Simulacrum number one had to agree. Although he could easily detect incoming sandworm attacks due to his mind sense, it was hard to deal with attacks that came from underground. Especially since the sandworm was huge, meaning they had little chance of stopping its attacks and could only move out of the way whenever they detected it coming.

"I have an idea," Zach-simulacrum said, quickly performing an alteration spell that hardened the sand beneath them into a stone platform and then raising it high into the sky.

"There," Zach-simulacrum said, smiling. "It's a bit expensive to maintain, but now the stupid thing can no longer reach us. For all their huge size, sandworms are useless against things that can

fly.”

He had barely finished speaking when the sandworm suddenly shook, almost like a dog trying to dry itself off, and a series of translucent, glowing, yellow wings grew out of its sides. They were long and paper-thin, reminiscent of dragonfly wings, and looked comically inappropriate for lifting a creature like that into the air... but as the creature’s many golden wings started slowly undulating like oars on a boat, the sandworm slowly lifted itself into the sky and then reoriented itself towards them.

Zach-simulacrum immediately deflated.

“Now this just isn’t fair,” he complained.

Simulacrum number one looked at the flying sandworm, which was currently flying towards them while accompanied by a swarm of devil wasps and decided he couldn’t agree more.



Zorian stood in the ruins of the sulrothum outpost they arrived in, observing the state of the battle. In the distance, Zach’s simulacrum was desperately trying to keep the giant, flying sandworm busy while Zorian’s own simulacrum protected the mercenaries from the sulrothum swarm. Curiously, when the Zorian’s simulacrum tried to influence the sandworm’s mind, he found it completely impossible to infiltrate. Usually he could at least make some headway when making such an attempt, even if the creature was heavily magic resistant, but the sandworm’s consciousness seemed to be protected by a mental equivalent of a stone wall – incredibly solid and unyielding. That was probably worth checking out in more detail in future restarts.

In truth, he thought that part of the battle was going really well. Yes, the mercenary group failed to get off all but one artillery spell and was constantly getting pushed back, but it served its job

as a distraction marvelously. The sulrothum even sent another swarm of warriors at them at one point, trying to take them out sooner, which caused simulacrum number one to rant expletives at him over their soul link for a full minute or so, but was pretty convenient for the plan as a whole.

No, the problem was that the simulacrum pairs sent to infiltrate the ziggurat weren't doing so well. Somehow the sulrothum discovered all three of them the moment they got close enough to the main structure, which probably meant there was some kind of subtle alarm ward protecting it. One of the teams then died trying to charge the front entrance, the other sacrificed itself to provide the third one a chance to punch a new entrance through one of the outer walls of the ziggurat, and the third one managed to get inside but was currently blocked in one of the corridors and would likely get swarmed by the defenders soon.

On top of that, the sulrothum figured out where the original forces first appeared and decided to send a group of warriors to check it out. That was how the outpost ended up in its current, ruined state.

"Although we haven't found the ring, yet, it's now or never. I'm commanding the simulacrum that managed to get inside to open a gate for us. We're going in."

"Understood," Alanic said solemnly.

"Finally," Zach said, cracking his knuckles.

Zorian took a deep breath and waited, tapping into the soul link he had with his simulacrums and paying close attention to his simulacrum inside the ziggurat. Opening a dimensional gate was a lengthy process requiring a lot of concentration, which meant it took some time and effort for the simulacrum to find himself in the position where he was able to do so. Finally, after using up all fifteen of his remaining grenades in one massive attack and having Zach's simulacrum charge forward and sacrifice itself to get

him some space, the simulacrum managed to successfully open a dimensional passage between itself and the original.

Zorian sent his two remaining golems through the dimensional gate to clear the way, and then he, Zach and Alanic all rushed inside.

There, they found a mangled artificial body of Zorian's simulacrum that ended up sacrificing his fleeting life to finish the spell in time. Rather than interrupt the gate-opening spell and save himself, the simulacrum chose to ignore the incoming attack from one of the sulrothum warriors and kept casting the spell till the very end.

Curiously, now that the two battle golems Zorian sent as a vanguard had cleared the entire corridor, there were no more sulrothum coming. That final grenade attack and the arrival of a new batch of invaders seemed to have caused them to temporarily withdraw and regroup.

"Let's go," Zorian said, pointing towards the corridor on the left.

"Any particular reason to go in that direction?" Zach asked. "I mean, that seems to be the place where most of the devil wasps are coming from..."

"Yeah, it is," Zorian admitted. "I don't know where the ring is, but I'm operating under the idea that our luck is horrible and thus our target is obviously in the most dangerous part of the ziggurat."

"Oh," Zach said. "Yeah, that does make sense."

Zorian turned to Alanic walking next to them, who was ignoring their banter in favor of scanning the walls for some reason. Probably looking for some clues as to where they are – all of the walls still retained detailed carvings of various religious scenes. Most of them were from Ikosian era, but some of them had been crudely 'repurposed' by the sulrothum, who did their best to modify the carvings into something that fitted better with their own

religious beliefs. Alanic was very unamused by their efforts, if his deepening frown was of any indication.

"Alanic, we're going to have to rely on you. Zach and I have been using our simulacrum to fight for a while now, and we need some time to recover our mana reserves a little," Zorian told him. "Do you think you can—"

Two sulrothum warriors suddenly charged out of the corner in front of them, both of them carrying spears and decorations that looked far fancier and better constructed than what they had encountered thus far. They were probably elite warriors of the colony, and they screeched out a challenge and charged at them the moment they saw them.

Alanic's expression didn't change in the slightest. He simply waved his battle staff lightly and two tiny, highly compressed balls of fire flew forwards at incredible speeds. They impacted the warriors' faces, burning a hole straight through them, and the two sulrothum died on the spot.

"Don't worry," Alanic said. "Leave it all to me."

He had barely finished speaking when a literal horde of sulrothum converged all of a sudden.

The entire corridor erupted into burning flames.



After much bitter fighting and several temporary retreats, the group finally managed to achieve its goal. One of the battle golems was rendered inert, the other was missing one of its arms and had three spears sticking out of it and slowing it down, Alanic had received a nasty-looking wound across his chest and Zach was almost out of mana.

But they had found it. They had found the imperial ring.

Unfortunately, they found it because the person wearing it decided to come to them. Apparently they caused such a commotion that the sulrothum high priest decided to confront them personally, accompanied by his highly-trained, well-equipped honor guard. He was a particularly large sulrothum, equipped with menacing-looking bone armor and holding what was unmistakably a spell staff. He was clearly a mage, and if the low-level magical aura he was emanating was of any indication, probably a soul mage to boot.

He was also decorated with an absolutely ridiculous amount of little trinkets and various jewelry, one of which was the imperial ring that he had on one of his hands. If Zorian didn't have the marker's function to detect pieces of the Key, he would have never spotted it among all that junk the high priest was wearing.

They couldn't fight him. Maybe when they were in their top form, but not now. However, Zorian just couldn't bring himself to flee without at least trying to pull off one last thing...

He summoned most of his remaining mana and launched a massive mental attack on the high priest. Just for a moment, he smashed aside his mental defenses, suppressed his will and forced him to perform one simple action.

In one smooth movement, the high priest ripped the imperial ring off his finger and threw it at Zorian, who immediately caught it in his free hand.

Then the effect was broken and the sulrothum high priest looked dumbfounded at what he had just done.

"Zach, get us out of here now!" Zorian urged him.

Just before they teleported away, leaving their poor damaged battle golem behind as a distraction, they heard a shrill, outraged scream from the high priest at the unfairness of it all.

Zorian nodded sagely in his heart. Yes, sometimes the world really was extremely unfair.

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mother of learn-
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the architect of
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