

Domagoj Kurmaic

MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc I - Part 1

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Chapter One

GOOD MORNING BROTHER

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

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

Zorian glared at his little sister, but she just smiled back at him cheekily, still sprawled across his stomach. She was humming to herself in obvious satisfaction, kicking her feet playfully in the air as she studied the giant world map Zorian had tacked to the wall next to his bed. Or rather, pretended to study – Zorian could see her watching him intently out of the corner of her eyes for a reaction.

This was what he got for not arcane locking the door and setting up a basic alarm perimeter around his bed.

"Get off," he told her in the calmest voice he could muster.

"Mom said to wake you up," she said matter-of-factly, not budging from her spot.

"Not like this, she didn't," Zorian grumbled, swallowing his irritation and patiently waiting till she dropped her guard. Predictably, Kirielle grew visibly agitated after only a few moments

of this pretend disinterest. Just before she could blow up, Zorian quickly grasped her legs and chest and flipped her over the edge of the bed. She fell to the floor with a thud and an indignant yelp, and Zorian quickly jumped to his feet to better respond to any violence she might decide to retaliate with. He glanced down on her and sniffed disdainfully. "I'll be sure to remember this the next time I'm asked to wake *you* up."

"Fat chance of that," she retorted defiantly. "You always sleep longer than I do."

Zorian simply sighed in defeat. Damn the little imp, but she was right about that.

"So..." she began excitedly, jumping to her feet, "are you excited?"

Zorian watched her for a moment as she bounced around his room like a monkey on caffeine. Sometimes he wished he had some of that boundless energy of hers. But only some.

"About what?" Zorian asked innocently, feigning ignorance. He knew what she meant, of course, but constantly asking obvious questions was the fastest way of frustrating his little sister into dropping a conversation he'd rather not have.

"Going back to academy!" she whined, clearly aware of what he was doing. He needed to learn some new tricks. "Learning magic. Can you show me some magic?"

Zorian let out a long-suffering sigh. Kirielle had always treated him as something of a playmate of hers, despite him doing his best not to encourage her, but usually she remained within certain unspoken boundaries. She was downright impossible this year, though, and Mother was wholly unsympathetic to his pleas to rein her in. All he did was read all day long, she said, so it wasn't as if he was doing anything *important*... Thankfully the summer break was over and he could finally get away from them all.

"Kiri, I have to pack. Why don't you go pester Fortov for a

change?”

She scowled at him unhappily for a second and then perked up, as if remembering something, and quickly ran out of the room. Zorian’s eyes widened when he realized what she was up to a second too late.

”No!” he yelled as he ran after her, only to have the bathroom door slammed into his face. He pounded on the door in frustration. ”Damn it, Kiri! You had all the time in the world to go to the bathroom *before* I woke up!”

”Sucks to be you,” was her only answer.

After hurling a few choice curses at the door, Zorian stomped off back to his room to get dressed. She would be inside for ages, he was sure, if only to spite him.

Quickly changing out of his pajamas and putting on his glasses, Zorian took a moment to look around his room. He was pleased to note Kirielle hadn’t rummaged through his stuff before waking him up. She had a very fuzzy notion of (other people’s) privacy.

It didn’t take Zorian long to pack – he had never really unpacked, to be honest, and would have gone back to Cyoria a week ago if he thought Mother would have allowed it. He was just packing his school supplies when he realized with irritation that some of his textbooks were missing. He could try a locator spell, but he was pretty sure he knew where they had ended up – Kirielle had a habit of taking them to her room, no matter how many times Zorian told her to keep her sticky little fingers away from them. Working on a hunch, he double-checked his writing supplies and, sure enough, found they had been greatly depleted.

It always happened – every time he came home, Kirielle would raid his school supplies. Putting aside the ethical problems inherent in breaking into your brother’s room in order to steal his things, what on earth was she doing with all those pencils and erasers? This time he specifically bought extras with his sister in

mind, but it still wasn't enough - he couldn't find a single eraser in his drawer, and he bought a whole packet of them before coming home. Why Kirielle couldn't simply ask Mother to buy her some books and pens of her own was never really clear to Zorian. She was the youngest, and the only daughter, so Mother was always happy to spoil her - the dolls she talked Mother into buying her were five times more expensive than a couple of books and a stack of pencils.

In any case, while Zorian had no delusions about ever seeing his writing supplies again, he really needed those textbooks. With that in mind, he marched off to his sister's room, ignoring the 'Keep out!' warning on the door, and quickly found his missing books in their usual location - cunningly hidden under the bed, behind several conveniently placed stuffed animals.

His packing done, he went downstairs to eat something and see what Mother wanted from him.

Though his family thought he simply liked to sleep in, Zorian actually had a reason for being a late riser. It meant he could eat his food in peace, as everyone else had already had their breakfast by then. Few things annoyed him more than someone trying to strike up a conversation while he was eating, and that was precisely the time when the rest of his family was most talkative. Unfortunately, Mother wasn't willing to wait for him today, and immediately descended upon him when she saw him coming down. He didn't even finish his descent down the stairs and she had already found something about him she didn't like.

"You don't really intend to go out looking like that, do you?" she asked.

"What's wrong with this?" asked Zorian. He was wearing a plain brown outfit, little different from the ones other boys wore when they were going into the city. It seemed just fine to him.

"You can't go out looking like that," his mother said with a long-

suffering sigh. "What do you think people will say when they see you wearing that?"

"Nothing?" Zorian tried.

"Zorian, don't be so difficult," she snapped at him. "Our family is one of the pillars of this town. We're under scrutiny every time we leave the house. I know you don't care about such things, but appearances are important to a lot of people. You need to realize you're not an island, and you can't decide things as if you were alone in the world. You are a member of this family, and your actions inevitably reflect on our reputation. I will not let you embarrass me by looking like a common factory worker. Go back to your room and put on some proper attire."

Zorian restrained himself from rolling his eyes just long enough to turn his back on her. Maybe her guilt trip would have been more effective if this was the first time she tried it on him. Still, it wasn't worth the argument, so he changed into a pricier set of clothes. It was totally excessive, considering he'd be spending the whole day in the train, but his mother nodded approvingly when she saw him coming down the stairs. She had him turn and pose like a show animal for a while before pronouncing him 'fairly decent'. He went to the kitchen and, to his annoyance, Mother followed after him. No eating in peace today, it seemed.

Father was thankfully on one of his 'business trips', so he wouldn't have to deal with him today.

He entered the kitchen and frowned when he saw a bowl of porridge already waiting for him on the table. Usually he made his own breakfast, and he liked it that way, but he knew his mother never accepted that. This was her idea of a peace gesture, which meant she was going to ask something of him he wouldn't like.

"I figured I'd prepare something for you today, and I know you've always liked porridge," she said. Zorian refrained from mentioning he hadn't liked it since he was about eight. "You slept

longer than I thought you would, though. It's gone cold while I've waited for you."

Zorian rolled his eyes and cast a slightly modified 'heat water' spell on the porridge, which was instantly returned to a pleasant temperature.

He ate his breakfast in silence while Mother talked to him at length about a crop-related dispute one of their suppliers was involved in, dancing around whatever topic she wanted to broach. He effortlessly tuned her out. It was practically a survival skill for every child in the Kazinski family, as both mother and father were prone to protracted lectures on every subject imaginable, but doubly so for Zorian, who was the black sheep of the family and thus subjected to such monologues more frequently than the rest. Thankfully, his mother thought nothing of his silence, because Zorian was always as silent as possible around his family – he had learned many years ago that this was the easiest way of getting along with them.

"Mother," he interrupted her, "I just woke up via Kiri jumping on me, I haven't had a chance to go to the bathroom and now you're pestering me while I'm eating. Either get to the point or wait a couple of minutes while I finish breakfast."

"She did it again?" his mother asked, amusement obvious in her voice.

Zorian rubbed his eyes, not saying anything, before surreptitiously pocketing an apple from the bowl on the table while his mother wasn't looking. There were a lot of annoying things Kirielle did again and again, but complaining about it to Mother was a waste of time. No one in this family was on *his* side.

"Oh, don't be like that," his mother said, noticing his less-than-pleased reaction. "She's just bored and playing with you. You take things way too seriously, just like your father."

"I am nothing like my father!" Zorian insisted, raising his voice

and glaring at her. This was why he hated eating with other people. He returned to his breakfast with renewed vigor, eager to finish this as soon as possible.

"Of course you're not," Mother said airily, before suddenly switching the subject. "Actually, this reminds me of something. Your father and I are going to Koth to visit Daimen."

Zorian bit the spoon in his mouth to prevent himself from making a snide comment. It was always Daimen this, Daimen that. There were days when Zorian wondered why his parents had three other children when they were clearly so enamored of their eldest son. Really, going to another continent just to visit him? What, were they going to die if they didn't see him for a year?

"What's that got to do with me?" Zorian asked.

"It will be an extended visit," she said. "We'll be there for about six months, most of it spent traveling from one place to another. You and Fortov will be at the academy, of course, but I'm worried about Kirielle. She's only nine and I don't feel comfortable bringing her along with us."

Zorian paled, finally catching on to what she wanted of him. Hell. No.

"Mother, I'm 15," he protested.

"So?" she asked. "Your father and I were already married when we were your age."

"Times change. Besides, I spend most of the day at the academy," Zorian responded. "Why don't you ask Fortov to take care of her? He's a year older and he has his own apartment."

"Fortov is in his fourth year," his mother said sternly. "He's going to graduate this year so he has to focus on his grades."

"You mean he said no," Zorian concluded out loud.

"And besides..." she continued, ignoring his remark, "I'm sure you're aware of how irresponsible Fortov can be at times. I don't think he's fit to raise a little girl."

"And whose fault is that?" Zorian grumbled quietly, loudly dropping his spoon and pushing the plate away from him. Maybe Fortov was irresponsible because he knew mother and father would simply dump his responsibilities onto Zorian if he just played dumb long enough, didn't that ever occur to her? Why did it always fall to him to deal with the little imp? Well, he wasn't going to get saddled with this! If Fortov was too good to take care of Kirielle, then so was Zorian!

Plus, the little tattletale would undoubtedly report everything he did back to Mother without a second thought. The best thing about attending a school so far from home was that he could do whatever he wanted with his family being none the wiser, and there was no way he was going to give that up. Really, this was just a transparent ploy by his mother to spy on him, so she could lecture him some more about family pride and proper manners.

"I don't think I'm fit for that either," continued Zorian a little louder. "You said only a few minutes ago that I'm an embarrassment to the family. We wouldn't want to corrupt little Kiri with my uncaring attitude, now would we?"

"I didn't-"

"No!" Zorian shouted.

"Oh, have it your way," she huffed in resignation. "But really, I wasn't suggesting-"

"What are you talking about?" Kirielle called out from behind him.

"We were discussing what a rotten brat you are," Zorian shot back immediately.

"No you weren't!"

Zorian just rolled his eyes and rose from his seat, intending to go to the bathroom, only to find an irate little sister blocking his path. There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" said Zorian quickly, knowing that Mother would demand that one of them open the door and that Kirielle wouldn't budge from her spot any time soon - she could be very stubborn when she wanted.

That was how Zorian found himself staring at a bespectacled woman dressed in expensive-looking khaki-colored clothes and cradling a thick book in her arm.

The woman gave him an appraising glance, adjusting her glasses. "Zorian Kazinski?"

"Uh, yeah?" he said, unsure how to react to this development.

"I am Ilsa Zileti, from Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts. I'm here to discuss the results of your certification."

Color drained from Zorian's face. They sent an actual mage to talk to him!? What did he do to warrant this!? Mother was going to skin him alive!

"You aren't in trouble, Mister Kazinski," she said, smiling in amusement. "The Academy has a habit of sending a representative to third year students to discuss various matters of interest. I confess I should have visited you sooner, but I have been a tad busy this year. You have my apologies."

Zorian stared at her for a few seconds.

"May I come in?"

"Huh? Oh!" said Zorian. "Forgive my manners, Miss Zileti. Come in, come in."

"Thank you," she accepted politely, stepping into the house.

After a quick introduction to his mother and sister, Ilsa asked him if he had somewhere they could discuss school matters privately. Mother quickly decided she had to go to town market and took Kirielle with her, leaving him alone in the house with the mage, who promptly scattered various papers across the kitchen desk.

"So, Zorian," she began. "You already know you passed the certification."

"Yes, I got the written notice," Zorian said. "Cirin doesn't have a mage tower, so I was going to pick up the badge when I got back to Cyoria."

Ilsa simply handed him a sealed scroll. Zorian inspected the scroll for a few seconds and then tried to break the seal so he could read it. Unfortunately, the seal was quite tough to break. Unnaturally so, even.

He frowned. Ilsa wouldn't have given him the scroll like this if she didn't think he had the ability to open it. A test of some sort? He wasn't anyone terribly special, so this would have to be something pretty easy. What skill did every recently-minted mage possess that would...

Oh. He almost rolled his eyes when he realized what this was all about. He channeled some mana into the seal and it promptly snapped itself in half, allowing Zorian to finally unroll the scroll. It was written in very neat calligraphy and appeared to be some kind of proof of his identity as a first circle mage. He glanced back at Ilsa, who nodded approvingly, confirming to Zorian that he had just passed a test of some sort.

"You don't really have to pick up your badge until you finish school," she said. "The badge is pretty expensive and nobody is really going to bother you about it unless you plan to open a shop or otherwise sell your magical expertise. If they do bother you for whatever reason, just refer them to the academy and we'll clear things up."

Zorian shrugged. While he did intend to break away from his family, he'd prefer to wait until graduation, and that was two years away. He motioned on for her to continue.

"Very well, then. The records say you lived in the academy housing for the past two years. I assume you intend to continue?"

Zorian nodded and she reached into one of her pockets and handed him a rather strange key. Zorian knew how locks in general worked, and could even pick simpler ones with enough time, but he couldn't figure out how this key was supposed to work – it had no 'teeth' to fit in with the tumblers inside the lock. On a hunch, he channeled some mana into it, and faint golden lines immediately lit across the surface of the metal. He looked at Ilsa in a silent question.

"Housing for third years works differently than you are used to," she told him. "As you're likely aware, now that you are a certified first circle mage, the academy is authorized to teach you spells of the first circle and above. Since you'll be handling sensitive material, greater security is required, so you'll be moving into a different building. The lock on your door is keyed to your mana, so you'll have to channel some of your personal mana into the key like you did just now before it will unlock."

"Ah," said Zorian. Idly he spun the key in his hand, wondering how exactly they got a hold of his mana signature. Something to research later, he supposed.

"Normally I would be explaining to you in detail what it means to be a third year student at Cyoria's magical academy, but I hear you have a train leaving soon, so why don't we jump straight to the main reason I'm here: your mentor and electives. You can ask me anything you wish to know afterwards."

Zorian perked up on this, especially the mention of 'mentor'. Each third year was given a mentor that they met with once a week, who was supposed to teach students in ways not possible in a standard class format, and otherwise help them reach their maximum potential. A choice of one's mentor could make or break one's magical career and Zorian knew he had to choose carefully. Fortunately, he had asked around among older students to find out which ones were good and which ones were bad, so he figured he

would at least be able to get an above-average one.

"So which mentors can I choose from?" Zorian asked.

"Well, actually, I'm afraid you can't," Ilsa said apologetically. "Like I said, I was supposed to get to you sooner. Unfortunately, all but one of the mentors have filled their quota of students at this point."

Zorian had a bad feeling about this... "And this mentor is?"

"Xvim Chao."

Zorian groaned, burying his face in his hands. Of all the teachers, Xvim was widely agreed upon as the *worst* mentor you could possibly get. It just had to be him, didn't it?

"It's not that bad," Ilsa assured him. "The rumors are mostly exaggerated, and mostly spread by students unwilling to do the kind of work Professor Xvim requires of his charges. I'm sure a talented, hard-working student such as yourself will have no problems with him."

Zorian snorted. "I don't suppose there is any chance to transfer to another mentor, is there?"

"Not really. We've had a really good pass rate last year, and all of the mentors are swamped with students as it is. Professor Xvim is the least burdened of the available mentors."

"My, I wonder why," Zorian mumbled. "Alright, fine. What about electives?"

Ilsa handed him another scroll, this one unsealed, containing a list of all elective classes offered by the academy. It was long. *Very* long. You could sign up for practically anything, even things that weren't of strictly magical nature: things like advanced mathematics, classical literature, and architecture. It was to be expected, really, since Ikosian magical tradition had always been inextricably connected to other intellectual pursuits.

"You can choose up to five, but no less than three electives this year. It would be a lot more convenient for us if you did it now,

so that we can finalize the schedules over the weekend before the classes start. Don't be too intimidated by the sheer size of the list. Even if you choose something that doesn't appeal to you, you can switch to a different elective during the first month of school."

Zorian frowned. There were a lot of electives and he wasn't quite sure which ones he wanted to take. He'd already gotten shafted in the mentor department, so he really couldn't afford to screw up here. This would take a while.

"Please don't take this the wrong way Miss Zileti, but would you mind if we take a short break before we go any further with this?"

"Of course not," she said. "Is something the matter?"

"Not at all," assured Zorian. "It's just that I *really* need to go to the bathroom."

Probably not the best way to make a first impression. Kirielle was so going to pay for putting him in this position.



Zorian trailed after his family in silence as they entered Cirin's train station, ignoring Fortov's exuberant greeting of some 'friends' of his. He scanned the crowd on the train station for any familiar faces but, predictably, came out empty. He didn't really know all that many people in his home town, as his parents loved reminding him. He felt his mother's gaze on him as he unsuccessfully searched for an empty bench, but refused to look back at her – she would take that as permission to initiate conversation, and he already knew what she would say.

'Why don't you join Fortov and his friends, Zorian?'

Because they're immature jackasses, just like Fortov, that's why.

He sighed, looking at the empty train tracks with annoyance. The train was late. He didn't mind waiting as such, but waiting in

the crowds was pure torture. His family would never understand, but Zorian hated crowds. It wasn't any tangible thing, really – it was more like large gatherings of people projected some kind of presence that weighed down on him constantly. Most of the time it was annoying, though it did have its uses – his parents stopped taking him to church when they realized that dragging him into a small hall packed with people resulted in vertigo and fainting in a matter of minutes. Fortunately, the train station wasn't currently crowded enough to produce such intense effects, but Zorian knew prolonged exposure would take its toll. He hoped the train wouldn't take *too* long, because he didn't relish spending the rest of the day with a headache.

Fortov's loud laughter broke him out of such gloomy musings. His older brother didn't have such problems, that's for sure. Like always, he was cheerful, sociable, and had a smile that could light up the world. The people he was surrounded with were clearly enthralled with him, and he stood out among them at first glance, despite having the same thin build that Zorian did. He just had that kind of presence around him. He was like Daimen in this way, only Daimen had actual skills to back up his charm.

He scoffed, shaking his head. Zorian didn't know for sure how Fortov had been accepted into a supposedly elite institution like Cyoria's magical academy, but he strongly suspected Father had greased a few palms to get Fortov in. It wasn't that Fortov was stupid, so much as lazy and completely unable to focus on a task, no matter how critical. Not that most people knew that, of course – the boy was charming as hell, and very adept in sweeping his inadequacies under the metaphorical rug.

His father always joked that Fortov and Zorian each got a half of Daimen in them: Fortov got his charm, and Zorian his competence.

Zorian had never liked his father's sense of humor.

A whistle pierced the air, and the train entered the station with a high-pitched squeal of metal wheels braking against the tracks. The original trains were steam-powered machines that billowed smoke wherever they went and consumed unholy amounts of coal to keep going, but this one was powered by the newer technomagic engines that consumed crystallized mana instead. Cleaner, cheaper, and required less maintenance. Zorian could actually feel the mana radiating off the train as he approached, though his ability to sense magic was too underdeveloped to tell him any details. He had always wanted to look around the engine room of one of these things but could never figure out a good way to approach the train operators.

But that was a thought for another time. He gave a brief goodbye to Mother and Kirielle and entered the train to find himself a seat. He intentionally chose an empty compartment, something that was surprisingly easy to find. Apparently, despite the gathered crowd, few of them would be taking this particular train.

Five minutes later, the train gave another ear-splitting whistle and began its long journey towards Cyoria.



There was a sharp crackling sound, following by the sound of a bell ringing.

"Now stopping in Korsä," a disembodied voice echoed. A crackling sound again. "I repeat, now stopping in Korsä. Thank you."

The speakers crackled one last time before turning silent.

Zorian released a long sigh of irritation and opened his eyes. He hated trains. The boredom, the heat, and the rhythmic thumping sounds all conspired to make him sleepy, but every time he finally drifted off to sleep he was rudely awoken by the station announcer. That this was the very purpose of that announcer – to

wake up passengers who would sleep through their destination – was not lost on Zorian, but it was no less annoying because of it.

He looked through the window, only to see a train station like any other. In fact, it was completely identical to the previous five, down to the blue outline on the big white tablet saying 'Korsa'. Apparently the station builders were working off some kind of template these days. Looking at the station platform they were stopping at, he could see a large crowd of people waiting to get on the train. Korsa was a major trading hub, and a lot of newly minted merchant families lived here, sending their children to Cyoria's prestigious academy to become mages and mingle among children of other influential people. Zorian found himself wishing that none of his fellow students join him in his compartment, but he knew it was an idle dream – there were too many of them and his compartment was completely empty aside from him. He did all he could to make himself comfortable in his seat and closed his eyes again.

The first person to join him in his compartment was a chubby, glasses-wearing girl in a green turtleneck. She gave him a cursory glance and started reading a book in silence. Zorian would have been ecstatic with such an agreeable traveling companion, but soon enough a group of four other girls came in and took the remaining four seats for themselves. The newcomers were very loud and prone to giggling fits, and Zorian was sorely tempted to get up and find himself a new compartment to occupy. He spent the rest of the trip alternating between looking through the window at the endless fields they were passing and exchanging annoyed glances with the green-turtleneck girl, who seemed similarly irritated by the other girls' antics.

He knew they were getting close to Cyoria when he could see trees on the horizon. There was only one city on this route that was this close to the great northern forest, and the trains otherwise

avoided getting close to so infamous a place. Zorian picked up his bag and went to stand by the exit. The idea was to be among the first to disembark, and thus avoid the usual crowding that always occurred once they got to Cyoria, but he was too late – there was already a crowd at the exit when he approached. He leaned on the nearby window and waited, listening to animated conversation between three first year students beside him, who were talking excitedly amongst themselves about how they were going to start learning magic and whatnot. Boy, were they going to be disappointed – the first year was all theory, meditation exercises, and learning how to access your mana consistently.

"Hey, you! You're one of the upperclassmen, aren't you?"

Zorian looked at the girl talking to him and suppressed a groan of irritation. He *so* did not want to talk to these people. He had been in the train since early morning, Mother had given him a nasty lecture because he hadn't offered Ilsa something to drink while she was in the house, and he was in no mood for anything.

"I suppose you could describe me as such," he said cautiously.

"Can you show us any magic?" she asked eagerly.

"No," said Zorian flatly. He wasn't even lying. "The train is warded to disrupt mana shaping. They had problems with people starting fires and vandalizing compartments."

"Oh," the girl said, clearly disappointed. She frowned, like trying to figure something out. "Mana shaping?" she asked cautiously.

Zorian raised an eyebrow. "You don't know what mana is?" She was first year, yes, but that was elementary. Anyone who went through elementary school should know at least that much.

"Magic?" she tried lamely.

"Ugh," grunted Zorian. "The teachers would so fail you for that. No, it's not magic. It's what powers magic - the energy, the power, that a mage shapes into a magical effect. You'll learn more

about it in lectures, I guess. Bottom point is: no mana, no magic. And I can't use any mana at the moment."

This was misleading, but whatever. There was no way he was explaining things to some random stranger, especially since she should already know this stuff.

"Um, okay. Sorry to bother you then."

With a lot of squealing and steam-letting, the train stopped at Cyoria's train station, and Zorian disembarked as fast as he could, pushing past the awed first-years staring at the sight before them.

Cyoria's train station was huge, a fact made obvious by the fact that it was enclosed, making it look more like a giant tunnel. Actually, the station as a whole was even larger, because there were four more 'tunnels' like this one, plus all the support facilities. There was nothing like it anywhere in the world, and virtually everyone was stupefied the first time they saw it. Zorian was too, when he first disembarked here. The feeling of disorientation was amplified by the sheer number of people that went through this terminal, whether they were passengers going in and out of Cyoria, workers inspecting the train and unloading luggage, newsboys shouting headlines, or homeless people begging for some change. As far as he knew, this massive flow of people never really ceased, even at night, and this was a particularly busy day.

He looked at the giant clock hanging from the ceiling and, finding out he had plenty of time, bought himself some bread from the nearby bakery and then set course for Cyoria's central plaza, intending to eat his newly acquired food while sitting on the edge of the fountain there. It was a nice place to relax.

Cyoria was a curious city. It was one of the most developed and largest cities in the world, which was at first glance strange, as Cyoria was dangerously close to monster-infested wilderness and wasn't in a favorable trade location. What really catapulted it to prominence was the massive circular hole on the west side of the

city – probably the most obvious Dungeon entrance ever and the only Rank 9 mana well known to exist. The absolutely *massive* quantities of mana gushing out from the underworld had made the spot an irresistible magnet for mages. The presence of such a huge number of mages made Cyoria unlike any other city on the continent, both in the culture of the people living there and, more obviously, in the architecture of the city itself. A lot of things that would be too impractical to build elsewhere were routinely done here, and it made for an inspiring sight if you could find a good spot to watch the city from.

He froze in his tracks when he noticed a swarm of rats staring at him from the bottom of the stairway he was about to descend. Their behavior was strange enough, but his heartbeat really sped up when he took notice of their heads. Was that... were their brains exposed!? He swallowed heavily and took a step back, slowly retreating from the stairwell before turning around and fleeing in a full sprint. He wasn't sure what they were, but those were definitely *not* normal rats.

He supposed he shouldn't be so shocked, though – a place like Cyoria attracted more than mages – magical creatures of all breeds found such places just as irresistible. He was just glad the rats didn't pursue him, because he had nothing in the way of combat spells. The only spell he knew that could be used in a situation like this was the 'spook animals' spell, and he had no idea how effective that would have been against such clearly magical creatures.

Somewhat shaken but still determined to get to the fountain, he tried to circle the rat gathering by going through the nearby park, but luck just wasn't on his side today. He promptly ran into a little girl crying her eyes out on the bridge he had to cross, and it took him five minutes just to get her to calm down enough to find out what happened. He supposed he could have just pushed past her and left her there to cry, but not even he was that cold-hearted.

"T-the b-bike!" she blurted out finally, hiccupping heavily. "It f-fell in!" she wailed.

Zorian blinked, trying to interpret what she was trying to tell him. Apparently realizing she wasn't making any sense, the girl pointed towards the creek running underneath the bridge. Zorian looked over the edge of the bridge and, sure enough, there was a children's bicycle half-submerged in the muddy waters.

"Huh," Zorian said. "Wonder how that happened?"

"It fell in!" the girl repeated, looking as if she was going to cry again.

"All right, all right, no need for waterworks, I'll get it out okay?" Zorian said, eying the bicycle speculatively.

"You'll get dirty," she warned quietly. Zorian could tell from her tone of voice that she hoped he would get it out anyway.

"Don't worry, I have no intention of wading through that mud," Zorian said. "Watch."

He made a few gestures and cast a 'levitate object' spell, causing the bike to jerkily rise out of the water and into the air. The bike was a lot heavier than the objects he usually practiced with, and he had to levitate the bike a lot higher than he was used to, but it was nothing outside his capabilities. He snatched the bike by its seat when it was close enough and placed it on the bridge.

"There," Zorian said. "It's all muddy and wet but I can't help you there. Don't know any cleaning spells."

"O-Okay," she nodded slowly, clutching her bicycle like it was going to fly out of her hand the moment she let go.

He bid her goodbye and left, deciding his relaxing time at the fountain just wasn't meant to be. The weather seemed to be worsening pretty quickly too – dark clouds were brewing ominously across the horizon, heralding rain. He decided to simply join the diffuse line of students trudging towards the academy and be done with it.

It was a long way from the train station to the academy, since the station was on the outskirts of the city and the academy was right next to the Hole. Depending on how physically fit you were, and how much luggage you had to drag around, you could get there in an hour or two. Zorian wasn't particularly fit, what with his skinny physique and shut-in ways, but he had purposely packed light in anticipation of this journey. He joined the procession of students that was still streaming from the train station in the direction of the academy, ignoring the occasional first year struggling with excessive baggage. He empathized with them because his asshole brothers didn't warn him to keep the luggage at a minimum either and he was like them the first time he arrived at the train station, but there was nothing he could do to help them.

The threat of rain and bad luck aside, he felt invigorated as he drew closer to academy grounds. He was drawing on the ambient mana suffusing the area around the Hole, replenishing the mana reserves he spent levitating that girl's bicycle. Mage academies are almost always built on top of mana wells for the express purpose of exploiting this effect – an area with such high ambient mana levels is a perfect place for inexperienced mages to practice their spellcasting, since anytime they run out of mana they can supplement their natural mana regeneration by replenishing their mana reserves from their very surroundings.

Zorian took out the apple he still carried in his pocket and levitated it over his palm. It wasn't really a spell, so much as raw mana manipulation – a mana shaping exercise that was supposed to help mages improve their ability to control and direct magical energies. It looked like such a simple thing, but it took Zorian two years before he mastered it fully. Sometimes he wondered if his family was right and he really was *too* focused on his studies. He knew for a fact that most of his classmates had much more tenuous control over their magic, and it didn't appear to be inhibiting them too

much.

He dismissed the mana construct holding the apple in the air and let it fall down on his palm. He wished he had some kind of rain protection spell – the first drops of rain were already starting to fall. That, or an umbrella. Either would work just fine, except an umbrella didn't require several years of training to use.

"Magic can be such a rip-off at times," said Zorian gloomily.

He took a deep breath and started running.



"Huh. So there is a rain protection spell," mumbled Zorian as he watched raindrops splattering upon an invisible barrier in front of him. He extended his hand over the edge of the barrier, and it passed unimpeded. He withdrew his suddenly rather wet hand into the safety of the barrier and followed the boundary as far as his eyes could see. From what he could tell, the barrier encircled the entire academy compound (no small feat, as academy grounds were quite extensive) in a protective bubble that stopped the rain – and *only* rain – from penetrating it. Apparently the academy upgraded its wards again, because they didn't have this feature the last time it was raining.

Shrugging, he turned around and continued towards the administration building of the academy. It was too bad the barrier didn't also dry you out when you passed it, because he was soaking wet. Thankfully, his bag was waterproof, so his clothes and textbooks weren't in any danger of getting ruined. Slowing down to a leisurely stroll, he studied the collection of buildings that made up the academy. The wards weren't the only thing that was upgraded; the whole place looked... prettified, for a lack of a better term. Every building was freshly painted, the old brick road was replaced by a much more colorful one, the flower patches were in full bloom,

and the small fountain that hadn't worked for years was suddenly functional.

"Wonder what *that's* all about," he mumbled.

After a few minutes of contemplation, he decided he didn't care much. He would find out sooner or later, if it was of any importance.

The administration building was, predictably, mostly empty of students. Most of them took shelter from the rain instead of pressing on like Zorian, and those that didn't often didn't live on academy grounds and thus had no reason to come here today. That was perfect as far as Zorian was concerned, as it meant he could be done here quickly.

'Quickly' turned out to be a relative term – it took two hours of wrangling with the girl working at the administration desk before he had taken care of all the necessary paperwork. He asked about his class schedule, but was told it wasn't finalized yet and that he would have to wait until Monday morning. Come to think of it, Ilsa had mentioned the same thing. Before he left, the girl gave him a book of rules with which third-year students were expected to familiarize themselves before sending him on his way. Zorian idly flipped through the rule book while he searched for room 115, before putting it into one of the more obscure compartments in his backpack, never to be looked at again.

Academy-provided housing was pretty terrible, and Zorian had had very unpleasant experiences with it, but it was free and apartment space was severely overpriced in Cyoria. Even children of nobles often lived on academy grounds rather than in their own apartments, so who was he to complain? Besides, living so close to the lecture hall cut down on the travel time each morning and put him close to the biggest library in the city, so there were definitely good sides to it.

An hour later, he smiled to himself as he entered a fairly spa-

cious room. He was even more pleased when he realized he had his own bathroom. With a shower stall, no less! It was a welcome change from having to share a cramped little room with an inconsiderate roommate and sharing a single communal bathroom with the whole floor. As far as furniture went, the room had a bed, a closet, a set of drawers, a work desk, and a chair. Everything Zorian needed, really.

Dropping his luggage on the floor, Zorian changed out of his wet clothes before collapsing on the bed with relief. He had two whole days before the classes started, so he decided to postpone unpacking until tomorrow. Instead he remained motionless on the bed, wondering for a moment why he couldn't hear the raindrops hitting the glass pane of the window next to his bed, before remembering the rain barrier.

"I've got to learn how to cast that," he mumbled.

His spell collection was extremely limited at the moment, consisting of about 20 simple spells, but he had plans to rectify that this year. As a certified first circle mage, he had access to parts of the academy library he didn't before, and he planned on raiding them for spells contained within. Besides, this year's classes were supposed to be much more focused on practical spellcasting now that they'd proven themselves capable, so he should be learning plenty of interesting things in class too.

Tired from the long journey, Zorian closed his eyes, intending to take a short nap. He wouldn't wake up until tomorrow morning.

Chapter Two

LIFE'S LITTLE PROBLEMS

Although the academy loved saying they were an elite institution thanks to the excellent quality of its teaching staff, the truth was that the main reason for their supremacy was their library. Through contributions of its alumni, generous budget allocations by a number of former headmasters, quirks of local criminal law, and sheer historical accident, the academy had built a library without equal. You could find anything you wanted, regardless of whether the topic was magical or not – there was a whole section reserved for steamy romance novels, for instance. The library was so massive it had actually expanded into the tunnels beneath the city. Many of the lower levels were only accessible to guild mages, so it was only now that Zorian was allowed to browse their contents. Fortunately, the library was open during the weekend, so the very first thing Zorian did when he woke up was descend into these depths to see what he'd been missing these past two years and maybe fill out his spellbook a bit.

He was pleasantly surprised at the sheer number of spells and training manuals available to a first circle mage. There were more books and spells than he could master in a lifetime. Most of the spells were either highly situational or minor variations of each other, so he didn't feel the need to obsessively learn all of them,

but he could already see this place would keep him busy all year round. A lot of them looked surprisingly easy and harmless, and he couldn't help but wonder why they were kept on the restricted level instead of being available to everyone. He could have used these during his second year.

He was right in the middle of trying to find the rain barrier the academy incorporated into its ward scheme when he realized he had skipped breakfast and was getting awfully hungry, and that it was past noon. Reluctantly, he checked out a couple of books to pore over in depth in the safety of his room and went to get something to eat.

There was no kitchen in his room, sadly, but the academy had a pretty good cafeteria available to students – the food they offered was cheap yet surprisingly edible. Still, it was something of a poor man's option, and most of the richer kids ate in one of the many restaurants in the vicinity of the academy. That's why Zorian was a bit shocked when he entered the cafeteria and realized that changes to the academy weren't only in exterior appearances – the cafeteria was positively sparkling, and all the tables and chairs were brand new. It was weird to see the place so... clean.

Shaking his head, he quickly loaded a couple of plates on his tray, idly noting the cooks were a lot less stingy with the meat and other expensive parts of the dish all of a sudden, and then started scanning the eating students for familiar faces. Clearly something was happening here, and he hated being left outside the loop.

"Zorian! Over here!"

How fortunate. Zorian immediately set off towards the chubby boy gesturing for him to come over. Zorian had learned over the years that his exuberant classmate was firmly plugged into the academy gossip network, and knew pretty much everything and everyone. If anyone would know what was going on, it would be Benisek.

"Hello Ben," Zorian said. "I'm surprised to see you in Cyoria so soon. Don't you usually come with the last train?"

"I should be asking you that!" Benisek half-shouted. Zorian never understood why the boy had to be so loud all the time. "I came here so early but you're already here!"

"You came back two days before classes start, Ben," Zorian said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at him. Only Benisek would think that coming a couple of days early is some great feat worth mentioning. "That's not all that early. And I just got back yesterday."

"So did I," Benisek said. "Damn. If you had contacted me, we could have arranged to travel together or something. You must have been bored out of your mind here, all alone for a whole day."

"Something like that," agreed Zorian, smiling politely.

"So are you excited?" Benisek asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"About what?" Zorian asked. Funny, hadn't Kirielle asked him the exact same question?

"The start of a new year! We're third years now, that's when the real fun starts."

Zorian blinked. To his knowledge, Benisek was one of those people who weren't terribly concerned about their success in the arcane arts. He already had a guaranteed post in his family business, and was here simply to obtain the prestige of being a licensed mage. Zorian had half expected him to drop out immediately following certification, yet here he was, just as excited as Zorian to finally start delving into the real mysteries of magic. Now he felt pretty bad about writing him off so quickly. He really shouldn't be so presumptuous...

"Oh, that. Of course I'm excited. Though I must admit I never knew you actually cared about your education."

"What are you talking about?" asked Benisek, eying him suspiciously. "The girls, man, I'm talking about the girls. The younger

ones *love* upperclassmen like us! The new batch of first years will be all over us."

Zorian groaned. He should have known.

"Anyway," said Zorian, recovering quickly, "since I know you're always gossiping around—"

"Informing myself about the current state of things," Benisek cut in, his voice assuming a mock-lecturing quality.

"Right. What's with the academy being all sparkly and clean all of a sudden?"

Benisek blinked. "You didn't know? Oh man, people have been talking about this for months! Just which rock do you live under, Zorian?"

"Cirin is a glorified village in the middle of nowhere... as you very well know," Zorian said. "Now spill."

"It's the summer festival," Benisek said. "The whole city is getting ready for it, not just the academy."

"But there's a summer festival every year," Zorian said, confused.

"Yeah, but this year is special."

"Special?" Zorian asked. "How?"

"I don't know, some astrological bullshit," Benisek whined, waving his hand dismissively. "Why does it matter? It's an excuse to have an even bigger party than usual. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, I say."

"Astro—" began Zorian with a quirked eyebrow when something occurred to him. "Wait, you mean planar alignment?"

"Yeah, that," Benisek agreed. "What's that anyway?"

"Do you have a couple of hours?"

"On second thought, I don't want to know," Benisek quickly backpedaled, chuckling nervously.

Zorian snorted. So easy to scare. The truth was that Zorian knew very little about planar alignments, and probably couldn't

speaking about them longer than 30 seconds. It was a pretty obscure topic. Zorian strongly suspected that Benisek was right, and that it was being used simply as an excuse to have a bigger party.

"So what did you do over the summer?" Benisek asked.

Zorian groaned. "Ben, you sound like my elementary school literature teacher. 'Now, children, for your homework you will write a short essay about what you did during the summer holidays.'"

"I'm just being polite," Benisek said defensively. "No need to snap at me because you wasted your summer away."

"Oh, and you spent it productively?" Zorian challenged.

"Well, not voluntarily," Benisek admitted sheepishly. "Father decided it was time I start learning the family craft, so I spent all summer helping him and acting as his assistant."

"Oh."

"Yeah," Benisek agreed, clacking his tongue. "He also made me choose estate management as one of my electives. I hear it's a really tough class too."

"Hm. Can't say my summer was particularly stressful. I spent most of my time reading fiction and avoiding my family," admitted Zorian. "Mother tried to dump my little sister on me this year, but I managed to talk her out of it."

"I feel for you," Benisek said with a shudder. "I've got *two* younger sisters and I think I'd die if they came to live with me here. They're both utter nightmares! Anyway, what did you take for your electives?"

"Engineering, Mineral Alchemy, and Advanced Mathematics."

"Eh!?" Benisek blanched. "Man, you're really taking this seriously, aren't you? I guess you're gunning for a spot in one of the spell forges, huh?"

"Yeah," Zorian said.

"Why?" Benisek asked incredulously. "Designing magic items... that's a tough, demanding job. Surely your parents could find you a spot in their business?"

Zorian gave him a strained smile. Yes, no doubt his parents already had a spot all planned out for him.

"I'd rather starve out in the streets," Zorian told him honestly.

Benisek raised an eyebrow at him, but then simply shook his head sadly. "I think you're crazy, personally. Who did you choose as your mentor?"

"I didn't get to choose," Zorian scoffed. "There was only one left by the time it was my turn to do so. I'm mentored under Xvim."

Benisek actually dropped his spoon at this, staring at him in shock. "Xvim!? But that guy's a nightmare!"

"I know," Zorian said, releasing a long-suffering sigh.

"God, I'd probably transfer if I got assigned to that asshole," Benisek said. "You're a lot braver a man than I, that's for sure."

"So who did you choose?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Carabiera Aoep," Benisek said, immediately brightening.

"Please don't tell me you chose your mentor based on appearance?" begged Zorian.

"Well, not *just* based on appearance," Benisek said defensively. "They say she's pretty tolerant..."

"You don't want to do any extra work," Zorian surmised.

"This whole thing is like a vacation to me," Benisek admitted sheepishly. "I get to postpone employment for two years and have some fun in the meantime. You're only young once, you know?"

Zorian shrugged. Personally he found learning about magic and gathering knowledge in general to be fun all by itself, but he knew all too well that very few people shared this opinion with him.

"I suppose," Zorian said noncommittally. "So is there anything else that everyone knows that I should be familiar with?"

He spent another hour or so conversing with Benisek, touching upon a variety of topics. It was particularly interesting to hear which of their classmates would be joining them this year and which ones wouldn't. Zorian had thought the certification exam was a bit on the easy side, but apparently he was mistaken, since roughly a quarter of their classmates would not be joining them. He did notice that most of the failed students were civilian-born ones, but this wasn't terribly unusual – mage-born students had parental support when learning magic, and a reputation to live up to. He was pleasantly surprised that one particular asshole wouldn't be joining them this year – apparently Veyers Boranova lost his temper on his disciplinary hearing and got himself expelled from the academy. He wouldn't be missed. Honestly, that boy was a menace and it was a disgrace they hadn't expelled him sooner. Fortunately, it seemed there were some things that just couldn't be overlooked, even if you were an heir of Noble House Boranova.

He left when Benisek started discussing pros and cons of various girls in their class, not willing to get dragged into such a discussion, and went back to his room to get some reading done. He hadn't even opened the first book properly when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. Very few people cared to track him down to his room, so he actually had a pretty good idea of who it was before he even opened the door.

"Hi, Roach!"

Zorian stared at the grinning girl in front of him, contemplating whether to take offense at the insulting nickname before shooing her inside. In the past, while he was still crushing on her, the nickname had kind of hurt... now it was just slightly annoying. Taiven promptly ran inside and jumped on his bed like a little kid. Really, what had he ever seen in her? Beside a beautiful older girl who was fairly nice to him and had a propensity to wear form-

fitting clothes, that is.

"I thought you graduated," he said.

"I did," she answered, taking one of the spellbooks he borrowed from the library into her lap to leaf through it. Seeing how she had already taken over his bed, he sat down on the chair in front of his work desk. "But you know how it goes – there's always too many young mages, never enough masters willing to take them under their wing. I'm working as a class assistant for Nirthak. Hey, if you took nonmagical combat you're going to see me all the time!"

"Yeah, right," Zorian snorted. "Nirthak blacklisted me in advance, just in case I get any ideas."

"Really!?"

"Yeah. Not that I would ever sign up for a class like that anyway," Zorian said. Except maybe to watch Taiven all sweaty and puffed up in that tight outfit she always wore whenever she trained.

"Pity," she said, seemingly engrossed in his book. "You really should put on some muscle one of these days. Girls like boys who exercise."

"I don't care what girls like," Zorian snapped crankily. She was starting to sound like his mother. "Why are you here anyway?"

"Oh calm down, it was just a thought," she said with a dramatic sigh. "Boys and their fragile little egos."

"Taiven, I like you, but you're really treading on thin ice here," Zorian warned.

"I came here to ask if you would join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow," she said, throwing the book aside and finally getting to the point of her visit.

"A job?" Zorian asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. Well, more like a mission. You know those job postings people tack onto the big board inside the administrative building?"

Zorian nodded. Whenever a mage in the city wanted something done for cheap, he posted a 'job offer' there for interested students. The payout was generally miserable, but students had to collect 'points' by doing these, so everyone had to do a number of them. Most people didn't start doing these before their fourth year, unless they really needed the money, and Zorian fully intended to follow this tradition.

"There is a pretty nice one there," Taiven said. "It's actually just a simple find and retrieve in the tunnels below the city that—"

"A sewer run!?" asked Zorian incredulously, cutting her off. "You want me to go on a sewer run?"

"It's good experience!" Taiven protested.

"No," said Zorian, crossing his arms. "No way."

"Oh come on, Roach, I'm begging you!" Taiven whined. "We can't apply until we find a fourth member of the team! Would it kill you to make this tiny sacrifice for your old friend?"

"It very well might!" Zorian said.

"You'll have three other people to protect you!" she assured. "We've been there hundreds of times and nothing really dangerous ever happens down there – the rumors are mostly exaggerated."

Zorian snorted and looked away. Even if they really did keep him safe, it was still a trek through smelly, disease-ridden tunnels with three people he didn't really know, and who probably resented having to bring him along for the sake of a formality.

Besides, he still hadn't forgiven her for that fake date she invited him on. She may not have known he was crushing on her at the time, but it was still a pretty insensitive thing she did that evening.

Also, he might feel a little more inclined to help if she stopped calling him 'Roach'. It was not nearly as cute as she thought it was.

"Okay, how about a bet?" she tried.

"No," Zorian promptly refused.

She let out an affronted cry. "You didn't even hear me out!"

"You want to fight," Zorian said. "You *always* want to fight."

"So?" she pouted. "You chickening out? You're admitting you'd lose to a girl?"

"Absolutely," Zorian deadpanned. Both of Taiven's parents were martial arts practitioners, and they had taught her how to fight since she could walk. Zorian wouldn't last five seconds against her in hand-to-hand combat.

Hell, he doubted anyone in school would do much better.

Taiven waved her hands in the air in a frustrated gesture and promptly collapsed on his bed, and for a moment Zorian actually thought she was accepting defeat. Then she sat up and folded her legs under her until she was sitting in a lotus position. The smile on her face was giving Zorian a bad feeling.

"So," she began cheerfully. "How have you been?"

Zorian sighed. This was *not* how he intended to spend his weekend.



Two days later, Zorian was well settled into his new room and it was Monday morning. Rising early was pure torture after he had gotten into the habit of sleeping in, but he managed. He had many flaws, but a lack of self-discipline wasn't one of them.

He had managed to fend off Taiven after three hours of verbal wrangling, though he was in no mood for anything after that and put off reading for another day after her visit. In the end he spent the entire weekend lazing around, actually somewhat impatient for the classes to start.

The first class of the day was Essential Invocations, and Zorian wasn't quite sure what it was supposed to teach. Most of the other classes on his schedule had a clear subject of study visible from the

very name of the subject, but 'invocation' was a general term. Invocations were what most people thought about when someone said 'magic' – a few arcane words and strange gestures and poof! Magic effect. It was actually more involved than that – a *lot* more involved – but that was the visible part, so that's what people focused on. Clearly the academy felt the class was important, because they had a period scheduled for it every day of the week.

As he approached the classroom, he noticed a familiar person standing in front of the door with a clipboard in her hands. This, at least, was a familiar sight. Akoja Stroze had been the class representative for his group since their first year, and she took her position *very* seriously. She gave him a harsh look when she noticed him, and Zorian wondered what he had done to annoy her now.

"You're late," she stated when he got close enough.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at this. "The class doesn't start for at least 10 more minutes. How can I be late?"

"Students are supposed to be in the classroom and ready for class 15 minutes before the class starts," she stated.

Zorian rolled his eyes. This was ridiculous, even for Akoja. "Am I the last person to arrive?"

"No," she conceded after a short silence.

Zorian walked past her and entered the classroom.

You could always tell when you walked into a gathering of mages – their appearance and fashion sense gave them away unerringly, especially in Cyoria where mages from all over the world sent their children. Many of his classmates came from established magical families, if not outright Houses, and many mage lineages produced children with noticeable peculiarities, either because of bloodlines passed down from parents or because of secret enhancement rituals they subjected themselves to... things like having green hair, or always giving birth to soul-

bonded twins, or having tattoo-like markings on their cheeks and forehead. And these were real examples exhibited by his classmates.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he went towards the front of the classroom, throwing polite greetings to those few classmates he knew a little better than the rest. No one really tried to talk to him – though there was no bad blood between him and anyone in the class, he was not particularly close to any of them either.

He was just about to sit down when frantic hissing interrupted him. He glanced to his left, watching his classmate whisper soothingly to the orange-red lizard in his lap. The animal was staring at him intently with its bright yellow eyes, nervously tasting the air with its tongue, but didn't hiss again when Zorian carefully lowered himself into the chair.

"Sorry about that," the boy said. "He's still a little uneasy around strangers."

"Don't worry about it," Zorian said, waving the apology away. He didn't know Briam all that well, but he did know his family bred fire drakes for a living, so it wasn't that unusual for him to have one. "I see your family has given you a fire drake of your own. Familiar?"

Briam nodded happily, scratching the lizard's head absent-mindedly and causing the creature to close its eyes in contentment. "I bonded with him over the summer holidays," he said. "Familiar bond is a little strange at first, but I think I'm getting the hang of it. At least I've managed to talk him out of breathing fire at people without permission, else I would have to put a fire-suppressant collar on him, and he hates that thing."

"The school won't bother you about bringing it to class?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Him," Briam corrected. "And no, they won't. You can bring

a familiar to class if you've reported them to the academy and can get them to behave. And, of course, as long as they're reasonably sized."

"I hear fire drakes can get pretty big," Zorian remarked speculatively.

"They do," Briam agreed. "That's why I wasn't allowed to have one till now. In a few years he'll get way too big to follow me into the classroom, but by that time I'll already be finished with my education and back at the ranch."

Satisfied the creature wouldn't try to take a bite out of him during class, Zorian let his attention wander elsewhere. He mostly spent his time studying the girls as covertly as possible. He blamed Benisek for this, since he usually wasn't in the habit of ogling his classmates. No matter how cute some of them were...

"Hot, isn't she?"

Zorian jumped in surprise at the voice behind him and cursed himself for being caught so unawares.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said quickly, turning as calmly as possible in his seat to face Zach. The cheery, smiling face of his classmate told him he wasn't fooling anyone.

"Don't be so flustered," Zach told him happily. "I don't think there's a single boy in class who doesn't occasionally daydream about our resident red-headed goddess."

Zorian snorted. Actually, he wasn't looking at Raynie at all, but at the girl she was talking to. Not that he was going to correct Zach about that. Or anything, really – Zorian had mixed feelings about Zach. On the one hand the raven-haired boy was charming, confident, handsome, and popular – and thus reminded him uncomfortably of his brothers – but on the other hand he was never mean or inconsiderate to Zorian, and would often chat with him when everyone else was content to ignore him. As a result, Zorian was never quite sure how to act around him.

Besides, Zorian never discussed his tastes in women with other boys. The academy rumor mill breathed rumors about who liked who, and Zorian knew all too well how even relatively innocuous rumors could make your life miserable for years to come.

"From your wistful tone, I'm guessing she's still immune to your charm," Zorian said, trying to shift the focus of the conversation away from him.

"She's tricky," Zach agreed. "But I've got all the time in the world."

Zorian raised an eyebrow at that, not sure what the other boy was implying. All the time in the world?

Thankfully, he was saved from further conversation when the door noisily opened and the teacher entered the classroom. Zorian was honestly surprised to see Ilsa walk into class with the huge green book that all teachers carried, though he really shouldn't have been – he already knew Ilsa was a teacher at the academy, so there was nothing unusual about her teaching this class. She gave him a smile before setting the book down on her desk and clapping her hands together to silence those students who were too engrossed in their own conversations to notice the teacher in the room.

"Settle down everyone, the class has started," Ilsa said, accepting the list of present students from Akoja, who remained standing beside Ilsa at attention, like a soldier in front of a superior officer.

"Welcome, students, to your first class of the new school year. I am Ilsa Zileti and I will be your teacher for this class. You are third year students now, meaning you have passed your certification and joined us in our... illustrious magi community. You have proven yourself to be intelligent, driven, and capable of bending mana – the lifeblood of magic – to your will. But your journey is just beginning. As all of you have noticed, and many of you have complained about, you have only been taught a handful of spells

so far, and all of them are mere cantrips. You'll be pleased to know this injustice ends now."

A cheer erupted from the students, and Ilsa allowed them to go wild for a second before gesturing them to be silent again. She certainly had a flair for theatrics.

Much like the students, really – that cheer certainly wasn't because they were honestly unable to contain their excitement.

"But what exactly are spells?" she asked. "Can anyone tell me?"

"Oh great," Zorian mumbled. "A review session."

Hesitant mumbling erupted in the classroom until Ilsa pointed to one particular girl, who repeated her answer of 'structured magic'.

"Indeed, spells are structured magic. To cast a spell is to invoke a particular mana construct. A construct that is, by its very nature, limited in what it can do. This is why structured spells are also called 'bounded spells'. The shaping exercises you have been doing for the past two years – the ones that you all think are a useless chore – are unstructured magic. In theory, unstructured magic can do anything. Invocations are simply a tool to make your life easier. A crutch, some would say. To cast a bounded spell is to sacrifice flexibility and force mana into a rigid construct that can only be modified in minor ways. So why does everyone prefer invocations?"

She waited for a few moments before continuing. "In an ideal world, you would learn how to perform all your magic in an unstructured manner, bending it to your will as you please. But this is not an ideal world. Unstructured magic is slow and hard to learn, and time is precious. And besides, invocations are good enough for most purposes. They can do amazing things. Many of the things you can accomplish with invocations have never been reproduced using unstructured magic. Others..."

She took out a pen from her pocket and placed it on the ta-

ble before casting what Zorian recognized as a simple 'torch' spell. The pen erupted in soft light that illuminated the room. Well, at least now he knew why the curtains were closed in the classroom – it was hard to effectively demonstrate light spells in broad daylight. The spell was nothing new to Zorian, though, since they were taught how to cast it last year.

"The 'torch' invocation is one of the simplest spells, and one that you should already know by now. It is comparable to the light-emitting shaping exercise that you should *also* know by now."

Ilsa then launched into an explanation about the relative advantages and disadvantages of the 'torch' spell compared to the shaping exercise, and how it related to structured vs. unstructured magic in general. For the most part, it was nothing that Zorian hadn't known from books and lectures already, and Zorian amused himself by drawing various magical creatures in the margins of his notebook while she talked. From the corner of his eye he could see Akoja and a number of other people furiously writing everything down, even though this was just a review session and they almost certainly had all of this already written in their last year's notebooks. He didn't know whether to be impressed with their dedication or disgusted by their single-mindedness. He did notice, however, that some of the students had animated their pens to copy down the entire lecture while they listened. Zorian personally preferred to write notes himself, but he could see how such a spell would be useful, so he quickly jotted down a reminder to find the spell they used to do that.

Ilsa then began discussing dispelling – another topic they had covered exhaustively during the previous year, and also one of the key areas they had to be proficient in to pass the certification process. To be fair, it was a complex and vital topic. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to effectively dispelling a structured spell, and without knowing how to dispel your own spells, experimenting

with structured magic could be disastrous. Still, one would think the academy would assume they knew it by now and move on.

Somewhere along the line Ilsa decided to spice up her explanation with examples and performed some kind of summoning spell that resulted in several stacks of ceramic bowls popping into existence on her table. She told Akoja to distribute the bowls to everyone, and then had them use the 'levitate object' spell to make the bowls hover over their tables. Compared to levitating that little girl's bicycle out of the river, this was insultingly easy.

"I see you've all managed to levitate your bowls," Ilsa said. "Very good. Now I want you to cast the de-illuminator spell on it."

Zorian raised his eyebrows at this. What would that achieve?

"Go on," Ilsa urged. "Don't tell me you have already forgotten how to cast it?"

Zorian quickly made a couple of gestures and whispered a short chant while concentrating on the bowl. The item in question wobbled for a second before finally dropping out of the air like any normal heavier-than-air item. A plethora of clattering sounds informed him that this wasn't an isolated occurrence. He glanced towards Ilsa for an explanation.

"As you can see, the 'levitate object' spell can be dispelled by the 'de-illuminator' spell. An interesting development, don't you agree? What does a spell designed to snuff out sources of magical light have to do with hovering objects? The truth, my young students, is that 'de-illuminator' is simply a specialized form of a general-purpose disruptor spell, which breaks down the structure of a spell in order to make it go away. While not designed with 'levitate object' in mind, it is still capable of affecting it if you supply it with enough power."

"Why didn't you tell us to just dispel it normally, then?" one of the girls asked.

"A topic for another time," Ilsa said without missing a beat. "For now, I want you to take notice of what happened when you dispelled the spell on the bowl – it dropped like a rock, and if it had not been magically strengthened, it would have probably shattered upon impacting the table. This is the main problem inherent in all disruptor spells. Disruptor spells are the simplest form of dispelling, and virtually every spell can be disrupted if you put enough power into the disruptor, but sometimes disrupting the spell can have worse consequences than letting it run its course. This is especially true for higher-order spells, which almost always react explosively to disruption because of the vast amount of mana that goes into their casting. Not to mention that 'enough power' can be far more than any mage can provide. Place your bowls on the table and put a few torn pages from your notebook into it."

Zorian was somewhat surprised by Ilsa's sudden request, but did as she said. He always found tearing paper to be somewhat cathartic, so he filled the bowl with a bit more paper than necessary, and then waited for further instructions.

"I want you all to cast the 'ignite' spell on the paper, followed immediately by the de-illuminator on the resulting fire to dispel it," Ilsa said.

Zorian sighed. This time he had caught on to what she was doing, and knew the flames would not be dispelled by the de-illuminator, but he did as she said anyway. The flames didn't even flicker, and the fire died out on its own when it ran out of fuel.

"I see all of you can cast the ignite spell perfectly," Ilsa said. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised – heating things is something that is very easy to do with magic. That and explosions. None of you managed to dispel the flames, though. Why do you suppose that is?"

Zorian snorted, listening to several other students trying to

guess the answer. 'Guess' being the operative word, because they seemed to be throwing random answers around in hopes of making something stick. Normally he never volunteered for anything in class – he disliked the attention – but he was getting tired of the guessing game and Ilsa didn't seem willing to supply the answer herself until someone figured it out.

"Because there's nothing to dispel," he called out. "It's just a regular fire, started by magic but not fueled by it."

"Correct," Ilsa said. "This is another weakness of disruptor spells. They break down mana constructs, but any fundamentally non-magical effects caused by the spell are unaffected. With that in mind, let us return to our immediate problem..."

Two hours later, Zorian filed out of the classroom with his fellow classmates, actually a bit disappointed. He learned precious little during the lecture, and Ilsa said she would spend an entire month rounding out their basics before moving on to more advanced stuff. Then she gave them an essay on the topic of dispelling. It was shaping up to be a relatively boring class, since Zorian had a pretty good grasp of the basics, and they had essential invocations five times a week – that is to say, every day. Joy.

The rest of the day was uneventful, since the remaining four classes were purely introductory, outlining what material would be covered for each class and other such details. Essential alchemy and operation of magical items looked promising, but the other two classes were just more of the same thing they'd had for the past two years. Zorian wasn't sure why the academy felt that they needed to continue learning about the history of magic and magical law into the third year of their education, unless they were deliberately trying to annoy everyone. This was especially true because their history teacher, an old man by the name of Zenomir Olgai, was very enthusiastic about his subject and gave them an assignment to read a 200-page history book by the end of the week.

It was a poor way to start the week in Zorian's opinion.



The next day opened with combat magic, which was taught in a training hall instead of a classical classroom. Their teacher was an ex-battlemage named Kyron. It only took one look at him for Zorian to realize this was not going to be your average class.

The man standing in front of them was of average height, but he looked as if he was chiseled out of stone – bald, grim-faced, and very, very muscular. He had a rather prominent nose and he was completely shirtless, proudly displaying his rather developed chest muscles. He carried a combat staff in one hand and the ever-present green teacher's book in the other. Had someone described the man to Zorian, he would have thought it funny, but there was nothing funny about facing this person in the flesh.

"Combat magic isn't really a category of spells as such," Kyron said in a loud, commanding voice, more like a general talking to recruits than a teacher talking to students. It was probably the quietest class Zorian had ever been in – even chatterboxes like Neolu and Jade were silent. "More like a way of casting magic. To use spells in combat, you need to cast them fast, and you need to overcome your opponent's defenses. This means they inevitably require a lot of power and that you shape the spell in an instant... which means that classical invocations like you learn them in other classes are *useless!*" He slammed his staff into the floor for emphasis, and his words reverberated throughout the training hall. Zorian could swear the man was empowering his voice with magic somehow. "Chanting a spell takes several seconds, if not longer, and most of your opponents will kill you before you finish. Especially today, in the aftermath of the Splinter Wars, when every fool is armed with a gun and educated in ways to effectively combat mages."

Kyron waved his hand in the air and the air behind him shimmered, revealing a transparent phantasm of a minotaur over him. The creature looked quite angry, but it was clearly an illusion.

"A lot of combat spells used by mages of old relied on people being awed by magic, or unfamiliar with its limitations. Today, every child that went through elementary school knows better than to be scared away by an obvious illusion like this one, much less a professional soldier or a criminal. Most of the spells and tactics you will find in the library are hopelessly obsolete."

Kyron stopped and rubbed his chin in thought. "Also, it is somewhat hard to focus on spellcasting when someone is actively trying to kill you," he remarked offhandedly. He shook his head. "As a consequence of all this, nobody casts combat spells as classical invocations anymore. Instead, people use spell formulas, like the one imprinted on my staff, to cast specific spells quicker and easier. I won't even be teaching you how to cast combat spells without these items, since teaching you how to use classical invocations effectively in battle would take years. If you're really curious, you can always browse the library for the right chants and gestures and practice on your own."

Then he handed them each a rod of magic missile and had them practice firing the spell at the clay dolls on the other end of the training hall, until their mana ran out. While he was waiting for the girl in front of him to run out of mana, Zorian studied the spell rod in his hand. It was a perfectly straight piece of wood that fit well into Zorian's hand and could be grasped at each of the two ends without any change in effect – that being a bolt of force emerging from the tip of the rod pointing away from the caster.

When it was finally his turn, he realized that casting with the aid of a spell formula was almost insultingly easy. He didn't even have to think about it much, just point the rod in the desired direction and channel mana through it – the spell formula in the rod

did almost everything by itself. The real problem was that 'magic missile' took a lot more mana than any other spell that Zorian had encountered, and he had burned through his mana reserves in only eight shots.

Drained of mana and a little disappointed in how quickly he ran out, Zorian observed Zach as he fired magic missile after magic missile with lazy confidence. Zorian couldn't help but feel a bit envious of the boy – the amount of mana Zach had to have used by now was easily three or four times bigger than his maximum. And Zach didn't appear to be slowing down at all, either.

"Well, I'm going to let you all go, even though the class isn't officially over yet," Kyron said. "You're all out of mana, with the exception of mister Noveda here, and combat magic is all about practice. As parting words, I must caution you to use your newly acquired combat magic with restraint and responsibility. Otherwise, I will personally hunt you down."

If it were any other professor saying this, Zorian would have laughed, but Kyron might just be crazy enough to do it.

Then it was time for spell formula class, which was the very branch of magic that was used to build the focusing aids they used in their combat magic class. Their teacher, a young woman with gravity-defying orange hair that stood up like the flame of a candle, reminded Zorian of Zenomir Olgai with her enthusiasm for the subject. Zorian actually liked spell formulas, but not quite as much as Nora Boole thought was appropriate. Her 'recommended reading' included 12 different books and she immediately announced that she would be organizing bonus lectures each week for those interested in learning more. Then she gave them 'a short test' (it had 60 questions) to check how much they remembered from their last two years. She then wrapped up the class by telling them to read the first three chapters from one of the books on her recommended reading list for the next class (which was tomorrow).

After that, the rest of the day was like a relaxation period in comparison.



Zorian knocked on the door in front of him, nervously fidgeting in place. The first week of school was rather uneventful, aside from finding out that advanced mathematics was also taught by Nora Boole, and she was similarly enthusiastic about that subject as well, giving them another preliminary test and more 'recommended' reading. Still, it was now Friday, and it was time to meet his mentor.

"Come in," a voice sounded from the room, and Zorian swore he could feel the impatience in the voice already, like the man felt Zorian was wasting his time before he even saw him. He opened the door and came face to face with Xvim Chao, the notorious mentor from hell. Zorian could tell straight from his facial expression that Xvim didn't think much of him.

"Zorian Kazinski? Sit down please," Xvim ordered, not even bothering to wait for an answer. Zorian barely caught the pen the man threw at him the moment he sat down.

"Show me your basic three," his mentor ordered, referring the shaping exercises they were taught in their second year.

He had heard about this part. No one had ever mastered the basic three enough to impress Xvim. Sure enough, Zorian had barely begun levitating the pen when he was interrupted.

"Slow," Xvim pronounced. "It took you a full second of concentration to snap into a proper mindset. You must be faster. Start over."

Start over. Start over. Start over. He kept saying that, again and again, until Zorian realized it had been a whole hour since they had started with this. He had completely lost track of time in his

attempt to focus on the exercise instead of his growing desire to ram the pen into Xvim's eye socket.

"Start over."

The pen immediately rose into the air, before Xvim was even done talking. Really, how could he possibly get any faster than this with the exercise?

He lost focus when a marble collided with his forehead, disrupting his concentration.

"You lost focus," Xvim admonished.

"You threw a marble at me!" protested Zorian, unable to quite accept that Xvim had really done something so childish. "What did you expect would happen!?"

"I expected you to maintain focus on the exercise *anyway*," Xvim said. "Had you truly mastered the exercise, such a minor disturbance would not have impeded you. It seems I have once again been regretfully proven right: the inadequacy of current academy curricula has stunted the growth of another promising student. It seems we have to start with the very basics of mana shaping. We will go through each of the basic three until you can do them flawlessly."

"Professor, I had those exercises mastered a year ago," Zorian protested. He was *not* wasting his time with the basic three. He had already spent too much time refining those in his opinion.

"You have not," Xvim said, sounding as if he was affronted Zorian would even suggest such a thing. "Being able to perform the exercise reliably is not the same as mastering it. Besides, doing this will teach you patience and how to control your temper, which is *clearly* something you are having trouble with. Those are important skills for a mage to have."

Zorian's lips pressed themselves into a thin line. The man was intentionally pissing him off, Zorian was sure of it. Apparently the

rumors were right and these sessions were going to be one giant exercise in frustration.

"Let us start with the levitation exercise," Xvim said, oblivious to Zorian's musings. "Start over."

He was starting to hate those two words.

Chapter Three

THE BITTER TRUTH

If someone had asked Zorian at the end of the first week what classes he thought he would have the most trouble with, he would have answered Spell Formulas and Advanced Mathematics. Combat magic maybe. Two weeks later, he could safely say the answer was 'Warding'.

Warding, the art of protecting things with magic, was a surprisingly complex field. You had to take into account what the thing you're trying to protect is made of, what its dimensions and geometry were, how the ward is going to react with the already existing magic... or you could just slap a general-purpose warding invocation on your target and hope for the best. But the professor would fail you for that answer, so that wasn't an option in the classroom.

But these complexities aside, the class should have been a breeze, or at least not this confusing – Zorian was a patient, methodical person when it came to magecraft, and had slogged through worse offenders than warding with decent results. The problem was that their teacher, a stern woman with hair cut so short she might as well have gone all the way and shaved her head completely, didn't know how to teach. At all. Oh, she clearly knew the subject matter very well, but she simply didn't know

how to translate that knowledge into a proper lecture. She was leaving a lot of things out of her lectures, apparently not realizing that just because they were obvious to *her*, they were not obvious to her students. The textbook she assigned for the class wasn't much better, and read more like a manual for a professional warder than a student's textbook.

Question 6: You are tasked with building a research outpost on a first degree mana well in the Sarokian Highlands. The building is meant to support a staff of 4 at any particular time, and the prospectors have expressed concerns over heavy presence of winter wolf packs and an infestation of borer wasps in the surrounding area. You have a budget of 25.000 pieces and are assumed to be a certified second circle warder.

Assuming only mana extracted from mana well is available for powering the wards, which combination of wards do you feel would be the best choice for the outpost? Explain your reasoning.

Draw basic floor-plans of the planned outpost and explain how the planned room placement and shape of the building itself affect ward effectiveness.

Do you think the issue of the borer wasp infestation is best resolved by using a vermin repellant ward or by careful choice of building materials? Explain your reasoning.

Assume that you are commissioned to build not one but five outposts. The budget remains the same. How does this change your answer? Do you believe it is better to make the wards identical for all five outposts or do you feel some amount of difference between them is in order? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Zorian rubbed his eyes in frustration. How was he supposed to answer a question like this? He didn't take the architecture elective, and wasn't aware that you had to take it to do well in your warding class. Not to mention that the question assumed they knew what the market rates were buying the necessary materials, or that they knew where the Sarokian Highlands were. Zorian was quite

good at geography, and he had no idea, though considering the presence of monsters like winter wolves, he suspected they were somewhere in the northern forest.

At the very least he knew how to answer the third part of the question. The correct answer was definitely wards. Even if the outpost was made inedible to borer wasp larvae, it would still make a prime place to build a nest. Considering how territorial those insects were, you didn't want them living anywhere near you. Theoretically, the 'careful choice of materials' options would free up mana that would otherwise be spent on maintaining vermin repellent wards, but those wards required very little mana flow to stay active. Especially if they were keyed specifically to borer wasps.

His thoughts were interrupted by a girlish giggle coming from the back of the classroom. Zorian didn't even have to turn around to know what was happening – Zach was entertaining the students around him again. He wished the teacher would penalize the guy for the disruption he was causing, especially in the middle of an exam, but Zach was a bit of a darling to the stern woman because he was the only student acing her exams. No doubt the guy had already finished his test with 100% accuracy. Which, by the way, made no sense whatsoever – during their first two years, Zach was a below-average student more distinguished because of his charm than magical talent. Kind of like a nicer version of Fortov, actually. This year, though, he was acing everything. *Everything*. He had a wealth of knowledge and a work ethic he hadn't had at the end of their second year, far in excess of what could be gained through the normal passage of time.

How does one get so much better in the span of a single summer?

15 minutes later he threw his pencil down on the table, calling it quits. He only filled in eight out of ten questions, and he wasn't sure how correct these eight were, but it would have to do.

He would have to set aside a couple of days for warding self-study, because the lectures were making less and less sense with every passing day. The only other student that stayed in the classroom as long as he did was Akoja, and she handed in her paper only a few seconds after he did and followed him outside. Of course, they stayed in the classroom so long for very different reasons. He stayed so he could scrape in a few stray points. She stayed because she was a perfectionist who wanted to triple check everything to make sure she didn't forget anything.

"Zorian, wait!"

Zorian slowed down and allowed Akoja to catch up to him. The girl could be insufferable sometimes, but she was a good person overall and he didn't want to snap at her just because the test didn't go the way he wanted.

"How do you think you did back there?" she asked.

"Badly," he answered, not seeing the point in lying.

"Yeah, me too."

Zorian rolled his eyes. His and her definition of 'badly' differed greatly.

"Neolu finished in only half an hour," said Akoja after a brief silence. "I bet she'll get a perfect score again."

"Ako..." Zorian sighed.

"I know everyone thinks I'm jealous but that's not normal!" said Akoja in a hushed but agitated voice. "I'm pretty smart and I study all the time and I'm still having problems with the curriculum. And we've both been in the same class as Neolu for the past two years and she was never this good. And... and now she's beating me in every single class!"

"Kind of like Zach," said Zorian.

"Exactly like Zach!" she agreed. "They even hang out together, two of them and one other girl I don't know, behaving like... like they're in their own private little world."

"Or like they're a couple," said Zorian, before frowning. "Triple? What's the word for a romantic relationship between 3 people?"

Akoja scoffed. "Whatever. The point is the three of them do nothing but waste time together and antagonize the teachers and get perfect scores anyway. They even refused the chance to get transferred to 1 tier groups, can you believe that!?"

"You're too worked up over this," Zorian warned.

"Aren't you a little bit curious how they do it?" asked Akoja.

"Of course I am," scoffed Zorian. "It's hard not to be. But what can I do about it? Besides, Zach has never done anything to me. I don't want to cause problems for him just because he has suddenly discovered his inner prodigy."

Zorian felt Benisek join them suddenly, simply popping up from behind a corner so he could walk beside them. Sometimes Zorian wondered if the chubby boy could *smell* gossip.

"I know what you mean," Benisek said. "I always thought Zach was no good at anything. You know, like me?"

"Hah. Well there's no way he got this good at everything over one summer break," Zorian said. "I guess he was pulling the wool over our eyes all this time."

"Man, that's so stupid," said Benisek. "If I were that good I'd make sure everyone knew it."

"I don't think he was faking lack of skill for two years straight," Akoja huffed. "He would have slipped at least occasionally."

"Well, what's left then?" Zorian asked. He refrained from listing some of the more obscure ways such a rapid growth could be accomplished with magic, because most of them were criminal and he was sure the academy checked Zach to make sure he wasn't a shapeshifting imposter or possessed by the ghost of a long-dead mage.

"Maybe he knows the answers in advance," she suggested.

"Only if he's an oracle," Benisek said. "Boole gave him an oral exam last Tuesday when you went home early, and he was rattling off answers like he swallowed the textbook."

The conversation died down as all three filed into the alchemy classroom, which was really more of a big alchemy workshop than a typical classroom. There were about 20 tables, each one full of various containers and other equipment. All ingredients for the day's lesson were already set out in front of them, though some would require additional preparation before they could be used in whatever process they were learning about that day – he was pretty sure they weren't going to be putting live cave crickets into the boiling solution, for instance.

Alchemy, like warding, was a complicated art, but their alchemy teacher knew her stuff *and* knew how to teach, so Zorian wasn't having any issues with the class. Technically they had to work in groups of 2 or 3 students because there were not enough tables and equipment, but Zorian always paired up with Benisek which translated to working alone in practice. The only problem was getting Benisek to shut up and stop distracting him during class.

"Hey Zorian," Benisek whispered to him not so quietly. "I never noticed it until now, but our teacher is kind of hot!"

Zorian gritted his teeth. The blasted idiot couldn't keep his voice down if his life was on the line. There was no way she didn't hear that.

"Benisek," he whispered back to his partner. "I need good grades in alchemy to get my dream job when I graduate. If you screw this up for me I will never speak to you again."

Benisek grumbled mutinously before returning to his ogling. Zorian refocused on grinding the borer wasp husks into a fine powder needed for the particular type of glue they were supposed to be making.

Admittedly, Azlyn Marivoski did look surprisingly good for a 50-year-old woman. Some kind of cosmetic treatment probably – she *was* their alchemy teacher, after all. Maybe even a true youth potion, though those were really rare and usually imperfect in some way.

"I don't see why you like this class so much," grumbled Benisek. "I'm not even sure I'd call it magical. You don't need mana for it. It's all searching for herbs this, cutting the roots the right way that... it's like cooking. Hell, we're making glue, of all things. You should leave that to girls."

"Benisek..."

"It's true!" he protested. "Even our teacher is a girl. A hot girl, but still. I read somewhere that alchemy traces its roots back to witches' covens, with their potions and what not. Even now the best alchemical families are descended from witches. I bet you didn't know that, huh?"

As a matter of fact, he did know that. He was, after all, tutored in alchemy by an honest-to-gods traditional witch before he went to the academy. She was so traditional, in fact, that she scoffed at the name 'alchemy' and referred to her skill strictly as 'potion making'.

But that wasn't the sort of stuff you wanted people to know, for a wide variety of reasons.

"If you don't shut up right now I won't let you partner with me anymore," Zorian told him seriously.

"Hey!" protested Benisek. "Who's going to help me with that stuff, then? I'm not good at this!"

"I don't know," said Zorian innocently. "Maybe you should find some girl to help you."

Fortunately, the teacher was currently too busy fawning over Zach's newest masterpiece to pay attention to Zorian's table – somehow the boy managed to make some kind of enhancement

potion out of the provided ingredients, and that was apparently very impressive. Azlyn didn't appear to mind that Zach completely ignored the assignment to make magical glue and did his own thing.

Zorian shook his head and tried to concentrate on his own work. He wondered whether he would have gotten the same reaction if he did something like that, or if he would be accused of showing off. The few times Zorian tried to wow the teachers he was simply told to work on his basics and not to get cocky, because arrogance kills. Was it because Zach was the heir of Noble House Noveda? Or something else?

It was in moment like these that he understood exactly how Akoja felt about all this.



"And that concludes today's lesson," said Ilsa. "Before you leave, however, I have an announcement to make. As some of you know, the Academy traditionally organizes a dance on the eve of the summer festival. This year is no exception. The dance will take place in the entrance hall next Saturday. For those of you who are unaware, attendance is *mandatory* this year."

Zorian groaned, slamming his forehead into the table in front of him, causing the rest of the class to snicker. Ilsa pointedly ignored his reaction.

"For those of you who don't know how to dance, dance lessons will be held every day at eight in the evening in room six. Those of you who do know how to dance still have to come to at least one of these lessons to prove so – I will not have you embarrass me on the night of the dance. Dismissed. Miss Stroze, mister Kazinski, stay after class please."

"Oh great," Zorian mumbled. He probably should have restrained himself from reacting so strongly to the pronouncement.

Truthfully, he intended to skip the dance, regardless of how mandatory it was. Did Ilsa realize that? No, he could detect no disapproval in posture, and he was pretty sure she'd be rather annoyed if she sensed his plans.

"Now then..." Ilsa began when he and Akoja were the only students left. "I assume you both know how to dance?"

"Sure," said Zorian.

"Umm..." Akoja fidgeted. "I'm not very good at it."

"No matter," Ilsa said. "We'll iron out any gaps you may have easily enough. The reason I told you to stay behind is that I want you to help me with the dance lessons."

Zorian considered refusing outright – it wasn't something he wanted to spend his time on – but he figured this could be a favor that would make Ilsa forgive him a transgression or two. Like, say, not showing up to the mandatory dance? Before he could express his tentative agreement, however, Akoja decided in his place.

"How can we help?" she said, clearly pleased they were chosen for this 'honor'. Zorian raised an eyebrow at the way she presumed to speak for him, but let it slide for the moment.

"We only have five days to teach everyone how to dance," Ilsa said. "That's why we're going to use magic to help."

"Animation spells," Zorian guessed.

"Yes," Ilsa said, then quickly moved to explain for Akoja's benefit. "There is a spell that will guide a person's limbs and body through whatever dance it is designed for. It's not really suitable as a substitute for dancing skill, but if you practice dancing while you're under its effects, you will learn a lot faster than you would otherwise."

"How does that work?" Akoja asked curiously.

"The spell moves you around like a puppet on a string until you learn how to move along with it, if only to make the feeling of

something jerking you around go away,” said Zorian. “Eventually you no longer need the spell to dance correctly.”

“I see you have personal experience with this method,” Ilsa said with a smile.

Zorian resisted the urge to scowl. Getting put under that spell by Daimen was one of his childhood traumas. It wasn’t amusing at all.

“I sincerely hope you intend to give students a choice to refuse,” Zorian said.

“Of course,” Ilsa agreed. “Though, those who refuse this method will have to attend at least three sessions instead of one, so I expect most will choose this option instead of the traditional one. In any case, I want you two to help me cast the spell on people during the lessons. I expect I’ll have to dispel and recast the spell often, and I could use some help.”

“And why did you choose us, specifically?” Zorian asked.

“You both have decent control over your magic and you seem responsible enough to be taught such a spell. Animation spells targeting people are restricted material, after all, and not something normally available to students.”

Huh. So how did Daimen get a hold of it then? In his second year, no less?

Well, whatever. At least knowing how to cast the spell will make it easier to counter it in the future.

“Anything else?” Ilsa asked. “Very well, then. Come to my office after the last class and I’ll set up some dummies for you to practice on before moving on to people. Poorly controlled, the spell is intensely uncomfortable. We don’t want to give anyone traumas.”

Zorian narrowed his eyes. He didn’t. Not even Daimen would... oh, who is he kidding? Of course he would have. Practicing such a spell on your own little brother was right up Daimen’s alley.

"Miss Stroze, you can leave – I have something else to discuss with mister Kazinski."

Ilsa began to speak the moment Akoja was gone, catching Zorian somewhat by surprise. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, trying to ignore his annoyance with Daimen in favor of paying attention to what Ilsa was saying.

"So Zorian," she said with a faint smile. "How are you getting along with your mentor?"

"He's having me work on my basic three," Zorian told her flatly. "We're still on the levitation exercise."

Yes, even after 4 weeks, Xvim was still making him levitate a pencil over and over again. Start over. Start over. Start over. The only thing Zorian learned in those sessions was how to dodge marbles that Xvim kept throwing at him. The jerk seemed to have an endless supply of those things.

"Yes, Professor Xvim likes his students to have a firm grasp of the basics before moving on to advanced topics," Ilsa agreed.

That or he hates his students. Zorian personally thought his theory was a lot more plausible.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that you might be able to change mentors soon," Ilsa said. "One of my students will be dropping out after the summer festival, and I'll have a vacancy to fill. Unless something comes up, you're almost certain to be the one I pick. That is, if you're actually interested in a transfer."

"Of course I'm interested!" Zorian half-shouted, much to Ilsa's amusement. He frowned for a moment. "Unless you also plan to throw marbles at me? Is that some kind of standard training method?"

"No," Ilsa chuckled. "Xvim is special that way. Well, I just wanted to see how you feel about this before doing anything. Have a nice day."

It was only after he was out of the classroom that he realized this development greatly complicated his plan to skip out on the dance. He couldn't afford to annoy his (potential) new mentor too much, else he'd be stuck with Xvim for the rest of his education.

Well played, professor. Well played.



"Why can't we just cast that spell ourselves once the dancing starts?"

Zorian let out a long-suffering sigh. "You can't make an animation spell do something you don't know how to do yourself. You don't know how to dance, hence you cannot animate anyone to dance either. Also, how are you going to break the spell once the dance ends if you can't move your arms where you want them to be? This really isn't the sort of spell you should be casting on yourself."

Really, there were so many problems with that idea that Zorian struggled to put them all into words. Are these people thinking about the questions they're asking at all?

"So how many dances do we have to learn?"

"Ten," said Zorian, bracing himself for the cries of outrage.

Sure enough, a rumble of complaints erupted after that statement. Thankfully, Ilsa took over the lesson at this point, instructing everyone to pair up and scatter throughout the spacious room to give everyone enough space. Zorian could already feel a headache coming and cursed himself from letting Ilsa talk him into this. Even though room six was fairly spacious, there were a lot of people and the invisible pressure they gave off was particularly strong today.

"You alright?" Benisek asked, putting his hand on Zorian's shoulder.

"I'm fine," Zorian said, waving his hand off. He didn't like to be touched much. "I just have a slight headache. Did you need help with something?"

"Nah, you just looked like you could use some company, standing all alone in your little corner," Benisek said. Zorian decided not to tell him that he was intentionally standing on the sidelines unless he was needed. Benisek wasn't the sort of person who understood the need for some breathing room. "Say, who is your date for the dance anyway?"

Zorian suppressed a groan. Of course Benisek would want to talk about *that*.

Relationships weren't something Zorian thought about often. The chances that one of his classmates would agree to date him were miniscule. For one, such a relationship would quickly be noticed by the rest of their classmates, and the resulting merciless teasing was something few relationships could survive for any appreciable length. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, all teenage girls liked older guys. Dating a guy that was two or three years her senior seemed to be a status symbol for a girl, and a majority of them loudly disparaged the male population their own age as crass and immature. When they were in their first year, all the girls wanted to date third years. Now that they were in their third year, all the girls wanted to date apprenticed graduates. Since there were plenty of guys willing to play along, the chances that some girl in his class would give him the time of day was negligible.

And the girls that weren't his classmates? To most of them he wasn't Zorian Kazinski, but 'that guy who is a brother of Daimen and Fortov Kazinski'. They had this image of what he ought to be like, and once it became obvious that the real him didn't match their expectations, they inevitably became upset.

Besides, all this romantic stuff... well.

"Well?" Benisek prodded.

"I'm not going," Zorian said.

"What do you mean 'I'm not going'?" Benisek said cautiously.

"Just what I said," Zorian said. "I'm skipping out on the whole dance thing. Turns out I had an alchemy-related accident and had to stay in my room for the evening."

It was perhaps a bit cliché, but whatever. Zorian had already found a particularly tricky potion that was supposed to make a person more outgoing and sociable – something that was entirely plausible for him to try to make – that would make a person very ill when done wrong but wouldn't actually kill him. If he does it right it will seem like an honest mistake instead of a way to weasel out of the dance.

"Oh come on!" protested Benisek, and Zorian had to pinch him to make him lower his voice. The last he needed was to have Ilisa overhear him. "It's the summer festival! A special summer festival, with the whole... parallel... thingy..."

"Planar alignment," Zorian offered.

"Whatever. The point is that you have to be there. Everyone who is anyone is coming!"

"I'm a nobody."

Benisek sighed. "No, Zorian, you're not. Look Zorian, we're both merchant kids, right?"

"I don't like where this is going," Zorian warned.

Benisek ignored him. "I know you don't like to hear this but—"

"Don't. Just don't."

"—you have a duty to your family to put on a good face. Your behavior reflects on them, you know."

"There is nothing wrong with my behavior," snapped Zorian, aware that he was attracting stares of nearby people but not caring at the moment. "You're free to go to whatever you want, but leave me out of it. I'm a nobody. A third son of a minor merchant family

from the middle of nowhere. People here don't give a fuck about me. They don't even know who I am. And I like it that way."

"Okay, okay!" protested Benisek, gesturing wildly. "Dude, you're making a scene..."

"Whatever," scoffed Zorian. "Leave me alone and go away."

The nerve! If there was anyone who should take a look at the impression he was leaving to people it should be Benisek! The irresponsible leech would have been dumped into a tier three group if it wasn't for Zorian's constant help, and this is how he repays him? Why was he even hanging out with that guy?

He scoffed, trying to calm down. Stupid summer festival and stupid dance. The funny thing is that unlike most people who hate these kinds of events, Zorian wasn't strictly *bad* at them. He knew how to dance, he knew how to eat without embarrassing himself, and he knew how to talk to people at these kinds of events. He had to know these things, because his parents used to drag him along with them when attending these kinds of events, and they made sure he knew how to behave himself properly once there.

But he hated it. He had no words to describe how much events such as these sickened him. Why should he be forced to attend something he hates when the academy had absolutely no right to demand it of him?

No, they had no right at all.



Hesitantly, Zorian knocked on the door to Ilsa's office, wondering why she called him here. There is no way...

"Come in."

Zorian peeked inside and was promptly told to have a seat while Ilsa calmly sat behind her desk, drinking something out of a cup. Probably tea. She looked calm and serene but Zorian could detect an undercurrent of disapproval in her posture. Hmm...

"So Zorian," Ilsa began. "You've been doing quite well in my class."

"Err, thank you professor," said Zorian cautiously. "I try."

"Indeed, one could say you're one of the best students in your group. A student I intend to take under my wing after this whole festival rush dies down. An example to everyone, and just as much a representative of your class as miss Stroze."

Oh, this is *bad*.

"I don't-"

"So, excited about the dance this Saturday?" asked Ilsa, seemingly changing the topic.

"Yes I am," Zorian lied smoothly. "It sounds like lots of fun."

"That's good," Ilsa said happily. "Because I heard that you plan to boycott the event. It was rather upsetting, I must say. I was rather clear that attendance is mandatory, I believe."

Note to self: find something horrible to do to Benisek. A spell that causes the target's tongue to feel like it's on fire or something... or maybe piercing pain in the genital region...

"Just a bunch of nasty rumors professor," Zorian said smoothly. "I would never dream of intentionally boycotting the dance. If I am unable to attend-"

"Zorian," Ilsa cut him off.

"Professor, why is it so important that I show up there, anyway?" asked Zorian, a bit of crankiness seeping into his voice. He knew it was a bad idea to blow up on a teacher, but damn this whole thing was *pissing him off*! "I have a medical condition, you know? Crowds give me headaches."

She snorted. "They give me headaches too, if it makes you feel any better. I can give you a potion for that. The fact is I'm one of the organizers of the dance, and if too many students are absent I'll end up with a black mark on my record. Especially if someone as prominent as yourself were to not show up."

"Me? Prominent!? I'm just an average student!" Zorian protested.

"Not nearly as average as you think," Ilsa said. "Just getting this far requires extraordinary intelligence and dedication – especially for a civilian-born student like yourself, who wasn't exposed to magic your entire life. People keep an eye out for people like you. Also, you're Daimen's younger brother, and we both know how famous he is."

Zorian's lips stretched into a thin line. Zorian was sure the last reason was what it all came down to in the end, and all the other arguments were just excuses and attempts to butter him up. Even with his brother on a whole different continent, Zorian still couldn't escape from his shadow.

"You don't like to be compared to him," she guessed.

"No," Zorian admitted in a clipped tone.

"Why is that?" she asked curiously.

Zorian considered side-stepping the question – his family was a sore subject for him – but uncharacteristically decided to go for honesty. He knew it wouldn't do much, but he felt like venting at the moment.

"Everything I do is always compared to Daimen and, to a slightly lesser extent, Fortov. It has been that way since I was a child, before Daimen ever became famous. My parents have never been shy about playing favorites, and since they were always interested chiefly in social achievements, I was always found wanting. My family has no use for a withdrawn bookworm, and made that abundantly clear over the years. Until recently, they ignored me completely, treating me more like I was my sister's babysitter than their son."

"But something happened recently that caused them to take notice of you?" Ilsa surmised.

"Fortov happened," Zorian growled out. "He bombed several

exams, had to be bailed out by father's connections. He has shown himself to be generally unreliable, which is a problem, because he was supposed to be the spare heir for the family business, just in case Daimen dies on one of his escapades. So now I am suddenly taken out of the metaphorical closet so they can groom me for the role."

"But you don't want to be the spare?" she guessed.

"I don't want to be involved in Kazinski family politics, period. I am not a part of that family anyway. Never was. At best, I was only ever a loosely aligned associate. I appreciate them feeding me and funding my education, and I'm willing to reimburse them for that when I get a job, but they have no right to ask something like that of me. I won't hear it. I have my own life and my own plans, none of which involve playing second fiddle to my older brother and wasting time on insipid social events where people suck up to each other non-stop."

He decided to stop there, because he was just making himself angrier. Plus, he suspected Ilisa didn't empathize with him much. Most people thought he was simply being overdramatic about his family. They weren't the ones who had to live with them.

When she realized he wasn't going to say anything more, Ilisa leaned back and took a deep breath. "I empathize with you, Zorian, but I'm afraid such comparisons are unavoidable. For what is worth, I think you're shaping up to be a fine mage yourself. Not everyone can be a prodigy like Daimen."

"Right," said Zorian, refusing to look at her.

She sighed, running her hand through her hair. "You make me feel like the villain here. Family issues aside, why are you so bothered by this? It's a party. I thought all teenagers liked parties. Are you concerned about finding a date? Just ask some first-years and they'll jump at the chance – they can't attend unless invited by an upperclassman, you know?"

Zorian released a sigh of his own. He wasn't looking for a way to find a date – he had no doubt that simply dropping his last name would net him some impressionable giggly first year for the evening – he was looking for a way out. Something that Ilsa wasn't willing to provide him with, it seemed.

"I'm not getting a date," Zorian told her, rising from his seat. "I may have to come to the dance, but I'm pretty sure that bringing a date is not mandatory. Have a nice day."

He was surprised that Ilsa didn't try to contradict him as he left. Maybe this whole dance thing won't be such a chore.



Zorian trudged through the corridors of his residence building wearily, not in any real hurry to get to his room. The teachers had refrained from giving them any substantial homework over the weekend, knowing that everyone would be too preoccupied with the summer festival to get any work done. Normally all that free time would be a godsend to Zorian, but just thinking about what he would have to endure tomorrow was enough to make Zorian lose the will to do anything fun or productive, so he fully intended to go to sleep the moment he arrived at his room.

As he entered his residence building he noted that someone was already in a celebratory mood, because the walls of the corridor he was passing through were full of colorful splotches in vivid yellow, green, and red.

"Zorian! Just the man I was looking for!"

Zorian jerked in shock at the loud voice behind him and whirled around to face the man who invaded his personal space. He scowled at the grinning idiot in front of him.

"Why are you here, Fortov?" he asked.

"What, I can't visit my little brother?" he protested. "You too good to hang out with big bro?"

"Cut the crap, Fortov. You never come to *me* when you just want to hang out with someone. What do you need help with, now?"

"That's totally not true," he huffed. "You're my favorite brother, you know?"

Zorian stared at him impassively for a few seconds. "Daimen isn't here so you'll settle for me, huh?"

"Daimen is an asshole," Fortov snapped. "Ever since he got famous he's always too busy to help out his younger brother. I swear, that guy only thinks about himself."

"The hypocrisy is thick with this one," Zorian mumbled.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that," Fortov said.

"Nothing, nothing," Zorian waved dismissively. "So what kind of trouble are you in now?"

"Um, I might have promised a friend I'll make her an anti-rash potion," Fortov said sheepishly.

"There is no such thing as an anti-rash potion," huffed Zorian. "There is, however, an anti-rash *salve*, which is applied directly to the affected skin instead of being imbibed like a potion is. This just shows what a total dunderhead you are when it comes to alchemy. What the hell were you thinking, promising your friend something like that?"

"I kind of pushed her into a purple creeper patch during our wilderness survival class," Fortov admitted. "Please, you have to help me! I'll find you a girlfriend if you do!"

"I don't want a girlfriend!" snapped Zorian irritably. "Least of all the kind of girlfriend Fortov would set him up with. Look, why are you bothering me about this? Just go to the apothecary and buy some."

"It's Friday evening. All stores are closed in preparation for the celebration tomorrow."

"Well that's too bad, because I can't help you," said Zorian. "First two years are all theory and lab safety, and I'm just starting my third year. We haven't done any serious alchemy in class so far."

So true and yet such a bald-faced lie. He hadn't done all that much alchemy in class but he had done quite a bit of private study in his free time. He could make an antidote for the purple creeper rash easily, but why should he spend his expensive alchemical ingredients?

"Oh man, come on. You can speak three different languages and you know all the silly shaping exercises they make us learn, but you can't even do something so basic? What the hell are you doing in your room all day long if not learning how to do stuff like that?"

"You're one to talk!" Zorian snapped. "You're a year older than me, you should be perfectly capable of doing this yourself."

"Eh, you know I never cared for alchemy. Too fiddly and boring for me," Fortov said with a dismissive wave. "Besides, I can't even make vegetable soup without ruining mom's kitchenware, do you really want me around alchemical equipment?"

Well, when he put it that way...

"I'm tired," Zorian said. "I'll make it tomorrow."

"Are you crazy!? Tomorrow is too late!"

"Oh come on, it's not like she'll die of a goddamn rash!" said Zorian irritably.

"Please, Zorian, I know you don't care about these kind of things but she's crushing on this boy and-"

Zorian groaned and tuned him out. That's pretty much all he needed to know about this 'emergency'.

"-and if my friend's rash isn't fixed by then she won't be able to go and she'll *never forgive me!* Please, please, please-"

"Stop it."

"-please, please, please, please-"

"I said stop it! I'll do it, okay? I'll make the damn salve, but you owe me big time for this, you hear?"

"Yup!" he said cheerfully. "How much time do you need?"

"Meet me at the fountain in about three hours," Zorian sighed.

Zorian watched him as he ran away, probably so he wouldn't change his mind or make some concrete demands. He shook his head and went back to his room to retrieve the necessary alchemical reagents. The academy had an alchemical workshop students could use for their own projects, but you had to bring your own ingredients. Fortunately, he had everything he needed for this particular task.

The workshop was totally empty aside from him, but that wasn't very unusual. Most people were preparing for the dance tomorrow and were unlikely to do some last-minute alchemy practice. Unfazed by the eerie silence of the workshop, Zorian scattered the reagents across the table and set to work.

Ironically, the main ingredient of the anti-rash salve was the very plant that was the cause of this mess – the purple creeper, or more accurately its leaves. Zorian had already left them to dry in the sun, and now they only had to be ground to powder. This was generally the most annoying part of the procedure, as purple creeper leaves released a cloud of irritating dust into the air if they were simply crushed with a standard mortar and pestle set. The textbooks he read had all sorts of fancy ways to deal with this, usually involving expensive equipment, but Zorian had a much simpler solution: he wrapped the leaves in a slightly wet piece of cloth, then wrapped the whole thing in a piece of leather, and then hammered the resulting lump until he felt no resistance. The irritating dust would bond with the cloth and the leaf pieces wouldn't.

After mixing the leaf dust with 10 drops of honey and a spoon of oblia berry juice, he put the whole thing over a low fire, stirring

the contents until they achieved uniform color and consistency. Then he removed the bowl from the fire and sat down while he waited for the stuff to cool.

"That was very impressive work," a rather feminine voice sounded behind him. "Nice improvisation with the creeper leaves. I'll have to remember that trick."

Zorian recognized the owner of the voice though, and Kael wasn't really female, despite some nasty rumors. He turned around to face the morlock boy, studying his bone white hair and intense blue eyes for a moment before returning his attention to cleaning the alchemical equipment he had used. No reason to get barred from using the workshop because he failed to clean up after himself.

He struggled to formulate a response while Kael was inspecting the salve with a practiced eye. The boy was rather mysterious, having only joined their group this year by transferring from gods knows where, and not being very talkative. Plus, you know, he was a morlock. How long had the boy been watching him? Sadly, he had a tendency to lose track of his surroundings when he worked on something so he couldn't tell.

"It's nothing special," Zorian finally said. "Now your work... that's impressive. I get the notion that you're on a whole different level from the rest of us when it comes to alchemy. Even Zach can't beat you most of the time, and he seems to be acing everything these days."

The white-haired boy smiled mildly. "Zach doesn't have the passion for the subject. Alchemy requires a craftsman's touch and a lot of patience, and no matter how extensive his knowledge is, Zach just doesn't have the mentality for it. You do. If you had as much practice with alchemy as Zach apparently does, you'd surpass him for sure."

"Ah, so you think he has prior experience, too?" Zorian in-

quired.

"I do not know him as well as yourself and the rest of your peers, having only recently joined your group. Still, one does not get as proficient in this field as Zach apparently is in a matter of months. He works with the practiced ease of someone who has been doing alchemy for years."

"Like you," tried Zorian.

"Like me," Kael confirmed. "I hate to be rude, but are you finished here? I'd like to make something myself today."

Zorian apologized to the boy for the hold up, which the morlock waved off as something of little importance, and bid him goodbye.

As he walked away, it occurred to Zorian that he should have probably made some kind of sleeping potion for himself while he was at it – he had to get plenty of rest tonight, because he certainly wouldn't get any tomorrow.

Chapter Four

STARS FELL

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Zorian grumbled, stomping towards the door. Really, what's with all the frantic knocking? Who exactly was so desperate to get into his room? He wrenched the door open and found himself staring at Akoja's disapproving face. "Ako? What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you that," she said. "Why are you still at home? The dance is—"

"Two hours away," Zorian interrupted. "I can get to the dance hall in 10 minutes."

"Honestly Zorian, why do you always have to wait for the last possible moment to do something? Don't you realize what a bad example you're setting?"

"Time is precious," Zorian said. "And I will repeat my question: what are you doing here? I don't think it's your usual habit to seek people out when they're not early enough for your tastes."

"Miss Zileti told me to get you," Akoja admitted.

Zorian blinked. It seems Ilsa wanted to make sure he didn't 'forget'. Hah. While the idea *had* occurred to him, he knew that would never fly.

"She also said you couldn't find a date, so that will be me for the evening," Akoja continued in a more subdued tone, suddenly finding the doorframe interesting enough to merit examination.

Zorian scowled. How does 'refuse to bring a date' become 'couldn't find a date'? It seemed that Ilsa, like his mother, had a tendency to 'translate' his words into whatever was most convenient to her purposes. The two of them would get along quite well, Zorian suspected.

"Anyway, get dressed so we can go already," she said, suddenly regaining her confidence. "You might be alright with cutting things close, but I'm not."

Zorian stared at her for a full second, trying to decide what to do. He was half-tempted to slam the door in her face and refuse to participate in this farce, but he supposed it wasn't Akoja's fault that she got roped into this. In all likelihood she had more pleasant plans for the evening than accompanying a surly boy who loathed the experience. He shooed her into the room and went into the bathroom to get dressed.

He really had to marvel at Ilsa's manipulation skills, though – if it was just him going to this thing, he would have come dressed in casual clothes, spent the absolute minimum of time there before leaving, and avoided people like a plague throughout the entire evening. Now? He didn't want to ruin Akoja's evening, which meant he would have to make at least a token effort. Yes, Ilsa and his mother would get along like two peas in a pod...

The walk to the dance hall was a quiet one. Zorian refused to strike up a conversation, despite sensing that Akoja found the silence awkward. The silence suited him just fine, and he knew he would be comfortable with very few things this evening. He would enjoy the peace while it lasted.

Which wasn't long – the hall that the academy set aside for this event was about 10 minutes away from his residence building.

The moment they approached it they were greeted with the sight of a large gathering in front of the entrance, full of excited students engaged in animated discussions.

Zorian paled a little at the sight of the dense throng – he was getting a headache just by looking at them.

Sadly, no matter how much he pleaded with Akoja, she refused to let them wait on the outskirts of the gathering until the start of the dance. As revenge, Zorian 'accidentally' managed to get separated from Akoja when they were ushered inside and got himself lost in the crowd. He chuckled to himself, wondering how long it would take her to find him again. He'd be shocked if it was less than half an hour, since he was quite adept at avoiding the notice of a particular person at a party without drawing attention from the other party goers.

For a supposedly simple school dance, the entire event was surprisingly lavish. The tables were overflowing with food, much of it so exotic that Zorian couldn't identify it, and the hall was decorated with high-quality paintings and animated carvings that moved in a pre-programmed manner. Hell, even the tablecloths were full of complicated lace and so soft they had to have been made of something monstrously expensive. Many of his fellow students were openly gaping at their surroundings and even Zorian, who had been at these kinds of events many times before, was a little shocked. Then he shrugged and did his best to blend into the crowd so Akoja couldn't find him.

He meandered through the tables overflowing with food, occasionally sampling one of the dishes when he saw something interesting, observing the other people and painstakingly avoiding notice from anyone who might be inclined to strike up a conversation with him. He could see why Ilsa was so determined to make everything about the dance run smoothly – the sheer expense of the thing aside, it wasn't just the students that were present. There

were also representatives from various guilds, Houses, societies, and organizations. And not just from the Alliance, but also from abroad, even other continents – he could see at least one man in the distinctive light blue Abnasia military uniform, a small delegation from Hsan, and a dark-skinned woman in a garb so colorful Zorian doubted anyone failed to notice her by now. He idly wondered what this dance was *really* about, since these people wouldn't be here for a simple school dance, before deciding he didn't really care. People like this lived in their own world, and had different standards of 'important' from mere mortals like him.

An hour later the first dance was about to start and Zorian made his way to Akoja. She was fuming, and didn't appear to believe him when he claimed he had honestly gotten lost and couldn't find her until now, but she managed to restrain herself from blowing up at him. He led her to the dance floor and didn't retaliate when she 'accidentally' stepped on his toes a couple of times.

"People were asking for you," she said finally, having tired of abusing his toes for the moment.

"Well I was around," Zorian said with a small smirk. "All they had to do was look for me."

"No reason why you can't seek them out now, though," Akoja remarked.

"But Ako, we're dancing. There is no way I'd leave a beautiful girl like you for anything. I've left you unattended for too long as it is," Zorian said, not a trace of mocking in his voice. It was a practiced skill.

She glared at him, but Zorian could see she liked the compliment.

Sadly, it didn't stop her from dragging him off to meet one group of people after another soon afterwards. Zorian hated being put on display like that, but he suspected Akoja was under orders from Ilsa, so he didn't snap at her. He was surprised his stalling had

worked for as long as it did, really. Zorian found himself memorizing various faces, names, and titles, despite not caring much. It was instinctive to him by now, and he did it even when he didn't mean to – the legacy of his family's failed attempt to turn him into a party animal.

"Kazinski? Oh, are you by chance related to-"

"Daimen and Fortov Kazinski, yes," Zorian said, doing his best to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"Oh my, how fortunate," she said. "I must say your brother isn't half bad with the violin." She gestured towards the stage, where the academy music club was playing a slow, relatively quiet song. Fortov was officially an ordinary orchestra member, but was obviously the most prominently placed musician on the stage. His presence, as usual, attracted attention and comments. "What instrument do you play?"

"None," Zorian deadpanned. His family had tried to teach him how to play an instrument, since it was a fashionable thing to learn among the rich (and those pretending to be), but were thwarted by the fact that Zorian was almost entirely tone-deaf. He had no ability to play music at all. Truth be told, he wasn't particularly interested in it either, though he could certainly feign interest when doing so was polite. It was one of his mother's bigger disappointments that he had no talent in this area, since Daimen and Fortov were both relatively decent at music – Daimen at playing the piano and Fortov at playing the violin. They weren't prodigies by any means, but they were skilled enough to impress the kind of people that frequented events like this. "I don't have much of an ear for music, unlike my brothers. Personally, I'm more interested in how the orchestra fills the entire hall evenly with sound, with everyone hearing them at the right volume, regardless of how near or how far they're sitting in relation to the stage."

Sadly, neither the woman nor anyone else gathered around

them could answer that question – apparently nobody else even noticed it until he mentioned it. In fact, Zorian got a distinct notion that people felt it was an irrelevant detail and that he was weird for even mentioning it. Bah – no appreciation for magic from these people. Why were they attending a dance at a mage academy, again?

Thankfully, Akoja decided to have mercy on him at this point and led them to a nearby table to get something substantial to eat. A couple of other students from their class joined them and a casual conversation settled in around them. Zorian didn't contribute much, since he found the conversation to be mostly aimless drivel that was of no interest to him. He still nodded and chuckled at appropriate times, of course, brushing off an occasional comment about him being 'too quiet' and needing to 'lighten up'.

He was just about to dig into the piece of cake in front of him when Akoja nudged him with her knee. He glanced at her with an unvoiced question.

"Wrong fork," she mumbled.

Zorian looked down at the fork in his hand and realized he was supposed to use the tiny fork reserved for desserts. He shrugged and stabbed the cake with the giant fork in his hand anyway.

"I know," he mumbled back.

That seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Zorian," she burst out, her voice carrying a pleading note in it. "Why are you being so difficult? It's just one night. I know I'm not what you wanted for your date..."

"It's not that," Zorian interrupted her. "It's not like I wanted a date, anyway. I was going to come alone to this thing."

She stared at him in shock. She seemed emotionally crushed, and Zorian didn't understand why.

"Y-You'd rather go alone than with m-me?" she asked.

Aw *crap*.

All this time he thought Akoja was roped into this to keep an eye on him, but what if she had *wanted* to go with him? That...

She fled before he could figure out something to say.

He swore under his breath and buried his face in his hands. This is why he hated these kind of events.



An hour later he was pretty sure Akoja was no longer in the dance hall and that she wasn't going to come back. He didn't really want to chase her through the streets in the middle of the night, so he refrained from following her outside. Besides, what was he supposed to say to her? He wouldn't know where to even start. He thought about going home himself, but in the end he simply climbed up onto the roof of the dance hall and observed the stars. He wasn't going to get much sleep tonight, anyway.

To keep his mind occupied, he silently named all the stars and constellations he could see. Due to his interest in the topic as a child and the Astronomy class they had in their first year at the Academy, he knew quite a bit. It was a full hour before he ran out of things to name and describe.

Monday was going to be awkward. Zorian had no doubt their little drama was overheard and would be *the* topic of conversation for several weeks to come. Considering that Akoja was a bit of a teacher's pet in most of the subjects, the teachers could very well decide to make his life more difficult in the days to come as well.

Damn it all.

It was the sound of fireworks that broke him out of his thoughts. It was midnight apparently, and the festival had officially started. Zorian relaxed a little as he watched various fireworks blossom against the night sky, each exploding in its own unique way. It was beautiful. Most of them dissolved into quickly

fading motes of light after the initial explosion, but a couple of them remained whole and consistently bright, more like flares than fireworks. They arced through the sky before dipping down and falling back to earth like falling stars. He frowned. Weird. Shouldn't they be exploding by now?

The flare falling closest to him slammed into the nearby academy residence building and detonated. The explosion was so loud and so bright that Zorian was momentarily blinded and deafened, stumbling back and collapsing to his knees as the entire building shook beneath his feet.

Blinking spots out of his vision, his ears still ringing from the sound of the explosion, Zorian scrambled back to his feet. He stared at the spot where the stricken residence building once stood. Virtually the entire building had been leveled to the ground, everything flammable in the vicinity of the impact site was burning, and strange flaming shapes were emerging from the epicenter of the destruction.

Wait a minute... that's *his* residence building!

He collapsed to his knees again as the implications of this hit him. If he had opted to stay in his room like he had originally planned, he'd have been dead right now. It was a sobering thought. But what the hell was happening here!? That was no firework, that's for sure! It looked and sounded more like a high level artillery spell.

It was hard to tell if it was simply a consequence of his hearing being damaged, but he noticed the faint sounds of celebration had stopped. Looking over the city he noticed that what happened to the residence building wasn't an isolated occurrence – wherever one of the flares hit, it left devastation in its wake. He only had a few seconds to ponder this before he noticed another batch of flares start ascending into the sky from the distance. This particular barrage was not masked by fireworks, so it was pretty obvious

that they *were* artillery spells. They were under attack.

As the flares started dropping back to earth, Zorian began to panic. What the hell was he supposed to do!? Running away would be pointless since he didn't know what the flares were targeting. He could very well be running straight into the area of effect if he ran blindly. Wait a minute, why does *he* have to do anything? There are a bunch of capable mages in the building, he should just notify them and have them handle it. He rushed down into the dance hall.

He had barely stepped on to the stairway when he ran into Ilisa and Kyron.

"Zorian! What are you doing here?" Ilisa demanded.

"Err, I just went out for some fresh air," Zorian fumbled. "But that's not important right now!"

"I agree," Kyron said. "Kid, what was that blast? Don't tell me this is something you did?"

"Hardly," Zorian said. "Some kind of flares are falling all over the city, destroying everything they hit. Looks like some kind of powerful artillery spell."

Ilisa and Kyron shared a look between each other before turning back to him.

"Go join Akoja and the others in the dance hall," Ilisa told. "We'll see what is happening and teleport everyone into the shelters if necessary."

The both pushed past him and rushed to the roof, leaving Zorian to stumble into the dance hall in a daze. Akoja... Akoja wasn't in the dance hall. She left. Because of him. She was out there, maybe even already dead...

He shook his head and banished such thoughts out of his mind. He took out his divination compass and quickly cast a divination spell to locate her. He wasn't sure if it was going to work, since the spell he used could only find people you were 'familiar with' – in

other words, friends and family. Thankfully, it seemed that being classmates with her was enough of a connection for the spell to work.

He took a deep breath to steel his nerves. He was liable to get himself killed, but... well, it was kind of his fault. He didn't think he could live with himself if Akoja ended up dead because of him.

Like an intangible ghost, he weaved between agitated students and foreign dignitaries, ignored and unhindered, until he was near the exit. He slipped out of the building and then broke into the run in the direction indicated by the needle of his divination compass.



Trolls were pretty nasty creatures. There were several subspecies, but all of them were large 3-meter tall humanoids with tough leathery skin and supernatural regenerative abilities so strong they were able to reattach severed limbs simply by holding them to the matching stump for a few moments. The most numerous and famous subspecies was the forest troll, which had vivid green skin and roamed throughout the great forested expanse in the north. As Zorian watched a troupe of trolls strut through the streets, smashing windows and howling unintelligibly, he reflected that it was fortunate the acrid smoke wafting from the nearby burning buildings masked his scent. His textbooks all said a forest troll's sense of smell was frighteningly good.

Normally he would have wondered what such a large gathering of forest trolls was doing in the middle of a human city, relatively far away from their native lands, but the blades and maces they were holding told him all he needed to know. Those were weapons too advanced to have been produced by the trolls themselves, who were highly primitive and lacked such high

metal working skills. They were war trolls. Somebody armed these creatures and set them loose on the city.

Once they were gone, Zorian relaxed a little and tried to figure out what to do. He was such an idiot. Why, oh why did he have to run off without getting some help from the teachers first? Then again, he assumed the flares were the only danger, in which case getting to Akoja wouldn't be an issue, assuming a stray flare didn't get him. Instead he found the city overrun with monsters. This wasn't some kind of a terrorist attack like he assumed, it was a full-blown invasion! Sadly, the option to return to the dance hall was closed to him – a lot of the invading forces were converging towards the academy, cutting off his retreat path. With that in mind, Zorian set out towards Akoja. He kept himself in the shadows, knowing the invaders would quickly notice anyone caught in the open, such as that boy standing... over... there...

Is that Zach?

"Over here!" Zach shouted, waving his hand in the air. "I'm over here you stupid animals! Come and get me!"

Zorian gaped at the reckless stupidity of what he was witnessing. What the hell was that idiot doing!? No matter how talented a student he was, there was no way Zach could stand up to the sort of monstrosities that were stalking the city at the moment. But it was too late to do anything – attracted by Zach's shouting, the trolls came running back, giving a single collective battle cry before charging at the boy foolish enough to attract their attention. Zorian could tell from Zach's posture that he intended to fight the trolls, which he thought was pretty crazy – what could he do against a creature that regenerates from virtually any wound done to it? Only fire and acid could do permanent harm, and they didn't-

Zach grasped his staff firmly in his hand, his other hand outstretched in the direction of the charging trolls – a roaring fire-

ball erupted from his hand and exploded right in the middle of the troll formation. When the flames cleared, only charred corpses remained.

Zorian was shocked. A proper fireball like that was a 3 circle spell, and required a sizable amount of mana to cast, much more than any academy student had. Even Daimen could not have cast that spell when he was Zach's age. Yet not only had Zach successfully done it, he didn't even appear drained from the action. Indeed, when a flock of iron beaks attacked soon after, raining their deadly feathers at the boy, Zach simply erected an aegis – a freaking aegis! – around himself and peppered the birds with tiny fireballs that homed in on their targets, like magic missiles made out of fire. Zorian was transfixed by the sight of his classmate effortlessly fighting off hordes of monsters single-handedly. So much so that he almost failed to notice one of the winter wolves attacking Zach had stealthily broken off from the main pack and was sneaking up on him. Almost. Thankfully, some primal instinct alerted him to the danger and he threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the creature's deadly pounce.

Zorian cursed himself as he watched the winter wolf reorient itself with startling ease for something so large, ready for another pounce. He really should have expected to be targeted, considering the amount of attention Zach was drawing to himself. He should have used Zach's fighting as a distraction and fled while he had the chance. Now it was too late - Zorian knew he was not fast enough to outrun a winter wolf, and he had no combat spells with which to defend himself. Or rather, no spell rods and such. If he survived the evening, he would definitely learn a few combat invocations, obsolete as they may be. It was a big if, though.

A shining bolt of force slammed into the winter wolf's head, causing it to explode in a gory mess of blood and bone fragments. Zorian didn't know whether to be disgusted that he was showered

by some of the bloody mess or relieved he would live for a little while longer. He also noted that the effects of the bolt were a bit strong for a regular magic missile. He supposed this was just another example of Zach's baffling proficiency with combat magic.

"Zorian? What the hell are you doing here?"

Zorian looked at Zach speculatively. Noticing the trail of corpses left in the other boy's wake, Zorian eyed the staff in his right hand and the belt full of spell rods. For all his seeming recklessness, Zach certainly came prepared. He was half tempted to ask the boy the very same question, but decided that would be needlessly antagonistic. Zach did just save his life, after all. He decided to go for honesty – maybe the other boy would be willing to help him get to Akoja, considering his awe-inspiring fighting skills.

"Searching for Akoja. She left the dance a while before the attack and it's kind of my fault."

Zach groaned. "Man, and I even went to the trouble of making sure you go to the dance, too. It's like you want to get killed or something!"

"You?" asked Zorian incredulously. "You're the one that told Ilsa I wasn't planning to go? All this time I've blamed Benisek! How did you even know about it?"

"You always stay in your room and get killed in the initial barrage if I don't do something to stop it. And let me tell you, convincing you not to stay in your room without resorting to violence or getting Ilsa involved is a damn chore. You can really be a stubborn ass when you want to be," Zach said with a sigh.

Zorian stared at him, confused. The way Zach was talking, you'd think this kind of thing happens every day or something!

"But enough of that," said Zach cheerfully. "Let's go find Akoja before something eats her. You know the way?"

And so they did. They traveled through the burning streets of

the city, leaving a trail of dead invaders behind them. Zach didn't even try to avoid the monsters, simply plowing through them like an angry god out for vengeance. At one point they were even attacked by a horde of skeletons and an enemy mage, but Zach simply made the earth beneath their feet open up and swallow them. Zorian dutifully kept his mouth shut and never questioned Zach about his seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves or his knowledge of advanced magic that should be beyond his access level and proficiency, content to enjoy the benefits of Zach's skill and talent. He would never have come this far without Zach's help, and he was honestly grateful for the boy's assistance. Zach could keep his secrets, whatever they were.

They eventually found Akoja barricaded in the upper floor of one of the houses. Apparently she was chased there by a pack of winter wolves and then refused to leave for fear that the creatures were waiting for her to come out. Smart, really. Smarter than what Zorian had done, that's for sure. Fortunately, there was no trace of winter wolves around the house at this point – not that Zach was likely to have had any trouble with them if they *were* present – so they moved to the slightly frustrating task of convincing Akoja that it was safe to unbarricade the door. Apparently her experience with the winter wolves had shaken her up pretty badly.

Zorian was certain she would blame him for causing her to leave the safety of the dance hall, so he was quite surprised when Akoja immediately latched onto him when she finally opened the door, hugging him and sobbing into his shoulder.

"I thought I was going to die!" she wailed. "There were these huge birds flinging iron feathers everywhere and the winter wolves and..."

Zorian opened his mouth in confusion, unsure how to deal with such an emotional outburst. He shot Zach a pleading look, but the boy merely grinned at him cheekily, apparently amused by

the reaction.

"Ah, young love," Zach nodded to himself knowingly. "But I'm afraid you'll have to continue your heart-felt reunion back in the shelters."

"Yes!" Akoja shouted immediately, raising her face out of Zorian's shoulder. She totally ignored Zach's jab about them being in love, though Zorian suspected it was because she hadn't even heard that part. She was still clutching his torso with an iron grip, as if afraid he'd disappear if she let go. It was kind of painful but he refrained from telling her so. "The shelters! We'll be safe there!"

Zach flinched back for a moment before catching himself. It was so quick Akoja didn't appear to have noticed, but Zorian did. So the shelters weren't safe either? But apparently they were still safer than where they were right now, because Zach appeared determined to go through with it.

"Great!" said Zach cheerily, clapping his hands in satisfaction. He took one of the spell rods out of his belt and handed it to Akoja. "You hold on too, Zorian."

"What is that?" Zorian asked suspiciously. The rod had none of the markings that might identify what it was for, which made Zorian a bit leery of it. Using unknown magical objects without identifying what they're for was a big no-no if you wanted to remain healthy and alive into your old age.

"It's a teleport rod," Zach said. "It's programmed to transport whoever is holding it to the shelters. I've set it to a 30 second delay, so hold it before you're left behind."

"But what about you?" Akoja asked. "You need to hold on too before it activates!"

"Ah, no," Zach said, waving her off. "I still have unfinished business here."

"Unfinished business!?" Akoja protested. "Zach, this isn't a game! These things are going to kill you!"

"I'm perfectly capable-"

Zorian wasn't sure what tipped him off, exactly – he just got a vague feeling of dread and knew he had to react immediately, much like what happened when the winter wolf tried to get a jump on him earlier. Wrenching himself free from Akoja's grip with a sudden jerk, he pushed Zach out of the way of the incoming spell. An angry red ray surged through the air in front of them, passing right where Zach's head was only a few moments ago, and hit the wall behind them. The jagged beam of red light bit deep into the wall, gouging a deep trench in it and shrouding the area in a cloud of fine dust.

"Crap," Zach said. "He found me. Quick, hold the rod before-"

Akoja winked out of existence as the rod teleported her away to safety.

"-it activates," finished Zach in a long-suffering tone. "Damn it, Zorian, why didn't you hold on?!"

"You'd be dead, then!" Zorian protested. He wasn't going to let a person who helped him so much tonight die from a stray spell if he could help it. Besides, whoever had cast it would surely fall to Zach's magical might, just like the rest of the creatures and enemy mages they had encountered so far. Just how bad could this enemy caster be, really?

A sudden gust of air blew the dust away and a gaunt humanoid figure stepped into view. Zorian actually gasped in surprise as he took in the appearance of the thing in front of them. It was a skeleton wreathed in sickly green light. Its bones were black with a strange metallic sheen, as if they were not bones at all, but rather a facsimile of a skeleton made out of some kind of black metal. Encased in gold-decorated armor, with a scepter held tightly in one of its skeletal hands and a crown full of purple gemstones, the creature looked like some long-dead king risen from the dead.

It was a lich. It was a thrice-damned *lih*! Oh, they were so

going to die...

The lich swept its empty eye sockets over them. As Zorian's eyes met the black pits that once held the lich's eyes, an uncomfortable feeling washed over him, like the lich was peering into his very soul. After less than a second, the lich lazily shifted its attention to Zach, apparently dismissing Zorian as something of no consequence.

"So..." the lich spoke, its voice resonant with power, "You're the one that has been killing my minions."

"Zorian, run away while I deal with this guy," Zach said, clutching the staff in his hand.

Without waiting for a response, Zach launched a barrage of magic missiles towards the lich, who retaliated with a trio of purple beams as it erected an aegis around itself with a single wave of its bony hand. Two of them were aimed at Zach, but sadly enough the lich saw fit to aim one towards Zorian's retreating form. While it failed to hit Zorian directly, the beam's impact with the nearby ground created a sizeable explosion that drove stone shrapnel into his legs. The pain was immense, and Zorian collapsed on the ground in an instant, unable to take a single step further.

Over the next five minutes, Zorian painfully dragged himself behind a nearby cart, hoping that it would shield him from at least some of the destructive power that was being thrown around in the battle. Zach was keeping the lich occupied enough that it didn't send any more spells after Zorian, which was fortunate because Zorian was no longer in any state to evade them. He watched with growing unease as Zach and the lich exchanged various destructive spells that Zorian couldn't even identify, realizing with rising dread that his prediction of their grisly death was well founded – no matter how good Zach was, he was not even in the same league as the lich. The thing was toying with the other boy, and was bound

to tire of the game sooner or-

He winced as a spear-like red bolt punched straight through Zach's aegis and impaled the boy through his flank. He suspected the hit was in a non-vital spot only because the lich wished to gloat a little more, and his suspicions were all but confirmed when the creature didn't finish Zach off with anything destructive, opting instead to hurl Zach into the air with a single casual gesture. Zach collided with the wall near where Zorian was taking cover, and groaned in pain.

Apparently not in any sort of hurry, the lich approached slowly. It seemed unconcerned that Zach was rising shakily to his feet, a spell rod clenched tightly in his left hand. Zorian could see that his right hand was pressed tightly against the bleeding wound on his flank.

"You put up quite a fight, child," the lich said. "Impressive for someone who is supposed to be a mere academy student."

"Not... impressive enough," Zach gasped out, the spell rod dropping from his hand as he clutched the wound on his flank with both hands, apparently in great pain. "I guess... I'll have to... try harder... next time."

The lich chuckled. It was a strange sound, hardly fitting the creature. "Next time? Silly child, there will be no next time. There is no way I'm letting you live, surely you know that?"

"Bah," Zach spat, straightening himself with a grimace. "Enough talking, just get it over with."

"You seem surprisingly unconcerned considering you're about to die," the lich remarked conversationally.

"Ah, whatever," said Zach, rolling his eyes. "It's not like I'll be dead for good."

Zorian looked at Zach incredulously, not really understanding what Zach was getting at. The lich seemed to understand, though.

"Aaah, I see," the lich said. "You must be new to soul magic if you think this makes you invulnerable. I could just trap your soul in a soul jar, but I have a much better idea."

The lich casually gestured towards Zorian, and he suddenly felt his entire body freeze up as if it was encased in some alien force. Another wave and Zorian was hurled with great speed towards the shocked Zach, where he painfully slammed into the other boy. They both ended up on the ground in a tangle of limbs, and Zorian was relieved that at least the unknown force paralyzing him was gone.

"It doesn't matter if your soul can be reincarnated elsewhere if someone mutilates it beyond recognition before it gets there," the lich said. "After all, the soul may be immortal, but no one said it cannot be altered or added to."

Dimly, Zorian could hear the lich chanting in some strange language that definitely wasn't standard Ikosian used in traditional invocations, but any curiosity about this was washed away by a wave of pain and unidentifiable *wrongness* that suddenly slammed into him. He opened his mouth to scream but then his world suddenly erupted into bright light before suddenly going completely black.

Chapter Five

START OVER

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

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

Zorian stared at Kirielle in shock, trying to understand what happened. The last thing he remembered was the lich casting that spell at him and Zach, and then blackness. His eyes darted left and right, taking in his surroundings and confirming his suspicions – he was in his room, back in Cirin. That didn't make any sense, though. He was pleased that he survived the whole experience, but at the very least he expected to wake up in the hospital or something. And Kirielle shouldn't be this casual with him after he went through so harrowing an experience – not even she was this inconsiderate. Besides, this entire scene was... eerily familiar.

"Kiri?"

"Um, yes?"

"What day is it?" Zorian asked, already dreading the answer.

"Thursday."

He scowled. "I meant date, Kiri."

"First of Chariot. You're going to the academy today. Don't tell me you forgot," Kirielle prodded. Literally – she accompanied her words with a well-placed jab at his flank, sticking her bony little index finger in between his ribs. Zorian slapped her hand away, hissing in pain.

"I did not forget!" Zorian snapped. "I just..."

He stopped there. What was he supposed to tell her? Frankly, he had no idea what was going on himself!

"You know what?" he said after a moment of silence. "Never mind that, I think it's high time you got off of me."

Before Kirielle could answer, Zorian unceremoniously flipped her over the edge of the bed before jumping up himself.

He snatched his glasses from the set of drawers next to his bed and his eyes swept through his room with more attention to detail this time, seeking anything out of place, anything that might unmask this as a giant (if rather tasteless) prank. While his memory wasn't flawless, he had a habit of arranging his belongings in very specific ways to detect nosy family members rummaging through his belongings. He found nothing massively out of place, so unless his mysterious re-enactor knew his system inside and out (unlikely) or Kiri finally decided she'd respect the sanctity of his room while he was away (hell would sooner freeze over), this really was his room like he left it when he went to Cyoria.

Was it all a dream, then? It seemed altogether too real for a dream. His dreams had always been vague, nonsensical, and prone to evaporate out of his memory soon after he woke up. *These* felt exactly like his normal memories – no talking birds, floating pyramids, three-eyed wolves and other surreal scenes his dreams usually contained. And there was so much of it, too – surely a whole month worth of experiences is too much for a mere dream?

"Mom wants to talk to you," Kirielle told him from the floor, apparently not in any great hurry to get up. "But hey, can you show

me some magic before you get down? Please? *Pretty please?*"

Zorian frowned. Magic, huh? Come to think of it, he learned quite a bit of magic. Surely if this was all a particularly elaborate dream all the magic he learned there would be completely bogus, right?

He made a couple of sweeping gestures and words before cupping his hands in front of him. A floating orb of light promptly materialized above his palms.

Huh. Not just an elaborate dream, then.

"That's amazing!" Kirielle gushed, poking the orb with her finger only to have it pass straight through it. Not surprising, really, since it was just light. She withdrew her finger and curiously stared at it, as if expecting to find it changed somehow. Zorian mentally directed the orb to fly around the room and circle Kirielle a few times. Yep, he definitely knew the spell – he retained not just the memory of the casting procedure, but also the fine control he developed with repeated practice with it. You don't get things like that from a mere vision, even a prophetic one.

"More! More!" demanded Kirielle.

"Oh come on, Kiri," sighed Zorian. He really wasn't in the mood for her antics at the moment. "I indulged you, didn't I? Go find something else to amuse yourself now."

She pouted at him, but he was thoroughly immune to such things by now. Then she frowned for a moment and suddenly straightened as if remembering something.

Wait...

"No!" Zorian shouted, but he was already too late. Kiri already ran into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. "Damn it, Kiri, why now? Why not before I woke up?"

"Sucks to be you," she answered.

Zorian leaned forward until his forehead collided with the door. "I had forewarning and I still fell for it."

He frowned. Forewarning, indeed. Whatever his 'future memories' were, they seemed to be fairly reliable. Was Cyoria really going to get invaded during the summer festival, then? What should he do about that? What *could* he do about that? He shook his head and marched back to his room. He would not even contemplate that sort of question until he found out more about what had happened to him. He locked the door so he would have some privacy and sat on his bed. He needed to think.

Okay. So he lived through a whole month of school before... something happened... and then he woke up in his room back in Cirin, as if the entire month never happened. Even with magic factored in, that was preposterous. Time travel was impossible. He didn't have any books in his room that discussed the topic at any appreciable length, but all of the passages that dealt with time travel agreed that it couldn't be done. Even dimensional magic could only warp time, speeding it up or slowing it. It was one of the few things mages agreed was beyond the ability of magic to accomplish.

So how, then, was he living through it?

He was just in the process of consulting the books in his room for any type of magic that could 'fake' time travel in some way when a knock on his door interrupted his thoughts, and he suddenly realized he was still in his pajamas and that mother wanted to talk to him quite a while ago. He quickly changed and opened the door, only to find himself under the scrutiny of two women, only one of which was his mother.

He almost greeted Ilsa by name, but he caught himself in time.

"A teacher from the academy has come to talk to you," his mother said, her disapproving stare telling him she was going to give him an earful once Ilsa left.

"Greetings," Ilsa said. "I am Ilsa Zileti, from Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts. I was hoping to speak to you about some

matters before you leave. It won't take long."

"Of course," said Zorian. "Um, where do you..."

"Your room shall suffice," Ilsa said.

"I'll bring you something to drink," his mother said, excusing herself.

Zorian watched Ilsa as she unpacked various papers and placed them on his desk (what was she doing with those, anyway?), trying to decide how to proceed with this. If his future memories were valid, she should be handing him the scroll right about...

Yeah, there it is. Knowing what's going to happen in advance is weird.

For the sake of appearances Zorian gave the scroll a cursory examination before channeling mana into it. It was exactly how he remembered it – the calligraphy, the flowery official-sounding phrases, the elaborate crest at the bottom of the document – and Zorian felt a wave of dread wash over him. What the hell had he gotten himself involved in? He had no idea what was happening to him, but it was big. *Very* big.

He had the urge to tell Ilsa about his predicament and seek her advice, but he restrained himself. It sounded like the most sensible thing to do – surely a fully trained mage like her was far more qualified for tackling this than he was – but what could he possibly tell her? That he was remembering things that hadn't happened yet? Yeah, that would go over well. Besides, considering the nature of his future memories, he could easily see himself arrested if a conspiracy to invade Cyoria was really discovered thanks to his warnings. After all, it's far more likely his shocking knowledge comes from being a defector of the conspiracy than him being some kind of weird time traveler. An image of a couple of government agents torturing him for information briefly flittered through his mind and he shuddered.

No, best to keep all this to himself for now.

So for the next 10 minutes, Zorian basically reenacted his memories of his initial interaction with Ilsa, not seeing the point in choosing differently this time – all of his choices were made for reasons that were currently every bit as valid as they were in his future memories. He didn't argue with Ilsa about Xvim this time around, though, since he already knew arguing over that topic was pointless, and he didn't request a bathroom break, since he already knew what electives he wished to take. Ilsa seemed completely indifferent to his strange decisiveness, apparently just as eager as he was to get this whole thing out of the way. Then again, why would she be surprised at his decisiveness? She had no future memories to compare this entire encounter to, unlike him. Hell, she didn't even know him up until now.

Zorian sighed and shook his head. They really did feel just like normal memories, and it was hard to ignore them. This is going to be a one long month.

"Are you alright, Mr. Kazinski?"

Zorian glanced at Ilsa curiously, trying to divine why she asked him that. She glanced towards his hands – only for a moment, but Zorian caught it. His hands were shaking. He balled them into fists and took a deep breath.

"I'm fine," he said. A second or so of uncomfortable silence ensued, Ilsa apparently unwilling to continue with her closing speech while she continued to study him. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Ilsa said. "That's why I'm here."

"What do you think about time travel?"

She was clearly taken aback by the question – it was probably the last thing she expected him to ask, or at least close to the bottom of the list. She composed herself very quickly though.

"Time travel is impossible," Ilsa said firmly. "Time can only be dilated or compressed. Never skipped or reversed."

"Why?" asked Zorian, honestly curious. He had never actually

seen an explanation for the impossibility of time travel, though that might be because he wasn't terribly interested in the topic up until now.

Ilsa sighed. "I admit I'm not particularly knowledgeable about the details, but our best theories indicate that going against temporal currents is utterly impossible. As in 'draw a square circle' impossible, not 'leap over the ocean' impossible. The river of time flows only in one direction. Beyond that, innumerable attempts have been made in recorded past, all ending in failure." She gave him a sharp look. "I sincerely hope you won't waste your talents on such a fool's quest."

"I was just curious," Zorian said defensively. "I was just reading a chapter discussing limitations of magic and wondered why the author was so certain time travel is impossible."

"Well now you know," Ilsa said, getting up. "Now if that's all, I really should be going. I'll be happy to answer any further questions on Monday after class. Have a nice day."

Zorian watched her leave and shut the door behind her before collapsing back on his bed. Definitely a long month.



For once the train ride didn't put Zorian to sleep. He had subtly prodded mother with some sensitive topics when she tried to scold him and he was pretty sure this wasn't some kind of elaborate illusion, unless the illusionist was aware of some very closely kept family secrets. And he seemed far too lucid for this to be some kind of induced hallucination. As far as he could tell at the moment, he really did travel back in time. He had spent most of the train ride writing down everything of importance he could think of in one of his notebooks. He didn't really think the memories were going to fade any time soon, but it helped him organize his thoughts

and notice details he might have otherwise missed. He noted that he forgot to retrieve his books from under the Kiri's bed in all the confusion, but decided it didn't matter. If the classes were anything like they were the last time around, he wouldn't need them for the duration of the first month.

It was that last spell the lich performed on him and Zach, Zorian was sure of it. The trouble was, Zorian had no idea what the spell was. Even the words were unfamiliar. Standard incantations used Ikosian words as their base, and Zorian knew enough of Ikosian to get a general feel of a spell just by listening to what the caster's chanting, but the lich used a different language for his incantation. Fortunately, Zorian had a really good memory and remembered most of the chant, so he wrote it down in his trusty notebook in phonetic form. He was pretty sure he wouldn't find the spell itself anywhere within his clearance level, as the spell was probably highly restricted and kept out of reach of first circle mages like him, but he would see about identifying the language and finding a proper dictionary in the academy library.

The other clue to this whole thing was Zach himself. The boy was capable of fighting a lich – a freaking *lich*! – for several minutes before succumbing to it. Even though the lich had been toying with him, it was still pretty impressive. Zorian would put Zach on par with a 3 circle mage, and probably more. What the hell was that guy doing with academy students then? Something was definitely strange about Zach, though Zorian had no intention of confronting the guy directly until he found out more about what's going on. For all he knew, it could be one of those 'you know about us, so now we have to kill you' sort of things. He would have to tread carefully around the Noveda heir.

Zorian slammed the notebook shut and ran his hand through his hair. No matter how he looked at it, this whole situation seemed utterly crazy. Did he really have memories from the

future or was he simply going insane? Both possibilities were terrifying. He was in no way qualified to tackle something like this on his own, but he didn't know how to get other people to help him without being carted off either to a madhouse or an interrogation chamber.

He resolved to think about it later. As in, tomorrow later. This whole thing was simply too weird, and he needed to sleep on it before he decides anything.

"Excuse me, is this seat free?"

Zorian glanced at the speaker, recognizing her after a second of recollection. The nameless green turtleneck girl that joined him in his compartment when they took a stop at Korsä. Of course, the last time she didn't bother to ask for permission before taking a seat. What changed? Ah, it didn't matter – what *did* matter is that last time she was soon followed by four other girls. Very loud, very obnoxious girls. No way he'd be spending the rest of the train ride listening to their banter... *again*.

"Yeah," he nodded. "In fact, I was just leaving. We're stopping at Korsä, right? Good day, miss."

And then he quickly grabbed his luggage and went to search for another compartment, abandoning the girl to her fate.

Maybe these future memories are good for something, after all.



Bam!

"Roach!"

Bam! Bam! Bam!

"Roach, open the thrice damned door! I *know* you're in here!"

Zorian rolled over in his bed and groaned. What the hell was Taiven doing here this early? No wait... He snatched the clock

from his dresser and brought it in front of his face... she wasn't early, he just slept past noon. Huh. He distinctly remembered going straight to the academy from the train station and falling asleep minutes after reaching his room, yet he still overslept like this. Apparently dying and then awakening in the past is tiresome business.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" shouted Zorian. "Stop banging on my door, already!"

Naturally, she just kept banging on it with more enthusiasm. Zorian rushed to make himself presentable and stomped towards the door. Wrenching the door open, he gave Taiven a withering look...

...which she promptly ignored.

"Finally!" she said. "What the hell took you so long!?"

"I was sleeping," Zorian growled.

"Really?"

"Yes," ground out.

"But-"

"I was tired," Zorian snapped. "Very tired. And what the hell are you waiting for? Get inside."

She rushed inside and Zorian took a moment to collect himself before he confronted her. In his future memories, she never visited him once after he refused to go along with her mission to the sewers, which spoke volumes about her true feelings about this 'friendship' of theirs. Then again, he hardly even thought about her himself until now, so he probably shouldn't judge. In any case, he was even less inclined to join her on this mission now than he was in his future memories – he actually had more pressing matters to attend to this time, in addition to general apprehensiveness that was still as valid now as it was then. Accordingly, he felt a lot

less reluctance in simply blowing her off, and it only took him an hour to convince her to leave him alone.

That done, he immediately set out for the library, making a short detour to a nearby bakery for a quick bite to tide him over. Once in the library he started searching for books on the topic of time travel and trying to identify the language the lich used in his spell.

To call it disappointing would be calling it mildly. For one thing, there were no books on time travel. The topic was not considered a serious field of study, what with it being impossible and all. What little was written about it was scattered across innumerable volumes, hidden in unmarked sections and paragraphs of otherwise unrelated books. Piecing together these scattered mentions was an absolute chore, and not all that rewarding either – none of it was useful in solving the mystery of his future memories. Finding the language the lich used in his spell was even more frustrating, since he failed to even identify the language, much less translate the chant.

He spent the entire weekend fruitlessly sifting through library texts, finally abandoning that avenue of research when it became obvious it wasn't producing any results. Plus the library workers were starting to give him weird looks at his choice of literature and he didn't want to create any unfortunate rumors. Hopefully he would be able to trick Zach into revealing what the hell was going on when school started.



"You're late."

Zorian stared at Akoja's stern face in quiet contemplation. He was glad he wouldn't have to deal with any drama because of his disastrous evening with her – almost as glad as he was about the

fact that he wasn't dead – but he couldn't help but wonder what her outburst had been about. She didn't really look like she had a crush on him, so why did his comment hit her so heavily?

"What?" she asked, and Zorian realized he had been staring at her a little too long. Oops.

"Ako, why are you telling me this when more than half the class isn't even here yet?" he asked.

"Because there is at least a chance you will listen, unlike them," Akoja admitted. "Also, someone like you should be an example to other students, not descend to their level."

"Someone like me?" inquired Zorian.

"Just get inside," she snapped irritably.

He sighed and went inside. It was probably for the best to leave things be – he had other problems to deal with, and she was far too rule-bound for his tastes anyway.

He didn't know what he was expecting to happen when he walked into the class. Everyone to stop what they were doing and stare at him, maybe? At least then he would have a reason for feeling so unnerved at attending his first class of the year for the second time. But of course they did no such thing. It wasn't a second time for them, and there was nothing visibly irregular about him for them to take notice. He quashed his unease and sat down in the back of the class, discreetly scanning new arrivals for signs of Zach. He was sure the other boy was connected to this somehow, and the mysterious boy appeared to be Zorian's best chance at understanding what was happening to him.

There was a brief commotion when Briam's fire drake familiar hissed up a storm and started chasing Briam's terrified neighbor across the classroom before Briam calmed it down. Apparently the magical reptile liked the unfortunate boy even less than it did Zorian. In any case, Ilsa came in soon after and started the class.

Zach never showed up.

Zorian spent the entire class in a daze, shocked at this turn of events. Where the hell was Zach? Everything happened almost exactly as it did in his future memories so far, with Zach's absence being the first major deviation. This firmly cemented Zach as somehow connected to this madness, but it also put the boy out of Zorian's reach for the moment.

The lecture was even more annoying now than it was the first time he listened to it, since from his perspective he went through these review sessions less than a month ago. Apparently Ilsa worked off some kind of a script, because the lecture was virtually identical to the one from his memory, the only difference being that Zach wasn't there to compete with Akoja for answering Ilsa's questions to the class.

Funny how things seem clearer in retrospect. Zach was acting strange right from the start, in that very first lecture, but Zorian thought nothing of it. Sure, Zach volunteering to answer the teacher's questions was out of character for the boy, but not completely implausible. It was just a review session anyway, and they had to know these things to pass the certification. It took two weeks before people really began to take notice the extent of Zach's sudden improvement.

So many questions, so few answers. He could only hope that Zach would show up soon.



Zach didn't come to class that day, or the next, or the day after that. By Friday, Zorian was pretty sure the other boy wouldn't be showing up at all. According to Benisek, Zach simply disappeared from his family mansion on the very same day that Zorian took the train to Cyoria, and nobody had seen a hint of him ever since. Zorian didn't think he could cook up anything the investigators hired

by the boy's guardian hadn't thought of doing, and he didn't want to attract attention to himself by asking around, so he reluctantly put the mystery of Zach aside for the moment.

His schoolwork was going well, at least. Thanks to his foreknowledge, he aced Nora Boole's surprise tests and didn't really have to study for any subject – a small refresher was sufficient to coast him through pretty much anything. Once his warding class really gets going that's probably going to change, but for now he had all the free time he wanted to deliberate on what he should do about the rapidly approaching summer festival and the accompanying assault.

Sadly, with Zach absent, Zorian had hit dead ends in all the clues he had, and was now at loss how to proceed.

"Come in."

Zorian opened the door to Xvim's office and defiantly met the man's gaze. He was pretty confident in the accuracy of his 'future' memories by now, Zach's mysterious absence aside, so he knew this was going to be another exercise in frustration. He was tempted to boycott the meetings, but he suspected it was his stoic perseverance in the face of the man's antagonism that eventually convinced Ilsa to take him under her wing. And besides, he felt that he would be doing Xvim a favor if he quit – Zorian had a distinct feeling that the man was trying to get him to quit the last time around – and he was far too spiteful to do that. He sat down without prompting, a little disappointed that the man hadn't remarked upon his intentionally rude gesture.

"Zorian Kazinski?" Xvim asked. Zorian nodded and expertly snatched the pen that the man had throw at him out of the air, having expected it this time.

"Show me your basic three," the man ordered, not in the least bit surprised at the feat of coordination.

Instantly, without even an extra deep breath, Zorian opened

his palm, the pen practically jumping out of his palm and into the air.

"Make it spin," Xvim said.

Zorian's eyes widened. What happened to 'start over'? His current attempt wasn't any worse than what he displayed during their last session before that fateful dance, and Xvim's only response that night had been 'start over', just like any other time. What changed *now*?

"Are you having problems with hearing?" Xvim asked. "Make it spin!"

Zorian blinked, finally realizing he should be focusing on the current session instead of his memories. "What? What do you mean 'make it spin'? That's not part of the basic three..."

Xvim sighed dramatically and slowly took another pen and levitated it over his own palm. Instead of just hanging in the air like Zorian's, however, Xvim's pen was spinning like a fan.

"I... have no idea how to do that," Zorian admitted. "We weren't taught how to do that in classes."

"Yes, it is criminal how badly the classes are failing our students," Xvim said. "Such a simple variation of a levitation exercise should not be beyond the grasp of a certified mage. No matter, we shall correct this deficiency before we move on to other matters."

Zorian sighed. Great. No wonder no one ever mastered the basic three to Xvim's liking if the man keeps redefining what 'mastered' means. There were probably hundreds of 'small variations' of each of the basic three, enough to spend decades learning them all, so little wonder no one could exhaust them all in two measly years. Especially considering Xvim's standards for labeling the skill 'mastered'.

"Go on," Xvim urged. "Start."

Zorian focused intensely on the pen hanging above his palm, trying to figure out how to do that. It should be relatively simple.

He just had to affix a stabilization point in the middle of the pen and put pressure on the ends, right? At least, that's the first think that popped into his head. He had just managed to get the pen to move a bit when he felt a familiar object impact into his forehead.

Zorian glared at Xvim, cursing himself for forgetting about the man's damnable marbles. Xvim glanced at the pen that was still hovering over Zorian's palm.

"You didn't lose focus," Xvim remarked. "Good."

"You threw a marble at me," Zorian accused.

"I was hurrying you up," Xvim said, unrepentant. "You're too slow. You must be faster. Faster, faster, faster! Start over."

Zorian sighed and returned to his task. Yup, definitely an exercise in frustration.



Between his unfamiliarity with the exercise and Xvim's constant interruptions, Zorian only managed to get the pen to wobble by the end of the session, which was... a little humiliating, actually. His above average shaping skills were one of the few things that set him aside from his fellow mages, and he felt he should have done much better, despite Xvim's repeated sabotage attempts. Fortunately, a book describing the exercise in detail was easy to find in the academy library, so he would hopefully master it by next week. Well, not *master* it – not in the sense that Xvim wanted him to – but he at least wanted to know what he was doing before he tackled his next session with Xvim.

Of course, normally he wouldn't be willing to pour that much effort into a lousy shaping exercise, but he needed a distraction. At the beginning, the entire time travel situation was so patently ridiculous that he found it easy to remain calm and collected. Some part of him kept expecting that the whole thing was a

double dream or something, and that he would wake up one day and not remember a thing. That part was becoming panicked and agitated now that it became obvious that the situation he faced was real. What the hell was he supposed to do? Zach's mysterious absence weighted heavily upon him, inflaming his paranoia and making him reluctant to tell anyone about the invasion. Zorian was not a fundamentally selfless person and didn't want to save people only to screw himself over in the end. Whatever his future memories really were, they were in essence his second chance at life – he was pretty sure he died at the end of his future memories – and he had no intention to squander it. He did consider it his ethical duty to warn people of the danger threatening the city, but there had to be a way to do it without destroying his life or reputation.

The simplest idea would be to warn as many people as possible (thus ensuring that at least some of them take the warnings seriously) and do so face-to-face, since written communications can be ignored in a way that is not really possible in personal interactions. Unfortunately, that would almost certainly paint him as a madman until he's eventually vindicated by the actual assault. *If* there is an assault, that is – what if the conspirators decide to lay low upon having their plans unmasked and the invasion doesn't happen? What if nobody takes him seriously until it's too late and then decide to turn him into a scapegoat in order to shift responsibility away from themselves? What if one of the people he tries to warn is part of the conspiracy and has him killed before he can tell anyone else? What if, what if... way too many what ifs. And he had a sneaking suspicion that one of those what ifs was responsible for Zach's disappearance.

As a result of these musings, the idea of staying anonymous appealed to him more and more with each passing day. The problem was that sending a message to a bunch of people without having it

traced back to you was not at all simple when magic got involved. Divinations weren't all-powerful, but Zorian had only academic understanding of their limitations, and his precautions probably wouldn't hold against a motivated search by a skilled diviner.

Zorian sighed and started outlining a tentative plan into his notebook, completely ignoring their history teacher's enthusiastic lecture. He had to figure out who to contact, what to put into the letters, and how to ensure they couldn't be traced back to him. He somehow doubted the government would allow authors to publish instructions on how to evade detection from law enforcement, but he would still check the library to see what they have on the topic. He was so caught up in his self-appointed task he barely noticed when the class ended, furiously scribbling away while everyone else packed and filed out of the classroom. He definitely didn't notice Benisek peering over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

Zorian slammed his notebook shut in a reflexive maneuver as soon as Benisek started talking and gave the other boy a nasty glare.

"It's impolite to look over other people's shoulders," Zorian remarked.

"Jumpy, aren't we?" smiled Benisek, loudly dragging a chair from the nearby table so he could sit on the other side of Zorian's table. "Relax, I didn't see anything."

"Not for the lack of trying," remarked Zorian. Benisek only grinned wider. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Just wanted to talk for a bit," Benisek shrugged. "You're been really withdrawn this year. You've got this frustrated look on your face all the time, and you're always busy even though it's the start of the school year. Wanted to know what was bothering you, you know?"

Zorian sighed. "This isn't something you can help me with, Ben..."

Benisek made a strangled noise, apparently outraged by his remark. "What do you mean I can't help you!? I'll have you know I'm an expert on girl trouble."

Now it was Zorian's turn to make a strangled noise. "Girl trouble!?"

"Oh come on," Benisek laughed. "Constantly distracted? Spacing out in the middle of the class? Making plans for sending anonymous letters? It's obvious, man! Who's the lucky girl?"

"There is no 'lucky girl'," Zorian growled. "And I thought you didn't see anything?"

"Listen, I don't think sending anonymous letters is a good idea," Benisek said, completely ignoring his remarks. "That's so... first year, you know? You should just walk up to her and tell her how you feel."

"I don't have time for this," Zorian sighed, getting up from his seat.

"Hey, come on..." protested Benisek, trailing after him. "Man, you're one touchy guy, did anybody tell you that? I was just..."

Zorian ignored him. He really didn't need this right now.



In retrospect, Zorian should have known that simply ignoring Benisek wasn't such a good idea. It only took 2 days for most of the class to 'know' that Zorian has a crush on someone, and their loud speculation was annoying as hell. Not to mention distracting. Still, his displeasure at the rumors evaporated when Neolu approached him one day and gave him a short list of 'books he might find useful'. He had half a mind to set the list on fire, especially since the list was decorated with dozens of little hearts, but in the end his natural curiosity won over and he went to the library to check them out. He figured that at the very least he'd get a good laugh out of them.

He got more than a good laugh, though – instead of silly love advice like he expected, the books Neolu recommended were all about making sure your letters, gifts, and such couldn't be traced back to you with divinations and other magic. Apparently if you call such advice *Forbidden Love: Mysteries of Scarlet Letters Revealed* and phrase it as relationship advice you can get straight past the usual censorship such topics would normally be subjected to.

Of course, he had no idea how reliable the advice in those books really was, and the librarian looked at him funny when he checked out books like that, but he was still pleased to have found them. If this whole thing worked out in the end he'd have to do something nice for Neolu.

So as the summer festival approached, Zorian prepared and plotted. He bought a whole stack of generic paper sheets, pens, and envelopes in one of the stores that looked too poor and disorganized to track their customers purchases. He worded the letters carefully to avoid revealing any personal details. He made sure not to touch the paper with his bare hands at any point, and that none of his sweat, hair, or blood ended up in the envelope. He deliberately wrote in a blocky, formal script that looked nothing like his normal handwriting. He destroyed the pens, the excess paper, and envelopes he didn't use in the end.

And then, a week before the festival, he put the letters in different public postal boxes all over Cyoria and waited.

It was... nerve-wracking, to say the least. Nothing happened, though – no one came to confront him about the letters, which was good, but also nothing out of the ordinary seemed to be happening. Did no one believe him? Did he mess up somehow and the letters ended up not reaching their intended recipients? Are they being so subtle in their reaction that no disturbance is being made? The wait was killing him.

Finally, he had enough. On the evening before the dance he

decided he'd done everything he could and took the first train out of the city. His letters may or may not have worked, but this way he'll be alright regardless. If anyone asked (though he doubted they would), he'll use his trusty 'alchemical accident' excuse. He messed up a potion and breathed in some hallucinogenic fumes, only coming to his senses when he was already outside of Cyoria. Yes, that's exactly what happened.

As the train sped away from Cyoria in the dead of a night, Zorian suppressed his unease and feelings of guilt for doing so little to warn anyone of the approaching attack. What else could he have done? Nothing, that's what. Nothing at all.

After a while he fell into uneasy sleep, the rhythmic thump-ing of the train his lullaby, visions of falling stars and skeletons wreathed in green light haunting his dreams.



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

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

Zorian gaped at his little sister incredulously, his mouth opening and closing periodically. What, again?

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" Zorian growled, and Kirielle quickly got off of him and scooted away fearfully. Apparently she thought his ire was directed at *her*. "Not you Kiri, I... I just had a nightmare, that's all."

He couldn't believe it, it happened *again*!? What the hell? He was glad it happened last time, since it meant he wasn't... you know, *dead*. But now? Now it was just *freaky*. Why was this happening to him?

Oh, and while he was lamenting his fate internally, Kirielle barricaded herself in the bathroom again. God damn it all!

CONCENTRATE AND TRY AGAIN

Zorian stared at the endless fields blurring past him, the silence of the otherwise empty compartment only broken by the rhythmic thumping of the train's machinery. He looked calm and relaxed, but it was only a practiced façade and nothing more.

His mask of stoicism might have seemed silly, as there was no one around to judge him, but over the years Zorian had found that acting calm on the outside helped him achieve calm more easily on the inside as well. He needed any help he could get in achieving inner peace now, because he was about to start panicking like a headless chicken.

Why was this happening again? The first time it had happened, he was dead sure the lich was responsible. The spell had hit him, and then he woke up in the past. Cause and effect. He hadn't been hit by some mysterious spell this time, though – not unless someone had snuck into the train compartment while he was sleeping, which he found very unlikely. No, he had just dozed off and woke up in the past again, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Then again, it did highlight some things that had been bothering him until now. After all, why had the lich cast a time travel spell on him? It seemed rather counterproductive to the whole

'secret invasion' plot. Time travel seemed too purposeful and complex to be an accidental side effect, and he seriously doubted the lich had used a spell whose effects it did not understand. Even a neophyte like him knew what a horrible idea it was to use a spell you don't understand in an uncontrolled environment, and the undead spellcaster wouldn't have reached the level it did if it was willing to do something so foolish for the sake of a couple of brats it had already defeated anyway. No, there was a simpler explanation: the lich wasn't responsible for his time traveling problems. It really *had* been trying to kill them. 'Them', plural, because Zach had also been the target. The same Zach that had been shockingly good in all his classes all of a sudden. The same Zach that was wandering around the city armed to the teeth with combat magic that should be beyond any academy student. The same Zach that had been making very curious offhand comments all month long...

Perhaps it was Zach, not the lich, who had cast the time travel spell?

Zach being a time traveler would explain his vast abilities and inexplicable academic improvement quite nicely. Since this particular method of time travel seems to just send a person's mind into their younger body, he could be of an arbitrarily large age, and what Zorian remembered of Zach's various comments led him to believe the boy had lived through this particular time period many times over. A mage with decades of experience and detailed foreknowledge would no doubt find 3 year curriculum laughably easy.

Though even if Zach had been the one to cast the time travel spell, there was still left the question of why Zorian was thrown back too. It could have easily been an accident – he knew that grabbing a mage while they're in the process of casting a teleport spell could pull you along for the ride, and they were basically tangled with one another – but that didn't explain why Zorian was repeating this month for the *second* time. Zach had been absent all

month long, and thus hadn't had the opportunity to cast *anything* at Zorian.

He didn't know what to think. Hopefully Zach would be present for questioning this time around.

"Now stopping in Korsa," a disembodied voice echoed, the faulty speakers crackling with signal noise every once in a while. "I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you."

What, already? A glance through the window revealed the familiar white tablet confirming his arrival at the trading hub. He was half-tempted to get off the train and spend the entire month fooling around and trying to forget this whole time travel business, but quickly dismissed it. Blowing off the beginning of the school year like that would be really irresponsible and self-destructive, even if going through another identical month of classes was anything but appealing. There *was* a possibility that he would be flung back into the past for the *third* time, of course, but that wasn't something he should be relying on. There was no way the spell could keep sending him back indefinitely, after all – it was bound to run out of mana sooner or later. Probably sooner, since time travel must be pretty high level.

...right?

"Um..."

Zorian snapped out of his thoughts and finally noticed the boy peering into his compartment. He frowned. He specifically chose this compartment because it was completely empty during his... second attempt at life. After he had left the green turtleneck girl to her giggling fate, he had come here for some peace, so this time he decided to be proactive and went here right from the start. Apparently it wasn't that simple. He supposed that his very presence attracted the boy – some people just plain liked company, and would avoid empty compartments.

"Yes?" Zorian said politely, hoping the boy just wanted to ask

him something instead of trying to find a seat.

He was mistaken.

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

"No, go right ahead," said Zorian, giving the boy a forced smile. Damn.

The boy smiled brightly at him, and quickly dragged his luggage in. A lot of luggage.

"First year, right?" Zorian asked, unable to help himself. So much for his plan on remaining silent and creeping the boy out into leaving the compartment. Oh well.

"Yeah," the boy agreed. "How did you know?"

"Your luggage," Zorian remarked. "You do realize the academy grounds are pretty far from the main station? Your arms are going to fall off by the time you get there."

The boy blinked. Apparently he *didn't* know. "Um, it's really not that bad, right?"

Zorian shrugged. "You better hope it doesn't rain."

"Ha ha," the boy laughed nervously. "I'm sure I'm not that unlucky."

Zorian smirked. Ah, the benefits of foresight. Or was it hindsight? Language really wasn't designed with the possibility of time-travel in mind.

"Ah! I didn't introduce myself!" The boy suddenly blurted out. "I'm Byrn Ivarin."

"Zorian Kazinski."

The boy's eyes lit up immediately. "Like-"

"Like Daimen Kazinski, yes," Zorian said, suddenly finding the window incredibly interesting.

The boy stared at him expectantly, but if he had expected further elaboration from Zorian on the subject, he was about to be sorely disappointed. The last thing Zorian wanted to do was talk about his eldest brother.

"So, um, are you related to Daimen Kazinski or is your last name just a coincidence?" asked the boy after a lengthy pause.

Zorian pretended he couldn't hear him, and instead retrieved his notebook from the neighboring seat and studied it intently. It was almost completely empty, since all his previous notes about the invasion and the mystery of his 'future memories' were now gone, lost in a future he left behind him. It wasn't much of a loss, since the vast majority of those notes had been worthless – hollow speculations and dead-end leads that hadn't got him any closer to solving this mystery. Still, he had written down a few things he remembered from his previous notes, like the spell chant the lich had uttered before killing him. Yes, Zach was likely responsible for all of this, but he couldn't be *sure*...

After judging the silence to have lasted for a fittingly awkward amount of time, Zorian looked up from his notebook to fixate a look of confusion at the waiting boy.

"Huh? Did you say something?" Zorian pretended, frowning slightly as if he honestly hadn't heard a word of the question he was asked.

"Err, never mind," the boy backpedaled. "It's not important."

Zorian gave the boy a genuine smile. At least he could take a hint.

He talked to the boy for a while, mostly just answering the boy's questions about first year curriculum, before growing bored with it and starting to feign interest in his notebook again, hoping he will take the hint.

"What's so interesting about that notebook, anyway?" He asked, either oblivious to Zorian's disinterest in continued conversation or deliberately ignoring it. "Don't tell me you're studying already?"

"No, these are just notes on some personal research," said Zorian. "It's not going too well so I'm a little frustrated with it. My

mind keeps drifting to it." Especially when the alternative was talking to an overly inquisitive first year.

"The academy library—"

"First thing I tried," Zorian sighed. "I'm not stupid, you know?"

The boy rolled his eyes at him. "Did you search for the books yourself or did you ask the librarian to help you? Mother works as a librarian, and they have these special divination spells that let them find things in minutes that would take you decades if you search by title and skimming alone."

Zorian opened his mouth before closing it. Ask the librarian for help, huh? Okay, maybe he *is* stupid.

"Well... it's not really a topic I want to bother the librarian with," Zorian tried. Which was true, but he knew he'd end up trying it anyway. "Maybe I could find the spells themselves in the spell repository? But no, if they are anything like other divination spells it's using them correctly and interpreting the results that's the problem, not casting them..."

"You could always get a job in the library," the boy offered. "If the academy library is anything like the one my mother works in, they're always desperate for help. They teach their employees how to use those spells as a matter of course."

"Really?" Zorian asked, rather intrigued by the idea.

"It's worth a try," he said, shrugging.

For the rest of the ride, Zorian stopped trying to evade conversation. Byrn had definitely earned some respect from him.



"Of course! We're always looking for help!"

Well... that was easy.

"We can't pay you much, understand – that miserable gnome of a headmaster cut our budget again! – but we're very flexible about work time and we've got a pretty friendly atmosphere here..."

Zorian waited patiently for the librarian to run out of steam. She was an unassuming middle aged woman at first glance, but the moment she had begun speaking he realized her looks were rather deceiving – she was cheerful and had a sort of indescribable energy about her. Just standing around her made Zorian feel the same sort of pressure he felt when stuck in a crowd of people, and he had to rein in his instinct to step back as if from a raging fire.

"I'm guessing you don't get many work offers, then?" Zorian tried. "Why is that? Shouldn't people be fighting tooth and nail to work in a place like this? It's a pretty famous library."

She snorted, and Zorian could swear he could *feel* the derision and a touch of bitterness in the seemingly innocuous sound. "Academy regulations require us to only hire employees that are first circle mages or higher. Most graduates have better paying and more glamorous options than this," she waved her hand towards rows or bookshelves around them, "reducing us to hiring students. Who are..."

She suddenly stopped and blinked, as if remembering something. "But anyway, enough of that!" she said, clapping her hands and beaming at him. "From this day on, you're one of the library assistants. Congratulations! If you have any questions, I'll be glad to answer them."

It was only through superhuman willpower that Zorian stopped himself from rolling his eyes at her. He never agreed to anything, merely inquired about the *possibility* of employment... and she undoubtedly knew that. But oh well, he *did* want the job, and not just because he was hoping to learn some nifty new spells and translate the lich's chant – he suspected that library employees got to access parts of the library that would normally be restricted to him as a first circle mage, and that was just too much of a temptation to pass up.

"Question one," said Zorian, "How often do I come to work?"

She blinked, surprised for a moment. No doubt she expected him to protest her presumptuousness. "Well... when *can* you come? Between the classes, and the need for study time and other commitments, most of our student employees work once or twice a week. How much time can you set aside for this?"

"The classes are pretty easy at this point," Zorian said. "We're mostly doing the review of our second year, which I know like the back of my hand. Setting aside one day for unexpected developments, I could be here 4 times a week. My weekends are mostly free too, if you need any help then."

Zorian mentally berated himself for talking like that – the classes hadn't even started yet, so how would he know what they consisted of? Luckily, the librarian didn't call him out on it. Instead her eyes immediately lit up upon hearing this and she started shouting.

"Ibery!" she called out. "I've got a new partner for you!"

A bespectacled girl carrying an armload of books popped out of the small room adjacent to the information desk to see what was going on. Oh. It was the green turtleneck girl (she was wearing it even now) that he shared a compartment with...

...except he had chosen a seat on the other side of the train this time, so they never met on the train. Oh well, probably wouldn't have mattered anyway.

"Anyway, I believe some introductions are in order," the librarian said. "I am Kirithishli Korisova, one of the few actual librarians in this place. This pretty lady," she gestured towards the turtleneck girl, who blushed at the praise and shifted uncomfortably, clutching the stack of books tighter in her arms, "is our resident busy little bee, Ibery Ambercomb. Ibery has been working here since last year, and I don't know what I'd do without her. Ibery, this is Zorian Kazinski."

The girl suddenly perked up at this. "Kazinski? As in..."

"As in, younger brother of Daimen Kazinski," Zorian said, unable to suppress a small sigh.

"Um..."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure she meant your *other* brother," Kirithishli said with a sly smile. "She's in class with Fortov and has a bit of a crush..."

She and a dozen other girls. Fortov never had a shortage of women throwing themselves at him.

"Miss Korisova!" Ibery protested.

"Oh, lighten up," Kirithishli said. "Anyway, Zorian here will be working with us pretty heavily for the foreseeable future. Go show him what to do."

And just like that, he was employed at the library. Only time would tell if he was wasting his time.



Much like the last time, Zach hadn't come to class. Zorian was half-expecting it, but it was no less annoying because of it. It cemented Zorian's suspicion that Zach was heavily involved in this mess, but the boy's absence made it impossible for Zorian to confront him about it. What was he supposed to do now?

For that matter, was he supposed to do *anything at all*? Last time he had been operating on the belief that if he didn't do something about the invasion, no one would. No one else had the strange future memories he did, after all. If his speculations were correct, though, Zach had probably traveled through time *specifically* to stop the invasion – what other reason did he have to frequent this particular time period? Besides, he had been wandering the city during the attack, picking off attackers. So all in all, there just might be an experienced time-traveling mage on the job already, and he would only get in the way.

The problem with that idea was that he was ultimately just guessing, and had no idea if it was true or not. He could be doom-ing himself and the city through inaction, relying on a boy who, quite frankly, didn't inspire too much confidence in him. Zach reminded him of his brothers a little too much. And besides, didn't Zach *lose* against the lich? Yeah.

Not knowing how to unravel the mystery presented to him, or even where to start, Zorian had thrown himself into school-work and his job at the library. Of course, thanks to going through this for the third time, the only issue he had with schoolwork was Xvim's grating insistence that his grasp on the pen-spinning (as Zorian affectionately called it) exercise was abominable and that he had to do it over and over *and over again*. His time at the library, on the other hand, was... interesting, though not really in the way he hoped it would be.

He hadn't learned any spells yet, though he suspected this was because there were so many other, more pressing things he had to learn before Kirithishli and Ibery decided to invest that kind of effort in him. Simply put, he wasn't very good at his job. The seemingly simple job of shuffling some books around was made immensely more complicated by the various library protocols and the all-important book classification scheme. Zorian had hoped to demonstrate basic proficiency with his duties before asking for favors, but it had been two weeks and he was beginning to understand that it would take him at least a couple of months to reach that level, and he didn't have that. The summer festival was getting closer.

That's why he proceeded to corner Kirithishli after she had dismissed him for the day to ask her about the coveted book divinations. Ibery lingered, pretending to be busy so she could eavesdrop. She sure was nosy for such a shy girl.

"Say, I've been meaning to ask a small favor of you," Zorian

began.

"Go ahead," Kirithishli said. "You've helped us a lot, so I'll be happy to help if I can. It's not often we get such a competent worker."

"Eh!?" balked Zorian. "Competent? I barely know what I'm doing – if it weren't for your and Ibery's help I would wander around like a headless chicken."

"That's why I paired you with Ibery – to learn. And boy are you learning fast! Faster than I did when I first started at this job, that's for sure. To be honest I usually give only the simplest and most tedious jobs to student employees, but since you're more dedicated than them I've given you the advanced course."

"Ah," Zorian said after a short silence. "I'm flattered." And he really was. "Anyway, I was wondering about book-finding divinations. I've been searching for a pretty obscure topic and I'm not going anywhere with it."

"Ah!" Kirithishli said, slapping her forehead. "How could I forget about that!? Of course I'll teach you, we teach all our long-term workers those. They're a bit tricky to use, though, so it will take a while to learn how to use them properly. Ibery will show you how. Though you can always tell me what exactly you're looking for and I'll do my best to help you out. I know this library like the back of my hand, you know?"

Zorian debated the merit of showing her the lich's chant, since he suspected it was something that could get him into a lot of trouble just for asking about it, but saw no other way. No doubt learning how to use those divinations took months – months he didn't have. He took out his notebook and ripped out the corresponding page, handing it to her.

Kirithishli arched her eyebrow at the text, and Ibery gave up on all pretenses of not paying attention and peered over her shoulder to see what was on the slip of paper.

"It's an unknown language," Zorian clarified. "I don't even know which one, really."

"Hm, tricky," Kirithishli remarked. "Finding a written reference based on a phonetic pronunciation of a word you don't even understand is a tall order, even with divinations. You should just find an expert in languages to help you if it's so important."

"You should try Zenomir," piped in Ibery.

"Our history teacher?" asked Zorian incredulously.

"He also teaches linguistics," Ibery said. "He's a polyglot. Speaks 37 languages."

"Woah."

"Yeah," Ibery agreed. "He should at least know what language that is, even if he can't read it. He's pretty helpful if you approach him nicely, I doubt he'll turn you away."

Interesting.



"Ah, mister Kazinski, what can I do for you?"

Zenomir Olgai was old. *Really* old. He wore blue robes – actual robes, like the magi of old – and had a carefully sculpted white beard. Despite his advanced age, he moved with a spring in his step and his eyes had sharpness that most people half his age lacked. Zorian hadn't taken the linguistics elective, but he knew from his history class that Zenomir cared about his subject almost as much as Nora Boole did about runes and mathematics – though he at least understood that most students didn't share his passion for the subject.

"I was told you can help me about some translation," Zorian said. "I have a pretty fragmentary recording of an unknown language in phonetic form, and I was hoping you could at least tell me what kind of language it is. It's nothing like any language I've encountered so far."

Zenomir perked up at the notion of an unknown language and gingerly took the paper slip with the lich's chant from Zorian's hand. His eyes widened barely a second afterward.

"Where did you get this?" he asked quietly.

Zorian debated internally what to do and then settled for a measure of truth.

"I was attacked by someone a while ago. They used a spell with that chant as the incantation. I just wanted to know what it does."

Zenomir took a deep breath and leaned back. "You're lucky it didn't hit. It's some kind of soul magic spell."

"Soul magic?"

"Necromancy," clarified Zenomir.

Zorian blinked. Necromancy? Well, it sort of made sense for the lich to use that sort of spells, but what did necromancy have to do with time travel? Nothing. This was pretty much a definite confirmation of Zach as a primary cause of his predicament.

"So, wait, what is that language anyway?" asked Zorian.

"Hm? Oh! Yes, the language... it's old Majara language, spoken by many of the cultures that shared the continent of Miasina with Ikosians before their rise to prominence. Many of the ruins in Koth are written in it and, sadly, it is the language in which many of the blackest rituals and necromantic spells are formulated. You won't find any books about it available in public circulations, I'm afraid. But let's return to the matter of this assailant. This is the darkest of magic they used, and they can be up to no good if they're throwing spells like that on academy students."

Deciding he couldn't just backpedal now, Zorian nonetheless decided against mentioning time travel in any way and settled for making something up. He told Zenomir about him overhearing a plan to invade the city during the summer festival. At first he dismissed it as some kind of prank because of its ludicrous nature, but when the two cloaked figures noticed him eavesdropping

and started throwing spells he didn't recognize at him, he grew concerned. Zenomir took him a lot more seriously than Zorian thought he would, and told him to go home and leave everything up to him from now on.

Huh. That went surprisingly well – at least Zenomir hadn't dragged him off to the police station to give a statement right away, though he suspected something like that might be in his near future. He paced nervously around in his room, unable to sleep and steadily losing the fight to keep his growing apprehension in check. Smart or not, the deed was done, and now the only thing he could do was wait and see what the consequences of his decision would be. For him and for everyone.

A knock on the door interrupted him. Strong, confident knocking that nonetheless only lasted for a second or two – completely unlike the knocking of anyone he knew.

"Coming!" Zorian called out, suspecting it was someone coming to talk to him about the story he told Zenomir. "What can I-urk!"

Zorian stared dumbly at the blade sticking out of his chest, his mouth opening in an unvoiced scream. He had just enough time to look at his assailant – a short figure dressed in loose black clothes and a faceless white mask – before the blade was painfully wrenched out of his body and then immediately inserted again into his chest cavity. Again and again and again...

When darkness consumed his vision he was actually glad he was dying. Being repeatedly stabbed in the chest *hurts*.



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

"Good m-!"

Kirielle was cut off as Zorian shot upright, eyes wide in fright, gasping for breath. He was killed! They killed him! He told someone about the attack and he was killed that very evening! How the hell had they even found out that fast!? Was Zenomir in on the attack or were they just that well informed!?

"Nightmare?" Kirielle asked.

Zorian breathed deeply, ignoring the phantom pain in his chest as he did so. "Yeah. Definitely a nightmare."



Zorian knew he should focus on what Ilsa was saying, but for the life of him his mind wouldn't stop dwelling on what had happened. In retrospect, he shouldn't be so surprised at that particular turn of events – an invasion of that scale cannot be kept secret without some hefty inside help, so of course they'd find out about anyone raising an alarm about them! And besides, if stopping the invasion had as simple a solution as notifying the law enforcement, surely Zach would have already done it and Zorian wouldn't be repeating this month for the third time.

Although, he was starting to develop a healthy dose of respect for these... restarts. This was the second time he died and he only went through this month thrice. He seemed prone to dying. Didn't Zach say something about him always getting blown up in that initial barrage unless he did something about it?

He snapped back into the real world when he realized Ilsa had stopped talking and was looking at him intently. He gave her a questioning look.

"Are you quite alright?" she asked, and Zorian noticed her glancing at his hands. Why would she-

Oh.

His hands were shaking. He was probably quite pale too, if the skin on his hands was of any indication. He rubbed his hands together a few times and then balled them up into fists to reassert control over them.

"Not quite," Zorian admitted. "But I will be. You don't have to worry about it."

She stared at him for a second longer and then nodded.

"Very well," she said. "Do you want me to teleport you to the Academy? I can't imagine riding the train in the state you're in is going to be very pleasant for you."

Zorian blinked, at loss what to say. He disdained train travel at the best of times, so an offer like this was a godsend at the moment, but... why?

"I don't want to inconvenience you..." he tried.

"Don't worry, I was going there anyway," she said. "It's the least I could do for getting to you so late and taking the choice of your mentor away from you."

Well, that much was true. Xvim really was a horrible, useless mentor.

Zorian excused himself to tell mother he was leaving – which took way too long in his opinion, since mother wouldn't stop bombarding him with questions about teleportation, suddenly concerned about his safety – before picking up his luggage and following Ilsa outside. He was actually a little excited, since he'd never teleported before. He'd have been even more excited, but the memory of being stabbed to death was still uncomfortably fresh, dampening his enthusiasm somewhat.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Don't worry, the rumors about the dangers of teleporting are mostly exaggerated," Ilsa said. "You can't get stuck inside solid objects – the spell doesn't work that way – and if something goes

wrong I'll immediately know it and collapse the spell before dimensional ripples tear us apart."

Zorian scowled. He already knew that, but saw no point in pointing that out – she obviously heard his little exchange with mother.

Ilsa started chanting and Zorian stood straighter, not wanting to miss-

The world rippled, then changed. Suddenly they were both standing in a well lit circular room, a large magical circle carved into the marble floor they stood on. There was no disorientation, no flash of colors, no nothing – almost disappointing. He studied the room they were in a little more closely, trying to understand where they were.

"This is the teleport redirection point," Ilsa said. "The academy wards shunt every incoming teleport into this place for security reasons. Of course, that's assuming you're properly keyed in and have sufficient authorization to teleport in at all." She fixed him with a penetrating gaze. "Teleporting into a warded space is just one of the many dangers of the spell. Don't experiment with it on your own."

"Err... I'm pretty sure teleport is *far* above my access level," pointed out Zorian.

She shrugged. "Some students are capable of reconstructing a spell after seeing it performed only once. Once you know the chant and gestures, 80% of the work has already been done for you."

Zorian blinked. Now why didn't he think of that?

"Would you mind casting that spell one more time?" he asked innocently. "Strictly for academic purposes, you see..."

She chuckled. "No. If it makes you feel any better, I doubt you have enough mana reserves to cast the spell even once."

As a point of fact, it *didn't* make him feel any better. He didn't care how dangerous it was, he'd learn the teleport spell as soon as

he was able. He just shaved off an entire day of train travel from his journey in an instant – the ability to do that kind of thing at will would be worth quite a lot of trouble to acquire. He let out a sigh and left Ilsa to her own devices to get settled in.

"I could get used to this kind of travel," Zorian mumbled to himself as he unlocked the door to his room and dropped his luggage to the floor in relief. "Too bad I could never fake distress convincingly enough, or else I'd convince Ilsa to take me along at the beginning of every restart."

He froze mid-step. He shouldn't be thinking like that. That was dangerous thinking. He had no proof that that the restarts would keep happening indefinitely. In fact, everything he knew about magic told him it *couldn't* be true – whatever spell had been put on him was going to run out of mana at some point and then there'd be no restart, no second chances... no return from the dead. He had to treat every restart as if it were his last, because it might very well be.

Though he had to admit that, despite it ending with him getting stabbed to death, the previous restart wasn't a complete disaster – at least he had all but confirmed it was Zach, and not the lich, that was responsible for this. Instead of researching unknown languages and time travel, it would probably be wiser to find out where Zach keeps disappearing to every time.

But not right now. He deserved a little rest after being brought back from the dead.



He really should have known it wouldn't be that easy. The moment he tried to track down Zach, he was reminded of why he didn't do that in his very first restart. Zach was not only an heir of Noble House Noveda – he was the *only* still living member of

that House, the rest of his family having been killed in the Splinter Wars. Zach stood to inherit a sizeable financial empire and a legacy of several generations of mages once he came of age, so everything about him was scrutinized closely by a great number of interested parties. Consequently, his disappearance was a Big Deal, and a lot of people wanted to know where he went. Zorian was just one of these people, and if those people (and the people they hired) hadn't managed to track him down, he had very little chance to do so. Needless to say, he didn't get anywhere. Like he suspected, the two girls Zach hung out with during Zorian's original month were nothing special without the Noveda heir there to help them out and hang out with them (and asking people about them led to some pretty annoying rumors being spread around; honestly, can't a guy ask about a girl without everyone assuming he's got a romantic interest in her?), his house was sealed with some pretty heavy ward-work, his legal guardian could not be reached, and if he had any close friends they weren't among his classmates. Zorian wasn't a detective, and had no idea what else to look for. And considering that many professional detectives had already failed (and continued to fail) to track the boy down, he suspected it wouldn't help even if he *did* know a thing or two about tracking people down.

A month went by with little to show for it. Summer festival came, and Zorian once again boarded a train out of Cyoria, awake and alert as the night deepened and minutes ticked away. He brought a pocket watch with him this time, and kept glancing at it every once in a while, silently praying that he wouldn't have to start over once again but wanting to know exactly when he got thrown back in case he did. Sure enough, his prayers wouldn't be answered. Somewhere around 2 past midnight he blacked out and woke up with Kiri on top of him, wishing him a good morning.

He probably should have admitted it to himself right then and there. He was a fairly smart person, after all, and not prone to de-

luding himself. Instead it took 4 more restarts before he accepted the truth of his predicament: he was stuck in some kind of a time loop, and it wasn't going to end any time soon.

He didn't know how it was possible. Maybe the spell was powered by Zach's seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves instead of being limited to a fixed amount at the moment of casting. Maybe it was one of those rare self-sustaining spells. Hell, maybe it reached into the Heart of the World and drew power from the Dragon Below itself! It didn't really matter how it did it, only that it did.

But that's retrospect – at the time he just refused to accept it, and instead tried to live like he normally would. It was rather boring, yes, but what if this particular restart was the one where it ended? The restart where the consequences of his choices would not magically disappear at 2 past midnight on the night of the festival (He checked and yes, it was consistent across all 4 restarts).

He was through with that though - he couldn't go on like this. Excluding the invasion bit, the month had been a bore even the first time around, and he had lived through it 8 times already. He knew the first month curriculum well enough by now to get near-perfect scores in all subjects, even warding. It had little effect on how people treated him, as he found out. He was known to be capable, and his grades had always been very good, so people weren't really surprised if he aced all the exams or effortlessly performed a perfect magic missile on their very first combat magic class. It was within the realm of people's expectations, unlike Zach's sudden improvement. The only people whose behavior changed in response to his improvement were Akoja and Xvim. Akoja had gotten twice as annoying now that she apparently found a kindred soul, always insisting that they check each other's work and asking him for help whenever she didn't understand something. Zorian had thought she'd be green with jealousy that he was beating her scores, but it seemed she was a lot less bothered to be outdone by *him*, as op-

posed to by the likes of Zach and Neolu. Xvim took his superb scores as an indication that he should be held to an even higher standard. As such, not only did he not declare his pen-spinning good enough to move on to something else, he had *demoted him back to the regular levitation exercise*. In all honesty, Zorian wasn't terribly bothered by that – even if he did master the pen-spinning exercise to Xvim's satisfaction, no doubt he'd get nothing more than *another* minor variation of the basic three to practice.

So all in all, going through *another* boring month like that was out of the question. He took different electives this time – Astronomy, Architecture, and Geography of the Global Mana Flow – and he fully intended to bring down his academic scores back to normal so Xvim and Akoja would remain their normal, more tolerable selves. He also intended to skip quite a few time-consuming homework projects to focus on his own personal studies, and he was going to spend a sizeable portion of his savings on alchemical supplies. Should this restart be the final one, he was going to be seriously inconvenienced, but it wouldn't be the end of the world, and he suspected the disruptions following in the wake of the invasion would render many of the normal concerns moot.

Then he walked into the essential invocations classroom on the first day of school and realized his plans would have to be adjusted.

Zach was finally back in class.

OF GAPS AND PRETENDING

At first, Zorian hadn't even noticed him. That was noteworthy by itself, as Zach wasn't an easy person to overlook. The boy loved attention and seemed to have trouble staying still and quiet, something that remained consistent even after Zach suddenly turned into some kind of a weirdo time traveler. Today, however, the normally loud and exuberant boy remained eerily silent. He also eschewed his typical tactic of sitting in the back of the classroom to occupy a seat near the front. If his out of character behavior hadn't caused people to glance at him a bit too often, Zorian would have probably overlooked him.

He was so shocked to see the boy finally present in class that he momentarily halted in his tracks, standing like an idiot in the middle of the classroom. Then, after a moment's thought, he set off towards the likely cause of his predicament.

His first instinct was to immediately march up to the boy and drag him away into some forgotten corner to clear everything up, but Zach's subdued appearance gave him pause. Zach's skin was pale and bloodless, and he was breathing a little too quickly and shallowly for a healthy person. He looked sick. Thinking about it a little more carefully, approaching the boy so directly would be a reckless and possibly dangerous course of action. His loss to the

lich aside, Zach was vastly more powerful than Zorian, and Zorian had no idea how the other boy would react if he knew there was another person tagging along in his time traveling adventure. He'd need to confront him sooner or later, though, so he fully intended to make at least tentative contact with the boy. He scanned the front of the classroom, looking for a free seat near Zach that would allow him to study the boy during the lecture.

He didn't have to look hard – Zach was sitting very close to Briam, and every seat around Briam was empty. The cause was easy to divine: people were reluctant to get close to the angry-looking fire drake he was holding. As someone with future knowledge, Zorian knew their fears were well founded. While the young fire drake didn't torch anyone (and sometimes Zorian wondered how much of that was thanks to the drake's youth and lack of ability, as opposed to having self-restraint) it didn't hesitate to bite and scratch, and it was hard to tell what would set it off. Fortunately, it seemed to tolerate Zorian better than most people, so he simply plopped down into the seat next to Briam, silencing the lizard's hissing with an annoyed glare. He stared at the fire drake's slitted yellow eyes until the reptile turned its head and left him alone.

"Wow, you shut him down in an instant," remarked Briam. "I wish *I* could control him that easily."

The fire drake snapped its jaws at the air in front of Briam's face, causing the boy to flinch back. Briam huffed in annoyance and apparently let the matter drop. Not for the first time, Zorian wondered just how smart that creature really was.

Then, doing his best to appear natural, Zorian turned to Zach sitting a bit further away from him.

"You look like hell," Zorian remarked.

Zach groaned and buried his face into his hands. "I *feel* like hell," he moaned. "What did that pile of bones do to me?"

Zorian's heart quickened. Zach no doubt expected his com-

ment to be disregarded as a weird metaphor, but to Zorian it was definite confirmation that Zach was also a time traveler. No points for guessing who or what the mysterious 'pile of bones' was.

Now... how could he get Zach to talk more without revealing that he knew more than he should?

"Pile of bones?" Zorian asked, his voice curious.

Zach opened his mouth to respond but Ilsa chose that exact moment to walk into the classroom and Zach dropped the issue.

Zorian had to restrain himself from glaring at Ilsa as she smiled at him. Couldn't she have waited a few more minutes?

Ignorant and uncaring of Zorian's internal grumbling, Ilsa accepted the list of present students from Akoja and began introducing herself and her class. It wasn't anything that Zorian hadn't heard eight times already, so he mostly ignored her in favor of keeping an eye on Zach and plotting how to extract time travel related information out of him.

Suddenly he realized that Ilsa had stopped talking and was looking in his direction. After a few moments he realized she was looking at Zach.

"Mr. Noveda, you look quite ill. Please tell me you didn't come to my class with a hangover."

The class erupted into laughter and Zach winced, either because loud noises bothered him in the state he was in or because he noticed the undercurrent of agitation in Ilsa's question. Either way he recovered quickly.

"It's not a hangover," protested Zach. "I just woke up like this, I swear."

"And you thought that coming to class like this was a good idea... why?" Ilsa prodded.

"Err... I honestly didn't think it would last this long. I figured it would pass in an hour or two," said Zach sheepishly.

Zorian frowned. If the sickness was a consequence of the spell the lich had targeted them with that evening (and Zach certainly seemed to think so, if his previous comment was any indication), that would mean Zach had been suffering its effects for the past 8 months or so, as Zach had been absent for that long. Why would Zach expect a condition that serious to pass 'in an hour or two'?

Why couldn't there be any simple answers in all this?

"Well it didn't," Ilisa concluded. "While I appreciate your dedication to your studies," Zorian distinctly heard Ako snorting derisively in the background, "I must insist you go home or, better yet, visit a healer. You look like you're going to collapse any moment."

Before Zach could say anything, Zorian rose from his seat.

"I'll get him home, teacher," he said. Zach gave him a surprised look, but Ilisa just nodded and shooed them away.

Zorian picked up his bag and left with Zach in tow, very pleased with himself. He got a legitimate excuse to talk to Zach in private *and* a permission to skip a class he had already attended 8 times by now. Could a victory be more complete?

"You didn't have to do that, you know?" Zach remarked, trailing behind him. "I can get back home on my own. I don't feel *that* sick."

"But if I *hadn't* done that, I would've had to sit through 2 hours of boring review," countered Zorian.

Zach laughed, but his laughter quickly collapsed into a painful sounding cough.

"Damn," he wheezed. "He really did a number on me."

"Who is this someone you keep mentioning?" prodded Zorian.

"It's not important," Zach mumbled. He took a deep breath and fixed Zorian with a speculative look. "Hey. Want to go to the cafeteria and grab something to eat?"

"You think your stomach can handle it?" Zorian asked.

"You bet," Zach nodded. "I'm starving!"

Zorian shrugged and gestured for Zach to lead the way.

That was how Zorian found himself sharing a table with the cause of his time traveling problems, trying to think of a good opening for a conversation he wanted to have with the boy. Or should he wait for a few days to make Zach get used to his presence? Hmm...

"You know, I find this whole situation very amusing," Zach said between mouthfuls, shoveling noodles into his mouth and attempting to talk at the same time. Now *that* was very amusing. His mother always insisted he should aspire to behave 'like a noble'. She would have a heart attack if he ever adopted Zach's eating manners. "A good little student like you, skipping class to have lunch with a class delinquent... what is the world coming to? What would your mother say if she saw you now?"

"First of all, I'm not skipping class – I'm escorting you home," Zorian pointed out, ignoring a snort from Zach. "We just stopped for a meal so you wouldn't collapse from starvation before we get there." Another snort. "And my mother would go all sparkly-eyed at who I'm having lunch with and promptly forget I'm supposed to be in class."

"Ah. A social climber," Zach said, a sour expression on his face. "Say no more. At least you're male so she wouldn't try to pair us."

"Well, I do have a 9-year-old sister..."

"Don't go there," Zach warned.

"Fine," agreed Zorian. He didn't particularly want to continue in that avenue, anyway. "So are you going to tell me who roughed you up or what?"

"You're a lot nosier than I remember," Zach huffed. "What makes you think someone roughed me up?"

"Your offhand comments aren't as oblique as you imagine them to be," Zorian said.

"Whatever," Zach scoffed. "I just breathed in some weird fumes while I was messing with my alchemy set yesterday, that all."

Ah, the trusty 'alchemical accident' excuse. So cliché, yet so effective. Zorian had used it quite a few times himself. In any case, he wasn't willing to let go so easily. He decided to risk it and try to provoke a reaction from the boy.

"Must have been some *really* weird fumes – the aftereffects almost look like soul magic exposure," Zorian speculated loudly.

Zorian had expected *some* kind of reaction from Zach, but what he got was quite a bit stronger than what he had imagined. Zach immediately sat straighter in his seat, eyes wide in realization. "Of course! That's why I'm still suffering the effects, even after the revert! The son of a bitch targeted the very thing that gets sent back – my soul!"

There was an eerie silence in the cafeteria as everyone stared at the crazy boy shouting nonsense in a crowded dining hall. Zach slowly lowered his hands (he had been gesticulating wildly during his little speech) and mumbled an apology that was too quiet for anyone but Zorian to hear. Scattered laughter rippled through the gathered students for a few moments before everything finally returned to normal.

"Err..." started Zach. "Maybe we should continue this at the fountain, yeah?"

"I don't know," remarked Zorian carefully. "If you intend to be this loud, I don't think it will do much."

"Oh ha ha," grumbled Zach. "So I got a little excited... not everyone is an ice cube like you Zorian."

"Ice cube?" asked Zorian, an undercurrent of warning in his voice.

But Zach was already packing, and Zorian could do nothing but huff in annoyance and follow after him. Still, Zach's little out-

burst answered a few of his questions. So it wasn't his memories, or even his mind that got sent back – it was his *soul*. That would certainly explain why his spellwork and shaping skills didn't disappear every time he started over. It was common knowledge that magic was heavily connected to the soul, even if no one really knew the exact mechanism of their interaction.

When they finally reached the fountain, Zach seemed to be in a contemplative mood so Zorian took a moment to study the schools of colourful fish swimming in the basin of the fountain. He actually pitied the poor things, since they were unlikely to last long. For years the fountain had been in disrepair, and it was only due to the grander-than-usual summer festival that it was renovated. How likely was it that the Academy would continue to maintain it after the occasion passed? Not very. And it was even less likely it would be kept in a good enough condition for the fish to survive. Their days were numbered.

"Zorian..." Zach prodded.

"Hm?"

"Tell me... what do you know about time travel?"

Zorian blinked. Well. That was direct.

"Time travel?" Zorian asked with as much confusion as he could fake. "Not much, I guess. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Ugh, well..." Zach fumbled with words, scratching his chin nervously. "You'll probably think I'm insane, but I'm a time traveler of sorts."

Wow, Zach really didn't have a subtle bone in his body, did he?

"You don't look very old," Zorian remarked. "If you come from the future it must not be a very far one."

"No, no, it's more like... the whole world resets itself on the night of the summer festival, and I'm the only one who remembers

what happened.”

That was an interesting way of explaining it, though the idea of a spell affecting the whole world was even more ridiculous than the idea of working time travel magic.

”I’ve lived through this month... god, at least 200 times by now,” continued Zach. ”Honestly, I’m starting to lose count.”

”Wait, you’re talking about it like you can’t stop it,” said Zorian, unable to keep a tiny bit of alarm out of his voice. Luckily, Zach appeared to be too agitated to notice.

”That’s just it, I don’t know if I can stop it!” Zach shouted, before he realized what he was doing and quieted down so as to not attract unneeded attention. ”I was hit by this spell in the previous revert, and its effects didn’t completely go away when I reverted into the past.”

Zorian frowned. ’Previous revert’? What about the other 7? Did Zach somehow skip those or did he simply not remember them? It occurred to Zorian that the after effects of the lich’s spell could have been even more serious than what he was currently looking at – what if Zach had spent the past 7 restarts in a coma? Though that begged the question of why his guardian had reported him as missing instead of bringing a healer.

”I guess it really was a soul magic spell like you said,” continued Zach. ”I need to watch out for those from now on. Anyway, at first I thought it’s just some nasty sickness that’ll pass, and to a degree I was right. I already feel a lot better than I did this morning. It’s just that it wasn’t only my body that was affected – my mind has been a little spotty ever since I woke up.”

Oh no...

”I don’t remember how I started this time loop,” concluded Zach, confirming Zorian’s fears. ”Or whether it was me who started it in the first place. My memory is full of blanks like that at the moment. I’m hoping it will all come back to me but...”

Zorian stared at the other boy, stony faced. Basically, they were both in deep shit.

Zach seemed to interpret Zorian's serious look a little differently, though.

"You don't believe me," he concluded.

"It's pretty far-fetched," Zorian said. If he hadn't lived through it, he wouldn't have believed him, no. "But I'm a pretty open-minded guy. Let's pretend you're right for the moment. What's that got to do with me?"

Zach arched an eyebrow at him, apparently incredulous about something.

"Huh," he said. "You're really different from your other self."

"My other self?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Yeah," Zach nodded. "My memory may be spotty about some things, but I definitely remember you. Mostly because you kept dying at the start of the attack..."

Zach mumbled the last sentence in a quiet voice that probably wasn't meant to carry but did. Zorian pretended he didn't hear it.

"You're different than you used to be," Zach said. "You were more irritable, and always busy with something or other. You never believed me when I tried to tell you about the whole time travel thing – you thought I was trying to make fun of you."

Well... that kind of story sounded *exactly* like something his brothers would try to fool him with. And Zach did have a great many things in common with those two already.

"You've changed," Zach concluded. "You're a lot calmer. More laid-back, I guess."

Zorian frowned. He didn't think he changed that much in personality, but he supposed it would be hard to *not* change when going through something like this. To say nothing of the fact that more than 8 months had passed since the restarts started for Zorian.

"So, wait... why did I change then?" Zorian asked. "Didn't you say the whole world resets itself?"

"Don't know," Zach shrugged, then gave him a speculative look. "Come to think of it, you were there too, weren't you?"

Zorian gave him a confused look. He wasn't going to get baited that easily.

"No, of course you don't remember," Zach sighed. "Do you at least feel a little different lately or something?"

"Come to think of it... yes," confirmed Zorian. "I chose different electives than I intended to, for no good reason really, and I did a bunch of other strange things ever since I came to Cyoria."

Zorian's motivation for saying that was two-fold. First of all, he wanted to see how Zach would react to the idea of another person going through the time loop with him. Secondly, he wanted to lay the groundwork for an explanation why he'd be acting differently in every restart, in case he decided not to tell Zach about himself.

He was surprised that Zach was so willing to believe him, though. Apparently even after all this time (nearly 17 *years*, if the other boy was to be believed), Zach still haven't developed an ability to effectively read people. That, or Zorian really was that good of an actor.

"Strange," was all Zach said.

"Yeah," Zorian agreed. "So... any advice a time traveler can tell a mortal like me? A secret spell of awesomeness, maybe?"

"To be honest, most of the spells I know are combat ones," Zach admitted. "I'm really good at combat magic, which is good because I need to be good at it. There is... something I'm trying to stop."

"Something involving the mysterious adversary that messed you up?" tried Zorian. He really wanted to work the invasion into

the conversation but didn't know how to justify knowing anything about it. "Do you remember how *that* happened, at least?"

"Ugh," grunted Zach. "Mostly. I distinctly remember you being there, but you probably died right at the start of the battle – no offense Zorian, but you aren't much of a fighter – and then I stupidly charged in, thinking myself invulnerable."

"Why would you ever think that?" Zorian asked, honestly confused. "That you're invulnerable, I mean. Doesn't it strike you as dangerously arrogant to perceive yourself as invincible?"

"Do you know how many times I've died in these reverts?" protested Zach. "My memory is failing me again, but it was a lot. You tend not to take it too seriously after a while. And it's not like I was too far off – I just have to watch out for necromancy next time, right?"

"Not just necromancy," Zorian replied with a heavy sigh. "There is also mind magic to worry about. Aside from the obvious possibility of ending up as a mind thrall, you could also end up with more than a few gaps in your memory – you could have your whole mind blanked out. Then there is a possibility of having a geas forced upon you if you're too careless, which also bind to the soul as far as I know. Some creatures, such as wraiths, *eat* souls – that's another thing to worry about. And there are a couple of methods of sealing away a mage's ability to do magic, which might very well stay with you when you... 'revert'."

Zach was silent, but Zorian could have sworn he had gotten even paler as he listened to Zorian speak.

"And that's just a couple of points off the top of my head," finished Zorian. "I'm only an academy student, and I don't know anything. It's obvious w- err, *you* are not invulnerable. Okay?"

Zorian swallowed heavily. That was close. It was fortunate that Zach was so oblivious, because had the situation been reverse, he would have called Zach out on it ages ago.

"Wow, you almost sound like you care," Zach finally said with a nervous chuckle. "You really *do* believe I'm a time traveler now, huh?"

Zorian shrugged. "I'm not completely convinced, but it's not something that's worth fighting over in my opinion. If you say you're a time traveler, then we'll pretend you're a time traveler."

Yes. Until he got a better feel for Zach's character and understood what the deal was with the time loop, he would pretend.



When Zorian finally returned to school, having missed both the remainder of essential invocations and the following lecture about magical law, he was beset by curious classmates and Ako. Ako was easy to deal with, since she only wanted to scold him for taking too long and warn him she recorded his absence in the attendance record. Zorian was pretty sure the only person, teachers included, who cared about what was written on that list was Akoja. The ones that wanted to know what's wrong with Zach were also easy. It was an alchemical accident.

What? It's the excuse Zach used!

Unfortunately, many people also wanted to know why he had suddenly volunteered to take him home, or what had taken him so long. Nosy, nosy people. And they were persistent too, refusing to leave him alone for the rest of the day. When Zorian finally reached his room he immediately locked his door and breathed a sigh of relief. He finally had enough time to think about what he found out today.

Zach was confident he would be fine by tomorrow, and that his memory would come back to him. Zorian was not nearly as confident. That Zach had a 7-month gap in his memory (and possibly existence) suggested something very serious had been done to him.

Why hadn't Zorian suffered anything of the sort? Well... maybe he had. He had felt uncharacteristically tired in his first restart, but had written it off as mental stress. Maybe he had only been caught at the very edge of the spell and thus only suffered minor damage, or maybe his 'first restart' was only the first one he had memory of.

It was a disturbing possibility, but there was not much point in dwelling on it much.

It really wasn't that unexpected, when you really thought about it. The strange time travel effect he and Zach were under had essentially turned them into soul entities. A lich was, at its core, *also* a soul entity. They were mages that ritually killed themselves and tethered their souls to an object – their phylactery – before it could move on into the afterlife. If the form they currently inhabited ever got destroyed, they'd snap back to their phylactery, and simply possess someone. It would make sense for a lich to know how to fight another lich. And a method that worked against a lich would work just as well against him and Zach.

And Zach had stupidly said as much to the lich at the end of their battle! 'It's not like I'll be dead for good,' indeed! The lich may not have known what Zach was exactly, but a statement like that strongly suggested he was either a lich himself or some kind of a possessor entity, and from a practical standpoint it wasn't that far off.

But that was all neither here nor there. The real question was: what was he going to do now? Even if Zach regained his memories (doubtful), he would no doubt want to keep the time loop going until he found a way to defeat the lich. If the boy's previous altercation with the undead mage was of any indication, that could take a while. And that was assuming Zach was the originator of the spell in the first place. If it happened once, it could have happened twice. He had a sneaking suspicion that Zach might be as much

of a stowaway as Zorian was. Was there a *third* looping person running around?

Suddenly, he didn't feel as desperate to get out of this thing as he was at the start of it. Getting out might not necessarily mean going back to normal. The invasion was clearly more than a random terrorist attack, and Zorian somehow doubted that stopping it would be the end of it. Something very big was happening, and Zorian was a very small fish. A roach, as Taiven would charmingly say. Inside the time loop, he had a chance to secure his future. Outside of it, he was just another victim.

Besides, if Zach was to be believed, 'normal' for Zorian meant getting killed at the start of the invasion. He didn't care much for that kind of 'normal'. In fact, the more he thought about it the more it seemed to him this whole thing was a giant opportunity rather than an annoyance. Once upon a time, when Zorian was younger, he dreamt of being a great mage. The sort that legends were made of, the kind that revolutionized whole fields of magic all by themselves. In time this dream died as it became clear he didn't have the talent, the work ethic, or the right connections to make that happen. He was just a slightly above average civilian-born student with no special advantages to his name. But now? He had all the time he needed to build up an advantage over his peers and become truly great. Greater than Daimen.

He shook his head, abandoning that train of thought. He was getting ahead of himself. He needed something more concrete than a fuzzy notion of greatness to guide him – a clear set of goals to achieve, and courses of action to pursue. Right now, the only thing he could think of was harassing Zach for some tips, raiding the library for more spells, and leveraging his curious monetary situation to improve his alchemical skills.

He was leery about relying on Zach for help. Even if the boy would be cooperative, there was only so much he could learn from

the other time traveler without revealing that he too retained his memories each time they reverted to the past.

The library was full of spells, of course, but anything 'serious' (that is, that could be used for combat, crime, or spying) was restricted, and he knew from talking to older students that teachers were really stingy with permission slips. Not even Fortov succeeded in getting one, and he could charm a troll into not eating him.

Honing his alchemy skills was definitely an option. The only reason he focused more heavily on invocation thus far was because he had to buy any ingredients he wished to work with, and he was trying to save money. Any serious study of alchemy required a lot of funds – alchemical ingredients were expensive. With his saving account spontaneously refilling after each restart, however, monetary concerns didn't limit him as much as they did before.

It wasn't much, to be honest. He needed a better plan. With another sigh, Zorian pulled out his trusty notebook and began to plot and write.



"Something I can do for you, sonny?" asked Kyron. "The class has been dismissed, in case you didn't notice."

"Err, I noticed. I just wanted to talk to you about something," Zorian said. Kyron gestured him to keep talking. "I hope you don't find it insulting, but your stated program seems a bit... easy. Practicing magic missile for a whole month seems rather pointless to me, since I already have a pretty good grasp on it."

Kyron stared at him for a few seconds. Zorian suppressed the instinct to shuffle nervously in place and returned the man's stare. Kyron seemed like a sort of person who would be impressed by that.

"I hope *you* don't find it insulting, sonny, but you just don't have enough power to be a proper battle mage," Kyron finally said. "Your shaping skills are rather impressive for your age, but you tire after only 10 shots from the rod. And that just won't do in any serious combat."

"Well, I kind of know that," admitted Zorian. His reserves had increased slightly from what they were when he first tackled this class, so 10 shots was actually an improvement. "Incidentally, is there anything I can do about that?"

"Nothing I would recommend," Kyron said, shaking his head. "Your mana reserves will grow as your proficiency in magic grows, of course, but so will everyone else's. You will always be at a disadvantage against naturally powerful opponents, which would be most of the professional battle mages. Of course, I cannot forbid you from pursuing a career as a battle mage, but I definitely advise you against it. There are plenty of magical disciplines where great shaping skills are an asset, but combat magic is mostly about power."

"I see," said Zorian. He didn't intend to become a battle mage, but he had a feeling he was going to need some combat magic, whether he liked it or not. At the very least he wanted to be able to deal with any stray winter wolves or trolls he might encounter during the invasion. "Though my point still stands. Since I can already do the spell well enough, and that's the only thing you intend to instruct us in for the foreseeable future, I can see little point in attending the class for the foreseeable future."

"Hmph," Kyron snorted. "Trying blackmail on me, sonny?"

"Er..."

"It's fine, I don't mind. And I *do* understand your point of view here..." Kyron rubbed his chin for a second, mulling something over in his head. "Wait here."

15 minutes later Kyron returned with another spell rod,

a small booklet, and four ceramic plates. He threw the plates towards Zorian, who hastily caught them before they shattered upon the ground.

"Good reflexes," Kyron complimented. "They're actually reinforced, so you don't have to worry about dropping them too much." He took one of the spell rods they used in class and grasped it firmly in his hand. "Let me demonstrate something to you. Throw one of the plates to my left."

Zorian immediately complied, and Kyron wordlessly pointed the rod in the plate's general direction and fired. He was wide of the mark, but the bolt of force actually homed in on the plate anyway, curving through the air to intercept it. The plate shattered into dust and sharp fragments.

"Again," Kyron snapped.

Zorian threw another plate, and another bolt of force sped towards it. This one was different, however – it was longer and thinner, like an oversized needle. It hit the plate, but instead of smashing it to pieces it went right through it, punching a hole through the center before dissipating.

"Throw the last two together," Kyron instructed.

Two plates flew into the air, and Kyron once again pointed the rod in their general direction. Zorian waited for the bolt of force, but none was forthcoming. Instead, both plates were suddenly cut in half by some unseen blades.

Kyron lowered his hand and began to speak.

"The reason I'll be spending so much time on magic missile is because it's a very versatile spell," Kyron spoke. "In its simplest form, it takes the form of a shining bolt of force that travels in a straight line, delivering concussive blasts of force to whatever it impacts. This variant is often called the smasher, and it is a very simple and effective spell. A skilled mage can do so much more with it, however. You can use animation magic to make it home

in on a target. You can sharpen it into a point that will pierce things instead of batter them, or a line to cut them – the piercer and cutter, respectively. You can fire multiple missiles instead of one – a swarm, even, if you have the reserves and skill to pull it off. And, of course, you can make the projectile invisible.”

”Invisible?” asked Zorian.

”Yes,” Kyron agreed. ”A perfectly cast force spell is completely transparent. The lightshow you usually see is magical leakage resulting from an imperfect spell boundary. The speed with which combat magic is cast virtually guarantees that some mistakes in constructing the spell boundary will be made, and even if no mistakes are made the large amounts of mana pumped into the constructs can easily distort or unravel some of the pieces.”

”So I’m messing the spell up?” summarized Zorian, thinking of the brightly shining projectiles he always got when he used the rod. ”Wait, your missiles normally shine too. Is that-”

Kyron chuckled. ”Like I said at the start – there are plenty of magical disciplines where great shaping skills are an asset, but combat magic is mostly about power. Most battle mages can’t even make a simple magic missile transparent, much less one of the higher level force spells. It doesn’t hold them back any. Even I usually don’t bother, since the benefits are so marginal. You, on the other hand, need every advantage you can get.”

Kyron pushed the spell rod and the accompanying booklet into Zorian’s hands.

”You are right that you won’t learn much in class in the next month or so. The smasher may be simple, but more than half of your classmates are having trouble with it as it is, and you’re the only one that truly has a good grasp on it. So read the booklet, find some targets to practice on, and make sure there is a friend nearby while you practice to get help if you screw up big. Oh, and don’t hurt anyone with the rod I’m loaning you or I’ll be mad. Come

back to me in two weeks so I can see how you're progressing."

"Right," agreed Zorian enthusiastically. This went a lot better than he thought it would.

"Now get lost," Kyron gestured towards the door. "You've wasted my entire coffee break already."



Zorian dropped the stack of books on a nearby table and surveyed the shelves. He had decided to try his luck as a library employee again, hoping he would find a way to get around spell restrictions as an employee. Zach had been absent from class for a couple of days at this point, probably still suffering from the after-effects of the soul spell, so he couldn't simply trick the answer out of his fellow time traveler. And besides, he wanted to learn those book divinations he was promised before being brutally murdered, and all.

He wasn't in a hurry to get Kirithishli to teach him those divination spells, though – the magic missile variations Kyron gave him to practice were giving him enough problems as it was. Like Kyron had said at the beginning of the lecture, the problem was that shaping had to be done in an instant and involved shoving a great deal of his mana reserves into a hastily constructed spell boundary. That was easy enough when you just wanted a bolt that traveled in a straight line and smashed things, but trying to weave, say, a homing function into the spell was a chore to do in a fraction of a second. To say nothing of trying to eliminate all the little imperfections and make the bolt transparent.

Which is not to say he made no progress! He could make the bolt curve towards a target even if his aim was a little off, and he managed to make a flawless piercer yesterday. Progress!

"You're pretty good at this stuff," Ibery remarked beside him, putting a book on the shelf. "I'm surprised. Usually it takes a while

for people to really understand the system we use here. I guess you worked in a library before, huh?"

"Uh, yeah," agreed Zorian. It *was* technically true. "It was... surprisingly similar to this one in organization."

"It's not really surprising," Kirithishli said behind him, causing him to jump in surprise. "All state libraries use the same organizing system. It's a standard enforced by the Society of Librarians. Hell, even the systems of other Splinter Nations are pretty similar."

"Because they all used to be part the same country?" guessed Zorian.

"It is debatable whether or not the Old Alliance could be considered a unified state," Kirithishli said. "The name says it all, really – it was an alliance more than anything. Arguably it was the attempt to turn it into a state that led to the Splinter Wars. But yes, being once part of the Old Alliance, the Splinter Nations inherited much of its administrative legacy, including library organization."

Zorian was starting to understand why Kirithishli had such strained relations with the current headmaster. He knew very little about the man, but what he did suggested he was very politically involved and... well, *patriotic*. And the country they were living in made its official position clear – there was no 'Old Alliance', because the Alliance of Eldemar never ended. It simply shrank. That this was a completely ridiculous claim was self-evident to citizens domestic and foreigner alike, but most found it easier to humor the politicians. Kirithishli apparently went a step further and denied there was a predecessor state to be an inheritor of in the first place. A fiery, opinionated woman that she was, she probably said something of the sort within the headmaster's earshot. That must have been a fun conversation.

"Hey!" called a familiar voice. "Is Zorian here? I heard-"

"Don't shout in the library, Zach," Zorian sighed. "Since you're back to your usual exuberance, I'm guessing you're alright now?"

"Yup!" Zach said happily, thumping his chest a few times. "Healthy like an oak. Got an hour to grab something to eat?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm working at the moment," Zorian protested.

"It's not an issue, Zorian, we're mostly done for the day," Kirithishli pointed out. Then she leaned towards him and whispered into his ear. "Unless you wanted to get rid of him and I'm interfering?"

Zorian waved her concerns away and followed Zach outside. As amusing as it would be to see what Kirithishli would say to Zach to get rid of him, he actually wanted to talk to the boy.

"So how come you sought me out?" Zorian asked. He thought he'd have to hound the boy to get more information, but it seemed Zach had taken a liking to him. He didn't know whether to be pleased or annoyed by that. It was convenient, but it increased the chances that he'd realize something was off with Zorian.

"You're the most interesting person I know of at the moment, and the only other person who believes me about time travel except Neolu," Zach said.

"Neolu?" asked Zorian incredulously.

"She's an avid reader of speculative fiction and mysteries and is very imaginative and open-minded," said Zach. "A naïve dreamer, her father would say. It was surprisingly easy to convince her I'm really a time traveler. I guess she wants to believe it's true."

"Ah," said Zorian. He supposed that he knew now why Zach involved Neolu so much the first time he went through this month. He still didn't know who the other girl was, though, and didn't know how he might work her into the conversation. "How many people did you try to convince, anyway?" asked Zorian.

"All of our classmates and teachers, the headmaster, and the heads of every police department in the city. A couple of nobles and other influential people."

How... persistent.

"Not very successful, I imagine," Zorian guessed.

"That's putting it mildly," Zach sighed.

Zorian frowned, suddenly realized something. Why did Zach try to convince all those people he was a time traveler? That didn't sound like something a time traveler that came specifically to stop the invasion would do. It sounded more like something Zorian briefly considered when he realized how utterly over the head he was, but ultimately decided to scrap the idea because he expected the results to be more or less identical to what Zach got.

"Zach," began Zorian carefully, "what about those gaps in your memory? Are they..."

"They're still there," Zach scowled. "I'm pretty sure they're not increasing anymore though, thank the gods."

"Hmm," agreed Zorian. "So you don't know how you achieved this time travel magic, then? I looked it up, and it's supposed to be impossible, you know? As impossible as drawing a square triangle, in fact."

"Well it's clearly not that impossible, is it?" Zach countered. "But no, I have no idea how I did that. *If* I did that."

"If you did that," agreed Zorian. "From your comments I'm getting a feeling you started these reverts as a common academy student. And I mean no offense, but the Zach I remember wasn't really the kind of person capable of inventing any spell, much less something as concept-breaking as time travel."

"Eh heh..." Zach chuckled nervously. "You're probably right. I used to be really bad at this whole mage business, didn't I? But enough of such depressing topics, because I've got good news for you!"

"Oh?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "I heard you've been trying to learn combat magic."

"Eh!? Where did you hear that?" protested Zorian.

"Kyron told the rest of the teachers, the teachers told the administrative staff, the administrative staff told the janitors and other low paying workers, they told the students, and the students told me," finished Zach. "What does it matter? What matters is that I'm very good at combat magic thanks to the reverts, and that I've decided to teach you. Think of it as a reward for believing me."

Zorian gave Zach an incredulous look. He was going to help him out on his own free will? Just like that? No need for any plotting or subtle maneuvering?

Almost disappointing.

"What?" Zach protested. "It's true, I really am good at combat magic! In fact, that's the field I'm most talented at!"

Oh, now that's a wonderful opening...

"Not that I don't believe you, but how exactly did you get so good at combat magic?" asked Zorian. "I mean, mages are really stingy about sharing combat magic. Even with these... reverts... why would they share them with an academy student like you? Especially since you're... uh..."

"Known to be irresponsible," Zach finished for him. "To be honest, I didn't get the spells I know legally. I wouldn't recommend my methods of acquiring combat magic to anyone who isn't a time traveler. You tend to die a lot."

"Oh."

"Yeah. But you have me, so there's that."

Quietly wondering what he was getting himself into, Zorian followed after him.

Chapter Eight

PERSPECTIVE

"Here we are!" said Zach happily, twirling around with his hands outstretched. "What do you think?"

Zorian studied the meadow in front of him, his eyes darting back and forth with suspicion. At first glance the area was just a large patch of grass surrounded by a ring of trees, but Zorian couldn't help but notice signs of obvious neglect. The grass was too wild and tall, and the space between trees was full of young saplings fighting for their own place under the sun. It was a good place to practice combat magic at, but also a good place to hide a body in. In an even remotely normal situation, Zorian wouldn't be caught dead following a complete stranger into a creepy, isolated place like this one. Oh how far his perspective had shifted...

"I wonder what's keeping the saplings confined to that ring of trees," wondered Zorian aloud. "This meadow should be a copse of trees by now."

Zach blinked. "I never thought about that," he admitted. "You notice the strangest things, Zorian."

"I also wonder how a place like this can exist at all," Zorian continued. "I mean, we're in Cyoria. Land is very expensive here. Why is someone letting this place deteriorate like this instead of selling it?"

"Oh, that's easy," Zach said. "It's my land. Or rather, it's part of the Noveda family estates. It's supposed to be a private garden for the Head of House, or something like that, so no one could do anything with it unless they had my explicit permission. But since I hadn't even known this place existed before the reverts... yeah."

"Hm," Zorian agreed. "I guess I should have expected something like that. Your home is pretty close from here, isn't it?"

"You know where I live?" Zach asked, surprise evident in his voice.

Crap. What to say, what to say...

"Of course I know where you live," Zorian said, looking at Zach like the boy was an idiot for asking. "Who *doesn't* know where the Noveda estate is located?"

A lot of people, probably. Zorian himself certainly hadn't known, not until he tried to track Zach down in one of the restarts.

"Heh. I'm pretty famous, aren't I?" Zach said, grinning widely.

Note to self: Zach is easy to distract by appealing to his pride.

"Yeah, yeah," sighed Zorian. "So is the great Noveda going to help me learn combat magic like he promised or not? Daylight's burning."

Zach snapped his fingers, apparently remembering just why they came here in the first place. His hands blurred into a sequence of gestures, and several humanoids made of earth rose from the ground on the other side of the clearing.

Zorian gaped. Now *that* was impressive. Zach didn't even have to chant anything to cast that spell, and he went through the gestures with such speed Zorian had trouble remembering what they even were. Plus, those earthen constructs weren't just immobile statues – they *moved*. It was in times like this that Zorian remembered he was dealing with a vastly superior mage that had him beat

in virtually every conceivable way. It was humbling, to say the least.

"Wow," he said out loud.

"It's not as impressive as it looks," Zach said. "They're nearly useless in actual battle. They make good targets though, since they're pretty resilient and reform each time you mess them up."

Zach fired a quick magic missile at one of the statues to demonstrate, hitting it square in the chest. The earthen construct took a step back from the force of the bolt, and a web of cracks erupted from the impact point, but the cracks quickly sealed themselves shut and the construct otherwise completely ignored the attack.

"I don't believe this," Zorian stated incredulously.

"What do you mean?" Zach asked. "They're just animated earth so it's—"

"Not them," Zorian protested. "The magic missile! No chant, no gestures, no spell formula, no nothing! You just pointed your finger at the target and produced a magic missile!"

Which, admittedly, was a gesture. Not one that should be sufficient to produce a magic missile, though.

"Oh, that," Zach said, waving his hand dismissively. "That's not terribly special either. That's just reflexive magic. When you cast a spell enough times—"

"Mana shaping becomes instinctive and you can start leaving out spell components," finished Zorian for him. Any serious mage had at least a couple of spells they knew so intimately they could leave out a couple of words and gestures and still get it working. "But getting a spell to work with something as simple as pointing a finger would take *years*!"

Zach simply grinned from ear to ear.

"Which, uh, I guess you had," Zorian concluded, feeling rather stupid. "This time travel thing is really convenient, isn't it? How many reflexive spells do you have, anyway?"

"You mean, how many are as reflexive as the magic missile I just showed you? Shield, hurl, recall, flamethrower, and a couple of other easy combat spells. There are a lot of spells I'm familiar with, but I can't exactly throw fireballs by pointing my fingers."

"Right," said Zorian sourly. He was getting way past 'humbling' and straight into 'feeling mightily inadequate' territory. Better steer the conversation back to the lesson before Zach completely demoralized him. "So where do we start?"

"Kyron gave you a spell rod and told you to practice magic missile, didn't he?" asked Zach.

"Yeah," confirmed Zorian.

"Well, let's see how that's working out for you first," said Zach, waving his hand in the direction of the earthen constructs. "Fire a couple of missiles at the mud people."

"Mud people?" asked Zorian incredulously. "Is that-"

"Probably not," Zach admitted. "I kind of forgot the official name of the spell, so I just refer to it as 'Create Mud People'. It doesn't matter all that much since the spell is obscure and obsolete, and virtually no one except me uses it."

"I guess," agreed Zorian. He was tempted to ask more, but figured he would never get to actual spell practice if he kept distracting Zach with his questions. He pointed the spell rod Kyron gave him at the closest... 'mud person'... and fired. He was a bit surprised when the construct tried to side-step his magic missile instead of soaking the spell like it did when Zach targeted it, but that didn't save it – he had enough control of the spell to alter the missile's flight path accordingly, even if he couldn't get the bolt to home in on the target on its own. Of course, the bolt did very little actual damage to the construct, and even that repaired itself quickly. Undeterred, Zorian kept firing. His next shot was a piercer aimed at the head of the construct, which succeeded in hitting it squarely in the forehead but failed to actually punch through

the animated earth. He tried to shape the next bolt into a cutter, but all he got was a diffuse blob of multicolored light that popped like a soap bubble half-way to the target. The next two were regular smashers, one of which missed when its target leaned to the side at the last moment before the bolt hit him.

Zorian stopped at this point, not wanting to completely deplete his mana reserves. He demonstrated pretty much everything he achieved so far, anyway.

Zach clapped overdramatically, completely ignoring the mild glare Zorian sent his way.

"You've only been practicing, what, for a couple of days?" asked Zach. Zorian nodded. "And you can direct your bolts already? You're a lot better than I thought you'd be."

"Oh?" asked Zorian, a hint of warning in his voice. "And why is that?"

"Let me ask you this instead: how many magic missiles can you cast before you run out of mana?" asked Zach.

"10," answered Zorian. He didn't see what that... oh. "Ah. Normally learning time corresponds to mana capacity, doesn't it?"

"Yup! The bigger your mana reserves, the longer you can train each day," confirmed Zach. "It means mages with larger reserves tend to learn faster than their less gifted compatriots."

"Assuming everyone is equally dedicated and equally good at shaping mana," noted Zorian.

"Assuming that," agreed Zach. "Though the difference in mana reserves tends to overshadow almost everything else. Do you know how many magic missiles I can cast before I run out of mana?"

Zorian hadn't forgotten Zach's seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves that he demonstrated during the invasion, and was aware that the number must be pretty high. Still, there was a limit to how big your mana reserves could get. The booklet Kyron gave

him said average mages can fire somewhere between 8 to 12 magic missiles before running out of mana, while very gifted ones could manage as much as 20 or 30. Furthermore, while mana reserves increased with age and practice, they were not unlimited in potential – most people's maximum was roughly 4 times the amount of mana reserves they started with, and usually less. Assuming Zach was in the above average range (something his comments and attitude strongly suggested), and that he achieved his maximum due to the time loop...

"50?" he tried.

"232," said Zach smugly.

Zorian almost dropped the spell rod in shock, but in the end settled for staring at Zach like he just swallowed a live chicken. 232? What the hell!?

"Admittedly I'm at the extreme high end when it comes to mana reserves," Zach said. Understatement of the century! "And unlike you, I've spent years building them up, so they're as high as they're ever going to be. Still, even if you had a lifetime of practice, you'd probably never go over 40. That would make my reserves almost 6 times larger than yours. Quite a disadvantage to make up for."

"No kidding," agreed Zorian. "I'm guessing that's where you come in. Unless you've brought me here just to tell me how much I suck compared to you?"

"Hah! I admit the look on your face when you realized how awesome I am was absolutely priceless, but that's just a bonus," said Zach.

He beckoned for Zorian to come closer and Zorian complied, allowing Zach to cast a completely unfamiliar spell on him.

Zorian felt the spell seep into his eyes, foreign mana straining against the innate magical resistance possessed by every living creature, and briefly considered snuffing the spell out before it took

root. Not because he thought the spell was harmful, mind you, but out of principle. Zach just cast a spell on him without asking for permission or explaining what the spell did, which was a major breach of magical etiquette no matter how you looked at it. In the end he decided not to be that spiteful and simply reeled in his magical resistance, allowing the spell to do its work unopposed.

"You already have control over your magical resistance?" asked Zach. "Sweet! I usually have to teach people how to do that, first. Hell, *I* didn't know how to do that before the reverts."

Zorian frowned, ignoring Zach's comments in favor of trying to figure out what the spell actually did. It was concentrated in his eyes, so he should... see...

Oh.

A glowing, mind-bogglingly huge pillar rose into the sky, warping and undulating like a living being, occasionally spawning short-lived whorls of glowing matter along its length. It only took Zorian a moment to realize what he was looking at.

"That's how the Hole looks like under mage sight?" he asked, focusing back on Zach.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Zach said. "Watching that huge geyser of mana rising into the sky always puts things into perspective for me."

"Mage sight shouldn't work in Cyoria, though," remarked Zorian. "Too much ambient mana saturating everything. Why aren't I blinded by painful glow emanating from everything in sight?"

"It's an experimental variation that tries to filter out such 'noise', showing only the important stuff," said Zach. "It's not terribly reliable, but it will do for our purposes."

"Those being?" asked Zorian.

"I'll cast magic missile repeatedly and you'll watch what I'm doing for a while before trying to copy me," Zach said. "I'll be using the proper invocation this time, and go at it as slowly as I can. Try

to memorize the words and gestures, because you'll be using them instead of the rod Kyron gave you. A spell rod is more useful in combat, but for training purposes it's better to work with actual invocations."

Zorian was completely on board with the idea – he had been trying to find invocations for combat spells for a while now, anyway. Zach was underestimating him, though. 'Try' to memorize? Zorian might not have Zach's absurd mana reserves, but his memory was quite good. It took only one proper casting from Zach and Zorian had already burned the casting procedure into his memory.

Unfortunately, the rest of the session was a lot less impressive. Zach kept performing the spell a few more times before instructing Zorian to give it a try, upon which he found out that performing combat magic with classical invocations wasn't only slower than using a spell rod – it was a lot harder too. Thankfully, the fact that he actually *saw* how the mana was supposed to be shaped during Zach's demonstration drastically improved his learning speed, so he managed to fire off a passable magic missile in the end. He was completely out of mana by then, however, and Zach decided that was a good time to stop for the day.

Walking back to his apartment, Zorian was lost in thought. Zach's comment about the giant pillar of mana putting things into perspective for him seemed oddly applicable to his situation as well. Time loop or not, he would never beat Zach and people like him at their own game. Clearly Zorian couldn't bulldoze his way through with combat magic, like Zach intended to do. No, if he was going to get out of this in a favorable manner, he had to forge his own path.

If only he knew what that path was, though. At the moment, getting to the bottom of what caused this time loop and how the damn thing worked seemed to be just about the only thing he could do to help himself. Which was unfortunate, because he just didn't

have the skills to unravel the mystery. Apparently he had to spend some time improving his magical abilities. Time, at least, he had in spades. Probably. He could never be sure the time loop would continue happening, but Zach certainly didn't behave like it would end any time soon, and Zorian decided to follow Zach's lead in that regard.

He really wished he had someone other than Zach to ask for advice on how to proceed in his quest to improve himself. Typically, this was what a student's mentor was for, but he already knew what Xvim would tell him: more shaping exercises. Then he'd throw marbles at him.

Although... Ilsa did offer to take over his mentorship in a couple of restarts, didn't she? Hmm.



Despite his desire for some additional help, Zorian delayed approaching Ilsa until he actually had a few sessions with Xvim. That would require a lengthy wait, but it would make it easier to complain about Xvim's mentoring methods, since he wouldn't have to explain how he knew so much about the man already. It wasn't like he didn't have anything to amuse himself in the meantime – Zach was, if anything, even more enthusiastic about their combat magic practice sessions than Zorian was, insisting they meet up every day after classes. After two weeks of such practice, Zorian was not only able to weave a proper homing function into the magic missile spell, but also learned how to cast shield and flamethrower spells as well. He was keenly aware that his ability to cast such spells would amount to exactly zero against a human battlemage, but he also knew they weren't the only threats he faced. Those spells might buy him a second or two against a winter wolf or a troll, which could be the difference between life and death.

Zach returned to classes the day after their first practice session, apparently completely recovered. For a guy that lost a good chunk of his memory, he was surprisingly exuberant. Zorian admired his fellow time traveler for his ability to maintain good cheer in poor circumstances, but Zach's attention grabbing behavior only made his inexplicable improvement in skill that much more noticeable. It was almost a repeat of the very first time he lived through this month, only instead of hanging out with Neolu and that other mystery girl, Zach was hanging out with *him*. Which, of course, made Zorian a target for every curious classmate that wanted to know how Zach suddenly got so good all of a sudden.

"What am I supposed to tell them?" he asked Zach. They were both in the cafeteria, and he had noticed a couple of students glancing at him a bit too often, doubtlessly waiting for the chance to talk to him when Zach left. "I can't exactly tell them you're a time traveler."

"Why not?" Zach asked. "Time travel. It's what I say every time they ask me how I got this good."

"You actually tell them you're a time traveler?" asked Zorian incredulously. He didn't know whether to laugh or bang his head against the table.

"Yeah," confirmed Zach. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Zorian felt a pang of phantom pain in his chest where, in another timeline, a masked assassin stabbed him through and killed him. Did Zach honestly never experience consequences like that when trying to convince people of his story? Then again, he said he tried to convince them he was a time traveler, not that he told them about the invasion. In fact, he didn't actually tell Zorian about that either – he danced around the topic whenever Zorian tried to lead the conversation in that particular direction.

"This could have all been avoided if you just held back a little in classes," Zorian sighed.

"I kind of like the attention," Zach admitted.

"Really?" asked Zorian. "I'm only going through this once and I'm already sick of it. You're saying the novelty of all that attention still hasn't worn off after, what, more than a decade?"

"Oh come on, do you really think I spend these reverts attending classes, of all things?" scoffed Zach. "That got seriously old after the third revert or so. I spend most of the time doing my own thing. Hell, usually I'm not even near Cyoria! I only attend the classes when I want to relax or when I am feeling nostalgic. The only reason why I'm here right now is because I got kind of roughed up in my last revert and I'm still trying to sort out the holes in my memory. Oh, and because you've kind of caught my interest."

"Why did I catch your interest, though?" asked Zorian. "Not that I'm complaining or anything, but how come you're willing to invest so much time in me? Isn't it all going to be useless in the next revert?"

"That's a pretty cold way of thinking about things," Zach said. "I don't really think like that. I've tried to get to know all of our classmates in these reverts, even though some of them were pretty uncooperative with the idea, and I've never thought of it as a waste of time. This is the first time I've gotten you this friendly, and I have no idea what exactly I did to cause that. It's best to make use of it while I can."

Now he was starting to feel pretty bad. Not only had he never tried to get to know any of his classmates during the reverts, the idea had never even occurred to him. And this wasn't the first time Zach had insinuated that Zorian was kind of a jerk to him in the past. Just what had happened between Zach and past-Zorian to leave that much of an impression?

"I see," said Zorian uncertainly, not knowing how to respond to that.

"I really do wonder about you, though," Zach continued. "You're so different from the Zorian I knew, I'm starting to wonder if you're really the same person."

"Who else would I be?" asked Zorian, honestly at a loss as to where Zach was going with this. He didn't appear to have figured out that Zorian was 'reverting', as he would say, so what was he getting at?

"I think I may have shifted timelines, or something," Zach said.

Zorian gave him an incredulous look. Shifted timelines? That's his explanation? Really? *Really really?* He almost revealed himself right then and there, just so he could tell him how silly that was. Almost.

"Or something," deadpanned Zorian.

"Whaaat?" protested Zach. "It could happen. Do *you* know how temporal mechanics work? No? Didn't think so."

"I did look up a couple of books about time travel after our first meeting," said Zorian. It was a lie, of course, but only a small one – he had sifted through time travel related texts, just not in this particular restart.

"And learned nothing," concluded Zach. "It's a total wasteland. All they write about is about various ethical dilemmas and time paradoxes and whatnot. That was the first and last time I set foot in the academy library, let me tell you."

Zorian gave him a strange look. "That was a joke, right?"

"Which part?" Zach asked.

"The part where you only visited the academy library once," clarified Zorian.

"Err, well..." tried Zach, chuckling nervously. "What can I say? I don't really like to read..."

Zorian stared at Zach, wondering if the boy was pulling his leg. He would totally understand if the old Zach, the one he knew before the time loop, told him he never set foot in the library. He wouldn't be terribly unique in that regard – lots of students never visited the library before their third year, since they couldn't access the spell repository before their certification, anyway. But *this* Zach had lived through this month over 200 times, and had access to the spells buried within its depths. And he never tried to search through it. Because he didn't like to read.

The mind boggled. Well, Zorian's mind boggled.

"You've clearly read our textbooks," Zorian noted. "There's no way you'd excel as well as you do otherwise."

"Yeah, well, I didn't say I don't read at all," Zach countered. "Just that I'd rather avoid it if I can. I learn much better by example anyway."

Funny, it was just the opposite with Zorian – he tended to learn much better when he had the chance to study the topic on his own before trying. He still thought it was a pretty serious flaw for a mage to avoid books, but Zorian had to remind himself that Zach was clearly achieving results somehow. Come to think of it, there was a serious shortage of anything dangerous in the academy spell collection, so a mage that was chiefly interested in the more restricted areas of magic would find the library of very limited usefulness.

"So you learn primarily by mentorship?" guessed Zorian. "I'm surprised you can convince mages to teach you in less than a month. Don't they all require apprenticeships lasting for several years before they'll agree to teach you anything useful?"

"Well, usually," said Zach. "But I'm the last Noveda, don't you know? I had highly respectable mages tripping over themselves to teach me my whole life. Usually I just have to show up and tell them who I am and they're all too happy to help me out."

Zorian suppressed a wave of jealousy that washed over him. Zach was just making the most of his unique situation, just like Zorian would have in his place. It still bothered him, though, reminding him of how Daimen and Fortov could ask and get all sorts of help and concessions from their teachers, only for Zorian to fail in securing the same for himself. His parents had lectured him endlessly that the difference was in their attitudes – that if only Zorian was more sociable, more polite, more *everything*... he too could enjoy the same benefits. To Zorian, it always seemed like his brothers had some sort of invisible tattoo on their foreheads that only mages could see, and which marked them as somehow more special than him.

Zach wasn't his brothers, though, and didn't deserve to be the target for Zorian's personal frustrations.

"Convenient," said Zorian out loud, giving his fellow time traveler a smile that was somewhat forced. Zach didn't appear to notice.

His jealousy aside, he was really starting to wonder if his assumption about Zach being an accidental stowaway like him had any merit at all. Zach had ridiculously huge mana reserves, probably the largest of any student currently attending the academy. He was the last member of a famous Noble House, enjoying all the prestige that comes from that without having to deal with nosy parents who might be freaked out by Zach's sudden transformation. In addition to the power inherent in his name, the boy was also fairly charming and outgoing, further improving his chances of getting help from otherwise unapproachable high-circle mages. He was not your average spoiled prince, by any means – there was a lot of potential in the boy, if only he would get enough time to bring it out. Time that Zach now had. It was... convenient. A bit too convenient, in Zorian's opinion.

That is why, despite Zach's seeming friendliness, Zorian just

didn't feel at ease with the boy. Not enough to reveal himself as a stowaway, in any case. Right now, his main advantage was that he was an outside element in this game Zach was playing. An unaccounted variable. He intended to use and abuse that advantage for all it was worth.

Whatever force was behind Zach, Zorian had no intention of revealing himself to it any time soon.



"Take a seat, mister Kazinski," Ilsa said. "I sort of suspected I'd be seeing you soon."

"You did?" asked Zorian.

"Oh yes," Ilsa said. "Usually students come knocking at my door immediately after a single session with Xvim. You actually waited until the second one, so points for patience."

"Right," said Zorian sourly.

"I can't transfer you to another mentor at this time, though, so I'm afraid you'll just have to bear with him for now," she said.

"I sort of expected that," Zorian said. Why should her answer be any different than it was the last time he asked her? "It's not what I'm here for."

"No?" asked Ilsa, raising an eyebrow.

"No," confirmed Zorian. "Since everything I've heard and experienced about Xvim suggests we'll never progress beyond the basic three, I've decided to be proactive about self study. I've been hoping for some pointers from you – where I should start, what I should watch out for, that sort of thing."

Ilsa sighed heavily. "It's hard to give that sort of advice, mister Kazinski. That's why the academy gives students mentors – because there is no one-size-fits-all solution. I suppose I could give you advice about my own subject, though. How good are you at the basic three?"

"Depends who you ask," said Zorian. "Most of the teachers from my second year told me I had them mastered. Xvim says I'm a shame to mages everywhere."

She snorted and handed him a pen. Actually handed it to him, not threw it at him like Xvim would have. Ah, the joy of interacting with sane teachers...

"Levitate that," Ilsa said.

She wasn't even finished talking and the pen was already spinning above his outstretched palm.

"Oh, so you can already spin the levitated object?" Ilsa said, sounding pleased. "I bet Xvim was very happy with that." No, not really. "Do you know any other variation?"

"No," said Zorian. "Don't tell me learning those is standard procedure?"

"Not like Xvim is teaching them," Ilsa said. "But yes, most mentors will give students variations of the basic three to improve their shaping skills."

"And how many of those variations are there?" asked Zorian.

"Oh, *thousands*," said Ilsa, confirming Zorian's suspicions. "But most students only learn 6 or so by the end of their third year. Here."

She pushed a rather heavy book into his hands, patiently waiting for him to leaf through it. It was apparently a book describing 15 'particularly interesting' variations of the basic three, 5 for each exercise.

"Let me guess: you want me to learn everything inside this book," Zorian sighed.

"That would be a pretty neat trick," Ilsa snorted. "Didn't you hear what I said? Most people learn 6 or less... *in a year*. You'll probably be finished with the academy by the time you've learned everything inside that book. Assuming you want to, of course – I'm not making you do anything."

"6 in a year, huh?" asked Zorian carefully, an idea forming in his mind.

"That's right," Ilsa confirmed.

"So what if I could master all 15 before this month is done?" asked Zorian.

Ilsa stared at him for a second before bursting into laughter. It took her a few seconds to calm down.

"My, aren't you the confident one?" Ilsa said, chuckling softly. "If you were really that good, I'd fill out the transfer forms right now, regulations be damned, and take you as my apprentice. I'd never pass up an opportunity to teach such a legend in the making. Not that I think you could do it, mind you."

Zorian just gave her a wicked smile.



Of course, there was absolutely no chance for Zorian to master all 15 exercises in this particular restart, but that was beside the point. Thanks to the wonder of the time loop, he had far more than a few measly weeks to learn the contents of the book. It was even available in the academy library, so he didn't have to go to Ilsa in the next restart to acquire it. And who knew, maybe if he learned those he could get Xvim to cut him some slack too. A man could dream.

Besides, the book was actually fairly interesting. Not only did it explain how to perform each variation in great detail, it also explained the reasons for including each particular exercise, as well as providing a background for understanding why the basic three were being taught to students in the first place. Zorian briefly familiarized himself with each of the variations before starting to read earnestly from the start.

Making an object glow, levitating it, or setting it aflame... these were very simple effects, requiring only rudimentary shap-

ing skills. The levitation exercise, for instance, was just repelling force emanating from the mage's palm. It doesn't get much simpler than that. There were actually a lot of these simple effects, certainly more than the three they were taught, but these three were deemed a priority. Production of light, heat, or kinetic force were common components of many spells, giving the basic three the sort of general usefulness that most other simple exercises lacked.

The variations listed in the book were not in the same category as these simple, or starter exercises. Although Xvim, Ilsa, and the book itself referred to them as 'variations', Zorian realized they were more like 'upgrades', or perhaps 'advanced versions'. He hadn't realized it at the time, but the pen spinning exercise – which was the very first variation outlined in the book, albeit under a fancier name – was a whole other category of difficulty from simply levitating the pen above his palm. Not only did he have to maintain the levitation effect on the pen, he also had to shape an additional effect to make the pen spin. The variation was supposed to teach mages how to multitask, by making them maintain two effects at once.

Though Xvim would have disagreed, Zorian considered his pen spinning exercise mastered, and the guidelines in the book seemed to agree with him. As such, he started poring over the other 4 variations of the levitation exercise, trying to figure out which one was the easiest. He quickly realized they were not only arranged in an ascending order of difficulty, but that mastering the later variations probably *requires* mastering the preceding ones first.

Vertical levitation required him to make an object stick to his palm with attractive force, position his palm vertically and then make the object separate from his palm without falling down. The sticking part was easy, and something Zorian could already do, but

making the object float off the palm without falling required that he balances the attractive force binding the object to his palm and the repelling force that made it separate from it. Without the ability to multitask he acquired from the pen spinning exercise, it probably would have taken forever to master this one.

Next was fixed position levitation, which required an ability to maintain the levitated object's position in space despite disruptions and changes in initial conditions. In other words, he had to be able to move his hand up and down, left and right, while keeping the levitated object static in space. It required the ability to balance attractive and repelling force he presumably acquired from the vertical levitation exercise, but this time he had to continually adjust the balance in response to changes.

And so on. Seeing how there was only one correct order in which these exercises could be learned, Zorian started practicing vertical levitation. Unfortunately, he wouldn't accomplish much in this particular restart.

The summer festival was approaching.

Chapter Nine

CHEATERS

"Majara," intoned Zorian, finishing the spell with the word he wanted the spell to search for. He felt the spell reach out around him, scanning the books in the surrounding shelves for any mention of the word in question, and poured some more mana into the spell to expand its radius. His efforts to overcharge the spell almost unraveled it, forcing him to spend several seconds stabilizing the spell boundary, but in the end the mana flow snapped into its proper place and the spell finished its task as planned. Seven golden threads flickered into existence, seemingly growing out of his chest and connecting him to various books in this particular section of the library.

Zorian smiled. The spell was one of the book divinations Ibery had taught him, one that sought out books containing a specified word or string of words. It was a somewhat fragile spell, failing if the number of positive matches exceeded a certain number – the exact number depending on the caster's skill. It was mostly used to search for quotes or really exotic terms.

Exotic terms like, say, the dead language of Majara. Zenomir hadn't been kidding when he had told Zorian that he wouldn't be able to find any books about it – there were no books specifically about the Majara language, and very few books even mentioned

it. Up until now, he had only found 13 other books that contained the word, and most of them only in the form of a throwaway comment or two. It was possible that the knowledge he sought existed somewhere in the library, only in a format that was invisible to the divinations he was using – Ibery had only taught him the very basics of ‘library magic’, as she called it, so his searches were painfully crude in the grand scheme of things – but if that was the case, there was little he could do about it.

He glanced down at the threads growing out of his chest and waved his hand through them, watching it pass through them without effect. He never got tired of doing that. Well, he probably would, in time, but the novelty hadn’t worn off yet. The threads were an illusion, existing only in the privacy of his own mind. Every divination spell needed a medium through which it could present information to the caster, since it was impossible for human minds to process the raw output of a divination spell. A self-imposed illusion like the threads he was currently looking at was actually fairly advanced as divination mediums go, or so Ibery had claimed when he had tried to tell her he got the spell working within 30 minutes of being shown how to do it. He had a distinct impression she thought he was lying. He didn’t really understand what was supposed to be so difficult about it, to be honest – the threads were a purely mental construct that didn’t even require much in the way of shaping skills... just visualization. It seemed pretty simple to him. Natural even.

He shook his head and followed after one of the golden threads till he reached a book it was attached to. It was a huge, intimidating, 400-page book about the history of Miasina, and Zorian had absolutely no intention of poring over it until he reached the tiny part that actually interested him, so he cast another divination Ibery had taught him. This one highlighted every mention of the chosen word (in this case ‘Majara’) in shining green, so he simply

flipped through the book till he caught a flash of green.

"Zorian? What are you doing here?"

Zorian immediately snapped the book shut and stuffed it back on the shelf. While he wasn't doing anything forbidden, he really didn't want to explain to Ibery what Majara was, and why he was searching the library for any mention of it.

The retort he planned to use died on his lips when he finally turned to get a good look on his visitor. Ibery was a mess. Her eyes and nose were red, as if she had been crying recently, and there was an ugly purple splotch covering her right cheek and neck. It didn't look like a bruise, not exactly, more like...

Oh hell no.

"Ibery..." he started hesitantly. "You wouldn't happen to go into the same class as my brother, would you?"

She flinched back and looked away. He sighed heavily. Just great.

"How did you know?" she asked after a second of silence.

"Brother dearest came to me earlier today," said Zorian. "Said he pushed a girl into a purple creeper patch and wanted me to make 'an anti-rash potion'. I wasn't in the mood so I kind of blew him off."

That was a lie, actually. He had discovered, during the last three reverts, that Fortov was either unable or unwilling to track him down if he failed to return to his room after class. That was actually the main reason why he spent the entire day in the library instead of inside his room. Still, due to his rather unique situation he knew what would have happened had he been present.

"Oh," she said quietly. "That... That's alright."

"No," disagreed Zorian. "No, it's not. If I had known he was talking about you, I would have helped him out. Well... helped *you* out. *He* can go die in a fire as far as I'm concerned." He paused for a moment, considering things. "You know, there is no reason why

I can't do it now. I'll just have to stop by my room to pick up the ingredients and--"

"You don't have to do that," Ibery quickly interrupted. "It's... not that important."

Zorian took in her appearance one more time. Yup, she had *definitely* been crying before coming here. Besides, her choice of words was conspicuous – she said that he didn't *have* to do it, not that he shouldn't, and that it wasn't *that* important, not that it wasn't.

"It's not really a problem," he assured her. "The main reason I refused in the first place is because it was Fortov who asked, not because it was so difficult to do. Just tell me where to find you when I'm done."

"Um, I'd like to come with you, if it's not a problem," she said hesitantly. "I'd like to see how the cure is made. Just in case."

Zorian paused. That was... potentially problematic. After all, the alchemical workshop would be closed down this late in the evening, and he would have to employ some, uh, *unorthodox* methods of gaining access. But what the hell, it wasn't like she would remember this in the next restart.

Thus they set off towards Zorian's apartment. Of course, having Ibery looking over his shoulder wasn't enough, so when he had finally reached his room he found another familiar person waiting for him. Specifically, Zach.

He wasn't terribly surprised to see Zach waiting for him, to be honest. The boy had been getting steadily more nervous during their practice sessions as the summer festival approached, no doubt unnerved by the impending invasion. Not that he ever told Zorian about the invasion – Zach was stubbornly tight-lipped about that, regardless of how much Zorian tried to goad him into blurting out something. Over the last few days, his fellow time traveler had questioned him about his plans for the summer festival several

times, not-so-subtly implying that staying inside his room would be a bad idea. As Zorian still remembered quite vividly how one of the 'flares' flattened his entire apartment building when the invasion started, he was inclined to agree with Zach on that one. Unfortunately, Zach seemed to have trouble believing that Zorian was in agreement with him on that point. No doubt he came specifically to make sure (again) that Zorian was going to attend the dance. Zorian wondered, for god knows what time, just what happened between Zach and his previous incarnations to produce this kind of impression. Had he really been that stubborn before the time loop?

He walked up to Zach, who was sitting on the floor next to his door, completely oblivious to his surroundings while he concentrated on something on his palm. No, now that he got closer he could see it was actually something *above* his palm. A pencil, lazily spinning in the air above Zach's palm. Apparently Zach knew the pen spinning exercise too, and was currently practicing it while he waited. Zorian had a strong urge to throw a marble at Zach's forehead and demand that he starts over, but decided against it.

Mostly because he didn't have any marbles on his person at the moment.

"Hello Zach," Zorian said, startling Zach out of his reverie. "Are you waiting for me?"

"Yeah," confirmed Zach. He opened his mouth to say something else but then noticed Ibery trailing behind Zorian and snapped his mouth shut. "Err, am I interrupting something?"

"No, not really," Zorian sighed. "I just came to grab some alchemical supplies and then I'll go make something for miss Ambercomb here. What did you want with me?"

"Eh, it can wait a while," Zach said dismissively. "What are you making? Maybe I can help – I'm pretty good at alchemy."

"Is there anything you're *not* good at?" asked Zorian with a

snort.

"You'd be surprised," mumbled Zach.

Ibery watched their interaction in silence, but Zach was a fairly sociable person, so by the time Zorian returned from his room with a box of supplies the two of them were engaged in lively conversation. Mostly about Ibery's current condition.

"Man, I didn't know your brother is such a jerk, Zorian," Zach remarked. "No wonder you turned out to be such a... uh..."

He trailed off when Zorian raised his eyebrow at him, daring him to finish that sentence. Ibery's reaction was more vocal.

"He's not a jerk!" she protested. "He didn't mean for this to happen."

"He should have fixed it, though," Zach insisted. "Intentionally or not, it was his fault. He shouldn't have dumped his responsibility on his little brother like this."

"Nobody forced Zorian to do anything," Ibery said. "He's doing this out of his own free will. Right, Zorian?"

"Right," agreed Zorian. "I'm doing this because I want to."

He actually agreed with Zach, but chose not to say so. If he had learned anything about Ibery from spending an entire revert around her it was that she had a massive crush on Fortov. No good could come from bad mouthing him in front of her. Besides, if he was to be honest with himself, Zorian had to admit he was incapable of being objective about Fortov. There was too much bad blood between the two of them.

Thankfully, the two of them quickly agreed to disagree on the topic and a comfortable silence descended on the group. Well, it was comfortable for Zorian – apparently Zach didn't agree.

"Hey Zorian," Zach said. "Why are we going towards the academy proper?"

"So I can access the alchemical workshop, of course," said Zorian. He knew what Zach was getting at, of course, but he was

still hoping to get away without revealing one of his most closely guarded tricks.

No such luck.

"But all the workshops are closed this late in the evening," remarked Zach.

"Ah!" Ibery exclaimed. "He's right! They closed down two hours ago!"

"It won't be a problem," Zorian assured them. "So long as we clean up after ourselves, no one will know we were there."

"But the door is locked," pointed out Zach.

Zorian sighed. "Not to magic, it isn't."

"You know unlocking spells?" asked Zach in a surprised tone.

Zorian understood his surprise – unlocking spells were restricted magic, due to their obvious abuse potential. Unless you possessed a special license, even knowing how to cast them was a crime. Not a particularly serious crime, but a crime nonetheless.

Perhaps it was good, then, that Zorian didn't know a single unlocking spell.

"No, I don't," said Zorian. "But it's just a simple mechanical lock. I'll just manipulate the tumblers telekinetically. Piece of cake."

They gave him a blank look. Like most people, they had no idea how locks actually worked, and how easy it was to bypass most of them. Zorian, due to his somewhat colorful childhood, did. In fact, he could pick your average lock without using magic at all – it was just a lot slower than his little magic trick and required him to carry around a set of lock picks.

He stopped in front of the door leading into the alchemical workshop and tried the handle. Like Zach said, it was locked. Shrugging, Zorian placed his palm over the keyhole and closed his eyes. He could feel Zach and Ibery cluster around him to get a

better look at what he was doing, and did his best to block them out. He needed total concentration for this.

He had developed this particular trick back in his second year, after he got bored of refining the standard shaping exercises they were given. It involved flooding the locking mechanism with his mana, using the resulting mana field as a sort of 'touch sight' to get a feel for the lock, and then carefully moving the tumblers into proper position so he could neutralize the lock. It took him months of stubborn practice, but by now he was good enough at it to unlock most doors in 30 seconds or less.

Even warded ones. He didn't say this to Zach and Ibery, but the door he was trying to open was actually warded. Anything even remotely important in the academy was, including most of the doors. However, as Zorian quickly discovered when he experimented with the newly-developed skill, low-level wards were very specific – they countered a handful of common unlocking spells, and nothing else. Zorian's little trick was not a structured spell, and thus didn't trip these rudimentary wards at all.

The door clicked and Zorian tried the door handle again. This time the door opened without resistance.

"Wow," said Zach as they all filed into the workshop. "You can open a lock just by pressing your hand against it for a few seconds!"

Zorian gave him a sour look. "It's a lot more complicated than that – that's just the visible part."

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second," Zach said.

Still, while Zach seemed very impressed with Zorian's achievement, Ibery remained strangely quiet and kept giving him funny looks. This was why he hated telling people about his lock-picking prowess – most immediately assumed he was some kind of a thief. Well, that and he didn't want the academy authorities to find out about his achievement. They would no doubt change their warding scheme and then he wouldn't be able to do what he just did.

Fortunately, Ibery wasn't as condemning as some people Zorian met in his life, and got over her suspicions quickly once he started to prepare the salve. Strangely enough, Zach didn't know how to make one, even though it was a fairly simple thing to make and Zach had demonstrated some mightily impressive alchemical work in class. He didn't appear all that interested in learning, either – apparently the anti-rash salve was too mundane for his tastes, and he was only interested in things like strength potions and wound closing elixirs. That sounded like trying to build a house without bothering to set up proper foundations, but it wasn't Zorian who was a decade old time traveler. Yet.

"Aren't those purple creeper leaves?" Ibery asked, pointing at the small pile Zorian had placed on a wet piece of cloth.

"Yes," confirmed Zorian, wrapping the leaves into the cloth. "They're the main ingredient, though they have to be crushed first. Alchemical manuals usually claim you have to reduce the leaves into powder but it's not really necessary to go that far. You just have to use more leaves otherwise, but it's not like purple creepers are in short supply..."

An hour later, the salve was done and Zach was kind enough to conjure some kind of illusionary mirror so Ibery could apply the salve on herself right then and there. Kind and sneaky, because while Ibery was busy with applying the salve on herself, Zach dragged Zorian away in the corner so he could talk to him in private.

"So?" Zorian prompted. "What is it?"

Zach reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring, which he promptly handed to Zorian. It was a featureless band of gold that reacted strangely when Zorian channeled some mana into it.

"It's a spell formula," Zach said.

"Magic missile?" guessed Zorian.

"That, plus shield and flamethrower," Zach said. "Now you can

use all three in actual combat.”

Zorian looked at the ring with newfound respect. There was only so much one could cram into a spell formula, and it was mostly dependant on the size of the item used as a base. Turning something as small as a ring into a spell formula for three different spells was a pretty impressive feat, even if they were relatively low-level ones.

”Must have been pretty expensive,” Zorian remarked.

”Made it myself, actually,” Zach said with a grin.

”Still, that’s a pretty valuable thing to give away to someone you’ve met less than a month ago,” said Zorian. ”Why do I get the feeling I’ll be needing this in the near future?”

Zach’s smile disappeared and he suddenly became more subdued. ”Maybe. I’m just making sure, you know. You never know when an angry troll might get a jump on you or something.”

”How... oddly specific,” noted Zorian. ”You know, you’ve been getting steadily more nervous as the summer festival approaches. And you seem oddly interested in making sure I attend the dance.”

”You will, right?” Zach prompted.

”Yes, yes, I told you I will half a dozen times already,” huffed Zorian. ”What’s so important about the dance, anyway? What’s going to happen there, oh great traveler from the future?”

”You have to see it to believe it,” Zach sighed. ”It’s possibly even more implausible than time travel being real.”

”That bad?” asked Zorian, privately agreeing that an invasion of that scale was something he would have had trouble believing in if he had not lived through it.

”Just... try to survive, okay?” Zach sighed. Before Zorian could say anything else, Zach suddenly donned a mask of fake cheerfulness and spoke in a voice loud enough to be heard by Ibery. ”Wow, Zorian, I’m sure glad we’ve had this talk but I should really get go-

ing now! Have to be well rested for tomorrow! Bye, Zorian! Bye, Ibery! I'll see you both at the dance!"

And then he left. Zorian shook his head at the other boy's exit and walked up to Ibery, who was now free of purple rash that once covered her face and neck.

"Well, I guess we should go too," Zorian said. "The academy normally doesn't have anyone patrolling after dark, but that idiot's shouting may have alerted someone to our presence."

"Oh. Um, right."

Zorian watched Ibery as they filed out of the workshop and he used his magic trick to re-lock the door again. She seemed strangely subdued for someone who got what they wanted.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked after a while.

"Err, nothing's wrong," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"You don't seem very happy to be cured," he noted.

"I am!" she protested. "It's just..."

"Yes?" he prompted.

"I don't have anyone to go to the dance with," she said. "The boy I was hoping to go with already has someone by now."

If her unnamed boy was Fortov (probably, considering her obvious crush on him), then yes, he most certainly did. In fact, he probably had one week in advance, so there was never much chance of her going with him in the first place, but he didn't feel the need to crush her dreams like that.

"Then you'll just have to do the same thing I will and go to the dance all by yourself, won't you?" concluded Zorian.

She suddenly stopped and gave him an appraising glance.

"You don't have anyone to go with, either?" she asked.

Zorian closed his eyes and swore in his head. He really walked into this one, didn't he?



Zorian was nervous. Ever since his very first restart, he had been studiously avoiding the city on the day of the festival, not willing to get caught up in the invasion again. Being present within city limits could easily result in his grisly death, after all, and back then he wasn't sure whether his current restart would be his last. That wasn't an option anymore, unless he wanted to clue in Zach that there was something wrong with him (he didn't).

Bottom line was, he was stuck attending the dance, with the unexpected addition of Ibery as his date for the evening. He wasn't exactly happy with that, actually. He didn't really have much of a plan for the evening, except to wait and see what would happen, but Ibery's presence at his side would no doubt limit him. Not to mention that he still remembered his disastrous evening with Akoja, and had very little desire to live through a repeat performance, consequences-erasing time loop or not.

Speaking of his evening with Akoja, Zorian had to admit one thing about Ibery: she was a lot more reasonable and considerate than Akoja was. She didn't drag him out of his room 2 hours before the event, or make him wait smack in the middle of the huge throng of people gathered at the entrance, or drag him off to chat with a bunch of people who only cared about him being Daimen's and Fortov's brother... She was also more interested in scanning the crowd for any trace of Fortov than paying attention to him, but that was okay – he was under no illusion that she had asked him out because she was actually interested in him. After a while he decided to have mercy on her and informed her that Fortov was already inside, preparing for tonight's performance along with the other members of the academy music club.

Naturally, Zach's entrance was in the boy's usual flamboyant style. He had caught everyone's attention when he had shown up with not one, but *two* dates for the evening (Zorian didn't recognize either girl), and then further wooed people by demonstrating

some very impressive – and attention-grabbing – dancing. Apparently Zach had learned more than magic during these restarts. Zorian clapped with the others when Zach finally finished showing off, and considered the merits of sinking some time into a non-magical skill. Not dancing, though. Or any other 'high society' skill, for that matter – honing those beyond the elementary level he had already grasped would require him to construct a mask so thorough he wasn't sure he'd be able to take it off afterwards. The benefits weren't worth selling his soul over, even metaphorically.

"This is a lot fancier than I thought it would be," Ibery noted, fingering the lacy tablecloth in front of her.

"It's obviously more than just a school dance," agreed Zorian. "I'm guessing the Academy was organizing some kind of event for foreign dignitaries this year and then decided to simply merge it with the school dance for whatever reason."

"I guess," Ibery said. "They *did* invest a lot into making everything look good this year, and I doubt they did it for our sake." Ibery looked at the far end of the table, where Zach was entertaining a small crowd around him, his two escorts nowhere to be seen. After a few seconds of this observation she turned to Zorian and stared at him strangely.

"What?" Zorian said, a little unnerved by her stare.

"I've been meaning to ask you..." she began hesitantly. "What is it between you and Zach? I mean, I know you're friends with him, but how did that come about? You seem very different from one another."

"It's a recent thing," said Zorian. "And it was mostly Zach's doing, to be honest. All I did was escort him home after he got sick in class one day, and he decided we were best friends after that. I sort of went along with the flow."

"So you don't know about... um..."

"His sudden growth in skill?" guessed Zorian. He was actually

surprised she hadn't questioned him about that sooner. Almost everyone else did. Of course, she would get the same shameless lie that he fed to everyone who questioned him about it. "I have no idea how that happened, but I can tell you it's real and not some kind of a trick like many people have been suggesting. He has been tutoring me in combat magic for a while now, and he really knows his stuff."

"Yeah, I heard you were doing that," Ibery said, causing Zorian to frown. Being associated with Zach had made people disturbingly interested in his activities, no matter how mundane or irrelevant they may be. Having people scrutinize his every action like they had been doing for this past month was a novel experience. Novel and unwelcome. "Kyron has been kind of impressed with your growth, you know?"

Yeah... at least until he found out that Zach was involved, at which point it simply became one more thing that made Zach such a mystery, rather than a product of Zorian's own talent. Obviously Zach had some kind of secret teaching technique on top of everything else. Obviously.

But it's not like he was still bitter or anything!

"Impressed, right," said Zorian sourly. "So what do *you* think is behind Zach's amazingness?"

"Err, well... it's kind of silly," Ibery said.

Zorian gestured for her to go on. He always loved to hear the explanation people thought up to explain the mystery that was Zach. Much of the speculation wasn't serious, so much as attempts to think up the most imaginative (or the funniest) solution to the problem, so he doubted Ibery's explanation was any sillier than some of the stuff he had been hearing all month long. His personal favorite was that Zach performed an ancient ritual where you eat another person's brain in order to get their knowledge.

"Time dilation," Ibery said after a brief moment of hesitation.

Zorian blinked. Oh Ibery... So close, and yet so far away...

"I don't think any hasting spell is *that* effective, to be honest," said Zorian. "Zach isn't just a little better than he was – I'd personally put him around 3 circle *at least*. I actually don't think he has any reason to attend the classes anymore, except that he finds it amusing to do so and flaunt his knowledge to everybody."

"I kind of noticed that," Ibery said, glancing momentarily to the small group of people surrounding Zach. "But I wasn't thinking of hasting magic. Do you know what the Black Rooms are?" Zorian shook his head in negative. "There are rumors that powerful nations like ours have special training facilities that use extreme levels of time dilation. You go inside the facility, spend a couple of months, or even *years* inside, and when you get out only a day or two have passed outside."

Zorian's eyebrows rose at the description. If one of the major powers had something like that, why weren't the effects more keenly felt? None of the Successor States were shy about using their power, and would have surely used such a tool to churn out trained mages on a mass scale by now.

"It's just a rumor," Ibery quickly added. "Something between a conspiracy theory and an urban legend. I only know about it because one of my friends loves those kinds of things and she keeps insisting there is one such facility in the tunnels beneath the city. Supposedly they consume massive amounts of mana, so they must be located at mana wells."

"And the Hole is the biggest mana well there is," Zorian noted. "What's the explanation for such secrecy surrounding them? You'd think they'd be using it pretty intensively."

"They can't," Ibery said. "Or at least that's how the story goes. They have some kind of severe limitations on their use. Exactly how countries pick who gets to use the Black Rooms is where the 'conspiracy theory' part comes in. The more conventional theories

suggest they're simply fancy facilities for training Black Ops super-agents. The wilder ones are... well, wild."

"It's a neat theory," Zorian hummed speculatively. Far closer to reality than anything else he'd heard, though he'd never say that aloud, even as a joke. If she could take such a farfetched rumor seriously, there was a good chance she might actually believe him upon hearing the truth, and that would be very awkward at the moment. Maybe he should try to convince her in one of the next restarts? Something to think about, at least. "But if Zach had spent years in one of those Black Rooms, why hasn't he visibly aged? And why exactly would they let Zach use one of those?"

"Well, he didn't have to *literally* spend years," Ibery said. "It's not that anything he's done is *that* advanced. A couple of months of intense tutoring could probably produce the effects we're looking at. And even if he spent years, there are potions that can halt your aging for a year or two. They actually work better on young people."

Zorian resisted the urge to frown as he realized something. As much as Zach liked to show off, he never really went wild with his abilities for all to see. If Zach had showed the sort of magic he did during the invasion, neither Ibery nor anyone else would be dismissing Zach's prowess as 'not advanced' so easily. Then again, perhaps that was the whole point. Extremely skilled Zach was surprising, maybe even shocking to those who knew him before the change. Instant archmage Zach would be probably alarming in the extreme and inspire a matching attitude in people around him.

Perhaps Zach's behavior was a lot more calculated than he thought it was?

"As for why him?" Ibery continued. "Well, he's a Noveda. They were quite influential before their eventual fall, and I don't just mean in the sense of being rich. They had their fingers everywhere. I could easily see some of that old influence surviving to this very

day. Zach is the last of his line, and the fate of his House rests upon his shoulders. Perhaps this was simply a desperate maneuver by Zach's guardians, trying to turn Zach into a worthy successor capable of returning Noveda to their former glory."

The ground shook, followed by a deafening explosion less than a second later. Windows rattled, but didn't break. An uneasy silence descended upon the dance hall, only broken by the periodic rumble of more distant explosions.

"What... what was that?" Ibery asked fearfully.

She wasn't the only one asking that kind of questions. Agitated murmurs started traveling through the gathered crowd, steadily growing in volume and alarm. The ever-present pressure Zorian always felt from being inside crowds intensified and... changed. What was usually just an annoyance pushing on the edges of his consciousness suddenly became a suffocating blanket of fear. He struggled not to faint as foreign feelings invaded his mind. What the hell was happening to him? He didn't remember anything about an attack like this from his previous experience of the invasion.

A minute ticked away. Then ten. Zorian could practically feel the anxiety and agitation of the crowd steadily rising. The last (and first) time he had lived through the invasion he was standing on the roof when that first barrage descended to earth, and was momentarily incapacitated as a result. At least, that's what he had thought. Apparently he had been knocked out for quite a bit longer than he realized, because by his reckoning Ilsa and Kyron should have been rushing to the roof to see what was happening by now. He could see them arguing about something in a nearby corner, and neither made the slightest move towards the roof.

"Zorian?" Ibery tried for either the fifth or sixth time, Zorian wasn't sure. "Are you sure you're alright? Maybe I should go find someone-

"I'm fine," Zorian said, somehow managing to shove the oppressive feelings aside for the moment. The explosions had finally stopped but that hadn't led to people calming down. If anything, now that the situation had calmed down somewhat, they wanted answers, and they wanted them now. They were getting restless. Thankfully, the academy staff seemed to realize this as well. "Look, Ilsa is trying to say something."

"Please remain calm!" Ilsa said from the music stage, using the same magic that carried music evenly across the dance hall to make herself heard by everyone present. "Me and my colleague will go to the roof now and open communications with the city authorities to find out what is going on. Please don't go anywhere until we return."

Well... that didn't do much to calm people down. If anything, they got even more unruly than they were before Ilsa's speech, and some outright ignored her warnings and left the dance hall the moment she went up the stairs and out of sight. He couldn't judge them too harshly, since in another timeline he had done the exact same thing. On the positive side, the oppressive feeling lifted and reverted back to the familiar headache-inducing pressure. He breathed a giant sigh of relief.

"Hello Zorian," greeted Zach, approaching Zorian. Of course he'd come to talk to him *now*... "Quite a commotion, huh? And I see you talked miss Ambercomb into being your date for the evening! Congratulations! I never knew you liked older girls."

"I'm only a year older than him," Ibery protested. She glanced briefly at Zorian to see if he would point out that it was *her* who asked *him* out, and relaxed when she realized he wouldn't. Zorian had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. "And how come you're here all by yourself? Why don't you introduce us to your dates?"

If Ibery thought to fluster Zach by pointing out the plural na-

ture of his partners for the evening, she was going to be sorely disappointed. And indeed, Zach only smiled at her, completely unaffected by the jab.

"They decided to leave for home early," Zach shrugged. "Probably for the best, considering what happened."

"What *did* happen, though?" asked Zorian. He didn't expect to get a straight answer out of Zach, of course, but it was worth a try.

"I guess we'll find out soon," said Zach, pointing to the bottom of the stairs leading to the roof, where Ilsa was talking to a bunch of students. After a couple of seconds Zorian realized that Akoja was among them, and recognized several other faces as well.

"Who is she talking to?" asked Ibery.

"Class representatives, I think," Zorian said. "At least, the ones I recognize are all class representatives for their groups."

It was so frustratingly slow. Maybe Zorian was expecting a little too much from a mere educational institution, but their response to the invasion was pretty underwhelming. At the very least he had expected them to start evacuating people to the shelters by now, or organize some kind of a defense force, or... well, anything, really. He was getting an impression that Ilsa and Kyron didn't even realize the severity of the situation yet.

Finally, Ilsa seemed to finish with her instructions and the crowd of class representatives dispersed into the crowd. It only took Zorian a minute to realize what they were doing – each one was gathering their own classmates into a single group. He bid Ibery goodbye and left towards his own group together with Zach.

Once everyone was present, Akoja told them what the plan was. The academy was going to use their limited teleportation capabilities to get foreign dignitaries and other important people out of the city, and the students were going to descend into the tunnels beneath the city to reach the shelters on foot - with no

teachers present to guide and defend them, because they had other duties currently and class representatives had to know the evacuation routes to get the job anyway.

Zorian looked at Zach to gauge his reaction and saw that the boy's expression was grim and focused.

"All right," Zach mumbled. "Show time."

Zorian had a bad feeling about this.



Surprisingly, it wasn't Zach who raised the alarm – it was Raynie, of all people. How exactly she detected the winter wolves 5 minutes before they showed up he had no idea, but notice them she did and she immediately raised the alarm. A lot of students didn't believe her, but most weren't willing to risk it. The entire procession of students started to move faster towards the small cylindrical building that marked the staircase leading down into the shelters.

They never made it there before the winter wolves reached them.

Zorian wasn't a soldier, and would never call himself an expert on tactics, but what the throng of students did upon sighting the horde of winter wolves coming after them still struck him as monumentally stupid. They scattered. The ones closest to the dungeon entrance rushed towards it, but the others immediately sought the closest shelter. He could hear Zach's frantic shouting, telling people not to separate from the main group but it was in vain.

Cursing, Zorian snatched Akoja by the wrist before she could bolt towards the nearby apartment building and wordlessly pointed towards the dungeon entrance. For a moment he thought about explaining his reasoning in more detail, but he knew he didn't have enough time for that. He let go of her and started running, hoping she would have the presence of mind to follow.

Thankfully, she did follow him, as did several other students that witnessed the silent exchange and realized the importance of it. As they ran, more people joined them, seeking safety in numbers.

Around him, chaos reigned. The winter wolves were pouring in by the hundreds, and unlike the fleeing students they were frighteningly well coordinated. Small groups of 3 to 4 wolves detached themselves periodically from the main body to intercept lone targets before rejoining the horde, using their superior numbers to flank and outmaneuver their opponents. Their white fur and the surprising silence with which they moved made them seem like an army of ghosts risen from the underworld to punish the living. Screams. Shouting. Flashes of light and canine howls of pain too – not every student was helpless. Up ahead Zach was defending the entrance to the tunnels viciously, sending swarm after swarm of force projectiles that hit far harder than your run of the mill magic missile, felling scores of winter wolves with each volley. A number of people reached the safety of a nearby building and promptly barricaded themselves inside, ignoring the pleas of those outside to let them in.

Just as Zorian thought they would make it to the entrance without incident, his luck ran out. A large group of 30 or so winter wolves noticed them and moved to intercept. The group halted immediately, unsure what to do as the pack continued to get closer. They had to go through it to reach the shelters, but fighting the wolves was suicide. Zach was busy incinerating a group of war trolls that finally made their appearance and wouldn't be able to help for a while.

"I told you I should have brought my sword," one of the boys groused. "But noooo, it's not suitable for a school dance you said. You're too paranoid for your own good, you said."

"Oh shut up," a female voice snapped back.

Zorian resisted the urge to fire off a couple of missiles at the

approaching winter wolves. Even shaped as piercers, they weren't guaranteed to kill in one shot something as resilient as a winter wolf, and he still tended to fail quite often when he tried to weave a homing function in them, so there was no guarantee he would even hit anything. He had to use his mana intelligently.

Not everyone thought so, however. A number of people had a spell formula hidden on them in the form of a ring or a necklace, much like he did, and they threw missile after magic missile into the advancing wolves. Only one girl was capable of casting a proper homing bolt, so most of them missed, and when they did hit they were just smashers so they didn't kill any of them. They did, however, slow the pack down and force it to cluster together, since the girl that could fire homing bolts targeted any wolf that tried to detach from the pack to flank them. And that gave him an idea.

The moment the pack got close enough, Zorian fired an over-powered flamethrower straight into their front lines. Clustered together as they were, most of them were caught in the blast. The winter wolves, notoriously weak to fire, howled in fear and agony. That's when someone else fired another flamethrower into their ranks, this one much bigger and hotter than Zorian's, and the winter wolves promptly turned and fled. The ones that still lived, that is.

Zorian turned to see who cast the other flamethrower and was surprised to see Briam there, staring smugly at the charred corpses in front of him. He was holding his fire drake in his arms like a living weapon, and the little lizard was licking its chops like it wanted to eat its kills.

So much for his theory that the drake was too young to breathe fire.

After a moment of shock at the sudden reversal, they all scrambled into the building housing the dungeon entrance and immedi-

ately descended into the tunnels below. Zorian was immediately intercepted by a worried Ibery, who seemed extremely relieved that he was alive. Even though he knew her death wouldn't be permanent, he had to admit he was glad she survived as well.

Though, now that he could sit down and think about it a little, it wasn't that unusual she had survived. She was a fourth year student, and they were at the front of the procession for some reason. That was very unfortunate, because fourth year students were, presumably, much more capable of defending themselves than third year ones... and they were the ones who reached the safety of the shelters first, leaving their younger compatriots to fend for themselves.

"I didn't know you had any fire spells," Briam noted from his left, stroking his familiar affectionately. "I guess that's one of the things Zach has been teaching you this past month, huh?"

"Yeah," Zorian admitted. He gave the fire lizard a dubious look, and the reptile stared back at him challengingly. "Did you really bring your familiar to the school dance?"

"Oh, no way," Briam laughed. "I'm not *that* attached to him. No, I used a recall spell to summon him to my side when the winter wolves started pouring in."

"Isn't summoning pretty mana intensive, though?" Zorian asked.

"Not if you're summoning your familiar," Briam said. "We're bound together, he and I. Connected through the soul. It's a lot easier and a lot less taxing to cast certain spells where they concern him."

"Huh," Zorian hummed.

An hour went by, with little to show for it. Zorian listened to stories of people around him, trying to put some sense into what had transpired and thinking what he could change in the next restart to make this evacuation thing less of a fiasco. His thoughts

were interrupted when a group of teachers finally stumbled into the shelters.

There were six of them and they looked tired and frightened, much like the students who had gathered around them for explanations and assurances. The only one among them that inspired confidence in Zorian was Kyron, who remained as stoic as always. He was no longer bare-chested, opting to wear full body armor that sort of resembled the chitinous shell of a saint bug, and had a plethora of spell rods hanging off his belt in addition to the combat staff he was firmly gripping in one hand.

Kyron had bad news – the attack on the academy was just one piece in an all-out invasion targeting the entire city. Zorian already knew this, of course, but everyone else was suitably shocked. The invasion was well prepared, and most of the defenders had been overpowered right at the start. The city was about to fall. Once that happened, the shelters would become just a giant death trap. They would have to go outside and fight their way out of the city before the invaders could secure everything of critical importance and turn their attention to them.

People were taking it pretty badly.

"Why don't you just teleport us out!?" someone called. "You're supposed to be able to do that!"

"Academy ward control has been subverted," Kyron said calmly. "The invaders have turned our own teleportation wards against us. We can't teleport in or out."

Zorian groaned. The enemy had control of the wards? How on earth did they do *that*? The academy wasn't just some random house with a generic warding scheme – it's supposed to be too secure and sophisticated for that!

The questions continued for a minute or so before Kyron got enough of it and started to bark out orders. They needed to get moving.

Zorian was paying attention to something else though. The student next to him had been acting strangely ever since Kyron and his cohort entered the shelters. Zorian could practically feel the boy's eagerness and anticipation. For what, he couldn't say, but he had a feeling it was nothing good.

That is why, when the boy threw a vial full of sickly green liquid on the floor and smashed it with his foot, Zorian held his breath and fired a smasher straight into the boy's chest. Foul smelling green smoke erupted from the broken vial, and the shelters erupted into chaos.

Zorian couldn't see anything through the no doubt poisonous smoke, but the sounds of fighting were unmistakable. He stumbled through the smoke, trying to find an end to it and failing. He could tell from the hacking students around him that breathing in would be a bad idea. Thank god it didn't also irritate the eyes or he'd never be able to cast a shield in time to stop a magic missile from smashing into his face. A circular plane of force flickered into existence in front of him, soaking the hit. The shield wavered for a second but held.

And then Zorian heard Kyron shout a series of words, and all the smoke around him rushed towards the source of Kyron's voice, as if caught in some sort of vacuum. Zorian had just enough time to see Kyron holding his left hand in the air, a smoky green ball compacting itself above it, before he was forced to erect a shield again.

At least he could breathe now. Thank the gods for small favors.

Before the attackers – who had probably teleported in under the cover of smoke, because Zorian would remember a bunch of middle-aged men in brown robes if they had been present when he got into the shelters – could regain initiative, Kyron snapped one of his hands and a shining whip flashed through the air. The

invaders promptly fell apart, the upper half of their bodies sliding off the lower half like they were never attached to one another at all.

Zorian stared at Kyron in shock. He knew the retired battle-mage was capable, but seeing it was something else. The man had assessed the situation within moments and solved it with a total of two spells. He wondered what would have happened during the initial evacuation if Kyron had been leading the students. He couldn't help but think that Kyron would have found a way to repel the initial winter wolf rush without losing anyone. Certainly the students would be more inclined to listen to Kyron than their class representatives – the man had a certain aura of command around him.

"How... the hell... are you... still standing?" wheezed Zach not far from him. Apparently he had breathed in some of the smoke, and was affected just like everyone else. Even decades old time travelers could be brought down by some tricks, it seemed.

Zorian was about to answer when the ground exploded next to him, showering him with stone fragments and knocking him on his back. He heard Kyron chanting something, but it was too late for him – the giant brown worm that emerged from the ground was far faster than it should have been and Zorian was in too much pain to move. He saw a huge toothy maw closing around him, and then he knew only blackness.

His last thoughts were that it wasn't fair. Just how many contingencies did these people have? These invaders were freaking cheaters!

Chapter Ten

OVERLOOKED DETAILS

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

"Good m—"

"No, it's not," Zorian interrupted. "How could it possibly be a good morning? I got killed again! Eaten by a giant worm this time. And waking up like this is really starting to get on my nerves! Couldn't the time loop have started a day later or something?"

He stared at his little sister expectantly. She stared back at him, confused out of her mind and probably a little frightened.

"Um, what?" she asked hesitantly.

Zorian wordlessly flipped her over the edge of the bed. She fell to the floor with a thud and an indignant yelp, and Zorian quickly jumped to his feet to better respond to any violence she might decide to retaliate with. Having learned his lesson during previous restarts, he immediately set out towards the bathroom before she could get her bearings.

She realized what he was doing quickly, but by then he had already locked the door behind him. Her screams of outrage were

music for his ears, especially since they eventually caused mother to come after her and give her a scolding.

Maybe it *was* a good morning, after all.



Trains... Zorian hadn't really liked them to start with, but he was starting to develop an intense dislike of them ever since he was caught in this time loop thing. Travelling via train on a regular basis was almost as annoying as Kirielle jumping on him at the start of every restart. He had toyed with the idea of killing time by striking a conversation with Ibery, so she'd be familiar with him when he got a job at the library, but scrapped the notion after a while. Mostly because he decided not to apply for the job in this restart. Working at the library like he had been doing was fairly time consuming, and he had a much more promising project to work on – mastering all the shaping exercises in Ilsa's book so he could woo her into taking him as her apprentice. Library magic was useful, but getting rid of Xvim would be absolutely priceless.

He wouldn't be present in Cyoria when the invasion came either. Not in this restart, nor in any near future one. Even if he had to reveal his secret to Zach because of it, he'd take the first train out of town on the eve of the summer festival. He knew that the smart, responsible thing to do would be to stay in the city and note what was happening – how the invasion was progressing and what could be done to stop it. He knew it, but... it was too much for him. And not just because getting himself involved in that mess seemed to invariably lead to his death, either. The emotional rollercoaster of the 'evacuation' was very hard on his nerves, but that was just a symptom of the real problem. He struggled with his thoughts for a moment, trying to identify the root of the problem. Every reason he could think of felt... not right.

And then it clicked. It was the helplessness. Every time his thoughts strayed towards the topic of the invasion, he couldn't shake the notion that the forces arrayed against him were vastly beyond his ability to handle, and that the only reason he survived as long as he had was through sheer dumb luck. It occurred to him that the manner of his most recent death could easily be an allegory for this entire invasion. So you repelled a murderous pack of winter wolves and reached safety, helped foil a traitorous ambush, and now you think the worst is over? No, stupid, a giant worm suddenly jumps out of the ground and bites your head off! How were you supposed to fight something like that? How was *he* supposed to fight something like that?

Maybe he shouldn't. A lot of things about the invasion seemed... implausible. About as implausible as Zach becoming a super-prodigy over the span of a single summer, Zorian learning all 15 shaping exercises in Ilsa's book within the span of a month, or time travel being real. What if his theory of there being a third time traveler was correct, and that someone was the mastermind behind the invasion? It would explain a lot. Then again, it would also pose a lot of questions on its own... like why hadn't this hostile time traveler dealt with Zach already? The lich had already proved it was very much possible to hurt people like Zach and Zorian, and was working for the invading forces already.

Regardless, he intended to involve himself again with the invasion only after he acquired some *serious* magic, or after he calmed down somewhat and felt emotionally capable of facing the situation. Whichever came first. It's not like he could study the invasion in any great detail if he kept dying at the very start of it, anyway.

Eventually the train arrived in Cyoria, and Zorian began his long trek towards the academy. He wasn't in a hurry this time, because he had finally found a spell to protect himself from rain

in the last restart and was eager to try it. Well, he had actually found *several* protective spells meant to deal with rain and other adverse weather, but only one was within his ability to actually cast. That was okay, though, since the 'rain barrier' spell was the one best suited for his purposes anyway – it offered the most complete protection, at the cost of being horribly draining to maintain. He could see why the mana drain would be a serious problem for people who wanted to use the spell extensively, but Zorian only needed it to last for an hour or two in an exceptionally mana-rich area of Cyoria.

Also, being encased in an invisible sphere that repelled water was just plain more impressive than the more subtle, sophisticated wards. The barrier actually worked on water in general, not just rain drops, so he didn't even have to worry about stepping into puddles and soaking his footwear. Seeing water on the road part before him like in front of some kind of celestial emissary was mightily amusing. Also a bit of an ego boost, which is something he sorely needed after being so thoroughly outmatched during the invasion of the previous restart.

He'd probably never use the spell after getting out of the time loop, since an umbrella was good enough for most occasions and didn't consume any mana, but finding a store that sold them along his usual route from the train station had proved surprisingly difficult. Which, now that he thought about it, suggested that he probably *would* use the spell from time to time, since he doubted this would be the only time in his life he'd find himself without an easily acquired umbrella.

He shook his head. He really shouldn't be fantasizing about what he'd do after getting out of the time loop, since it didn't appear that would happen any time soon. He had to concentrate on the present... and boy did that sound weird, considering his situation. Like what was he going to do with Zach? He was sorely

tempted to just admit everything to the boy and have them try to figure out this mess together – surely two heads are better than one? Impulsive he may be, but Zach couldn't have gotten as far as he did without having a good head on his shoulders. He didn't feel entirely comfortable with that idea, though – he strongly suspected there was more to Zach than it appeared, and he hated to charge in without knowing what he was getting himself into.

He decided to see how Zach interacted with him in this restart before deciding.



"Zorian! Over here!"

Zorian glanced towards the happy-looking Benisek waving at him like a lunatic and wondered what he should do. He didn't really want to talk to him. Benisek might be his closest friend among the student body, but he was also rather irritating at times, and it's not like he could tell Zorian something he didn't already know at this point. In the end he sighed in defeat and trudged over to the grinning boy. Time loop or no, it felt wrong to blatantly snub someone so visibly happy to see him, especially since he shared so much history with Benisek.

He did find it interesting that Benisek was present in the cafeteria at this time, since that wasn't his usual behavior in the restarts Zorian experienced so far. These kind of unexplained divergences happened all the time, which was to be expected – there were at least two time travelers wandering around the time loop, changing things both inconsequential and crucial – but it was surprising to see a change this soon into the time loop. It had only been a day since he arrived in Cyoria. Usually it took at least a week until everything went off the rails, and even then a lot of things repeated themselves. Most teachers followed some kind of a fixed

teaching plan, for example, and rarely deviated from it. As far as he knew, Fortov always came looking for him for help with the purple creeper salve, even though his accident with Ibery only happened near the very end of the time loop. Which, now that he thought about it, suggested the accident wasn't so accidental after all. Kind of suspicious for an accident to be so insensitive to changes...

"You just got to Cyoria, didn't you?" Benisek prompted excitedly the moment Zorian sat down beside him.

Zorian nodded hesitantly. Benisek was only ever this excited when talking about a particularly hot girl or when he got a hold of particularly juicy gossip material. Hopefully it was the latter, because there was no way Zorian would be staying otherwise.

"You're so not going to believe this!" Benisek said excitedly. "You know Zach? You know, Zach Noveda, last scion of the Noble House Noveda? He went to class with us these last two years."

Of course it's Zach. He really should have known.

"Of course I know him," Zorian said. "He is... very memorable."

"He is?" blinked Benisek. He shook his head. "I mean, of course he is. I kind of didn't expect you to know, though, since he's kind of a failure as a mage and you never interacted with him much."

Zorian shrugged. Truth be told, it was very rare for him to forget someone's name, regardless of how often he had interacted with them or how long it had been since he last saw them. Even before the time loop, Zorian would have instantly known who Benisek was referring to.

"Anyway," Benisek continued, "Zach escaped from his family mansion yesterday."

"Err, what?" asked Zorian incredulously. "What do you mean 'escaped'? Why would he need to escape from his own mansion?"

"Well that's the question, isn't it?" Benisek said. "Apparently he had an argument with his guardian that eventually descended

into a full-blown magical duel. A duel which, get this, Zach *won*! Half of the mansion was trashed, and Zach fled into the city and has yet to be found. They're searching for him everywhere!"

"Um, wow," Zorian said, honestly at a loss for words. What the hell was *that* about?

"You said it," Benisek agreed. "I'm not sure I believe the official story, though. I mean, there's no way Zach could have taken on his guardian in a magical duel! Tesen Zveri is a 7 circle mage or something, and Zach barely passed his own certification! Then again, *something* sure demolished Noveda mansion..."

"How do you know this?" asked Zorian.

"It's all over the newspapers," said Benisek. "Besides, everyone is talking about it. I can't believe one of our classmates would be involved in something like that. What do you think, Zorian?"

"Ben... I honestly don't know what to think about that," said Zorian.

And he really meant it. He didn't doubt for a second that Zach could beat the stuffing out of his guardian, 7 circle or not – the man was a politician, as far as Zorian knew, not a battlemage – but why would he want to do that?

"I suppose he won't be coming to class this time, then," mused Zorian out loud. Then again, he would not have put it past Zach to just walk into class one of these days as if nothing was wrong.

"I doubt it," Benisek laughed.

"Did he kill anyone?" asked Zorian. Benisek shook his head in the negative. "So basically he didn't do anything *that* serious. What's the worst that can happen to him if he simply turns himself in?"

"Well, Tesen must not be too happy with him now, and he's too influential to brush off, even for someone like Zach," said Benisek. "Attacking one of the Elders of Eldemar is actually a fairly serious crime, and Tesen could really ruin Zach's day if he

was inclined to pursue satisfaction. Not that I think he would, since that would just draw even more attention to what happened. This whole thing is a giant political scandal for him. I'm guessing Zach will come back after a month or so, after he cools off a bit, and Tesen will 'magnanimously' forgive him everything."

Zorian was silent. Zach had told him that it was rare for him to spend a restart in Cyoria, and even rarer for him to attend classes. In light of that, it had been foolish of him to expect Zach to be around in this restart. Zach may have found Zorian interesting in the previous restart, but probably not *that* interesting. Still, this was more than a little strange. If he had wanted to leave and do his own thing, couldn't he have just walked out of his mansion one day and kept going? Who would have stopped him? His guardian? Why would Tesen do that? The man was clearly very hands-off in his dealings with his charge, as evidenced by Zach's frequent absences from school during the last two years, as well as Zach's abysmal performance prior to the time loop.

There was no obvious answer, and Zorian didn't feel like trying to track down Zach. He probably couldn't find him, even if he tried, and he had more attainable goals to pursue.

Like getting out of Xvim's merciless clutches. What could be more important than that?



The rest of the restart was pleasantly uneventful. There was no Zach, since the boy never showed up in school and couldn't be found by anyone. After a week or so, the newspapers stopped covering the story because there were no new developments to justify the articles, and the rumors making rounds across the student body died down soon after. For his part, Zorian threw himself completely into mastering the exercises in Ilsa's book. He neglected

virtually everything else, often skipping classes when he thought he could get away with it. Akoja was furious, since he was apparently ruining the attendance record of the class, and got Ilsa to corner him one day about it. Fortunately, Zorian's ability to get top grades on every exam, despite his spotty attendance, blunted the impact of Akoja's criticism, and Zorian managed to convince Ilsa he was working on a personal project that was taking most of his time... *not* skipping classes for the heck of it as Akoja claimed. He assured her the project would be finished within a month, and that he would resume attending classes regularly after the summer festival. She made him promise that he would show her what he was working on when he was done, and he enthusiastically agreed with her.

His single minded focus gave results quickly – he mastered both vertical and fixed position levitation by the end of the restart. He didn't bother showing these advanced skills to Xvim, who was still having him work on the pen-spinning exercise, since he doubted he'd get a worthwhile reaction. Nothing seemed to please that guy.

He hadn't been present in the city when the invasion came, of course. Without Zach's ring, he was even more useless in combat than he was in the last restart, so it was doubtful he could have lasted for very long in the midst of it all. He did make sure to practice with combat invocations he learned from Zach each day, hoping to hone them into the same reflexive state that Zach displayed. That would take years of practice, of course, but that just meant he'd better start as soon as possible. He also didn't just leave via train like he usually did – he traveled by foot to one of the hills overlooking the city and observed the city from there.

Watching the invasion unfold from such a high vantage point was not only a lot easier on Zorian's nerves than being in the thick of it – it was also rather informative. It was interesting to see how

the invasion played out in broad terms. It seemed to have several stages, the first of which was, of course, the disguised artillery magic barrage. The explosive flares mostly targeted three crucial areas – the city hall, the local military base, and one cluster of buildings that Zorian didn't recognize. The academy didn't appear to be a primary target, possibly because the invaders wanted it reasonably intact. Aside from the initial blast, the impact zones seemed to spawn scores of fire elementals that had to be dealt with. Fortunately, a lot of buildings in Cyoria were at least moderately warded against fire, because Zorian didn't doubt for a second that the entire city would've been aflame within minutes otherwise. Once the fire elementals had a few minutes to make a nuisance of themselves, monsters poured out of the sewers, and after they rampaged across the city a bit, the spellcasters finally arrived.

The battle was still raging when the clock finally hit two past midnight and everything went suddenly black.

All things considered, the army of monsters was the least destructive part of the invasion – if he could somehow prevent the initial barrage from crippling the city defense right from the start, or take out a lot of the attacking mages that followed in the monster's wake... well, it was worth a shot when he finally got some skills under his belt.

The next three restarts were essentially the same, right down to Zach dueling his guardian and escaping into the night. Apparently that *wasn't* just a one-time thing, but a rather routine occurrence. The exact details varied, but every time he roughed Tesen up before setting off god knows where. Unfortunately, Zorian couldn't find out anything substantial about Tesen – the man was a high ranking politician, and thus not exactly approachable, and nothing in publicly available sources explained Zach's apparent hostility towards the man.

His work with Ilsa's book progressed steadily, but he was

frankly getting a bit sick of it. There was only so much of incessant shaping practice he could stand before he lost all enthusiasm. Besides, Ilsa said most students go through them at a rate of 6 per year, and he was already more effective than that – something that he attributed to his unusual focus in the matter. How many people could afford to focus all their energies on shaping exercises? There were so many things vying for the typical student's attention that shaping exercises no doubt ended up near the bottom of their priorities.

That was why he was currently in Ilsa's office, trying to see if he could get something out of her without mastering quite the entire book.

"What can I do for you, mister Kazinski?" Ilsa asked.

"Well, I'm a bit concerned about the program you outlined in your first class," said Zorian. "I'm not sure I'll get anything out of it, since I already have a solid grasp on all the topics you mentioned."

Ilsa raised an eyebrow at him. Hey, it worked on Kyron, why wouldn't it work on Ilsa too?

"I see," she said after a second of silence. "Would you mind if I gave you a couple of quick tests to confirm that?"

Confident he could deal with anything she tested him with, he agreed. Ilsa proceeded to rummage through her drawers and took out 2 different tests. One was an exact copy of the same test Ilsa gave to the whole class just before the summer festival, and Zorian proceeded to fill it out in 10 minutes flat by sheer memory. The other was unfairly hard, because it covered advanced topics that didn't turn up in class at all. Zorian only managed to fill out a quarter of the questions before time was up, and he was fairly sure not all of his answers were correct.

Ilsa skimmed through them quickly and then nodded to herself.

"Your theoretical knowledge is pretty spotty," Ilsa said with

a theatrical sigh, and Zorian had to stop himself from scowling. That was such bullshit! She gave him that second test just to make sure he failed! "Here... I'll give you a list of additional reading to study in your free time."

Two minutes later Zorian found himself practically pushed out of the door, a piece of paper with hastily scribbled writing in his hand. He glared at the list of book titles, very much tempted to incinerate it on the spot. He was supposed to start on the variations of the flame producing exercise, anyway. But he didn't. He would not be defeated that easily! If he could survive Xvim's mentoring methods this long, he could definitely read a couple of theoretical manuals. He would be back. She could be sure of that.



"Good morning, brother! Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

"Good morning, Kiri," said Zorian pleasantly. "Thank you for waking me up."

Kirielle stared at him for a couple of seconds and then huffed in disappointment at his lack of reaction and got off of him all on her own. Well damn – he should have tried that ages ago.

"You're no fun," she accused.

Zorian simply nodded in agreement.

"Mom wants to talk to you," Kirielle said. "Could you show me some magic before you go, though? Pleeeeeease?"

Well... why not? He quickly cast the 'floating lantern' spell, causing an orb of light to spring into existence above his palm. He had the orb fly around the room while he repeated the spell two more times, producing a different colored orb each time.

The books Ilsa had told him to read were mostly boring crap, but they did tell him something rather interesting. All those variations he had been practicing had more uses than just improving

his shaping skills, apparently – they also allowed him to adjust certain spells more to his liking. The same variation of the light emitting exercise that allowed him to produce colored light also enabled him to change the color of the glowing orb produced by the floating lantern spell. Mastering a whole bunch of light-related exercises would apparently also make light-based invocations more powerful and less mana intensive, and the same principle applied to other groups of spells as well... such as fire-related exercises improving invocations based around fire and heat, and levitation-based ones improving spells relying on telekinetic forces. He was a lot less annoyed at having to go through all those shaping exercises when he found *that* out. Hell, if they were that useful, he'd probably see if he could find more of them when he ran out of the ones in Ilsa's book.

"More! More!" Kiri demanded.

Distracting Kiri with a few more orbs, Zorian quietly slipped out of the room and went to the bathroom before Kiri could realize what was happening. Why was she always so intent on getting there first anyway? That was horribly petty, even for Kirielle. He'd have to ask her in one of the restarts.

Unfortunately, he sort of forgot he filled his entire room with multi-colored orbs of light by the time Ilsa came around to visit, so he thought nothing about inviting her into his room. He hastily swept his hand in front of him, casing them all to wink out of existence, but it was too late – Ilsa had already seen them and was looking at him curiously.

"That's not really a second year spell," Ilsa remarked, her eyes boring into his own.

"Daimen can be a pretty good teacher when he wants to be," said Zorian with a cheeky smile, shamelessly relying on Daimen's fame to deflect any concerns. Teaching first circle spells like that one to uncertified mages was illegal, but if Zorian ever learned

something in his life, it was that Daimen can get away with anything.

"And you know how to produce something other than white light," Ilsa noted. "Impressive. I guess this should be easy for you, then."

She handed him a very familiar scroll, and Zorian was just about to flood it with mana to break the seal when he realized something was wrong. Ilsa was studying him like a hawk, expectant and alert. She had never shown this much interest in his scroll-opening before, so what made this one special? He stared at the scroll for a couple of seconds, unable to see any difference from the scroll he was used to. Even the symbols on the seal were the same. Wait...

A few moments later he remembered where he saw the symbols inscribed on the seal and promptly felt like banging his head against the wall or something. How... why... those sneaky little...

He had been doing it wrong! All this time he had been simply pouring mana into the seal to break it, when instead he had to channel mana into it in very specific ways so he could peel it off intact! It said so, right at the god damn seal! It required more mana control than simply flooding the seal with mana, but it was nothing he hadn't already been capable of, even before the time loop. All this time he had thought the symbols on the seal were purely ornamental in nature, but no, they were *instructions*. Instructions written in a somewhat obscure form, but still. How could he have missed that?

He directed his mana to flow along the sides of the seal, causing it to pop off without resistance.

"Well done," Ilsa said with a smile. "Not many students have such a firm grasp on their magic at this stage. I see someone is continuing in Daimen's footsteps."

Zorian smiled back politely. He mustn't scowl, he mustn't

scowl...

"Unfortunately, I'm in a bit of a hurry so we'll have to continue this conversation later," Ilsa said. "Visit me in my office when you get to Cyoria. Now about your electives..."



Ilsa stared at him. He stared back. She glanced towards the two completely filled out tests on her desk and then returned her gaze towards him, this time with a speculative look. Zorian remained silent.

It actually felt good to baffle someone like this, Zorian decided. Apparently Ilsa wasn't as cold-blooded about improbable skills as Xvim was.

"I must admit, I didn't quite expect this level of knowledge and shaping skill when I told you to come and see me," Ilsa said thoughtfully. "That second exam I gave you is the one I give to students at the end of their third year, and you only got 2 of the questions wrong. On top of that, you know 10 different variations of the basic three, which is astronomical for a 3 year student."

She tapped her pen against the table, lost in thought.

"You may be a bit too advanced for what I intend to teach your group this year," Ilsa finally admitted. "My class is mostly there to make sure the students don't have any obvious holes in their shaping skills and theoretical knowledge, and to teach them a few miscellaneous spells that are of general utility to most mages. You're way beyond that. What am I going to do with you?"

"Transfer me away from Xvim so you could teach such a promising student?" Zorian tried.

She laughed at him.

"Sorry," she said. "You're good, but not *that* good. Besides... you should have it easier than most of Xvim's vi-err, *charges*. What with your amazing shaping skills and all."

"You'd be surprised how little difference that makes to him," Zorian sighed.

"Oh come on, mister Kazinski, you didn't even have a single session with him," Ilsa chided. "I'm sure that whatever rumors you heard were greatly exaggerated."

"Right," said Zorian, unable to keep himself from rolling his eyes. "Can you at least give me a written permit to skip your lectures? You said yourself I have nothing to learn there, anyway."

That wasn't quite what Zorian was after, but he supposed it was better than nothing. It would give him a bunch of free periods throughout the week, which wasn't terribly useful while he was inside the time loop (where he could just skip classes if he needed more free time) but would come in handy when and if he got out of it. And besides, a written permit would cut down on Akoja's whining, if nothing else.

"No," Ilsa said. "I need you in class, if only to motivate the rest of your classmates to try harder. Don't worry, I'll make sure you're not bored during class."

Crap. Maybe he shouldn't have asked her that...

"In the meantime, I'm going to do you a favor," Ilsa continued. "While I am personally too busy to teach you, I will see if I can find a teacher willing to give you some private instruction. Do you have an area of magic you're particularly interested in? Personally, I would recommend you look into either divination or alteration, but it's your choice."

"Spell formulas," Zorian said firmly.

"Oh? Ambitious," noted Ilsa. "It's a hard subject. Not something your shaping skills can help you with, either."

"I'm certain," Zorian confirmed. Spell formulas had fascinated him ever since he started to learn magic, so there was no way he was wasting this kind of opportunity.

"Very well," Ilsa shrugged. "I don't foresee any problems, in that case. I'm sure miss Boole will be ecstatic to have such a talented and determined student."

'Miss Boole'? As in, Nora Boole, the orange-haired maniac that expected them to read 12 books within a week and gave them 60-question 'progress tests' every other lecture? Zorian resisted the urge to sigh. Why couldn't he have a normal mentor for once?

Chapter Eleven

LIMITERS

"Why is your test longer than mine?" Benisek whispered to him hurriedly. "Did I lose a page or something?"

"You didn't," Zorian whispered back. "Nora is just testing me because... well, it doesn't matter. I'll tell you later."

Zorian sighed and continued pondering the advanced spell formula questions in front of him. As if the original 60 question test hadn't been enough! Worse, Nora took a page out of Ilsa's book and decided to test him on knowledge that he technically shouldn't even have, because the additional questions had nothing to do with second year curriculum. Thankfully, he had actually read all 12 of her 'recommended' books over the course of several previous restarts, so he wasn't *completely* stumped while looking at the piece of paper in front of him.

Still, the additional questions were encouraging, since they suggested Nora was taking him a lot more seriously than she usually did when he asked for some advanced instructions out of her. In the handful of restarts he had tried, the results were underwhelming – while enthusiastic about her subject, Nora Boole never seemed to believe he was as advanced as he claimed. All of his teachers were like that, as far as he could tell from his initial attempts, with Kyron being the biggest exception. Though

now that he thought about it, that probably had more to do with the ease with which his proficiency with the magic missile spell could be demonstrated, rather than Kyron's inclination to believe his claims. In any case, the sheer speed with which things were happening gave him hope – it was only yesterday that he and Ilsa had talked in her office, and already Nora was testing him. That was absurdly fast, since teachers liked to take their time about things like this. Zorian had expected the entire process to take a week, *at least*. Apparently he had left an even bigger impression on Ilsa than he thought he had.

Good. It was nice to have a confirmation that he was actually going somewhere, rather than just wasting his time.

A few minutes later his peace was once again broken by Benisek. He gritted his teeth as the boy started to pester him for answers. Zorian had always found Benisek to be somewhat annoying, despite him being Zorian's best friend (or at least the closest thing to it), but Zorian found himself steadily losing his patience with the boy as restart after restart went by. It wasn't really fair to Benisek – the chubby boy was behaving no worse than his usual fare – but the time loop made Benisek's antics annoyingly repetitive. He quickly scribbled answers to a handful of questions on a piece of paper and thrust it at Benisek. Benisek looked like he would say something to him in his not-whisper (Benisek whispered far too loudly for it to be called a real whisper), but Zorian silenced him with a quick glare.

As annoying as Benisek might be, Zorian wasn't ready to give up on him just yet. Whether that resolve would hold throughout the entire time loop remained to be seen, however.

"All right, time's up. Pencils down, everyone," Nora said, earning her a wave of protests from the student body. "Except for mister Kazinski, that is. He can keep working on that special second test I gave him."

Zorian cursed internally as all eyes momentarily shifted towards him. She just had to tell that in front of the whole class, didn't she? He made a note to himself to watch what he said in front of Nora, since discretion obviously wasn't her strong suit.

Akoja hurriedly collected all the tests, lingering slightly longer near his desk so she could see what his 'special' test was all about. After that, the class continued as normal. It was the exact same thing he had already listened to countless times before in the previous restarts, so he did his best to block it out and continue solving the test. Even with his massively unfair advantage, the test was rather hard. Spell formula in general involved a lot of mathematics and geometry, as the very name of the discipline hinted at, and that automatically made it hard for a lot of people... him included.

Eventually the class came to an end, and Nora asked him to stay behind while everyone else filed out of the classroom. She immediately started to look over his tests when the last of his classmates left, and Zorian watched her intently for a reaction.

Unlike Xvim, or even Ilsa, Nora Boole was a very expressive woman. By the time she had reached the end of the first test, he could see she was pleasantly surprised. She damn well should be, considering it was 100% correct. When she started inspecting the second test, though, her face quickly morphed first into shock, and then barely restrained glee. Evidently she liked what she saw. Finally, she set the test aside and met his eyes, giving him a penetrating gaze that actually caused Zorian to flinch a little. She reminded him of Zach and Kirithishli, because she seemed to radiate a similar sort of... vibrancy, for the lack of a better word. It was always a bit uncomfortable being around people like that, especially when they were focused solely on him like Nora currently was.

"Well..." she began. "I didn't expect that. Do you know why I gave you the second test?"

"Uh, no," said Zorian. "To scare me off?"

"Exactly!" Nora exclaimed. "Exactly!"

Zorian blinked, unable to believe she actually admitted that to his face.

"Spell formulas require bravery! They require passion!" continued Nora animatedly. Funny. Everyone else said they required patience and meticulousness. "They require determination! Anyone who is scared off by this little thing here," she waved the second test in front of his face, "will surely give up when we delve into the truly difficult parts of the discipline. I had to make sure you wouldn't bail out on me somewhere along the line."

Zorian was starting to feel a little unnerved by Nora's outburst. Was he signing up for spell formula tutoring or cult membership?

"Of course, I didn't actually expect you to solve any of the questions correctly," Nora said. "I just wanted to see if you'd leave it completely blank. Not that I'm complaining, far from it! Let's see..."

She went back to her desk and pulled out a stack of papers out of a drawer. She frowned as she leafed through them, apparently unhappy about their contents, before finally setting them aside with a sigh. After an entire minute of silence, she glanced towards him and shook her head, as if suddenly remembering he was still there.

"Tell me, what are spell formulas?" she asked him. "And I don't want to hear a textbook definition. I want to hear it in your words."

Zorian opened his mouth for a moment and then quickly snapped it shut as he considered what to say.

"Come on," Nora encouraged. "Bravery, remember? Besides, I just want to know your opinion. There is no right answer."

Hah. There might be no right answer, but Zorian knew from experience that there was always a *wrong* answer. Always. But he supposed that, in this particular instance, silence was the *wrongest* answer of them all.

"It's the practice of using geometric shapes and various sigils to modify spells, usually in order to strengthen wards or amplify spellcasting," said Zorian.

"Really? How do they do that?" asked Nora in mock curiosity.

"Err... they limit mana flow along pre-determined pathways?" tried Zorian.

"Yes!" agreed Nora. "They limit, that's exactly what they do! I can't tell you how many mages think they're some kind of inherent amplifier or something. Drives me crazy, I tell you. Of course, most modern crafters use special materials that *are* inherent amplifiers, but that's something else entirely. Anyway, you know the point behind structured spellcasting, right?"

"The narrower the effect of the spell is, the more mana efficient it becomes. Structured magic creates a spell boundary to forcibly narrow down effect space into something manageable for a human spellcaster."

"And spell formulas are the exact same thing, only with more pronounced benefits and drawbacks," said Nora. "Since mages can take their time when crafting the spell formula, they limit the mana flow much more tightly than your typical invocation. This means bigger potential benefits, but also makes the spell even more inflexible. And, of course, the tighter spell boundary means there is less margin for errors, so designing a working spell formula is a lot harder than designing a working invocation."

Zorian waited patiently until she was finished, not really sure why she was telling him these things – this was all basic theory that he had heard and read a thousand times – but unwilling to interrupt. Unfortunately, it appeared he would have to wait to hear what the point of her little questioning was, because Nora suddenly looked at the clock hanging by the door and blanched when she realized how much time had passed.

"Sorry, Mister Kazinski, I guess I got carried away. You better

go to the next class before I get you in trouble,” Nora said apologetically. Zorian shrugged – he had intended to skip the next class one way or another, but it probably wouldn’t impress her much if he told her that. “I’ll need a few days to set up a schedule, so I’ll tell you the details via Ilsa. We’ll have a blast working together, I can already tell.”

He was just about to leave when she suddenly started talking again.

“Oh! I almost forgot. Go see Ilsa sometime today – she has something she wants to talk to you about. Something about you returning a favor you owe her for setting this up...”

Now why did that sound kind of ominous?



Cyoria’s main train station was always busy. There was a sort of hurried feeling suffusing the entire area that Zorian found either annoying or invigorating, depending on his current mood. When he was disembarking from the train, it served as a metaphorical bucket of cold water to wake him up from the long sleepy journey, and he welcomed it. When he was simply standing on platform number 6, waiting for the train to arrive, it was oppressive and unwelcome, and he desperately wished he knew how to suppress it. Especially since the damned train was 2 hours late!

In order to amuse himself and pass the time, he had taken to harassing the numerous pigeons and sparrows milling around the place. Not physically, of course – that would be not only childish, but would also cause people to stare at him – he was instead pushing his mana at them, trying to control them mentally. Of course, simply pushing mana at something and wishing for it to happen wasn’t enough to do real magic, but it did seem to agitate them a lot. Typically, whatever bird he was concentrating on became in-

creasingly erratic as seconds went by before fleeing away from the area after a minute or so.

Finally, *finally*, the shrill whistle of the incoming train broke him out of his concentration, and the local wildlife was spared further indignation. Zorian scanned the crowd of people disembarking from the train, searching for his target. He was technically supposed to hold a sign and wait, but he was confident he could spot the guy without problem. It's not like there'd be many white-haired teenagers on the train platform, after all.

It actually wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be, this favor Ilsa had asked of him. Admittedly, helping a transfer student carry his luggage and showing him around the city would waste an entire day... but on the bright side, he was excused from attending today's classes! Besides, it would give him a legitimate excuse to approach Kael, the transfer student in question – the morlock boy was a bit unapproachable even at the best of days, and Zorian had been thinking of trying to befriend him. He really ought to find some friends beside Benisek, and Kael seemed like someone he could get along well with. If he turned out to be wrong... well, it's not like the morlock would remember any awkwardness between them once the time loop reset itself again, would he?

Finally, he spotted Kael disembarking and moved towards him to help him with his luggage. It wasn't just an empty gesture of good will on Zorian's part, either – Kael was clearly having problems with his burden, probably because he could only use one arm to manipulate the heavy bags. The other hand was currently supporting a little girl that clung to Kael's side like a barnacle, observing everything around her with childlike intensity.

Kael was momentarily surprised when Zorian wordlessly started helping him, but quickly went along with it. The little girl clutching his side was now staring at Zorian with undisguised curiosity, and Zorian wondered who she was. Was this his little

sister? Her vivid blue eyes certainly reminded him of Kael, since the morlock had eyes of the exact same shade, but her hair was jet black, and she didn't look very much like a morlock to Zorian. And in any case, surely the boy wouldn't bring a child this young with him? Zorian kept expecting her mother to step out of the train and take the little girl out of Kael's hands, but somehow that never happened.

Finally, the last of the bags was standing on the floor and Kael finally turned towards him.

"Thank you," the boy said politely. For all his aloofness, Kael was never actually rude. "I'm Kael Tverinov. I'm not normally this inept, but it's hard to handle the luggage with one hand. Kana has been rather clingy today, and I didn't have the heart to pry her off. The move was too stressful for her, I'm afraid."

"It's no problem," Zorian said. "I'm here to help, after all – that's what Ilsa sent me here for. I'm Zorian Kazinski, one of your classmates. Ilsa Zileti sent me here to help you with your luggage and show you around the city."

Kael gave him a startled look, clutching the little girl attached to his hip like Zorian was about to snatch her away.

"What?" Zorian asked, surprised at the alarm in the boy's posture. "Was it something I said? I didn't mean to offend."

Kael gave him a long, suspicious look, before finally reaching a decision of some sort.

"You didn't do anything, mister Kazinski, and it is I who should apologize," Kael said finally. "Allow me to introduce myself again: I am Kael Tverinov, and this is my daughter, Kana."

Zorian stared at the morlock for a moment, before glancing at his... daughter. Kana gave him a shy wave, but otherwise remained silent. She was very young, probably around 3 years of age, but Kael wasn't much older than Zorian. That would mean Kael was 13 or so at the time she was born. Huh. Talk about being a young

parent.

"I see," he said finally. And he really did, too. Kael probably got enough grief from people around him over being a morlock without adding this sort of fuel to the fire. If Zorian was in his place, he would have done everything he could to keep this sort of thing from his classmates as well. "If you're afraid I'll go around telling all our classmates about you having a daughter, you don't have to worry – I understand the need for discretion in matters like this."

Kael breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Zorian said, waving him off. Considering the child's mother wasn't here with them, there was probably a very stressful story in there somewhere. He would have to be a total jackass to set the academy rumor mill on the poor guy by telling them about this. He was a little curious as to how the boy intended to watch over his daughter while attending the academy, but supposed he had already arranged for a nanny of some sort for the child. "I'll just cast a quick spell to carry your luggage and then we'll be off."

Zorian quickly cast the 'floating disc' spell, and a ghostly horizontal circle flickered into existence in front of them. It was a very useful spell that they were supposed to learn in Ilsa's class somewhere in the middle of the third year, but Zorian had been proactive enough to track it down in one of the restarts. It was similar to the 'shield' spell in mechanics, but this particular force construct was mobile and optimized for supporting weight as opposed to absorbing blows. It dutifully floated after them as they started walking out of the train station.

"Interesting," Kael said. "I must admit that, when Ilsa told me my education is severely lacking in many areas, I thought she was exaggerating. Is this what an average third-year student is like?"

"Well, no," said Zorian. "I'm actually way beyond what a third-

year student should be. Though I'm hardly unique in my skill..."

Kael hummed thoughtfully.

"Why would your education be lacking, anyway?" asked Zorian.

Kael remained silent for a few seconds, and Zorian was just about to conclude the morlock wasn't interested in talking when the boy finally decided to answer.

"My education was... unconventional," said Kael. "I was a sort of unofficial apprentice to a village mage. One that wasn't a member of the guild. Her skills were somewhat specialized, so much of my proficiency with magic is a product of my own personal efforts. In other words, I'm largely self-taught."

Zorian's respect for the other boy rose a few notches after hearing this. Magic was hard enough to learn with proper instruction. For a young boy to go at it all by himself and get far enough to join a third-year class... though if he's such a genius...

"I hope I'm not being too nosy, but..."

"But why am I going into Cyoria, now?" guessed Kael. "I got a pretty good offer from the academy, and it wasn't like I had anyone stopping me from leaving. My parents died when I was young, and my teacher... she got sick during the Weeping. As did my wife. Kana is the only family I have left."

Zorian flinched. "Oh gods, I didn't mean..."

Kael shook his head. "Don't worry about it, mister Kazinski. If I was to fall apart every time someone broached that topic, I would have to become a hermit and avoid people completely. It is natural to be curious about these things."

Zorian still felt pretty terrible. He had pretty much assumed Kael had gotten some girl pregnant and later had to take responsibility for the child. But no, the guy had been married and everything. A bit shocking to marry and have children so young in this day and age, but hardly unheard of. He studied Kael out of the

corner of his eyes in the resulting silence. The boy looked very delicate, with pale, willowy physique and gentle facial lines. Coupled with his shoulder-length white hair, it gave him a rather... feminine appearance. Nonetheless, the boy clearly had no shortage of inner strength if he could move on after losing so many people to the horrible sickness. Back in Cirin, there was a woman who had lost a husband and both sons to the bloody tears fever, and never managed to move past that. She had actually blamed the entire Kazinski family for her tragedy, claiming they had used their 'magic powers' to curse her loved ones because of some petty disagreement. Zorian would be the first person to admit he and his family were no angels, but that was just absurd. And kind of sad.

"There is no need to pity me, mister Kazinski," said Kael, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, I don't pity you," Zorian said. "I think you're very inspiring, actually. You're a single parent who somehow managed to find the time to teach himself magic to such a degree that a world-renowned institution like the academy in Cyoria acknowledged your potential. They gave you a scholarship, didn't they?"

Kael nodded. "I wouldn't be able to attend otherwise."

"They rarely give out scholarships, you know?" Zorian said. "About 5 to 6 of them each year. You must be pretty amazing to have caught their attention like that."

"It's mostly my medical expertise," Kael sighed. "I made a vow to myself after... well, you know. I swore to myself I would become the best healer of the age and make sure a tragedy such as the Weeping can never happen again."

Uh... wow. Zorian didn't know what to say to something like that.

"I made quite a lot of progress on that front, if you permit me to be a little immodest here," Kael said. "But... well, it's complicated. We can talk later, if you're still interested. Me and Kana

are rather tired from the journey and I'd like to retire for the day. Kana especially."

Zorian suddenly noticed Kana was starting to doze off on Kael's shoulder. She had been so quiet throughout his entire interaction with Kael that he had almost forgotten she's there. If only Kirielle could be that docile.

"Yes, sorry about that," Zorian apologized. "I got carried away, I guess. I'll have to give you a tour of the city some other time, then."

They spent the rest of the walk in comfortable silence.



"You were absent yesterday."

Zorian gave Akoja an annoyed look. She wasn't going to give him grief over that, was she?

"I was excused," he noted.

"I know," Akoja said. "I was just wondering where you were."

Zorian was about to tell her it wasn't her damn business where he went in his free time, but then he reconsidered. He was getting strange vibes off Akoja, almost as if she was... *concerned* about him. Very strange. Normally he would write it off as just another weird thing Akoja did from time to time – the girl seemed to have logic all of her own sometimes, one that not even her obsession with rules could explain – but his recent conversation with Kael stopped him. Was he too dismissive of other people? Up until yesterday, Kael was simply 'that morlock transfer student' to Zorian... It brought back memories of his conversations with Zach, and the other boy's remarks about Zorian's behavior in previous restarts, before he became aware of the time loop.

"I was doing a favor for Ilsa," Zorian said. "Showing our newest transfer student around the city and such."

"Oh," Akoja said, glancing at Kael for a moment. The white-haired boy was sitting several rows behind Zorian, silent and aloof as always. He gave virtually no indication that he knew Zorian was in the classroom, but Zorian could feel the morlock's eyes on him from time to time. "Who is he anyway?"

"Kael Tverinov," Zorian answered.

"I didn't mean his name," Akoja huffed, realizing, after a few seconds of silence, that he wasn't going to say anything else.

"Not sure what else to tell you," Zorian shrugged. "He sounded like a good person to me."

"He looks kind of arrogant," Akoja remarked. "And girly."

"Well how judgmental of you," Zorian remarked with a frown. "You come off as a bit arrogant yourself, you know?"

Well, so much for being nice to Akoja! She stomped off soon after that, shooting him a nasty glare.

Resolving to be more understanding towards people was hard.



It took Nora Boole only 2 days to organize their first lesson, and the moment Zorian stepped into the classroom Nora had reserved for them he realized Nora was taking this very seriously. It was a professional-looking workshop, the sort that students normally couldn't access without special permission from the teachers. Nora beckoned him forward, positively radiating excitement and enthusiasm. Suddenly he remembered why he had been pensive about getting instruction from her. Considering the amount of homework and additional reading Nora assigned as a matter of course during her classes, Zorian dreaded finding out what she considered an appropriate workload for an actually talented student.

"Ah, you're too quiet!" she complained. "Courage, Zorian, courage!"

"Right," agreed Zorian half-heartedly.

"We'll make a proper crafter out of you yet, just you see!" huffed Nora. "But first, let me just wrap up our discussion from last time. I was a little long-winded, but what I had been trying to build up to was that spell formula are... support magic. Magic affecting other magic. By itself, even the most elegant spell formula is merely a theoretical exercise. You need to actually cast the spells and anchor them to the spell formula before it's of any use. I note this because Ilsa seemed to think your skill in invocations would do you no good in my subject, which annoyed me because it revealed a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the discipline. Which is very disappointing, coming from her, since she is... well, you know..."

"A teacher," finished Zorian.

"Yeah," Nora agreed, a little awkwardly. Teachers rarely spoke ill of one another, in Zorian's experience, so it was no wonder why she was uncomfortable criticizing Ilsa in front of a student. They did have to work with one another on a regular basis, after all, and undermining other teacher's authority like that could get ugly very quickly. Fortunately, only Zorian was present in this case, and he didn't intend to make trouble for her. She seemed to realize it too, after a moment, because she smiled and continued as if nothing had happened. "Anyway, I guess we should get you started on the beginner's cube."

As it turned out, the beginner's cube was a perfectly cubical block of grey stone, each side roughly 10 centimeters long. The one Zorian was given was completely blank and smooth, but Nora showed him a couple of finished ones as a demonstration. They did things like heat up, shed light, or float in the air when activated, or when certain conditions were met. Basically, each finished cube was a crude magic item that used a couple of simple spells and a whole lot of spell formula to produce a neat little toy. They were

a standard training tool, according to Nora.

Zorian wanted one the moment he had laid his eyes on them. Giving such a blatantly magical toy to Kirielle would probably keep her out of his hair for *hours*. It would be his secret weapon against her! Besides, a small floating cube would make a much more challenging target for his magic missile practice than the boulders and tree trunks he usually practiced on. Especially if he could somehow get it to dodge...

He wouldn't have to wait long to acquire one, as it turned out – crafting one was the idea behind today's lesson. And not just any beginner's cube, either. Zorian had expected Nora to give him something easy for a start, but apparently she had something a little more... ambitious... in mind.

"But those ones are too easy for you," Nora concluded. "No, I have something much more fun for you to work on. Here."

She handed him another cube, though this one was positively covered with spell formula. Zorian noted with rising dread that he couldn't make heads or tails of it. Hell, many of the sections looked like mere placeholders instead of working spell formula, being little more than stylized pictograms. Wait...

"As you may have noticed, I compressed the spell formula somewhat," Nora said. "Partially it's because there wasn't enough space on the cube to represent it fully in its raw form, and partially to stop you from simply copying the entire thing line by line on the blank one I gave you earlier."

"Isn't that the whole point?" Zorian asked. "For me to study a working example to see how it's done, that is?"

"Absolutely. But I'm afraid blindly copying the spell formula from one cube to another won't teach you what I want you to learn. If I thought you needed to practice memorization and precision, I'd have you copy a dozen or so easy ones to start with, but I'm sure you're already beyond that. No one spends as much time on

spell formula theory as you have without trying out some practical examples.”

“Err, I never encountered anything like those cubes in the texts I read,” said Zorian. “But yes, I have been using spell formulas from time to time. Mostly to establish an alarm perimeter around my bed during my second year – I had a really nosy roommate – and also to make some free lamps and heating plates.”

Invocations didn’t last long. Even if a mage poured more mana into them than absolutely necessary – and there was only so much you could overpower a spell before it shattered from the strain – they inevitably degraded after a couple of hours at most. The spell boundary degraded with time and eventually fell apart, regardless of whether the spell had enough mana left or not. As a consequence, if Zorian wanted his alarm spell to last throughout the entire night, or his makeshift lamp not to wink out every hour or so, he had to stabilize the spell boundary somehow. Spell formulas were the easiest and most reliable way to do that, so long as someone already crafted a stabilization formula for that particular spell and made it available to the public.

“It’s not very surprising you never encountered beginner’s cubes in your reading,” Nora said. “They’re mostly used for theoretical exercises. Not very useful. Most mages don’t really care how spell formulas work – only that they do. They memorize the well-documented formulas and some quick-and-dirty methods of modifying existing ones, and then they only have to know when to apply which one. Then they say spell formulas are dry and boring. Hah! If only they knew the true mysteries of the Art, the hidden beauty of numbers and geometry...”

Zorian listened stoically as Nora mumbled to herself about ‘unimaginative rabble’ and ‘sleeping in the bed they made for themselves’ for a while. After a while she took a deep breath and plastered a pleasant smile on her face before turning her attention

to him again.

There was no sane teacher in this school, it seemed. Zorian wondered whether it was the stress of teaching itself that was producing these kind of effects, or if you simply had to be crazy to accept a teaching position here.

"But I digress," Nora said cheerfully. "I guess I should stop wasting our time and tell you what I want you to do. Here, let me demonstrate..."



The cube Nora wanted Zorian to recreate was quite complicated. At its core, it was a glorified lamp using a simple 'torch' spell as its base. It could be activated and deactivated verbally, by saying one of the several command words, and it had to be able to tell when someone was referring to it specifically, as opposed to using the command word in some other context. It had three different brightness settings. It conserved mana by not shedding light from any side that was covered by something – the side resting on the floor didn't shine, for example, and wrapping it in a blanket would cause it to turn itself off. Each individual side could be turned on and off by tapping on it twice in quick succession. It could be keyed in to a specific person, taking orders from him or her alone.

Nora had told him not to worry if he couldn't duplicate it exactly – she only wanted to see how far he'd get on his own by the next time they met. That was good, because this assignment was far more complex than anything spell formula related he had done up until now. Their next session was on Monday, so he had an entire weekend to work with, but he doubted he could fully rise to the challenge.

He had mixed feelings about Nora's teaching methods. On one hand, she was taking him seriously, and that was good. On

the other hand, she seemed to think that throwing a person overboard was a perfectly valid way of teaching people how to swim, metaphorically speaking.

"Come in."

Zorian sighed before stepping into Xvim's office. What a wonderful way to end a week. For all her faults, he infinitely preferred Nora's way of teaching compared to that of Xvim.

"Zorian Kazinski? Sit down, please," Xvim ordered, not even bothering to wait for an answer. Zorian caught the pen the man had thrown at him with practiced ease, and then promptly caused it to float off the palm of his hand, gently spinning in the air. Woops. He hadn't meant to do that. Oh well, let's see what the man will say about that.

"Make it glow," Xvim barked out without skipping a beat, completely unfazed by Zorian's skill.

Zorian wasn't even surprised anymore. The pen promptly snapped back to his hand and erupted in soft ghostly glow. He cycled through various colors without prompting from Xvim, occasionally changing the intensity of the light just to prove he could.

Xvim arched his eyebrow at him. "I didn't say you could stop levitating the pen."

Zorian's lips twitched in an aborted smile. If Xvim thought he would stump him with that, he was very much mistaken – combining two different shaping exercises was an obvious thing to do, and Zorian had already tried it. Moments later, the pen was spinning in the air in front of him, glowing.

Xvim tapped his finger on the desk thoughtfully. Was it possible? Had he really managed to give the man pause? The world was coming to an end! Zorian watched in anticipation, wondering what the crazy man would think up next.

"I suppose there is no point in testing your ability to burn

things. That was always the easiest exercise of the three," Xvim mused. As a point of fact, Zorian was a bit deficient in the burning exercise... at least compared to the other two. Not that he was going to tell that to Xvim, of course. "Your essentials are... adequate. Almost decent, though not quite. Your attitude could use some work, but I suppose you at least have more tact than most of the unfortunates that haunt these halls. Plus, miss Zileti has appealed to me on your behalf, asking me to be 'not such a hardass' towards you. As such, as much as I'd like to shake up your woefully shaky foundations, I'm going to reluctantly move on to something *slightly* more advanced."

To Zorian's great confusion, Xvim handed him a strip of cloth. What was he supposed to do what *that*?

"Err..."

"It's a blindfold," Xvim explained. "You put it over your eyes so you can't see."

"And... why do I need a blindfold again?" Zorian asked.

"We're going to train your ability to sense mana," said Xvim. "You're going to put the blindfold on, and then I'm going to throw these mana-charged marbles at you."

Zorian stared at the man incredulously. Had he really heard him right?

"I'm either going to throw them over your left shoulder, over your right shoulder, or straight at your head. If you get hit by a marble, you lose a point. If you move when you don't have to, you lose a point. Otherwise you receive a point. We'll stop when you accrue 10 points or our time runs out."

Yes, he really *had* heard him right. Thank you so much for your help Ilsa, thank you *so* much!



The next two weeks were busy, but routine. He directed most of his efforts towards mastering spell formulas, largely because Nora was very willing to indulge him – the harder he tried in their lessons, the more enthusiastic she became about teaching him. She even suggested they meet on Sundays for additional instruction, apparently not having any private obligations to distract her. He had learned much, but Nora set a grueling pace, and he was glad the restart was fast approaching. He doubted he could last much more than a month of Nora's teaching.

Interestingly, he seemed to be attracting attention from the teachers and students alike in this particular restart. Maybe it was him impressing Ilisa as much as he did, maybe it was the way he quietly went with the insane workload Nora gave him, or maybe Xvim said something nice about him to the other teachers. Well, probably not that last part, since he had made little progress in mastering Xvim's current 'exercise'. In any case, he was getting a lot of attention for his efforts, which was rather curious. Most of the time, no matter how hard he tried in class, everyone was pretty flat about it. He thought about trying to leverage all that attention into something useful, but he was too exhausted by his studies to plot properly. Some other restart perhaps.

The attention had the unfortunate side-effect of wrecking any chance he had of befriending Kael. Associating with Zorian would surely bring great scrutiny on the morlock, something the boy was understandably concerned about, so Zorian wasn't surprised the other boy never sought him out. Frankly, he wasn't sure he could befriend the boy even in normal circumstances – the morlock had a daughter waiting for him at home, and thus probably wouldn't want to spend his time after class socializing with friends.

Akoja was extremely pleased with him, though. Zorian couldn't really understand why, but she was.

And then it happened. Suddenly, without any warning, there

was a wrenching sensation and everything went black. He woke up, as usual, with Kirielle lying on top of him, looking smug.

There were two possibilities that Zorian could think of to explain this occurrence. The first one was that something or someone had killed him so fast he was dead before he realized it. He was skeptical of this, as he had done nothing to warrant an assassination, and he couldn't think of any natural force that could kill so suddenly and thoroughly. He hadn't even felt any pain before he died.

The second possibility was much more likely, and also much more worrying. While he was minding his business, learning spell formulas in Cyoria, Zach was off somewhere in the world, doing insanely dangerous things. Zach died. When he did, his soul was dragged into the past to start over... and it dragged *Zorian's* soul back with it.

Which would make Zorian soul-bonded to Zach.

Damn it.

Chapter Twelve

SOUL WEB

Zorian stomped into his room, closing the door behind him with way more force than necessary. He should have known he wouldn't find out anything about soul bonds that he hadn't already known, but it was still annoying to come back empty-handed after spending an entire day in the library.

The books all repeated the same warnings he received back in his first year: soul bonds were a dangerous and poorly understood branch of magic, capable of causing some pretty horrifying side-effects if used recklessly. Every once in a while, some ill-informed couple decide that soul-bonding themselves together would be the most romantic thing ever, only for everything to end up in tears and lawsuits a few months later when complications surface. The main issue was that one of the participants usually started to mentally and spiritually dominate the other, making them more like themselves in mind and soul, not to mention disturbingly obedient and deferential. This was a good thing when binding animals as familiars, since it was almost always the animal that got dominated by the human, and animals actually tended to benefit from such domination by developing higher intelligence and better control over their magical abilities (if they had any). Sentient beings usually had issues with someone magically subverting their entire

personality and worldview, however. At least until the soul bond finished, turning them into a servile clone, that is.

Zorian ran a trembling hand through his hair and started to clean his glasses with the hem of his shirt to calm himself down. He really, *really* hoped he was wrong and that there was no soul bond between him and Zach. Zach had 6 times larger mana reserves than Zorian's theoretical maximum, was naturally more outgoing and confident, and – thanks to being in the time loop far longer than Zorian – was probably decades older than him too. No points for guessing who'd be the dominant one between the two of them!

The worst thing about it was that he couldn't even go to someone for help. He was pretty sure the soul bond, or whatever it was, was responsible for him looping around along with Zach. If he asked someone for help, they'd insist on severing the bond (an understandable sentiment and something he'd eagerly agree to in normal circumstances), which would cause him to lose everything he had gained inside the time loop, memories included, once Zach started over at the end of the month.

Yeah, he was totally screwed.

He took a couple of deep breaths and put his glasses back on. Maybe he was looking at things too fatalistically. Considering the sheer size of disparity between him and Zach, he should have experienced some pretty massive personality shifts by now, and he didn't notice anything of the sort. He certainly wasn't feeling submissive towards anyone, least of all Zach. Obviously things weren't as bad as they seemed. He could very well be overreacting and overlooking some other, perfectly reasonable explanation for the unscheduled restart...

Someone was knocking. Who could possibly-

Oh. Right. Taiven.

He sighed heavily. Just what he needed right now. The knocking turned into banging, prompting him to finally open the door.

"Hi Roach!"

"Hi Taiven," Zorian said in a slightly suffering tone. "How nice of you to visit me. Do you want to come in?"

Taiven promptly did what she always did once he let her inside – she jumped on his bed and made herself comfortable. Zorian shrugged and went after her. Best to get it over with quickly.

"Didn't you graduate?" he asked. "You said you were going to go into exploration after you graduate, what happened to that?"

She gave him a sour look. "It's not that simple. No expedition is going to take a complete beginner like me with them. I need an established explorer to take me as an apprentice. I'm working on it."

"Funny, I heard you're working as a class assistant to Nirthak," Zorian remarked. "Isn't that going to interfere with searching for another master?"

"Well, sort of," she admitted. "But I'm not literally searching for another job at this point. I'm actually trying to build up my reputation and get people to notice me by doing missions and such. In fact, that's what I came to talk to you about – I'd like you to join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow."

"Sounds suspicious," Zorian said. "What could a measly third year help you with?"

"Um, fill out our numbers?" Taiven answered. "We can't take the job until there are 4 or more of us, and we're one short of that."

"Well, why *does* the job require four people?" asked Zorian, knowing from previous restarts that this was the fastest avenue to shut down Taiven's excuses. "Surely the employer didn't put that there just to be mean to groups like yours."

"It's supposedly dangerous," Taiven huffed, folding her arms across her chest. "The old man is overreacting. The spiders aren't even that big from what he told us."

"Spiders?" prodded Zorian.

"Yeah," Taiven said hesitantly, apparently realizing she probably shouldn't have mentioned that. "Spiders. You know, hairy eight-legged-"

"Taiven," Zorian warned.

"Oh come on Roach, I'm begging you!" Taiven whined. "I swear its not as dangerous as it sounds! We've been in the tunnels hundreds of times and it wasn't that dangerous at all! We can protect you easily!"

"Hundreds of times?" asked Zorian dubiously.

"Well, a dozen times at least," she relented.

Zorian was just about to tell her no, like he usually did at this point, but then he stopped himself. He probably wouldn't be able to do anything remotely productive for at least a week, what with the possibility of a soul bond between him and Zach weighting heavily on his mind and all. A nice distracting stroll through the sewers might be just what the doctor ordered, so to speak.

"Sure," he said.

"Really!?" she squealed.

"Yes, really," confirmed Zorian. "Just tell me where to meet you tomorrow before I change my mind."

A few minutes later Taiven left, thanking him profusely and kissing him on the cheek 'for being a friend' before running off to... wherever she had been going, he supposed. He didn't ask, being too shocked by her kiss, innocuous as it may have been. He was a bit angry at himself for being so affected by a silly kiss on the cheek, but he supposed he shouldn't be too hard on his subconscious. She was his former crush, after all.

He decided he had had enough of everything for the day and drank one of the sleeping potions he kept in his stash. Hopefully things would seem clearer after a good night's rest.



The next morning he woke up a bit more level-headed than he had been after his visit to the library, and things didn't seem as hopeless as they had the day before. He had been jumping to conclusions, and needed more information. He was tempted to skip classes for the day to have another go at the library, but he suspected that he lacked both the research skills and the access level to properly tackle a restricted topic like soul bonds. And besides, there was someone in his class he absolutely had to talk to – Briam, the guy with a fire drake familiar. Surely someone who is already soul-bonded to another, even if it was to a magical animal instead of another human, could tell him more about those blasted things.

"I see your family has given you a fire drake of your own," he said conversationally, sitting down beside Briam and ignoring the threatening hissing of the fire drake. For some reason, the ill-tempered beast never saw fit to attack him in previous restarts, so he didn't think it would start now. "Is he your familiar already?"

"Yes," Briam confirmed, clearly pleased with that. "I bonded with him just this summer actually. A bit strange, at first, but I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"Strange?" asked Zorian. "How so?"

"Well, it's mostly the bond being there, you know?" Briam said.

"So the bond can be felt?" Zorian said speculatively, trying not to let his excitement show. He didn't feel anything. "Is that normal? Can everyone who is soul-bonded feel their bond?"

"No, not everyone," Briam chuckled. "Only a tiny minority can, and nobody is sure why. I can, though. I guess I'm lucky that way."

Zorian suppressed a scowl. He had been hoping that him not being able to sense any bonds meant there was none, but apparently that was no proof. Damn.

"You know," Zorian tried, "I've always had an... *academic interest* in familiars and soul bonds..."

Thankfully, Briam didn't find Zorian's interest in any way sus-

picious and was happy to indulge Zorian's curiosity. What Briam told him was interesting, to say the least. According to Briam, the soul bond spell was actually a ritual of some sort, one that took at least 10 minutes to properly cast, and usually more. Not something you cast as a regular invocation. Also, even the most oblivious of participants tended to feel something after a few weeks, after the bond had properly anchored itself to the participants.

There were a lot of things Zorian had experienced so far in the time loop that could qualify as signs of a developing soul bond, but it was hard to say how much of that was simply a consequence of the crazy situation he had found himself in. The effects were just too weak compared to what Briam told him should happen. His mana reserves were slightly larger than they had been at the start of the time loop, for instance, but the increase was nothing special. It could just as easily be a consequence of his regular combat magic practice instead of being caused by the soul bond trying to twist his soul to be more in line with Zach's. The spell that the lich cast on them definitely wasn't a ritual either... but then again, it *was* a lich. Who knew what kind of magic a creature like that had at its disposal?

All in all, it would appear he was lucky – the link between him and Zach was either very weak or of a different type. Or perhaps it was only half-formed? According to Briam, the bond required physical proximity and a lot of personal interaction between participants to fully mature. It was why he carried his fire drake everywhere he went at this point in time. Considering he only interacted with Zach in one of the restarts so far, and that the boy spent virtually all of the restarts away from Cyoria, the bond may have never gotten the chance to solidify. If so, he must never allow it to fully form – he would avoid contact with the other time traveler from now on until he could figure out more about what was happening.

Which, admittedly, could take a while. Hopefully his idea of avoiding Zach as much as possible would keep him from being overwhelmed by the bond in the meantime. He really ought to make a learning plan for himself. So far, he had been learning things rather haphazardly. There was no hurry, as far as he knew, and he didn't know where to begin anyway. Also, he had wanted to grow a little as a mage before breaking out of the time loop, since he would never get an opportunity like this again. That kind of disorganized approach was no longer appropriate, however – he wanted the soul bond broken as soon as possible, and that meant finding a way out of the time loop as quickly as possible.

But that would have to wait for another time, because he had a meeting with Taiven and her friends scheduled for the evening. Why did he agree to this again? Oh yes, Taiven picked a really inconvenient moment and he had a momentary bout of insanity. He should have at least gotten some favor out of her for doing this. Oh well, live and learn.

Taiven had chosen an annoyingly distant meeting place, so Zorian had a long trek across in front of him. Apparently there was a meeting spot for chess players in one of Cyoria's parks, and one of Taiven's friends was a regular visitor. He never actually visited that particular park, but the path towards it was somewhat familiar and he couldn't figure out why.

He realized why it was familiar a few minutes later when he stumbled on a small bridge just inside the park. This was where he had met that crying little girl whose bicycle fell into the stream, back before he was aware of the time loop. Come to think of it, he never visited this place after that, did he? There just wasn't any reason to, since he knew in advance there were obstacles blocking his path if he went this way. He peered curiously at the section of the creek beneath the bridge, trying to see if the bike was still there. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't. Yesterday's heavy rain had swelled the

creek into a raging torrent, and the bicycle was, no doubt, picked up by the currents and swept along.

The little girl wasn't there this time, of course, but that didn't mean he was alone on the bridge. There was a small-ish cat, probably a very young one, looking forlornly at the raging waters of the stream. Zorian didn't generally stress himself about the plight of animals, but when the cat turned to look at him and their eyes met, he was assaulted by an intense feeling of sadness and loss. Unnerved by the experience, he picked up his pace, hurriedly leaving the strange cat behind him.

Finally, after nearly 30 minutes of wandering the park, he found the meeting place. Taiven should really learn how to give proper directions one of these days. It was a rather peaceful place, though populated almost entirely by old people. As in, *really* old people. Taiven's group of teenagers stuck out like a sore thumb, but none of the old geezers surrounding them seemed to mind so Zorian decided not to let it bother him and cautiously approached.

Taiven's other friends were a pair of gruff, muscular boys that looked more at home in the boxing ring than in a mage school. One of them was currently frowning at the chess board in front of him, contemplating his next move, while Taiven and the other boy sat on each side of him. Taiven was clearly impatient and bored out of her skull, at one point actually trying to snatch a figurine from the board to pass the time with, only to get foiled by the players. The other boy was more relaxed, lazily observing everything around him like a guard dog. It was this other boy who noticed him and pointed him out to the other two.

"Roach!" Taiven waved. "Thank the gods, I was starting to fear you'd never show up!"

"I wasn't late," Zorian protested.

"Well you sure developed a habit of cutting it close since the last time we saw each other," she accused. "But anyway. Roach,

I'd like you to meet my two minions, Grunt and Mumble. Grunt, Mumble, this is my good friend Roach."

Zorian rolled his eyes. At least it's not just him who gets a stupid nickname.

"Damn it, I told you not to introduce us like that!" One of the boys protested. It was more out of force of habit than because he honestly expected Taiven to change, if Zorian was reading things correctly. He sighed and turned towards Zorian. "Hi, kid. I'm Urik, and the guy playing chess is Oran. Thanks for helping us out like this. We'll make sure nothing happens to you, so don't worry about anything."

The chess player grunted, possibly in agreement. That must be Grunt, then.

"I'm Zorian," he spoke back. The guy never told him their last names, so why should he tell them his?

"Right!" said Taiven enthusiastically. "Introductions are over, so let's get going, shall we?"

"Not until I finish this round," the chess player said flatly.

Taiven's shoulders slumped in defeat. "I hate that game," Taiven whined. "Find yourself a seat, Roach. This could take a while."

Zorian clacked his tongue in annoyance. For once Zorian empathized with Taiven's impatience. He wasn't a big fan of chess either.



The Dungeon was an extremely dangerous place. Also known as the Underworld, the Labyrinth, and a million other names, it was a staggeringly extensive network of caves and tunnels that ran beneath the surface of the world. At first glance, the place seemed like every mage's dream come true – ambient mana levels increased

the deeper one descended into the endless depths of the Dungeon cave system, and the lower levels were practically swimming with useful minerals with fantastic magical properties. Unfortunately, mages were just one of the many creatures that thrived in such an environment. Monsters of all sorts lived in the tunnels, and the deeper one went the stronger and more alien they became. Even the greatest of archmages had to take care not to go too deep when exploring the Dungeon, lest they come face to face with something they had no hope of defeating.

Cyoria, like many other cities, took advantage of the Dungeon beneath it when the city was being built. The topmost portion of the Dungeon was cleared of anything aggressive or particularly dangerous and then systematically walled off from the deeper levels. These tunnels were then modified into shelters, storage spaces, flood-control systems... and the city sewer system. Human settlements had used the Dungeon as a sewer for so long that several species of oozes and other monsters adapted specifically to take advantage of this unique ecological niche, and humans often transplanted them from one city to the next when they built new settlements. Of course, the separation of this topmost layer from the deeper parts of the Dungeon was never 100% effective – especially since many Dungeon denizens were very capable diggers. Regular maintenance was required to keep the whole thing functioning properly.

Cyoria's Dungeon boundary was widely known to have more holes than a sponge. It was a fairly young city, and the local Dungeon was particularly extensive. It grew too big, too fast, and a proper separation between layers was never finalized. That was probably why the invaders managed to smuggle an entire army of monsters into the city by having them pour straight out of the tunnels – though how exactly the invaders mapped out the Deep Dungeon well enough to find a route big enough for an army to pass

through is anyone's guess. Just one more example of how ridiculously well prepared the enemy was, Zorian supposed.

Despite the obvious danger, Zorian wasn't too worried about following Taiven into the tunnels. Cyoria's underground wasn't the safest place in the world, but it was by no means a certain death sentence either. And he doubted the invaders were currently in there, since a giant army of monsters living just beneath the city was absolutely impossible to hide, regardless of how good the invasion organizers were – they would have to navigate their route on the day of the invasion to avoid detection. He would feel better if he had a focusing item for his combat magic, of course, but that was beyond his reach at this point. Nora's tutoring aside, he still wasn't good enough with spell formulas to make one from scratch, and he couldn't buy one without a permit.

Unfortunately, their employer didn't seem to share Zorian's confidence.

"This is the fourth member you found?" the old man demanded incredulously. "Did he even graduate yet?"

Zorian looked at the scowling man waving towards him in a dismissive manner and promptly decided he could understand Taiven's irritation with the guy. If the guy was so worried about their ability to deliver results, why didn't he hire an actual professional to recover his damn watch? Oh, that's right – he didn't want to pay a professional's wage! Frankly, Taiven and her group were probably the best he could hope to get, considering where he looked for help.

The job itself was simple enough – the old man lost a pocket watch in the tunnels while fleeing from a duo of giant spiders, and now they had to get it back. The old man tried to retrieve it, but when he came back to the spot where he had dropped it, it was no longer there. Personally, Zorian was sure it was eaten by an ooze or some other metal-eating scavenger living in the tunnels,

but the old man insisted it was still intact and in the spiders' possession. How he knew that was anyone's guess. What would a bunch of spiders, giant or otherwise, do with a watch? Were they like magpies, collecting shiny items just because?

"Nope," Zorian said, completely unrepentant. "I'm a third year."

"A third year!" the man squawked. "And you think you can survive down there? Do you even know any combat magic?"

"Sure do," confirmed Zorian immediately. "Magic missile, shield and flamethrower."

"That's all?"

"You get what you pay for," Zorian shrugged.

"Look, what's your problem?" Taiven interrupted. "Its four of us versus two large-ish spiders. I alone would be enough for that!"

"Just because I only encountered two doesn't mean there isn't more of them," the man grunted. "I don't want you to stumble on a whole hive of those things and get slaughtered. Those things are *fast*. And stealthy – I didn't even notice them until they were right on top of me. I'm lucky to be alive, talking to you four."

"Well there's four pair of eyes among us," Taiven reasoned. "We'll watch each other's backs, so good luck on them sneaking up on us. I don't suppose you'll finally tell us what's so important about that watch you lost?"

"It's none of your business," the man shot back. "It's not valuable or anything, I just have sentimental reasons for wanting it back." He shook his head. "I suppose the kid is right. I got what I could, considering the reward I'm offering. Just... don't get careless. I don't want the lives of a bunch of children weighing on my soul when I finally die."

A few minutes and a whole lot of pointless bickering later, Taiven finally led them all towards the nearby Dungeon entrance. There were guards stationed there but Taiven had a permit to go

in and could bring people with her, so they were free to pass. That was reassuring at least – it meant someone in the permit office considered Taiven capable enough to keep relative non-combatants like himself safe down there. Apparently she hadn't been talking completely out of her ass when she had said she could protect him.

The tunnels themselves were a lot less sinister than Zorian imagined, or at least this particular section was – smooth stone walls and nothing more threatening than rats wandering around. The stone covering the corridors reflected light pretty well, so the four floating lanterns they had hovering above them (Taiven insisted they all cast one and space them away from each other, so they wouldn't be immediately plunged into darkness on the off chance they encountered something that could dispel them) illuminated the tunnels quite nicely. Unfortunately, there was no sign of either the missing watch or the giant spiders. Taiven seemed to think it would be easy to track down the spiders with a simple 'locate creature' spell, and was stumped when the spell – and all other divinations she tried, for that matter – came out empty.

As it turned out, Taiven and her two friends were more than a little specialized in combat magic, and didn't have the faintest idea how to go about tracking down either the watch or the spiders once their rudimentary divination attempts failed. Eventually they settled on just wandering around, hoping they'd stumble on the spider's lair, occasionally repeating the divinations with no effect. After about 2 hours of that, Zorian was ready to call it quits. He was just about to suggest they give up and come back tomorrow, when he suddenly felt very, *very* sleepy.

Being a mage required a great deal of mental discipline – shaping mana correctly required focus and ability to visualize the desired result with crystal clarity. As such, all mages were, to an extent, resistant to mind magic and other effects targeting the mind. It was the only reason why Zorian was still awake and desperately

fighting the sleep spell, instead of collapsing on the ground in deep slumber. In front of him he saw Taiven and one of her friends sway on the spot as they tried to resist the spell as well, while the other boy already laid sprawled on the floor.

He struggled with the spell for a second or two, and then the sleep effect just... withdrew. Before he could do anything, he was forced on his knees by a stream of memories and images that bored themselves directly into his mind.

Confusion. A memory of him staring at a particularly baffling spell formula problem, tapping his pen against the table in frustration. An image of two floating balls of water connected by a collection of ever-shifting streams of water flowing from one orb to another. An alien memory of a war troll tearing through delicate white walls that seemed to be made solely out of cobwebs. A question.

[*Are you-*] the voice boomed in his mind, before collapsing into another psychedelic collection of images and alien memories. The deluge lessened for a moment, as if waiting for a response. Then it started again. Frustration. [*I thought-*] Brotherhood. Webs stretching across lightless chasms, orbs of light trapped within them. [*-don't understand me, do you?*] Sadness. Pity. More frustration. Resignation.

The flow of images abruptly stopped assaulting his mind. Zorian clutched his head to lessen the raging headache pulsing inside his head and looked around. Taiven and her two friends were unconscious, but appeared to be unharmed. There was no trace of their attacker anywhere. He tried to wake them up, but they wouldn't budge.

Deciding the best idea would be to get back to the surface before something decided to finish them off, Zorian promptly cast the floating disc spell and piled his three unconscious teammates on top of it before making a beeline towards the dungeon entrance.

He just hoped his head would stop killing him by tomorrow.



Zorian woke up very confused. A part of him was wondering what he was doing in a hospital, of all things, while another part was surprised he hadn't woken up back in Cirin with Kirielle wishing him a good morning, just like every time he started over. A few seconds later his mind cleared up and he remembered what had happened yesterday. He didn't start over because he hadn't died in the tunnels – he just had his mind scrambled. This was actually far more worrying than merely dying, since any damage to his mind carried over across restarts, but it would seem he didn't suffer any permanent damage.

He vaguely remembered the doctor concluding the same when he was brought in yesterday, before shoving him into this room and telling him to sleep it off. Some doctor. He didn't need a hospital for that. He wondered how Taiven and her two friends were faring – they had been still completely comatose when he had stumbled out of the Dungeon entrance and the guards had rushed them all to the nearest hospital.

"Finally awake I see," Ilsa's said from the doorway. "Do you feel up to talking or should I come back later?"

"Miss Zileti?" Zorian asked. "What are you doing here?"

"As our student, the Academy is obliged to represent you in legal matters," Ilsa said, approaching his bed. "This qualifies. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Zorian shrugged. He didn't even have a headache anymore. "I might as well go home once you finish questioning me."

"Questioning you?" Ilsa asked. "It sounds almost sinister, the way you say it. Why would I be questioning you?"

"Err, well..." Zorian fumbled. "The police tend to be hard-asses towards witnesses in my experience. Just in case they're hiding something and all that."

For a moment Zorian thought she would ask him where he got that kind of experience with the police, but she instead just shook her head and chuckled.

"Well I'm not the police," Ilsa said. "Though I did come to ask you what happened. Your friends don't remember anything substantial, having been hit with that sleep spell right at the start of the attack."

"Are they alright?" Zorian asked.

"Yes," Ilsa confirmed. "They woke up yesterday with no ill effects. Your injuries were far more serious, medically speaking." She gave him a wry smile. "I think it was their pride that was hurt the most. A third year resisted a spell they could not and saved their lives. Cyoria's Dungeon boundary is infamously... porous. If it weren't for you, they probably would have been dead by morning."

Zorian looked away uncomfortably. Is that why Taiven had never contacted him after that initial invitation to go with her at the start of each restart? He thought she was being callous.

How *did* he resist that sleep spell, though, if Taiven and her two friends didn't? And what happened afterwards... it hurt, and it was unpleasant, but he had a feeling it wasn't an attack. His attacker could have finished him off at any particular time but chose not to. The words, the images... it was as if something was trying to talk to him but didn't know how to communicate with humans properly.

Considering the number of webs in the alien memories he had been bombarded with, it was probably the spiders. He never heard of any sentient spiders with access to mind magic, though.

"I'm not really sure what happened," Zorian finally said. "After the sleep spell failed, I was immediately bombarded by a barrage

of images that almost made me black out. It was very painful and disorienting. After it stopped I tried to get my bearings to respond to further attacks, but after a minute or so I realized none were coming and decided to hightail out of there. I have no idea why the attackers stopped."

"Hmm," Ilsa hummed. "There are lots of possibilities. Maybe, instead of walking into a deliberate ambush, you simply stumbled upon someone who didn't want to be seen and they moved to incapacitate you so they could slip away unnoticed. Maybe someone left a spell trap in that section of the tunnels for whatever reason and you set off the trigger. Maybe you resisting two spells in a row intimidated them into leaving. We may never know, I guess."

Yes, all valid possibilities. It certainly wasn't giant sentient telepathic spiders, no sir!

"Oh and Zorian?" Ilsa continued. "You're forbidden from going down in the tunnels until further notice. I get that you wanted to help a friend, but it was still a foolish thing to do."

"Err, yes professor," Zorian agreed. "Understood."

10 minutes after Ilsa left the nurse came to tell him he could go home.



"This is boring!" Taiven complained.

Zorian cracked one of his eyes open so he could glare at her.

"You said you wanted to make it up to me," he reminded.

"But I meant teaching you some kickass spells, not..." she scowled at the bowl full of marbles in front of her. "...throwing marbles over your shoulders. Shouldn't I at least aim a couple at your forehead? I bet you'd be a lot more motivated to get it right that way."

"If you do that, I'm going to track you down to your room and suffocate you in your sleep," Zorian threatened heatedly. The

whole reason he was having her do this was so that he could practice this stupid trick without suffering through Xvim's methods.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. After a few seconds he felt the mana-charged marble pass in the vicinity of his face but couldn't pinpoint over which shoulder it flew.

"Left," he tried.

"No, right," Taiven. "Now you're just guessing, aren't you? Just give it a rest for today, you're not going to get anywhere once you get frustrated."

"No, I just need a couple of minutes to calm down," Zorian sighed. Taiven groaned in response and he opened both eyes so he could properly glare at her. "Why are you being so difficult about this, anyway? You know I can't ask anyone else to do this for me, right? I don't know anyone else who can aim their throws precisely enough, and none of them could keep charging marbles for more than half an hour without depleting their reserves."

"I know, I know," Taiven sighed. "And I'm glad you asked me for help. It's the least I could do after... well, you know. But you're not taking advantage of me properly!"

Zorian raised an eyebrow.

"Err, that came out wrong," Taiven chuckled nervously. "What I meant was: I can do much more than this. My accurate marble throwing skills aren't my only gift. I know I must seem pretty pathetic for getting knocked out by a single spell but come on!"

"I never thought of you as pathetic because of that, Taiven," Zorian sighed. "But alright. What can the great Taiven do for me?"

"Teach you how to fight, of course!" she grinned.

"The magical way, I hope," Zorian remarked warningly.

"You should never underestimate the usefulness of a fist to the face, even in a magical duel," Taiven grunted. "But yes, I meant the

magical way. Were you telling the truth when you told the old guy who hired us you can cast magic missile, shield and flamethrower?"

"Of course," Zorian said.

"Well, let's see them," Taiven said, waving towards a duo of dummies on the other side of the room.

"Err, won't your parents mind if I wreck their training dummies?" Zorian asked.

She rolled her eyes. "The whole reason I told you to come to my place was so we could train here. The whole room is warded, and those dummies especially. You won't even scratch them, trust me."

Shrugging, Zorian quickly cast a magic missile, shaping it into a piercer and weaving a homing function into it so it would hit the head of the dummy. The bolt of force sped across the room and struck the dummy square in the forehead. The faceless wooden head of the dummy bent backwards with the force of the blow in a manner that would snap a real human's neck in several places, but then promptly snapped back to its default position as if nothing was wrong.

"A decent magic missile," Taiven praised. "I like that you can cast one without a spell focus – I thought that would be the first thing I would have to teach you."

Her hands blurred in a dizzying display of skill, the chant spoken so softly he barely even heard it. A veritable swarm of magic missiles erupted from her hands, speeding towards the dummy with a lot more speed than Zorian's piercer had and impacting it with enough force to lift it off its feet and smash it into the wall behind it. Though they were simply smashers, Zorian knew they were a lot more dangerous than the piercer he had produced, even individually.

She didn't appear the slightest bit strained by the effort to produce the display.

"So was there any purpose for doing that, other than rubbing in how far beyond me you are?" Zorian inquired. "Firing that many magic missiles, even sequentially, would drain my reserves dry on the spot. I don't think I'll be repeating your feat any time soon."

"Err, really?" Taiven asked. "I guess I kind of assumed your mana reserves are huge, like your brothers'. How many magic missiles can you cast in one sitting?"

"11," Zorian said, pointedly ignoring her first remark. "It started out as 8, but I increased it somewhat."

"Eight!?" Taiven gaped. "But that's... practically below average!"

Zorian knew nothing good would come out of blowing up at her. It was Taiven. She didn't really think before speaking, and if you were bothered by that you had no business interacting with her.

"Does that mean you admit defeat and we should get back to the marbles?" he asked with deceptive cheer.

"No!" she shrieked. "No, I was... I was just surprised, that's all. I sort of wanted to teach you how to cast multiple magic missiles with one casting, but I suppose it wouldn't do you much good with such tiny mana reserves. You should make your every spell count instead of going for quantity. Show me your shield and flamethrower while I think of something."

After trying to burn a dummy to a crisp and failing, Zorian cast a quick shield, thinking just its existence would be enough of a proof for Taiven. Apparently not, as she immediately whipped out a spell rod out of her belt and fired a smallish purple projectile at the shield. Zorian's eyes widened at the unexpected attack, but the attack splashed harmlessly against the semi-transparent plane of force and dissipated into a puff of purple smoke that soon disappeared without a trace entirely.

"What the hell was that!?" Zorian demanded.

"I was just checking if the shield can hold," Taiven told him. "The spell is harmless, just a simple coloring bolt that carries some force to it."

Zorian wanted to tell her his shield held against a hostile mage that was actually trying to kill him, but he couldn't really do that. He settled on giving her an annoyed look.

Eventually, Taiven admitted she couldn't think of anything at the moment and reluctantly started throwing marbles over his shoulders again. She made it clear to him, however, that she would enlist help from her parents in the coming days, and that this way of training was a onetime thing. Zorian managed to negotiate at least an hour of marble throwing each session, in addition to whatever crazy scheme she would come up with eventually.

Truthfully, combat magic was only a side interest at the moment. He was starting to realize he couldn't keep blundering blindly through this. As much as he had wanted to advance his magical studies before finding the exit, he couldn't simply ignore the danger posed by the possibility of a soul bond – the longer he stayed inside, the bigger the chance of the bond activating in full force and devouring his will and personality. The mental assault he recently went through simply highlighted that the time loop had its own dangers, and that it was irresponsible to take them lightly.

A rough plan was forming in his head. He needed to find out everything he could about the time loop – how it came to be, how it functioned exactly, and how he could get out of it. Also, what was the nature of his connection to Zach? And what was the deal with the invasion – it seemed too conveniently timed to be a coincidence, so what was its connection with the time loop? Finding answers to those questions would require skills in divination, information gathering, and infiltration, so that's where the bulk of his efforts should focus on. He still intended to learn other things

too, of course, but these three things were a must and a priority.

He would have to finish his semi-apprenticeship in the library and learn all the tricks of that trade he could within the constraints of the time loop. The Academy library was an incredible resource to have, and he was sure he would have to use it extensively if he was to find answers to the questions that were plaguing him. So far his attempts to use it had not yielded much in the way of results, but that was probably a consequence of insufficient authorization and lack of research skill on his part than an actual void of information on the topics in question. He needed to know how to bypass the protections on the secure sections of the library, and how to search them efficiently once he got through, and Kirithishli and Ibery were his best shot in getting there. He would apply for the job in the library first thing tomorrow morning.

And, though it was too late for that in this particular restart, he should impress Ilsa again and choose divination as his interest this time. If Ilsa's choice was even half-way as motivated as Nora Boole was, he would have a particularly easy avenue on learning that otherwise tricky subject.

And then, as he was climbing the stairs inside his apartment building, everything went black and he woke up via Kiri jumping on him and wishing him good morning. Apparently Zach died again. Only a few days into the restart this time, too. Hopefully Zach would get the hang of whatever he was attempting very soon, because being wrenched without warning into another restart could get old really fast.

He would soon learn he should really stop tempting fate with such thoughts.

Chapter Thirteen

ANY SECOND NOW

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

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

Zorian growled as he roughly pushed Kirielle away from him. Fifth time! This was the fifth time the restart terminated after only a handful of days! How many times would Zach need to die before realizing he should back off for a while and try again later? Honestly, Zorian would have reconsidered his approach after the second attempt..

He snatched his glasses from his bed post and stomped off towards the bathroom before Kirielle could gather her wits. The short, irregular restarts were ruining every plan he cared to make, not to mention disrupting his concentration. He really couldn't do anything substantial while this was going on, other than browsing the library for helpful texts and hoping Zach would quit killing himself on a regular basis. What the hell was the boy trying to do anyway?

He shouldn't get so worked up over it, though – after all, how much longer could this possibly go on for? 10, 15 restarts?

Yeah. Yeah, that sounded about right...



"Hi Roach!"

Zorian wordlessly gestured for Taiven to come inside before slowly closing the door and shuffling after her. He could feel her impatience at his sluggish pace, but he paid it no heed. He was deliberately stalling, trying to decide what to do.

He fully intended to have a chat with the weird telepathic spiders that inhabited the sewers, but it would be lunacy to go there at this point. There was no guarantee they would be as friendly as they were the last time, and their mind magic made them dangerous even within a time loop. He needed a way to protect his mind before venturing into Cyoria's underworld, and so far he had only found one ward that protected the caster's mind in the academy archives. Unfortunately, that particular ward blocked *everything* related to the mind, mind-based communication spells included. He needed something more selective than that.

But just because he was unwilling to descend into the Dungeon didn't mean he was content to let Taiven get herself killed by going there either. He wasn't sure why he cared, exactly – pragmatically speaking, he shouldn't be bothered, since everything would be reset in a couple of days and she'd be fine again. Still, he *was* bothered, and since he was forced to have this conversation repeatedly every few days, he could as well find a way to talk her out of going.

He didn't think for a moment it was going to be easy. Taiven was possibly even more stubborn than Zach.

"So, Taiven, how is life treating you?" he began.

"Eh, so so," she sighed. "I am trying to secure an apprenticeship but it's not going all that well. You know how it goes. I got

Nirthak to take me as his class assistant this year, so there is that. You wouldn't happen to have taken non-magical combat as one of your electives?"

"Nope," Zorian answered cheerfully.

"Figures," Taiven rolled her eyes. "You really should have, you know? Girls-"

"...love boys who exercise, yes, yes," Nodded Zorian sagely. "Why are you here, Taiven? You tracked me down here even though I only moved in yesterday and never told anyone which room here is mine. I suppose you used a divination to find me?"

"Uh, yeah," Taiven confirmed. "Pretty easy thing to do, really."

"Aren't these rooms supposed to have some sort of basic warding scheme placed on them?" Zorian inquired.

"I'm pretty sure it's just rudimentary stuff like fire prevention and basic detection fields to warn the staff about fighting in the hallway and attempted demon summonings and what not," Taiven shrugged. "Anyway, I'm here to ask you to join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow."

Zorian said nothing, patiently listening as she said her sales pitch. It was actually on Monday, not tomorrow – Taiven's definition of 'tomorrow' differed greatly from the standard definition – but other than that, she was actually fairly honest in her explanation of the situation. She even mentioned that there was a small chance they might encounter something very nasty in there, but emphasized that she and her friends were totally capable of confronting anything they may find there. Right.

"Anything?" Asked Zorian suspiciously. "You know, I happen to have read up on magical spider breeds, and they can be pretty powerful. A single grey hunter has been known to wipe out entire hunting parties of mages, and they're no larger than a human at their biggest. Phase spiders can literally jump on you out of nowhere and drag you off into their own private pocket dimen-

sion. Some of the breeds are even sentient and have mind magic at their disposal.”

The last one was a joke in more ways than one. Dungeon ecology was a giant mystery, even to mages that specialized in it, and information about monsters that made their home there was very scarce. As such, it was probably not surprising that he could find nothing on sentient telepathic spiders in the academy library, even after conscripting Ibery and Kirithishli on the effort.

Was it just him, or was the academy library a lot less useful than he had imagined it to be? Every time he tried to find something there he got disappointed. Then again, the things he was trying to find information on lately tended to be obscure, borderline illegal or both.

“Oh please,” Taiven snorted dismissively. “Don’t be so paranoid. As if something like that could be right below Cyoria. We won’t be delving into the Dungeon’s depths, for Gods’ sake.”

“I don’t think you should go at all,” Zorian insisted. “I’m getting a really bad feeling about this.”

Taiven rolled her eyes, an undercurrent of annoyance in her voice. “Funny. I never took you for a superstitious guy.”

“Time changes people,” Zorian said solemnly, smiling at his private joke before straightening his features into a serious expression. “But seriously: I’m getting a *really* bad feeling about this. Is this really worth getting yourself killed over?”

Apparently this was a wrong approach to take, as Taiven’s temper flared immediately. He supposed she perceived his comment as an insult towards her skills as a mage. Before he could apologize and rephrase his argument she was already shouting at him.

“I’m not going to die!” Taiven shouted irritably. “Gods, you sound just like my father! I’m not a little girl and I don’t need to be protected! If you didn’t want to come you should have just said so instead of lecturing me!” She stomped off angrily, muttering to

herself about conceited brats and wasted time.

Zorian winced as Taiven slammed the door behind her. He wasn't sure why she had reacted so strongly to his words, but apparently pointing out the potential danger of the job was ineffective and only pissed her off.

Oh well, he didn't expect to succeed on the first try anyway.



"Hi Roach!"

"It is a good thing you came, Taiven," Zorian said with a grave expression. "Come in, we have much to talk about."

Taiven raised an eyebrow at his behavior before shrugging and sauntering inside. Zorian tried to project a serious, ominous presence about himself, but it seemed to amuse her more than anything.

"So... I gather you wanted to see me then?" she asked. "I guess you're lucky I decided to drop by, then?"

"Not quite," Zorian said. "I knew you would come today, just as I know you're here to conscript me into joining you for a sewer run."

"It's not a-" Taiven began, only to get interrupted by Zorian before she could gather steam.

"A sewer run," Zorian repeated. "Retrieving a pocket watch guarded by some very dangerous spiders from the top layer of the Dungeon under the city."

"Who told you that?" asked Taiven after several seconds of bewildered pause. "How could they possibly know? I told nobody where I'm going or why I'm visiting you."

"Nobody told me," Zorian said. "I had a vision about this meeting... and about what will happen should you descend into the tunnels."

Well, it *was* true in a way...

"A vision?" Taiven said incredulously, disbelievingly.

Zorian nodded gravely. "I have never told you this before, but I have prophetic powers. I receive visions of the future from time to time, seeing glimpses of important events that will affect me personally in the days ahead."

It wasn't completely implausible – people like that did exist in the world, though their powers were quite a bit more limited than what he had at his disposal thanks to the time loop. From what he understood, their visions were less of a detailed recording of the future and more of a general outline of some upcoming event. The future was always changing, always uncertain, and trying to get a clear image of it was like trying to grasp a fistful of sand – the more you squeeze, the more things slip past your fingers.

Unfortunately, while being prophetic was not impossible, Taiven clearly wasn't buying his claim.

"Oh really?" Taiven said challengingly, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "And what did this 'vision' of yours tell you about the job?"

"That it will be the death of you," said Zorian bluntly. "And me as well, should I choose to follow you down there. Please, Taiven, I know it sounds ridiculous, but I'm serious about this. The visions are rarely as clear as they were this time around. I won't go down into the sewers and you shouldn't either."

As seconds ticked past in silence, Zorian began to think she would actually listen to him. This impression was destroyed when she suddenly started laughing.

"Oh, Roach, you almost had me there!" she wheezed, breaking into uncontrollable chuckles after every couple of words. "Visions from the future... Roach, you have the funniest jokes. You know, I missed that quirky sense of humor of yours. Remember... remember that one time you pretended you were asking me out?"

How Zorian stopped himself from physically recoiling at that he would never know. She just had to mention that, didn't she? He forcefully pushed away the memories of that particular evening, determined not to dwell on it.

"Yeah," said Zorian emotionlessly. "What a funny guy I am."

Why was he trying to save her again?

"So..." she said, finally getting her giggles under control. "How *did* you know I was coming?"



"Hi R-" Taiven began, only to stop when she saw his vacant, hollow expression. "Whoa, Roach, what the hell happened to you?"

Zorian kept staring off into space for a few more moments before shaking his head, as if to clear his thoughts a little.

"Sorry," he said in a subdued voice, motioning her to get inside. "I just had an extremely vivid nightmare tonight and I didn't get much sleep."

"Oh?" Taiven said, collapsing on his bed like usual. "What about?"

Zorian gave her a long look. "Actually, you were in it."

Taiven stopped fooling around and gave him a shocked look. "Me!? Why the hell would I be in your nightmare? You'd think a beautiful girl like me would automatically make for a pleasant dream! Now I *got to* know what it was about."

"I was walking through the sewers with you and some other two guys I never met," began Zorian in a haunted tone, "when we were suddenly set upon by a swarm of giant spiders. There... there were so many of them... They just swarmed over us and started biting and..."

He took a couple of deep breaths, pretending to be on the verge of hyperventilating, before finally calming down.

"I'm sorry, it's just... it was so real, you know?" he said, giving Taiven the most vacant stare he had. After a few moments he looked down on his trembling hands and balled them up into fists in a very visible motion. "I'm sorry, it's just... it was so real, you know? The feeling of their fangs sinking into my skin, the poison coursing through my veins like liquid fire... they didn't even kill us in the end, they just wrapped us in spider silk and dragged our paralyzed bodies off to their lairs to feed upon later. Such a horrid, vivid vision – I don't think I'll ever look at a spider in the same light again."

Taiven shifted nervously where she sat, looking extremely uncomfortable and vaguely ill.

"But it was just a nightmare," Zorian said in forced cheer. "To what do I owe this visit, anyway? Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"N-No!" Taiven blurted out, a nervous laugh escaping her lips. "I just... I just stopped by to have a chat with one of my friends, that's all! How has life been treating you anyway? Aside from the whole... nightmare... thingy..."

She found an excuse to leave in a matter of minutes. He would later find out she went into the sewers anyway and never came back.



"Spiders?" asked Zorian, doing his best to appear alarmed. "Taiven, don't you listen to rumors from time to time?"

"Umm... I've been pretty busy lately," Taiven chuckled awkwardly. "Why, what do the rumors say?"

"That there are some mind magic using spiders prowling the city sewers," Zorian said. "Word is the city is trying to root them out, but the creatures are evading them thus far. They've been

trying to suppress the information, since it would make them look incompetent and all that."

"Wow, good thing I talked to you then," Taiven said. "I never would have thought to put a mind ward on myself before going down otherwise."

"You're still going down there!?" Zorian asked incredulously. "What makes you think this mind ward of yours is enough?"

"Mind magic is a subtle thing," Taiven said. "It uses tiny amounts of mana in very sophisticated ways, which makes it easy to counter with brute force. So long as you know in advance you're going to face a mind mage, it's easy to make yourself effectively immune. Trust me, now that I know what to expect from those crawlies, I won't fall for their tricks."

Zorian opened his mouth to protest, but then reconsidered. Was Taiven right? Maybe he was looking at things from the wrong perspective. He was trying to get Taiven to *survive*, which didn't necessarily mean stopping her from going into the sewers.

"I guess," he finally conceded. "But I won't be going with you."

"Oh, come on!" Taiven protested. "I can totally keep you safe!"

"Nope," Zorian insisted. "Not happening. Find someone else to go with you."

"How about-"

"No fighting," Zorian interrupted. "Look, there is no way to talk me into going along with this. Do tell me how the whole thing turns out afterwards, though. I don't want to have to check to see if you survived."

She actually did visit him a few days later, telling him the sewer run was a failure as far as finding the watch went, but that nothing attacked them either.

Huh. Maybe Benisek was onto something when he spoke so highly about the power of rumors and gossip.



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

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

"Good morning, Kiri!" yelled Zorian back, engulfing the shocked Kirielle into a hug. "Oh what a wonderful, wonderful day this is! Thank you for waking me up, Kiri, I really appreciate it! I don't know what I would do without my wonderful little sister."

Kiri wriggled uncomfortably in his grasp, not used to receiving such a gesture from him and unsure how to react.

"Who are you and what did you do to my brother!?" she finally demanded.

He just hugged her tighter.



"Something I can do for you, sonny?" asked Kyron. "The class has been dismissed, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yes, I've noticed," Zorian confirmed. "I just wanted your advice about something, if you can spare the time."

Kyron impatiently gestured him to get to the point.

"I was wondering if you knew any means of countering mind magic," Zorian said.

"Well, there is your basic mind shield spell," Kyron said carefully. "Most mages agree that's all you need as far as mind magic protection goes."

"Yes, but that spell is a bit... crude," Zorian said. "I'm looking for something more flexible than that."

"Crude, yes," Kyron agreed, suddenly becoming more interested in the conversation. "Often useless, too. A simple dispel is enough to strip the protection off the target, and a proper mind mage will ensnare your mind before you even realize you're being targeted."

"Then why do most mages think it suffices?" asked Zorian.

"You know why most mind magic is restricted or forbidden?" Kyron asked. It was a rhetorical question, apparently, because Kyron immediately launched into an explanation. "It's because it's most commonly used to target civilians and other mostly defenseless targets. Most mind mages are petty criminals that use their powers on the weak-willed, and cannot be called a master of anything, let alone mind magic. It's rare for mages to encounter mind mages that know how to use their powers properly. Still, even a moderately talented mind mage can easily ruin your life, to say nothing of magical creatures with mind-affecting powers on their disposal. There are methods of dealing with mind magic without resorting to warding spells, but most find it easier to practice mind shield until it's completely reflexive and they can cast it on a moment's notice. Or just carry a spell formula for the spell on their person at all times."

"And these other methods are?" Zorian prodded after he realized Kyron wouldn't say anything more.

Kyron gave him a nasty smile. "I'm glad you asked, sonny. See, not too long ago, the combat magic class had a much more demanding curriculum, including what was called 'resistance training'. Basically, the combat magic instructor would repeatedly cast various mind spells at students while they tried to fight off the effects. It was quite effective at making students innately resistant to common mind-affecting spells like sleep, paralyze, and dominate. Unfortunately, there were a lot of complaints from students who reacted particularly badly to it, and after a number of scandals where

teachers and student assistants were discovered to have been using the training exercise as an excuse to punish students outside of proper channels, the practice was discontinued. An overreaction in my opinion, but I was overruled."

Zorian stood in silence for a moment, trying to digest this information. Was that really the best way to deal with mind magic? He got what the idea behind it was – it worked on the same principle that shaping exercises and reflexive magic did, burning the defense procedures into his soul the same way repetitive movements burned certain reactions into muscle memory. It just sounded so... mindless. And probably very painful.

That's when he noticed Kyron was giving him a very predatory look.

"How about it, sonny?" Kyron asked. "You think you have what it takes to go through it? I've been wanting to revive the practice for some time now, to be honest. I promise I'll go easy on you."

He lied. The very first spell he cast on Zorian was the 'Nightmare Vision' spell. Whatever the spiders had to say, it better be worth it.



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

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

Zorian took a deep breath and focused on the image of what he wanted to achieve until it was so real he felt he could almost touch it. Billowing streams of mana erupted from his hands, invisible to

the naked eye but easily felt by his senses – a mage could always feel his own mana, especially while in the process of shaping it. In little more than a second, everything was ready and he set the effect loose on the little pest lying on top of him.

Nothing happened.

Zorian opened his eyes and let out a long frustrated hiss. This was no structured spell he had been attempting, but pure unstructured magic – specifically, he had been trying to levitate Kirielle off of him by using the basic levitation exercise. He knew such an attempt would be much harder to accomplish than levitating a simple pen over his palm, but *nothing*?

"That tickled," Kirielle said. "Were you trying to do something?"

Zorian narrowed his eyes at her. Okay, that? That was a challenge.



"What can I do for you, mister Kazinski?" Ilsa asked. "Normally I'd assume you are here to complain about Xvim, but you haven't even had a single session with him yet."

Zorian smiled brightly. That was the one bright spot in this series of short restarts – they always happened before Friday, so he didn't have to deal with Xvim while they lasted.

"Actually, I'm here to ask for advice on a personal project," Zorian said. "Do you know a training regimen that will allow me to lift a person telekinetically without casting a structured spell?"

Ilsa blinked in surprise. "As in, using pure shaping skill? Why would you ever have a need for that?"

"I sort of ran out of shaping exercises after mastering everything in Empatin's 'Expanded Basics'," said Zorian. "It seemed like an interesting project."

"All 15 of them?" Ilsa asked incredulously.

Instead of answering, Zorian decided to demonstrate. He picked up a particularly large and heavy book from Ilsa's table and made it spin in the air above his palm. Spinning a book like that was actually much harder than spinning a pen, because a book was a lot heavier than a pen and had a tendency to snap open unless a mage used magic to force the covers shut while it was being levitated. That particular trick was something he was taught by Ibery, of all people – she claimed that being able to keep a book shut while levitating it was a must-have for some of the spells she intended to teach him. Unfortunately, it took a couple of weeks for Ibery to warm up to him and decide to teach him seriously, and he didn't have that in these short restarts.

He made the book glow ominous red after a while. Using pure shaping skills to spin a book in the air while keeping it shut and making it glow with colored light was a pretty impressive showing from a third year, and should be ample evidence of his skills.

Ilsa took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair, obviously impressed.

"Well..." she said. "Your shaping skills certainly aren't lacking. Still, hovering a person without a spell is... not really something there is a manual on. Nobody does it, as far as I know. If they have a need for on-the-spot levitation, they just carry an appropriate focus on their person at all times. Rings, usually, since they're small and unobtrusive. I really would recommend you focus on something else if you want to hone your shaping skills further. The number of shaping exercises in existence is virtually endless, and the academy library has quite a collection of them. Stone crumbling and north finding exercises are extremely useful, for instance, but they're typically not taught to most students due to time constraints."

"Stone crumbling and north finding?" asked Zorian.

"Stone crumbling consists of placing a pebble on your palm and then causing it to disintegrate into dust. That's a flawless result, however, and most people are satisfied if they can get it to fall apart into sand-like grains. It's a useful exercise for those who plan to heavily focus on alteration spells, since the first step when restructuring matter is nearly always to break apart the existing state. North finding is an exercise for diviners, involving the use of a dummy compass to locate magnetic north. Those of sufficient skill don't even need the compass – they simply *feel* where the north is at all times."

"Those do sound useful," agreed Zorian. "I'll definitely try to learn those. Still, are you sure you can't help me with my people levitating problem?"

Ilsa gave him an annoyed look. "You're still not ready to give up on that? Why are so many talented students so intent on wasting their time on useless pranks?"

Zorian was about to object but then realized she was right. He was essentially trying to prank Kirielle. Ilsa reached out and snatched the book out of the air, causing Zorian to blink in surprise. He was still levitating it? After a second of introspection he realized that yes, he kept the book in the air throughout the entire exchange. He stopped spinning it and it no longer glowed, but apparently levitating an object over his palm was so easy for him now that he barely even registered doing it. Huh.

His pondering was cut off when Ilsa threw the book on the table where it hit the wood with a deafening boom. She smirked at his surprise and gestured him to pay attention.

"Like I said, there is no manual for this," she said. "And I never tried something so foolish, either. So keep in mind that this is all pure speculation on my part, alright?"

Zorian nodded eagerly.

"The first thing I would do if I were in your place would be to

stop relying on hands to levitate things,” Ilsa said. “Focusing the magic through your hands makes the process way easier, yes, but only for a certain category of tasks. In a very real way, levitating an object over your palm isn’t ‘true’ non-structured magic – the palm provides a reference point for the effect, which both guides it and limits it. If you mastered everything in Empatin’s book, you are familiar with fixed position levitation?”

Zorian took a pen from a box full of the next to him and made it float above his palm. After a second, he moved his hand left and right, but the pen remained hovering in the exact same spot in the air he left it in, stubbornly refusing to follow the movements of his hand.

“A flawless demonstration,” Ilsa praised. “But let me ask you this: does it not appear to you that fixed position levitation achieves its goal in a kind of convoluted, roundabout way? Why do you need an advanced shaping exercise to achieve something a simple levitate object spell can do as a matter of routine?”

Before he could answer, Ilsa reached out and twisted his palm sideways. The pen instantly fell to the table.

“Because using your hand as a reference point limits what you can do with the mana you’re shaping,” Ilsa said, leaning back. “Even though the pen appeared independent of your hand, it was only an illusion. A pretty baffling one too. Why would you bother? You basically put a limiter on the mana flow – making it dependent on the position of your palm – and then tried to subvert that very same limiter to decouple it from your palm.”

The book Ilsa threw on the table to catch his attention suddenly rose into the air. Ilsa didn’t make a single movement, but he knew she was responsible.

Not the least because she was grinning at him.

“Look,” she said. “No hands. Of course, this is just about the limit of what I can do without using any sort of gesture to help me

out with the shaping. It is a hard skill to learn, but you probably won't need it in its pure form simply for the sake of this 'project' of yours. You just need to reduce the degree to which your shaping depends on your hands and make it more flexible. Twisting your hand sideways shouldn't have caused the pen to plummet down like a rock."

"You just surprised me," Zorian huffed indignantly. "I don't usually lose control of my mana that easily."

"I stand by my words," Ilsa said with good-natured smile. "You are very impressive for a student, or even a regular mage, but you have a long way to go if you want to join the ranks of the truly great. But anyway, if and when you get some progress on that, you should try levitating some living being smaller than a human. *Much* smaller. Try insects for a start, then progress on mice and so on. All in all, it should only take you.. oh, about 4 years or so."

If she thought he would be discouraged by that, she was sorely mistaken. Not only did he have his doubts about the accuracy of her predicted timetable, he really didn't have anything better to do at the moment.

"I guess I better get started then," was all he said.



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

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

Zorian stared blankly at the ceiling above him, at a loss for words. That prediction he had made? He lost track of how many restarts had passed in the meantime, but the number was way bigger than 15. And nothing had changed since then – rare was a

restart that lasted more than 3 days, and none of them went on for more than 5. Whatever Zach was doing, it was lethally hard and Zach was too much of a stubborn ass to give up any time soon.

"Zorian? Are you alright? Come on, I didn't hit you that hard. Up, up."

Zorian ignored Kirielle who was currently pinching his side with ever increasing vigor, staring at the ceiling while suppressing so much as a twitch. The pain was negligible compared to a couple of particularly nasty pain spells Kyron used on him during one of their 'resistance training' sessions. Thankfully, Kyron never used any of them more than once per restart. Kirielle slapped him a few times and then pretended she was going to punch him in the face. When he didn't react to that, her fist stopped just before it would impact with his face.

"Umm... Zorian?" Kirielle said, actually sounding somewhat concerned. "Seriously, are you okay?"

Slowly, mechanically, Zorian turned his head to meet Kirielle's eyes, keeping his expression as blank as possible. After a few seconds of silent staring he slowly opened his mouth... and screamed at her. She recoiled at the sudden outburst and let out a girlish scream of her own as her retreat caused her to tumble off the bed.

He watched for a few moments as Kirielle began to turn red from rage, and then he could no longer restrain himself. He started laughing.

He kept laughing even as Kirielle's little fists started to rain down blows on him.



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

"Good m-"

With an inarticulate yell, Zorian flipped Kirielle on her back and mercilessly started tickling her. Her shrieks reverberated through the entire house until mother came up to his room and made him stop.



"Good morning, brother! Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

A short silence ensued, broken only by the rustling of Zorian's blankets as Kirielle shifted impatiently on top of them.

"Kiri," he finally said. "I think I'm starting to hate you."

He was exaggerating, of course, but gods was this becoming annoying as hell. Amusingly, Kirielle actually appeared concerned by his proclamation.

"I'm sorry!" she said, hurriedly wriggling herself off the bed. "I was just-"

"Woah, woah, woah," interrupted Zorian, fixing Kirielle with a mock glare. "My little sister apologizing? That doesn't happen. Who are you and what did you do to Kirielle?"

Kirielle's appeared dumbfounded for a moment, but her expression quickly grew stormy as she realized what he was implying.

"Jerk!" She huffed, childishly stomping her foot for emphasis. "I do too apologize! When I'm wrong!"

"When you're backed into a corner," corrected Zorian. "You must want some pretty big favor out of me if you're this desperate to remain in my good graces. What's the story?"

He really did want to know, too. She gave no indication she wanted something from him all those times he had been through this, yet it must be pretty important to her if she was willing to apologize to get it. That didn't make much sense – Kirielle wasn't

really a shy girl, and had no problems with making her wishes known in the past. For a moment he was tempted to conclude he misinterpreted the situation but then Kirielle looked away and started mumbling something intelligibly.

"What was that?" he prodded.

"Mother wants to talk to you," Kirielle said, still avoiding his eyes.

"Yeah, well, mother can wait," said Zorian. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what you want from me."

She pouted at him for a moment before taking a big breath in preparation.

"Please take me with you to Cyoria!" She said, folding her hands in front of her in a pleading gesture. "I've always wanted to go there and I don't want to go to Koth with mother and..."

Zorian tuned her out, shocked at the revelation. How could he have been so *blind*? He *knew* there was something strange about the ease with which he could convince mother not to make him take Kirielle with him, but he didn't want to question a favorable outcome and so ignored it. Of course it was easy... she didn't want him to take her either! It was Kirielle who wanted to go. Mother was just making a token attempt so she could tell Kirielle she tried and failed. No wonder Kirielle always seemed so sullen on the way to the train station.

"Zorian? Please?"

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and smiled at Kirielle, who was looking at him with bated breath and hope in her eyes. Now how could he say no to that? That it would ruin mother's schemes was simply a bonus.

"Of course I'll take you with me," he said.

"Really!?"

"So long as you behave y-"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Kirielle yelled happily, jumping around in excitement. He could never understand this boundless energy she had. He was never that exuberant, even as a child. "I knew you'd say yes! Mother said you'd refuse for sure."

Zorian looked away in embarrassment.

"Right," he said lamely. "Shows what she knows. Shall I assume then that you already have mother's permission for this plan?"

"Yeah," Kirielle confirmed. "She said she was fine with it so long as you agree."

Oh that diabolical woman... saying no but making him take the blame for it. Looking back at it, the plan was almost magnificent in execution – she even gave him a lecture on proper attire and family honor to put him into foul a mood before springing the question.

With a sigh he put on his glasses and got out of bed. "I'm going to the bathroom."

A second later his brain caught up with what he said and he froze. Looking back at Kirielle, he was surprised to see she wasn't trying to race him to his destination and was instead looking at him in confusion.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," Zorian said, before walking out of the room. He supposed the only reason she did that in your average restart was to make him confront mother as soon as possible. A poor move, since it only made him more annoyed at her, but she was only a kid and probably didn't think things through all that well.

It was going to be an interesting restart.

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