

New Eden 951

Chapter 951 Changing The Runes

The runic circle would indeed channel immense power into his soul, may haps allowing it to overpower the soul snare, but it seemed... forceful.

It was like trying to unlock a door by prying it open.

The spell, lacking finesse, was a volatile force, its power raw and unrefined. Killian couldn't shake the fear that David had gravely understated the pain it would inflict, a pain that could potentially shatter his very soul.

One thing that Killian knew for a fact about souls was that they were a fragile thing. And pushing too much power into it brought with it the danger of breaking it.

But Alex started grinning, which made David frown.

"What are you pulling a big dumb grin for?" David asked, worried.

"This spell, I think I can make it better," Alex replied, as runes started changing, mana oozing out of Alex.

The pressure of his mana grew, as the spell activated fully under his control.

But David was staring at the runes with fear.

"Hey! Stop it! You have no idea what you are doing!" David warned, trying to lock the runes into place.

But his mana was promptly erased by Alex's, which only made David tense up more.

"Alex, you are messing with a ritual that I barely know how to perform. Stop it. If you keep changing it, I won't be able to guide you through..." he claimed, his face showing visible worry.

But Alex was too focused on his tampering to care.

His mind was elated by all the knowledge that was pouring into it, as if the runes themselves were telling him what to do.

'Where does this knowledge come from?' he wondered.

And it was Sanguis who responded to his mental question.

'Those are divine runes. The divine shard held memories of them, memories which are now yours. I imagine it was all just stored away inside your mind until you accessed it.'

Alex winced slightly at the strange reverb in Sanguis' voice, but acknowledged his words.

'Convenient,' he simply responded.

But all this knowledge allowed him to do something he would have never imagined possible.

He rewrote the entire spell, the runic circle changing, expanding, and glowing with more and more power.

By the time he was done tampering with it, the circle had almost reached the edge of the cargo hold, and David could barely recognize it.

Killian looked at the runes, his eyes wide. Most of them, which he had recognized, had now changed, and he couldn't make heads or tails of their function.

But one thing was certain. He could tell by the flow of the mana inside the runes.

This spell was a lot more refined.

Once Alex was satisfied with his handiwork, he infused the runes with a hefty dose of his mana, to the point where it almost condensed into Aether, and the spell activated.

Killian jolted in pain as his body seized up, throwing his head back, a silent scream escaping his throat, as the air refused to go past his larynx.

His body floated up slightly as it reclined back, sending him into a position parallel to the plane floor, as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Already, heavy beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, as the physical toll on his body began to exacerbate.

But Alex was too focused to notice.

He was already entering Killian's mental space by force and looking at his soul with a grin.

"Hah. Child's play," he scoffed, looking at the soul snare.

What had looked like a terribly complex thing earlier now looked like it had been done by a kid learning binding magic.

He walked toward the soul; the thorns lashing out at him.

Soul snares were always made with defences to the soul itself, which was a precaution the casters set into them, in case another mage tried to torture the snared being through his soul.

The snare would then protect the person afflicted by it, making sure no information was revealed. If it couldn't protect them, then its second function would activate.

Which was what was currently happening, after the first bramble smacked into Alex's mana barrier, turning it to ash.

The brambles around Killian's soul started constricting in on it, slowly poking their thorns into the soul.

On the outside, David watched as Killian started bleeding from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears before a scream of pain escaped Killian's lips, the wail attracting attention at the front of the plane.

Kary stepped in front of the doorway, peeking into the cargo hold, and saw Killian's floating body, blood trickling down his face, and David looking at him worriedly.

"Everything alright?" she asked.

"I... I don't know. Alex did something to the ritual. I can't even tell what he's doing to him right now..." David muttered.

Kary sighed, almost as if she had expected this to happen.

"I'll make sure the kids don't come close. Contain the mana, though. The plane started shaking a moment ago, and it's worrying them," she said, closing the cargo hold door.

David hadn't even noticed the shaking, as his mind was reeling from Alex's reckless actions. But now that she pointed it out, he realized the turbulences were only getting stronger.

"The mana must be affecting the air outside, forming a pocket around the plane... Can I even contain his mana, though?" he questioned.

He shrugged. It wasn't time to hesitate.

Since he couldn't guide Alex through the ritual anymore, he might as well ensure the rest of them stayed safe.

Extending his senses outside the plane, David reached to the edge of the expanding mana bubble, and started pushing back on it with his own.

It was an arduous process, but he managed to push it back into the confines of the cargo hold, at least for now.

He wasn't sure he could hold for long, though.

And if this ritual took anything close to how long his would have taken, then there was no way he would hold on that long.

"At least, I hope whatever you did makes it swifter... The longer this goes on, the more risk Killian is in, and the more risk we are, with your monstrous mana trying to push us out of the sky..."

Chapter 952 A Being Long Thought Dead

The brambles wrapping around Killian's soul were writhing erratically as Alex started pulling at them, one by one, and tearing them asunder.

The defence mechanism even reactivated, as the spell felt it was being torn apart.

With more and more vines lashing at him, Alex frowned.

"This spell... It's far more intricate than it appears. Who could have crafted such a thing?" Alex mused, his voice tinged with a mix of curiosity and concern.

But he couldn't take the time to ponder. The snare was already dangerously close to crushing Killian's soul.

Alex was only here to ensure his rune circle could function, though. He had reacted to the attacks, but he didn't need to be in here at all.

With a motion of pulling, Alex drew the circle into Killian's mind space, where it snapped onto the walls, before pulsing with mana.

The brambles shook and writhed as they started burning away increasingly fast. Alex could see the soul was bleeding energy through the gaps, and he extended his hand toward it.

He managed to hold on to the bleeding soul essence, buying himself some time, as the snare was slowly being burned away.

But as the soul snare burned away, the energy contained in the vines amassed over Killian's soul.

Alex looked at the smoke, and a frown appeared on his face.

"This isn't something a normal human can do. Show yourself, whoever you are," he said, locking his eyes on the smoke.

There was a moment of silence before the smoke shaped itself into a head, a face with sharp features morphing into it.

"Who are you, and why are you trying to break my hold on my descendant?" a baritone voice boomed.

Alex smirked at the face, which had no colour to it, aside from the black of the smoke.

But some traits were unmistakable.

A glowing pattern shimmered through the dark smoke in the left pupil of the smoke face, and Alex grinned.

"So that is who you are, sorcerer," Alex said, recognizing the symbol.

Long ago, he had seen it in a fable when his mother still read him stories before bed.

"Answer my question, human," the smoke face repeated.

It was pressed for time, as it felt its hold on Killian's soul diminish by the second.

At a single glance, the face in the smoke realized that the runes on the inside of his descendant's mind were way past an average caster's reach.

As it focused its eyes on the human again, it realized that he was now much closer, floating in front of his face.

"Here, let me make this easier for you," Alex said, stabbing his hand into the glowing sigil in the left eye.

Instantly, Alex's vision swam, and he entered another mind space, this one much more filled.

One could even say it was cluttered...

The mind space was an echo of a study, with books lining the walls higher than the eye could see, and garnishing the floor, making it almost impassable.

And at the end of the study, in a lavish chair, with red velvet and golden trims, an old man glared at Alex, a crystal ball still shimmering before him.

"How did you get inside my head, young man?" he growled, his face a mask of anger and distrust.

"You aren't the only one who can connect to minds and souls, old man. But I am surprised you aren't just a memory, an echo of a distant past. To think the great sorcerer would dabble in magicks as dark as possession," Alex said, walking toward the old man.

The old man frowned, as his interlocutor grasped concepts that no other mage besides him should know—at least not on Earth.

"How do you know who I am?" the old man asked, fear creeping up in his heart.

If he were discovered now, after so long of existing, his prestige would wane, and his legend would be spun into a dark tale. He couldn't afford that.

Not now, as the world teemed with an energy that could make his life goal a possibility.

"Who I am doesn't matter. On the other hand, who you are is a much more interesting subject. I wonder how many would pay to know that the great Merlin still lives. And how many would rejoice at the thought of taking you down themselves, given you sully the legend of your name, Merin Ambrosius, or rather, Myrddin Emrys?"

The old man jolted to his feet, a great staff appearing in his hand, as it glowed with power.

"I know not who or what you are, and how you know all you know. But I cannot let you leave here alive," the old man scowled, as thorns of pitch black shot out of his staff.

But they hit nothing, as Alex reappeared next to the old man, forcing him into his chair with a shove.

The old man was almost immediately reminded of a reality that he hadn't experienced since his last fight against the dark witch.

If someone could enter your mind, it meant they were, at the very least, as powerful as you...

"Sit down, Merlin. I didn't come here to fight you. Only to talk," Alex said, smirking at the old man.

Contrary to how the legends depicted him, with long flowing robes and a beard that almost reached his feet, the Merlin before him looked a lot sleeker.

His short trimmed beard, and business-cut suit, seldom made him look like a sorcerer. He resembled more like someone in Jack's entourage than a sorcerer of old Britain.

His pearl-white hair and beard almost flickered with the fireplace flames to his left, as he glared at Alex.

Alex looked into his eyes and knew he wasn't facing an imitation or a doppelgänger.

This was the real Merlin.

Merlin's family crest was glowing in golden light in his left pupil, as the other eye, steel grey, was almost too plain in comparison.

Alex sat on a pile of books across the small coffee table in front of Merlin's chair, on which the crystal ball rested.

"Now, tell me. Why are you still alive? And why are you tormenting your descendants like this, you remnant of a time that should be lost?"

Chapter 953 In Need Of Blood

Aboard the aircraft, Killian's body had crashed back onto the cold, metallic ground, as his eyes were still in the back of his head, passed out from pain.

David was sweating profusely, but he could finally relax from his life's most challenging two minutes.

With the ritual seemingly done and Alex's mana returned to himself, David breathed in relief. Holding back Alexander's mana pressure had not been easy.

David could tell the ritual had succeeded at a glance, as the soul snare was gone. And he could even see that Killian's soul seemed otherwise intact.

This was a fortunate development, given the vicious nature of soul-snaring spells. But something still felt wrong.

He looked at Alex, whose eyes were still closed, and could feel a tether of mana leaving from him, and going back toward the ground, in the direction of where they had just left.

'Is he astral projecting?' David wondered.

Seeing as Alex wasn't moving from his position, it confirmed his thought. But where could he be projecting to?

And why now, of all times?

Those were questions he would have to ask him later, when he was back. But, for now, he needed to make sure Killian was ok.

Even if his soul looked fine at first glance, that didn't mean his body was. And the blood on the ground under him attested to that.

Getting to his feet, David rushed to the cargo hold door, sliding it open, only to end up facing Kary's back.

Hearing the door slide open, she turned her head slightly to get David in the corner of her eye before she snapped her head back forward.

In front of her, Cory was looking at her with supplicant eyes.

"Come on, Kary. Let me through. There is no way that he is okay after screaming in pain like that. Let me go check on him."

Kary was about to tell him off for the fourth time already when David put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright. We are done. And I do need him, anyway. Just to make sure Killian is okay."

Kary clicked her tongue, annoyed that she was now forced to back off.

The adolescent had refused to obey her, even after she threatened to leave him stranded in China, and now David needed him, making all her threats useless.

"Fine. But you and I will talk later, Cory," Kary scowled.

Cory nodded his head, gulping his saliva dryly, before she stepped aside and let him through.

Cory almost pushed past David, and saw Killian on the ground, with blood all over his face and under his head.

"The hell did you do to him?!" he exclaimed, throwing himself to Killian's side as his hands lit up in a golden glow.

"Believe it or not, that was the snare's doing. We actually saved him from far worse," David said, trying to sound like he was the good guy.

Cory seemed unconvinced, but had no time to care.

Through his healing, he could feel that Killian was in extreme blood deficiency, which he could not fix. At best, on this side of the veil, he could boost the natural regeneration of blood.

But it remained a precarious situation.

"I think he needs a blood transfusion. He lost so much blood..." Cory said, looking at the small puddle under his head.

"We can try to get some blood delivered to us at the airport in China. For now, you'll have to stay with him and keep him alive with magic. Can you do that?" David said, looking at Cory with confidence.

"I'll do my best," the boy replied.

David nodded, satisfied with his answer.

"In the meantime, I need to rest a bit. We shouldn't be too long before we reach China, so I'll take a nap until then. Wake me up when we get there, or when Alex returns," David said, thumping down on a pile of brown covers.

Those were usually supposed to be over the crates, but he had used them to make himself a makeshift bed at the start of the flight, and now he was glad he had done so.

Cory frowned at his words.

"Wait, returned? He's right there," Cory said, pointing at Alex, who was still unmoving.

But David was already passed out, exhausted.

Kary was looking inside the cargo hold, heard every word of their conversation, and was about to head to the pilot's cabin, to have the major reach out to Jack or Alfred, so they could have the blood they needed at their next stop, when she heard David's last words.

She halted, turning back to the cabin, and noticed Alex was still sitting on the ground, eyes closed.

Extending her mana senses to him, she felt the same tether David had felt, and frowned.

'What is he doing?' she wondered.

But, since there was no answer to be had from David, who was already passed out, or from Alexander, who wasn't in his body at the moment, there was nothing she could do about it.

She would wait until he returned to his body and ask then.

In the meantime, she had the major contact Alfred, who promised to arrange a medical delivery of blood for Killian to the hangar where they would refuel.

He didn't press for a reason, or didn't seem to care about it, and the communication ended as fast as it started.

On the other hand, the major looked at Kary with a strange gaze.

"Did someone get stabbed over there? Why do you need a blood transfusion?" she asked, feeling concerned.

"Nothing of the sort, Major. A slight mishap happened, and one of our teammates had a bad nosebleed. And since he suffers from a rare genetic disease, his blood is super thin," Kary lied.

"Is he ok? Do we need to land so he can go to the hospital?" the pilot asked, slight worry flashing across her face.

"No need, Major. We got the bleeding under control, but they are feeling quite faint. The blood transfusion is just a precaution."

The major nodded her head, none the wiser, before Kary left the cockpit. She didn't like lying much, but it was better if the woman stayed in the dark, at least for now.

'Let's just hope he doesn't die on us before then...'

Chapter 954 Howard Owens The Third

Amidst the chaos, Alex's thoughts were a world away, trespassing into the depths of another man's mind.

Howard Owens, a man of great influence, found himself in the midst of a crucial meeting with the English prime minister, when a peculiar sensation jolted his thoughts.

He recognized the familiar sensation of someone attempting to wrest one of his soul-snared acolytes from his control and was prepared to dismiss it when the sensation took an unexpected turn.

The usual response from the soul snare was enough to shatter all the attempts, normally. But this time, it was different.

When the first tether broke inside Killian, Howard instantly knew.

"I'm sorry, Prime Minister. Could I reconvene with you at a later date? Something urgent has come up, and I must deal with it personally," he apologized.

Given the world's situation, the prime minister took no offence at being set as a second priority. He could seldom offend one of the few people who could actually help the ordinary folks with it.

"Of course, Exarch Owens. Just set another appointment with my assistant once you are free, and I'll make time for you. I hope whatever came up isn't too bad?" the Prime Minister said, trying to glean information.

But the Exarch didn't bother replying, as he cut the call immediately.

Clicking his tongue angrily, the Prime Minister ordered his assistant to keep him apprised of the Merlineans' movements before delving into other tasks that needed his attention.

He was a very busy man with the many countries that wanted England's help with the monster uprising. After all, he needed to get all those countries to build adequate offices for the Merlineans to settle in.

However, Howard was a difficult man, and he wanted only the best for his organization, making it an arduous task.

"This man is asking for too much, in this time of crisis. He should know better than to exact demands in a situation like this," the Prime Minister grumbled to himself.

Meanwhile, Howard had already left his office and was heading deeper inside the family castle, located far up in the Wales countryside.

After reaching a seemingly innocuous corridor, he stopped at an old painting of one of their most prestigious ancestors, which was kept lit at all times of the day.

The portrait of an old man, whose long flowing beard and expensive-looking silken robes exuded a sense of great wisdom, with the name Myrddin Emrys carved in the frame.

The torches on each side, a remnant of a time without electricity, were kept dust-free by the castle's maids and manservants, all in the vanity of reminding everyone of their great ancestral background.

After bowing to the portrait, and making sure he was alone in the hallway, Howard pulled the torch to the right down, as a loud click echoed.

It was promptly followed by a slight shaking of the wall and ground, before some loud cogs ground behind the wall, and it slid open to the left.

Howard pushed the torch back upright, before shuffling in the already-closing gap in the wall.

With a snap of his fingers, old torches lit his path forward and down, lighting up one set after another almost ominously, as Howard quickened his stride down the path.

He could feel the tethers to his soul snare snapping one after another, and had already focused his mind on making the bramble defence more aggressive. But he could tell it was in vain.

Whoever this mage was, he was much stronger than what the defences could deal with, at least without his direct control.

Reaching the end of the path, he entered a cave deep under the castle. Five pillars supported the ceiling, placed in a pentagonal shape around a raised altar.

On this altar, a bright blue orb was seated.

Almost dashing to the orb, Howard slapped his hands on it.

"Pro viribus Merlini, vires praebe mihi tuas!" he chanted, before his eyes lit like beacons with powerful blue flames.

This was the exact moment his face had appeared in the smoke made by the burning brambles.

And even minutes later, as this other magus invaded his mind, he still stood before the altar, his hands upon the glowing blue orb, and his eyes burning in bright blue fire.

Merlin and Alex had been staring each other down for the last minute or so, their mana pressures grinding against each other, as Alexander tried his best not to give his hand away.

But Merlin was no joke of a sorcerer, and for someone to even rival his magical prowess was astounding to him.

He knew that some monsters around the world were his equals, at best, but this young man was standing before him, unwavering and strong, like this was just him standing his ground.

Somewhere in the corner of this fantastical study, filled with grimoires and books on occult sciences, Howard Owens the third's mind was silently watching as his ancestors dealt with this intruder inside their head.

He wasn't a prisoner of Merlin's influence, contrary to what Alexander thought, but more of a co-owner of the place.

It was a mutually accepted pact, that all Exarchs accepted, when they were picked to wear the mantle, to let Merlin's mind inhabit their own, as a continuance of his legacy.

Of course, most of his power was locked inside the orb he was currently holding, but it nonetheless made the Exarchs very powerful mages.

Alex was the first to get tired of this constant pissing contest, and he decided to let go of his ego first.

Recalling his mana pressure, he let Merlin's mana slam into him, as it barely ruffled his hair, making him chortle. He passed his hand in his hair, straightening it up again, and grinned at the sorcerer.

"So. Are we going to have this talk, or would you rather we duke it out inside your little brain? Because I doubt that would be the best for you," Alex mocked, looking at the mountains of books everywhere, and the bookshelves that disappeared above head.

This young man's arrogance ticked off Merlin, but the power he displayed was such that he couldn't just blast him away from here.

Retracting his power, which had little to no effect on the kid, Merlin sighed exasperatedly, before eying the intruder with a severe gaze.

"Fine. Talk. But the moment you sound too annoying to me, I'm flushing you out."

Chapter 955 Making Demands

Alex kept himself from replying that he would like to see him try. He had questions he wanted to ask before he started antagonizing him again.

"Would you mind giving me an actual seat instead of me sitting on these books? It's not that I'm not comfortable, but I doubt you want me to damage them," Alex said, pointing under him.

Merlin nodded, his face still stern, and as soon as Alex lifted his ass, he waved his hand at him, pushing the books away carefully, before a bland-looking brown wooden chair appeared in their stead.

Alex looked at the uncomfortable seat and chuckled.

"Sure. That'll do."

He sat on the chair, looking at Merlin with a shit-eating grin.

"Now, as I was saying earlier, what are you doing still alive, Merlin? Forcing yourself upon your descendants is a far cry from the righteous front your legend says you upheld."

"Child, speak not of matters you know nothing about. I am not forcing myself upon anyone. Each Exarch chooses to let me in of their own free will. And I don't push them out of their bodies, either. Howard is still somewhere in here, probably waiting for you to leave."

Alex looked around with a curious gaze, but he couldn't sense the other mind. It didn't help that he was an unwelcome guest inside this man's head, though.

"Whatever you say. But that doesn't explain the soul snaring. Seems a bit of an excessive measure to take on people under you, no?" Alex asked, trying to look outraged.

But his acting skills were less than adequate, and Merlin looked unfazed.

"Do not presume to understand my motives, young one. I have lived almost a thousand years, and your mind could not begin to comprehend the dangers humanity has faced in the shadows before you were even a drop in your father's sac."

Alex snorted at the comment.

"Wow. If the historians knew you had a foul mouth like this, I wonder if your legend would have caught on as it did," he chuckled.

"Enough taunting and verbal scrimmage. What do you want?" Merlin snapped, pulsing his mana out again.

Alex felt his mind tug slightly backwards, as he was almost expelled, being caught off guard.

He could feel his body getting further and further, and the connection between them was slowly becoming tenuous. He couldn't play around too long before his mind retracted on its own.

He wasn't a telepath, after all. Already, making it this far out of his own body was a feat he hadn't expected to accomplish.

"Fine. No more messing around. I am already breaking the soul snare on Killian, and I want it to stay this way. He is a friend and ally, and I don't want a third party to mess around in his mind if I am to trust him," Alex said, his face becoming serious.

"And why would I do that? Who are you to make demands of me?" Merlin replied, his face turning into an arrogant grimace.

Alex's grin widened.

"I'm the man who will soon start shaking up the truths of power this world thinks it has established. All the hidden old beasts of the world are about to have a run for their money, as I upset the balance in power," Alex arrogantly answered.

Merlin wanted to laugh him off, but he kept himself serious. Even if he thought it was erroneous that a child could upset the balance of power already established, this young man had already done something he thought impossible.

"Those are big words, coming from such a young person. Do you think that balance you seek to upset is so easily perturbed?" Merlin asked.

But Alex only grinned back at him.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough. In the meantime, stay out of Killian's mind. If you try to snare him again, I'll come after you, physically this time," Alex threatened, before he retracted his mind.

Merlin looked at the chair, his gaze hardening.

"Howard, I know you are watching. Come here."

A moment later, Howard's form phased out of a nearby bookshelf, and he bowed to the old man.

They didn't look too distant in age, on appearances alone, as Howard was already a little past his sixties, and Merlin had died looking still the age of sixty, although he had reached almost four centuries past that.

"Yes, venerable ancestor," Howard said.

Looking at him, Merlin couldn't help but think this man was one of his most reliable descendants yet.

Throughout the thousands of years he had been dead, all his descendants and the Exarchs he had resided inside of had come nowhere near his level of smarts.

Howard was an astute man, in both business and magical arts, and he had managed to unlock the highest potential within himself that the Merlineans had seen in a long time.

With his business smarts, he had managed to make the ancestral fortune flourish like no one before him, enabling their family to hold a position in today's society that had been long since lost.

If it wasn't that the natural magic of the world had waned so much over the last millennia, Merlin was almost sure that Howard could have reached close to his height in power at that same age.

"What do you think of this young man? You keep tabs on people of potential around the world. Did he seem like one of your potential powerhouses?" Merlin asked, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Howard sat on the chair before Merlin, scratching his chin for a bit.

"I think I saw him in a report a little while back. Something about displaying strange powers. We thought he might be a lycanthrope, given he was shifting into a beast-like entity.

"At first, we thought we might have let a family of lycans slip through the net during the great hunt, and that they might have moved overseas. But with further digging, we couldn't find any other like him. So we ruled out lycanthrope," Howard said, thinking back to the report.

"A shifter, then?" Merlin asked, looking slightly confused.

"We ruled that out as well. He maintains the same appearance the rest of the time, making him unlikely to be a shifter. After all, they can't stand wearing the same skin too long."

Merlin sighed tiredly.

"Do you think his threats hold any weight?"

Howard's face became glum.

"Very much so, venerable Merlin. He has already killed many, and we fear his actual kill count may be higher than what we can confirm. He is already marked as a level-three threat."

Merlin's face darkened.

"Mark him level five, but note him as 'keep tabs.' I don't want us to conflict with him just yet. Making a powerful enemy at this moment is not in our best interest."

Howard bowed, before he retracted from the mind space and returned to his body.

As Merlin was left alone, he sighed again, looking dejected.

"What in the gods has been unleashed upon our world? Where do all these monsters come from, and why are more powerful people being born? Is the world really ending?" he mumbled.

His gaze went to a scroll in a corner, which was unrolled and displayed inside a glass case.

'Let's hope they were just the ravings of a crazed woman on death's door...'

Chapter 956 David's Scolding

As Alex's mind snapped back toward his body, it quickly flashed through the skies, giving a very brief but detailed view of a castle which sat on the edge of a cliff near the ocean.

As his vision kept pulling him away, he saw the landmass shrink, until it looked like an island, just off the coast of Europe, and Alex memorized its position.

'Don't fuck with my plans, Merlin. I have enough enemies as it is,' Alex thought, as clouds flew past him, and he accelerated away.

Soon enough, he was back inside his body, taking a deep breath in, as his body had been in a semi-catatonic state, still sitting cross-legged on the cargo hold floor.

The first thing he noticed was Killian's unconscious body before him, basking in a golden white glow, with Cory hovering over him, sweating bullets.

His eyes blinked a few times, as the light was slightly blinding him.

"What happened to him?" Alex asked, making Cory jump in surprise.

"Holy shit, bro! Don't scare me like that," Cory said, his spell blinking a bit before it stabilized again.

But it was David who responded to Alex's question.

"It was you that happened to him. Whatever you did to the spell, it transferred some of the pain to his body from within. He lost a lot of blood, and we need a transfusion once we hit the ground in China."

David sounded pissed, and Alex frowned at his tone.

"The modifications I did shouldn't have done that..." he mumbled, falling into thought.

Alex heard footsteps getting near him, and as he lifted his head, he was unable to react in time before David's fist cocked him in the jaw.

Alex's face was pushed back, as mana infused the strike, and David took the opportunity to push him to his back and climb over him, grabbing him by the collar.

The anger on his face surprised Alex, given David had never appreciated Killian that much, at least to his knowledge.

"How would you even know?!" David shouted in his face, holding his collar in his grasp.

"Excuse me?" Alex asked, confused.

"How would you even know what your modifications did, you fucking moron? You didn't know the spell until I showed you, and suddenly you're an expert in soul rituals? You're full of shit!"

Alex's face became stony.

"David, get off me. I wouldn't have modified the ritual if I didn't know what I was doing," he said coldly.

"No! You took a risk with someone's life, and that is unacceptable! We are not gods! When we start playing around with other's lives, that is when we become no better than them!" David shouted at him, his face red with anger.

"Guys, please don't fight," Cory asked, feeling the tension rising.

He was getting nervous.

With how Alex's mana had affected the plane earlier, he didn't dare imagine what a fight between these two would cause. It was safe to assume they wouldn't make it to China, that much was certain.

Alex sighed, trying his best to calm down.

"I didn't take a risk, David. I can't explain why I knew what I knew, but the moment the runes started making sense, my knowledge of them expanded exponentially, until the spell looked unrefined to me, to the point I couldn't stand it.

"I modified it to make it safer. I doubt the damage to Killian's body is because of my modifications, and the chances are, the soul snare caused the damage before it completely broke. Now get off of me. Please."

David glared at him, unsure if he was telling the truth or just bullshitting his way out of a scolding.

But Cory was right. Fighting was not an option right now.

Standing up and off of Alex, David leered at him again.

"If he dies, this is on you," he spat.

Alex sat up, nodding at him.

Of course, he would take responsibility. Even if he was sure this wasn't his fault.

But now was not the time.

"Do you know how long we have until we land in China?" Alex asked Cory.

"Maybe an hour?" Cory replied, seemingly uncertain.

Time had felt like it was crawling forward since he was forced to keep a healing spell active constantly for Killian.

Alex frowned.

"How is that even possible? We just left London..."

David scoffed from the far end of the cargo hold.

"We've been in the air for almost four hours, you dumbass. I'm surprised you can even feel your legs after being seated like that for so long."

Alex looked at him in confusion.

Looking at his legs, he noticed that they indeed felt numb. He could barely tell they were there at all.

"How? I was only gone for a few minutes," Alex said, frowning deeper.

"No, you weren't. You were sitting there for this entire time, your face stuck in a shit-eating grin, like you were having fun pissing someone off. But it has been almost four hours."

Alex scratched his chin, wondering what had caused him to time-lapse like that.

"Maybe the time inside Merlin's mind is slowed down?" he mumbled to himself.

David's sharp hearing heard the words, and his face dropped.

"I'm sorry. Did you say Merlin's mind?" he asked, his face changing from anger to stupefaction.

"Hm?" Alex hummed, turning his head toward him.

"Yeah, I said Merlin. That's where I was. But it's strange. To me, it seemed like minutes, at most," he added.

David took a moment before replying to Alex.

"Merlin has been dead for almost a thousand years, Alex. Are you sure you didn't get your mind muddled by Killian's father?"

Alex could see the perplexed expression on David's face.

"Yeah, about that..." he replied, scratching the back of his head.

David's heart skipped a beat as he imagined the implications of what he thought Alex was about to say.

"It seems Merlin isn't exactly dead. At least not in the complete sense of the word. I'm not sure why he kept himself alive all this time, but he is absolutely still of this world."

Chapter 957 A Little Game

David didn't know if he could believe him or not. After all, Merlin was a myth.

A legend told in books of an all-powerful sorcerer that existed in the Middle Ages. But, by all accounts, he was just that.

A legend.

"Tell me m—No. You know what? One thing at a time," David started saying, only to cut himself off.

What was the point of putting more things on his plate now? He already had his hands full.

Alex chuckled to himself, as he could imagine what was going on inside David's mind.

"Once we've triumphed over the harpies, and embarked on our journey to meet Zhong Kui, we can turn our attention to the enigmatic Merlin and his secretive Merlineans. But for now, our hands are full with the present challenges," he said, echoing David's thoughts.

David nodded, his previous anger dissipating as he fell into deep thought.

Seeing this, Alex didn't want to disturb him, so he decided to go back to the passenger cabin. But before leaving, he glanced over at Cory and noticed he was very pale and shivering all over.

He could tell from the mana withering inside him, through his perfect mana senses, that Cory was close to collapsing.

It didn't help that the environment wasn't ideal, either, which was probably draining some of his mana just to resist the cold.

Alex rummaged around, finding emergency blankets in a stowage bin to the side, and wrapped Cory's shoulders in it, before pushing a bit of his mana inside the kid.

The mana wasn't exactly compatible, but, given a bit of time, Cory's body would be able to purify it into its own. And with the blanket now keeping him warm, he wouldn't have to expend as much to keep himself from freezing to death.

"Thank you," Cory said, feeling the blanket warm him up.

"Hang in there, buddy. Once we land in China, you can rest for the rest of the trip."

Cory nodded, feeling renewed vigour inside him, as he now had a goal to look forward to.

Leaving him to focus on keeping Killian alive, but not before covering him with a blanket as well, Alex returned to the center part of the plane.

Kary was seated, answering questions from the others as best she could about the state of affairs in the cargo hold, but Alex could tell her patience was growing a little thin.

Clapping his hands to garner everyone's attention, he waited until all eyes were on him.

"Alright. Since most of our conversation was upon your ears earlier, I guess there is no point in hiding anything from you. Killian's soul snare has been removed, and he is safe, for now, so long as we can get him a blood transfusion in Wuhan once we land.

"As for any other question regarding soul snares, you will have to wait until we are returning home, as we have other matters we should focus on. In the meantime, how about we play a game?" Alex asked, smiling at them.

Kary raised an eyebrow, glad Alex was taking the burden off her shoulders, but curious about what he had in mind.

But from the side, Aapo was confused about what kind of game they could play on an airplane, thirty-six thousand feet up in the skies, that would entertain all these kids.

"Aapo, you'll be joining in as well," Alex said, snapping the man's attention to him.

"Beg your pardon?" Aapo replied, confused.

"I said you'll be joining into the game as well. It'll be good for you," Alex responded.

But Aapo frowned at him.

"If you don't mind, guild leader, I would prefer to look outside and rest. I doubt any game for children would keep my attention or interest for long."

Alex clicked his tongue as he shook his head.

"I feel like you are misunderstanding me here, Aapo," Alex said, smiling at him.

"How so?" the Finn asked.

"In many ways, I believe. The first one being that I wasn't asking. You are joining. And the second thing I know for sure is that I'm sure you think I meant a children's game. But that is not what I want you all to do."

Aapo became even more confused.

Kary grinned at Alex, realizing what he was going to have them do.

Clapping his hands together, Alex smiled at everyone.

"Alright! Everyone, get in your seats and listen up."

Violette and Jonathan were the most curious about what he was going to have them play, and practically stumbled to their seats speedily.

Winston was worried about his uncle Killian, and his mind was preoccupied with other things, so he was slower on the uptake, but he made his way to his seat, nevertheless.

Kary also sat down, choosing to participate in this game, if only for her own enjoyment.

Once everyone was seated, Alex walked to the center of the passenger cabin and asked that they spin their seats to face him.

With a bit of shuffling and grunting, the seats were pivoted, and all eyes were on him.

"The game will be simple. I'm sure all of you have at least a basic understanding of mana, and can all sense it, but for the purposes of this game, I will make sure everyone can see it," Alex said as he formed a glob of water over his hand.

Aside from Kary, everyone became confused as to where this was going.

"This game is simple, and it is something Kary and I have discussed as an excellent way to hone everyone's mana senses and mana control.

"It is something that the mage's guild in New Eden uses to train their younger students in mana control, and I believe it will occupy your minds enough for the remainder of the trip," he continued, passing the globe from one hand to the other in smooth flowing motions.

He then threw it over toward Kary, who used her mana to catch it midair, before letting it hover over her hand.

Although her elemental focus was fire, this exercise wasn't strenuous for her, as the water was only to give shape to the mana, and she could focus on the mana itself for the game.

Everyone followed the orb of water, wondering what the purpose of this was, before Kary shot it toward Winston, catching him off guard.

Being unprepared for it, the water globe smacked into his face and burst.

Winston yelped as the cold water washed away his stray thoughts.

"And this is the goal of the game," Alex chuckled, making a pulling motion to regather the water over his hand.

"We will throw the water orb around and try to keep it intact for as long as we can. If you fail to catch it, you get a refreshing shower, before we start again. This will help your mana-sensing capabilities, and your mana control will sharpen as well.

"If you manage to hold this globe of water afloat for at least ten minutes before we make it to China, I'll give you all a little gift."

Already, grins abounded.

The prospect of gifts was always an enticing lure, to anyone involved.

Chapter 958: Benefits Of Mana

But one person was still unsure of the purpose of this.

Aapo raised his hand, catching Alexander's attention, and Alex nodded at him.

"What's the point of me doing this, sir? I am not a mage. Mana control will do nothing for me."

Alex smirked back at him.

"Is that what you think?" he asked, walking over to the Finn.

"Sir, with all due respect, what would mana help in my case? I fire a rifle, and what I hit dies. No mana involved," Aapo stated, his skepticism clear in his voice.

"Tell me, Aapo. Inside the game. Do you use magic-infused bullets?" Alex asked, stopping in front of him.

Aapo nodded, confused about what this had to do with now.

"And do you make those yourself? Or do you buy them?"

"I have them fabricated by a gnomish technomancer. My character, Simo, has no mana at all. I have a different stat that replaced it. It's called focus."

This took Alex slightly aback. He knew many players with special classes had started getting new stats and new skills, but it was the first he heard about one called focus.

But his point still stood.

"Tell me, Aapo. Do you think you could mimic the focus stat on this side? Or would you need the help of the system?"

Aapo shook his head.

"From my understanding, the focus stat only makes my gun more accurate, and eases my spotting of a target in a multiple enemy scenario. I think good training would give me the same advantages. But I don't understand where you are going with this..."

Alex grinned.

"So the stat is useless out here. Let me tell you what isn't useless. Mana. Mana has multiple uses. You can use it to make magic, which is the most glaring use. But it has other benefits," Alex said, pulling out a pocketknife.

This made Aapo slightly uncomfortable, given the proximity of the weapon to his body.

But Alex only smiled, flipping the handle towards him.

"Take the knife."

"I would rather not," Aapo replied, starting to sweat.

"Take it. Stab me, Aapo. With all your strength. You won't hurt me."

The Finn was getting increasingly uncomfortable, as Alex inched the knife handle ever-closer.

Eventually, Alex lost patience and pulled his hand forward, putting the pocket knife inside it, as he closed the fingers around the handle.

"Stab me. You don't need to worry about me. I heal fast," Alex said, smiling wide.

Aapo began trembling as he shook his head no.

"I couldn't, sir. I can't willingly hurt another person..."

Alex's smile disappeared from his face, as his eyes became cold.

"Tell me, Aapo. If someone came after you, wanting to take your life, would you fight tooth and nail to stay alive? Or would you just lie down and let yourself get killed?"

"It isn't the same, sir. You are asking me to hurt you."

Alex imagined that the man needed a little incentive to do as told, so he suddenly let his mana pressure mount on Aapo.

As the mana pushed into the man's mind, he started feeling like a beast was glaring at him, and when he looked into Alex's eyes, he saw pure malice.

His mind played tricks on him, as he saw what he was sure were horns of shadow growing on his forehead. The pressure grew and grew before Alex's lips parted for a whisper.

"If your life were at stake, would you just stand there in fear, or fight to survive? Because I don't need cowards in my guild. Cowards deserve death."

As the last word escaped his mouth, Alex forced another surge of mana out, knowing full well it would send Aapo's mind into hallucinations.

And it did.

The Finn saw Alex's maw open, and rows of jagged teeth go toward his throat, as the black eyes glared into his very soul.

In a moment of panic, Aapo thrust the knife forward, letting out a scared yelp, until his hands couldn't go further. He had closed his eyes on instinct, refusing to see the gush of blood that would inevitably come from stabbing a man in the stomach.

But the mana pressure soon vanished, as quickly as it came, and Aapo opened his eyes, wondering why he couldn't feel the warm blood dripping on his hands.

Looking at Alex, he saw the man grinning at him, a tinge of pride in his eyes.

"Good. You at least have some survival instinct. But you proved my point."

Looking at his hand, Aapo saw the pocket knife pushed into Alex's clothes, the blade bent at ninety degrees, as if he had slammed it into a metal sheet.

It did not even damage Alex's clothes, and Aapo's face went blank.

"How?" he muttered, pulling his hand back and looking at the bent blade.

"Mana," Alex responded, taking the knife from the man's hand.

"Like I said. It has many uses: fortification, empowerment, magic, and enhanced sensing. There are so many ways you can use it. The mana coursing through your body, which entered as a natural process from the gaps to the other world, just isn't as strong as mine.

"So the blade couldn't wound me. With enough control, you can make your body harder than any metal on Earth. You can even make yourself stronger than any competitive bodybuilder or faster than even the fastest sprinters.

"With a good control over mana, you could make your own bullets, and ensure they are strong enough to pierce even the hardest materials or hides. This is why mana control and mana sensing are important. Do you get it now?"

Aapo looked at Alex with astonishment, realizing why he always seemed so confident.

Of course, Aapo was aware he had become stronger already. He could lift more weight than before and move faster when he focused, but he never would have thought it would reach that point.

To think that someone could use mana to become superhuman like this. He knew people in the game were doing it. But to believe it could happen on this side as well?

That was beyond his wildest thoughts.

"Will you play the game now?" Alex asked, breaking his train of thought.

Aapo shook his head vigorously. If that was the result of harnessing mana, then he needed in.

Chapter 959: Final Test Before Landing

Once everyone was set and understood the rules, Alex conjured the globe of water again. In a spirit of camaraderie and friendly competition, he started by passing it off to someone he knew had a fine mana control, and let them choose who to pass it to next.

As anticipated, most of the people in the passenger cabin were adept at mana control. Once they grasped the way to catch and release the mana, this game was a breeze for them.

Jonathan and Violette, with each playful interaction with the orb, were showcasing a level of control that was on par with Alex and Kary. Alex could sense their potential, knowing that in due time, theirs would far surpass his, a testament to their growth and progression in mana control.

Winston quickly pushed through his limitations on mana sensing, focusing only on the water itself. He could barely feel the mana inside, but seeing it helped him focus on what to catch.

Of course, it made his mana control very brutish, but it was getting better every time the orb came back to him, and, even though he was sweating buckets by the time they were flying over China, he had grasped the technique well enough that it no longer burst on him.

But that wasn't before many failed attempts, or slip-ups in control, making him take a cold shower more than once.

Of course, the one that was worst for wear was Aapo.

His mana sensing was the most rudimentary of the bunch, and he could barely feel anything from the water at all. This made catching the water globe next to impossible for him.

The few times he caught it were flukes, and the water globe almost immediately leaked to the ground, as he failed to keep the mana together long enough to throw it back.

Frustration was growing on his face, and Alex often gave him tips, aiding him as best he could without outright catching the globe of water for him. This was something he needed to learn for himself, after all.

The last hour of travel went by like a breeze, their minds all busy either enjoying the game or being too focused on not getting soaked to care about the flow of time.

But Alex was keeping a close watch on time every time the game restarted. And by the time Major Schrute told them to strap in for landing, they were already seven minutes into their attempt.

They all knew they had failed to reach ten minutes, and looks of disappointment appeared on the younger ones' faces.

However, Alex wasn't going to let this get them down.

"Alright, let's switch things up! Landing is bound to get rougher, so let's put all your talents to the test!" Alex exclaimed.

Kary's eyebrow rose, curious about what he was about to suggest.

"Jonathan, I can tell by our angle of travel that we have a crosswind. I want you to focus on outside. Forget the water globe and head into the cockpit. You will try to counteract the crosswind and help the Major land the plane smoothly. You up for it?"

Jonathan's eyes went wide, before an excited smile stretched his lips.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, jumping up from his seat.

He ran straight to the cockpit and knocked on the door.

"I don't want anyone in here for landing," the major replied on her intercom.

But Alex wasn't about to give her a choice.

"Let the kid in, Major. It's an order."

He could feel her anger through the steel door, but watched as it slid open.

He nodded in satisfaction, as the door closed behind Jonathan, and turned his eyes to Violette.

"As for you, we will work on your multitasking. Since you excel at this, let's make it a challenge."

Violette nodded, her eyes becoming focused.

"I want you to conjure two other balls of water, and cycle through temperatures with them. I want one boiling, one freezing and one tepid, cycling on each other. Can you do that?"

Violette frowned a bit, as it sounded simplistic.

"Yes. But that doesn't sound very hard..."

"It'll get harder, as you won't be controlling them, only playing with their temperatures," Alex said, before turning to Winston.

"Winston, I want you to hold them afloat. All three at the same time. Just imagine you are holding your mana as a solid plate with edges, and hold all three orbs at the same height until we touch down."

Winston's face became stern. It wasn't something hard to do, per se, since he had already learned how to harden his shield with mana in the game. But out here, it would be a different thing.

But he nodded in acknowledgment of his task, focusing his eyes on the now three globes of water.

Violette still failed to see how this would be a challenge for her.

However, Alex still hadn't assigned a task to Aapo.

Turning to him, Alex grinned.

"Your task will be the simplest one, but it will be great for your skill set."

Aapo gulped as he imagined getting an arduous task.

He was having trouble sensing the mana in the water orbs, even now that they were actively being tampered with and infused with much more mana than before.

If he had to do anything troublesome, he feared he would disappoint everyone, and their trust in him would drop.

"Aapo. Do you know what makes modern bullets more accurate and increases their range?"

Alex asked.

Aapo nodded his head, as this was a simple question.

"The rifling in the barrel imparts a spin to the bullet, stabilizing the bullet through centrifugal force, and creating a wind funnel to reduce wind resistance. Why?"

Alex grinned.

"That is your task until we land. I want you to act as the rifling of our water bullets. Spin them with everything you got. Make them go the fastest you can, without letting them leave their trajectory. Be the barrel of this gun."

Aapo looked at him with a blank face.

"Excuse me?"

Chapter 960: Different Tests For Different People

"Be our gun barrel. Hold the water globes from extending past a certain point, which Winston will help with, and spin them like they are bullets travelling through a gun barrel."

Aapo's eyes were fixated on him, his heart pounding in his chest. The task, seemingly

straightforward, loomed over Aapo like an insurmountable mountain, threatening to swallow him whole.

"Sir... I can barely feel them or hold them. You are asking me to move them... Isn't this a bit too much?"

Alex shook his head in response.

"You don't have to worry about holding them together. That is Violette's job. And holding them in place is Winston's. Your job is to move them on a rotary trajectory. You can do it. Learning this will help you as well."

The Finn was still unconvinced he could achieve this, and his uncertainty reflected on his face. But there was no time to play around.

"Begin now. If you can spin these until we touch the ground, I will teach each of you something that will help with getting stronger."

Immediately, Violette started cycling the temperature in the orb. It wasn't too complicated at first until she realized that going from one extreme to another was tougher than she expected. If she had four water balls, cycling them from hot to tepid, to cold and back wouldn't have been too hard. But with three, it meant that flash boil them after the freezing part.

She was almost sure Alex had given her that order because he knew that freezing the water was easier for her than boiling it. But she was managing.

That was until Aapo started spinning them.

At first, the rotation was slow, practically imperceptible. But it quickly took speed, reaching a rotation of one cycle every three seconds.

Given the width of the circle they were kept in, that was already pretty quick, making Violette's focus on her task a little complicated.

Alex grinned as he noticed Aapo's distraught expression finally calm down.

'He just found his way.'

In Aapo's mind, all this time, he had been looking at the balls like three objects he needed to spin individually, and with his pitiful mana control abilities, it was an arduous task.

But as he spun them around, he recalled what Alex had told him.

'Be the gun barrel... How could I be a gun barrel to three spinning projectiles...'

But as he spun them faster, his eyes started losing their focus on each individual orb. Quickly enough, he was looking at it as a whole.

That's when his mind clicked into place.

He started imagining the trajectory as the inside of a barrel, and the three orbs as a single, large bullet. His mind honed in on this thought, as he thought of spinning his imaginary bullet faster, to achieve greater accuracy.

He knew the speed bullets spun was dependent on rifling in a barrel, and that each of them varied from one gun to another. But his mind started thinking off the beaten path.

'What if I can force it to achieve a higher speed? Could mana control do this?' he thought.

His focus honed in on his imaginary bullet, and he started thinking of ways to accelerate the rotation. And the results were immediate.

As he controlled what little mana he could, to form a vortex, the balls started spinning increasingly fast, until they became almost a blur to the naked eye.

Already, Violette had stopped relying on her eyes to track them, closing them and using her mana senses alone to keep track of the three orbs. Splitting her mind on all three of them, as they spun at this speed, cycling the temperature, had become more than just challenging.

She could tell this was what Alex had meant when he said her task would become harder, but she hadn't imagined it would be this hard.

Simply keeping track of them was already a herculean task. Controlling their temperature at the same time was taking a toll on her focus.

The seconds felt like minutes, as Kary looked at this in silence, a smile on her lips.

'He may be a terrible strategist, but he has a knack for thinking outside the box. Each of them is using a type of control that will be useful for their strengthening.'

Winston had already changed the shape of his hardened mana to accommodate the quick spin of the water orbs, and had to harden it constantly, as the centrifugal force threatened to shatter his mana.

He had already changed it from a simple, plate-like shape to a donut-like case, in which the orbs were spinning at a break-neck pace. And with all his focus, he hardened it, thickening and compressing the mana manifold, so it withheld the pressure.

Violette was being forced to split her attention on many factors at the same time, practicing her split focus to the extreme. If she managed to hold this on the battlefield, she would be able to change her spells on the fly and adapt in a split second to changing circumstances.

As for Aapo, his learning moment was when he finally stopped relying on what humanity considered standard logic. When he finally freed his mind from those pre-established conventions, the speed at which his mind adapted was incredible.

The spin on the orbs was far faster than anything she had ever seen. There was a visible funnel forming under the orbs' path, caused by the intense rotation and the cycling temperatures.

She could tell Alex was already controlling the effect the test was having on their surroundings, as she felt his mana move all around them.

She became curious about Jonathan's task, and extended her senses outside, encompassing a large area around the plane.

And what she felt amazed her.

Jonathan, in an impressive feat of wind control, was practically rewriting the laws of nature.

Expanding her mana senses further, to fully see his prowess, Kary almost gasped in awe.

'This is beyond simply controlling his mana... It's like the wind is reacting to his thoughts and adapting to his will...'

