

A New Destiny

Ahoztar Iragartze Peridotian was luxuriating in a steaming hot bath when the alarm came. It took him a moment to place it, an unfamiliar, utterly irritating noise that disrupted both his thoughts and the peacefulness of his soak. He had almost called to his help to go shut up that noise before he finally placed it. His family had worked with the Wardens to install a city-wide alerting system in case the city was attacked, and it would be bad form for him not to know the sound, despite having only heard it in testing. Crisis averted, so it seemed. Well, one anyway.

He had to admit, he hadn't been entirely certain that the Harbinger Elves had been telling the truth when they showed up, telling tall tales of invading monsters. Still, when the Wardens had proposed upgrading the defenses of the Protectorate, there was little reason not to embrace their enthusiasm - and the lucrative contract. In the worst case scenario, it was an unobtrusive addition to the city that saw little service, and the ongoing maintenance would be another reliable revenue stream. Now that it had actually been activated, it wouldn't hurt for him to put in an appearance, to make a show of inspecting the system post-use to declare that, once again, the Iragartze Peridotians had crafted yet another brilliant success. With a sigh, he reluctantly stood and left the bath. He would allow himself some real decadence later as a way of making up for the inconvenience now.

As he toweled off, he could hear another sound add to the two-tone of the alarm - a high-pitched humming that cycled up, released, and then started anew. This, at least, he had heard before, but still was not used to - the automated defenses, spell batteries warming up and firing. There was a certain excitement to it, despite the annoyance of the noises - Zephyrcrest was under attack! Why, the Protectorate hadn't been actually invaded in centuries! The Wardens were certainly battle-trained, but nothing had actually reached their borders in so long that this was almost unthinkable. It was certainly a novelty, and made him glad that he'd chosen to spend the month in a place as remote as Zephyrcrest.

Ahoztar couldn't wait to discuss this with friends later. A few drinks after dinner, recount the day... yes. Perhaps this interruption wouldn't be so bad after all. Already, he was starting to design some changes, modifications that would need to be added to the systems. He strode into his bedchamber, where his manservant had laid out clothing for him. He called to Corbo to help him get dressed, and the Hobling wordlessly took up the task.

"Corbo, take a note," Ahoztar said, standing there while Corbo dressed him. "We'll need to add some noise dampeners to the spell batteries. Possibly that alarm, though perhaps we just install them on the estate instead...we can tune them to reduce annoyance sounds if they're more localized. Yes, a much better idea. Have the groom bring around..." he paused, looking over the clothing, "...the sapphire crystal stallion, I need to cut a good figure. I'll be headed towards the upper rings, to tour the defenses. I'll want the spyglass, of course. Add a bottle of merlot and a chalice to the saddlebags, I expect I'll be taking a drink in Leafwalker Park." Lekerika Itxaropena Zirconates and her husband would likely be there, and he couldn't pass up a chance to gloat in front of them. He stroked his chin. "Have the kitchens prepare to receive visitors for

dinner and cocktails, have the chef prepare lamb. I'm expecting... at least a dozen, though we should prepare extra. If this goes as well as I expect, we can bill this as a private dinner, and plan a more elaborate celebration tomorrow." He grinned at Corbo as the Hobling buttoned up a vest, pleased with a new thought. "Yes! Something tomorrow, with the Warden commander as the guest of honor." This was beginning to turn out in his advantage.

He could already see new plans coming to mind... if this battle proved eventful enough, perhaps even a new line of security golems.... His train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the chamber door. The slight chiming sound, matched with the weight of it, marked the presence of one of his own golems. Curious. He motioned to Corbo, who hurried to answer the door. "Master Ahoztar," the golem said, making a tilting forward motion that approximated a bow. Dear departed Iragartze's designs may have made their dynasty filthy rich, but neither she nor her descendants had quite managed to grant their creations the fluidity needed for a proper bow. Ahoztar himself had tinkered with it from time to time, as something to occupy himself during fits of boredom, but had never given it the time to pursue it with a passion. Yet another project he'd need to shelve now, as far more important things than a minor increase in dexterity lay ahead of him...perhaps a mobile spell-battery.... He snapped his attention back to the present. The golem had delivered a report, and he'd not even heard it. "Say again?" "Enemy forces are attacking the city," the golem repeated.

"Yes, yes, of course, I already knew that." He waved the golem away. All that effort wasted reporting a situation he'd already been aware of? Perhaps he'd task one of his underlings to tinker with the tactical acumen of the golems. If the Wardens were going to war, they could likely use golems with upgraded abilities.... "Master Ahoztar?" Corbo cut in. Ahoztar watched as the Hobling turned towards him, a far-away look on his face. He recognized it, the same sort of expression most of them had when conversing with other members of their Union. That communication was almost more vital to him than their prodigious skills as workers. "I'm getting reports from all over the city." He shook his head, frowning. "It's bad. Really bad." Ahoztar scowled at him. Bad?! What an absurd comment! Clearly, these Hobblings had never experienced a battle before, and were just overreacting. He'd need to speak with the Warden commander - what was her name again? Janai? Yanai? - about having more Hobblings travel with her units so that the Union was more prepared to deal with combat situations. He was in the middle of mentally composing a letter to her when he was nearly tossed into a wall as the whole city lurched. Catching his balance, he glared around the room, searching for the cause. What?! The city shook again, this time followed up by a tremor that left the crystal golem making an unpleasant chiming sound in its wake.

Ahoztar gaped at it, trying to grasp what was happening. If the city was vibrating at the same resonance as the crystals that made up their golems.... The city rocked a third time, and the whole world tilted to the side. The golem fell over, sliding down the hallway on its back as it struggled to right itself. Corbo clung to the bed, and Ahoztar slammed into the wall next to the door. Panic set in, wiping his mind entirely empty for a moment. He fought to get his breathing under control. This... this was unthinkable. Utterly impossible! He... he needed to get out of here! He scrambled his way out of the room, staggering at the awkward angle. He had a skyship

- 'a boat, really, minor, barely enough room for ten people, I should really commission a larger one....' his brain supplied, attempting to find purchase on any thought aside from abject terror - that could get him out of here if he could only get to it.

The next few minutes were an awkward blur, and as he clambered into his ship, he wondered how he'd gotten covered in bruises and blood. It didn't quite make sense to him, but at this point, almost nothing did. He went through the sequence, aligning the crystals to start the arcane engine, bringing the gyroscope up to speed, opening the vents and closing the baffles. Just about ready.... Zephycrest rocked one more time, and his stomach lurched. The city was starting to fall.

He reached out, fingers wrapping around the levers to bring the engine to full power, and as he did, he realized that, in his haste, he'd forgotten to disengage the docking clamps. As the gyroscope attempted to right the ship, there was a horrible shrieking of protesting wood. His footing gave way, and he was falling with the tumbling city. Ahoztar was dimly aware of someone screaming, and he desperately wished that they'd stop. It took him far too long to realize it was himself.