

From top to bottom

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A booming noise rattled a dank lit tunnel before an infernal wall of fire swept the corridor. Incinerating anything in the way. Then, silence.

Once the roar of flames quieted down, the only sound was the Click-clack of a pair of leather boots bouncing off cracked stone walls with the telling carefree stride of overconfidence. A wizard stepped out of the resulting cloud of smoke, surrounded by a protective coat of blinding light.

With a snap of his fingers the light dissipated, revealing his bright red robes completely unscathed. He raised a palm to his mouth...

And yawned.

“For something called ‘*Maze of Unpredictability*’ its traps are quite predictable.”

One of his steps rang hollow. A plate under his feet sank and a wyvern-poisoned arrowhead shot from the wall on his left a fraction of a second later. Its point moved fast, but never

approached him, as the wizard trapped it in a time dilation before walking through without a hitch. The very next step also caved in. This time three furred and spiky tentacles came from the ceiling, blocking the way.

Byron rolled his eyes. A gentle flick of the wrist beckoned stray sparks from the previous explosion. Magic fueled the sparks and invigorated them into tongues of flame which knit themselves into a vaguely humanoid form. The conjured flame creature came to life with a forge bellow, spouting slag. To which the beast in the wall responded with its own blood-curdling scream, and both monsters wound up in a fierce battle.

Byron looked at them squirm for a few seconds before growing bored. When he decided to take a peek at how long was left of the corridor.

"Finally, a loot chamber!"

Of course, it was right past the wall monster's and flame summon's death match. His summon fought fiercely, but the slag slid off its adversarie's fur without leaving a mark. On top of an immunity to fire, the triple tentacles siphoned mana from the construct, shortening its artificial lifespan by the second. All the fire elemental could do was stall for time.

Bayron squeezed right past them now that the trap was wholly focused on feeding on his summon. He did have spells that would be able to kill this monster, but why waste mana? He could always resummon his elemental after a long rest. When he pushed through, the summon itself turned its head to face him, expectant, its fire already dimming to orange.

"Uuuuh, thanks for buying me some time."

With those parting words he left his dying construct behind and stepped into the open chamber. Behind him a large stone wall fell down from the ceiling, silencing the noise of the struggle and aftermath on the other side.

Of course Bayron wasn't thinking of the trapped corridor anymore. Why would he?

No, his attention was focused in this very room. At its very center, an altar rose with a pair of finely engraved wristbands hanging from twin supports. Even from the entrance he could feel them radiating power. Bayron stepped closer, as expected, no trap sprung up. Treasure rooms never had any, an odd decision but after littering the way inside with mortal killing traps, the architect must have considered them unnecessary this deep in.

Bayron's smirk widened.

"Clearly they didn't consider me."

A flick of his wrist and a water elemental formed out of thin air.

"Go check the other rooms and fetch me any gold you may find" The creature bowed and began its search while he headed for the big prize.

Once at the top of the steps, Byron saw the bands much more clearly. They appeared to be cast in silver, with carved runes written in an old language he didn't recognize, but of an undeniable power. Byron ran a hand along their surface, his smile growing. Each one had a large blue crystal embedded into the metal which irradiated both warmth and coldness. If the runes were a catalyst for powerful magic, these would be the wellsprings from which magic poured. As Bayron touched the artifacts, information coalesced into words in his mind.

-Arcana check failed.-

- Bonds of corrupted Mithral (legendary equipment)....

'Mithral, eh? I recall it makes a very good magic conductor.' Bayron frowned. *'There's something else written after the legendary equipment, but I can't make it out. Ugh, forget it, let's just look at the stats to know if it's even worth grabbing.'*

- Bonds of corrupted Mithral (legendary equipment)....

+999 mana pool

Enhances elemental damage and spells.

Improves summons.

+4 AC

Reduces piercing and slashing damage.

Status: bonded familiar

Needs attunement.

"Holy shit this artifact is insane! With this amount of mana I'd be able to cast spells left and right for hours without even breaking a sweat! Let's get the attunement part out of the way and take it for a ride." He pushed his hands through the hoops and pulled the bands from their ancient resting stand.

"Ugh, why did they have to make them so heavy?" Byron groaned.

After the bands were taken from the altar, the blue gems came to life. Bayron felt them pumping out magic into his veins, and felt stronger already. The bands seemed to grow lighter and tighten around his wrist. A boon not listed when he scried the item, probably part of the attunement process. With a quiet *'TING'* the bracelets finished shrinking, now perfectly fitting against the wizard's skin

"This has to be the quickest attunement I've ever experienced. No legendary artifact takes less than a few hours to attune, and this one just took a couple of seconds. That's... disconcerting."

As Bayron pondered, gray spots appeared on his hand, running up his arm under the cover of his robes. But it didn't stop there, as the spots merged into larger stains his skin became rougher and itchy. Bayron scratched his arms absentmindedly when a grainy texture in his fingernails took him back from his thoughts, his eyes widened as he recognized... pebbles? *'Where in the hell did this come from?'*

Looking back at his arm, not only he found the stains growing, but bulging out of his skin like raising dough.

"WHAT THE FUCK??!" Bayron screamed.

Panicking, he pressed his hand against his growing arm to stop the swelling. Instead of the heat he expected, he felt stone coldness in his taut yet bloated skin. Bayron pressed harder, rubbing his arm while he casted healing hands. As he did, stone jumped to his fingertips, making the rubbing produce an unnerving noise of stone grinding against stone.

Bayron recoiled with horror at the sight. "Why didn't it work?!"

A surge of magic rippled through his body, and his body **GREW**. His chest pressed against his robes and stretched them to the point where the once slack fabric now strained with lines of pressure. Bayron followed the magic to its source. If it was a trap he could disable it before... Oh. Of course how could he have been so careless!

"It's these gauntlets, they're cursed!" Bayron tried to take them off, unsuccessfully. The artifacts were quite wedged between his rock growths and shaking them did not get them more loose, but further tore up his robes.

"Think, think, think. Maybe there's some instructions I missed about how to take them off?" He closed his eyes and focused on the energy of the bands.

- Bonds of corrupted Mithral (legendary equipment)

He focused more on the text besides it, trying to decipher it.

-Arcana check passed.-

Equipment only available for summons.

Equipment permanently bonded to summon after attunement.

"NO!"

"No, no, no! Why is it only for summons?! That's what it's turning me into? But why?! And how??!"

Rock swepted over his hand impassively. Bayron raised it in front of him and waved hoping the rock would magically shrug off. His hand felt stiffer; maybe even numb, like it was not his own. All he could feel were the cursed bonds crackling with warped magic, arching over its surface like lightning.

"Wait... they were made of Mithral right?" Bayron jogged his memory.

-Arcana check passed-

Mithral conducted magic, yet made it unpredictable... And dangerous. But it was supposed to temporarily shield the user from its adverse effects.

Bayron covered his face with a hand.

"Unless It only count's summons as the user. Fuuuuuu-"

Bayron felt a light bump in his shoulder. His remaining elemental headbutted his changing skin, looking almost... curious? No, that was Impossible, summons were not sentient. Silently, the elemental lowered itself, pressing its head against his chest, and began to nuzzle. His outstretched mantle stood no chance grinding against living stone, tearing a large hole which exposed a pair of large assets.

"What are you doing? Get off me!"

Despite a direct order, the construct kept nuzzling his chest and soaking his robes. His already large pecs swelled with growth, stretching the drenched and torn fabric further. Underneath, skin turned to beige and then gray, forming dark spots similar to the ones on his arms.

Where his elemental scratched, his skin hardened and split into boulders pushing from his pectorals. Bayron's brow creased, his pecs didn't budge but they felt soft under the elemental's touch...

Bayron shook his head. "Get. Off. Me. You rogue summon!" He pushed back, but the monster's embrace just grew stronger. Breathing became harder as his abdomen compressed into pure rock. As a result Bayron struggled to think clearly. Everything felt so... sluggish.

One step, then another. The elemental didn't let go, but he could drag the both of them back to the entrance and then- then he'd think of something else. Another step. The following came later than he expected. He was slowing down.

Not just slowing down. His pace was growing more erratic as rock replaced his petrifying flesh and he lost control over his muscles. "Come.... on! Just a little more" Bayron growled.

Maybe there was a chance to turn back, a possibility for help. That alone maintained the flame of hope and incentive to keep moving forwards. All hope was swiftly crushed when his legs stopped responding altogether. He couldn't feel them, and with the rocks climbing his neck he couldn't turn his head either, which remained looking forwards.

Sensing his master giving up the struggle, the elemental uncoiled from his body and its face entered his field of view. Cold, unexpressive.

"Wh-why are you doing this to me?" Fear gripped his heart as the numbness crept at the corners of his mouth. "Please help me! hel.." His mouth froze mid-plea, his eyes shrinking in horror as the numbness crept at the edges of his vision. As his vision darkened, the last thing he heard was a happy warble. Then, his mind gave out too.

The wizard's whole body was completely petrified and his mind remained still. At this point he barely even resembled a human at all. Nothing more than a massive, vaguely humanoid statue. That was not where the artifact ended its effect. After a brief pause, the gems shone their magic once more, this time as a rocking flow cutting through the numbness of his body.

The elemental stared at the petrified shape with elation, and put a hand to its cold surface. Its fingers found their grip in between its former master's cracks and stretched, pushing deeper into its husk of a body like rain seeping through soil. Magic warmth filled the statue. Its fingers twitched, trying to grab something unseen.

Pouring more of its essence, the construct molded the statue, forcing its water to seep through the cracks following the path of least resistance, stretching its joint boulders to allow the rushing water to dampen their friction, shaping it into the most effective shape it knew.... Its own.

Its arms expanded to sizes no human could dream of, rock swelling by magic. The elemental took great care spreading the growing rocks apart, keeping the jagged ends outwards and making sure the joints remained flexible and free of solid boulders. Curiously, it compared one of its arms with his master's. While still smaller the former human's arms were a near exact replica down to the cracks on the stone, which filled with rushing water like the veins of a giant.

First they reached its hands. Water engulfed them and dissolved their rock, leaving the fluid floating in the shape of claws, which continued their twitching. Two whole sections of his arms received the same treatment and broke off from the body, while still connected by pillars of water.

After being done with the arms it reached the chest and flowed down, eroding the stone on its path past its hips. Unlike its torso, the statue's legs had not increased in size and still looked human sized, somehow standing the weight of its top heavy body.

In the meantime, the veins finally met at the statue's center. Water swirled, progressively spinning faster and pulled to its center of mass in a roughly spherical shape. This attracted more water. But instead of increasing in size, the water orb glowed brighter and spun faster, with more strength.

The statue's legs might have stood the transformation process, but they were torn apart by the magical orb's strength. One by one rocks were plucked from the leg before water ground them to nothing but dust. Soon, its navel and stomach were eroded to reveal a bright blue sphere oozing with mana. The elemental knew how important it was and used some of its floating debris to cover it as protection. Despite the orb's pull, the new boulders hung below its pecs maintaining their positions.

Pleased with his performance, the elemental swiped and knocked out the last leg the statue stood on. Rather than falling over, a spiral of water twirled from within the core and touched ground, propping it back upright and stabilized it. The elemental warbled happily at the sight. One hand ran down its creation's back, tracing an imaginary spine and setting its sights on the finer details.

Massive crystals sprouted in a row running down his back, seamlessly parting the stone and bending his spine into a hump. Its head, already swallowed in between his pecs and traps now was too by the recent hump. The elemental cupped it and the face of terror it portrayed. It didn't like seeing its master so displeased. So with a quiet warble it rearranged the rocks,

smudging its human features and giving the head a more square look. Using a finger as a chisel, it chipped away parts of the face with surgical precision and etched a powerful rune identical to its own.

Finishing touches out of the way, the creature moved back to admire its creation. Magic flowed around the inanimate statue and soaked every pebble. One by one, its fingers began to move, before the elemental returned to life with a jolt.

Bayron came to his senses with a hollow gasp.

His body felt...different.

Looking down he strained to see past his shelf of pecs, but noticed faint wisps of water flowing from his vortex.

'Vortex?'

Elemental energy expelled from his bright blue core, manifested as a waterspout and swirling with enough force to hold his own weight. Such a strange concept came to his mind like a familiar memory. All elementals have a vortex, why shouldn't he?

Bayron shook his head.

"No, I'm not an elemental." Despite the dire situation, his voice was a calm hiss.

Bayron knew he should be angry, but couldn't get himself to muster that feeling. Instead his mind felt at ease, almost already accepting his situation. *'No. Something is very wrong.'*

A figure moved closer and, startled, Byron turned to face a stone visage. Oh, it was just his elemental. Seeing the creature at eye level was disorienting, but had no reason to be. After all, they were cut from the same vein, so they were similar -like two drops of water- *'No, no no. This is wrong, I'm a human! A master!'*

Bayron moved away from the construct. The creature stopped and looked at him quizzically. From its chest rose the quiet bubbling of a stream. There was meaning behind those flowing sounds he could almost make it out.

Kin. Alike.

Bayron stared speechless. He could understand the elemental. Once again it floated closer to its former master. This time pointing a claw to itself.

Kin.

"Wh...what?"

It pointed at him, and then back at itself.

Alike

.

Was it saying they were similar?

"No, I'm human. I'm your master." He responded, not realizing he did so in the same flowing dialect.

The elemental shook its head.

No master. No human. No name.

A small buzz came down in the back of his mind, when it lifted it felt like it'd taken something important with it. The novice elemental checked his body again, but saw no further changes. Didn't the other elemental say something about a name? Foolish, he didn't have one -no, wait. He did, right?

His thoughts jumbled with two sets of memories overlapping. He had to have a name, but he couldn't remember it off the top of his mind.

Relax. Give in. Feel better.

The elemental's voice massaged his mind. Forcing his grip on those thoughts to loosen. They couldn't have been that important if they were so easily forgotten, now they were just an uncomfortable buzz in his mind he wished he could shut off. Honestly the idea was alluring, even this elemental nudged him to do the same.

Yes, this elemental took care of him and sought him becoming happier and more efficient. Even in these moments where he was confused and more slow, it calmly advised him to better himself. It was nice to have someone like him, caring for you. A boyfriend, as humans would say.

No, that thing wasn't his boyfriend!!

Clarity returned to the former human's facial rune.

Quickly, he pointed to the elemental and... nothing happened. No spells came to his mind. Confusion crossed his face. What happened to his magic knowledge? Then it dawned on him, his knowledge was still there. He didn't know any spells simply because he didn't need them. For beings like them magic was as simple as willing it into existence.

Beings like them.

Something about that thought was too ominous for his liking. Following his mind's advice, he willed his existence somewhere else to open a portal, but that plan failed too.

"What am I missing?"

Different magic. Not ours. The elemental interjected.

Magically, all his knowledge of spells evaporated except for the ones involving water and ice, which became the only ones he remembered. What his kin said made sense though, water elementals have control over water as well as ice spells, but arcane magic was out of their league. If he wanted a portal he'd have to ask a wizard.

"Gggrrrr" The elemental was doing it again, messing with his thoughts.

Kin. Alright?

His boyfriend floated, always close to him, guiding. No- manipulating him whenever it answered one of his questions patiently and respectfully. *'Stop. Stop defending him!'* But it was so hard not to when he looked after his wellbeing.

"Yes."

His stomach fluttered at the pleased trill the elemental produced. Then chastised himself for his reaction. His counterpart had done this to him, so why did he feel like this? He couldn't, *"like"* him. No, for elementals that was a strong word, but being cut from the same vein had bound their souls intrinsically. This went further than a simple relationship, they couldn't exist without one another.

He wanted to hate this monster who looked just like him, but all the time the same question stopped him in his tracks: Why did he want to hurt his soulbound boyfriend? It looked so proud of a work well done, although it wouldn't share what it was.

Kin good. Strong. Will fit perfectly.

The elemental's words did little to uplift his mood. Rather, they cemented the sense of dread tormenting him. His kin noticed he wasn't joining in its excitement, it looked hurt.

Kin upset. Why?.

He didn't want to answer at first. But then the elemental grabbed his shoulder comfortingly and nudged him to look it in the face.

Confide. I listen.

Both sets of memories coincided this was true. His shoulders rose and fell mimicking a sigh.

"I unsure if ready for... this."

It didn't understand. Everything was perfect. They were together, safe, and their mana reserves would last them a long time. Why wasn't its kin happy?

Then it dawned on the elemental, its kin could not be happy because he had no master, no purpose to its existence. Which explained why he had acted so erratically before. But he had bouts of trouble adapting to existence. What if their new Master didn't approve of him and decided to leave him behind? It would obey of course, such was his nature. But would forever miss him.

Making use of its limited autonomy, the elemental schemed. Its gaze fell upon the bracelets and a plan fully formed in his mind. Simply put, it would not give their master a choice to be made.

The elemental placed a hand on the silver jewelry, prompting its soulbound to look up.

Kin. Better than he thinks.

The former mage was so focused on its words he didn't notice its tail touching the blue gem and being pulled taut. But when he did, his eyes flashed with confusion.

“What is kin doing?”

Remain together. This is best.

A strange mix of emotions he didn't recognize flashed across his mind, but he couldn't put them into words. Its tail disappeared inside the cuffs, pulling the elemental. Before allowing itself to be assimilated, it turned to its soulbound boyfriend.

Will be close, kin. Find purpose.

With that, his boyfriend was swallowed into his cuffs, its magic presence mingling with his own. Too similar. Too alike.

- New ability unlocked: Split.

Gain a charge of “*Summon elemental*”. When in control of an elemental, spend a charge of “*summon elemental*” to summon a second elemental.

Reading the description, he was overcome by a wave of shame. Despite talking about him, the information was reserved for someone else.. Still, that information shook him. If as a summon he became bound to another wizard, would he still be himself or nothing but a second “charge”?

‘*Does it really matter?*’ The elemental surprised himself with this thought.

Was his mind still being tampered with the elemental out of the picture? A chill ran down his spine. Time was running short, he needed to act before more of his mind changed and he lost himself. An exit. He needed to find a way out. No, he should stay and wait for help. Actually, maybe it'd be best to continue exploring the dungeon... All possibilities tug on his mind in different directions, but none have enough force to push him to action. In time, they quiet down.

He looked around the empty room lost, aimless. His mind was as calm as a sunny sea now, yet he felt a void in his chest, a longing for purpose...

“Master”

He pictured himself silent, fulfilling every command he was issued without thinking. Instead of being horrified, he found himself warming to the idea, just helping, just offering assistance. Not expecting anything in return, since he required nothing but his master's wellbeing.

Letting go of the pretenses of ordering around and becoming the one who obeys barely felt opposition, like he was created- born for this.

Suddenly the elemental's words made complete sense.

Oh, to be a part of something bigger and granting the wishes of their master. Not as a heinous genie of course, those fiends didn't understand the simple pleasure of following their master's orders to the letter. Such was a pleasure reserved for servile creatures such as

him. Be it menial tasks or combat orders, he would do them gladly, and eagerly expect his master's next need of him.

Former Bayron would be disgusted, but the nameless creature yearned for that fate. The elemental stood at a crossroads, either he rejected his new body and fought for a way back to his old self, or he lived a life of servitude. Choices, choices, he was never created to make them. As he fiddled with his armbands, the warmth of his soulbound twin comforted him from inside the magical item, soothing his thoughts and worries.

"I'm Kin..." Words flew out of his mouth confidently. **"I'm... an elemental."**

It felt good to admit it at last, after all that was the truth. He was an elemental. Quite ironic how he'd always seen elementals as nothing but his servants and now was cursed to live as one himself. A twisted divine lesson the elemental understood now, and magic involvement or not, he was prepared to face a life of servitude as penance. If he did a good job perhaps he would return to normal.

All he needed was a master.

– An unknown amount of time later –

The Click-clack of a pair of leather boots bounced off cracked stone walls. Someone was coming? A potential master!

He hid in the ceiling as always, eavesdropping. The steps drew close. They picked up the pace as they rushed into the room but suddenly stopped. Did they notice him?

"Oh, what? There's no treasure here?!" A young voice called from below. The elemental looked down, but all he saw was a round wizard hat.

"God dammit, I knew I was too lucky finding this place. Someone must have gone ahead and claimed it's treasure first."
They groaned and paced in a circle.

No more waiting, he had to greet his new master!
He slid off the ceiling and a few moments later met the ground beside the new arrival. He hears his master-to-be yelp startled and then a thud as they tripped and fell down.

The elemental sized them up; a human, male, scrawny and fairly young, clutching a spellbook in their arms; a wizard. No-, still a novice by the robes they wore. Poor guy flipped through the pages of his spellbook looking for a useful spell but finding none. Quite the miracle they managed to get so far in without being killed.

"I no hurt you."

"What?"

Terror phased into shock, but they stopped panickedly flipping through the pages. Progress. He pointed to the book, finger leaving a drop of water over a translating spell. The wizard looked up confused, but not wanting to provoke the towering construct, they complied.

“Human hurt?”

The human’s eyes widened with surprise, as they understood the elemental.

“N-no, I... I’m fine.Thanks...” Still the human didn’t move, and continued gawking with that terrified expression, as their eyes lowered to his prominent chest. Human emotions were not his forte but he was pretty sure that was fear. Offering them a hand, he pulled the human back to his feet.

“Why human here?”

“Questing! Well it's my first quest, actually. All other jobs but this one were already taken, but this is not as hard as they warned me. A lot of trash and debris on the way in but no traps so far. It must be my lucky day!”

‘Lucky indeed.’

‘This human is going to get himself killed’. Something inside him clicks. He needs to protect this human at all costs.

“Well uuh, it’s been nice but I will be going.”

Before they could begin to walk the elemental moved to stand in their way.

“Human, need help? Can protect human. Then Human takes me outside.”

“Oh you want to get out? I thought you were a monster protecting this dungeon.”

“No. Why would be?”

“Uuuh- good point. So a partnership?”

Yes that would be- No, that would imply he believed himself on the same level, when creators were clearly above creations. He shook his head sharply.

“No partner. Me serve.”

“Oh, then I suppose you want me to be your master?”

Hearing that was like a shot of dopamine being injected directly in his brain and satisfying his elemental nature. *Aaaah-*, back to his rightful place below a master. It just feels more fitting than being on par with a wizard. Even one of such low power. He gave a sharp nod.

The human eyed him up and down with a bashful smile before he threw his hands in the air.

“Okay, sure, I can be your master. I'm quite new to this so let me know if I do something wrong!”

The elemental just stared speechless.

"You say order, I comply. Simple. Can't go wrong."

"Alright! Then... uh, follow me!"

His first order!

The elemental dutifully moved behind his master and bliss bloomed in his mind as a reward. This was a simple command, one could only imagine how it'd feel to complete increasingly more taxing or specific tasks only he could do. He was already hooked on the feeling, and hoped his master would require his services more often.

"By the way, my name's Zekke." The human presented himself as they exited the room. Odd master, they share their name with a summon after they just met? He hadn't shared his with his summon since- maybe years.

"So what's your name?"

The elemental was caught off guard, and discovered his mind was blank.

"Don't have one."

"Huh? Why not, everyone has a name."

'Master asks why, I could tell him the full story of who I was before... But what if he freaks out and leaves me behind, or stops being my Master?' Just imagining a life without a master or purpose, and depriving his soulbond from the same delight made him feel awful.

"Elemental's don't have names, Master Zekke."

Perfect, a technically correct explanation which answered Master's question and didn't jeopardize their dynamic. The mental bliss delayed, unsure if that'd count or not. Ultimately it showed mercy and showered his mind with tangible happiness.

"Oh, If you don't have one I could give you one!"

The idea didn't excite him. Then again, it was not his place to question what his master decides.

"If that's what Master wants, Master can choose." He responded, monotone.

Master's excitement wore off as he turned to face him.

"Don't you like the idea?"

Master was directly asking him. No doubt it was a test to check if he was rogue. He steeled himself and repeated **"If that's what master wants, Master can choose."**

"Oh." Master frowned. "Well it's ok. We don't need to."

Did he pass the test? Because he didn't feel any rewarding bliss. Was it related to how the Master changed his opinion at the last second? Must have been something he said but he

didn't understand, everything he's said was keeping Master's priorities above his own. Was he missing something?

Pondering on this, he spotted an off centered plate on the ground.

"Trap. Don't step."

"Oooh! Thanks! I hadn't seen it!" They carefully walked around it.

His master was not quite observant, so he'd need to be on the lookout for traps. He was NOT going to lose his first master on his first day. And so the elemental lead on the front, pointing out the traps before disabling them. His master needed not move a finger, and so they decided to talk to ease the walk. While he didn't care for conversation, he obliged his master nonetheless.

"You say you have a twin?"

"Soulbound, Master." The elemental gently corrected him.

"Fascinating, how does it work?"

On grounds of providing context, the elemental proceeded to explain to his master the backstory between his twin and him. Memories poured from his mind like water from a well, becoming increasingly detailed the more he explored them.

"Fascinating! And you say your twin looks just like you?"

"He's me and I am him, but I can summon him at will if the master demands."

"That's good to know, hehe" Master laughed in a way that caught his attention, although he couldn't quite place why.

Boldly, he dared ask.

"Why is it, Master?"

The question caught Zekke completely off-guard.

"I-I just think your body is neat is all, so if your twi- sorry. Your soulbound is a mirror of your image, he would look just as nice, that is all." Master's face blushed red like a tomato and they spoke quickly and stumbled over their words. They were acting strange. The elemental wondered if casting Minor restoration would fix them.

With the Master explaining themselves in a flustered state, the next pressure plate went unnoticed until the elemental heard a quiet click under his master's voice. Immediately, he turned in the direction of the sound, spotting a man-made hole in the wall besides his master.

"Danger!" He shoved Master Zekke behind him and hurled a freezing bolt against the trap. Disabling it.

“Oh gods!!” Master Zekke’s distress put him on high alert. He turned around to check on them. They looked horrified, but their body didn’t show any harm. The elemental tried to move closer but something held him back. Taking a glance back he saw a large metal beam sticking through his hand, narrowly missing the bracelets.

“Are you ok?! We can pull that out of your hand and I’ll cast a minor restoration spell to heal your wound.”

The elemental stared blankly at his hand. It slid off the beam like water and reformed free in a matter of seconds. **“No need. Elementals resist non magical piercing, slashing and bludgeoning.”**

Master looked at his reformed hand with a glimmer of wonder in their eyes. When they realized he was staring, they appeared to shrink a bit on themselves.

“Still, it looks like it hurt.”

“Constructs don’t feel pain. We are not alive... Albeit, it still felt displeasing.”

“Ok, ok. But if you can help it, try to avoid the traps, ok?”

A master showing concern... Intriguing. Normally mages didn’t care for the wellbeing of their summons, maybe his master was as special as he felt afterall! Meanwhile Zekke waited for an answer from the floating water being, which never arrived. Time stretched on in an uncomfortable silence.

“So... Should we turn left now?”

Hearing his master, the elemental looked in that direction. The path was literally still smoldering from the traps they activated within the hour; they were walking in circles.

“Already took that direction last time. Look for marks on wall.”

The elemental clawed one of the corners, forming three shallow indentures in the stone, fairly visible under a lamp’s light.

“Good thinking, that way we won’t get lost”

Hours passed making and undoing paths, changing direction whenever they came across markings. Eventually tiredness got to them and they decided to take a long rest in one of the big rooms (after making sure it was trap free). Being Zekke’s first quest, the kid had brought supplies for just one day of dungeoneering, and hadn’t packed a single bed roll. The servant watched his master lay on the hard cobble floor, shivering with cold.

“Does the master need anything?”

“N-no, n-no. It’s just a little cold, it’ll pass. Don’t worry about it.”

Master’s orders, he mustn’t worry about it.

Still, as time marched on, Master's shivers only worsened, accompanied by growing trembling as they braced himself to conserve heat, which they would lose in their condensed breaths. The construct couldn't tear his sight away from the form of his master. And against direct orders, he worried.

Gently, he slid closer to his master making little more noise than a small stream. He contoured his body around his master's and spoons him, letting his water gently rush against his skin, isolating it from the snapfreeze dungeon air.. Sensing his intentions, his soulbound twin emitted a warm glow from the gem, illuminating the sleeping master's face. Slowly, his master stopped shivering. His eyes opened half-asleep and stared at him. The servant worried of having made a mistake, instead, Zekke shifted in his cradle, they pulled themselves closer and rested their head on the rounded stones of his chest cleft, using it as a pillow.

Murmuring an unintelligible thanks, they slipped back to sleep. This time, peacefully.

'What just happened? I disobeyed a direct order from my Master but that was the right call. And this time I didn't feel forced to help him but I just... did? Even the happiness I feel seems different, like it's actually my own.' He gently maneuvered an arm to rest on their back without waking them up. *'What is this feeling? I hope I'm not the one broken'* That night the elemental stood guard to make sure nothing happened to his beloved master.

The following morning is mostly uneventful. Mostly trial and error and avoiding traps while they look for some treasure. The servant construct keeps himself closer to his master, pointing out the most evident traps and explaining how best to disable them safely.

In the afternoon however the trap density spiked to levels the elemental was vaguely familiar with. Trap density is always proportional to their proximity with treasure rooms, which means their journey was almost at a close. Something nagged at the back of his mind, but his master's excitement was far more appropriate to focus on.

"With the money we get, maybe I can buy myself a new spell tome, or my own magic staff. It's nothing like a normal staff you see..."

The elemental simply nodded.

"Now don't think I'll spend it all on me. You're the one who pulled his back the most to get us here, so it's only fair you get a big part. We could find you some new armbands, or a big golden necklace wrapped around your neck. That could look cool too. What would you prefer?"

"Whatever Master deems necessary, I will desire."

Zekke rolled his eyes. "C'mon, there's got to be at least something that you like."

"Hmmm, perhaps... The necklace could have its share of practical uses."

"Necklace then, got it."

The Master's repetitive attempts to treat him more personally never ceased to intrigue him. If this was a test he should have long passed it, and yet Master stopped every time they could to "get to know him". Charming in a way, but these conversations left him feeling tingly all over in a way he couldn't explain. Just a look at his master's excitement though, was enough to convince him these talks were worth any possible side effects. Anything for his master, afterall.

"Hey look, treasure!"

Ahead of them the path opened into a massive room, from which came a bright golden shimmer. From this far away identifying the cause was impossible, but it had to be something truly important. And here important things were closely guarded.

The construct's hollow voice came from behind. **"No. Perception check first."**

"Oh come on, we already found like 6 traps so far, what are the chances they got more?"

Not adding another word, the construct picked them up and encased them in a glowing orb carrying it atop their head and walked toward the treasure. He didn't even flinch when spikes and other traps sprung up that could slay a lesser mortal, simply walking through them and continuing to lumber onwards toward their goal.

A pair of silvery bracelets.

Wait...

He'd been here before.

"Come on, don't just stand there like a statue." Master was inspecting one of them.

"Look at these stats! They more than double anything I have right now!" This sense of repetition made his stomach turn.

"*'Bonded familiar'*. Hey this could help you a lot!"

Realization struck him like lightning. **"NO!!"** Before he knew it, he'd dashed up to his master and smacked the gauntlets out of his hands. The artifacts clattered to the ground, getting damaged beyond use.

Master Zekke was shaken by the unexpected outburst and looked at him with fear..

"Wh-what was that for?!"

With the rush of fear ebbing away, his neutral nature took back control and reflected on what he'd done. He'd scared his master and ruined their rightfully earned spoils. He'd been a bad servant. Dread closed around his neck, choking him in guilt. He only had one job: to **SERVE**, and he couldn't do that.

No. He had not failed. Besides mindlessly servitude, his prime directive was to make sure his master was safe and sound; and now he was, he rationalized.

“Had to protect the master.” He steeled his voice.

“Protect me?” They looked at the ruined pair of armbands confused “It was just loot, and a very powerful one! If you didn’t want it you could have just told me and we would have sold it.”

Master’s naivety continued to surprise him, selling cursed items, even obviously, was heavily punished and experts could smell the taint in the item’s magic. *‘Maybe if the Master was to sell them on the black market... No, respectfully, Master didn’t look cut for that shady business. Then again who would willingly buy cursed gear?’*

“Unlikely sell, powerful curse.”

Zekke’s eyes went wide.

“Are you saying the bands are cursed?”

“Yes, indeed. Very old magic. Quick. Effective.”

His own transformation was proof of that, the elemental thought. Those moments as his twin and soulbond carefully crafted him into a more fitting shape replayed in his mind. Now those actions seemed normal; if the master was changing and he had no way of stopping it, how could he not make their change pleasant? Thankfully he wouldn’t have to put that to the test..

“Warps body, mind, soul of victim. Normal magic can’t dispel.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. How do you know all of this?”

The elemental didn’t respond at first, almost biting back the information.

“I experience curse.” He rumbled in a neutral tone, and once again fidgeted with his armbands.

Zekke looked at them and then back at the suspiciously similar garments they almost put on. Their eyes flew open. Everything made sense now! The disabled traps, the torn clothings, the vagrant friendly elemental in the dungeon, and his reaction when they found the armbands. If the elemental hadn’t knocked them off their hands...

They shuddered.

“So you were turned into an elemental, were you human before?”

An irrelevant question, but one his master demanded to know. The construct politely bowed his head. *‘Wait, master is looking at me weird, have I done something wrong?’*

“Wh-why didn’t you say anything before?”

“I...”

Another senseless question, was the Master testing him?

“Not relevant to serve Master. Was human before, but I’m not anymore.” He shrugged.

“Ah, I see... Can I at least know your name?”

“Master, Elementals don’t have-”

“No, no. I mean your human name.”

On instinct, the elemental tried to recall, but his head swam with dread as he prodded a forbidden recess of his mind. Important **DANGEROUS** information was locked away there. Possibly **USELESS** and **OUT OF HIS SCOPE**. His own mind aimed to drive him out.

The elemental tried to formulate words, but he could only curse in Aquan.

“You remember, right?”

“It’s not that I don’t remember, it’s-” A chastising mental flail tumbled down his train of thought. How shameful, a familiar would never raise their voice against their master. The elemental squared up and resumed in a stoic voice. **“That knowledge is forbidden.”**

“Really? By who?”

“...I do not know.”

His master frowned, appearing to be deep in thought. Suddenly his eyes lit up.

“But.. that someone would not be more important than your ‘Master’, right?”

What is he-

“Certainly not, Master”

“Good! In that case, you would listen to me if those morals contradicted, right?”

Cunning bastard.

“Master, are you ordering me to retrieve my human name?” The elemental’s neutral voice sounded almost intrigued.

“That’s exactly what I’m ordering.”

With his master’s blessing, the construct looked within his psyche unobstructed. Deep inside he found a name he had almost forgotten **“Bayron”**. It barely represented anything to him anymore, the man it belonged to was no more and that name was the only thing of his remaining. Why complicate things?

“It’s best I give it away, elementals have no names. Human name distracting-”

“You should keep it.”

He lowered himself to better see the small human.

“What is it, master?”

“Your name. You should keep it. Even if you’re not human anymore you can’t just toss away everything you were before, you know?”

Not... toss it away? Thoughts and priorities jumbled in his head trying to make sense why a Master would want to give more individuality to their servant. Why would a servant need to carry the burden of such unnecessary thoughts clogging its mind? It served a sole purpose and that was to fulfill all of its master’s whims. That’s what a servant did, It served.

“But I’m just a servant.”

“You put your life on the line to save my skin from many traps. Servant’s don’t do that, friends; however, do. I’m not asking you this as your master, but as your friend.”

The elemental was ready to give in his role and completely forsake his humanity. Now he was presented with a new chance. Fighting against the subservient thoughts he spoke with slightly more emotion in his voice.

“M-master, are you sure? It might take away from my efficiency in fulfilling your orders.”

“Of course I am. I trust your judgment, Byron.”

Master had spoken.

Bayron’s doubts peeled back to a corner of his mind, and for once in this body he felt like himself, mostly. As the invisible force shaping his thoughts let go, Bayron felt a sense of warmth swell in his chest. He looked up to his savior, his master, his friend.

“Thank you, Master. Thank you so much.”

“Are you... yourself again? You keep calling me Master.”

“I am better than I was, Master. Serving you...Protecting you, I feel purpose, and now that purpose is not forced on me I can choose to embrace it completely.”

“Are you sure about that?” Zekke asked, flustered.

Bayron pulled his human closer, gently holding him in a hug.

“I am, Master.”

Zekke relaxed into his construct’s burly arms, feeling safe surrounded by a massive wall of stone and water. A smile tugged on the edge of his lips as he stared up at his protector.

“Well, in that case I wouldn’t mind being your Master for some time, friend.”

Both returned from the Maze of Unpredictability as changed men in more ways than one, but they never left each other's side. Zekkes relationship with Bayron continued to grow. "Friends" couldn't describe it, the feeling that they felt towards the familiar. "lovers" didn't fit either, even if some other, less open-minded mages felt their physical consummation was nothing more than lustful fulfillment. The truth was simply too all-encompassing to give a label. The two were the same sides of a single soul, magically linked now and forevermore. The Familiar always seemed to be the one to risk their life for the Summoner, but the feeling was mutual. The Summoner would gladly go to the same lengths for lumbering hunk of arcane energy that fought for them.

They were partners in a commitment larger than either of them. Magically bound, their connection was tighter than sacred matrimony while lacking all the useless fanfare and expensive trinkets. Only one single crystal from the construct given to the young mage was enough to be bound to him as his familiar. Symbiosis, neither of them would live without the other now; not because they couldn't, but because they didn't want to.

The End.