



The Dawn of the Witch

The Graduation Exam and the Winds of War

3

By Kakeru Kobashiri
Art by Takashi Iwasaki

Original Design of Select Characters by
Yoshinori Shizuma

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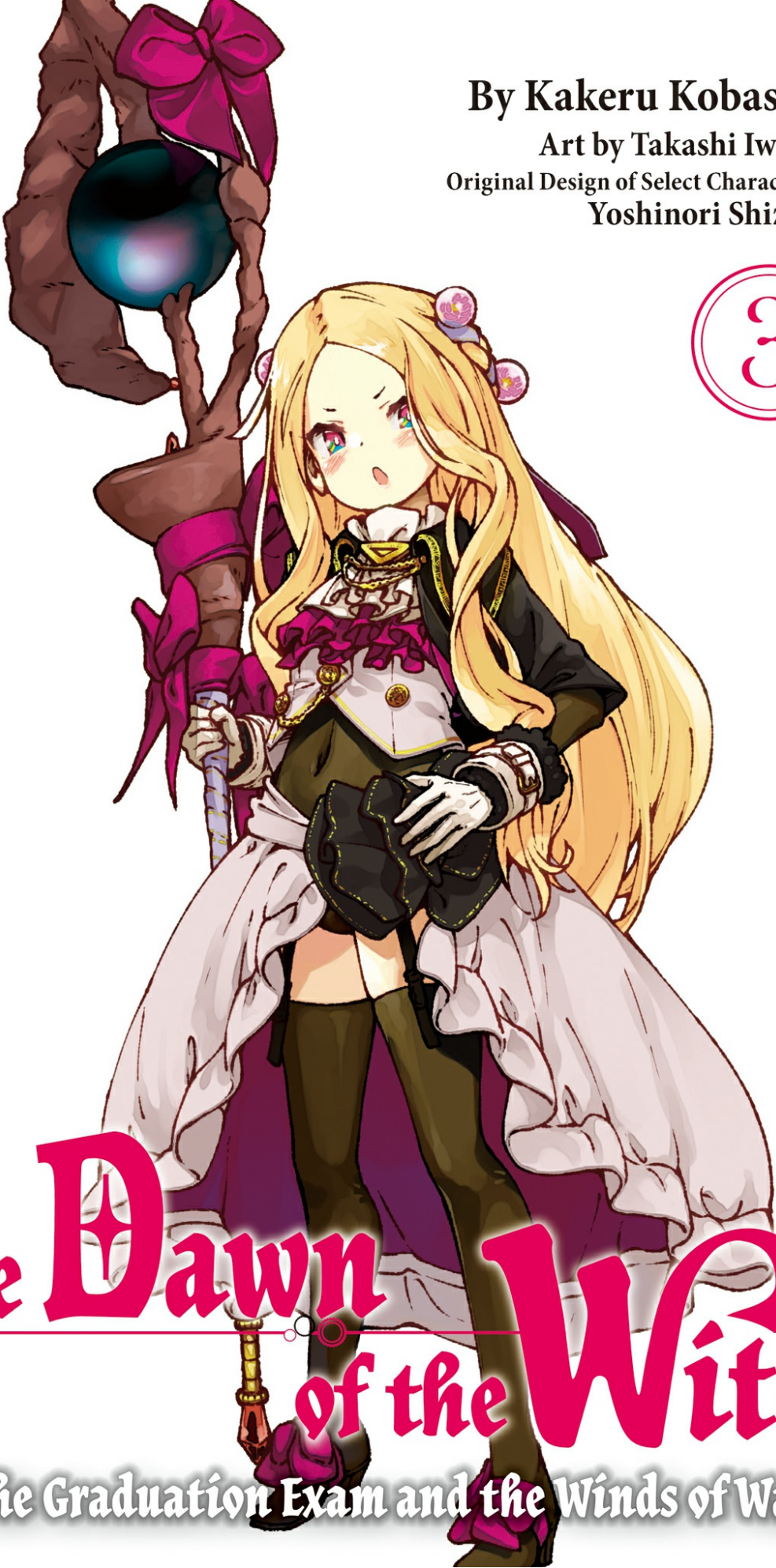
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Loux Krystas

*The stage is set.
All is in readiness for the curtain
to go up.
Loux Krystas drew in a deep breath.
Then:*

"Say hello, Ludens."

*The witch gave a terribly theatric
and reverent bow, seen by no one.*



"Heed my call!"

Behind them, a resounding incantation seemed to herald the advent of death itself, and the arrows of light rained down from the heavens.

Hort

"Zahard Loph'd!
Fly swift, fly true!
Chapter of Hunting,
Verse Two—Steim!
Heed my call!"

Saybil

"Heed my call!"

Kudo



"Aaargh, I've had it!
I can't kill this bastard,
no matter how many
times I try!
Sorry, Witch!
Mind lendin' me
a hand?"

"Leave it to me.
I may not look it, but
destroying demons is
my specialty."

Zero

Mercenary

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KODANSHA

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A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

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Witch

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Chapter One



“Then I think I might like Professor Los.”

Hort was surprised at how little Saybil’s declaration shocked her. She could count on two hands the entire cast of characters whose names Saybil knew, and one would suffice for those he might consider potential love interests.

And his actual love interest, as it turned out, wasn’t Hort—she herself had denied the possibility. But could what Saybil felt for Professor Los truly be called romantic love? The ancient witch had protected them and led them all the way from the Academy of Magic to the Witch’s Village. Everyone loved her, and Hort was no exception—she loved Los dearly. But is that really the same thing?

She’s a lot older than she looks, you know. I think you’re talking about respect, Sayb, not love.

These thoughts stood ready at the tip of Hort’s tongue, but they went no further. She was scared of shutting down this romantic feeling that Saybil had finally, *finally*, begun to recognize.

“Love is something you just fall into,” or so the girls and boys Hort’s age would say, with dazzling smiles on their lips. But Hort knew that didn’t hold true for everyone—it hadn’t for her. Hers had started with a tiny twinge, a slight preference over others. Gradually, that feeling had grown into a crush. Small moments of affection accumulated, until one day, one instant, she’d realized she was in love. Hort didn’t know if the seeds of love in Saybil’s heart would ever grow, but even if they bore no flowers, they would nourish his next love.

That's just how it went.

"Sayb!" Hort clutched Saybil's hands. "I get it. Professor Los is, like, suuuper, super adorable! If I were a guy, I'm *positive* I would've fallen head over heels for her! I mean, I totally do love her now!"

"So, you're in love with Professor Los, too?"

"Nooope! I'm, you know, all about you..."

"Oh, right," Saybil murmured, sounding somehow troubled. "Sorry... I'm probably really hurting your feelings right now, but...I don't know what to do..."

"It's...It's fiiine! You're free to like whoever you want, Sayb! If anything, I'm really happy you opened up to me about liking Professor Los!"

"You're happy...?"

"Sooo much happier than if you'd been like, 'That's none of your business, Hort.' And this means I get to help my crush go after the person he likes, right? Wouldn't that make you feel, like, really special?"

Hort flashed a smile so perfect that the girl reflected in Saybil's eyes almost fooled her, too.

Saybil studied her intently. "...You're really cute, Hort. And so kind."

"It's not an accident, you know! I work hard at it!"

"You're really incredible. I've known you were awesome since the first time we met, but...the more I get to know you, the more amazing I think you are. I wish I could be like you."

"Ohh? Wanna get a little smile practice in? All right, say cheese!" Hort pushed up the corner of Saybil's mouth with her fingers, but his expression only stiffened slightly, still falling far short of anything anyone could call a smile.

“That’s so weird... I’m pretty sure you’re not, like, incapable of smiling...”



“It’s hard for me to bust one out on demand.”

“Then you’ve just gotta have tons of fun and get used to them coming naturally! Sayb, what kinds of things do you wanna do with Professor Los? What do you think would make you smile?”

“Huh? I dunno...”

“You ‘dunno’...?! Th-There’s gotta be *something*!! You’ve got to have, like, *some* idea!”

“Not really... I mean... It’s not like there’s anything special I particularly want to do. I’m seriously fine with the way things’ve been...”

“Hmm... Yeah, I guess that makes sense! That actually sounds right to me! Sorry, I got ahead of myself!” Saybil wasn’t only a beginner at love—he was a beginner at human relationships in general. Maybe it was only natural he didn’t concretely know what he wanted to do, or be, with the object of his affection.

“But...But you know, one day, you might get the urge to take your relationship to the next level, and want to do more and more special things together. And when that happens, I’ll be here to talk you through it. Promise me, okay? Promise me you’ll come to me first for love advice!”

“Okay. I’d swear it on a sorcerer’s blood contract.”

“So dramatic!” Hort laughed and clapped Saybil on the shoulder—a strong, manly shoulder that paired well with his height and unchanging expression, all of which gave him something of a stoic air. And yet, he was so helpless. Hort couldn’t help but want to protect him, and his love.

Is this what they mean by “a fool for love”?

“Hrm?” Suddenly sensing something strange, Hort raised her head. *I could’ve*

sworn I felt someone leave the house just now.

“Hort?”

“I-It’s nothing. So, you gonna head over to Professor Zero’s place?”

Saybil had apparently recovered his missing memories the night before when the Tyrant had kidnapped and nearly killed him. And neither apprentice could imagine a more appropriate person to discuss this development with than their proctor, Zero, the Mud-Black Witch.

After all, the Academy is definitely hiding something from Sayb.

Hort was practically positive Saybil hadn’t actually lost his memories—the Academy of Magic had sealed them away. There was no way they could have overlooked the startling fact of Saybil’s limitless store of magical power, much less chosen to do nothing with that information. Saybil hadn’t even taken the Academy’s rigorous entrance exam. Which meant the Academy must’ve ushered him in.

“Are you okay going alone? Want me to come? You’re just getting over those awful injuries...”

“No, I’ll go by myself. I’m still kinda...scared, I guess.”

“Scared?”

“You know... Of you finding out.”

Hort was thunderstruck. Saybil had just, in essence, said that her opinion mattered to him. He was afraid of what she might think, and he hated the thought of her having a negative image of him. The realization made Hort very happy.

“R-Right, right! You did say it was something you didn’t exactly want to

remember.”

“I think I will want to tell you one day, though. That is, I think I’ll have to.”

“Okay. And whenever that day comes, I’ll be ready to listen. I want to know. And I’ll always be on your side, Sayb, no matter what happened in your past. Truth is, I’m *dying* to know right now, but I’ll be patient and wait ‘til you’re ready to talk about it.”

“Thanks,” Saybil breathed. “I wish there was something I could do for you, too... You’re always the one helping *me* out.”

“Yeah? Then, could I ask for my morning mana top-up? Things have been non-stop crazy since yesterday, and it never really seemed like the time to ask.”

“Oh, right... Kudo left for the clinic before I could give him his, either. I wonder if he’s okay.”

“Maybe you should drop in and see him later.” Hort held out her hand to Saybil, who took it in his, just like always. Then, he froze.

“...Sayb?”

“I can’t do it.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, Hort. I...I just...” White as a sheet, Saybil released Hort’s hand. Though his expression remained as emotionally impoverished as always, it somehow felt incredibly tense as well.

“Th-That’s totally okay, Sayb! Sorry, I guess you can’t be feeling a hundred percent after you got hurt so badly! And here I am, being so insensitive...!”

“N-No, that’s not it. It’s just...” Saybil backed away a few paces, looking terrified.

Hort was utterly confused.

“Sorry, I...I’m gonna head to Professor Zero’s place.” Saybil rushed out the door, seemingly pursued by his tormented thoughts.

“Sayb, wait!” Hort started to follow, but stopped short. Even if she did go after him in that moment, she wouldn’t be able to help. And mere moments ago she’d promised to wait until he was ready to talk. Hort’s shoulders sagged, weighed down by a sense of helplessness.

Then she, too, stepped out the door—to track down the “other presence” she’d felt.

+ + +

I shall make as if I heard nothing.

Loux Krystas, who had been eavesdropping on her students from the shadows, slipped out of the house even more cautiously than she’d slunk in, then scurried off. She’d wanted nothing more than a front row seat to watch love blossom between these young, innocent youths; the thought that she herself might become an obstacle to that love had never crossed her mind.

“...Yes, well... To be perfectly frank, ’twas not an *entirely* unexpected twist, I must admit. I am, as all can plainly see, a ravishing young lass. And the love between educator and pupil is a tried-and-true tale, as old as the hills.”

And yet, in her way, Los had done all she could to prevent something like this from happening. Three hundred years she had lived, traveling from North to

South and back again, making the acquaintance of many a character along the way. To claim that in the course of these meetings and partings none had offered her their love would be untrue. She had never returned such affections, however—not even once. She was incapable of it.

It was for this reason—or only partly so—that she adopted such a dramatic flair, and preferred such extravagant mannerisms: to advertise to those around her that she was not really a part of their world.

Los was, in a word, a supporting character. Though she joined the other actors onstage, she did not participate in their stories. Though she interacted with the audience, she did not exist offstage. She appeared between acts to address the audience directly, her fanciful costume and way of speaking at odds with the universe of the show itself. All of it was a performance intended to convince people, in a way words alone never could, of her peculiar place in the world. Others had (if they were lucky) a hundred short years in which to make the most of what life had to offer, but with the Staff of Ludens by her side, Los's existence would go on indefinitely—and so she experienced life at an entirely different pace.

“Nevertheless, perhaps I share a portion of the blame in this instance. Wouldst not say, little Ludens? Have I become too charming for my own good?”

Los wandered into the forest in search of solitude. Peering into the lake, she saw reflected there a face she'd grown tired of after three long centuries. She had fled from every previous offer of love, surreptitiously vanishing from whatever group, and pressing on as if nothing at all had happened. It was the least troublesome way of dealing with the situation, after all. This time, however, she could not help but feel it would be a terrible shame to wander away from the village without a backward glance.

I want to see whither my fledglings fly, to watch a little longer yet.

So Los would act as if she had heard nothing.

At least, that was the plan.

“Professor Los, you’ve gotta hear this! Sayb says he’s in love with you!”

Hort leapt out from the thicket, bowling Los over with her momentum and sending the witch plunging headfirst into the lake.

“Professor Los?!”

“Aaaaargh, thou hast ruined iit! The tender thoughts of secret love are as dust before the wind of a young lass’s passions!!”

Brushing off the hand Hort rushed over to offer, Los crawled out of the lake. Thanks to the Staff of Ludens, neither the witch’s hair nor clothing had gotten wet.

“Amazing!” Hort cried excitedly when she saw this, but Los was in no mood to brag about the particulars of such a feat.

“Young Hort, the object of another’s love is not to be bandied about so readily. Sayb did not ask thee to convey this message to me, did he?”

“The fact that it doesn’t surprise you means you *were* the one in the house, huh. I *knew* someone was in there! And I was totally right!”

Los’s eyes widened slightly. It occurred to her that she might feign ignorance, but her curiosity at the questions this news posed overcame her desire to hide the truth.

“What a curious assertion. Even should we presume I had stolen into the dormitory, I can hide my presence completely. Thou shouldst have no means of

detecting it.”

“But I can tell when someone’s there ’cos the movement of the air changes.”

“The movement of the air?”

“Doesn’t it feel funny to you when something, like, human-shaped blocks the flow of air in a spot that should be empty? I might not’ve noticed if you’d hadn’t moved, but you left halfway through, so I felt the currents shift.”

Los shut her mouth. A talented witch could indeed conceal herself such that no one could detect her presence—no one, that is, but another talented witch. Once they had polished their senses to perfection, witches could hear a single feather land on snow, could read currents of air weaving in and around obstacles.

Mere days ago, she was a fledgling who hardly knew up from down, and yet...

“Young Hort... What has Mud-Black been teaching thee?”

“What do you mean...? Ever since I hit Mercenary with my spell, I’ve been working on nothing but magic control.”

“Naught but control? Can this be true?”

“H-Hey, is it really so hard to believe?! Of course it’s true, c’mon!”

“Thou sayest it in passing as if ’twere of no significance, but thou hast accomplished something truly remarkable. If canst perceive even *my* presence, there are very few who might yet deceive thy senses.”

Hort blinked several times. Then her eyes narrowed. “Are you sure you’re not just over-selling yourself, Professor Los?” she asked, trading doubt for doubt.

Los brandished her staff. “I am an ancient witch who has walked this land for more than three hundred years!! I am irrefutably amazing!”

“But you don’t have any mana, right? Which is why you can’t use sorcery or magic?”

“Aargh! Thou wouldst make sport of me?! ’Tis all the more proof of my brilliance. I detest inadvertent encounters. At the very least, none in this village save Mud-Black and her Mercenary could detect me, should I choose to hide my presence.”



“Huh? Mercenary, too?”

“He may seem a fluffy-duffy furball, but that one is far more dangerous than he appears. Should thy spell have struck a little deeper, it might very well have been *thy* life that was forfeit.”

“You mean...because Professor Zero might’ve killed me?”

“No. I speak not of vengeance. ’Twould have been almost entirely instinctive. Much like with my dear little Ludens.”

“You mean he’s...demon-bound? Mercenary?”

“I cannot say for certain. Nevertheless, *something* resides within him. My little Ludens trembles with fear whenever we come face to face.”

Something horribly empty, a bottomless presence—

This small village boasted both the witch who had saved the world and her personal sellsword—it would strain credulity to assume there *wasn’t* more than met the eye. Los had not yet managed to quiet the underlying sense of incongruity she felt at such great figures settling in this quaint community.

’Tis no wonder, then, that in training here, my chicks would emerge as great eagles within a matter of days. And yet—

“Tell me thou art not dabbling in anything dangerous. That Mud-Black has a pernicious habit of looking too much to her own capabilities as a baseline for others.”

“I don’t know about dangerous, but... Well... A little unfair, maybe?”

“Unfair?”

“Like, these days I’ve been releasing a constant trickle of magic. But regulating my output *super* carefully. Because of that, it gives me a start whenever the air

shifts even just a little, you know? Ordinarily I wouldn't be able to train like this 'cos I'd run out of mana, but you know, we've got Sayb, so..."

"'Tis a far more reckless thing than I feared!! One slip in thy concentration and thine output could go out of control! Couldst cause great harm!"

"*I know!* That's exactly why I'm training like this, so I don't do any damage even if my concentration *does* slip! Plus, I'm practicing with harmless spells that won't hurt anybody if I mess up!"

"Even so..."

"But forget about that," Hort said. "What're you gonna *do*, Professor Los?! About Sayb!"

"Th-There is nothing *to* do... Young Sayb did not intend to share his secret with me. I could hardly act upon something I heard only by chance."

"So you're not gonna run off somewhere?" Hort asked, her tone simultaneously searching and somehow accusatory.

Los blinked again. *This day is full of surprises.*

"Young Hort, what exactly concerns thee?"

"I mean, you ran away, didn't you? As soon as you heard what Sayb said..."

"Ran a...? Nay, I merely decided to act as if I had not heard a peep. I was not intending to flee, as such..."

"The thing is, I was raised by the Church."

"Another sudden turn in the conversation?!"

"It's *totally* related! Let me finish!"

In the face of Hort's scolding, Los settled in to listen.

“So we had this teacher at the Church, right, this really, really nice lady, and one of the kids started to have a crush on her... Fell, like, crazy hard for her... The teacher turned her down, obviously, but the kid got super depressed and stopped wanting to study or do anything...so our teacher quit teaching entirely.”

“A believable enough tale. Thus thou didst suspect I would also run away? That I would follow in the steps of thy teacher at the Church and abandon you three?”

“Uh huh...”

“Preposterous...! Or so I would like to say. But I have a great love of keen perception. Thou art correct, young Hort—I am indeed the sort of professor who would abscond, just as thou dost fear.”

“I *knew* it! I figured you’d probably love watching a student and teacher fall in love, but would absolutely *hate* it if it happened to you!” Suddenly, tears welled in Hort’s eyes, and she threw her arms around Los. “Don’t go! I don’t want you to go! Plus, think of what it’d do to poor Sayb if you left! If he figured out the person he’s crushing on ran away *because* he fell for her, he’d be too terrified to ever love again!”

“Calm thyself, young Hort. Under normal circumstances, I would admittedly depart post haste to avoid any bothersome complications. I have not yet tired of watching you three, however.”

“So, you’re not just gonna disappear? You won’t abandon us?”

“Truly, thou art the very picture of a poor, clinging babe. Dost have so little faith in me?”

“I meaaan...” Hort childishly puffed up her cheeks, which Los then pinched

and yanked.

Born with antlers, abhorred by her mother, and persecuted by the Church, this young girl had been sent into enemy territory only to garner great expectations for her talent, and was now on her way to becoming a witch of unrivaled prowess.

It must be terrifying for her to wield such overwhelming power, and yet have no one to turn to, nowhere to call home. How could anyone abandon this little chick, trembling so in fear of the world?

“Young Hort, dost thou see in me the mother that delivered thee unto the Church and disappeared, or the clergy who tossed thee into the Academy of Magic?”

“N-No, but still...! I’m nervous...” she whispered, vigorously rubbing away her tears.

Had she always cried this easily? To Los, it seemed Hort had behaved more like a grown-up when they first met. Perhaps being surrounded by people she could trust had allowed her to relax that facade, as if reclaiming the childhood she never got to experience. *Rejoice in my pardon!* Los thought, smiling to herself. She held no rancor for regression, if it was for the sake of growth.

“Someday I shall leave this place. While that fact remains unchanged, I shall not fail to inform thee before my departure. Let us cry and wail and rue our parting when the time comes.”

“...Would you swear that on a sorcerer’s blood contract?”

“Without hesitation! A promise once made I never break,” Los declared, puffing out her chest. At that, Hort sniffled and finally released the witch’s tiny frame.

“Hngh... It’s okay. We don’t need a blood contract. I believe you, Professor Los.”

“How very mature of thee, young Hort. Well done, well done.”

“Aargh! Kudo’d never let me hear the end of it if he found out about this...!”

Just then, a scream rang out from the village. Los and Hort turned to each other.

That voice...

“Was that Kudo...?!”

“Unless I’m mistaken, young Kudo is at the clinic...treating that miscreant from the anti-witch faction!”

The two raced off toward the village.

2

A little earlier...

“Professor Zero!” Saybil cried, panting as he ran into Zero’s shop on the outskirts of town.

“I’ve been waiting for you, young man.” Two cups of tea sat steaming on the table, as if Zero had known Saybil would be coming. The witch gestured toward the chair opposite her, but Saybil remained standing where he was.

“I...I, um—my memories, they...”

“They have returned, I expect? The spell was broken last night, after all,” Zero said, tossing the pieces of what looked like a shattered glass marble onto the

table.

“So...you sealed away my memories?”

Saybil’s recollections had begun with his meeting with Albus, just before he enrolled at the Royal Academy of Magic. All he’d had aside from that was a fragment of the scene when he’d first met Zero. Somewhere deep down, he’d always known Zero must have had something to do with his amnesia.

“Why?” he asked. “Um, that is... Not why did you *do* it, but why did *you* do it...?”

I can kind of guess the reason she sealed away those memories. They’re horrendous. I wish they’d stayed forgotten. So if it was Professor Zero who locked them away, I’m sure it was out of kindness. But–

“Because that was your wish.”

Zero’s unexpected response only made Saybil that much more confused.

“Sit, young man. Then we can talk.” Once again, Zero gestured toward the seat.

This time Saybil accepted it, and took a sip of the hot tea. It calmed his nerves a little.

Zero said nothing. Saybil remained silent also, unsure of where to start, so at length the witch began to speak in a leisurely voice.

“This day came sooner than I’d expected.”

“It...did?”

“And you seem less perturbed than I’d feared.”

“No, I mean, I was pretty much freaking out.” Saybil had raced over in a full-on panic, sprinting until he ran out of breath. Though he hadn’t been able to

fully work out what he wanted to ask her, all Saybil knew was that he *had* to see Zero.

The witch gave a satisfied smile. “That is true. You were indeed rather flustered. But you did not tremble with fear, nor did you let despair claim your spirit.” She paused. “I am gratified. You have gained the strength to resist the crushing weight of your memories.”

“The weight of...my memories?”

“Unspeakably painful recollections can at times become a poison that eats away at our bodies and souls from within.”

“That’s... Yes, I get that.” The stench of his mother’s blood still lingered in Saybil’s nose. He could see the witch melting away before his eyes, her final screams echoing in his ears.

“By the time I found you, you recalled nothing of the incident. When I asked where your mother was, you said you didn’t know. You had already sealed off the memories of that tragic day before I locked anything away.”

“Huh? Then what memories did you...?”

“Those of the days after you were orphaned, when you wandered lost, until you were taken off the streets only to be treated like a slave.”

That’s right. It’s all coming back to me—my life after that awful night. Another day, another beating.

And yet, every time Saybil was berated for his incompetence or treated as if he were worthless, he felt a sense of relief. He’d internalized that assessment somewhere deep in his subconscious, using it to fuel the belief that he was not to blame for the deaths of his mother and that witch.

“I...think I probably...chose...to live in those awful circumstances...”

It's not as if no one had tried to help Saybil, to lift the boy out of a life in which he was treated no better than livestock. But he had brushed aside every helping hand that was offered.

"Yes... You feared the prospect of salvation and embraced your torturous conditions. When I told you I would take you to a place that befitted you, you responded, 'This place fits me best.' Though sealed away and out of reach, your tragic memories had deeply entrenched themselves within your mind and were leading you down the path to a slow death. This is why you needed to make a clean break, to start from scratch."

Saybil thought back to that moment amid the pouring rain when Zero had welcomed him into her warm, enveloping cloak. He had rejected her help. He'd feared her bluish-purple eyes—eyes like his own. And yet, the next thing he knew, Zero had wrapped him in her mantle and whisked him away in a most witch-like fashion.

Saybil looked at the shattered fragments of her sorcery that lay on the table before him.

"'Any memories you truly need will return to you.' That's what both you and Headmaster Albus told me when I asked about my amnesia. So why did I need them yesterday? The Tyrant was just trying to kidnap me."

"I suspect that, faced with life-threatening danger, you reached for the most similar memory you possessed: recollections of another day when your life was on the line. And—" Here Zero reached out and rested her five fingers against Saybil's temple. "You fought to survive. You refused to allow malice to sweep you away, and you took control. You racked your brain for a means to fight, even if it meant dredging up memories full of nothing but anguish."

"I fought to survive...?" Saybil touched his other temple.

“Young man, you are no longer empty.”

What had Saybil thought about, stuffed inside a sack on the back of that wagon?

I thought about how I didn't want anybody to get hurt trying to save me.

I thought about how there were people trying to save me.

I thought about my mother, who died in the attempt.

“...My mom died because of me.”

“I know. I saw where it happened.”

“Huh?”

“The first task I set myself after learning of your existence was to discover your hideaway. By the time I finally did, however, you were nowhere to be found. All I found were the remains of two witches. I buried your mother as best I could. And I...took out the ‘trash’ as well.”

Zero smiled, and Saybil felt a heavy weight lift from his chest. “Thank you,” he whispered. The witch slid her fingers down and caressed Saybil’s cheek with her thumb.

“I searched for you—with everything I had. I must say, you didn’t make it easy for me. I could hardly believe it. Not only had you locked up your memories and sealed away your magical power, but you were living in a Church town, which meant that not even a demon with the sight of a thousand eyes could scry it for me. Having essentially nothing to go on, I was left with no choice but to search for you the old-fashioned way—on foot.” Zero chuckled mischievously. “But at least you—”

“Had your eyes...?”

Zero smiled. Saybil had never met anyone else with the same color eyes as his. And his mother had warned him about it.

“My mother told me to stay away from a witch with eyes like mine, that she would take everything from me. What did she mean? She also said my father was a bad man.”

Zero looked a little taken aback. “Your mother was truly a sagacious and prudent woman, and she clearly loved you very deeply.” The witch’s blue-purple eyes—the eyes she shared with Saybil—stared off into some unknown distance, their lids heavy as if with sleep. “As I told you before, your father was an extraordinarily gifted sorcerer. But...yes. I cannot deny your mother’s charge that he was a ‘bad man.’ Your father would stop at nothing to achieve his goals, and he had no respect for the value of human life.”

“Then why would my mother...?”

“Your father sought her support, and in exchange gave her the reward she desired: a child. Namely you. That much I can definitively say based on diary entries and testimony from other witches.”

“Why would a child be such a reward?”

“Talent in the magical arts is hereditary. A child born of the union between a great sorcerer and a great witch stands a high chance of exceeding both their parents’ gifts. However, there are far fewer skilled sorcerers than there are witches. Sorcerers are few and far between to begin with—at least, they were around the time of your birth.”

Suddenly, a grotesque suspicion seized Saybil. “Does...that mean my father might have... You know... Had lots of other children...with other witches, too?”

The only plausible solution for overcoming a steep difference in population

between witches and sorcerers would be for one sorcerer to bear children with many witches. Did that mean Saybil had a whole host of siblings whose faces and names he might never know?

Zero chuckled at the apprentice mage's innocent question. "I feared the same. And yet, his records mentioned only you—and his records are infallible. He would never have falsified them for any reason. And the truth is, your mother held special importance for him, too."

"Special?"

"As the one who would 'create' you." The silver-haired witch gently closed her eyes. When she slowly opened them once more, their bluish-purple hue stood out strikingly. "These eyes are rather unusual, you know. My older brother and I inherited them from our father."

"Your brother...? Wait, then that means you're—!"

"Yes, I am your aunt—your blood kin. My brother and I were each other's last and only siblings. We understood each other in a way no one else could. As a result, he could be somewhat...eccentric when it came to me. I do not doubt he would have destroyed the entire world for my sake," she said, seeming more weary than proud as she spoke of him. The exasperation felt warm, however, not tainted with hatred. Her tone clearly indicated she was talking about family. The thought tickled something in Saybil.

"Your deep well of mana is an extension of this, too. It was devised as a gift for me. I believe my brother theorized that mixing his blood with your mother's would result in a child with limitless magical power. Sensing this, your mother fled. She took you and stole away into the forest, hiding and striving to ensure no one ever learned of your existence."

“Oh, so that’s why...” my mother said my father was a bad man, and told me to stay away from a witch with eyes like mine. Huh. Is that all there was to it?
“That’s a lot less awful than I’d expected.”

“The lineage my father contrived for you forced you into a traumatic childhood. ‘Awful’ does not begin to cover it.”

“That doesn’t really bother me. Honestly, I’m just relieved it wasn’t about you.”

“About me?”

“The reason my mother was so wary of you. It was all my father’s doing, and my mother just figured you might pose a danger, too... Right?”

Zero looked at Saybil with a complicated expression. “You don’t blame me?”

“It may have been for your ‘sake,’ but it wasn’t your ‘fault.’ I can’t tell you how happy it makes me just to know you’re not my enemy.”

Relaxing the clenched fist that rested on the table, Zero gently tucked a silver lock behind her ear. “You’re so alike.”

“Me and my father?”

“Indeed. Only in his favorable aspects, of course,” Zero added. “Does that make you uncomfortable, young man?”

“No, I want to hear it. That is, I want to know everything. I’ve recovered my lost memories, sure, but I still feel like I’m missing something...”

Saybil looked down at his hands, then remembered why he’d raced over to Zero’s shop in the first place. The moment he’d taken Hort’s hand, a vision of her death had appeared in his mind’s eye. Pour out too much mana and the recipient would die—there was a world of difference between knowing the risks

in theory and actually having killed someone. Up until the previous day, Saybil had thought himself in the former camp. Now he could no longer act with the recklessness of ignorance.

I need to know who I am, and where I come from. Without that, I'll be stuck forever.

“Well... Your father was an unmitigated pragmatist. He would call off a duel to the death and join hands with his foe the instant he deemed it the more logical course. That’s just the kind of man he was.”

“And that’s...a good thing?”

“It depends on the circumstance, young man. Let us say, for instance, that an infant and a ten-year-old child fall into a river. Which do you rescue?”

“U-Um... The baby?”

“Why?”

“Because the ten-year-old might know how to swim, and might be able to hang on until I’ve saved the baby.”

“Your father would have abandoned the infant without hesitation, as the practical choice,” Zero said calmly, without a hint of censure for the man who would have left a baby to die.

“So it’s more logical...to let the baby drown?”

“No—it’s more logical to prioritize the ten-year-old over the infant. Even at ten years of age, the child might not know how to swim, or might have been knocked unconscious by the impact of the fall. Quickening currents might sweep him out of sight while you try to save the infant.”

“That’s true, but if you didn’t try to help the baby, it’d definitely die.”

“Indeed. A creature so weak might even have died the moment it fell into the river.”

“...Ohh.”

“The ten-year-old would stand a greater chance at survival with help from an adult. Here you have two children: one looked after for a decade, the other for only a year—and many infants die unexpectedly of disease. Which death do you think would constitute the greater loss?”

“I...” Saybil’s reply caught in his throat. All of a sudden, he felt like saving the older child and giving up on the baby was the obvious choice. And yet...

“Is it...logical...to give up any hope of rescuing *both* children from the start?”

“Attempting to rescue both despite the low chance of success is not ‘logical’—it’s a gamble. Minimize casualties and maximize benefits: that is how a pragmatist functions.”

“But that...doesn’t sit quite right.”

“Oh no?”

“In here.” Saybil tapped his temple. “Hort’s sobbing and raging at me in my mind for deciding to abandon the baby. Professor Los, too—and Kudo. None of them are saying, ‘The baby’s a lost cause. Let it go.’ And once I imagine that’s how they’d react, I get the urge to save the baby, too.”

“What then would those three say if in the attempt you failed to save either child? Would they not castigate you for failing to put the older boy first, when your rescue might have succeeded?”

“No, they wouldn’t. But they *would* all be really sad,” Saybil replied. “...Oh.” Zero looked strangely forlorn, and he knew the reason why. “Do you think if I took the path that would make them hate me, but managed to save one of the

children...in the end they'd all say, 'good thing you rescued at least one'...?"

"I do. No reasonable adult would blame you for abandoning the baby."

In that case, I guess it would be more logical to save the older child.

"...I still think I would want to try and rescue both... Is that strange?"

A faint smile played about the witch's lips. "No, young man, that is not strange—it's human. Humans are emotional creatures."

"Emotional..."

"As humans, we cannot ignore our emotions, no matter how hard we may try. They can even send us racing down the path of folly, leaving all logical considerations by the wayside. I am no exception. Your father, however, took his overzealous pragmatism to the extreme. As a result, he lost the ability to consider the emotional implications of his actions, and committed unspeakable atrocities."

What do you mean, atrocities? Saybil wanted to ask, but there was no need.

"He instigated a war," Zero explained. "Many, many lives he sacrificed to spread magic throughout the world. To create a world for witches, he ushered even witches to their deaths—those who tried to protect humankind."

A name floated into Saybil's mind, one he had heard countless times in his classes at the Academy. It belonged to the wicked sorcerer who had stirred up the witches' rebellion, spread the study of magic, and attempted to secure a world for his kind, only to be defeated by Albus and burned at the stake.

"Thirteen—that was the name of my elder brother, and your father."

Finally, it all clicked.

The reason Zero had rescued Saybil.

The reason he'd gotten into the Academy of Magic without an entrance exam.

The reason his mother had hidden deep in the woods.

Saybil had always felt a certain sense of unease. He'd let the flow of life carry him along, ever unable to make sense of these things. It had left him feeling trapped, as if he were just another doll in a puppet show. And yet now he felt he could finally put a name to his role.

"Does Headmaster Albus know?"

"Yes, she does."

"And she was still so kind to me..." Every student at the Academy knew that Albus's grandmother had died in a witch hunt as a result of Thirteen spreading magic across the kingdom. This made Saybil the child of Albus's sworn enemy.

"To quote you, young man, it is not your 'fault' that you are Thirteen's son."

"But humans are emotional creatures—right?"

Zero laughed. "Indeed. Hmm... This is an extraordinarily confidential secret, but I will share it with you: Thirteen was said to have been burnt at the stake by Albus, but..." Zero lowered her voice and brought her lips to Saybil's ear. "The truth is, he was not executed."

"Huh? What?!"

Zero merely chuckled at her nephew's dumbfounded reaction.

"But, it said in my textbooks...!"

"That was a lie."

“A lie?! There are lies in our textbooks?!”

“Now *that’s* a fine face you’re making, young man. I do not dislike your usual indifferent air, but it is refreshing to see you so flustered.”

While Saybil couldn’t tell what sort of expression he wore, he *had* thought he could feel his facial muscles twist out of shape with an uncanny creaking sound.

Saybil had indeed recovered his memories, but his world was still dismally small. He knew the forest where he’d lived with his mother, the town where he’d worked like a beast of labor, the Academy of Magic, and now this village. The textbooks he’d studied at the Academy had been the only tools he could use to learn about the wider world. The thought that they might contain falsehoods had never so much as occurred to the naive, unworldly young man. He could, however, picture Hort and Kudo saying things along the lines of, “I never trusted that propaganda from the start,” or, “Must be all rainbows and fairies in that mind of yours, to just swallow whatever you’re told wholesale.”

Zero went on: “At the time, the civil war had left Wenias in chaos. The kingdom needed a parable the people could easily understand—one where the righteous witch Albus defeated the evil sorcerer Thirteen. It was none other than Thirteen himself who wrote the script for his own execution.”

“So is my father still alive...?”

“No, he is not. But he did not die at the hands of any executioner.”

“Then, you’re telling me Headmaster Albus colluded with Thirteen?”

“‘Used’ might be the better word.”

“Used...” Saybil murmured.

At that, Zero’s eyes flashed with sudden realization. She turned to the apprentice. “No, wait. ‘Used’ is a little too harsh. Mooncaller was still quite

young at the time, and would have had great difficulty running the kingdom without Thirteen's assistance. So..."

This time it was Saybil's turn to be struck with realization, at his aunt's uncharacteristic loss for words. "Oh, it's okay. My father is basically a stranger to me." *So hearing that someone used him doesn't really bother me.*

"I see... Yes, I suppose it wouldn't. In any event, Thirteen was a valuable tool—valuable enough that even Mooncaller had to admit it would be best to put her hatred aside and make use of him. That is why she faked his death."

"If he was so amazing, how did he die?"

"Thirteen—" Zero began fidgeting with the sorcerous fragments scattered atop the table. "—died protecting Mooncaller. He sacrificed himself in her stead and transferred all his power to her."

"...Because that was the rational thing to do?"

"No. It was exceedingly irrational—emotional, even." The witch smiled wryly. The softness in her voice, colored by fond recollections and a love for the illogical, coaxed the tension out of Saybil's shoulders.

The unmitigated pragmatist had followed his feelings down a decidedly unpragmatic route. Even the man known as Thirteen had felt emotion, then. Scraps of the sundry human sentiments Saybil had been fruitlessly fumbling with had existed within his father as well. This man he'd never met began to take shape in a small corner of his heart.

Saybil studied his left hand, opening and closing it gently. Then he offered it to Zero.

"Professor Zero, would you please let me share my mana with you?"

"Whence this, all of a sudden?"

“I tried to share some with Hort this morning, but I couldn’t do it. I got scared I might kill her, and I froze up.”

“I see... Perhaps it was inevitable, now that your memories have returned.”

“Is that why you wanted me to find other work to do, besides just the mana shop? Because you knew this would happen?”

“In part, though not quite so soon—I expected it would come to pass two, three, maybe even ten years down the line. And I had hoped you would find some other path to pursue in the interim.”

“I do want to keep running the mana shop, though... As long the field training program lasts, at least.”

“For your friends’ sake?”

Saybil looked down, choosing his next words carefully. *For my friends? ...No.*

“For my own sake. I’m still not very good at casting spells, but Hort and Kudo have improved so incredibly quickly. As long as I’m around, they can keep training as hard as they like without having to worry about running out of mana, and they’ll keep getting stronger—much, much stronger.”

“And that serves you?”

“Yes. I’ve asked them to teach me magic. They’ve grown so much, they’re probably better than the professors at the Academy by now, don’t you think?”

Zero smirked in unspoken agreement. Magic as a technology was still very young. As such, very few people had mastered it. Even the professors at the Academy of Magic only had a few years of practice under their belts.

“Hort and Kudo constantly push themselves to the limit. Kudo goes even further—he pushes himself *past* the limit every day, then ends up fainting when

he runs out of mana... Vomiting, suffering... Still, slowly but surely, he's building up his stores of magical power."

"So putting them in your debt is the logical choice—is that it?"

"That's part of it. But the biggest reason is the gap in power between us. For now, it makes more sense to let the talented mages have my mana instead of keeping it for myself."

The village and its inhabitants were in danger: anti-witch extremists within the Church were targeting them, and Saybil was sure the mana he could provide gave Hort and Kudo some comfort amid this treacherous situation.

"Sharing my mana with you chills me to the bone, Professor Zero, in a way it doesn't with anyone else. You're so much emptier than any other witch who's come to me... I can't even see how deep the void goes. But that's exactly what makes me think that going a little overboard won't harm you."

"Meaning you'd like to practice on me?"

"Yes. For me *and* my friends' sakes—because it's the most logical thing to do."

Zero furrowed her brows a little, but after a moment, she quietly held out her hands.

"Huh? Both hands?"

"I will send back to you the mana I receive, making a closed loop between the two of us. Focus on keeping the flow constant and even."

Quite a few witches of great renown had come to the village seeking Saybil's mana. They took however much of it they wanted, then went on their way. Saybil was like a brimming reservoir, powerless to decide how much water he would share with others. He had always been colorless, transparent, accepting all the beatings and shouts of derision he could take. Even after enrolling in the

Academy, he'd basically done no more than breathe. Whatever was asked of him, he did, chipping off pieces of himself and giving them away in the hopes he might be forgiven for existing—without ever realizing that was what he was looking for. And he dreamed that one day, at some point in the future, he would lay down his life to protect someone, just as his mother had for him.

But now I want to get stronger. I don't want to die for someone else—I want to keep on living, so that I can save even more people. I want to be able to hug a bloodied, dying child close to me and say, "It's okay. I'm going to save you." One day, I want to be the kind of mage—or the kind of sorcerer—who Zero can rely on. I want the strength to be able to choose which parts of myself, and how much, I share with others.

Saybil took Zero's hands in his. *Yep, there's that little shudder.*

Zero gently closed her eyes. "You are as a lake atop a cliff, and I the parched earth below. Even now, your mana seeks to flow down into me, but your fear is blocking its path."

"Yes."

"Picture in your mind a rivulet of water trickling from that lake. If you pay close attention to your partner, control the flow of your mana, and take care when sharing it with them, you will cause no tragedy."

Saybil tightly gripped Zero's hands, and began to pour the tiniest bit of his magic power into her. He could sense the flow of mana—but it still felt less intentional than like water spilling through the fissures in a cracked pitcher.

I've got to be more precise.

Saybil shut his eyes. The mana he'd given Zero came flowing back to him. He could feel a tingling, burning sensation in his blood vessels—that same sensation

Hort and Kudo felt every time he channeled his life force into their hands.

That's when he heard it—a sharp cry, carried on the wind.

“Huh? Kudo?”

“Quiet. Don't lose focus.” Saybil had tried to pull his hands away the instant he heard the scream, but Zero didn't allow him to. “Sorcery and magic require great concentration. If you cease your incantation every time a comrade cries out in battle, you will fail to protect anything or anyone.”

“But—” He began to protest, then paused to consider the situation—not emotionally, but rationally. Hort was in the village, as were Mercenary and Los. Kudo, the source of the scream, was himself a more capable fighter than Saybil. Even if he did race to the scene, it wouldn't change anything. And there was no way Zero would fail to pick up on it if Saybil's presence *was* in fact needed. The thought drove home just how powerless he was.

I already know that. And it's a terribly bitter pill to swallow.

No longer could Saybil convince himself there was some way he could actually help.

“I'm going to get stronger.”

“Yes, I think you will. Stronger even than I, perhaps.”

+ + +

“My, my, my. 'Twould seem we've arrived too late to be of help.”

Hearing Kudo's scream, Hort and Los had raced to the clinic, only to find the situation already completely under control. Los quickly scanned the room. It

was a shambles: the cot's bedding was in disarray, a chair had been knocked over, and a heap of medicines had tumbled out of the cabinet. Kudo stood pressed against the wall, his eyes filled with wariness, scales darkened to a heavy grey. His gaze was trained on a young man who lay flat on the floor, gritting his teeth so tight it seemed they would shatter. The lad seemed to have forgotten all other emotions save rage and hatred, and it was no great wonder—after all, the Tyrant had plopped himself down on the young man's back and had one of his arms wrenched up behind him.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Hort shouted the instant she saw this. “Get off that boy—now!”

The Tyrant obeyed without a word. The moment he did, however, the young man snatched up a shard of broken glass from the floor and lunged at Los.

Unmoved in the face of his attack, the witch merely murmured her oft-repeated phrase: “Say hello, Ludens.”

3

“Come to think of it, we did leave the Tyrant in the clinic overnight to recover from the priest's ad-hoc amputations. 'Twas a wise choice, it seems.”

Los stepped lightly over the boy, who'd fainted after unleashing an unearthly shriek at the Staff of Ludens's somewhat over-exaggerated “hello,” and walked up to Kudo where he stood frozen against the far wall. Hort shot the Tyrant a piercing glare, but he only shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *You're the one who said to let him go.*

“Come now, young Kudo. How long dost thou intend to stand there like a

statue? Is thy wound so deep?"

"No, it's closed up already."

"Kudo, your side! It's bleeding!"

"It's closed up, I said! Dammit, that little snake shanked me outta nowhere...! Who stabs people without some kinda threat first?! If I hadn'ta been a beastfallen with healing powers, I woulda been dead meat."

The deep gash in Kudo's tunic and the thick layer of blood staining it spoke to the truth of his claim. Hort bit her lip. *I didn't make it in time—and the Tyrant rescued Kudo.* The thought rankled her to no end.

"Argh...! What exactly happened here?! And, like, who *is* this kid?! Wait!! Where'd the Church extremist go?! Did he get away?!"

"What balderdash art thou spouting, young Hort? The extremist and that lad on the ground are one and the same. He must have judged me the weakest among us and elected to use me as his avenue for escape. The poor dolt."

Los cackled, then fished some rope out of the cabinet and tossed it to the Tyrant. He caught it without a word, bound the boy, and rolled him onto a bed without needing to be told.

"'Twas difficult to discern beneath the copious swelling of his face thanks to those bees, but now his wounds have healed, our intruder appears much younger than one might have imagined. In his mid-teens, I'd warrant... Perhaps only two or three years younger than thee, Hort."

Hort furrowed her brows. "S-So that kid...is an extremist...? The Church sent someone that young...to unleash Remnants of Disaster on the village?"

"Don't tell me that surprises you. They sent you to infiltrate the Academy of Magic, remember?" Kudo snapped. "Same thing."

Waving her fists about, Hort retorted, “There’s a *huge* difference between enrolling at the Academy and attacking a peaceful village with dangerous monsters! It’s way more evil!”

“Then you just got lucky you didn’t have to stoop to that level,” Kudo shot back. “Plus, you *did* try selling us out to that asshole.” He gestured at the Tyrant.

Her face turning bright red, Hort glared at Kudo. “No, I *didn’t*! We just happened to run into each other! Goddess, you know, that’s the most hurtful thing you could’ve said to me!”

“All right, all right, my bad. That asshole just tried to *get you* to sell us out. That’s the kinda shit the Church is always tryin’a pull. See? No surprises there. This kid’s situation is right on par with yours.”

“That...” Hort began, then swallowed her protest. “That might be true.”

“Damn, you switch gears fast, huh?”

“There are plenty of virtuous people in the Church as well, Kudo. I can’t say I approve of you judging such a large organization based on the actions of a limited few.” An authoritative female voice resounded from the open clinic doorway.

Turning, they saw a woman no taller than Los, but whose apparel lent her a dignified, ladylike demeanor. She held a basket full of bread, and her vibrant hair, red-hot like a smoldering stone, hung halfway down her back in a meticulous braid. An intensity as fiery as her hair smoldered behind a pair of silver-and-glass spectacles.

“Why, if it isn’t Miss Hearthful. And what’s this? Wherefore dost thou carry a basket so stuffed with delicious dainties?”

“With two patients in the clinic, I thought perhaps there might be a need for more bread. I heard a cry on my way here, though, so I approached with some caution and waited to see what would happen. Please do forgive me for eavesdropping so rudely.” The woman Los had addressed as Miss Hearthful finished with a polite bow of apology.

Originally a private tutor to a noble family, Hearthful had been driven from her home in the North by the infamous disasters, and had since taken up residence in the village, where she was now in charge of general education for the whole community. She was fiercely passionate about teaching the children—and the adults—and it was thanks to her that the village enjoyed an extraordinarily high literacy rate for a settlement so small.

Hearthful commanded a stern presence out of all keeping with her tiny frame and ephemeral air, cowing any and all before her. Of all the village residents, Los had conceived a particular fondness for this one. Hort, on the other hand, found the indomitable dame difficult to stomach. Talking with her never failed to remind Hort of her time with the Church, dredging up flashbacks of being scorned as a “devil child” and held down on a bed while her antlers were sawed off.

Hort pursed her lips. “So you’ve been watching this whole time... Since before we came?”

“No, you were all here by the time I arrived. However, I thought it prudent to wait and see if the situation would require me to call for help before rashly barging in.”

All Hort could muster in reply to the schoolteacher’s textbook-perfect response was a “Hmph.” Hearthful was a powerless woman, without any fighting prowess whatsoever. Her best, and most useful, course of action in a

crisis would indeed be to run for help.

“Truly, ’twould seem all the denizens of this village have embraced their role as protectees. Fully aware of their own vulnerability, they are also equipped with the knowledge of how best to contribute in case of emergency. And yet, I cannot help but wonder...” Los trailed off as her eyes flicked over to the unconscious young man. “The fundamentalist branch of the Church has at long last begun to move in earnest. We may very well see some residents abandon this village for safer halls.”

“You will see nothing of the sort. That particular concern is an old acquaintance to us all. We recognize that living in this village inevitability marks us as targets of the Church’s extremism, and have all elected to reside here nonetheless, ready and prepared to face such an eventuality.”

Heels clicking sharply against the floor, Hearthful walked over to the Tyrant and held out the basket of bread to him.

“...Hm? Whaddaya want? I ain’t no waiter.”

The Tyrant towered so far above the diminutive Hearthful that it was hard to believe they were both members of the same species. The vast difference in their statures lent the scene a sense of the surreal, an effect only intensified as he flinched in the face of Hearthful’s smile.

“A man of your stature must work up quite the appetite. I thought perhaps you might require about as much sustenance as Mercenary does.”

“Oh... Uh, much obliged... Don’t mind if I do.”

In response to his artless thanks, Hearthful shot the Tyrant an even more powerful smile before taking one small cloth sack out of the basket and saying, “For this little one.” She gently placed the bundle, seemingly filled with sliced

bread and fruit, by the bound boy's pillow, and stared long and hard at his unconscious face. "He really is just a child... What could the extremists have been thinking, enlisting one so young as this?"

"What do you mean?" Hort asked.

Hearthful turned to face her. "I mean, why would they choose to burden a child with such a dangerous mission, and send him to infiltrate a witch's village all on his own? If I were they, I would assume from the start that someone this young would likely fail."

"...That's a good point."

And the boy had indeed failed. Los had retrieved all the Remnants of Disaster he let loose, and he had nearly gotten himself killed when he stumbled into bee territory. This was a witch's village—it was beyond foolish to attempt an incursion without presuming there were some sort of defenses in place.

"So, like, he was just a disposable pawn?"

"More like chum, I would wager, scattered atop the murky waters of our little swamp to see what kind of fish it might conceal." Los tapped her staff against her shoulder. "Could a helpless babe steal into the village and infest it with Remnants of Disaster? Should he prove successful, would the village have the means to deal with the threat? Would the child make it back in one piece? And if he were captured, would the villagers kill him or spare his life?"

Kudo spat in disgust. "Who gives a goblin's ass what happens to him?! I got no sympathy for the little shit. I bet he woulda murdered every brat in the village without battin' an eye. Spare me the 'but he's a victim, too' crap."

No one tried to counter his bellicose rant—rather, Los sidled up to Kudo with a cheeky grin. "Not a *soul* among us has even *tried* to breathe a word of

sympathy, now *have* we? We were merely engaged in a measured discussion regarding the fact that the lad was seen as nothing more than cannon fodder. I certainly have not heard so much as a *hint* of pity for the boy, hast thou?"

"Huh...? Wait, what...?"

"Young Kudo, hast not *thou* of all people begun to harbor sympathy for the lad...? Of all us present here, hast thou alone not taken pity on him? Ever more so as he seemed destined to meet his death!"

"Wait, no, I...I was reading the room! That was *totally* the vibe in here!"

"I cannot say, for I have a distinct inability to pick up on 'vibes'! Very well, rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of such compassion as overpowers hatred! Now come, thy beloved professor shall give thee a well-deserved pat!"

Los stepped up onto the Staff of Ludens, which was hovering in the air to serve as her footstool, and pinned a protesting Kudo against the wall, patting away at his head willy-nilly.

"Back off! Cut it out! I'm all set!"

"Aww! Kudo, you're so lucky! I can be compassionate, too, Professor! Look, I'm doing it, too!"

Miss Hearthful smiled as the tension in the room relaxed. The Tyrant, however, just stood there uncomfortably, unsure how to react; he had never before in his life experienced such amicable harmony. At a loss what to do with his hands, he plucked a bun out of the basket and tore off a massive hunk with his teeth.

"Oh my." Hearthful shot the Tyrant a sharply critical look. "What terrible manners. How about we sit down before we eat?"

“Manners...? I’m an Arbiter, lady...”

“Proper manners are important—for Arbiters, witches, and beastfallen alike.”

“Oh yeah? Will they help me kill my enemies?”

“One might say so.”

The Tyrant sniggered, but Hearthful didn’t so much as twitch. “One’s reputation in society can at times tip the scales between life and death. Even if you can’t kill someone with it, your standing *can* serve to shield you. And etiquette can be a vital tool for building one’s reputation, wouldn’t you agree? It’s much quicker than acquiring sufficient skill to be recognized for one’s superiority, at least.”

“I’ve got all the killin’ tools I need under my belt already. Ain’t no point in addin’ that prim-and-proper bullshit to the list now,” the Tyrant sneered, tossing the rest of the bun into his mouth.

“Shall I take that to mean you intend to employ your ‘killing tools’ to build relationships with the other villagers, then?”

For a split second, the Arbiter was struck dumb. The moment passed, however, quickly replaced by contempt for this woman who would ask him that so late in the game.

“*Intend*,” my ass... “That’s the job, ain’t it, Boss?”

As soon as Hort, thrilled that Los was patting her head, realized who the Tyrant was referring to, her ecstatic smile gave way to a scowl.

“Your job is to defend the premises! You’re here to *protect*, not to kill!”

“Same thing, ain’t it?”

“Definitely not! Also, I’m warning you, now that I’m in charge of your

supervision, I'm gonna work you to the bone. Don't think for a second I'll take it easy on you!"

"Miss Hort. Given that his responsibility will be to protect the village, wouldn't it be prudent to ensure he has a secure grasp of what lies where, and who the residents are? If it's all right with you, might I be allowed to give him a tour?"

"Huh?" Hort's eyes opened wide. "But...I don't think that's safe. He's a murderer."

"Virtually everyone in this village has killed before," Hearthful replied. "Furthermore, Ms. Zero and Mr. Mercenary have already accepted him into the fold."

"Wh-What do you think, Professor Los?"

"An excellent question." Her interest stimulated, Los began twirling her hair around her finger. "We can hardly expect to entrust the Tyrant with defending the village if we deem a mere turn about the environs too dangerous. Even should he attempt some mayhem, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. And if we agree that he has absolutely no prospect of escape...it should be safe to entrust him to Miss Hearthful's capable hands. In my humble opinion, at least." Los grinned at her student. "But the final decision rests with thee, young Hort. I cannot guarantee the Tyrant would not accept his own death if it meant he could slaughter the villagers—much like this young man attacked Kudo and myself."

"I don't kill nobody 'less I get paid for it. Ain't worth the trouble. Not that I don't enjoy the work when I have it, mind you." The Tyrant let out a full-bellied laugh, only for Hearthful to poke him in the stomach. He yelped and looked down to find the diminutive teacher staring daggers at him from behind her glasses.

“As the one responsible for education in this village, allow me to enlighten you on one point: attempts at emphasizing how wicked, dangerous, and fearsome a person you are will earn you exactly nothing here. No one in this village is afraid of you.”

“...Izzat so.” The Tyrant felt a pricking sensation—the sting of being patronized, perhaps—and his hand instinctively reached out toward Hearthful’s slender neck. It would be easy, so easy, to snap it with the slightest pressure... And yet.

“There’s no need to overreact, Professor Los. I’m quite sure he merely thought to test whether he could actually frighten me or not.”

That’s when the Tyrant noticed the razor-sharp blade pressed against his throat. It had slithered out of the jet-black globe embedded in the heart of the Staff of Ludens, and now had the Tyrant at its mercy. Unlike the hatred Hort directed at the former Arbiter, this was a dispassionate intent to kill, pure and simple. Slowly the Tyrant pulled his hand away from Hearthful’s neck, and the blade silently receded in kind.

“That is the last bit of tomfoolery I shall allow, Tyrant. Not all in this village are as magnanimous as I. Try repeating that stunt in the presence of Mercenary or the good father, or Mud-Black, and thine head shall fall even before thou canst lay a finger on Miss Hearthful.”

“Right—my bad.”

Hearthful beamed ever brighter. “Now then... What do you say, Miss Hort?”

“Oh, uh... Well... I guess, would you please show him around...?” The Tyrant’s official supervisor faltered, her response lagging behind Los’s deadly determination.

Manners as a shield, huh? In a social order maintained by the threat o’ the

most extreme violence there is, that Hearthful might be onto something. The Tyrant smiled bitterly.

4

“Wait, he’s just a kid. Guess I’ll have to scrap my first plan...”

Mercenary rubbed his muzzle. He had been the very first to arrive after word got around that Los’s captive, the Church extremist, had recovered from his injuries and was now awake. The moment the massive beastfallen realized the prisoner bound to the bed was a boy of tender years, however, his ears went flat and his tail drooped.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘plan’?” Kudo peered suspiciously at the white-furred giant.

“To torture him,” Mercenary replied, without a hint of compunction.

“Don’t you dare!” the reptilian beastfallen raged, slamming his tail against the floor as his scales turned an angry shade of crimson. “I *just* healed the little prick, and now you wanna rough him up again?!”

“I told ya, I’m not gonna.” Mercenary shot Kudo an annoyed sideways glance—and his eyes landed on the apprentice’s flank. Kudo hadn’t changed clothes since he was stabbed; his tunic was still soaked in blood, and there was a gaping gash in it.

“Now there’s a fatal wound.”

“For a human, maybe.”

“That ain’t the issue here. The brat meant to kill ya, didn’t he?” Mercenary’s tone was casual, but his words bristled with concern. “All right, so torture’s off the table—but I could still probably get the piggy to squeal if I threatened to eat him, doncha think?”

“Don’t *ever* use that threat again. *Ever*. Not on anyone.” Kudo’s scowl deepened, his attitude taking on a lethal tinge as he glowered at Mercenary’s grinning face. The reptilian beastfallen had never completely gotten over Mercenary claiming to have devoured Hort during the test the students went through when they first arrived at the village.

“Sorry,” the retired sellsword said with a shrug, his sincerity very much in doubt.

“And yet, young Kudo, didst not claim moments ago that thou hadst no pity for the boy? By that logic, would the conventional wisdom not be to heal the boy’s wounds after each torture, thereby ensuring an unending cycle of pain?”

“Hanh? The hell? What’s that got to do with it?”

“With what?”

“I’m sayin’, whether I pity the kid or not don’t have a damn thing to do with my duty to protect my patient,” Kudo retorted angrily.

Los and Mercenary exchanged a quick glance. Somehow unsettled, the latter averted his eyes. Los, on the other hand, beamed with unbridled pleasure.

“Aye, so be it! Rejoice, for I approve wholeheartedly, young Kudo! Thou hast flown in the face of easy rationality and demonstrated an almost daft level of devotion to thine occupation! Well said, my lad! I have a great love of thine entire being!”

“Gross—way overdoin’ it there. Also, I’m genuinely pissed off right now. You

woulda tortured the guy if he hadn't been a kid, right?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"Fuck your 'maybe'! We agreed we'd get him stable then escort him to Wenias. But now you're sayin' you woulda given him the third degree here in the village?! You can't just take the law into your own hands!"

"A-Amazing, Kudo!" exclaimed Hort. "You sound so smart! I'm with you one hundred percent! Torture's a big no-no!"

"Just as you say." Mercenary smiled wryly, swishing his tail. "But if I can't beat him up, and I can't threaten him, we're better off handin' this over to the priest."

"I can *totally* see him being, like, a master of verbal abuse—ack! Careful!"

Hort's arm whipped out and slapped down the tree branch that had come flying at her out of nowhere. Turning around, she found the priest standing in the doorway, looking the picture of innocence.

"Now, that is a surprise. I meant for that to hit you."

"Arghhh! Don't you start, Father! Violence is another no-no! And you call yourself a clergyman?!"

"I would have no reason to resort to violence if you considered more carefully who might overhear you when you spoke." The priest's cane clicked across the floor as he walked into the room. He headed straight for the sickbed and poked the prostrate boy in the chest with the tip of his cane. "Furthermore, this little one is awake—and has been for some time."

No sooner had he said this than the young boy jerked his body up, hands still bound behind his back, and lunged at the priest's neck with his teeth. The instant before his jaws clamped down, however, the priest grabbed the boy by

the throat, lifted his body up a few inches, then slammed him face down on the bed before settling himself upon the captive's back. At this undeniably dazzling feat, a simultaneous murmur of amazement rose from all assembled.

"Dammit! What the hell is going on with this goddessforsaken village?! Are you *all* monsters?!"

"...Monsters?" The priest's eyebrow jerked up. He clutched the prostrate prisoner, still serving as his makeshift seat, by the scruff of the neck and leaned in close. "Reflect long and hard on your own glass house before throwing any stones, heretic—you cannot even begin to fathom a fraction of the Church's true intentions. And now you have tried to claim the lives of an unarmed priest and the doctor who treated the wounds of a certain criminal who attacked this village. Even babes in arms learn the nature of crime, of wrongdoing, of monsters...but should these concepts prove beyond you, just say the word and I will gladly lop off your useless head and replace it with that monster's."

Another simultaneous reaction escaped the crowd, but this time it was more of a reproachful gasp.

That's takin' it way too far. The kid's barely a teenager. "An' don't you go draggin' me into this," Mercenary growled. "Hey, Kudo. Don't you have anythin' to say to the number one extremist in the village over there?" What he meant was, *Don't just pick on me—get on the priest's case, too.*

All Kudo offered, however, was a disgusted "Ugh."

"My, my. Fascinating. Didst waste no time in deciding that thou wert the 'monster' to whom the good father referred, my dear Mercenary."

"Ack! Dammit, yer right. We got a girl with antlers, a lizard beastfallen, and a devilish hag with a titanic staff, and still I...!" Devastated by the realization of

how deeply he had internalized a sense of his own monstrosity, Mercenary cradled his head in his hands.

“Ooh, ooh, Father, I’ve got a question. How’d you know the kid was just pretending to sleep?” asked Hort.

“The rhythm of his breath was unnatural, and his heart was beating wildly,” the priest replied, then added as always: “I have a rather keen sense of hearing.”

“Huh. Guess this village *is* nothin’ but monsters,” Kudo muttered, frowning at the thought.

“Perhaps it is at that,” agreed Los with a cackle.

Graciously letting the snide comment slide, the priest asked Mercenary, “Did Zero not come with you?”

“Can’t say why, but she was holdin’ hands with our little mana merchant, so I left her to it.”

“My condolences.”

“Why’re you makin’ it sound like somebody died? My heart’s still pumpin’, and I wouldn’t ever suspect anythin’ fishy between that kid and my witch.”

“I don’t recall anyone saying anything about ‘fishy’ business between the two.”

“Thou didst fall right into his trap.”

“There’s no fishy business, and I didn’t fall for a damn thing!”

“Then let us proceed with the interrogation. Loux Krystas, might I ask you to darken the room for me?”

“‘Twould be my pleasure.”

Hort blinked at this ever-so-casual exchange. “Why would you ask Professor Los? I can shut the windows if you want.”

“Too much light filters in through the cracks. I would not be able to open my eyes.”

The priest reached for his blindfold. Los tapped the Staff of Ludens’s butt against the floor and darkness began to ooze from its globe, burying the clinic in gloom.

“Would the equivalent of a moonlit night suffice?”

“That would do nicely.”

“Whoaa! I-It’s so daaark!”

“I can still see,” Kudo boasted.

“Me too.” This was Mercenary.

“I do believe I can see as well, if I put my mind to it,” Los added, a hint of pride in her voice, too.

Maybe there are only monsters in this village.

Freed from their covering, the priest’s eyes seemed to glow in the darkness—or at least, that was how it appeared to Kudo. The clergyman stood up from his seat upon the captive’s back and lightly snapped his fingers a few times in front of the terror-stricken boy’s face.

“I will now ask you a series of questions, but you need not answer. I will not stop you if you *do* choose to respond, but know that lies will not fool me.”

“Huh? What are you, some kinda mage in priest’s clothing? Sounds like *you’re* the heretic here.”

“I do not need to resort to violence or magic to extract information from a

whelp like you. I suggest you thank the Goddess for your own weakness.”

Not gonna let up on the verbal abuse, huh?

Drawing back in disgust, Kudo felt Hort bump into him as she blindly groped through the dark for something to hold onto. He grabbed her by the antlers and forced her into a sitting position. “Don’t move if you can’t see, deer-for-brains.”

“Ughhh, I don’t even know which way I should be facing...!”

Paying Hort’s consternation no mind, the priest commenced his interrogation. “First of all, were you the only one sent to this village bearing Remnants of Disaster?”

“Dunno.”

“Affirmative. Just as I expected.”

“Huh?! I didn’t say nothin’! What are you—”

“Moving on. Are there plans for further attacks involving Remnants of Disaster?”

“...Hell if I know.”

“A look of embarrassment. I see, it would appear you truly don’t know—and are ashamed that you have not been entrusted with that information. Is there a contingency plan for your rescue?”

“Th—”

“Strong negative. He was apparently informed from the start that no help would be forthcoming if he were captured.”

“Whaaa?!” Hort squealed, her voice tinged with fright. “Wh-What’s going on...? How does he know...? Is he just making things up? Or bluffing?”

“’Tis all in the expression—the flicker of an eye, the tremble of a lip. The good father is reading the emotions that rise unconsciously to the surface.”

“Is that even possible?!”

“With special training, yes. If memory serves, his moniker as an Arbiter was ‘The Mask,’ and his primary remit was to worm his way into local politics and gather information. The boy has had no instruction in concealing his emotions. ’Tis no great wonder, then, that our one-time spy can read the lad’s thoughts as plainly as if they were conversing openly.”

“Eeegh, creepy...”

It didn’t take special training to see the boy was petrified. And who could blame him—with every question, the priest extracted more information despite the fact that the boy hadn’t uttered a word.

“I’ve more or less learned what there is to learn. You may let the light in again.” Just like that the interrogation was over, and the priest had once again donned his blindfold.

A flick of Los’s staff and light poured back into the room.

“It’s so bright!” This time Hort squeezed her eyes shut. “So? What’d you find out?”

“Honestly, not a great deal. They dispatched the boy on the assumption that he would be caught and questioned, and we cannot discount the possibility that he was fed lies to pass on to us.”

The boy’s cheeks flushed bright red.

“Like a lizard sacrificin’ its tail,” remarked Kudo, and every gaze in the room shifted to his hindquarters.

“Are we supposed to laugh at that?” Hort probed.

“Shut UP! Do whatever the hell you like!” the beastfallen snapped, embarrassed that he’d said anything at all.



Chapter Two



They had not gleaned much. But *not much* wasn't the same as *nothing*.

"Now then, allow me to summarize the situation. First and foremost, we know the organization that arranged this assault upon the village must be of a fair size. Given that it had the capacity to acquire Remnants of Disaster, we might also safely assume the upper echelons of the Church are involved—yes, the blackguards must be very highly placed indeed. Are we in agreement?"

Leaving the young interloper under Hort and Kudo's supervision, Los had headed to the tavern with Mercenary and the priest to hold a grown-ups-only strategy session.

The priest nodded. "Given that our foes have visited Remnants of Disaster upon us, we underestimate them at our own peril. They are pursuing a clearly defined goal without concern for the risks involved. To wit, they wish to destroy this village, perhaps even society itself, on the brink of widespread acceptance of witches as it is. There are no notable anti-witch extremist groups capable of bringing such a plan to fruition, however, nor any that operate under their own banner, for that matter. Which leads us to the unfortunate conclusion that it is none other than the Church itself behind these machinations."

"Hmm." Zero stroked her chin. "Meaning someone has embedded themselves within the Church cloaked in the guise of a conciliationist, while actively supporting extremist activities?"

"No real surprise there. Infighting in the Church has turned real nasty, from what I hear. Scary stuff."

“Secondly, the lad was dispatched here with no information of import, and no other goal but to ascertain the current state of the village. He is naught but a cat’s paw, in other words... A tail to be sacrificed, as young Kudo would have it. Put plainly, more will come in his wake; this will not be their final attack. The only question, then, is when and how the second wave will come—” Los suddenly ceased her restless pacing. “And yet, curiously enough, they have made no move. The Academy of Magic can call upon the power of the Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten-Thousand Leagues, who can grant us a glimpse of whatever we may wish to see. Upon asking it to reveal the scoundrels who threaten the village, however, he showed us no more than the lad we have already captured...which would suggest that a second wave does not, in fact, exist. Ludens, dear. If you please.”

Black ooze flowed out from the Staff of Ludens, which Los had stood in the middle of the room. It moved down the handle before slowly spreading out across the floor, converting the surface into an enormous map. Los pointed out the location of their village and the other hamlets in the vicinity, as well as the closest city.

“This village does not stand in isolation. It survives through cooperation with the several other nearby communities, and I have also heard tell that its witch-crafted medicines have saved lives in the city as well.”

Mercenary shrugged. “Well, true enough. We *have* made some pretty big inroads toward acceptance, that’s for sure.”

“Then, the question is—how far?”

“How far?”

“How far will the Church go to denounce us as heretics?”

Mercenary turned to the priest. As a former Arbiter of Dea Ignis, he possessed the insight to perceive how far the Church's sickles would reach to cut down the diseased wheat of its enemies.

"As long as they can destroy *this* place," he began, "the neighboring villages under the witch's sway will awaken from the curse and regain their purity of heart and mind. Through the destruction of this one village, they can show the world the wickedness of witches, as well as the Church's might, and the depth of its benevolent mercy."

"You sound ready to go back to your old gig with Dea Ignis any second, priest," Mercenary remarked with disgust.

The clergyman harrumphed. "I am fully prepared to hunt down any witch, should the bishops ask it of me. I do hope it does not come to that, however. I do not enjoy the taking of life."

"Pretty damn sure o' yourself, huh? Tell me, whose head would you take first?"

"Mine would be the very first to roll, you dimwit."

"Right, uh... Sorry..."

Though his haughty bearing made it easy to forget, the priest was not in fact the strongest of combatants. He was weaker than the beastfallen Mercenary, and weaker than the magic-wielding Zero. By contrast, even the beastfallen chapel mouse could conceivably get the best of Mercenary, with the right tactics.

The clergyman plopped down in his chair with a huff. "Fighting prowess was never my specialty as an Arbiter, after all. Judging from the speed with which we've seen our pupils progress recently, it is only a matter of time until I will be

forced to abandon all pretense of holding the upper hand. In fact, one might argue I qualify more to be protected than to protect, now that we have a bona fide brute like the Tyrant in town.”

“He really that strong? You didn’t seem to have much trouble choppin’ off his arms and legs...”

“Only because I caught him unawares, and under cover of night. The Tyrant is an expert trapper, and he commands the requisite physical prowess to drive his marks into those traps. While they do take some time to set up, once his traps are set, he is unparalleled when it comes to securing a location or hunting prey.”

“You fought him once, didn’t ya, Granny? How’d that go?”

“How indeed. The memory escapes me,” Los replied, taking a sip of the liquor she’d shamelessly pilfered from a bottle on the tavern shelf.

“Give me a straight answer or I’m confiscatin’ that.”

“Well, he is adequately adroit in hand-to-hand combat, shrewd enough to discern his foes’ weaknesses, and has the cunning to use anything within reach to his advantage. His boorishness masks a clever mind. In sum, he is a warrior well-versed in every facet of battle.”

“Quite the compliment, comin’ from you.”

“As an educator, I believe in the power of positive reinforcement.” Los poured herself another drink before giving what remained of the bottle to the Staff of Ludens.

The staff drinks liquor, now? Mercenary thought to himself, fully aware that a witch’s village was no place to make a fuss about something as insignificant as an imbibing staff.

“The Tyrant is fundamentally a tool. He makes no decisions for himself, and simply obeys the commands of his master. One need never fear betrayal from a man like that, so long as the master remains the same. With proper supervision, he promises to be of great use, and will excel under a talented hand.”

“A talented hand, eh...?”

“What’s this? Art thou regretting thy decision to entrust him to young Hort?”

“Not exactly, but...”

“Oh, come. Thou needst not worry for Hort. She is a strong one, that lass. Though she may seem a touch unsure at present, ere long she shall be unshakeable.”

“Like I said, I *ain’t* worried.”

“Is that so? Well, now,” Los replied, brushing off Mercenary’s rebuttal.

Witches never listen to a single damn word anybody says.

“We have quite the quandary on our hands. We cannot very well prepare to counter an attack that has not even begun to be put in motion.”

“Nay, there thou art mistaken, Father. In all likelihood, the preparations are already concluded. I do not expect we shall have to wait long before the next wave rolls in.”

Mercenary flattened his ears against his head and looked at Los. “How can you be so sure? Not even the Thousand-Eyed Sentinel could show us any extremist reinforcements gearing up to attack.”

“That is precisely my point.” A quick wave and the map spread over the floor was swiftly sucked back up into the staff’s black orb. “That which we expect to exist cannot be found. Therefore, we must presume not that our foes will

henceforth begin their preparations, but that they are already prepared and hiding from us somehow.”

“Hiding? Where?”

“For that, we must best the Church in a contest of wits. First off, perhaps it would behoove us to postpone our plans and not send our prisoner to Wenias just yet.”

“Hunh?! What’s that brat got to do with this?”

“That is exactly the question we must now answer,” the priest responded. “Let us delay his journey. No matter the boy’s true nature, if the Church sent him to us, we are likely the only ones who can properly deal with whatever is to come.”

+ + +

Hort was a little irked to have been kicked out of the grown-ups’ discussion.

“Sometimes bigshots just gotta have their bigshot time,” Kudo had told her. Still, Hort was one of the main fighters the village would rely on for protection, and she couldn’t help but wonder if she shouldn’t get some say in the matter.

“Yeah, like that’ll ever happen... Not as long as I’m an ‘irresponsible Academy of Magic student’...”

I mean, I do get it. I might be strong, but I’m still just a kid. Like with the Tyrant—the fact that they let me choose what to do with him was an exception, not the rule. Normally, students wouldn’t ever have a say in their teachers’ decision making.

Hort plodded around the village, anxious for no good reason. She couldn't think of anything in her life that should cause such disquiet—nothing that didn't sit right, no problems she had to resolve. And yet, even in the absence of such things, a cloud still hung over her.

“...Oh.”

The next thing she knew, Hort was standing in front of the village schoolhouse—though since the number of children in the community was extremely small, the term was essentially a formality used to describe the building where Hearthful worked. Reading and writing, history, and current events counted among the many and varied topics she taught to everyone in the village, adults included. Apparently she also penned letters for those who didn't know how to write.

Their parents being too occupied with their various occupations to pay them much mind, the village children spent their days studying with Hearthful until sundown. The building itself was a nondescript house, but unlike most, its doors were always open, and a signpost with a book-and-pen crest stood outside.

The laughter of rambunctious children spilled out from within, and Hort entered, as if drawn in by the happy chatter.

“...Oh,” she said again absently.

There were Hearthful and the children—and the Tyrant. The little ones were diligently lashing tree branches together with vines to craft some type of contraption. Hearthful sensed Hort lingering by the door and looked up.

“Miss Hort! My, this *is* a treat. It's not every day you stop by.”

“I heard laughing...and figured I'd check up on how the tour went.”

“Well, I had planned to show him most of the village and finish here at the

schoolroom, but the children caught us first. Now we're having Mr. Tyrant show us how to make traps for fish."

"Traps..."

"He used to work for a smithy that specialized in hunting traps, evidently."

"Did he tell you they were meant for people?"

"Indeed, the very first chance he got. He seems positively fixated on striking fear into my heart—like a child." The schoolteacher shrugged her shoulders in exasperation.

Like a child—she's exactly right. What reaction was I hoping for when I said that? In truth, Hort had wanted to see this seemingly unflappable, peerlessly courageous educator bare her revulsion and shower the Tyrant with abuse. *Like some kind of snot-nosed bully.*

Embarrassed with herself, Hort said nothing more than, "Oh."

"I did it! Hey, mister, check out my trap!" shouted Laios, first to finish.

The trap was nothing more than a simple cone made of twigs and vines, but the Tyrant earnestly scrutinized the boy's handiwork without a shadow of condescension.

"Looks pretty good ta me."

"D'you think it'll catch any fish?"

"If yer lucky. Set this baby up so it runs with the current, and surround the hole at the small end with rocks. That way the fish'll swim in the bigger end and have no way ta get back out. It's about as simple as it gets, but I figure it's just about right for kids to mess around with."

"Miss Hearthful! I wanna go to the river!"

“That’s a lovely idea. How about we all go down together once everyone has finished making their traps?”

“Yaaaay!” Laios’s eyes sparkled.

Hort bit her lip and put a hand on her chest. Her anxiety had just ticked up several notches.

But he’s a murderer. Laios shouldn’t open up to him and smile like that, not when the bastard wouldn’t think twice about killing a little kid like him if he was ordered to. That said, it wouldn’t feel right to come out and tell these kids, “Stay away from that man. He’s a murderer.”

Hort turned to Hearthful, who noticed the apprentice mage’s gaze and gave her a reassuring smile. “But it’s rather late today, so the river will have to wait until tomorrow,” she told the class. “Ah, Miss Hort, might I possibly ask a favor of you?”

“Hm...? What is it?”

“I imagine you may still have some misgivings about letting us traverse the forest on our own. Work permitting, might I ask you to escort us tomorrow? Just for the morning?”

“O-Of course...! I mean, that’s the kind of thing I do for work, so...!”

“Are you comin’ too, mister?” asked Laios. “You gonna show us how to set the traps?”

The Tyrant shrugged and gestured toward Hort with his jaw. “Ask the boss. I got no say in it.”

“O-Obviously you’re going, too! I told you I was gonna work you to the bone, remember?!”

“You sure you’re okay lettin’ a murderer like me play with the precious kiddos?”

“Shh—idiot! How can you say that kind of thing in front of the children...?!”

The Tyrant smiled smugly as he watched Hort get flustered. The children in question, however, merely blinked, and didn’t appear particularly surprised at all. In fact...

“Mister, are you gonna murder us?” Laios asked fearlessly. It was enough to drain the venom out of even the Tyrant.

“I mean, no, I ain’t plannin’ to. Seein’ as they’ll kill *me* if I do.”

“Then it’s okay for us to play together, right? Right, guys?” The children looked around at each other and nodded, followed by a chorus of “Sure!”

“What kinda crap are you teachin’ these kids?” the Tyrant asked with a certain amount of accusation in his voice, and Hort silently wondered the same thing.

But Hearthful let out a devil-may-care chuckle. “Didn’t I tell you? The people of this village aren’t afraid of anything, and that includes the children. So long as we have no good reason to fear, nothing can scare us.”

“Aren’t you worried the Tyrant might turn on us or something, though?”

“I seriously doubt Ms. Zero or Mr. Mercenary would allow such a dangerous individual to roam free... And you yourself gave me permission to show him around the village, despite your apprehensions, didn’t you?”

“Well, I...”

“I don’t know anything about battle,” Hearthful said. “But I do believe I know true fear. And I think I can recognize genuine danger when I see it.”

The Disasters of the North—most of the residents here were survivors of that catastrophe, the fortunate ones who had escaped the demon onslaught that destroyed their towns and villages. Demons tortured humans for pleasure. These people knew all too well the terror of being trapped, had experienced the bloodbath firsthand. To them, someone like the Tyrant, whose actions they could more or less predict, might not even register as much of a threat at all.

“I don’t mean to imply that throwing caution to the wind is a virtue, mind you. We can’t discount the possibility that once we leave the village, he’ll try to escape or take the children hostage... Which is why I would’ve had to cancel the outing if you had declined to serve as our escort, Miss Hort. Thank you very much for agreeing to do so. The children will be thrilled.”

Hort unwittingly met the Tyrant’s eyes. The certainty that no one but him shared her opinion on the matter only served to make her that much more melancholy.

I know it’s safe, but I’m still scared. It makes sense, but my feelings just can’t keep up. Isn’t that just what it is to be human? It’s hard not to feel a little ashamed when she can compartmentalize it all like it’s nothing. Even the kids buy into it, but here I am all restless and anxious.

“We have an exciting day ahead of us tomorrow, don’t we, children? Let’s hear you give Miss Hort and Mr. Tyrant a nice thank you.”

“Thank you, Miss Hort!” the kids chanted in unison. “And Mister the Tie-runt!” The former Arbiter looked uncomfortable.

Hort couldn’t contain her laughter. “‘Mister the Tyrant’ doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue, does it?”

“Feels pretty damn weird, if I’m bein’ honest...”

“Then why don’t you tell them your real name? It’s not like you’re an Arbiter anymore.”

“My real name...?”

“Oh, my!” The schoolteacher’s eyes twinkled. “Will you tell us? The priest at the chapel is so terribly tight-lipped about his, I thought for certain Arbiters must die on the spot if they reveal their names to anyone!”

“Pretty sure it’s some kinda anti-witch defense tactic. Somethin’ about witches havin’ ya by the short ones if they know yer name.”

“An anti-witch defense tactic! Y-You don’t say.”

Hort nodded. “Names are important, but what matters more is, like, the internal recognition that *this is my name*... Umm, for example, you’d turn around if I called your name, right? If I was like, ‘Miss Hearthful!’”

“Why, of course.”

“That’s like a spell and its effect. It works better to call someone by their name than just to be like, ‘Hey, you!’”

Hearthful cocked her head. “But if I say ‘Mister Tyrant’ and he turns around, isn’t that the same as if I had called his name?”

“Maybe. There are plenty of people who basically go by the name of their profession... But there’s a stronger magical connection between a person and the name they’ve been called since the day they were born than there is with, like, a social indicator they picked up at some point along the way—or at least, that’s what my textbooks said.”

“My, my, my...! How wonderful! Even though you’re still a student, Miss Hort, you sound like a proper professor yourself! Perhaps I should call you Professor Hort! Won’t you please tell us more? Tell us everything! I’m sure the children

would love to hear whatever you have to share!” Hearthful leaned forward, her cheeks flushed.

Hort pulled back a little. The diminutive woman’s unexpected fervor had suddenly flipped Hort’s unfavorable impression of her as a fearless, unshakeable educator on its head.

The schoolteacher snapped back to her senses. “I-I do apologize... I let myself get carried away. That must have been rather unpleasant.”

“Not so much unpleasant as just, like, surprising, I guess...”

Hearthful fanned at her cheeks, which still burned with enthusiasm. “The truth is, I would have loved to become a mage if I’d had the aptitude for it. Unfortunately, Ms. Zero told me I did not... Even so, I can’t help but be overcome with excitement whenever the conversation turns to magic. Embarrassing as that is to admit.”

“Aptitude...? Huh, well... Some people just don’t have any, I guess...”

“It’s evidently rare to find someone with such a conspicuous lack, though. I’d heard one’s strength in magic is determined by the strength of one’s thoughts, so I don’t quite understand...”

“I think it’s probably...because you’re such a...fair-minded person.”

“I’m sorry?”

Hort scratched her cheek. “Everyone with some talent for magic has a *terrible* personality. We’re all self-centered, selfish, quick to judge...with a very clear line between the things we like and the things we hate.”

“I-Is that so? But you and Ms. Zero and Ms. Los all seem like such kindhearted people. Even Mr. Kudo is a kind soul, despite his rough tongue. And Mr. Saybil is so even-keeled—”

“S-See! That’s what I’m talking about! You genuinely think so highly of everybody! Mages are nothing like that!”

“Ohh...?”

“Especially me! I’m as petty and narrow-minded as it gets! All I think about all day is how to make the Tyrant suffer, or how something benefits me, or what it’d cost me...”

“Think you could cut back on all that schemin’ for my sufferin’...?”

“Shut up! You’re my henchman! My tool! If I tell you to lick my feet, you’re *going* to lick them!”

“Yer bare feet? Sounds more like a reward.”

“Don’t ever talk to me again, perv.”

The Tyrant stuck out his tongue and wagged it as if to say, *At your service any time.*

Hearthful cleared her throat with displeasure, and Hort shot him a murderous look, heavy with the threat that she might blast him with a spell at any moment.

“Just jokin’,” the Tyrant mumbled, averting his gaze.

2

Kudo spent the rest of the day holed up in the clinic keeping an eye on the young extremist. The responsibility hadn’t been pushed onto him—he’d just figured he was the best fit for the job and volunteered. Part of him felt he had to make up for letting his guard down and getting stabbed like that (not to

mention the pathetic scream he'd let out), and another part worried the kid might get tortured under anyone else's watch.

Just as the sky began to deepen to indigo, a little mouse delivered a letter detailing what they'd decided to do with the boy; the priest must've told Lily to dispatch a friend of hers to bring it to Kudo. He read its contents out loud, earning him a defiant glare from his ward.

“Postponing my deportation to Wenias'? What the hell? They finally decide they're gonna torture me after all?”

“Don't ask me you little shit think for yourself as if you'd even believe me if I *did* tell you you dumbass.” Kudo finished his diatribe without so much as pausing for breath, then tossed a blanket to the boy. “You're no patient anymore. C'mon, I'm takin' you to one of the vacant houses in the village.”

“Vacant house? Don't you mean dungeon?”

“Dungeon? Don't tell me you seriously think you're worth that much trouble get your head outta your ass if you wanna run then go ahead and try but even I can't escape this damn village.” The beastfallen spat out these last words as if he'd been testing the limits of his lung capacity, then gestured for the kid to get up. The grudge he bore his assailant ran deep, but the anger he felt at the boy for trying to stab Los ran even deeper.

Clutching the blanket, the young boy cautiously followed Kudo. “You're not gonna kill me?”

“Why're you so convinced you're even worth killing—”

“Shut up about what I'm worth, already! I know I ain't worth a damn,” the boy grumbled. “I was supposed to die here. At least then I'd go down in history as a martyr...”

Kudo slammed his tail against the ground and shot a withering scowl over his shoulder at the boy, who flinched away.

“You wanna go down in history? Then do something *good* with your life instead of this terrorist shit, you misguided moron. Wake up—that kinda idiotic logic’s exactly how they get off treatin’ you like trash, you pathetic street rat. Die if you want, but not a damn soul’s gonna remember your name. If anything, those arrogant assholes at the top’ll gladly pretend you never existed!”

“S-Stop talking like you’re better than me! You’re the epitome of depravation, you could never understand the sublime virtue every true believer has in their heart!”

“Oh yeah? Pretty sure you ain’t got much of anything in your heart, let alone virtue.”

“Wh—”

Fresh out of patience, Kudo stopped short and grabbed the boy by his shirtfront, yanking him so close their foreheads were touching. As the beastfallen glowered, he saw reflected in the boy’s eyes an infuriating level of foolish naiveté.

“Didn’t you hear that damn priest tell you to think for yourself? What does evil really mean to you? Who counts as a monster? What do you base that on? Who can you kill in good conscience?”

“Witches and beastfallen,” the boy retorted brazenly.

Kudo got even more riled up. “And how many witches or beastfallen have you actually met in your pathetic life?! Do you realize how friggin’ stupid you have to be to write off whole groups like that, as if they’re *all* evil, as if they’re *all* your enemy?! That’s it. Come with me!” He shoved the kid away and walked

off.



“Where are we going?!”

“To the church you love so damn much!”

The boy stood still for a moment, unsure what to do. Then, seemingly realizing he had no other choice, he obediently followed after the beastfallen.

Without looking back, Kudo asked, “What’s your name?”

“Kady.”

Kudo turned his head to look back at the surprisingly forthcoming boy.
“Kudo.”

“Weird name.”

“I’ll beat you bloody, you little turd.”

The two walked around behind the chapel, where a humble vegetable patch grew beside the priest’s living quarters, which abutted the main building. They knocked at the residence’s unadorned door, and a small child no taller than Kady’s waist peeked out. The figure was covered from head to toe in a cloak, but the fingers Kady glimpsed were abnormally small.



“Kudo!”

“The postscript on the note said to drop by tonight, but...mind if we add one more person?”

“Sfine. Father’s not here, and it’s the more the merrier, as far as Lily is concerned, but...can he keep it a secret?” Lily looked cautiously up at Kady.

“Who’s this twerp?” Kady looked sullenly down his nose at Lily, who squeaked and scurried back behind the door.

“You better watch your mouth, if you value your life. I’m dead serious.”

Ignorance is no sin, but it can still be fatal sometimes. It wasn’t just that Kady would have to face the priest’s wrath if he disparaged Lily; she herself was a beastfallen, and a combatant not to be trifled with.

“So? Why’re we here? And what’s with the runt?”

Kudo gave Kady a look of contempt that seemed to say, *Do I have to explain everything to you?* “Ain’t it obvious? We’re here to bum some dinner.”

How did this happen?

Seated in the chapel’s cozy refectory and faced with so many dishes that he wondered if he hadn’t sat down at an aristocrat’s banquet by mistake, Kady froze up. The overwhelming visual input from all the delicacies overloaded his brain; he had no idea where to begin.

For him, food had always meant either stale bread or vegetables stewed into oblivion. He had essentially no notion of cooking as a higher pursuit. Presented with a fresh roll at lunch that day, he’d been convinced the villagers were

mocking him, conspiring to poison him. Apparently, though, fluffy bread was an everyday thing for these people. But what about this plethora of vibrant dishes Lily kept bringing out as she scurried back and forth from the kitchen? Even that bread paled in comparison.

“You’re really goin’ all out today, huh, Lily?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s a party!”

“But you’ve only got one more person than normal. I mean, the priest’s usually here and all.”

“Father doesn’t eat much, and he never tells Lily how it tastes. That is, his sense of taste is pretty dull...”

“What a waste...”

“But now Lily has two guests, so we went from zero to two! It makes Lily so happy! Eat up, eat up! Enjoy!”

“All right... Thank you for the meal!” Kudo said politely, then reached for a plate. “Damn, this is amazing. I don’t care what anyone says, it’s *way* better than what old man Mercenary makes.”

“That’s ’cos you and Father both like subtle flavors. But the village men and Auntie Witch prefer their food rich, so Merce makes it the way they like.”

“Huh. So *that’s* why I’m your taste-tester?”

“Didn’t Lily tell you?”

“I mean, as long as I get to eat this well, I don’t really care why.” Kudo freely served himself from the dishes on the table, as if he’d completely forgotten Kady was even there.

At least it seems like it isn’t poisoned. I don’t know about sharing a table with

a beastfallen, though—and a stupid lizard, no less. But the lure of the heaping dishes of food was enough to overcome Kady's contempt, and then some. If that lizard monster's taking on the role of poison taster, seems like there shouldn't be anything here I can't handle.

Ever so cautiously, Kady took a morsel from a plate of meat. The steak's seared exterior gave way to a gorgeous scarlet on the inside, so juicy and tender that the boy's tastebuds overflowed with ecstasy.

After that, it was as if a dam had broken within Kady, and he began laying into the dishes almost as if he were trying to out-eat Kudo. By the end, he had stuffed himself so full that for perhaps the first time in his life he thought, *I can't eat another bite*. He could feel the joy of supper fill every nook and cranny of his body, in a way the meatball he'd purchased with the gold coin given him by that Church bigwig the night before he left for his mission had failed to accomplish.

"Wow! You ate it all! So, so, which one was the best?"

"No idea... They were all so good..." Kady blurted out his honest response before Kudo could even open his mouth to answer.

Pointing to a soup bowl in the middle of the table, the lizard beastfallen said, "This soup smelled so damn delicious. I'd say that was my favorite."

"Any that needed work?"

"You mean...that needed work before the priest would like 'em? This one had a bitterness to it that I feel like would make him say, 'Have you seasoned this with poison?'"

"Ahhh, you're so right!" Gripping a pen in her tiny hand, Lily began scribbling down Kudo's feedback.

“...So you feast like this every day?” The question slipped out before Kady could stop it.

“Sometimes,” was all Kudo said.

“Kudo can’t talk nice, so he’s *really* bad at flattery. Which makes him the perfect taste-tester,” Lily explained.

“Don’t you go tellin’ anyone, though, got me? Lily seems to wanna keep it a secret that she practices her cooking for the priest’s sake.”

“Then why’d you bring me here?”

“To drag you into the depths of despair.”

“Huh?”

“Admit it—that was the best meal you’ve ever had, right?”

“I mean... Yeah.”

“So good you stopped giving a shit that you were sharing it with a beastfallen, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Now, here’s the thing.” Kudo hauled himself out of the chair he’d half-burrowed into and walked over to whisper something in Lily’s ear.

“Eep!” she squealed. “Why would you do that?!”

“Dammit!” Kady shot to his feet. “You *did* poison it, didn’t you?!”

“In a way, maybe.”

“You bastards—!”

“No!” Lily cried, cutting off the flushed boy’s imprecation. “Lily would never treat food that way! It’s just...!” She sighed then, and reluctantly pulled back the

hood she had kept over her face since they had gotten there.

Kady froze for a few seconds, speechless, then shrieked and jumped back. “Y-You’re a mouse?!”

“Mm-hmm. Lily’s a mouse...”

“You’ve gotta be kidding... You’ve gotta be! Did I just eat a meal cooked by a mouse...?!”

“Sure did. Stuffed your face with it! Look at you, all happy and satiated after gobbling down a dinner cooked by the epitome of depravation. Some religious fanatic you are!”

Kudo let out a guffaw, and Lily indignantly pounded her tiny fists against his legs.

“You shouldn’t’ve done that!” The white ears peeking out from Lily’s snowy fur flattened against her head, while her hairless tail drooped to the floor. “Lily, um, Lily’s sorry. Lily didn’t know you didn’t know. You can go barf it up, if it bothers you!”

“Ungh... But that...” *would be such a waste*, were the first words to cross his mind, appearing more quickly than any thought of hatred.

This had unquestionably been the most wonderful meal Kady had ever eaten. During dinner he’d forgotten all about his current predicament, his mission, his upbringing—everything. When he imagined throwing it all up, he was beset with the fear that somehow it would mean losing the most sublime moment of his life. At the same time, he couldn’t let go of the fact that he had been tricked.

How dare they make me eat a meal cooked by a dirty beastfallen? And yet, for some reason he was beginning to feel less confident in the righteousness behind his anger.

“...Huh. You didn’t freak out as much as I thought you would,” Kudo remarked with apparent boredom, giving the floor a light tap with his tail. “Well, whatever. You just stay there and have a good hard think about what you’re gonna do: insult the chef by vomiting your guts out and then book it, or express your appreciation to the kind soul who so generously served you dinner. Me, I’m gonna help clear up.”

“Oh, uh... Me too...!” Kady said in a fluster. A mountain of plates stood on the table, all of which he and Kudo had practically licked clean. “I’ll help you with this sh–tuff.”

Mortified by the ridiculous word his sudden veer away from vulgarity had produced, the boy began stacking up dirty dishes and bringing them over to the sink, where Kudo had already begun washing. Kudo shot him a sideways glance, and sighed. “Man, you’re no fun.”

“The hell d’you mean?”

“Kinda takes the wind outta your sails when the guy you’re tryin’a mess with does a one-eighty and starts actin’ like someone who’s actually got brains.”

“That’s a hell of a thing for the epitome of depravation to—”

“Listen, you little prick, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten you literally stabbed me, and here I am letting that go. You should be thanking me for my kindness, dude. Get your head on straight.”

The two made quick work of the dishes and decided not to overstay their welcome.

Lily kept apologizing as she saw them off. “Lily’s sorry. Lily’s so sorry.”

Finally, Kady found himself speaking up. “Excuse me...!”

“Hrnh?”

“You don’t gotta...have to...apologize. Umm... That was the most delicious food I’ve ever had... Thank you.”

Kady knew—he knew what was just, what was evil, what real depravation looked like, and what it meant to be a monster. And in that moment, he knew the right thing to do was to thank the person who had served him such a wonderful meal.

Lily’s ears and tail shot up in surprise. Then she broke out in a warm smile and said, “Come back again sometime!”

Kady trudged along a few steps behind Kudo. Suddenly, nothing made sense anymore.

Epitome of depravation—beastfallen—witches.

There was no conceivable way Lily didn’t know that Kady had set the Remnants of Disaster loose in the forest, but she hadn’t uttered a single word of reproach. She hadn’t even mentioned it. His heart was half full of suspicion about whatever scheme they might be concocting—while the other half was filled with an emotion Kady didn’t quite know what to call.

“Hey, we’re here. This is the place.”

“Oh, okay...” Kady stepped inside to find a perfectly normal table, chair, and bed furnishing the room. He scowled.

“What’s with that face?”

“I...thought you’d make me sleep on a floor covered with cow dung or something.”

“You really think we’d go to all that trouble...?”

“Why is everybody being so... I mean... Weren’t you talking about torturing me?!”

“That was just Mercenary being Mercenary. The old man only says stuff like that ’cos he knows no one’ll actually let him do it. Good thing yer useless as an assassin, though. You better believe nobody would’ve tried to stop him if you’d really managed to kill me and stab Professor Los.”

Kady clenched his fists. He had trained his ass off—or at least, that’s what he’d thought. For two whole years he’d studied how to fight so he could one day fulfill his mission. He’d been picked up from the side of the road, thrown a bone, and trained like a fighting dog.

But everyone in this village treats me like I’m just some helpless kid.

He should’ve died alone and unmourned in the forest after those bees attacked him, but the villagers healed him from the stings; he meant to go out in a blaze of glory when he stabbed the doctor, but the beastfallen’s wound closed up the very next instant; driven to desperation he’d lunged at a little girl, only for her staff to scare him unconscious. And just as he’d braced for them to finally kill him, he was spared any torture, and instead treated to an impossibly delicious meal, gorging himself until he was nearly bursting at the seams. Now they’d shown him to a fully furnished house, where he wasn’t even restrained in any way.

I can’t keep my guard up like this.

The next thing Kady knew, he was crying.

“Hanh?!” Kudo exclaimed, startled at the sudden turn. “What’s wrong with you?! You’re seriously gonna cry just ’cos I called you useless? Talk about nerves of steel! You really thought a softie like you could handle mass murder?!”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this! They told me that witches sacrifice babies for their rituals and beastfallen eat people! They said I’d be better off killing myself if I got caught—even gave me the poison to do it!”

“What kinda nowheresville rock have you been living under these last ten years...? This the poison you were talkin’ about?”

“Wait, that’s—!” One look at the small vial Kudo held out set Kady frantically rummaging through his pockets. It should’ve been hanging around his neck, but it was nowhere to be found. “Why?!”

“I’d be an idiot not to at least search you, dumbass. We’d all be done for if you poisoned the well or something.”

“Oh... Ohhh...” *Huh. I guess it’s only natural they’d assume that’s what someone who attacked them would intend it for.*

“Don’t worry,” Kudo told him. “I’ll get rid of it.”

“...Why didn’t you snitch? About the poison.”

“I was plannin’ to, once I checked it out and was sure that’s what it was... Tomorrow I’ll report that I found a suicide dose on you, ’course. And they might tie you up again, so that you don’t hang yourself,” Kudo sneered, but for some reason, Kady sensed no malice in his words.

“I’m not gonna...kill myself...”

“Well, probably no easier than runnin’ away anyway—seein’ as I’m here and all.”

“I tried to kill you...”

Kady had stabbed Kudo in the relatively unprotected flank, then twisted the knife to tear up his insides. No normal person could’ve survived that. But the

beastfallen had just pushed Kady off him, and by the time he pulled out the knife, the gash in his stomach had already started to heal. Kady had no idea what had happened.

I'm sure I saw him bleeding, so how...? “Magic’s pretty crazy, huh...”

“Take the Academy’s entrance exam, if you wanna learn for yourself,” Kudo said casually, turning his back to the boy.

Kady watched the beastfallen leave, then threw himself on the bed in the empty house. A wave of drowsiness washed over him almost instantly.

“—Ow.” His stomach ached. *Guess I must’ve eaten too much... It almost feels like something’s wriggling around in there.*

“...Hope I can go back for more.” It was the last thought he had before dozing off.

3

The three mage apprentices shared one formerly vacant house as their dormitory. Loux Krystas had another house to herself, but on this particular evening had ended up joining her wards in their living room. There Los sat with Hort, overseer of the Tyrant she so despised; Kudo, recently stabbed by the patient he’d treated; and an ominous feeling that the anti-witch extremists who’d loosed Remnants of Disaster in the forest would strike again—

“Forsooth, your stay here has begun to feel like something other than a field training program, has it not?” Los frowned, feet up on the table as she rocked back and forth on her chair’s hind legs.

Hort sat with her chin resting on her hands, watching the witch.

Kudo sat reading on the bench, and eyed Los over his book. “What’s wrong with that? If things get rough, it’ll be way easier to accomplish something that gets us graduated.”

“Such a valiant heart thou dost possess. I very nearly do not recognize thee, young Kudo.”

“As if,” Kudo scoffed. “I couldn’t take the constant fear, and eventually my heart just froze.”

“Sayb still hasn’t come home yet, though, huh.” Her face slumping to the table, Hort chimed in as if she were continuing the conversation, even though her comment had absolutely no connection to what the others were talking about.

Los gazed out the window. It was dark, nearly time to turn in for the night, yet Saybil had not returned.

“D’you think he’s still at Professor Zero’s place?”

“‘Bout time he started takin’ his studies seriously.”

“He’s always been super serious about it!” Hort cried in Saybil’s defense, though she couldn’t deny that his efforts to date had fallen far short of what one might call “realizing his full potential.”

“Well, perhaps I shall go pay them a little visit, to make sure things are proceeding apace.” With the chair still balanced on its hind legs, Los twirled herself into a handstand on its back before launching herself off with the power of her arms alone and sticking a silent landing.

Hort never failed to applaud the witch’s stunts. “Me, too! I’ll go with you!”

“My ass is staying right here.”

“Kudo, you’re...like, so Kudo.”

“Don’t use my name like it’s an insult!”

“Aren’t you curious what kinda training Sayb’s doing?”

“Nope. His magery and mine are totally different. He’s got his way a trainin’, I got mine, and you got yours.”

“Never thought I’d hear a glorified gecko talk so much sense! Where’s the roughneck we all know and love?”

“Quit it with that glorified gecko shit! I’ve just decided I ain’t ever gonna let pride get the best of me and make me run off on my own again! It only makes things harder for everybody else!”

“Impressive. Thou showest true maturity.”

“...Wait. Someone’s coming.”

Suddenly, the air grew tense. The Staff of Ludens stirred in Los’s hand—*What is this intimidating presence?*

“Is this...Sayb’s magic we’re sensing?” Hort ventured.

“‘Twould...appear so.”

“Something’s a little off, though, ain’t it?” asked Kudo. “Did it always feel like this?”

The three rushed outside. Sure enough, there stood the figure they had expected to see: a tall apprentice mage with slumped shoulders, drowsy eyes, and not enough meat on his bones—but the *power* emanating from him...

“Young Sayb... What in heaven’s name has Mud-Black done to thee?”

“She taught me how to control my mana.”

Hort dashed over to Saybil and began circling him, poking his body all over. “It’s not spilling out.”

“Yeah... Professor Zero said it was useful that just being around me could help people recover their mana, but she pointed out that if my opponent were also a mage, my presence alone could make things worse. So I reeled it in.”

“Is that even possible?!” exclaimed Hort.

“Professor Zero helped me understand how. It’s like with casting spells. Up ’til now, I’ve tried to either hold all my power back or let it all rip... But check this out.” Saybil sped through the incantation for Solm, and in his palm appeared a ball of light—exactly the right size and brightness. He split it into two, three, then four, and set the little balls afloat in the air. “Casting a Flagis on multiple targets like you can is still way outta my league, but...at least with simple spells...” The balls of light shifted into the shapes of moons and stars. “I feel like I’m...starting to get the hang of it.”

“Wowww!” Hort clapped. “Amazing! That’s so pretty and neat, Sayb!”

“C’mon, that’s just some stupid parlor trick...”

He changed the shape of the light.

Before her very eyes, Los was witnessing her fledgling mature into a hawk in real time. The little bird still hadn’t realized it himself, but wings that had not yet properly learned to fly were beginning to get a feel for the wind, and soon he would be soaring to great heights.

“Wait, I wanna try, too! Let me give it a shot!”

“Grow up, it ain’t a competition.”

“If you can’t do it then just sit there and watch, Kudo.”

“I never said I couldn’t!”

Hort and Kudo both silently summoned the light of Solm and fumblingly managed to split their spheres in two. Once they got to the shape-shifting stage, however, they floundered.

“Huh? Is it just me, or is this, like, pretty hard? Changing the shape is way trickier than adjusting the light level...”

“Yeah, for that, try making the balls bigger, then just darken the sections you don’t need...”

“Oh, I get it. So it’s not, like, changing the shape, per se, but adjusting the different parts... O-Oh-Oh...! I’m doing it! I think I’ve got it! Kudo, I think I got it!”

Hort’s spheres of light morphed into a rabbit and cat in midair—at least, very abstract representations of them, especially above the neck. Kudo’s, on the other hand, just kept flickering on and off, showing no sign of changing shape.

“Hang on, how’d you get it so quick?! Huh?! What the hell? You darken only, what? Specific parts? And make the shape you want? What kinda control is that it’s impossible only a freak could do somethin’ like that!”

“Whoa! This is wild! It’s such a simple spell, but it’s, like, so hard!”

Saybil nodded. “It’d be trouble if I let an advanced spell get out of hand, so... Professor Zero told me to try making the easiest spells as complicated as I can.”

“Huhhh, like sewing with your opposite hand. That’s such a great idea! I’m

gonna try practicing like that, too!”

“W-Well, I guess...I could add that ta my routine...”

“Oh, Professor Los!”

“Aye? What is it, lad?” The witch, who had been watching the children test their boundaries with a warm smile on her face, now blinked as Saybil rushed over to her side.

“Um, the Staff of Ludens absorbs mana, right?”

“Indeed.”

“And can you tell about how much magic power it’s taken in?”

“Aye, by and large.”

“Great! I was hoping you could help me out with a little experiment. There’s something I wanna try making, but it’d be way too dangerous to test on people...”

Such ardent passion. Until today, Saybil displayed none of this impatient urgency. Now he appears loath to waste even a few precious seconds.

“Rejoice in my pardon!” Los declared, beaming wide. “I have a great love of the impassioned quest for progress. Tell me, Little Ludens, dost not grow curious to know what sort of torturous ordeal young Sayb intends to put thee through?”

“I’m not planning anything like that... Oh, but I did have one more thing I wanted to tell you.”

“And what might that be? I am in a positively munificent mood—the limits of my pardon may well know no bounds today. Prithee speak.”

“I love you.”

“Rejoice in my pa–ngh!” Los almost bit her tongue in two as she clamped her mouth shut before she could finish. “Whaaat?! A veritable bolt from the blue! I...! You... Dost thou intend to make me blush?! I, too, love thee and *all* my students!”

“That’s not it... I, um... I mean I want to marry you.”

“M-Marry?! Hast lost thy mind?! What precocious balderdash dost chirrup, and thee a fledgling ignorant in all matters of romance?! Not even I can pardon this! To allow the stoking of a one-sided infatuation might be one thing, but...!”

“I don’t mean right away. But once I’m a great mage, once I can claim the title of sorcerer and become someone who deserves to be by your side—then I want you to be my mate.”

Los staggered backwards. Hort and Kudo were too flabbergasted for words.

“M-Mate...?! What kind of ideas has Mud-Black been putting in thine head...?!”

“She said nothing will ever happen if I just think about things, so I should say what I’m thinking out loud and act on it. She said that would fortify my convictions and generate results.”

“I-I cannot disagree... Indeed, I am entirely of the same mind, yet still this does not sit well with me...!”

“Ah...Aaaah! Wait, Sayb, hang on! Love is all about give and take! You can’t just force it on someone! You’re gonna scare Professor Los away!” On the verge of tears, Hort clutched Saybil’s arm. Just that morning, she had fought back the fear that Los would vanish from the village to escape from Saybil’s feelings. Hort genuinely wanted to support Saybil in his love, but she couldn’t possibly have imagined he would try to reach his goal in a single bound. Nor, needless to say,

had Los.

In a bid to somehow regain control of the situation, the Dawn Witch thrust her staff under Saybil's nose. "Mark my words, young Sayb: there is a proper order to these things. Such an unexpected proposal is naught but unnerving!"

"Huh? Was I being scary?"

"That *was* sort of alarming, Sayb! You seemed like some kind of lunatic!"

"Man, this is hard... I'm sorry, Professor Los. Forget I ever said—"

"Impossible!" Los shrieked.

"Right, of course... So what do I do?" Saybil asked, looking troubled.

I'm the troubled one here! Los wanted to shout.

"Ahem, well, what can I say... Yes... I am most flattered. Very well. I shall take thy confession to heart."

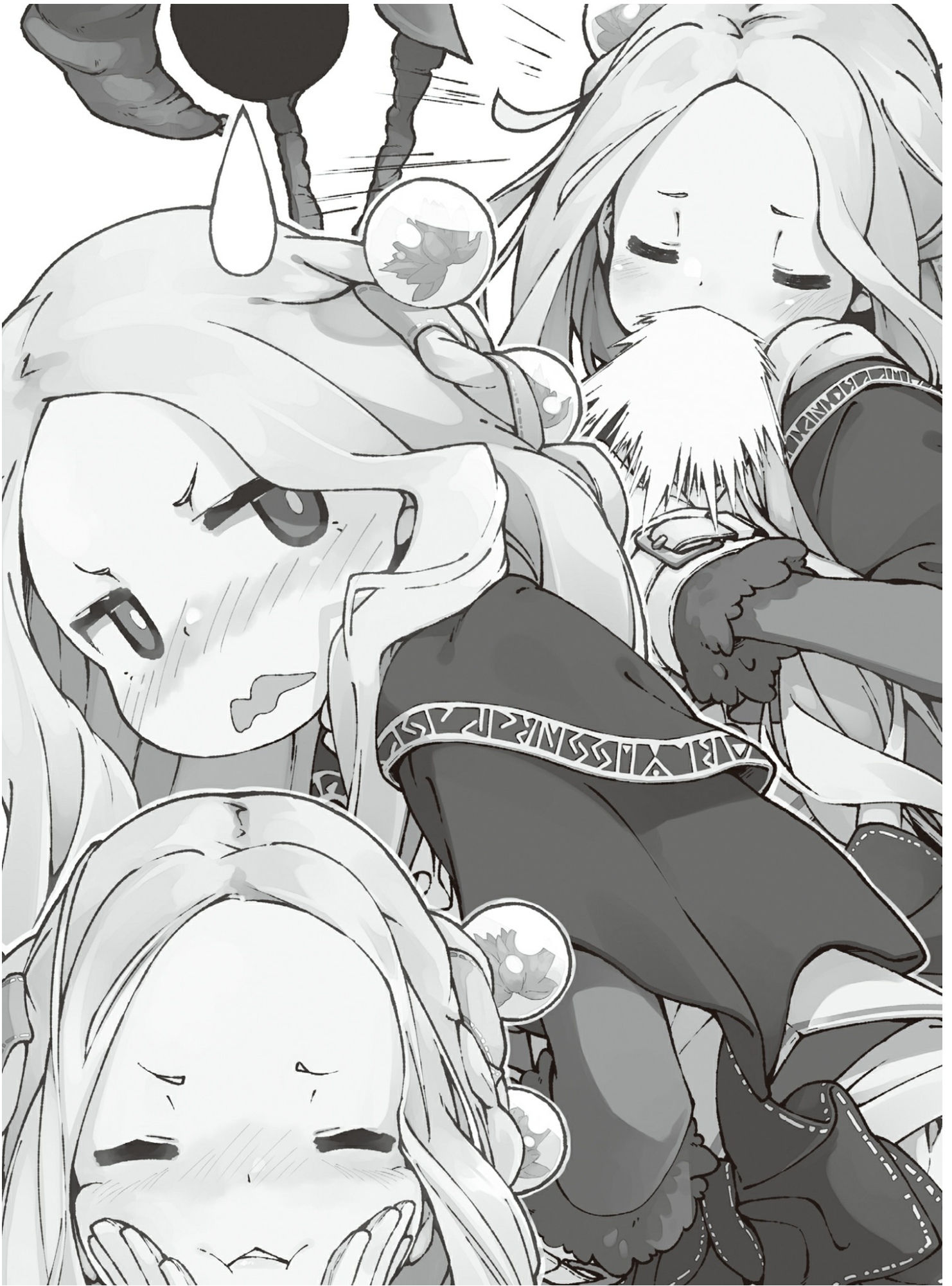
"Flattered, as in happy?"

"Let not such a trifle brighten thy spirits so! What, art thou some innocent young maiden?!"

"That ain't his spirits—he's just makin' his Solms burn brighter." Looking up at the balls of light Saybil had floating in the air, Kudo's scales turned a nauseated mud-brown color.

Saybil made the lights flicker and sparkle. "I figured it might be easier to express my emotions this way, like with Kudo's scales. I might even be able to change the colors, if I tinker with it a bit."

"I-In any event! Now is not the time to lose oneself in infatuation! I shall take thy feelings to heart, but there they shall remain, dormant and deferred!"



“Okay! That’s enough for me. I’m so glad. I love you.”

“Append not such declarations of love as if they were an afterthought!”

“Professor Zero said it’s best to tell people you love them as much as possible.”

“Once again, I must agree! As long as I am not myself the object of affection!”
Los held her head in her hands and bent backwards before plopping down on the ground. “I have a few choice words for that Mud-Black. Dismissed, all of you! Come, little Ludens!”

And so Los set out for Zero’s shop.



Chapter Three



Kady lay face down amid the sweltering heat. His limbs were long past the point of exhaustion and he could no longer move them. His unbearably parched throat lusted after water.

“Are you in pain?” a voice asked from above him.

Knowing the suffering would never end if he answered honestly, Kady said, “I’m fine.”

“On your feet. Witches are not so merciful as we.”

“Yes, sir,” Kady replied. He stood up, hungry and thirsty, aching and exhausted.

“The witches are to blame for everything. Those monstrosities have ravaged our country, our world, and our people’s hearts. The North lies in ruins because of a witch, and we must defend the South at all costs.”

And in order to do that, they told Kady, they would need warriors—stout-hearted soldiers who would not buckle when faced with a witch. Kady had a debt to repay the Church for raising him after his parents abandoned him. In fact, that debt was the *only* thing he had. He’d been happy when the Church asked for his help. They had flattered him, telling him he showed great talent—which was exactly why they had to be so hard on him.

Kady had believed them. He’d had no other choice.

Several dozen children were rounded up in all. Talking to them, Kady found they all felt the same way. None of them had anywhere else to go, and they

took pride in being given the opportunity to repay their gratitude to the Church for raising them.

Until the first of them died, that is.

“Poor creature. And yet, better this than to die by a witch’s hand. How fortunate to be able to pass away here, in peace.”

Fortunate. Kady turned the word over in his mind. He wondered what could be peaceful about writhing in pain and foaming at the mouth as you died. *Fighting witches must be so much more awful than this. They must be so much crueler. So this, this death, it’s unfortunate, but what can you do? Anybody who couldn’t survive this training wouldn’t stand a chance against a witch, anyway. This is just. The Church is just.*

I have to keep getting up.

I have to keep fighting—so the witches don’t get me.

So the witches don’t kill me.

So the Church doesn’t kill me because I don’t have what it takes to slay a witch.

“Kaaadyyy! Let’s go plaaaay!”

The next morning, Kady awoke to the sound of children calling his name. He was drenched in sweat from head to toe. His body felt languid, heavy and unbearably hot, and his throat was parched.

“Maybe he’s still sleeping? Kaaadyyy!” another child called out.

Hang on, though. I’m deep in enemy territory. The voices didn’t necessarily

belong to Kady's enemies, but not once in his life had he made the kind of friend who would invite him to go play first thing in the morning. *It's just a dream. In that case, I'll keep sleeping. I mean, who knows how many more nights I'll get to sleep in a bed...*

"Rise and shine, punk. The kids're callin' you. Get yer ass up, you lopped-off lizard tail."

Only after his covers were rudely yanked away did Kady spring to his feet. Kudo was standing right there, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. Kady hadn't sensed his approach at all.

"How...How did you...?"

"What?"

"Are you some kinda super stealth master?!"

"No, you're just a total idiot. C'mon, hurry up and get ready."

"Huh? What? Ready for what?"

"Kudo, is Kady up? Is he coming with?"

Kady goggled at the girl with antlers sprouting from her head, whose face had appeared around the door. *I'm pretty sure her name was...Hort or something...*

When Hort saw Kady standing on the bed, a broad smile brightened her face. "Oh, you're awake! Hey, so, the kids are going down to the river to catch some fish, and Miss Hearthful thought maybe you'd want to come, too."

"Huh...? Fish? What? River? Why?"

"So you can at least catch your own damn food, dumbass."

"Oh. I...see?"

“Ughh! You know that’s not it, Kudo! Plus, we’ve got bread for breakfast! Here, Kady, this is for you.”

Kady took the loaf Hort offered him and suddenly realized he was insatiably hungry. He hastily tore off a bite, and felt a rumbling in his stomach. It wouldn’t subside no matter how much he ate, and before he knew it, he’d devoured the entire loaf.

“Damn, you sure can eat... You might actually *need* to find your own grub, or we’ll end up with a food shortage around here.”

“Don’t be such a bully! If Kady’s gonna stay in the village for a while, you’d be better off making friends now! Ooh, but, I bet grilling the fish we catch will be so taaasty!”

“Hanh? Make friends? With me? Why?” The unspoken implication being, *I attacked you guys, you know.*

“Come on, come on,” was all Hort said by way of reply, urging him outside where he found the children, the Arbiter known as the Tyrant, and the petite, bespectacled woman they’d called Miss Hearthful.

Kady glowered at the Tyrant. “You filthy traitor...” But the Tyrant merely sneered and said nothing. Irrate, Kady got in the much larger man’s face. “I woulda killed that lizard yesterday if you hadn’t butted in!”

“Not a chance. I like this kid, he’s a comedian.” Chuckling, the Tyrant gently poked Kady in the forehead. The one-fingered push was enough to send him stumbling back into Hort’s arms.

“Hey! Leave him alone!”

“Awright, awright,” the Tyrant relented. “I’m warnin’ you now, though, kid, ’cos I ain’t about to have you stirring things up: the only people in this village a

failed Arbiter like you could ever hope to kill are Four-Eyes here and her little kiddos. As long as Lizard Boy and Antlers were on their guard, you wouldn't give 'em any more trouble than a gnat buzzin' around their heads."

Kady scowled. "Failed...Arbiter?"

"What, they didn't tell ya that neither? So you never got any 'rewards'? Damn, I'm surprised you put up with that horrible trainin' for so long."

The Tyrant guffawed and walked off, leaving Kady's question hanging unanswered in the air. The gaggle of children swarmed around the hulking man as he went, and Hearthful followed after. Hort and Kudo nudged Kady to do the same.

+ + +

"...Hey, Kady. About what the Tyrant said earlier..." Hort sidled up next to Kady, who had been trudging in silence through the forest, and struck up this conversation in a friendly tone. "What did he mean by 'horrible training'? What did they make you do?"

"...Nothing really," Kady replied curtly. *I don't gotta answer your questions.*

"Can't you tell just by lookin' at him?" Kudo cut in. "When he stabbed me and attacked Professor Los, he moved like a fighter with at least *some* kinda combat training. A pathetic excuse for a fighter, but still."

"Kudo! Do you have to say it like that?!"

"And, I mean, can't you imagine for yourself what he went through? Do you seriously need to ask? You guys are basically comin' from the same place, aren't

you?”

“Hmm.” Hort cocked her head. When Kady turned to look at her, curious what that might mean, she said, “Oh, right!” and gave the boy a smile—a perfect smile.

She musta had it pretty easy growin’ up, thought Kady with disdain. However...

“I grew up in the Church, too. My mom gave me up... But I was, like, overflowing with youthful talent, so the Church gave me a really tough mission: they sent me to spy on the Academy of Magic, and—”

“And you got pampered as a star student, so you flipped on your old masters like *that* and went all in on becoming a mage.”

“Kudo!” Hort fumed, shaking her fists angrily, but the lizard just tuned her out, swishing his tail back and forth as he walked.

Kady stared daggers at Hort, but he wasn’t confident his look carried any real malice. “So you’re a traitor, too, huh?”

Hort just smiled. “Guess that depends on how you look at it! I mean, official Church doctrine is that we should make nice with the witches now, right? The ones trying to use kids like you and me to pick a fight with the magic-users are a minority extremist group, so...”

“Exactly. That’s not being a ‘traitor,’ it’s called ‘turnin’ over a new leaf.’”

“I-I dunno why, Kudo, but that pisses me off, too...!”

“How are you both so...chill about this?” Kady asked, almost to himself. Hort and Kudo both turned to look at him. “Once a traitor, always a traitor. This girl, the Tyrant, they might be on the mages’ side right now, but who’s to say they won’t go runnin’ back to the Church at some point? How can you play at this

buddy-buddy crap?”

“I don’t play buddy-buddy with just anybody, ya know—Hort got put through the wringer during this twisted test the Academy made us take, and it wasn’t ’til after that. Believe me, I don’t trust *anybody* right off the bat.”

“That’s right! It’s actually super hard to get people to have faith in you, Kady! Kudo aside, I don’t know if the headmaster even totally trusts me... And, like, I don’t trust the Tyrant as far as I could throw him. *Without* magic, I mean,” Hort added, her face turning icy and severe as she scowled at the former Arbiter walking up ahead of them beside Hearthful. A shiver ran down the Tyrant’s spine and he glanced back, then shrugged as if to say, *Hoo boy*.

She really means it—Hort seriously doesn’t trust the Tyrant at all. Their entirely unexpected answers left Kady at a loss. He’d been ready to argue against any lecture about the sanctity of the trusting heart, but after hearing “I don’t trust anybody, and nobody trusts me,” all Kady could say was, “Oh.”

“Also, like, the Church is all about shoving this one-sided way of thinking down your throat! They took me in when I was really little and I got pretty badly brainwashed, so when I first got to the Academy it was all, like, so freeing I almost couldn’t handle it!”

“Th-The Church teaches the truth,” Kady countered. “Spreading the truth isn’t ‘brainwashing.’”

Kudo snickered.

“What the hell’s so funny?”

“Every damn word you just said. Tell me, how much of what the Church taught you’s been true since you woke up in the clinic yesterday?” Kudo knew full well that Kady had been dumbfounded by the vacant house they’d prepared

for him.

The boy couldn't find anything to say in response. Nothing about this village was as the Church had told him it would be.

"So, like, I don't know what kind of awful boot camp they put you through, Kady, but I do have a pretty good idea of the kinda things they told you to make you put up with it all."

"Yeah, sure."

"The wool has been pulled over the people's eyes. Even the righteous have been fooled by the witches' clever falsehoods, victims of their own trusting hearts. We must root out the evil before it overwhelms all that is good. The Church does not condone violence—but there are times when violence is the only answer."

Kady turned back to look at Hort. *That's exactly what they told me—in pretty much the same words.*

"Turns out, they've got this handbook they use to win kids over. At the end of the day, they're just a bunch of basic birdbrains who can't even think for themselves what to say!"

"Th-That's not—"

"So listen, Kady!" Hort took Kady's hands in hers and pulled him close. "Kudo and I aren't asking you to trust us. Go ahead and think of us as the enemy if you want. But don't throw away your future just to cover for your past."

"Wh-Where the hell did that come from...?!"

"And you can attack me or Kudo or the Tyrant however many times you want. But don't hurt the children or anyone else who can't fight for themselves, just because they're the only ones you can get at. That's all!" Hort smiled. "That's

the *only* absolute no-no in this village. And I give you my word! No matter how many times you try to kill me, I'll never kill you!"

For some reason, the unshakeable confidence in her own superior strength that shined through Hort's smile gave Kady the chills. He shook off the hand gripping his.

"Hey, that's mean!" Hort wailed, but Kady was too overwhelmed by the cold sweat dripping down his back to care.

Kudo clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Scary, ain't she?"

"Oh, uh..."

"Freaks me out enough having her on my side, but the last thing I'd ever wanna do is turn her against me. That should be enough warnin' for you not to pull anything stupid. C'mon, let's go catch some fish."

"I'm not scary, you know!!"

"If you don't realize it, that's even scarier. What are you, like, evil incarnate? I could see you razing a whole country to the ground if it was 'for a friend.'"

"I would never!"

She might not destroy a whole country, but she would definitely murder me the minute I laid a finger on those kids. Kady was somehow convinced of it, even though Hort had been nothing but smiles all day. He clenched his fists.

"Hey... Why'd you betray us?"

"Huh? The Church, you mean?"

"If you're really so strong, you could've..." *accomplished all kinds of stuff, back in the fold.* Kady was nothing more than a disposable pawn; he'd been as good as dead from the start. But Hort would've racked up a dazzling track record, no

doubt about it.

“Hmm... Let’s say I *did* use my magic to help the Church. Don’t you think they’d just toss me out with the trash once they were done with me?”

“I mean... I...”

“And it’s not like I could come crawling back to the mages at that point and ask them for help! I’m still a believer, but I don’t believe in those jerks who tried to use me to break the peace, not one tiny bit. In fact, I *never* did. I couldn’t, after I realized I was only there because I didn’t have any other place to go—and that they’d stolen the possibility of belonging somewhere else from me.” Hort smiled. “You know, I only turn on the smiles for people who’re useful to me. That’s why I’ll never give any Church extremists so much as a grin ever again. Like the Tyrant, for instance.”

“The Tyrant turns out to pretty useful, though,” Kudo pointed out.

Hort’s face instantly froze over. “And I’m gonna make sure he stays useful, smiles or no.”

She’s seriously ice cold when it comes to him.

“But...you smile at me.”

“You’re still in your trial period! And...I guess you seem kinda promising?”

“Man, you’re a nasty one.”

“Makes me easier to trust than someone who’s unconditionally nice, don’t you think?”

She could be right. All the fight suddenly went out of Kady, and he laughed despite himself.

“What’s so damn funny about that?” Kudo demanded with a scowl. Still, Kady

couldn't help but think that since he and Hort shared a similar upbringing, he was probably just as nasty.

As soon as the tension in him gave way, Kady's stomach let out a violent growl. He blushed uncontrollably.

Beaming with the brightest smile she'd given him yet, Hort said, "Guess we better catch a lot of fish!"

2

"Top of the morning to you, Professor Los."

It was morning. Los had been hugging the Staff of Ludens close, thoroughly indulging in the pleasure of repose, and when this somewhat implausible greeting startled her awake, she quite literally "jumped out of bed": using the staff for support, she launched herself towards the ceiling, spun through the air, and landed on the back of her armchair—just as one might to evade a midnight sneak attack.

"That's a novel way of getting out of bed. Oh, would you like some tea? And I brought some bread for breakfast. You always bring it to me, so I thought it was about time I returned the favor."

It was Saybil.

The Staff of Ludens was the first to lower its guard, and, while Los remained hunched on her perch, it began to attend to her unruly bedhead.

"...Nay, nay, nay." Los slowly shook her head. "Nay, nay, nay, nay, nay. This is all wrong! Thou dost move too fast! Art some foppish rake up on the stage,

bedding every lass in sight?!”

“Huh? Did I do something weird again? But every morning, you bring m—”

“I am thy professor! Thou art my pupil! I crave adventure! Thou art a veritable shut-in! Dost not see the natural order of these things, just as two cogs complement one another in the turning of the wheel?!”

“But you’re the one who told me I should get out more.”

“That, at least, I cannot deny, but...!”

Saybil set the table, making sure to prepare *three* cups of tea alongside the breakfast rolls. It appeared he had not forgotten that Los always poured the Staff of Ludens its own cup. Pleased by the gesture, the staff stretched a tendril from the orb embedded in its tip and pulled out Saybil’s chair for him.

Infidelitous wretch! Los inwardly cursed the staff. “...Well, so be it. I shall pardon thee for trespassing into a lady’s sleeping quarters and drooling over her sleeping form.”

“I wasn’t drooling...but you’re right, I should’ve knocked. I wasn’t thinking and just kind of copied what you always do...”

Presented with this, Los could no longer call on her role as an educator to protest. She let out a deep sigh, then took a sip of her tea. It was her favorite kind. Silently, she reached a hand toward Saybil.

“Yes?”

“Thine head.”

“Oh.” Saybil hunched forward and offered the witch his head, which she patted roughly. “What did I do to deserve that?”

“While jarring me from my sleep should by rights earn thee a demerit, thou

didst come bearing the tea and victuals I so enjoy, and that is worthy of my approbation.”

“I see... I’ll come back again tomorrow, then.”

“How aggressive thou hast become in the span of one night...! Very well, but thou must knock first.”

“Right. So, on another note—”

“Just like that?! Hast even had time to truly repent?!”

“Sorry...”

“Thinkest no more of it. I have a great love of youthful exuberance unbound by the chains of the past. Now what wouldst thou speak of?”

“Do you remember when I asked if you would help me with an experiment?”

“Aye, indeed, I do. Concerning the making of something, if I recall aright?”

“I just couldn’t get to sleep last night...so I ended up pulling an all-nighter, and I finished it,” Saybil explained as he rummaged through his bag.

“Oh hoh? And so it was that patience eluded thee and thou didst barge into a lady’s chambers at such an appalling hour?”

“Hort and Kudo already left for work, so I figured everybody would be up by this time...”

“I have a great love of indulging in idle slumber, and as such awaken a touch later than most. In any event, ’tis quite the devotion those two show to their occupations!”

“They said the children were heading down to the river to catch fish, and they were going along as escorts.”

“Oh my! How lovely! Fish!”

“I’m pretty sure we’ll have some for dinner,” Saybil added, prompting images of the sort of fare they might expect that evening to race enticingly through Los’s mind. “Anyway, this is what I was talking about...”

Saybil finally fished a small vial filled with a pale crimson liquid from his bag. Los took the proffered vial and scrutinized its contents. Tilting it to one side, she found that the liquid was slightly viscous.

“Oil?”

“Yes, extracted from a few different types of seeds. The formula is from this book Professor Zero lent me, and apparently it’s used as a base for magical elixirs.”

“Elixirs? Meanst thou some form of remedy?”

Magical elixirs were, in a word, witch-made medicines. Each witch or sorcerer used their own recipe to blend herbal compounds before infusing them with mana to augment their potency—at least, that was the conventional wisdom. However...

“Not exactly. Here, look.” The young mage pulled out a thick, unmarked tome and rifled through until he found the page he wanted, then presented it to Los.

The witch frowned. “What in... These scratchings evoke the final anguish of a strangled chicken.”

“Huh? You can’t read it?” Saybil blinked in surprise.

“I imagine I might be able to, if I truly put my mind to the task...but handwriting this tortured might as well be a cipher. Only a witch of truly twisted character could have authored such a tome. Never mind inviting others to read it, ’twould seem she was intent on discouraging any and all prying eyes.”

“It was a sorcerer.”

“Hm?”

“The author—it was the sorcerer Thirteen.”

Los’s eyes widened. *I hardly thought I would hear that name from Saybil’s own lips—especially not so laden with meaning, nor so soon.*

“...Hast thou learned the truth, then?”

“Yes, yesterday.”

“Dost seem rather calm for that.”

“Professor Zero said the same thing,” Saybil admitted. “Honestly, though, I couldn’t care less about Thirteen being my father.”

Most impressionable young men Saybil’s age would be thunderstruck to learn their father was an infamous sorcerer destined to go down in history for his wicked deeds. Saybil, however, did not seem to be exaggerating; he clearly had no interest in the matter whatsoever.

If anything, he appears to have a powerful interest not in Thirteen as his father, but in Thirteen as the author of this book—a fitting attitude for a sorcerer, I must say.

Los wrested her gaze away from Saybil and looked down at the page he was pointing to.

“See? Right here it says you can imbue the oil with any magic you want. The thing about this book is, the ink is fresher on the pages closer to the front, so I think he must’ve just added new pages on top whenever he thought of something.”

“I see... It does indeed speak of ‘magic,’ not ‘sorcery.’”

“Right? And apparently you apply a traditional Wenisian sorcery technique to do it.”

“And? Go on.”

“So I borrowed a book on Wenisian sorcery from Professor Zero’s library.”

“Traditional Wenisian sorcery involves ‘sealing’ and ‘releasing.’ Verily, the barrier surrounding the entire kingdom, the one which limits the use of magic within its borders, is an example of just such traditional techniques.” Los leaned forward. She had not noticed this book during her forays into Zero’s library. *Perhaps I did see it, only to unconsciously label it “unworthy of my time” for its atrocious penmanship.* “That blasted Mud-Black, hiding such an interesting find from me. I shall go and harry her anon.”

“A little further back there’s a section on infusing sorcery into potions as well, but that looks like it might be too complicated for me... Actually, that happens all the time in this book: it’s got all these formulas for elixirs with the same effects, but each new variation gets easier and more effective.”

Los flipped through the book, starting with the last page and keeping an eye on the titles. Saybil was right: there were many formulations for elixirs with exactly the same name. But the processes and ingredients—as well as the effects—changed slightly with each new entry.

“Fascinating... I feel an itch to put these all in proper order.”

“I know, right?!” Saybil’s enthusiasm instantly spiked. The unfamiliar zeal was a touch overwhelming for Los. “I was thinking maybe if I categorized the medicines by function, gave them all different names, and compiled them in a new book, it might be useful for Hort and Kudo, too.”

“That it would, young Sayb. A grand idea. Stupendous. I myself would be

curious to see, indeed to read, such a compilation. Once completed, it might very well qualify as a valuable achievement and contribution to this village, and save thee from the threat of expulsion.”

Grinning, the witch poked Saybil in the ribs. The young mage was struck dumb, looking blankly back and forth between Los and the book. “Huh? Really?” he managed lamely.

“Was that not thine intent?!”

“I mean... I didn’t think compiling a book would have anything to do with being a mage... This was just something I wanted to do for fun, and I thought maybe I might learn something in the process...”

“What flummery art thou spouting? Then what, pray tell, is this?” Los jabbed her finger at the vial Saybil had brought.

“What? It’s...umm...a magical elixir.”

“Indeed—an elixir thou didst make, yes?”

“I guess, but I was just kind of tinkering around...”

“Which is itself very much the occupation of a mage. Someone with no grounding in magic or sorcery might read this book, but even if they could decipher these scribblings like unto those made by a demon in its final death throes, they could never hope to actually *recreate* the compounds contained therein. Not to mention recompiling its contents, young Sayb. Even I overlooked the value of this tome, yet thou didst discern its true worth.”

It might not count among the greatest achievements of magicdom, and Saybil might not have been the only one capable of accomplishing it (ten years down the line, someone else might have discovered the book), but it was Saybil who found it, who perceived its value—and that was an accomplishment only he

could claim.

The ease with which he deciphered a book likely to provoke migraines in most anyone else might also be considered a talent in and of itself. Talent doesn't refer only to the possession of some exceptional ability—it describes an exceptional aptitude for a certain undertaking, a strength that allows the bearer to accomplish the task without too much hardship. *That* is true talent. It is by following pure drive, attempting something or “tinkering” with something out of the pure desire to do so, that someone carries off the great feats of which they alone are capable.

“This is the very definition of an accomplishment, young Sayb. Thou hast found thy calling.”

Saybil studied the small vial. “Accomplishment...” he whispered, a sudden smile spilling across his face.

“Ngh...!” Feeling a sudden vice-like grip on her heart, Los clutched her chest.

“Huh? Are you all right?”

“Hngh heh heh... Impressive, Sayb...! To think a young man unfamiliar with the intricacies of a smile could flash one so deadly on a whim...! Any other woman would have perished on the spot...!”

“I don't really understand what you're...”

“Never thou mindest, 'tis mine own affair,” Los reassured him. “Now then, young Sayb. With what sort of spell hast thou imbued this elixir?”

“Actually, I haven't added any magic yet. This elixir is still one step below that.”

“One step below?”

“I skipped the spell part and just poured mana into it... I don’t know if I did it right, but if it works, it could help people refuel even when I’m not around.”

“Oh ho! Very good, my lad. And thou art already at the testing stage. Astonishing! Now I understand thy desire for little Ludens’s assistance. So be it! Experiment to thine heart’s content!”

Los stood the Staff of Ludens upright, then released her grip. Even without support, the staff remained ramrod straight.

“Umm... The Staff of Ludens absorbs the mana of anyone who touches it, right...? Should I pour this on the handle?”

“Thou mayest simply dump it o’er little Ludens head. Go on, my lad, douse away!”

“I feel kinda bad... Sorry, Ludens. Here I go, okay?” The young mage uncorked the vial and began sprinkling its contents over the Staff of Ludens. The black orb embedded in its tip trembled, then shot out tendrils that sucked up every last drop of the concoction. “W-Well, what do you think?”

In response, the Staff of Ludens shot out countless tentacles and wiggled them vigorously, evidently in high spirits.

Los gripped the staff. “Oho! Our mana stores have indeed grown—in the amount of the power of two full mages, easily.”

“What?! That much?!”

“A dangerous brew thou hast created. The average unsuspecting mage would most assuredly overdose and melt away to nothing. Thou didst choose wisely in enlisting little Ludens as thy guinea pig.”

“Weird... I was pretty careful to hold back when I was making it...”

“We are all wont to pour more into the cauldron than we intend. And from the looks of it, ’twould appear each constituent element of this elixir can itself absorb great volumes of mana.”

“Oh, yeah, huh... Maybe I ought to switch them out for ingredients that aren’t so mana-absorbent... I’ll try a few different compositions... Hopefully make the elixir about half as potent as this one... And I’d like to make some progress on the book... I wouldn’t mind having a few more reference materials, too... And I’d love to go collect more raw materials...”

Saybil immediately began scribbling down notes on a piece of paper, his handwriting no more or less atrocious than Thirteen’s. His hand could hardly keep up with the speed of his thoughts.

“’Tis rather enjoyable, wouldst not say, young Sayb?”

“Huh?”

“To learn, and progress! The time simply flies by, does it not? No matter how much time one has, it never seems to suffice.”

“Oh... Yeah, totally. I don’t have enough time, or knowledge, or skill. And I’ll never be able to recreate the ‘regular’ potions in this book if I don’t master spellcasting first... Oh, but do you think if I mass-produced these, even people who can’t normally use magic would be able to...? Actually, that sounds too dangerous. I’d probably need to get the headmaster’s approval...”

“Deep breaths, my lad. Deep breaths,” Los urged. “It is in times of haste that we must proceed most steadily.”

“You’re right... Sorry, my mind is just racing.”

The apprentice mage took two or three deep breaths, looking for all the world like a little boy who’d discovered his new favorite game. The sloth and utter

lack of ambition that had led him to fritter away his time on Hort and Kudo's chores had disappeared completely.

To think one tiny catalyst could change a person so dramatically—'tis precisely what makes humans such fascinating creatures.

"Okay. For now, I'm gonna make another elixir. Then—"

"I shall await thee, together with little Ludens."

"Thank you!"

"Tonight, however, thou must sleep! Push thyself too hard and I shall not cooperate with thine experiments!"

"Oh... Right. I'll be mindful of that." Saybil gathered all his things in a rush, then nearly flew out of Los's house. He stopped short as he crossed the threshold, however, and turned around as if he had suddenly remembered something. "Um, Professor Los?"

"Yes?"

"I love how you always have our best interests at heart."

"Hngh...?!"

"You help us think things through, you celebrate with us and empathize with us... It feels really nice to be around you. I hope it goes on forever."

"S-Stop right there...! Wh-What is all this?! Dost wish to make me blush?!"

"I asked Hort for advice last night... She told me you might not understand if I just tell you I love you out of nowhere, and she said I should really consider what specifically it is I love about you and then express that to you."

"O-Oh hohhh... However, young Sayb, in such case, well, you know... Would it not then stand to reason that thou shouldst fall in love with Hort as well, she

who imparted such advice to thee? That lass is also wont to celebrate, and learn, and empathize with thee.”

“...Good point.” Saybil cocked his head. “Oh, I know.”

“Th-Thou dost...? What, pray tell, dost thou ‘know’...?”

“I love the way you say things like that to test people.”

“Urgh...!”

“I feel like you help me think on my own, so I can find myself. Whenever you give me a smirk that’s saying, like, *I bet you can’t answer that!*, I get this sort of jolt...and I like how that feels.”

“Very well! That is quite enough! I understand completely! Now, off with thee!”

“Okay. I’ll come back again tomorrow, then. What about you?”

“Oh, I must away to keep an eye on that young lad I caught the other day, Kady or some such.”

“Huh? But Hort said they were gonna invite him to go fishing with Miss Hearthful’s class.”

“What?” Los asked. “H-How long ago was this?!”

“They left pretty early in the morning, so I’ll bet they’re already at the river by now. Kudo and the Tyrant are with them too, though, so I don’t think we need to worry about Kady getting violent or trying to run away or anything—Professor Los?!”

The Dawn Witch dashed out the door without a word.

Remnants of Disaster unleashed on the village.

A powerless young boy, privy to nothing of import.

A second wave that must exist, yet can't be found.

I have a terribly ominous feeling about this.

3

"I caught one! I caught a fish, Mr. Tyrant!" the boy cried, clutching a tiny, flopping fish close to his small chest.

The Tyrant scowled. "Didn't even use yer trap! You tryin'a tell me you can just snatch fish outta this river with yer bare hands??" His shoulders slumped.

Hearthful chuckled. "Laios, that's no different than how you normally fish. Let's make sure to use our traps, okay?"

"But it's faster with my hands..."

"Then what the hell didja make that trap for in the first place?"

"Huh? 'Cos it was fun?"

The boy—who was apparently called Laios—answered with such sincerity that the Tyrant rolled his eyes skyward. *Not that I don't get it, if I'm bein' honest.*

Traps were the most pleasurable when they worked exactly as they were meant to. During his stint as a professional man-trap maker, the Tyrant had been ordered to design plenty of incredibly inefficient traps. If all you wanted to do was catch someone, a simple trap would do the trick. But to corner someone, terrify them, deliver a glimmer of hope only to wrench it away

again—nothing compared to the indescribable sense of accomplishment when that sequence flowed just right.

What kinda trap should I make next? How should I set it up? What's the best place I can put it to catch my prey? The more cunning the mark, the more interesting the task became. For many long years he'd belonged to the powerful, living as their personal tool. *And I'd be lyin' if I said I didn't find any joy in it.*

"Hey, Mr. Tyrant? Could you make a trap that made it easier than catching fish by hand?" Laios asked.

The Tyrant nodded. "'Course. As long as ya set it in the right spot, you could put one down in the mornin' and have ten fish by nightfall."

"I could catch ten fish with my hands, though."

"Maybe ya could, but the nice thing 'bout traps is that after you set 'em up, you can go about yer business."

"Ohh, I get it. So while my trap is catching fish, I could go pick mushrooms? Awesome! Teach me how to make *that* kind of trap!"

"Need ta tie a net fer that."

"Then show me how! I'm gonna go off on an adventure one day, so I'd better start learning all that stuff now. It's a promise, 'kay?" Confident in the pact before the Tyrant had even agreed to it, Laios squared off against the river's current once more, preparing to snatch his next fish. His classmates forgot about their traps entirely, and started jumping off high rocks into the water to prove their courage.

"...These brats need a tighter leash."

"Oh, I agree." Hearthful's eyes softened gently behind her glasses as she

watched the carefree youths.

“Hearthful. That’s a Northern name, ain’t it?” The Tyrant had no reason to keep the conversation going, much less ask a question to do so, but the query slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Not taking her eyes off the children, Hearthful replied, “Color me impressed.”

“Meanin’ that witches turned yer life upside down, but here you are livin’ in a witch’s village?”

“Everybody asks me about that.”

“And? Whaddaya tell ’em?”

“That even if a hunter killed your family, you wouldn’t begrudge all hunters for the act.”

“Anyone’d start hatin’ the profession itself, though, if a hunter killed their precious babies.”

“Even if we would die of starvation without them?”

“Could just eat bread, couldn’t ya?”

Hearthful smiled. “I’m certain I couldn’t bear that. As a child, I once ate a poisoned mushroom I’d found in the forest, which left me hovering on the brink of death. Afterwards, I became so fixated that I gathered every species of mushroom I could find in the forest and tested every last one for poison. I even turned my findings into a book. Now they’re one of my favorite foods.”

“Anyone ever tell ya yer a strange one?”

“Every day.”

“Yeah, I bet.” The Tyrant craned his neck toward the sky.

"I think if a hunter killed my child, I would become a hunter myself, and spend the rest of my life figuring out how to ensure that no child ever had to die in a hunting accident again. That's why I'm drawn to witches, and why I want to learn about magic. I would have loved to become a mage, if I'd had the talent—that's simply the kind of person I am. It's how I was made."

"Miss Hearthful!" the children called out. Lifting her long skirt, the schoolteacher splashed straight into the river. She was small enough that, from behind, she looked just like a child herself. Suddenly, it struck the Tyrant that she hadn't seemed small at all while she was standing at his side.

"...How she was made, huh?" Then whoever made her's got some real skills. She's perfectly put together. At least, that's how it feels ta me.

The Tyrant idly let his eyes follow her, until he felt a vicious aura appear next to him. He knew without looking that it was Hort. "What? I ain't doin' nothin'."

"So you do have something like human feelings after all."

"Hunh?"

"Miss Hearthful. You fall for her?"

"Hunh." *Where the hell'd she pull that from?* he thought as he turned to look at Hort. As ever, she was so cold that it seemed like her profile was carved in ice.

Let's try messin' with her a little. "I mean, she *is* a fine woman. And seein' the prim and proper type lose all reason and start screamin' and cryin', well... That does hit the spot," he responded, expecting Hort to castigate him for it. But the antlered mage said nothing.

"Oi, you in there?"

"Good. Looks like you'll manage to get along with everyone just fine." Hort

gave him a charming smile. “Keep it up. That’s an order.”

With that she walked off, leaving the Tyrant with the sense her words had carried some unfathomable implication—a sense he was powerless to do anything about.

I don’t give a damn what my master thinks of me. Doesn’t change what I’ve gotta do: follow orders like a machine. If she wants me to play nice, I’ll play nice—just like the Mask did on his missions. Easy enough to pretend to be amiable. My main job here’s to protect the villagers, and that’ll be a whole lot easier if they trust me than if they always think I’m up to somethin’.

In that sense, he could understand Hort’s logic.

“Guess I’ve just gotta work out the how... Eventually...” he muttered to himself, then scowled.

Drive your prey into a frenzy, infect them with fear, then herd them into your trap—that was the Tyrant’s way. He’d never learned how to catch flies with honey. It was much simpler to exploit people’s fundamental instincts: intimidate them with a sinister weapon and they cower in terror; chase them and they flee. And the simpler the mechanism, the better it held up. Any trap that could be derailed by a single pebble wasn’t worth a damn.

“A trap...”

Out of nowhere, a sense of unease washed over the Tyrant. He looked this way and that until his eyes lit on the captive who’d called himself Kady, the kid the Tyrant had described as a failed Arbiter.

The Church had plucked convicts from death row and beat them into Arbiters, but once they’d made peace with the witches and the details of these witch hunters’ training came to light, the program had become untenable. Arbiters

had been chosen from among the ranks of condemned convicts because they were as good as dead already; the Tyrant himself had been awaiting the gallows when he was selected. But now the Church had to look elsewhere, so they turned to another source of manpower: wayward children with nowhere else to go—children like Kady and Hort. They drilled into these impressionable youths the righteousness of the Church, the wickedness of witches, and a fear of all magic-wielders. Preying on the little ones' misconception that their lives had no value, the Church gave them a false sense of worth and coerced them into martyrdom. They promised rewards to any who successfully returned from their missions: praise, recognition—and a new career, or perhaps some land and a farm. Kady, however, had received no such assurances. No bait had been dangled before the boy to motivate him to fight for his life or to make it back alive at all costs. So what had the Church wanted him to do?

His mission never included a return ticket. Was his death part of the plan all along?

“Kady! Come join us!” Hearthful tugged the boy's arm and led him into the river. He waded in gingerly, shivering at the cold, then suddenly doubled over and wrapped his arms around himself.

The schoolteacher put a concerned arm around the boy's shoulder and called out, “Mr. Kudo! Kady doesn't seem to be feeling w—”

It wasn't like the Tyrant predicted what was coming. But something was off. *Humans don't—can't—move like that...*

“GET AWAY FROM HIM!”

But the *thing* was the first to respond to the Tyrant's shouted warning. Kady's hunched body suddenly arched back, and a deep gash split his abdomen in two, each side of the opening sprouting a haphazard row of fangs. Aghast, Miss

Hearthful stood frozen in place, and the gaping maw that had appeared in the boy's belly snapped at the petrified schoolteacher—but before it could sink its jaws into her soft flesh, the Tyrant yanked her by the arm, toppling her over into the water. Its prey lost, the belly-maw gnashed its teeth and ran its long tongue over its lips.

Then, it spoke.

“H-Hu-Hun-Hun...Hungry, hungry, huuungryyyyy...!”

It was Kady's voice. His body was bent so far back it threatened to snap in two, face staring straight up at the sky with wide eyes. Tears stained the boy's cheeks and he was foaming at the mouth—but he was still alive.

I just gotta kill him, then, and that mouth'll shut fer good. I ain't got my hammer, but a tiny little monster like this I can take with my bare hands.

The Tyrant reached out to snap Kady's neck. But—

“Gh...gah?!”

—he heard the sound of teeth chomping through flesh. Another mouth, complete with its own set of fangs, had opened in Kady's throat. Blood spouting like a fountain, the Tyrant instinctively tore himself away from the boy just as Hearthful got back to her feet. He wrapped his other arm around her waist and got them both back to the riverbank with a giant leap.

“The children!” Hearthful cried.

“Hort's got 'em covered!” the Tyrant shouted, his words half-overlapping hers.

The children's emergency training proved to be no joke: not one of them cried, or screamed, or tried to approach Hearthful where she had fallen in the river; they had all simply run straight to Hort's side for protection.

And the antlered mage had already begun her incantation. "*Ravon y Zaleik!* Beckon to slumber! Chapter of Capture, Verse Two—Culdesomn! Heed this call by the power of my name—Hort!"

The Tyrant knew this was a spell meant to put its target to sleep. Mages had to recite incantations to activate their magic, which was tantamount to tipping their hand to their enemies. The anti-witch extremist faction of the Church already had a grasp of more or less all the incantations taught at the Academy of Magic, as well as their effects.

But Kady simply remained standing in the middle of the river, even after the spell hit him.

"Dude, that spell didn't do a damn thing!" Kudo shouted, his voice cracking.

"I-I know! I *know!* Maybe...M-Maybe Kady's already unconscious—which means I can't put him to sleep!"

"Then how is he still moving?! More like, what the hell happened to him?! An' what the hell is with those teeth?! They came outta nowhere! This some new breed of beastfallen or somethin'?!"

"A beastfallen what?! Mouth?!"

"Nah, pretty sure it's a trap," the Tyrant answered, even though no one had asked him.

"Since when are you Mr. Know-It-All?! A trap??"

"Bet they rigged it so this'd happen whether the kid lived or died. Meanin' he brought more'n one Remnant of Disaster with him."

“Hun...gry, hungry, HUNgry... Hun...Hun...”

His body still bent backward, Kady’s knees buckled and he plunged into the river. His limbs began thrashing wildly, kicking up a violent spray, and as they watched, a cloud of red spread out to dye the water around him.

“Is he...eating...the fish...?” Kudo gulped loudly.

The Tyrant held out his bloody hand to the beastfallen mage. “Hey, lizard. Fix this for me.”

“Hanh?”

“Soon as he’s all outta fish, we’re next. Hort, you head on back to the village with the kiddos. I’ll finish him off.”

“Don’t be an idiot! You really think I’m gonna leave *you* to take care of this?!”

“Ain’t no time to be picky!”

“I’m saying I can’t trust you! We can’t rule out the possibility that this is all your doing!”

Fair enough. Not like I’ve got any means’a shakin’ off her suspicions, either.

“Plus, you’re not even armed! How exactly do you plan to fight?!”

Hort’s argument left no room for rebuttal. The Tyrant was, in other words, useless. Thinking he could at least help Hearthful and the kids retreat to the village, the former Arbiter looked over Hort’s shoulder.

“I’ll take care of the children!” Hearthful shouted. “Please, do whatever you can to control the situation!” She and the children ran off without another moment’s hesitation, and, in the blink of an eye, had disappeared among the trees.

“Damn... Whatta woman.”

“Gimme your hand, Tyrant. I’ll fix it.”

“Kudo, wait!” At Hort’s cry, both Kudo and the Tyrant froze.

The splashing had stopped. By the time Kady sluggishly rose from the riverbed, he was no longer recognizably human. Stuffed with fish, his bulging belly had become so grotesquely large that it pushed away any recollection of its previous contours. A blood-stained tongue dangled limply from the jaws in his abdomen, and his arms, now so distended that they reached the surface of the water when he stood, ended in mouths of their own. Kady was clearly on the hunt for his next meal—and it didn’t take him long to find it.

“T-Ti-Ti-T...Time to dig iiiin!”

Slaver dripping from every gaping orifice, Kady shot forward with such force that every stride covered ten paces’ worth of ground, driven not by a lust for blood but by a primal hunger, the insatiable voracity of a famished monster. Even the Tyrant felt an evil chill run down his spine.

“I’m gonna start the incantation! Tyrant, hold Kady down!”

“I’ll keep a recovery spell going ’til I run outta mana! Don’t you dare go down, even if it kills you! Hort loses that spell and we’re *all* done for!”

A wall of flesh. Without his traps and his hammer, that was all the Tyrant amounted to. “Aaah, shit! I ain’t ever goin’ *anywhere* without a weapon again!” he roared as he flung himself with desperate, reckless abandon at Kady and his gnashing, razor-sharp fangs. The Tyrant might as well have been a rabbit rushing toward a hawk—the instant he slammed into the monster, its mouths began tearing away at his body. Though Kady had been far smaller in stature than the Tyrant, he was now inexplicably just as tall, and seemed to grow more every time he swallowed another chunk of the man’s flesh.

“Maelim soh Heghans! Rally to me, wall of stones! Spin me a net, O grass, O vines!”

Before Hort had finished her incantation, most of the flesh from the Tyrant’s thighs had already been eaten away, and he began to lose his balance.

But—

“Ēa doh Raghanz Hangh doh Lahgraze! Shining white serpent, I summon thee to me! Chapter of Protection, Final Verse—Quaocul! Heed this call by the power of my name—Kudo!”

His wounds closing up with every word Kudo chanted, the Tyrant regained his footing just as he was about to topple over, and slammed Kady down to the ground.

“I can’t keep this goin’ without Saybil here! You’ve got one shot, Hort, make it good!”

Hort gritted her teeth, then shouted, “Tyrant, get away!”

The Tyrant leapt back from Kady, his flesh tearing away where the monster’s jaws had bitten into him.

Then Hort completed her incantation.

“Seal the gates of heaven and earth! Cradle, take this transgressor into your embrace! Chapter of Hunting, Verse Three—Etorahk! Heed this call by the power of my name—Hort!”

The earth around Kady shot toward the sky, creating an impenetrable prison in a matter of seconds. Mere seconds—and yet, just before the four walls converged to form a ceiling above the mutated boy, he leapt over them with terrifying power and landed comfortably outside Etorahk’s earthen cage.

No one had to say a word. They all understood.

We blew it. That was our last chance.

His monstrous transformation complete, Kady's physical capabilities now far outstripped any mere human's. Even if they turned and ran, they would never escape.

We've got to fight him. Right here, right now.

Kady crouched low, then once again barreled toward his prey. From where he lay sprawled, the Tyrant managed to snatch Kady's leg at the last second and send him toppling to the ground before once again throwing himself atop the monster and pinning him against the dirt with the full weight of his massive frame.

"Listen up, kiddos! Your little friend here ain't ever comin' back from this! Any soft-hearted take-him-alive bullshit is just gonna get us all killed!"

"Shut up, we get it! Hort! *Torch him!*"

Hort paled. "But, Kudo...!"

"I know!"

The Tyrant had overheard Hort promise not to kill the boy only that morning. But they'd failed to capture him alive—twice. A hunger stronger than any bloodlust had taken hold of Kady, and he would surely attack the village if they let him slip away.

Kudo sliced off his tail and tossed it to Hort. "It won't just be you, Hort. We'll do it together—!"

Hort bit her trembling lip. For a moment, she wavered, then steeled her resolve. "I've got one Flagis left in me! I'm gonna make it count!"

“Hang in there, Tyrant! I’ve only got one spell left in me, too! And I can’t use it to heal ya until that thing’s dead!”

The fangs on Kady’s four limbs each crunched down on one of the Tyrant’s own, crushing his bones. Having finally outgrown the former Arbiter, the mutated boy managed to reverse their positions, holding him down as he tore into the man’s entrails.

“Gnh...ah...!”

The Tyrant had been reduced to game, there to be devoured. In his now inverted view of the world, he looked at Hort. *All ya need to do is slow yer spell down the tiniest bit.* If she waited until he had perished before killing Kady, Hort would have her revenge. Blood sprayed from the Tyrant’s stomach, and more spewed from his mouth, beginning to choke him. He struggled in vain, unable even to breathe. And as he struggled, the dying man smiled bitterly.

That’s yer plan, ain’t it?

A devil’s child, complete with horns... Letting a man she detested die before her eyes would mean nothing to one such as—

“*Bahg do gü Laht!* Hellsfire, rally to me! Blast and burn! Chapter of Hunting, Final Verse—Flagis! Heed this call by the power of my name—Hort!”

“Geeyaaaaah!”

A shrill shriek ill-matched to Kady’s enormous frame erupted simultaneously from the myriad mouths now covering his body, as countless fiery serpents coiled around him, sinking their fangs of flame into his monstrous flesh. Though he could feel their stifling heat, none of the snakes threatened to singe a single

hair on the Tyrant's head.

And at the same instant—

“Chapter of Protection, Final Verse—Quaocul! Heed this call by the power of my name—Kudo!”

—the beastfallen completed his own incantation, skipping the first half entirely. Another few seconds and the Tyrant's heart would have stopped beating, but in the blink of an eye all his wounds were healed. Though his mind was numb, he could no longer hear the approaching footfalls of Death.

I'm saved—they saved me.

Still finding it difficult to believe, the Tyrant slowly pushed himself up. Steam billowed from the middle of the river where the scorched monstrosity lay convulsing. The three stared from a distance at what Kady had become—an appendaged mass of flesh with jaws protruding from every extremity—then exchanged glances.

None of them had let down their guard yet; both Hort and Kudo were suppressing the urge to rush to Kady's side—that was how much menace his monstrous form still radiated.

“Tyrant, can you run?” Hort asked.

Wordlessly, the former Arbiter got to his feet. “I'm a little dizzy... Lost too much blood.”

“Not like running would get us—” Kudo took a step back. Kady's bloated body looked like it had gotten even bigger as it lay in the river, and with every blink it ballooned further.

He's gonna burst.

The thought must have occurred to all three of them simultaneously. Something was growing within Kady, struggling to get free. It squirmed inside his stomach, the skin stretched to its breaking point—then finally crawled out into the open.

“Bugs?” Hort was the first to speak.

Black *things* wriggled one after another out of the mouths—holes—covering Kady’s body.

“Nah... Those aren’t bugs. They look almost human...”

Kudo was right. The creatures coming out of Kady had two arms and two legs, just like human beings, though they crawled on all fours. Within moments they were swarming over every inch of Kady’s burnt body, overflowing into the river and crashing onto the bank like a wave. As one, the little jet-black humanoids opened their jaws wide to reveal disturbing crimson mouths lined with white fangs that glittered in the sunlight.

Those latch onto us and we’re done for. “Run! We’ve gotta run—NOW!”

Snapped back to reality by the Tyrant’s cry, Hort and Kudo broke into a sprint.

This ain’t no time to complain about being dizzy. Run, or we’re lunch.

“What do we do...?! What do we do, what do we do...?!” The blood drained from Hort’s face as she ran, her body trembling all over, but neither the Tyrant nor Kudo had the wherewithal to comfort her.

He’s still alive.

In that moment, that instant, Kudo and Hort wavered. Could they run from Kady, who wasn’t yet dead, and from the swarm of tiny monsters that flooded out from his insides? Could they really leave him like that?

But in reality, they had no choice.

Thankfully, the creatures coming out of Kady were too slow to catch up to running human beings—at least, human beings in peak form. But, teetering with every step, the anemic Tyrant could barely remain upright. It didn't take long before he could no longer keep pace with the apprentice mages. Hort and Kudo looked back at him.

“Go! I'm done for!”

“Got no time for your sob story, old man! Get up!”

“Don't be an idiot! If you die, Kudo will have healed you for nothing!!”

The two caught the Tyrant just as his knees were about to give way and ran on, supporting him from either side. They hadn't hesitated, not even for a split second. A foolishly, cloyingly naive altruism underpinned their actions; their belief in what was right never wavered. The smart move would've been to leave him behind, put some distance between themselves and the swarm as it feasted on his body, and go warn the village. Nevertheless, Hort and Kudo were determined to take the Tyrant with them, even if it meant dragging him the whole way.

It was the height of folly. But the Tyrant didn't even have the energy to shake off these youngsters so intent on throwing their lives away. Stumbling as they pulled him along, the Tyrant prayed for the first time in his life.

Dear Goddess—

The man-eating insect-people were hot on their heels. Some had even sprinted by them, trying to cut off their escape.

Dear Goddess, I beg you—!

His prayer did not fall on deaf ears.

One after another, tree branches bent slightly, as if under the weight of birds settling to rest their wings—and this shiver running through the forest was coming unmistakably closer.

The Tyrant grabbed both mages by the scruff of the neck and pulled them to the ground, throwing himself over them.

“Hey!!”

“The hell, old man?!”

“Duck! An’ close yer eyes!”

The sun was shining brightly, but in the blink of an eye it disappeared behind an ebon curtain, plunging the area into night. The shroud was thin and yet permitted not a glimmer of light to pass, as it completely enveloped the marauding horde that threatened to devour the three prostrate figures.

Then there came a voice.

“Time for a snack, Ludens.”

Chomp, crunch, gulp.

When the Tyrant opened his eyes again, not a single one of the horrifying little creatures remained.

If there was one mastermind pulling all these strings, and if taking them out would solve everything, I'd go after them right this instant.

Such were the thoughts running through Hort's mind as they buried Kady in the village cemetery. The boy who had laughed and called her a "nasty one" the previous morning was gone. Not even his dead body had survived—they couldn't afford to let it. Carnivorous humanoid creepy-crawlies just kept on pouring out of his lifeless corpse, so Los had instructed the Staff of Ludens to devour everything.

Hort regretted not being able to save him. And she couldn't understand how they'd failed. *We've got the Mud-Black Witch right in this village, and she has the power to destroy the entire world. We've got the Dawn Witch, who's lived for over three hundred years. And we've got three mages—apprentices, but still—one of whom has a limitless well of mana, another who's amazing with the Chapter of Protection, and me, the best student the Academy of Magic has ever seen. And yet...*

"We couldn't even save one of our friends..."

To make matters worse, it was Hort who had sentenced him to death—and she'd made Kudo bear that burden with her.

"C'mon, you literally just met him."

"We *would've* been friends, I just know it...!" Hort knew Kudo wasn't trying to be cruel, but even so, she couldn't help getting defensive.

I'd started to believe I could do anything, that I could brush off any threat

without so much as breaking a sweat. I'm so angry at myself for getting that cocky. I've been racking my brains trying to think of another way we could've dealt with the situation, but I've got nothing. And I'm angry at myself for that, too.

The cemetery lay behind the chapel. It was small but well-kept, a tranquil, beautiful resting ground. Since the priest had set out for the city several days prior and was yet to return, they had dug a grave for Kady without him. It didn't sit right that all they had to bury in it were the knife and poison Kudo had confiscated for safe-keeping, so Lily prepared a meal and they put that in the coffin, too, before covering it with a blanket of dirt.

The gravity of the incident must have weighed heavily on the village adults, whose faces all bore the same severe look.

"...I should've gone with you," Saybil muttered from behind Kudo and Hort, who stood facing Kady's grave.

For days Saybil had been shut up in his room working on something. Hort had invited him along on the fishing trip, but he'd declined, saying he had a few things he wanted to try out. Hort had welcomed the positive change—she thought it was wonderful. Now, though, she couldn't help but wish he'd been there with them, in that moment when they'd faced the terror of mana depletion—faced the fear of death itself.

"Don't kid yourself. It wouldn't'a changed a damn thing if you'd been there. No matter *how* many spells you can throw at something, sometimes you're just outta luck."

"Sure, but..."

"Once Culdesomn and Etorahk both failed to catch him, taking him out was

the only choice we had left. Even if you *had* tagged along, we still wouldn't've been able to save Kady, and everyone made it out just fine without you there—right, Hort?”

Hort looked down. She didn't have it in her to refute Kudo's argument. She *did* think she would've felt a lot better if Saybil had been there—but at the same time, she knew she was just being childish. So she dug deep, forced a smile, and said, “Yeah. Don't give it a second thought, Sayb.”

“It's not like we're gonna get to work together like this forever, ya know. If we start takin' Saybil's mana provision for granted, we'll be worthless as mages.”

“Oh, about that!” Saybil suddenly spoke up. “It'd be helpful if you could resupply, or, like...replenish your magic power even when I'm not around, right?”

“The hell you talkin' about? 'Course. That'd make everything easier.”

“You mean you figured out a way?”

Saybil rummaged around in his bag and fished out a pale crimson vial. “I made a mana elixir, just to see if it'd work. I even tested it out on Ludens, and I tried it on myself this morning with no problems... I think you should be able to replenish your magic with this.”

“W-Wait, slow down! What do you mean? Are you saying we can just drink that to refill our mana?”

“No, definitely don't do that! It's got some botanical oils and extracts in it that might make it dangerous to drink. Probably best to just pour some on your left hand, like when I share my mana with you...”

Saybil took Hort's hand. Things had been so hectic and there hadn't felt like a good moment to ask for a mana top-up amid all the commotion, so she'd been

running on empty since the day before. As soon as Saybil uncorked the vial, a medicinal smell assaulted Hort's nostrils, and she knew he was right: there was no way she could drink the concoction. He poured a few drops onto her hand, and she felt the faint stirring of magical energy.

"Hm, I think..." Hort focused on her hand. "This might not really work as is. You've got to get a feel for the currents of mana in the body, so if you just do it this way..."

"Hey, let *me* try."

Saybil took out another vial and handed it to Kudo, who poured the contents into his left hand. "Ahh..." he murmured, understanding now.

"Right?" Hort said when she saw his reaction.

Saybil didn't seem to follow. "Does it seem like it'd be useful? Anything you think could be improved?"

"I don't know how to put it, but, like...whenever I get a refill from you, I don't have to think about it. The mana just flows in... But with this, unless you intentionally focus on sucking up the power, it just sits there on your palm and spills out along with the liquid."

"Wait, that might be better though," Kudo said. "Seein' as a mana overdose can kill you an' all."

"Oh, good point."

"So it's probably for the best to have this level of resistance, instead'a lettin' the mana flow straight in as soon as it hits your skin... Especially if someone who wasn't a mage touched it or whatever."

"Yeah, that might actually be better," Hort agreed. "This is amazing, Sayb! Really awesome!"

Saybil's expression softened for a moment, then immediately tightened up again. "So you're saying, just pouring the solution over your hand doesn't restore your mana, right?"

"Umm, yeah. It's kinda like how eating can help replenish magical power, but it doesn't work if you just touch your food, you know? I think it's basically the same idea."

"Gotcha."

"You tried it on yourself though, right? And that part didn't bother you?" Kudo asked.

"I've never gotten mana from anybody, so it didn't even really occur to me..."

"Wait, though, does it hafta be a liquid?"

"Huh?"

"If you're just drizzling this on your hand, you might spill some and get less mana than you'd expected, right? Once it soaks into the ground, it's useless. So could you make the same thing, but in solid form?"

"Oh, I get it... Good point. That'd make it nice and portable, too. I guess I don't have to follow the book's instructions exactly. Thanks, Kudo, that's a great idea." Saybil whipped out a small bundle of papers and began scribbling down the ideas their conversation had given him.

Peeking over Saybil's shoulder, Hort shuddered at the illegible scratch marks covering every inch of the notepaper. "Sayb, are you trying to come up with a new writing system or something?" she asked, entirely in earnest.

Surprise, then embarrassment at the horrific state of his own penmanship, washed over Saybil. "No, sorry, I've just got horrible handwriting. It's a little better if I take my time, but..."

“So wait, this is what you’ve been doing the whole time you were up there in your room?” *He wasn’t just sitting it out. Saybil was doing research, conducting experiments, and coming up with real results.*

Hort understood that mages did more than fight on the front lines; Saybil hadn’t been on the battlefield because that wasn’t where he belonged. All alone in his room, Saybil’s thoughts had been with Hort and Kudo. The notion soothed Hort’s sentimental, childish sense of resentment.

Calculating, much? she thought, wordlessly mocking herself.

“Hey, you said something about following ‘the book’s instructions’ to make this, right? Does that mean you found all this written out somewhere?”

“Uh huh. In one of Professor Zero’s books...”

“An’ you were able to just whip it right up?!”

“Welllll... Actually, this is a little different from what was in the book... The directions were for making a spell-infused potion, but I skipped the spell step and just made one to replenish mana.”

Hort blinked. She exchanged glances with Kudo, then turned back to Saybil. “So you invented this?”

“Huh? Oh... No, I just added my own touch to the formula—or more like subtracted from it.”

“But nobody’s ever made this before, right?”

“It’s possible somebody has, but...”

“But none of the faculty at the Academy of Magic have, at least,” Kudo chimed in.

“Exactly,” Hort nodded. “Is it just me, or is this, like, more than enough of an

accomplishment for you to graduate on the spot?”

“Forget graduation. Saybil could mass-produce these babies.”

“Plus, it’d probably be really hard for anybody but you to make them, since you’re the only one who never runs out of mana.”

Saybil’s got no idea how big this is, Hort thought. But in that moment, she could feel the history of modern magic take a great stride forward. If these elixirs circulated among the general mage population, they could even shake up the inter-kingdom balance of power.

“Wait, wait, wait. Let’s think about this for a sec. You said ‘spell-infused potions,’ right? That’s already huge. Why isn’t something that useful already on the market? Especially if this book was in Professor Zero’s library.”

Saybil shrugged. “She said she’d tried to follow the directions, but the potions never came out right. Apparently a lot of it is written in a kind of code.”

“Then how the hell can *you* read it, dude?”

“I’m not totally sure...but I guess it’s because my father is the one who wrote it?”

“Huh?!” Hort and Kudo cried in unison.

“Your pops was a sorcerer?!”

“And a bigshot, if his work was in Professor Zero’s collection!!”

“Yeah... Umm, I’ll tell you this because I think you both should know, but...” Saybil began, then faltered a little. “Thirteen. My father was Thirteen.”

“Thirteen,” repeated Hort. *That’s not a name, it’s a number*. But it was a number significant to all mages, and it *was* a name as well, one that designated a particular sorcerer. “Sayb, are you talking about the guy who tried to kill off

everybody in Wenias except the witches?”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s your dad?”

“That’s what Professor Zero said.”

“What kinda dragon dung is that?! What’re you, like, the *chosen one*?!” Kudo roared, grabbing Saybil by the tunic.

“Chosen one...?” Saybil repeated in confusion. But Hort knew exactly where Kudo was coming from.

Magical talent was heavily hereditary. The offspring of an illustrious witch or a famed sorcerer would inevitably be a prodigy of rare talent. Albus, headmaster of the Academy of Magic, was a perfect example: her grandmother had been the greatest witch in all the land.

“No wonder you get all sorts of special treatment! You didn’t even have to take the entrance exam for the Academy did you?! *Did* you?!”

“*That’s* what bothers you?”

“Obviously! What else?!”

“Don’t you think I’m...like, creepy, or scary, or that I shouldn’t be allowed to live?”

“Hort, you have any idea what this idiot’s talkin’ about?”

“Umm, I think he’s wondering if we’re asking ourselves, like, ‘Since his dad was the evil sorcerer Thirteen, is Saybil gonna turn out to be a bad apple, too?!’”

“The hell do I care!! No one in their right mind would be scared of a washout like you! Worry about that *after* you learn to actually cast a spell, you lazy, do-

nothing sack of unearned ability!”

“H-Hey, don’t be a jerk...! I am working at it *now*, the best I know how...!”

“Hmm. *Finally*, I think you mean?” teased Hort.

Kudo’s blistering assault notwithstanding, Saybil gave a tiny, wry smile. “Yeah, *finally*.”

Suddenly, a massive shadow passed above them. They all looked up to see a colossal creature whose outstretched wings nearly blotted out the sun.

“Dragon!” Kudo shouted.

The majestic beast circled the village a few times as it descended. The three apprentice mages raced away from the cemetery, making it to the village square just as the dragon landed. An imposing knight clad head to toe in black armor leapt from the great creature’s back.

“The Dragon Conqueror King!” they all shouted as one.

Startled, the knight fixed a stern gaze on them. “...You three, huh? Haven’t seen you since I delivered your examination results.”

“What’s going on? Has the headmaster sent another message?” Saybil asked.

The Dragon Conqueror King nodded, then solemnly declared, “You have been ordered to return to Wenias. This village will soon become a battlefield.”



Chapter Four



“Professor Zero! Why are we being ordered back to Wenias?”

“And where do you get off deciding somethin’ so important without even *talkin’* to us first?!”

“And, like, the village is gonna become a battlefield?! What does that even mean?!”

As soon as they’d received the Dragon Conqueror King’s message, the three apprentice mages rushed to Zero’s shop.

Zero, their proctor for the special field training program, took in their protestations with perfect calm. “Word travels fast,” she said, smiling softly. “So you’ve spoken with the Dragon Conqueror King.”

“He landed in the square a few minutes ago,” Saybil confirmed. “Is this because of the Remnants of Disaster being here? Is the field training program getting canceled because it’s too dangerous?”

Kudo’s scales turned a dull red. “In other words, this village is being targeted, right? If battle’s comin’, sending us away is just gonna leave the place with even thinner defenses!”

“Th-That’s right, Professor! I mean, c’mon, we were already running short on fighters. That’s why we went and took in someone as nasty as the Tyrant, isn’t it? So if we leave—!”

“You three are students. We cannot allow you to risk your lives in battle.”

“D-Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?! We’ve *been* risking our lives!

Kudo, Sayb, and I all came *this* close to getting killed by Remnants of Disaster!”

“Indeed. I failed you. Thrice have I exposed to life-threatening peril the pupils whom I, as proctor, am meant to protect. But there is a world of difference between knowingly sending my students off to face certain danger and having it come on them during a moment of neglect. Three times I have been caught unawares. A fourth and even fifth occasion cannot be far behind. I have proven wholly inept as an educator.”

Saybil felt a twinge of pain in his heart. It hadn’t been long at all since they came to the village, but Saybil—all three apprentices, in fact—had made such remarkable progress that they could now hardly recall the people they had been before. And it was all thanks to Professor Zero. She neither imposed anything on them nor gallantly led them by the hand; she simply stood by their side, gently showing them the way.

Saybil was angry—angry at the injustice of it all. At long last he had found a spark that brightened his life, and it was about to be snuffed out again. Back at the Academy of Magic, he could most likely continue working on the book and conducting his research on potions and elixirs. But he could not hope to benefit from anything like the rich wealth of knowledge that the Mud-Black Witch, she who was said to create existence from nothingness, had to offer. And he knew without a doubt that if he and his fellow apprentices returned to the Academy, Loux Krystas would once again set off on her journeys.

He had too much to lose. So he had no intention of obediently following these orders—and he wasn’t the only one.

“Don’t try an’ start actin’ like a real teacher *now*! And what’s so wrong with sendin’ your students off to battle?! You’re gonna need as many healers as you can get, aren’t ya?!”

“That’s right! And there must be something I can do to help! There’s got to be! This time, there *will* be! Professor, I promise I can be useful!”

“You two took a life yesterday.” At Zero’s words, Hort and Kudo’s faces stiffened. Through narrowed eyes, the witch nodded slightly at their unease. “War means becoming hardened to killing. It means losing the ability to mourn the taking of one life, and coming to take pride in slaughtering one hundred. Can you do that?”

“That’s... But, I mean, our enemies this time are really bad guys...!”

“‘Bad guys’? Do not speak so rashly, antlered one. Our foes advance upon us waving the banner of justice and crying death to the wicked, firm in their belief of the ‘badness’ of witches. To them, *we* are evil incarnate. The hundred you would slay tomorrow are no different from the boy you killed yesterday, and whose death you now rue.”

“But, it’s not like we can just sit here and let them kill us!”

“No, we cannot. Which is why we will fight—not because our enemies are wicked, but to survive. We steel ourselves to take the lives of others so that we may save our own. The soldier who raises his sword to fell you on the battlefield may well have a family waiting back home. He may have young children who impatiently await the return of their father. We recognize this and yet elect to kill them for our own sake all the same. Can you imagine what that is like? Can you? And having envisioned it, can you still say you will fight?”

Hort opened her mouth, took a breath, and let out a weak sigh. “I...I don’t know...”

“Who says we’re not allowed to live with the regret of killin’ a hundred people?”

The corner of Zero's eye twitched, but Kudo's scales did not change color—his resolve was no artifice.

"If I hadda kill the guy in fronta me to save a hundred of my own people, I'd do it without a second thought. It don't make any difference how many people might pine for him back home, whether he's got one kid or a hundred, whether it'd haunt my dreams or make me want to die myself! Look, Professor. Hort and I have already crossed that line. Those nightmares are comin' every night, whether we like it or not. The Academy *failed to protect us*. The least you could do is train us to deal with this ourselves!"

"Th-That's right... I mean, either way...either way we're gonna have to fight eventually, right? Once we graduate, we'll get called to work as guards and stuff, right? Then what does it matter if—"

"It is true. The time will surely come when you must of necessity take another's life. But this is not that time. I have made my decision, and it is final. Follow your orders or you will be expelled," the witch declared bluntly.

Hort and Kudo shrank back from her words.

Saybil, on the other hand, thought, *Oh. Okay*. "Then I choose expulsion," he said nonchalantly.

"Sayb?!"

"Think before you speak, dumbass! Haven't you ever hearda negotiating?!"

Under his classmates' flabbergasted stares, Saybil looked at Zero. "I'll accept my expulsion, remain in the village, and fight. And, if my contributions prove useful..." Saybil took a deep breath, then went on. "I'd like you to reaccept me into the Academy."

For a moment, all was silent. Then Zero laughed away the suggestion. "Don't

be ridiculous... Who would ever approve such a farce?"

"Sh-She's right, Sayb! That's totally unrealistic!"

"But this will be a defensive battle, won't it?"

Zero said nothing. Hort and Kudo looked at each other uncertainly.

"It's not as if we're going to go after anybody ourselves," Saybil continued. "This fight will be about staving off *their* attack. Professor Los once told me that battles between witches are all a question of evading each other's traps. In other words, you're planning to booby-trap the village, aren't you?"

"And if I were?"

"Then we could just make traps that chase off or capture the enemy without killing any of them. If we make a hundred traps and each one stops ten people, we can nullify a thousand-person-strong battalion."

"You make it sound so simple, young man. But how do you intend to craft such traps? It is exceedingly more difficult to incapacitate than it is to kill."

"I'll perfect my magic potions."

At that, Zero looked Saybil in the eye for the first time since the three had come barging into her shop. The young apprentice mage pulled a vial filled with pale crimson liquid out of his bag and handed it to Zero.

Taking it, she knit her brows. "...You made this?"

"I followed the instructions in that book. Professor Los helped me test it out, and Hort and Kudo tried it a minute ago, too."

"I see... So you succeeded..." Suddenly, Zero let out a weary chuckle.

Saybil became flustered. "Oh, but, hold on...! I haven't perfected it yet! This is just kind of an empty vessel, all I put into it was pure mana. I'm not good

enough at casting to infuse it with actual spells like it says in the book...! But,” Saybil turned to Hort and Kudo, “with Kudo’s help, I could make Chordia potions, and with Hort’s help I could infuse some with Flagis. And correct me if I’m wrong, but the Tyrant’s specialty is traps, right? If we consult him about what kind of traps to make, then—” *we might really have something...is too vague an argument to get us anywhere right now. Professor Zero’s not going to agree to this unless I can explain exactly what I could contribute.*

Saybil’s unlimited mana stores alone could justify him remaining in the village, but then he would be nothing more than a tool. And Zero would never acquiesce to exploiting Saybil like that.

But this plan, it’s different.

“I can help. I can reduce magic-related casualties in the coming battle. This village was set up here to show the people of the South that magic-users are nothing to be afraid of, right?”

“And therefore I should keep you on the battlefield? So that you can transform the extremists’ offensive into a victimless farce?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Accomplish that, and forget expulsion—I’ll have to graduate you.” Zero smiled then, all the tension draining from her face. To Saybil, it felt like he’d caught his first glimpse of “the real Zero.” Though at times she had seemed somehow vapid, he had always sensed an aura of witch-like and almost transcendental detachment; now it was as if that had cracked like a thin layer of ice, allowing warm water to well up from below.

Just then—

“I have heard all I need hear!”

The door burst open with a crash, and Los flew into the room. Zero put her hand to her forehead as if to say, *Here comes another headache*, while the apprentice mages exchanged glances that silently cheered, *Our unflinching ally has arrived!*

“A splendid idea, this graduation exam! A fascinating challenge! I am the one and only Dawn Witch, she whose love of innovative endeavors is ever-lasting. Rejoice, for I hereby devote myself entirely to assisting in this trial!”

“Dawn... This is between the Academy and its students—”

“Oh, hush! Did I not escort these fledglings’ here as their professor? I am as involved in this matter as any. I have even signed a blood contract with that blasted Albus, swearing I would protect my pupils. So long as they remain in this village, I shall contribute mine and my dear Ludens’s power to its defense.”

You could almost read the *She’s got me right where she wants me* on Zero’s face as she turned to Los. “In other words, if I send the students away, we lose your cooperation?”

“Quite the predicament! Dire straits indeed you would find yourselves in! This village is perpetually lacking in fighting strength, and thou wert counting on mine, wert thou not? What a terrible shame!” Los exclaimed. “’Tis only my fledglings I hold dear. This humdrum village could be erased from the face of the earth and ’twould pain me no more than the bite of some mangy cur!”

“That actually sounds pretty painful,” Saybil muttered under his breath.

“Egad, ’tis true!” the witch cried, recoiling violently. “Perish the vile thought—I have grown fond of this community! I beg of thee, allow me to protect it and fight for it and do not leave me by the wayside!” The great Dawn Witch flopped to the ground and began throwing a tantrum.

And at last, Zero relented. “All right, fine! I see your point, so don’t throw a fit, Dawn! You have convinced me of the benefit of having our students remain in the village, but the decision is not mine alone. I will broach the subject with Mooncaller...”

“Really?! Hooray! You did it, Professor Los! Thank you!” Hort exclaimed, then threw herself on top of Los.

“I have not finished, antlered one. If Mooncaller says no, then the answer is no. Every student at the Academy signs a contract with her, and you three are no exception. You cannot disobey her orders.”

“It’s still way better than getting sent back without even a discussion! Right, Sayb??”

“Yep. That’s all we can ask for. Thank you very much, Professor Zero.”

Feeling somehow unsatisfied, Saybil turned to Kudo.

“What?” The beastfallen looked dubiously at Saybil, then raised a clenched fist. “Times like these, this is what you do.”

Saybil raised his fist in imitation of Kudo, who then knocked his own into it. It hurt and stung a little, but Saybil also felt like it was exactly what he’d been looking for.

He’d objected to Zero’s decision with all his might, and successfully gotten his point across. And he wasn’t just being willful; he’d made a convincing argument for how he could contribute, and Zero had acquiesced, at least in principle. It made him unbelievably happy.

“Hup!” Los untangled herself from Hort’s arms and hopped back to her feet with an impressive display of acrobatics. Tapping her staff against her shoulder, the Dawn Witch gave a satisfied smile. “Stupendous! The heart races! This

promises to be among the grandest spectacles of my three-hundred-year career! With all eyes on our performance, we shall drop these blood-thirsty soldiers into a comic pantomime and make them the subject of mockery for centuries to come! Hah! Hahaha! Bwahahahaha!”

Shooting the cackling witch a sidelong glance, Zero got out her witch’s letter. Through it, she could communicate instantly with Headmaster Albus back in Wenias. After scribbling furiously for a bit, Zero tossed her pen aside and slumped back in her chair to stare languidly at the ceiling. “And I quote: ‘Sure, why not! Sounds fun!’”

+ + +

“Prepare to get busy, Holdem! We’ve got a show to put on!”

Her brief back-and-forth with Zero complete, Albus cast aside her pen and dashed out of her office, Holdem frantically following behind.

“You say that, but the plan hasn’t really changed, has it? This was always gonna be a defensive battle, and Zero’s people never planned to lay a hand on the enemy to begin with.”

“This changes everything, dummy. Try thinking about it from the spectators’ point of view. Who wants to see them sit tight and weather the storm, when it’d be so much more interesting to make a fool of the encroaching forces and send them packing?”

“To show ’em just how far outta their league we are, you mean?”

“Exactly. It’s like saying, ‘You can’t even defeat *students* from the Academy of Magic.’”

It was the apprentice mages' move to the Witch's Village that had spurred the extremist faction of the Church into action. The trio's arrival in the settlement, forever short of fighters—not to mention the addition of the Tyrant—sparked what had been a small reactionary minority to swell dramatically in size.

Not like I didn't see this coming—but I definitely didn't think it'd be quite so extreme. Nevertheless, the students have stepped up to take the reins in repelling the enemy. In other words, this is going to be their grand debut, witnessed by the entire world. I'd say that warrants us going all out to back them up.

A war waged without a single casualty—a bloodless victory. To pull it off, Albus and her allies would need to demonstrate just how much more powerful they were than their opponents. And this was the perfect opportunity, since the enemy had made the first move.

“If we're switchin' up the battle plan, we're gonna need to get the word out. You want me to call up the Saint of Akdios after all?”

“Well, we *are* aiming for zero bloodshed, but there's still a chance people might get hurt, so it probably makes sense to ask her mage medics for help.”

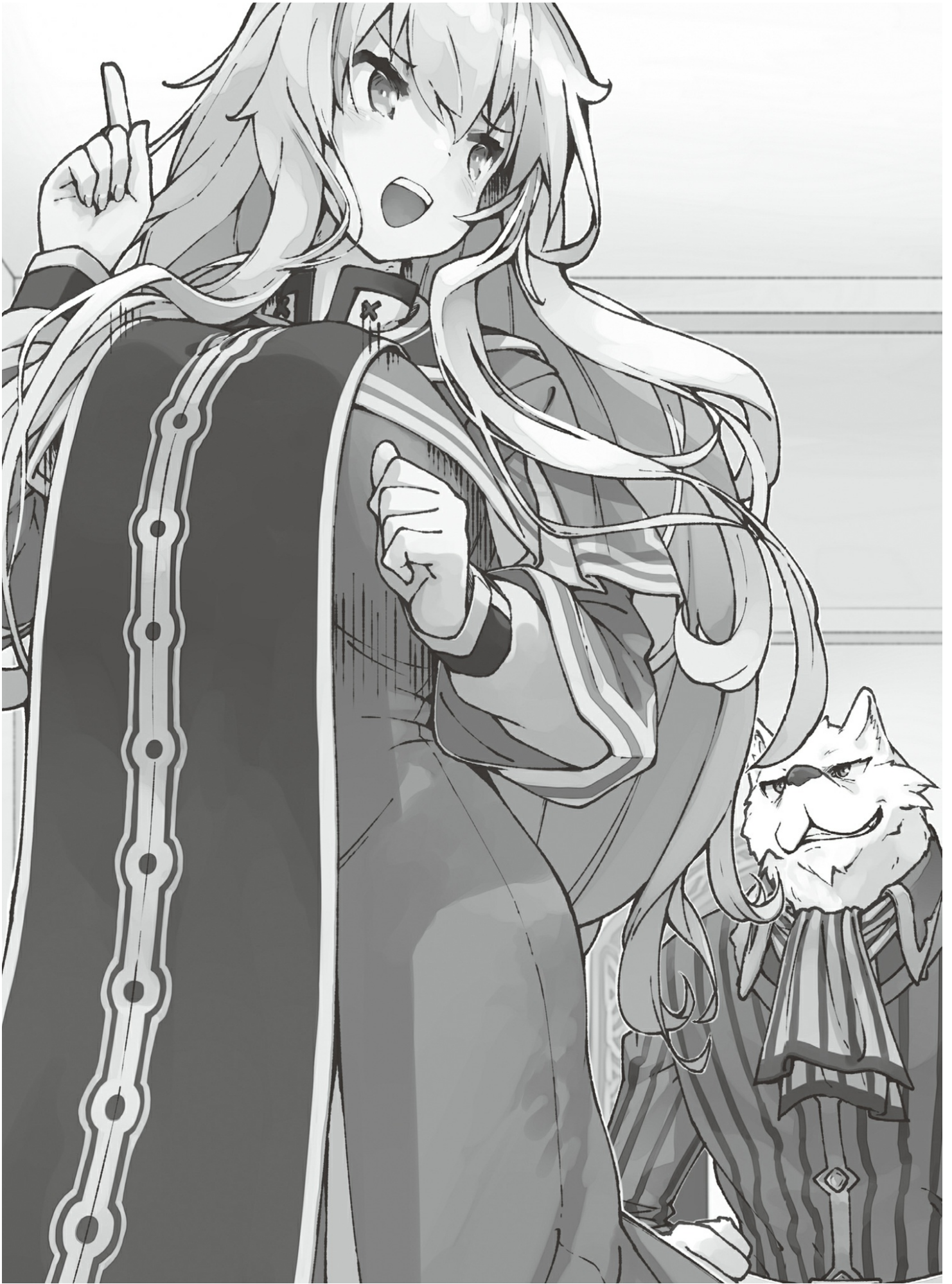
“How 'bout the Dragon Conqueror King? Want me to get him back here? The Church and Mage Brigade—”

“I'll leave the rest of the casting call to you! That's not really my wheelhouse. I need to start drumming up an audience instead. See you later!”

At the end of the hall, Holdem and Albus went their separate ways: the lupine beastfallen headed to the Church and Mage Brigade barracks, while the headmaster left her Academy behind and hopped into a horse-drawn carriage.

If only we could turn this war into a farce, killing no one and letting no one die.

Albus had been harboring precisely that notion from the beginning. Holdem had denounced her ideas as naive, however, and none of the prominent sorcerers had signed on to her plan. Without allies, the scheme was doomed to fail. But now Albus had those allies—and she was going to pull out all the stops for her students. Because those selfsame students were helping turn Albus's dreams into reality. War was upon them. And yet now its advent was no grim affair; Albus could face it with high hopes—and that made her so happy, she couldn't help but smile.



It wasn't long, therefore, until some troubling rumors began to spread.

"Have you seen that twisted grin that's been plastered on Headmaster Albus's face since she started devoting everything to preparing for war? The battle madness is on her, and no mistake..."

2

I still can't really say I know what I've gotten myself into. Fer decades I've lived as other people's tool, takin' any order, doin' whatever I was told to make it through another day. I've killed people, killed witches—and now here I am, in this Witch's Village.

"A rather strange feeling for a former Arbiter, isn't it?"

Shooed out of the clinic for taking up a bed when he wasn't injured anymore, but feeling it was still too early in the day to head back to his room in the tavern, the Tyrant had taken a seat under a tree. He was just whiling away the time, hammer held loosely in his hand, when the Mask slunk up behind him.

"Weren't you suppose'ta be in the city?"

"I returned not long ago."

"How are things back at the ol' Church?"

"Encrypted messages were flying every which way in a furious effort to muster troops. They've also hired no small number of beastfallen who are out of work thanks to the decrease in witch hunting."

"Wish I could just book it outta here." The Tyrant let out a deep sigh.

“Why don’t you?”

“Can’t. I’m on the job,” the Tyrant replied matter-of-factly. The Academy of Magic had hired him to stay and defend the village. There was no way he could run off, however much he might want to. Without that order to retreat, he could never pull out of a battle, not even one that was sure to claim his life. That was what it meant to be a Dea Ignis Arbiter.

Former Arbiter, that is...

“Even sayin’ I did get out, where would I go? Join up with the Church?”

“That might not be a bad option. Should you help us lay traps to defend the village then leak their location to the Church’s forces, you could conceivably put us in a difficult position.”

“I ain’t doin’ that. Those Academy goons’re terrifying if you get on their bad side.”

“And you feel no terror in having betrayed the Church to join the witches?”

“We got no more connection to those holy bastards. Ever since Dea Ignis got disbanded, we don’t even technically exist.”

“And yet you were allowed to live on.”

The Tyrant shot the priest a look over his shoulder. The Mask was facing straight ahead, but it was impossible to tell where his gaze was fixed behind that blindfold.

“Dea Ignis was an assemblage of condemned convicts, many of whom were executed in accord with its dissolution. Only a very few were granted clemency. I, for one, was granted the opportunity to serve as priest in the Witch’s Village in recognition of my loyalty to the Church and the work I had done in demonstrating my tolerance toward witches. But you...”

“See right through me, do ya?”

“I have my theories.”

“Backed up by some hard investigatin’, if I don’t miss my guess.”

“Well, yes,” the priest conceded with a slight nod. “Your life was spared on the condition you devote yourself to supporting the extremist faction, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s the long an’ short of it.”

“Only an individual in the uppermost ranks of the Church would have the authority to make such a promise. In other words, while the higher-ups proclaim peace with the witches, there is at least one among their number providing material support to the extremists.”

“Don’t even try askin’ me who, though. I only ever talked ta some peon who got sent as messenger.”

“I did not expect you to know. However, after this business with Kady, I cannot discount the possibility that you intentionally allowed yourself to be captured. You are, after all, beholden to the mercy of a very powerful individual.”

“Ahaaa,” the Tyrant exclaimed. “Now I getcha. Definitely wouldn’t put it past the bastards to pull somethin’ like that.”

“Earning someone’s trust by feigning fellowship only to betray them is the Church’s favored modus operandi, after all.”

“Can’t deny that. Wouldn’t be any point in denyin’ it, neither. At the end of the day, I’m nothin’ but a tool. An’ it’s up to the person usin’ the tool to decide how far they wanna rely on it.”

“And when to dispose of it?”

The Tyrant smiled wryly. “Well, broken tools ain’t nothin’ but a hazard.”

“Then how is one to test whether a tool is fit for use or not?”

“Not much ta do but try it out.”

“In a controlled environment?”

“Swhat I’d do.” Uncomfortable in the abrupt hush that fell between them, the Tyrant pushed away from the tree trunk where he’d been resting. “*What?*”

“I understand you put yourself in harm’s way to protect our young apprentices.”

“...Oh?”

“Or so Loux Krystas reported. ‘Far more compassionate than I’d supposed, that one.’”

“That ain’t nothin’ but slave smarts. Save yer master even if it costs ya yer life, or they’ll just kill ya anyway.” Cackling, he got to his feet.

“Where are you going?”

The Tyrant thrust his jaw toward the schoolroom. “The little teach and her kiddies asked me to come by.”

“I see. You’ve become quite close, haven’t you?”

“Wouldn’t kill ya to give me some credit, ya know.”

“Yes, it is a joyous development... May the Goddess bless you.” The priest shrugged pointedly. The Tyrant clicked his tongue before shouldering his hammer and trudging off.

That felt as uncomfortable as all hell. Hearing himself called “compassionate” sent a shiver through the hulking man, though he couldn’t say why.

Putting his discomfort aside, the Tyrant arrived at the schoolhouse around midday as instructed. Its door, always left open, was shut, and when he went in, he found that curtains had been pulled over all the windows, leaving the interior pitch dark. Even so, he could sense people inside, could hear the nervous tittering of children. Then—

“Thank you for saving us, Mr. Tyraaant!”

Light poured in through the windows as the little ones’ cries pierced the Tyrant’s ears, and he flinched despite himself. Horribly disfigured cakes and cookies were set out on the table, and in front of it stood the beaming school children and their teacher, Miss Hearthful.

You gotta be shittin’ me, he thought, his face fixed in a taut frown.

Confused by his reaction, the children looked up at Hearthful. “He doesn’t look very happy, miss.”

“My, my. Perhaps it was a touch too soon for this, after all?” Hearthful furrowed her brow and hurried over to the Tyrant where he stood tense as a statue. “All right, children, go ahead and eat your treats. I think Mr. Tyrant is just so pleased that he doesn’t know what to do with himself.”

“Yes, miss!”

The Tyrant could only stand there and watch as if everything the schoolteacher and her pupils did was happening in some distant world. Hearthful gave him a gentle smile.

“This was what the children and I came up with to show you our thanks.”

“Thanks...? For what...?”

“If you hadn’t pulled me away from poor Kady, the children might’ve had to watch as he devoured me.”

“Lizard boy woulda fixed ya up.”

“Perhaps. Nevertheless, my being hurt would be a terrifying prospect for the children.”

“Well... Yeah... ’Spose so.”

The terror of losing your guardian—it was a fear the Tyrant was all too familiar with, having exploited it many times. He felt uncomfortably out of place. He could almost hear the cracks opening along his body as his soul was stuffed into this ill-fitting environment. While he had no reason at all to incite fear or confusion in this peaceful place, a parade of options for accomplishing the task ran unceasingly through his mind just the same.

“I’ve told them Kady was seriously hurt and taken to a hospital in the city for treatment.”

“Ahh, right...”

“Won’t you try some of the sweets the children baked for you?”

“No, I—” he began, but then couldn’t find a reason not to.

Hort had commanded him to “get along” with the people of the village. As a tool, it was his role to simply obey. *And it’s goin’ better than I ever coulda hoped.*

After what happened with Kady, the Tyrant at least had the children’s trust in the bag. Hearthful was hard to read, but if nothing else, she had clearly decided he posed no danger to her pupils. Everything was going smoothly. Even so, the

Tyrant felt anxious, as if he were dancing on mousetraps.

What in the hell is this unsestlin' feeling—?

In the end, the Tyrant decided to ignore it, and began to dig in to the children's offerings.

"Hey mister, if you and Mercenary fought, who'd win?" one of the kids asked.

"Gimme ten days to get ready, and even a beastfallen'll fall right into my trap," he boasted.

A little while later, the children, tired from all the excitement, ran out behind the school and cuddled up together for a nap, taking shelter from the midday sun beneath a nearby tree's shady boughs. The Tyrant helped Hearthful clean up after the party, responding noncommittally to the attempts at casual conversation she threw his way.

"You seem distracted."

He turned to look at her. A jolt of surprise hit him as he found Hearthful's face, usually far below him, much closer to his own level. Upon closer inspection, he saw that she had brought a stool over just so she could stand next to him. The Tyrant scowled at himself—he hadn't even noticed her do it. "Just got some things on my mind."

"Oh? Anything I can help with?"

"You? No way in hell."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Yer gonna regret it."

"I prefer to regret things I've done rather than things I haven't," she replied. "Now go ahead, I'm all ears."

The Tyrant gave her an evil grin. “I can’t stop picturin’ all these different ways you and the little kiddos could die. How you’d suffer, cry, scream—I can’t get it outta my head.”

“Does that...mean you like me?” The irrational turn in the conversation took the Tyrant aback. Blinking several times behind her glasses, Hearthful reached out and took the Tyrant’s cheeks in her small hands. “You keep having all these awful premonitions, right? It’s okay. Don’t be afraid. A lot of the people in this village experience the same thing. We’ve all finally found a place to settle down here after surviving unspeakable horrors. So whenever we look at the precious things we’ve gained, we can’t help but wonder: ‘What if it all gets destroyed?’”

“Nah... That ain’t it. See, I’m the one who does the destroyin’, always have been... So...I keep thinkin’ what I’d do, if that were my job...”

“And do you enjoy those thoughts?”

“...No.” *She’s right—I don’t like it.* Picturing the hunt was one of the Tyrant’s pleasures. He felt a great sense of accomplishment at the thought of one of his traps capturing—or killing—its mark. It was proof that the contraption had worked perfectly.

But this...

The feeling he got when he imagined the children—imagined Hearthful—getting massacred over and over in his mind was something akin to fear.

Hearthful smiled. “In that case, I believe you may have taken a liking to me and the children after all. You know myriad ways to cause us pain, and in order to design countermeasures, first you have to run through those ways in your mind one by one, to make us suffer in your imagination as vividly as possible.”

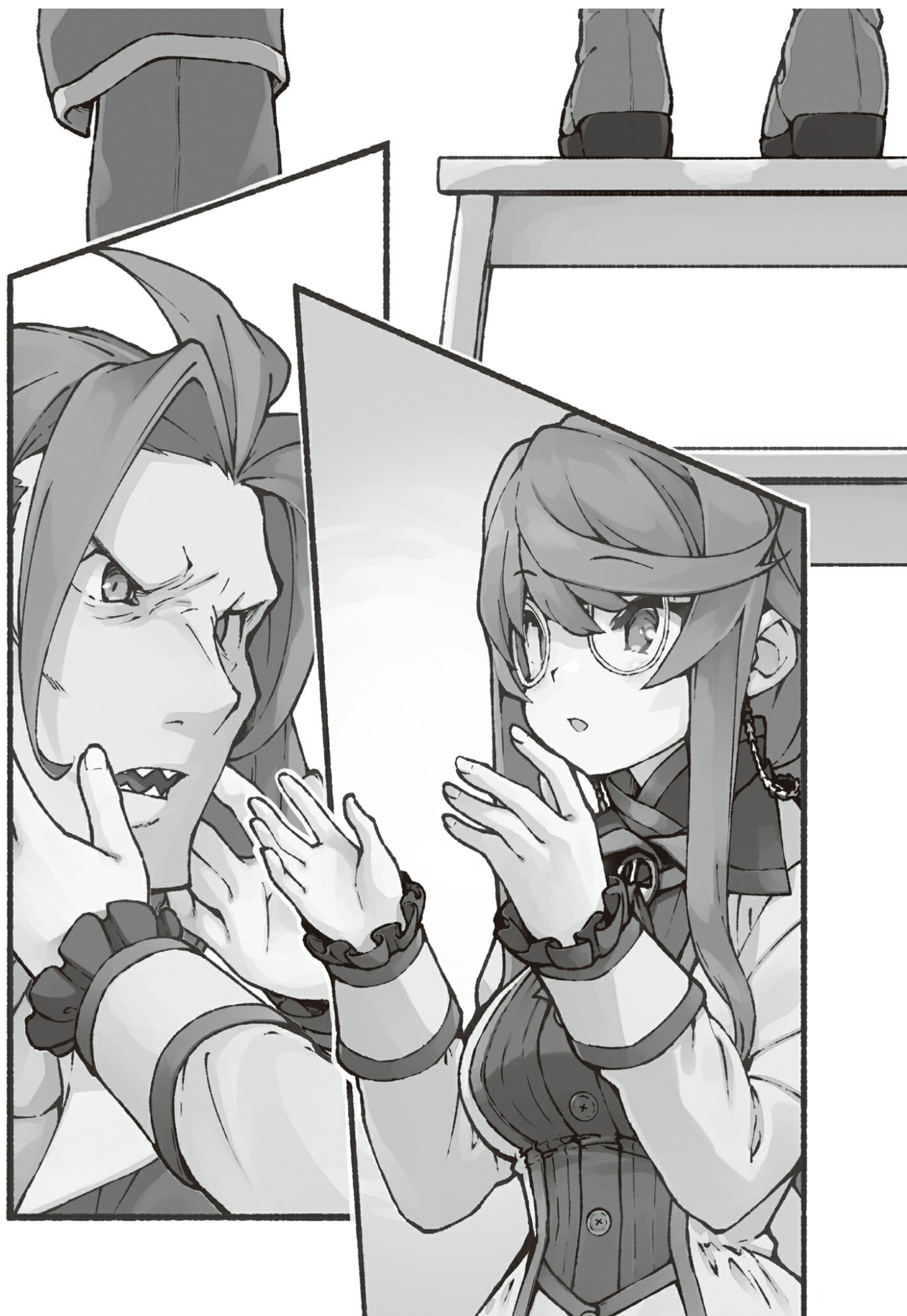
“Countermeasures,” the Tyrant repeated.

“You’re trying to protect us, aren’t you? Thank you. That must be very difficult for you, as someone who’s grown so accustomed to taking life.”

The Tyrant gripped Hearthful’s hands and pulled them away from his cheeks. Without another word he picked up his hammer and hurried out of the schoolroom. He’d taken more lives than he could ever count, and knew better than anyone what happened to people with something to lose. *I’ve gotten a little too close. Gettin’ the villagers to accept me’ll sure make for easy work, but it’ll all go to shit if I let them in, too. Tools don’t need no feelings.*

The Tyrant had to be prepared to sacrifice one child without hesitation if it meant saving all the others. That was his job.

That meant never faltering or looking back, even if one of the kids were to be taken hostage—no matter who would sob and wail, whose heart would break, whose hatred it would earn him.



On days when Hort didn't have any work for him, the Tyrant spent most of his time cooped up in the first floor of the tavern. He walked in now to find that there were no customers so soon after midday, and no sign of the establishment's beastfallen proprietor, either.

In their stead—

“Welcome back, Tyrant.”

—he found a young woman relaxing at the counter, facing the entrance.

3

Hort welcomed the Tyrant with the kind of perfect smile she never normally directed at him. The former Arbiter flinched, sensing something menacing in the grin.

“I saw, you know. Saw Miss Hearthful and the children giving you that big ol' thank you.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Did it make you happy?”

“Nope.”

“That so.” Hort's smile widened, terrible and dark.

—Good. Looks like you'll manage to get along with everyone just fine.

What Hort had said down by the river came back to the Tyrant now.

What'd it mean? If I were Hort, what would I make the person I hated most do? If that person suddenly found somethin' "precious" for the first time in his life, what would I order him to do?

The Tyrant recalled his conversation with the priest. *How would you make sure a tool wasn't broken? Try it out in a safe environment. That's right—there is one way to prove I'm a tool without a will of my own, who'll carry out any order I'm given.*

"You know, Miss Hearthful kind of rubs me the wrong way, if I'm being honest."

"I dunno what ideas that damn priest has put in yer head, but lemme cut to the chase." The Tyrant sneered. *"I could do it."*

Hort's smile vanished.

The Tyrant felt the sensation of bones splintering in his hands. He could picture in vivid detail how it'd feel to snap Hearthful's slender neck.

"...Gross. You're no fun," Hort snapped, jumping off her stool. "You mean you really are just a tool with no will of your own?"

"Yep."

"So no matter how much you loved someone, you'd just kill them if you were ordered to?"

"That's how I was trained."

"Not super convincing when you look so sad about it." Squaring off against the much larger man, Hort stood on her tiptoes and peered into his face.

Her twisted grin made the Tyrant feel like he was looking in the mirror. *Pretty sure whatever smile I've got going looks just as bad.*

“If it’s convincin’ ya want, try me. See for yerself if I’m useful or not. Seein’ as yer my master just at the moment.”

“...I wouldn’t do something that dumb. I just wanted to tease you a little.”

Hort tucked her grin away, replacing it with the typical sulky look of a girl her age. When she took a half-step back, the Tyrant’s shoulders involuntarily relaxed. And she picked up on it immediately.

Shit. I’ve started carin’. These feelings snuck up on me, just like that.

“Sayb’s really counting on your traps, you know. Says he wants to combine them with his magic potions.”

“That right...”

“But that means your handiwork will be, like, the cornerstone of our strategy.”

“Guess so.”

“Honestly, I can’t *stand* the thought. But I couldn’t object to Sayb’s idea. D’you know why?”

“No clue.”

“Because you and me, we’ve faced death together and come out alive.”

The Tyrant failed to stifle a giggle at the absurdity of her statement. *That all? Just that handful of moments from when the mutated Kady first attacked ’til Loux Krystas arrived?* But Hort had a point: the Tyrant had faced death with the apprentices and survived. He couldn’t deny feeling the same way.

And despite having numerous chances, Hort had not killed the Tyrant. Even when they’d had a justifiable reason to abandon him to certain death, she and Kudo had half-carried the Tyrant as they fled. That was why he’d had to protect

the students with his own body.

The fundamental instinct of mutual aid, which operates as a matter of course, without calculation or thought, is something the “elaborate machines” called human beings are all meant to be equipped with. The Tyrant had always thought he was the exception, but now he realized it was very much there within him.

“Even a piece of trash like you can put your life on the line for someone else when it matters most. Once that thought hit me, all these things I was so sure about suddenly seemed a little less certain.”

“...I hear you.”

“But you know, this just means you’re gonna keep getting closer with the villagers, and more of them are gonna become important to you, right? And then the gravity of what you’ve taken from so many others will hit you. It’ll haunt your dreams every night.”

“...Maybe so.”

“You poor, poor thing.” Hort smiled brightly. This time, her grin held no menace at all; it was joyful, coming straight from the heart. “I can’t *wait* to see that, so I’m not gonna let you die. That should be enough for you to trust me, right? You were looking at me, weren’t you, while Kady was killing you? With a *You’re gonna abandon me, aren’t you?* kinda look in your eyes. Trust me, I know that look.”

In that moment, their trust in one other reached a kind of contentious equilibrium. As long as the Tyrant continued to care for the villagers and work to protect them, Hort would preserve his life at all costs. Of this and only this, neither the Tyrant nor Hort had any doubts.

“Welp, that’s all I came to say. See ya.”

As Hort walked off, the Tyrant felt like there was something he ought to say, but the words caught in his throat. A jumble of uneasy feelings surging through him, he took a seat in one of the tavern’s many chairs and quietly cradled his head in his hands.

“...She got me good, that little brat.”

This tool’s gettin’ rusty.

From now on, every time the Tyrant took a life, he would picture it: the scene of carnage as that upstanding teacher and the children who adored him got slaughtered in retaliation.

+ + +

“Stint not on maintenance, maintain a healthy suspicion, and have faith.”

This eminently reasonable comment came from behind Hort after she had taken only a few steps away from the tavern. Swiveling around, she saw Los leaning against the Staff of Ludens, a loaded grin plastered across her face as she watched the antlered apprentice.

Hort was too uncomfortable to meet the other’s eyes. “You heard all that?”

“Naturally. I am not one to miss a dramatic scene.”

“Then I’ll bet this fell pretty short of your expectations.”

“Wherefore dost display such modesty?! ’Twas every bit as thrilling as I’d hoped—a moment of true suspense!”

Unable to muster a proper smile, Hort's gaze fell listlessly to the ground. *She was keeping tabs on me.* Los had anticipated Hort's plan to pay the Tyrant a visit.

"Aren't you gonna scold me?"

"For what? Thou didst but confirm that thy tool would function properly. Stint not on maintenance, and have faith, as I said. While I have a great love of the idealistic dream of unconditional trust, I detest the imprudence of failing to consider its pitfalls."

The idealistic dream of unconditional trust. Hort was incapable of giving herself over to that dream, and hated herself for it. She recognized that her deeply suspicious and cunning nature was necessary, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

"I shall let thee in on something." Los guided Hort's gaze away from the ground and toward the shadow of a nearby tree. There stood the priest, affecting a nonchalant stance.

Hort blinked. "I didn't know he was back."

"Hadst thou not done it, he would have in thy place."

"Huh?"

"And should he have failed to do so, 'tis likely I would have in his stead." The witch smiled reassuringly.

Huh? If I hadn't tested the Tyrant, the priest would've, and if he hadn't, then Los would've. That means—

"Professor Los... Was it the Tyrant you were keeping an eye on? Not me?"

"Hanh? Wherefore should I monitor thee, young Hort?" Los tilted sideways,

staff and all, to demonstrate her confusion.

Hort felt her heart clench. *I'm always so suspicious of other people that I end up thinking they're suspicious of me.* She was so weak-minded, and she hated herself for that, too.

Seeing Hort unable to answer, Los grinned once more, hopped onto the Staff of Ludens, and threw her arms around Hort's head. "Oh, come now! Such a severe countenance! Dost find shame in not having a pure heart, trusting of all? Ah, youth! 'Tis but a vital step toward adulthood! Rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of the tainted yearning to be cleansed!"

"D-Don't call me tainted! It's just, like, I'm the only one who's mean-spirited, I'm the only cunning one, I'm the only one who's an awful person...!"

"Nay, shouldst look at it quite the other way round! Trusting the Tyrant to be at the heart of our battle plans *without* reservation goes well beyond purity of heart and into the realm of pure folly!"

"But Sayb and Kudo—!"

"What of them? Are they bumbling fools who would unquestioningly trust a dangerous individual?"

Hort blinked. *No. Not a chance. Saybil overthinks absolutely everything, and Kudo's so deeply suspicious, he goes around boasting that he doesn't trust anybody. So why are they both okay with hinging our strategy on the Tyrant this time? What is it that makes them trust him?*

"I-I'm...gonna head back to the dorm!"

"As thou shouldst." Los ruffled the girl's hair.

Hort hugged her tightly, then sprinted off toward the dormitory. Throwing open the front door, she found Saybil and Kudo in the living room, frowning at a

motley assortment of potions and elixirs laid out before them, and flipping through the pages of various books as they discussed their experiments.

Saybil noticed Hort's return and looked up. "Welcome back. *How'd it go?*"

"H-How did what go?" she asked, unsure what he meant. Saybil and Kudo exchanged a glance. "Huh? Wait, what's going on?"

"Sorry, maybe I misunderstood. I thought you'd gone to see the Tyrant."

"Huh? Why?!"

"Dude, the second we started to get into the nitty-gritty of how to integrate the guy's traps into our strategy, you were all like, 'I just remembered there was something I needed to do!' and bolted out the door. What other reason could there'a been?"

"Reason for...?"

"For testing the Tyrant. To see if we can trust him..." Saybil offered.

"Wait, you *did* sign a blood pact or something to make sure he physically *can't* stab us in the back, right?"

"That'd put too much of a burden on Hort. Those contracts promise an equal exchange, so she'd need to guarantee him something, too. Anyway, they're so dangerous we're not allowed to use them until we graduate. Don't tell me you didn't know that, Kudo—"

"You some kinda walkin' rulebook or somethin'?!"

It's me.

The realization hit Hort that Saybil and Kudo felt they could trust the Tyrant because she, the person most suspicious of him, had said nothing to stop them.

It's not the Tyrant they trust—it's me.

As soon as she realized this, an uncontrollable tickling emotion welled up inside Hort, and she could do nothing to stop the awkward smile that spread across her face.

"Waah, that's the creepiest smile I ever saw!"

"Do you have to say it like that?!"

"Just to be sure, that *was* a smile, right?"

"Not you, too, Sayb!" Hort puffed out her cheeks, then sullenly joined her fellow apprentices at the table where they were brewing their potions.

"So? What ended up happening with the Tyrant?" Kudo prodded.

"Listen, Kudo. You know you, like, have total faith in me, right?"

"Not a chance in hell. You screwin' with me?"

"Hrm?" Saybil sounded puzzled. "But a minute ago, I was like, 'You really think it's okay to trust the Tyrant?' and you were all, 'If Hort hasn't said anything, then I'm sure it's fine.' Remember?"

"Dammit Saybil, shut UP! I definitely can't trust *you*!"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot you were feeling shy about it."

"I'm *not* shy, asshole—ugh, you're so *Saybil*!"

"I don't really know what that means, but it's okay, you don't need to explain."

"Dude, you've gotten so twisted! You used to be more... Back me up here,

Hort!”

I bet it's more than just anger turning Kudo's scales red right now.

Even as he loudly proclaimed he didn't have faith in anybody, Kudo had deemed Hort's skeptical intuition trustworthy. Hort's upbringing in the Church had taught her that deceiving and doubting people was wicked. So she had always felt somehow perverse as she used her own smile to hoodwink others while assuming there was ill will behind theirs.

But it's different here.

In a world filled with enemies and allies, where failing to correctly differentiate between the two could put your life in danger, Hort's skepticism could become a force to help protect her friends—at least, there were people here who believed that without question.

“I actually think I could go for this nasty Sayb, too.”

“Recently, I've been thinking that at the end of the day, whether someone's nasty or nice has a lot to do with what's useful for whoever's judging them.”

“Th-That's exactly right, Sayb! That happens all the time! You're, like, starting to pick up on the dark undercurrents of social interaction! Wonder if it's 'cos you got your memories back...?”

“Are you, like, cursed to praise every last piece of drivel that comes outta Saybil's mouth?!”

“Maybe. Love is a kind of curse, you know.”

“Don't you start in with that sappy shit!”

“You're amazing, Kudo. I didn't know your scales could change color so quickly. How do they work? Can I have one?”

“And you—shut the hell up and get to work on those potions!”



Chapter Five



“Quite the festival, these preparations for battle.”

“Enough o’ that, ’s dangerous talk.”

“Gark!” Los yawped as a long, lively, furry tail slapped her in the face. She and Mercenary were sitting side by side in the doorway to the tavern watching the villagers bustle about. The village was a veritable hive of activity as everyone prepared for the coming battle. None of the Church’s soldiers would make it this far—or at least that was the plan, but that didn’t mean they could shirk preparations just in case.

“What dost thou think? A few food stalls would certainly add to the festive feeling, no?”

“Like I said, this ain’t a festival.”

“And yet the commotion and preparation are on par, are they not? As the good father tells it, the Church will like as not issue an official edict mobilizing their troops in ten days’ time.”

“The Church? More like fundamentalists champing at the bit to tear away from the conciliation faction.”

“Aye... They mean to proclaim, ‘We shall accept a new bishop as our leader, cast down the witch-infested village, and demonstrate unto the world that we alone represent the *true* Church.’ I warrant they shall be preceded by dancers and musicians on their march, as if to profess their singular claim to justice.”

Mercenary didn’t respond at first, seemingly lost in thought, but then he

sighed. “Well, guess it is as rowdy as a real festival.”

Before the day of the festivities arrived, however, they still needed to chop down trees from the forest to erect observation towers and a palisade around the village. The community had always been small, but that said, all its residents had initially been recruited in a bid to rebuild the place, so many of them were either artisans skilled in construction, or strapping, powerful men and women. For them, fortifying the village in a mere ten days’ time was not as tall an order as it might otherwise seem.

“I must say... He proved the perfect man for the job.”

“I’m honestly debating whether to start callin’ him Boss instead’a the Tyrant from now on.”

“I do believe I’ve heard several residents refer to him so already.”

The most valuable contribution in this flurry of construction had come from the blacksmith-cum-trapmaster and former Arbiter himself, the Tyrant. As his previous responsibilities had consisted mainly of hunting prey—be it beast or human—the Tyrant was leagues more knowledgeable than anyone else when it came to throwing together defenses like this. It was he who had catalyzed the commotion, drawing up blueprints in a flash then delegating jobs left and right while the “mage troop,” consisting of Zero and the apprentice mages, hotly debated where and how to lay their magic-infused traps.

“So, you really think we can pull this off?”

“Thou worriest whether we can indeed end this conflict without bloodshed?”

“That I do.”

“And yet, such should always be the ideal in battle. ’Tis far wiser to dispatch a force ten thousand strong to surround a fortress manned by a hundred soldiers,

and so steer them toward peaceful capitulation, than it is to fling two hundred warriors against its walls and sacrifice a hundred lives on each side.”

“You get that *we’re* the fortress manned by a hundred soldiers in this scenario, right?”

“And our enemy is indeed a force ten thousand strong.” A man’s voice cut into the conversation, drawing Los and Mercenary’s attention. It was the priest, standing before them with a sour look on his face.

“Ten thousand? Well, ain’t that somethin’.” Mercenary whistled.

“Quite the congregation,” Los remarked with a cackle.

“This is no laughing matter. In terms of the conflict between the Church and the witches, it’s the largest army mustered in a century.”

“Didn’t they have around eight thousand when they surrounded Wenias? No real difference there.”

“Don’t be absurd. You’re talking about eight thousand troops dispatched against an entire kingdom; this time we shall see ten thousand sent to assault a single village.”

“Like ants to sugar.” Mercenary chuckled sarcastically.

“A fine comparison!” Los exclaimed with a giggle. The priest’s scowl only grew more severe at their total lack of tension.

“Don’t gimme that look. I don’t hear you tryin’ ta tell us it’s reckless, that we shouldn’t go ahead with it. So you think it’ll all work out somehow, too, doncha?”

“Well, I’ve gleaned a fairly good sense of what sort of soldiers they’ve assembled through my reconnaissance flights with the Dragon Conqueror King

over the past two days.”

“Yeah? And what’re they like?”

“Farmers, paupers, starving folk... The weakest and most vulnerable elements of society, in other words. If anything, it would strain credulity to think we might *fail* to defeat such a foe.”

“Not much for subtlety, those scoundrels...!” Seated on the tavern’s steps, Los let herself fall backwards onto the wooden boards.

Mercenary smiled wryly. “So cut ’em down and we’re the bad guys, huh?”

“Precisely,” the priest confirmed with a shrug. “It would mean massacring ten thousand men to protect a village of no more than a hundred—or just a handful of witches. The history books would have a field day.”

“I warrant the papers would enjoy their merriment first. The Church must know full well the risks incurred when marching on a witch’s village. ’Tis certain they have already laid plans to spin the tale in their favor should they lose.”

In other words, at the end of the day...

“This is not a question of whether or not our plan will work. With the eyes of the entire world trained on us, gracefully ending this war without loss of life is our only viable option.” The priest seemed utterly dismayed.

Mercenary and Los looked at him with pity in their eyes, as if his plight had nothing to do with them.

Just then, the door to the tavern opened and a small, fluffy white mouse beastfallen no taller than a child stepped out. Gripping a bunch of vegetables in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other, she shot daggers at Mercenary.

“Merce, breaktime’s over! We’ve got meals to prepare!”

“All right, all right, I’m comin’. Good grief.” Mercenary got heavily to his feet.

“What, thou art serving meals? Why, the whole affair adopts a greater festive flair by the minute!”

“Lily,” the priest called out from where he stood beside Los, who was wiping away the drool brought on by the promise of delicious food.

“Eep!” Lily shrieked, then timidly looked up at the priest, her fists still clenched around her cleaver and veg.

“This evening, the Dragon Conqueror King is going to evacuate the village children to Loutra Cathedral. You are to join them.”

“Huh? I don’t wanna.”

“...What?”

“I don’t WANNA!”

“Lily!”

“Lily’s super strong! Lily’s gonna fight with everybody and protect Father. Right, Merce?”

“Right you are. Better fighter than me, even, if I don’t watch myself.”

Bolstered by Mercenary’s support, Lily puffed out her chest proudly, with such vigor that it looked like she might catapult herself back through the doorway. Thankfully, her long tail steadied her enough to remain standing. The priest glowered at the coalition of beastfallen from behind his blindfold, but could make no counterargument, and in the end fell silent.

“How now? Be this cutesy widdle mousie such a redoubtable warrior, and me none the wiser? How alike we are!” Los crawled closer to Lily, who tried in vain to hide behind Mercenary before being enveloped in the ancient witch’s mad

embrace. “Wh-Whoaa...! What’s this?! Thou art far fluffier even than I had dreamed...! Father, thou scoundrel, dost cherish this wonderful little creature to death each and every day?! I am green with envy!”

“I do no such thing, and she is clearly uncomfortable—release the mouse this instant.” The priest grabbed Los by the scruff of the neck and tore her away from the tiny chef. “Goddess, these witches are an insensible, inconsiderate lot, every last one of them...”

“Haven’t gone there after all, huh? I coulda sworn you—”

But before Mercenary could finish his sentence, the priest slammed his staff full-force into the beastfallen’s face.

“Oww,” Mercenary groaned, doubling over in pain. Lily squared off in front of him, expression grave and cleaver held aloft. “H-Hey now, pipsqueak, I was just joking. Don’t take it so seriously, I’m sorry...!”

“Merce, you big dummy! Lily hates you!” Lily threw down her vegetables and knife, then scurried away from the tavern.

“Lily, wait! The food prep! We’ve gotta feed everyone! I’m beggin’ ya, come back and help!” Mercenary ran after her in a panic.

“Now, look here, Lily!”

“’Tis futile, Father.” Los swung the Staff of Ludens out to stop the priest as he made to chase after the runaway chef. “Thou didst bear witness to her determination. That fluffy-duffy you call Lily shall not budge from this village, come hell or high water.”

“Fluffy-duffy...”

“’Tis love, and no mistake! Well do I know, for the heart of a maiden swells within my breast!”

“What frivolous nonsense...” The priest heaved a deep sigh.

“Mark my words, Father, this farce shall go down in history. ’Twould be heartless to wrench those with the will to fight away from the action.”

“That little one has no such will.”

“What does move her, then?”

“Love for me, I presume,” he responded calmly.



Momentarily unable to process his response, Los reeled back, bending almost in half.

“Why the surprise? You were the one just talking of love and maidens’ hearts.”

“Aye, but...I am somewhat vulnerable to fierce love and passion bereft of any shyness or embarrassment... It sends me all atwitter...for I am but a tender young maid.”

“That is rich indeed, coming from one even more elderly than Zero.”

“How cruel!” Los shrieked, stung by the venomous look of contempt that came so clearly through the priest’s blindfold. “Well, no matter. Did I hear aright that thou wilt travel to Loutra with the Dragon Conqueror King?”

“Yes. The only bishop I currently deem trustworthy is at the Cathedral there.”

“Might there be a seat on this trip for me as well?”

“...What?” The clergyman scowled in apparent distaste, at which Los reached into the black, shape-shifting sphere embedded in the Staff of Ludens, thrusting her arm in all the way to the elbow. When she pulled it out, a small, insect-like humanoid with an enormous mouth for a head rested in the palm of her hand.

“I should like to show this to the only bishop thou deemest trustworthy.”

“I cannot see...whatever ‘this’ is.” The priest pointed to his blindfold.

“What?! Thou truly canst not see?! And yet dost stride about however thou wilt?!”

“So? What is it?”

“One of the Remnants of Disaster that ate its way out of Kady’s stomach. Or, rather, a replica of one.”

“A replica?”

“My little Ludens is quite handy, I’ll have thee know. There is something I should very much like to try.” No sooner had the words left her lips than the Staff of Ludens produced a whole swarm of the carnivorous insects; in no time at all, they had Los and the priest completely surrounded.

“I trust you do not intend to put the bishop in any danger?”

“Oh, yes, it may well prove perilous. However, dost not wish to know? Had I not exterminated these vermin, they might have reproduced ad infinitum and spread from this village to devour the entire populace. The question remains: would those extremist Church knaves not have made preparations to deal with such an eventuality?”

“In other words, did they first secure a cure before unleashing such a plague?”

“We can no longer deny that whoever is supporting these extremists is a high-ranking member of the Church, cloaked in the guise of a conciliationist. Thus, I should like to put a question to this bishop whom someone as deeply dishonest and distrustful as thyself has deemed trustworthy.”

“That question being, whether the Church has the means to counter those?”

“If the answer be no,” Los grinned evilly, “I dare say we might smoke out this vile monster who would don sheep’s clothing while sacrificing his own lambs to the wolf.”

The Church and Mage Brigade's headquarters was located in Plasta, the capital of the Kingdom of Wenias. The Brigade's leader was naturally stationed there as well, but despite the fact they took a dragon as their symbol, Ghoda, the Dragon Conqueror King, was not that leader.

"...You won't dispatch troops? But it's all too clear that this madness cannot be justified! The Church and Mage Brigade is the shield that protects the witches and the sword that defends the Church! If we don't quell this disturbance, the Goddess of Mercy and the Twin Lords of War will never forgive our trespass!"

General Eudrite, every inch as big and burly as the massive carnivorous beastfallen Mercenary, pressed Holdem so vehemently that the wolf found himself leaning back from the imposing pressure of that mighty physique.

"Now, now, no need to get riled up." Holdem put up his hands, gently coaxing the general back into his seat. "I only meant we won't be sending troops to purge the invading army... But I will ask you to dispatch your forces."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning grown men don't go all out against children at play, do they? The anti-witch faction, and particularly this extremist branch, aren't nearly strong enough to pose an actual threat to anyone. Am I right?"

"Well..."

"And yet somehow they've managed to muster ten thousand soldiers to crush the Witch's Village," Holdem continued. "You know what that means, don't you? Being the former general of the Knights of the Church and all."

"Naturally! It is an insolent rebellion against the Church for its decision to accept peace with the witches! Which is why we must respond with all our

might to—”

“Would you break a kid’s arm and beat him to a pulp just because he’s going through a rebellious phase?”

General Eudrite frowned. “A rebellious phase...?”

“This is an untrained, ad-hoc army of civilians, which the Church slapped together with simplistic speeches about how ‘witches are all evil’—most of them probably aren’t even true believers. How do you think we should respond to people like that?”

“As I said, with absolute conviction and unshakeable—!”

“Equanimity,” Holdem cut in, sensing a drawn-out diatribe in the offing. “The kind of composure that says, ‘You’re not even worth fighting.’”

“I see. Yes, that has a certain logic to it.” Unfazed in the slightest by Holdem’s interruption, the general stroked a jaw seemingly fit to crush stone. “But how to approach it? The original strategy was to allow the extremists into the village, then have the Church and Mage Brigade surround them and wipe them out. Wasn’t the point that the villagers would simply hunker down and endure the attack until then, and so demonstrate to our neighbors just how harmless witches truly are?”

“Yup, and we’re still going to send those troops, and you’re still going to surround the enemy—we’re just nixing the ‘wipe them out’ part. And the witches won’t be doing any hunkering down.”

“Won’t be...? But if Master Zero engages the enemy, that would defeat the very purpose! How can we demonstrate to the Southerners that the witches are not a threat if—”

“That’s why they’re going to drive the enemy back without killing a single one

of 'em."

"What?!"

"And we'll hem the cowards in so they won't be able to worm their way out of it after they turn tail and run."

General Eudrite, who had been leaning forward in an excess of passion, drew back almost imperceptibly and stared down at the beastfallen. "That will require significantly more soldiers—since their numbers won't be reduced by casualties."

"In a sense, it's a kind of all-out war, I suppose." *Show them the magnitude of our force, but lay a hand on no one.* "Which brings me to an important question, General." Grinning, Holdem shot Eudrite a look of challenge. *"How many troops can you muster?"*

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"A request for the Akdios Mage Medic Corps to provide battlefield support?"

"Yes. It came from General Eudrite of Wenias."

The Holy City of Akdios, governed by Faeria, the Healing Saint, belonged to the maritime Republic of Creon. Located to the southwest of Wenias, the Republic was staunchly pro-witch thanks to Saint Faeria and Prime Minister Torres. The Holy City drew many mages well-versed in the Chapter of Protection, with Faeria at their head, and so never failed to receive appeals for rescue and aid personnel in the event of war. However...

"Do my eyes deceive me, or does this say our presence is requested 'to

prevent the loss of even a single enemy life’?”

Faeria tucked a lock of her voluminous pale-red hair behind one ear, and pushed her glasses back up her nose as she peered at the letter. She had only recently reached the age of twenty, and had a calm, easygoing demeanor that was a touch quotidian for someone hailed as a saint. As the crutch leaning beside her chair implied, she also did not have full use of her legs. Faeria had saved countless people with her healing, and had paid the price with her own body. It was thanks to this that the people of Creon—or at the very least, of the Holy City Akdios—had no fear of witches or their power.

“It says the Church extremists have assembled an army ten thousand strong, and are marching on Zero and Mercenary’s village... My, how awful! It certainly wouldn’t do for those ten thousand poor souls to be massacred.”

“You said it. Neither of ’em’s too big on restraint.” The reply came from a white hawk beastfallen with a razor sharp beak and talons, who met the Healing Saint’s gaze as she looked up from the letter.

“Let’s see...” Faeria began. “The number of sick coming to Akdios for treatment has fallen somewhat of late, hasn’t it? Do you think my presence would be sorely missed if I assigned one mage medic to remain in my stead? With the aid of the apprentices, I imagine they’d be able to manage for a hundred days or so.”

“We almost never get cases so severe that *you* actually need to go out an’ heal ’em, anyway. Take two hundred days, three hundred days—if you wanted, you could even hang up your saint’s cloak for good. You know that, right?”

“Oh, don’t be mean!” Faeria puffed out her cheeks, her mature poise giving way to a childish temperament out of keeping with her appearance. “Remember, Cal, I consulted you on this, and you didn’t stop me. So if anybody

scolds me for this later, you're going to have to take the scolding along with me, you hear?"

"I'm not gonna stop you. The Mage Medic Corps didn't even exist until six years ago. Those geniuses in the South still prefer to refuse our help and let people die who coulda been saved. You ask me, it's about time the world learned to be grateful for the mages of Akdios, an' this seems like the perfect opportunity."

"Yes. Yes, you're right. I'm glad you agree, Cal." Faeria nodded with conviction, then picked up her pen and turned to her writing desk. "Urgent communiqué from Lady Faeria, Sovereign of the Holy City of Akdios, to His Excellency Lord Torres, Prime Minister of the Republic of Creon: I write to inform you of my decision to leave the Holy City with a skeleton crew of healers while I mobilize every available mage medic."

Faeria swiftly rolled up the parchment and pressed her seal into the wax. Cal took the letter and said simply, "Right, back in a bit," before climbing onto the window ledge and bounding out into the open air.

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After entrusting the casting call to Holdem, Albus headed out for *the place she needed to go*. Still young, the headmaster didn't have much in the way of what you might call an interpersonal network. And though the new king who had inherited the throne upon his father's passing was perfectly capable, he was still young himself. There was, however, one man Albus and the King of Wenias could look to for support: Prime Minister Torres of the Republic of Creon, who

graciously received Albus upon her unannounced visit to Ydeäverna Castle, and let a hearty laugh ring out when he heard what she had to say.

“Brilliant! A fascinating proposal! I would expect no less from the Kingdom of Wenias’s honored Chief State Mage! I have long held that war would be better played out upon the chessboard, but never had I considered conducting the game on the battlefield! And on such a grand scale—marvelous!”

The position of prime minster in the Republic of Creon was determined not by heredity but by election, with a change in administration generally occurring every three years. Since Torres had taken up the post, however, no one had so much as dreamed of installing anyone else as head of state. Tall and imposing, this refined fifty-something gentleman would likely maintain the position for another decade to come.

Albus inwardly breathed a sigh of relief at obtaining his approval, but, leaning in close with an aggressively affable smile on his face, the Prime Minister pressed her further. “But do you really believe it will be so easy to make this dream a reality?”

“Don’t play coy. If you’ve got something to say, let’s hear it,” Albus replied curtly.

Torres put up his hands and stepped back. “Well, it’s about the illicit trade in Remnants of Disaster that you reported to us... We’ve discovered their source.”

“Seriously?!”

“It would appear to have been an unintended product of circumstance.”

“Unintended...? You’re telling me someone *accidentally* brought those monsters back from the North?”

“They belong to a class of parasite that takes corpses for its hosts, as we’ve

seen. Seems some blue blood with a passion for daring tales of adventure mustered his own private army and set off for the North. He lost half his men, but he did manage to bring their remains back with him—only to discover a variety of Remnants of Disaster had seeded themselves inside the bodies. The fellow decided it was too much for him to deal with, and after hearing his sob story, the Church agreed to take custody of the vermin. And somehow they found their way into the hands of the extremists.”

“Achhh,” Albus groaned, holding her head in her hands. “That must be why Madea couldn’t find their supply route, even with her farsight...!”

One of Albus’s subordinates possessed the power to scry on any place in the world with the “sight of a thousand eyes.” This would only reveal what she asked to see, however; if the scope was too limited, she would end up seeing only a single letter of some unidentifiable text, while a net cast too wide would present an entire shelf of books. Not even her powerful clairvoyance could have hoped to perceive the truth if the Church had simply *pretended* to cleanse and bury the mountain of corpses that returned from the North—*while in fact preserving them, Remnants of Disaster and all.*

It is impossible to find the answer to a question you don’t know to ask, and the Church wasn’t going to provide that information of their own accord.

The sight of a thousand eyes was an extremely useful skill, but it was not infallible. So it was that Albus was sometimes forced to rely on the kind of information people like Torres could dig up by more conventional means.

“So does that mean the Church extremists still have a huge stockpile of Remnants of Disaster?”

“As I understand it, that foolhardy noble took nearly a thousand soldiers North with him, and brought home about five hundred to bury. If we assume

each one of those played host to a Remnant... The real question is, when and where will they deploy them?”

“Here and now, I’d say.”

“Precisely what I would do!”

“Yeah, me too.” *Which means it’s likely to be what they’re thinking as well.* Albus chewed at a nail in frustration. *I never thought it would be easy to pull this off, but looks like it’s going to be even trickier than I’d expected.*

Just then, a certain hawk landed vigorously on the windowsill. “Torres, emergency communiqué from Ria—Albus? Didn’t know you’d be here.”

Albus greeted the scroll-bearing avian beastfallen with a broad smile. “Cal! Perfect timing. How many mage medics did Faeria say she can spare?”

“Enough that she feels like she’s gotta inform the Prime Minister.”

Cal handed the letter to Torres, who quickly scanned its contents before turning to Albus with a grim look on this face. “I sincerely hope you end this war even as it begins.”

“I’m doing all I can. Cal, mind if I ask you a sorta dangerous favor?”

“I’m tellin’ you now, you’re in for a disappointment if you expect me to race every which way like the Dragon Conqueror King.”

“I want you to fly up North and find the commander of the Mage Battalion. Tell her to put her mission to clean out the major cities on hold and come on back.”

“The North?!” Cal squawked. “You’ve gotta be joking. That’s a job for the Dragon Conqueror King if I ever heard one!”

Albus only doubled down, however. “Sending a dragon up North’ll call too

much attention and only cause more conflict! Don't worry, the road from Wenias to Mage Commander Amnir's location should be perfectly safe!"

"Safe according to who? I'm a pretty vulnerable target, ya know!!"

Avian bodies eschewed weight wherever possible to enable the miracle of flight. But being light also means being fragile. As a hawk beastfallen, Cal was no exception; his bones were hollow, meaning they could be shattered with one swing of a child's bat.

"Don't worry, you'll be *fine*. Amnir's even more of a genius than I am, so I'm sure she'll take good care of you. I'll let Faeria know, so you get going ASAP! As in, A-S-A-NOW!"

Herded toward the window with a few more please and thank yous, Cal begrudgingly took to the skies once more.

"Right then," Albus said, turning back to Torres. "I've gotta get back to the Academy and tell Zero about the Remnants of Disaster! Just make sure you put together a sellout crowd, okay, old-timer?"

"I'll let some fraction of the story slip to all our sailors—I'll just tell them we're to witness the stunning debut of the Academy of Magic's finest pupils yet!"

3

"Is that everyone?"

The Dragon Conqueror King guided ten or so people into the basket affixed to his dragon's torso, then scanned the now depopulated village square. He had been charged with evacuating the villagers a few at a time as the construction

approached completion. Work on the palisade had finally finished that morning, and the black-clad dragon rider was about to set off with the last remaining residents. This would mark the final step in their preparations for war. Zero and Mercenary, the two Arbiters, and the three apprentice mages—in short, the entirety of the fighting force left in the village—came out to see the villagers off.

“To be perfectly honest, I’d prefer to shove Lily in there, too,” remarked the Mask with irritation, sending a ripple of laughter through the group.

“Give it up, Father. Just let the pipsqueak do her thing and be grateful. She’ll be nothing but an asset on the battlefield.”

“In terms of her ability to manipulate other rodents, perhaps. But Lily could not survive a single arrow. She herself is no hardier than a child.”

“Well, only someone like Mercenary could take an arrow and continue on like it was nothing.”

“And why is that a point of pride for *you*, Zero?”

“Because he is *my* Mercenary, naturally.”

“I ain’t yours and arrows *do* hurt and Kudo’s the really indestructible one here.” After thoroughly raining on Zero’s parade, Mercenary turned to face the apprentices. “This is your last chance. If you want out, hop on board.”

“No. I’m staying,” Saybil replied, as if he’d had his response prepared in anticipation of Mercenary’s words.

“Me too,” Hort added.

Kudo just scoffed. “Little late in the game for that.”

Mercenary smiled wryly. “Yeah, I guess it is, at that. That’s everybody, Dragon Conqueror King. Take ’em up.”

“Wait!” cried a voice from within the basket, stopping the knight in black even as he moved to mount his steed. A moment later a small child appeared, pushing his way through the adults’ legs.

“Whatsa matter, Laios?” asked Mercenary.

“Sayber, c’mere,” the boy called out, more or less ignoring the beastfallen’s question. But Saybil hesitated. He had ventured into the forest with the boy and almost gotten him killed. Laios had believed he’d be safe with the apprentice, but Saybil had failed to live up to that trust, and afterwards promised the boy’s father Uls that he would keep away from his son until he had become a full-fledged mage.

And yet, that selfsame Uls now gave Saybil a troubled nod.

Saybil approached the basket and kneeled down before the boy.

“I wanna stay in the village and fight, too.”

“You can’t, Laios. It’s going to be really dangerous.”

“I know, I’m still just a kid.”

“That’s right.”

“But I’m gonna get real strong, and grow up to be as big as Papa. The reason I can’t play with you is ‘cos you can’t protect me, right? So I figure I’ll just hurry an’ grow up so *I* can protect *you*. I’m goin’ off on a jer-nee now to train and get strong, and that way I can become a grown-up real soon and come back to play with you.”

“That so?” Saybil smiled—ever so naturally. “I’ll be waiting, and looking forward to the day you come home all grown up.”

“Good. Just hang in there ‘til then, okay?” Laios shot out his little fist, and

Saybil bumped his own against it.

Hearthful ushered the boy back into the middle of the basket to make sure he wouldn't fall out. For a moment she and the Tyrant locked eyes, but neither of them said a word; they merely exchanged a glance and shrugged—that was the extent of their relationship, of where they stood with one another.

The dragon flapped its great wings and flew off. Once it was out of sight, a new tension crackled through the air as the remaining combatants prepared themselves for what was to come.

Mercenary scanned their little army. “Most wars're won through preparation: raising troops, erecting fortifications, digging moats, laying in supplies. The enemy has prepared themselves to kill us all—but we've made our preparations so as not to let any of them die.”

They'd laid a number of traps in the forest. Each involved a combination of potions imbued with offensive and healing magic, the former to render the enemy soldiers unable to fight, and the latter to ensure they survived.

Wound, don't kill—that'll slow the enemy down and whittle away at their will to fight. It was a tactic the sellsword Mercenary knew well. The booby traps were intended to grow in severity the further into the forest the enemy infiltrated, each one forcing their troops to wonder, “What other terrors are waiting for us if we continue?”

Let's retreat and regroup—if even half the soldiers had that turn of mind, few of the remaining troops would choose to press on with such dramatically diminished numbers.

And yet...

“One wrong move, and we'll have blood on our hands.”

A sword hung at Mercenary's waist. The Mask had his scythe, and the Tyrant had his enormous hammer in hand. They'd all brought their lethal weapons with the determination to use them.

"You probably got this from our experience with Kady, but the folks marching on us now don't necessarily hate witches or beastfallen deep down. They're all just in the sorriest of situations and needed someone to blame for it—and we were an easy target. The poor saps were goaded into it, that's all."

The evacuees from the village included several burly men who no doubt had what it took to be counted formidable fighters, and others from neighboring settlements had volunteered to join the fight as well. They had all been turned away, however, in favor of keeping the fighting force to an elite few—and with good reason.

"Goin' up against us, these chumps the Church is sendin'll just end up gettin' massacred. So best case scenario, we rout 'em without any bloodshed... But Culdesomn didn't work on Kady, did it?" Mercenary looked to Hort and Kudo, who both quietly shook their heads.

What if the soldiers who break through to the village are all like Kady? The possibility had crossed the minds of everyone who had remained to fight.

"My theory? What the Church is really after is the chance to tell the whole world that mysterious monsters flooded outta the village, slaughtering friend an' foe alike." *The extremists are just dyin' to tell everyone how they rallied together all the downtrodden to destroy the Witch's Village, only for the wicked heretics to greet 'em with Remnants of Disaster, taking countless innocent lives. And once that rumor starts flyin', no one'll dare talk about anything like peace or conciliation with the witches ever again. We can kiss goodbye any hope of a future where magic-users are accepted into society. And anyone who chooses to*

stay in the village an' fight will be vilified in the history books for the rest o' time.

Therein lay the reason they had decided to allow only those directly related to the conflict—witches, mages, and Church Arbiters—to remain behind. It was what motivated the priest to push for Lily's evacuation as well: she was just a plain old beastfallen, and so had no real skin in this game. But Mercenary had stayed. Fighting for Zero was everything to him—and Lily knew this. So she had stayed, too, because standing by the priest for good or ill was everything to *her*.

"I got a question, old man."

"What, Kudo?"

"Say we do send 'em packing... If it turns out they *are* like Kady, won't they all just end up turnin' into monsters somewhere else? And then won't the Church try to make it seem like the soldiers they sent into the Witch's Village all got magicked into monsters an' ran away?"

"An excellent question, my young lizard friend," Zero replied, taking over from Mercenary. "Mooncaller has written me from the Kingdom of Wenias in regard to this. And I quote: 'Leave it to me.'"

"Meaning what, exactly...?"

"I haven't the faintest." Zero smiled gently. "However, Dawn has also gone to her aid. They must have something in mind."

"Fair enough." Kudo shrugged. By nature, he was the cowardly type, but still he had chosen to stay. And that decision was predicated on trusting his brothers-and sisters-in-arms and swallowing whatever came his way—because once he started asking questions, there'd be no end to it. Now they were telling him to have faith in the headmaster of the Academy, and in Los. In which case, "Fair enough," was really all Kudo *could* say.

“Whoaa! I’m, like, shocked! I thought you’d make a way bigger stink about it.”

“Me too. You sounded kind of cool there, Kudo.”

“Shut the hell up, I’m thinkin’ about all this stuff, too, ya know!” With Hort and Saybil giving it to him from all sides, Kudo’s scales turned red and he slammed his tail against the ground in aggravation.

Saybil looked up at the sky. Los hadn’t returned to the village after departing with the Dragon Conqueror King several days prior, instead tasking the knight with delivering a simple message: “There is something I must attend to.” It left him feeling a little forlorn, but at the same time, it bolstered his confidence in the others involved in the plan.

There was plenty more to do, though. The village contingent hadn’t yet readied itself enough to be worthy of *their*—of Los and the headmaster’s—confidence.

“Professor Zero, may I?” Saybil silently offered Zero his left hand.

The witch raised an eyebrow. “Young man, that is—”

“I know you’re reluctant to use my mana, Professor. But honestly, *that’s not my problem*,” he shot back bluntly.

An unhappy look crossed Zero’s face. “...I take your point.”

“I want to prevent any possibility of our plan failing just because you refused my mana for personal reasons and don’t have enough power to cast a spell when we need it most. As long as you’re in top form, you could salvage things even if our strategy went a little off the rails, right?”

“I won’t deny it.”

“Then this is the most logical move. Professor, you have a duty to do

everything in your power to protect our—to protect the future of *all* mages. That’s a burden you’re duty-bound to bear, even if it means destroying my individual future in the process.”

“S-Sayb?!”

Saybil didn’t so much as turn his head at Hort’s flustered cry. He simply continued standing there, holding out his hand to Zero.

Letting out a sigh, the witch took it in hers. “You decide, young man. How much mana you share is up to you. I will accept whatever you offer.”

Saybil gripped Zero’s hand and smiled intrepidly. “Let’s open the floodgates.”

The fact that his smile bore a faint resemblance to his father’s stirred up an indescribable emotion in Zero. “Gently, if you please.”

A rush of magical power surged into Zero’s left hand. It felt as if every vein in her body was in a wild frenzy, her blood boiling within them. The mana seeped into her bone-dry heart, filling it to the brim in the blink of an eye and continuing unabated until it threatened to spill over the edges.

“...It can’t be. Just how much—?!” Zero snatched her hand back, practically slapping Saybil’s away in the process. A thin trickle of blood ran from her nose. The witch regarded Saybil, her face pale. He had given her an unheard-of helping of mana—enough to completely refill her depleted stores. The fact was not lost on Saybil, whose face looked stiff and drawn.

“Do you...feel anything?”

“A little...*lighter*, I guess. So this is what it feels like when your mana diminishes, huh?”

“I...underestimated you... And Thirteen...”

Thirteen had tried to change the world with magic, to create a world for witches, and no doubt he had recognized what an obstacle magic depletion would present. In other words, Saybil had not been conceived for Zero's sake alone—he had been created to serve as an unending wellspring of mana for witches the world over. Saybil's existence alone had the power to transform the state of magic worldwide.

Zero's expression shifted from astonishment to admiration. "I look forward to the day, young man, when you become a sorcerer of great renown. Just as I am Mud-Black, as Albus is Mooncaller, and as Loux Krystas is Dawn... The Abyss Sorcerer—that is what I shall say to any who ask me your name."

It all felt terribly over the top to Saybil, and he just stood there, at a total loss—until Hort and Kudo gave him a simultaneous clap on the back.

"Stand tall, dude! Don't let it freak you out! We don't get to decide if we have ability or not. So if you got it, flaunt it—'s the least you can do for the losers who don't!"

"I-It's just...kind of hard to process it all..."

"Okay, but Professor Zero only said it's what she'd say to anybody who asked her your name, Sayb! That doesn't mean right now; she's talking about after you've done something big enough that people will want to know who you are! Actually, shouldn't we all be thinking of our own names, just like Sayb of the Abyss over here?!"



“Remember, should this war go poorly, you three will all be expelled together.”

The three apprentices turned pale.

And so it was that their preparations for war were finally complete.

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At that same moment, Loux Krystas stood atop a tall tree in a corner of the forest, the Staff of Ludens at her side.

The long, winding train of the anti-witch army snaked along the ground below her.

“Oh hoh. That must be the beastfallen company the good father mentioned, armed to the teeth with witch-hunting weapons. And there—” Loux Krystas fixed her gaze on an individual beastfallen, larger than the rest and with a conspicuous aura. “Is that...a demon-bound? ’Twould seem they did manage to muster more than a motley crew of foot soldiers after all,” she remarked cheerfully, tapping the staff against her shoulder.

“Ahh no, dear Ludens, there is no need to worry. The village is not where we shall play our role.”

This—this was to be Loux Krystas’s moment in the spotlight.

“I hope thou art yet watching, dear friend. I warrant this farce will tickle thy fancy.”

Darkness began to ooze from the globe embedded in the witch's staff.

The stage is set.

All is in readiness for the curtain to go up.

Loux Krystas drew in a deep breath. Then: "Say hello, Ludens."

The witch gave a terribly theatric and reverent bow, seen by no one.



Chapter Six



When the man selected to command this army of utterly untrained civilians learned they would be marching on a village of witches, he knew: *This battle is meant to be lost.*

Witches. Though still only in his mid-thirties, he had belonged to a witch-hunting squad in the Knights of the Church before it was refashioned into the Church and Mage Brigade, so he knew exactly what it meant to go up against them. Only after the Church unfurled the full weight of its divine protection to subdue their powers would a raid have even a glimmer of hope. That was simply the nature of the beast. Too many of his friends had lost their lives to witches. Not a single night passed that the man was not visited by nightmares of his comrades dropping like flies, without so much as catching a glimpse of their destroyer. So when the Church had decided to make peace with the witches, he'd felt deeply betrayed.

After leaving the Church and Mage Brigade, the man had fetched up in the South, where the anti-witch faction was strong. Their proclamations of "Let us strike down these evil witches and become a beacon to those who would resurrect the rightful Church!" struck a chord, and the man enlisted in their ranks. And yet, one look was all it took to see clear as day that these soldiers were being rallied for the slaughter.

The man's job, too, was clear: after these soldiers—ordinary citizens with no fighting capability to speak of, advancing on the foe with only lofty aspirations to drive them forward—were massacred by the witches they sought to destroy,

he was to reframe the story and, as a survivor, spread word of the tragedy to every nation.

This is no battle of weapons. It is a battle of words, meant to usher in a new age.

“Say, Commander, sir. Once we wipe out all the witches here, the world’ll take a turn fer the better, right? An’ even folks like me’ll get some o’ the land those infernal creatures’re hoggin’?”

Each battalion proceeding through the forest was comprised of a thousand soldiers led by a commanding officer, under whom served ten captains, one selected for every hundred troops—but not even those captains could claim the experience of a single battle, much less of fighting witches. They had been chosen solely for their ability to ride a horse.

A promising lot indeed.

The commander gave a noncommittal answer, then turned his mind to contemplating the best moment for his retreat. Turn tail while most of his forces still lived and he would be a laughingstock. To acquit himself admirably in this war and ensure his rightful place among the Knights of the Church, entrusted once more with the protection of the citizens of the world after they had been reminded of the evil of witches, he would have to perfectly calibrate the moment of his withdrawal—that is, the moment those under his command would die.

As the man surveyed the troops marching through the forest, a shriek suddenly erupted from somewhere among the trees. Before he could determine its point of origin, the screams of soldiers and whinnying of horses rang out from every direction.

“Rats!”

The shout, simultaneously idiotic and dreadful, echoed all the way down the line. Then something plopped down from the boughs of a tree onto the man’s shoulder. No sooner did he realize it was a rat as large as a cat than he added his own shrieks to the cacophony. He tried to shake it off but the rodent only chomped down on his finger, so he spurred his horse, desperate to get away. He fled blindly in whatever direction the rats were not. No one had issued any such order; it was simply the only thing to do. And it was only once the violent surge of rodents had completely abated and silence had returned to the forest that he realized he’d been had.

“...A trap.” Taking a deep breath, the man roared, “Retreat! We’ve walked into a witch’s trap!”

Turning his steed around, he felt the horse step on something. The thought had barely registered when he felt a gust of wind, and the next thing the man knew, both his arms had been lopped off, plopping to the ground like broken branches. *Fwump, fump* came the chorus of untold such “branches” landing amid the mulch of the forest floor, followed by the reek of gushing blood. As bloodcurdling shrieks rose from every direction, the man’s horse reared and he fell to the ground.

Bereft of both arms, the man struggled to scan the area in an attempt to get a grasp of the situation. Of the thousand soldiers under his command, roughly half had lost at least one of their limbs, and the remaining half were either rushing to calm their sobbing comrades or standing frozen to the spot, stupefied by the tragedy that had played out so suddenly before their eyes.

That’s when it finally hit him: *There will be no retreat.* Untrained soldier or former Knight of the Church, it made no difference. To the witches, they were

all equally powerless, like wooden dolls. *When death comes for my forces, I will die as well.*

Even in the depths of despair, the man still noticed it had begun to rain. Beyond the canopy of trees, the sky was blue and clear, without a cloud in sight. *Then what is...?* He looked up at the sky, and when he lowered his gaze again, he found that his severed arms were once more where they were supposed to be. *It can't be!* he thought, but opening and closing his fists experimentally, he found they responded as normal.

Looking around, he saw that all the soldiers who had lost limbs now looked as if they had just awakened intact from a nightmare. But this was no dream. Countless severed arms and legs lay where they had fallen, and his entire body was drenched in blood. Their limbs *had* been chopped off, only for new ones to grow in their place. It seemed like an evil joke, but that was the only explanation that presented itself.

“Oi, look! The trees...!”

A murmur shivered through the soldiers. The man turned toward the nearest tree trunk.

Boo! Did we scare you?

Though only a moment before there had been nothing there, the message was now emblazoned on every tree in sight. The man did not stop to wonder how or when this could have happened. A war with witches was essentially a war of traps.

They must've laid these ahead of time. But what did they mean...?

“Did you hear that? Sounded like a scream!”

An ear-splitting shriek pierced the air, shaking the commanding officer out of his deliberations as to whether to proceed or retreat. “Our comrades are in danger!” he shouted. “To the rescue!”

The man hopped on his horse and raced through the woods, leaving most of the recruited rabble behind. There were ten battalions, each with a thousand soldiers, and each picking its own path through the forest. They had all been wary of traps, but evidently his wasn’t the only to fall foul of them anyway.

I need to see for myself.

What met his eyes was literal hell on earth: a thousand men engulfed in flames, screaming and writhing, the air itself hot enough to burn their lungs to a crisp. Man and horse pulled back as one from the horrifying tableau, but the next moment the fire vanished, leaving in its wake only naked men no worse for wear save for the fact that their arms and armor had been completely burned away.

I know this magic. I’ve heard rumors of a spell that burns only the targets indicated by the caster. These traps, then, must have been set to wear down our army’s fighting capability.

The man was gobsmacked: just as it had been with his own men, who had lost limbs only to see them regrow, not a single soldier whose armaments had been incinerated bore even the slightest sign of injury.

“...This is a lost cause,” someone muttered.

These were only the first traps, and the further they ventured into the forest, the more ferocious they promised to become. Even assuming they could make it through everything else that lay in store, by the time the army reached its

target, it was sure to be well under half its original size—and this diminished force would then have to fight the witches who had set the traps in the first place.

The witches could've already killed us all if they'd wanted to. This realization was more than sufficient to sweep away any remaining will to fight. If we continue on, I'm as good as dead. Is this fight really worth it? And which side really cares about these soldiers? The anti-witch faction who sent them to their deaths, or the witches who seem to be vouchsafing their survival so long as they retreat?

Turning his horse around, the commander returned to his men, many of whom still stood petrified amid the thick, putrid stench of blood.

“Fall back.”

Many brightened at the order, but some hesitant voices raised concerns. “If we just go runnin’ away, won’t we get punished? Executed, even?”

“In a normal war, yes. But this is no such fight. I, for one, will retreat. You all do as you see fit.”

The figure who had given the man his commission had been shrouded in mystery. He didn’t even know if it was a man or woman. What right did someone who could not even reveal their name or face in their revolt against the current regime have to punish these soldiers who marched openly to battle? Confronted with the staggering strength of his supposed enemy, the man’s heart was filled with an indescribably pitiful feeling.

“C-Commander! In front of you!” one of the captains called out from behind to the man, whose downcast eyes were glued to his horse’s mane as he contemplated his retreat.

When he looked up, he found a massive figure standing directly in front of him, so tall that despite the fact the man was on horseback, he had to crane his neck.

A beastfallen—! How did it get this close? Only then did his horse rear in fright, as if it, too, had only just noticed the beastfallen's presence.

"Retreating?" asked the colossus, two curved horns protruding from its head. *Must be a bull beastfallen—but still, it's enormous.* The ten or so other beastfallen gathered behind looked like children in comparison.

The man began to quake. "I-I..."

Wordlessly slipping past the faltering man, the exceptionally large beastfallen snatched up one of the countless severed limbs from the ground, opened his mouth wide, and chomped down. Following his example, the other beastfallen picked up arms and legs that had only moments earlier been part of someone's body, chewed them up and gulped them down, then pushed on deeper into the woods.

"Never expected anything from you anyway. Witch hunting's *our* wheelhouse." The beastfallen bringing up the rear clapped the man jovially on the shoulder and smiled, revealing a mouth stained red with human blood.

For ages, beastfallen had been regularly employed in witch hunts. Ever since the peace accord between the witches and the Church, however, countless such beastfallen had lost their *raison d'être*. Sellswords are forever seeking out the next battle; without war, they have no livelihood. The quicker this peace collapsed, the better for them. Around a hundred of these war-starved mercenaries had joined this deployment. And one of them was, well...

"Think they'll make it to the village...?" one of the captains wondered aloud,

as if it had nothing at all to do with him.

The commander lightly shook his head. “They might as well have been *born* on the battlefield. They’ll stop at nothing to find their way back to it, no matter the cost.”

2

“Now then, let us review where we stand.” Back in the tavern, Zero unrolled a map of the forest and slid a bull-shaped figurine from the edge to the outskirts of the village. “The rats succeeded spectacularly at driving the enemy into the traps our apprentices and the Tyrant had set, scattering all ten thousand soldiers and sending them running back whence they came. We have done an impeccable job of defending the village, and have won the war—or so I should like to say, but there remains one group that was unfazed by the rodents and has cunningly slipped through our every trap.”

“That’d be the company of beastfallen mercenaries. We’re just gonna have to kill those bastards dead. They ain’t nothin’ like those poor deluded farm boys—they’re professionals, warriors to the bone.” Mercenary stroked his fluffy chin, then flicked the bull over with a claw.

Hort cocked her head. “But I thought beastfallen didn’t work in groups? Like, aren’t they too territorial to feel comfortable around others of their kind? So how did the Church manage to put together a whole unit of them?”

“It ain’t all that uncommon for us to band together temporarily for a job, and it’s easier when there’s a clear hierarchy of power.”

“Huhhh. So really not much different from regular people, huh?”

“Except we basically never connect with our peers. If a hundred beastfallen have teamed up, it’s ’cos there’s a big guy at the top who could take ’em all on at once. But once that head honcho’s dead, the group falls apart.”

“But Mercenary, you get on with Lily and Kudo, and even Mr. Pooch, right? I mean, I’m more or less a beastfallen, too...”

Hort’s antlers had recently sprouted quite a bit. “I’ve never let them get this long,” she’d say, bumping into things left and right, but Saybil had insisted, “They’re so cool. You should *definitely* let them keep growing,” so she had decided to let them do as they pleased.

Mercenary shot her a glance. “That’s ’cos I’m strong as hell,” he declared coolly.

“Huhhh. Then we should be good, even when those beastfallen mercenaries get here! We’ve got this war in the bag, and we didn’t even have to fight anybody!”

“Yeah. We’ve got Professor Zero, and you’re real strong, Hort, and Kudo’s here in case anyone gets hurt. And as long as I’m around, no one’ll have to worry about running out of mana...”

“Sounds swell, but I’m not gettin’ a *we can’t lose* vibe here,” said Kudo, scanning the faces of the adults in the room—and finding them all wearing the same scowl.

“I have Lily’s mice scouting the forest, but...it appears the company of beastfallen is more than a hundred strong,” said the priest. “Which means that, as Mercenary just suggested, they have one at their head powerful enough to command them all.”

Saybil looked to Mercenary. “Does that mean someone...stronger than you?”

“Tough to say. But they ain’t your run-of-the-mill beastfallen, that’s for sure. Considering they waltzed right past all the traps you laid—”

“In all likelihood, the leader is a demon-bound.” Zero’s words sent a shiver of tension through the room.

“Demon-bound,” Saybil repeated.

Zero glowered at the bull figurine lying on the map. “Demon-bound are beastfallen who can cast a number of spells without an incantation, and without the limitations of mana. They are more than the ordinary witch can handle. Mercenary and I shall face this particular foe.”

“Leaving the remaining ninety-nine to us?” the priest asked, sounding anything but thrilled at the prospect.

Mercenary smirked. “Whaat? You scaaaared? Then maybe you shoulda evacuated with the rest o’ the villagers. Poor, fragile little priesty.”

“Oh, absolutely. I only remained out of concern for the safety of my dear friends,” the priest replied in an icy tone completely at odds with his words.

“It was just a little joke,” Mercenary mumbled defensively.

“Don’t worry!” Hort cried. “I’ll protect you, Father!”

“How terribly comforting,” the priest replied, his voice as cold ever. Just then, however, his face turned grim.

A second later, Mercenary’s fur stood on end, and he drew his sword. “Father, that voice!”

“Lily—the fool!”

The priest practically flew out of the tavern, scythe in hand, with Mercenary hot on his heels. The three puzzled apprentices watched them go, then turned

blankly to Zero.

“Umm... Did you hear anything?” asked Hort.

“No, I didn’t...” Saybil responded.

“Something happen to Lily?”

“Those two have very good hearing.”

“Did you hear it, too, Professor Zero?”

“No. But based on their conversation...” Zero stroked her shapely chin, then strolled out after Mercenary and the priest. “It would seem our mouse has been caught hiding in the woods. The signal fires are lit—battle is joined. Steel yourselves.”

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Lily trembled all over. She’d been so confident in her ability to spy on the enemy’s movements without being discovered, but instead, she was detected all too easily, captured on the spot and shoved into a sack before she could even think about running.

“You were right, Boss! There it was, up in the trees. We took it alive like you said, but—”

“Bring it along.”

“And then what?”

“They watch us eat it. More fun than killing it here.”

“Good thinkin’! Hey, you hear that, little mouse? Somethin’ to look forward

to.” As they poked at her, Lily cradled her head and curled up into a ball inside the sack.

Lily got caught. She’d been calling to the rodents, trying to find a way out of this mess on her own, but they had practically no hope of success against this hundred-strong band of beastfallen. *Lily needs to escape or it’ll be trouble for her friends.* Wanting to help, to protect the priest, Lily had refused his orders and stayed in the village. And this was what she had to show for it? *What if something bad happens to Father because Lily got caught?* The very thought made Lily want to scream. *Maybe it’s best if Lily just dies right now.*

“That mouse.” It was the one they’d called Boss, his voice intruding on her hopeless thoughts. “Better bait than I thought.”

“Huh?”

For a moment, Lily felt like she was floating. “Eep!” she squeaked, sounding every inch the mouse. The next second she felt a heavy blow to her back and realized she’d been thrown to the ground. As she struggled to free herself from the sack’s tightly cinched mouth, some sort of tepid liquid began to soak into it. She had only to smell it to recognize what it was: the blood of the beastfallen who’d shoved her inside. Sensing innumerable lumps of flesh on the other side of the fabric, Lily began thrashing around in earnest.

He’s here. He came for Lily.

The priest had come to rescue Lily from the band of beastfallen. *Need to get out of this bag, need to tell him, “Lily’s okay now!”* Because she knew he’d risk his life for her, even though she wasn’t important to him.

“There’s someone there! Up in the trees—GAAAH!”

Lily tore through the fabric with her teeth and somehow managed to crawl

out of the sack. Just as she'd expected, the ground around her was littered with clumps of shredded beastfallen, their blood mixing with the mud to form a sludgy mess. She tried to scamper away—but someone picked her up off the ground before she could.

“Ouw...! No! Let go...!” Flailing her little arms and legs, Lily twisted around to get a look at the giant who had her in his clutches: two curved horns pointing toward the sky, a body covered in black hair, uncannily bulging muscles—it was a bull beastfallen. Or so it seemed, but the pupils in its crimson eyes were narrow, almost feline slits. *This is the one they called “Boss.”*

As soon as their eyes met, Lily stopped struggling. One look and she knew instinctively that nothing she could do would make the slightest difference. That's how strong he was. That's how terrifying he was. Lily gulped, and the beastfallen smirked.

“Which?”

“...Huh?”

“Let you live, or kill you—which'll wind 'em up more? Which'll be more fun?”

“K-Kill me!” Lily screamed without hesitation.

“Hnh. Okay then—” *guess I'll kill you*, the bull began to say, but his words were cut short by a sudden shockwave running through his body.

Lily smelled burning flesh as her body was flung through the air once more. She felt herself be caught, only to be tossed upwards again the very next instant, landing atop a tangle of overgrown branches. Lily blinked, then hurriedly peered down to see what was happening on the forest floor. There stood a lean man with hair the color of jade, wielding an enormous scythe.

“Father!”

“Speak no more.” The priest had not removed his blindfold, nor did he so much as glance in Lily’s direction. Even so, she could sense the excruciating fury emanating from his slender frame. Lily had insisted the bull beastfallen kill her because killing her would be to her friends’ advantage, and it had driven the priest mad with rage.

“...Not growing back. That weapon—what’d you do to it?” The stench of burning flesh rose from the smooth surface where the monster’s severed arm had been.

“A witch’s curse and the Church’s consecration. Not particularly threatening to the average beastfallen, perhaps, but it should have a sharper bite for the demon-bound.”

“Hmm. Hurts.” Tilting his head at the pain eating its way up through his arm, the bull grabbed the last remaining stub of his limb and ripped it off, shoulder and all. Then, before their very eyes, a new arm began to regrow from the gaping wound.

“Most beastfallen here are ‘average.’ Can that thing cut off their arms, too?”

“Who can say? I’ll have to try it to find out.”

“Father! His arm, it came back!”

“I don’t need my sight to tell me that much,” the priest snapped. “Now be silent or you’re dead.”

Lily drooped dejectedly atop her perch.

“Also—” A spray of fresh blood splattered onto the priest’s cheek before he could say more. He frowned with displeasure as Mercenary, drenched in his enemies’ blood, trudged up beside him. “—we have a demon-bound among our ranks as well,” the priest finished almost as an afterthought, wiping the blood

from his face and hair with obvious disgust.

“Heya,” Mercenary called out with a quick wave. A trail of silent beastfallen carcasses stretched in his wake.

“...Aha. Getting interesting.” The demonic bull grinned. He casually lifted a finger, at which the scattered flesh of Mercenary’s foes gathered together, assembling into forms that resembled the original creatures, though they had not actually come back to life. One by one, these puppets of dead flesh got to their feet and picked up their weapons, stooping under their weight.

Mercenary scanned the ghastly crowd. “Huh,” he grunted. “Guess that’s a demon-bound for ya. Only the ones *you* dismembered are stayin’ dead, Father.”

“Seems we should’ve had your sword consecrated as well.”

“I’ll look into it. You take those, and I’ll take care’a this one. Let’s get this over with.”

“Lily.” At the priest’s voice, the mouse beastfallen flinched. “Watch closely. I am admittedly not the most powerful fighter, but I cannot tolerate being taken so lightly.”

Clutching a branch, Lily looked down as Mercenary faced off against the demon-bound, back to back with the priest as he prepared to take on the rest of the beastfallen. Those that yet lived stood frozen to the spot, however, overwhelmed by this eerie turn of events. A split second later, the priest and Mercenary brandished their weapons and attacked.

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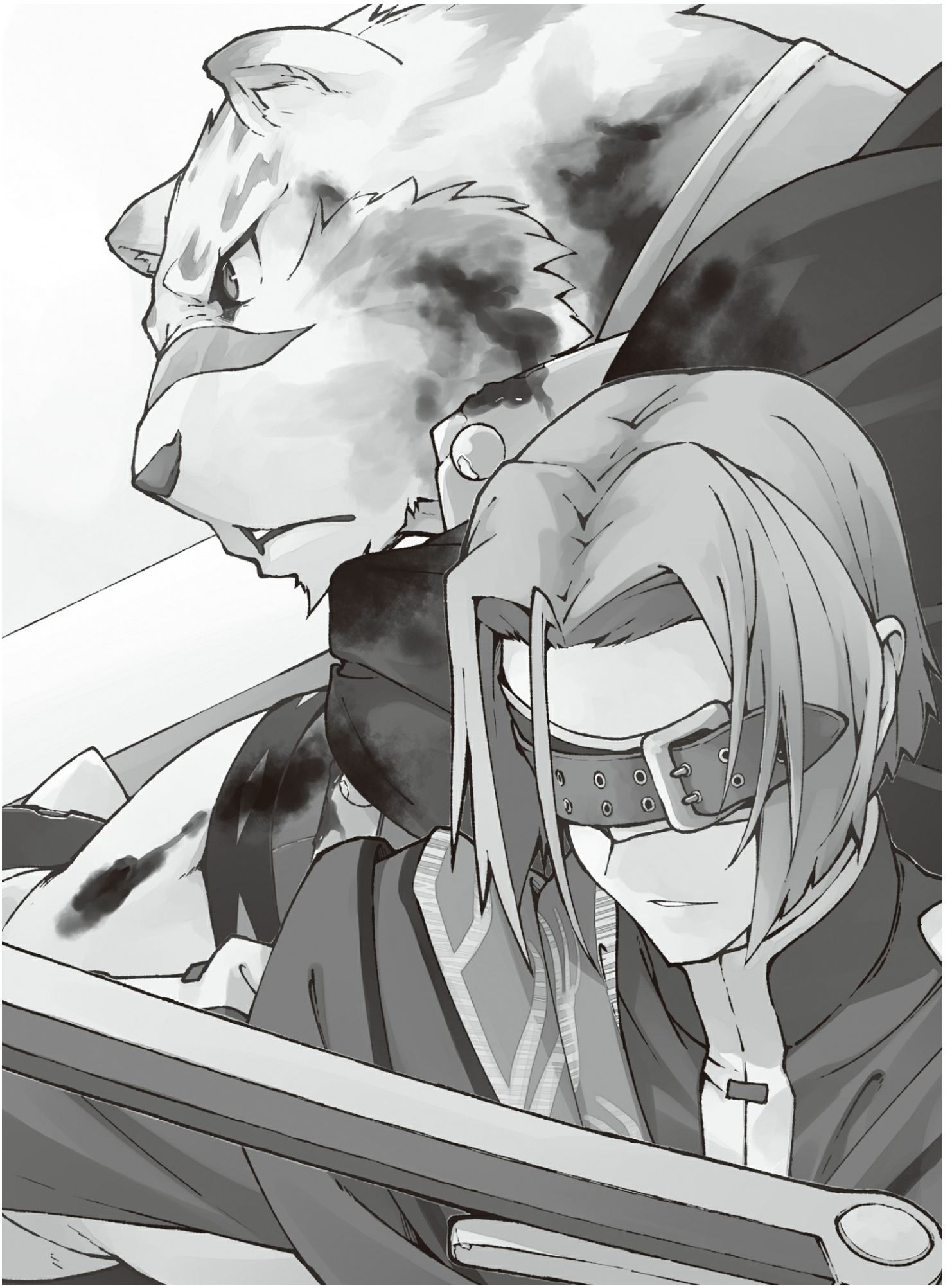
“Filthy monster”—that’s what I’ve been called all my life. Me an’ most other beastfallen, one of the invaders thought. In the face o’ that abuse, I leveraged my brute strength and spent my life on the battlefield, killin’ to get by. But today, for the first time, I had that thought about someone else: “Monster.”

I thought it about the blind clergyman shreddin’ powerful beastfallen with his strings and his scythe, and I thought it about the beastfallen warrior slicin’ clean through two torsos with a single swing of his massive sword. Even worse than them, though, was the demon-bound—puttin’ dead, dismembered beastfallen back together an’ movin’ ’em around like puppets.

The carnage was enough to make even this hardened beastfallen sellsword, who’d spent so many long years on the battlefield, question whether it was all a nightmare. So he fled—or rather, advanced.

They clearly sent out their trump cards, which means the village must be relatively undefended. I’ve taken down witches before—killed mages, too. I’m better off pushin’ on to deal with them, ’stead o’ hangin’ round here with these monsters, thought the warrior—poor fool.

A little over fifty beastfallen soldiers slipped through the front lines with him and barreled toward the village. The moment they stepped out of the trees, however, the earth beneath them suddenly gave way, swallowing them whole and burying them under sediment and debris. Before he could even process what had happened, the beastfallen heard a hearty guffaw from above.



“Aaahahaha! Man, you guys really fell for it, didn’t ya. Hook, line, an’ sinker! C’mon, a pitfall like that’s kid stuff! Somethin’ scary send you runnin’? Won’t be much use in battle if ya can’t even watch where yer goin’!”

Brushing the dirt off himself, the beastfallen looked up to see a man with an enormous hammer standing on the parapet of the wall that encircled the village. He was clothed in the vestments of the Church—an Arbiter of Dea Ignis.

“You son of a bitch... I know that hammer! Aren’t you the Tyrant?! You’re suppose’ta be on our side!! Traitor!!”

“I ain’t nothin’ but a tool. Tools can’t betray shit.”

“Yeah, right... I bet you think yer all safe up there behind that flimsy little wall, but we’re gonna take you *and* those dirty witches dow—”

But before the ranting beastfallen could finish, an arrow of light whistled through the air and drove straight into his shoulder. Screaming in agony, the wounded sellsword saw three young people standing behind the Tyrant.

They’re just a buncha kids.

But when he saw them moving in tandem as if pulling back the strings of invisible bows, every hair on his body instinctually stood on end. These weren’t lambs to the slaughter, no. They were to be feared—

“Sayb, did you mean to hit that guy with your Steim?”

“Oh, uh huh. Looked like he might jump out, so I just kinda let it rip.”

“Awesome! All that practice is really paying off! Your force and aim were totally on point!”

“Shut up and focus! They’re all professional warriors, ’member?! Let your guard down and you’re dead meat!”

“I-I *know* that...! Prepare the next volley!”

“Take those three down first!” someone yelled, at which several agile-bodied beastfallen leapt onto the palisade and began to clamber over the top. But the Tyrant sent them crashing back down to earth with a lazy swing of his massive hammer as he leapt down off the parapet. He was just one lousy human being. A coordinated rush of a few dozen beastfallen should have been able to overwhelm him easily, but every time they so much as took a step forward, arrows of light rained down on them from above.

“Spread out! They’re just four people, they can’t take us all at once!”

“...I wonder.”

A quiet, calm, icy female voice crept forward to caress the beastfallen’s eardrums. One glance and he knew: that woman with long silver locks standing directly behind the three mages was a witch.

The witch whispered something to the youngsters, who nodded in unison and drew back their invisible bows once more—but this time, the bolts of light that could rend plate armor, pierce flesh, and shatter bone manifested not only in the mages’ hands, but as a hail of missiles sufficient to blot out the sun.

“At a glance, I’d put the antlered one at about thirty, the lizard at ten, and five for the young man.” The silver-haired woman chuckled, then lightly raised a hand. “What matters, however, is not the quantity produced, but the number that strike home. Aim well, students.”

She’s teaching them. Out here on the battlefield, in this life-or-death situation, she’s givin’ ’em a lesson—calm as anything.

“Fall back! Into the woods! Take cover in the trees!”

The several dozen furious beastfallen who had spread out around the

palisade, each looking for their opportunity to tear the mages to shreds, turned and made a mad dash for the forest.

Behind them—

“Zahard Loph’d! Fly swift, fly true! Chapter of Hunting, Verse Two—Steim. Heed my call!”

“Heed my call!”

“Heed my call!”

—a resounding incantation seemed to herald the advent of death itself, and the arrows of light rained down from the heavens.

Most of the fusillade ended up cleaving through tree trunks, pulverizing them and sending up clouds of dust. Not a single cry was to be heard from the beastfallen.

“Whaaat?! They, like, all missed!”

“Got dodged, you mean! Those assholes used the trees as shields!”

“There’s a kind of tactile aspect to spells, huh...” Saybil mused. *“You can actually feel whether the arrow hit or not...”*

“Our foes are veteran warriors. They will not offer you their necks so easily. Now, here comes the next wave. So? What will you do?”

No sooner did they realize the downpour of magical arrows had petered out than several beastfallen leapt forth from the rising clouds of dust. Judging that his comrades’ counterattack would not be ready in time, the Tyrant took a small vial hanging from his belt and chucked it behind the rushing warriors. The instant the vial shattered and spilled its liquid contents on the ground, countless

vines shot forth, snaking around the beastfallen and dragging them down to the dirt.

“What the—plants?!”

“‘S called a ‘magic potion.’ Ha hah! Now ain’t that a hoot. Guess I’m a mage now, too!” The Tyrant laughed heartily as he slammed his hammer into the soldiers who hadn’t learned their lesson and were trying to rush past him, sending them flying back towards the forest. One of the beastfallen warriors, however, jumped right over the former Arbiter in a single great bound and landed atop the wall. “Shit! Heads up! One of ‘em’s comin’ yer way!”

Saybil stepped forward.

“Sayb!”

“It’s all right. I’ve got this.” Saybil reached out and touched the beastfallen’s shoulder as he brandished his blade above his head. Blood gushed as the sellsword’s skin and muscles fell away, bare bones tumbling to the ground.

“GaAaAaaaH!” Wailing in the face of this sudden horror, the beastfallen staggered and fell from the parapet. Several others who’d crouched in preparation to leap up the wall after him hesitated at the sight.

“What the hell did he do...?!”

“He just touched him! Think it’s poison?!”

Saybil studied his hands, then cocked his head a little when he saw Hort, Kudo, and Zero staring at him in surprise. “I just sent a current of magic power through my hands. When I tried it on a branch, it withered away from the overdose of mana, so I figured it’d probably work on living beings, too.”

The apprentice mage picked up the beastfallen’s sword, holding it by both ends; the length of blade between his hands grew dull and black, the metal

corroding before their eyes.

“That’s amazing, Sayb! You just invented a whole new way to take people down without killing them!”

“Don’t you dare touch me, dude! Never again!”

“Wow, you really are polar opposites.”

“Okay, okay, my turn! Time for my best trick!” Hort glanced at the beastfallen slinking back toward the trees, then snapped her fingers. Flames sprang to life all across the field, engulfing every foe in her sight and burning off *only their fur*. “Tada! How d’you like my no incantation, super-ultra-precisely targeted—”

“Gyaaaah!”

“—fail.” Evidently, the flames had burned more than the fur of a few of her targets. As she listened to their screams, Hort’s shoulders drooped.

“Guess I gotta bail you out,” Kudo sighed, then hopped down off the palisade. He went around to all the beastfallen who lay face down on the ground, their flesh sloughed off by the searing flames, and wordlessly touched them with a fingertip. That alone was enough to regenerate their burnt skin, and the resuscitated warriors began to get groggily to their feet. “Think you’re so special... But I can cast Chordia without the incantation, too.” Kudo’s voice sounded calm, but the vibrant blue of his scales gave off an air of subtle braggadocio.

Both Hort and Kudo had spent days repeating the same incantations over and over for the magic potion traps, beating the feel of the spells into their very bones in the process. Kudo turned his back, exposing himself completely to his ferocious foes, and strolled over to stand beside the Tyrant. Atop the parapet stood Hort and Saybil—and behind them, Zero.

“So?” Zero asked once more. “What will you do?”

The question was not directed at her students this time, however—she had posed it to the array of hired warriors with *Defeat* scrawled across their faces.

+ + +

Ultimately, not a single beastfallen managed to maintain a foothold around the village. As the host of sellswords fled, however, they crossed paths with two figures going the opposite way—that is, barreling *toward* the village: a huge feline beastfallen, his white coat splattered with the blood of his foes, and a hulking bull beastfallen far more massive even than the other. Exchanging barrage after barrage of vicious blows as they ran, the two at length plowed straight into the palisade, smashing through the sturdy-seeming structure like a wall of toothpicks and tumbling into the environs of the village itself.

“What was that?! What is that, what happened?!” The sudden impact leaving her no time to revel in their victory, Hort screamed and clung to Saybil.

“Old man?!” shouted Kudo.

“Who you callin’ an old man?! I’ll wring your neck!” Mercenary roared back like clockwork. Then, amid the billowing cloud of dust, he plunged his sword straight into the enraged demon-bound’s neck before yelling up to the parapet once more. “Aaargh, I’ve had it! I can’t kill this bastard, no matter how many times I try! Sorry, Witch! Mind lendin’ me a hand?”

“Leave it to me. I may not look it, but destroying demons is my specialty,” Zero responded, then closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she glanced at her three pupils with a wicked grin. “Watch closely,

students. I'm about to set a bad example for you... Mercenary! Outside the barricade, on my signal! The gloves are coming off."

"Wait—you're not pullin' *that* one out, are ya?!"

"Indeed I am, for the first time in a long while. *Arдох Gehldoh in de cor Deia Zeia!*" The witch began to weave her spell without a moment's delay. It was an incantation the apprentices had never heard before. They exchanged glances and, curious what Zero meant by a "bad example," listened attentively to her every word. The incantation alone was enough to make an unpleasant sweat burst from their every pore, and a sense of foreboding far more sinister than anything the spells in their textbooks had ever inspired seemed to emanate from every individual strand of Zero's silver hair. Instinctively, the three huddled close.

"In the name of the King of Despair Who Leered from the Crossroads of Desire and Longing, come forth from the mud-black abyss, O Gate of Decay! O Servants of Strife, bound by contract of blood and flesh, descend on this fool's wild banquet, and feast!"

Suddenly, it was as if night had fallen. Though still shining in the sky, the sun lost its light, and the students could feel *something* crawling out of the lengthening shadows of the darkness all about them.

"Fall back, Mercenary!"

Mercenary yanked his sword out of the demon-bound's neck and took a great leap back through the hole they'd just created in the palisade, then covered his head with his arms like one preparing for an impending storm. That's when he

noticed the Tyrant standing there idly, and tackled the man to the ground.

“Oi! What the hell’re ya doin’...?!”

“The witch’s about to cast a forbidden curse! Close your mouth! An’ cover your eyes and ears!”

The Tyrant did as Mercenary said, just as Zero finished her incantation.

“Forbidden Chapter, Final Page! Segtor Medis, the Black Void! Heed me now, for I am Zero!”

Out of the darkness gushed a mass of hatred and malice, as if countless human beings had melted together and coalesced into one. The rank stench of blood and rotten flesh permeated the air as the bloated swarm of souls, determined to find a new companion to join them in their eternity of unending anguish, rushed toward the demon-bound and began to devour him. After the tempestuous herd of wraiths had passed on, scattered fragments of bone were all that remained of the mighty beastfallen.

“Was that...magic...? C-Can...magic, like, even do that? I mean, that was—”

“A wayward magic-user of great prowess could easily lay waste to the entire world,” Zero cut in, then smiled. “So don’t any of you go astray. I fear it would take quite a bit of work to subdue you.”

The Church and Mage Brigade wasted no time in surrounding the entire forest

as soon as the massed force of Church extremists disappeared into the trees on their march to the Witch's Village. And yet, what with the band strumming its cheerful tunes, the chefs lining up their tents to dish out hot meals, and the Medical Mage Corps on standby to receive the wounded, the encirclement had none of the gravity of war; it had instead the jubilant spirit of a festival suddenly manifesting out of a daydream.

"Brilliant, brilliant! Though the prospect of experiencing war a second time, let alone a third, does not appeal, I would welcome festivities such as this every year!"

"Hmm... It cost a pretty penny, so I don't know about *every* year... Though if the extremist faction makes attacking Zero's village an annual thing, we'll do what we have to..."

Standing next to the towering prime minister as he threw out his chest and laughed contentedly, Albus felt a little perturbed at the scale of the encampment she herself had assembled. She'd leveraged everything in her power: connections, money, military might—and it wasn't as if she hadn't estimated the kind of production she could muster if she went all out; in fact, this was right along the lines of what she'd imagined. Still, witnessing the tremendous power she could wield did make her cringe just a little.

"Has our little 'exercise' been graced with the presence of all the illustrious leaders of the seven cathedrals?"

"Yep, they're here."

"Any of particular...interest?" Torres asked.

"Yes. All we need to do now is present our irrefutable circumstantial evidence before the largest possible audience."

Albus smirked conspiratorially. She had no intention of crossing swords with the Church's ten thousand soldiers. Instead, she planned to welcome the retreating troops who had tried to lay siege to Zero's village with a smile and a "Good job out there," offering them music, food, and medical treatment in a bid to dampen the anti-witch sentiment spreading across the whole of the Great Continent.

And if we can publicly unmask the mastermind behind this whole ploy at the same time, so much the better.

It hadn't taken much to pinpoint the ringleader. All Albus had needed to do was ask the witch with the sight of a thousand eyes, pride of the kingdom of Wenias, to scry "the highest-ranking individual directing the attack on Zero's village," and the farsight revealed the person's face just like that. From there, matching that face to a name could in theory have required a fair bit of effort, but that too became the work of a moment when the individual happened to be well known—never mind when it was *one of the Bishops of the Seven Great Cathedrals*.

All seven had gathered for the occasion: from the South had come the bishops of Loutra, Dolphem, Cirossa, and Ydeämore, and from the North, the bishops of Agta, Sanguis, and Knox. The Northern bishops had fled to Wenias in the face of the Disasters of the North, however, and all three now resided at the newly-built Wenias Cathedral, so it was really only the dignitaries from the Southern dioceses who could be said to have responded to the convocation.

The three bishops of Wenias Cathedral acted as the conciliation commission regulating peace between the witches and the Church, and all had earned Albus's trust. The Northern bishops knew the dreadful nature of demons, as well as the terrifying power of witches, and recognized that the age of

maintaining the equilibrium of peace through opposition to witches as humanity's shared enemy was over.

But what of the four Southern bishops?

"To be frank, I, Torres, have recently begun to question whether my discerning eye is quite as sharp as it once was. If you have no objection, might I hazard a guess as to the object of your suspicions?"

"Be my guest."

Torres bent his tall frame to whisper in Albus's ear, prompting her bodyguard Holdem to make a nuisance of himself—"Don't you think you're a little close there? Come on now, take a step back"—but both Torres and the Mooncaller Witch chose to ignore him.

"Bingo!" Albus gushed when she heard the name on Torres's lips.

"So it *was* His Excellency Ydeämore!" Torres broke into a satisfied grin.

Ydeämore was the southernmost cathedral on the Great Continent. All bishops relinquished their own names upon accepting their positions, and "His Excellency Ydeämore" simply referred to the bishop appointed there.

"Well, well! For many generations the bishops of Ydeämore have had a strong tendency to take on something like the mantle of 'ruler of the South,' after all! The current bishop isn't yet out of his forties, and quite the ambitious fellow to boot. I imagine he can hardly stomach this peace, in which the Church shares its interests, power, and control with the witches."

"I thought only upstanding people became bishops."

"No unmitigatedly upstanding person becomes a politician. Even I am wont to deceive my political enemies—as are you, naturally."

Albus was, in fact, smack dab in the middle of such a machination at that very moment. The headmaster looked toward the forest. *Those Remnants of Disaster infesting the young boy who attacked Zero's village—Loux Krystas says none of the bishops worthy of our trust had ever seen their like.* Albus had double checked with General Eudrite, who was deeply knowledgeable about the history of the Church, and he confirmed that information regarding the creatures had not reached the Church's inner circles.

Somehow, we've got to find a way to neutralize those things...

Looking at the forest, Albus furrowed her brows. "Something's coming," she murmured.

Torres followed her gaze. "Aren't those just the trees' shadows?"

"The sun is behind us. *The shadows can't be falling towards us.*"

Even as Albus spoke, it seemed as if the shadows were stretching out from the forest towards them. One by one, the others around them began to notice this bizarre phenomenon, and a ripple of consternation passed through the crowd.

Albus took a deep breath, then yelled, "Remnants of Disaster! Everyone on your guard! Those insect things eat people!"

Torres added his own booming voice to hers, his shout carrying as it always did. "Secure the bishops!"

The Church and Mage Brigade elite stepped in front of the seven bishops, readying sword and shield as they awaited the multitude of tiny monsters rushing out of the forest. Once they saw the swarm cover the ground completely in a sea of black, however, they quickly realized their armaments would avail them nothing.

“Mage Commander Amnir!”

“Mage Battalion, to the fore!” The battle mages, clad in matching uniforms, sprang into action at the command—though they responded so quickly, it seemed they had already determined the necessary course of action before hearing Albus’s cry for aid.

The Church and Mage Brigade was split into two divisions: the knights under the Dragon Conqueror King’s command, and the mages under Amnir’s. The knights mostly undertook missions that affected everyday life in one way or another—keeping the peace in towns and cities, say, or vanquishing bandits or marauding beasts. On the other hand, the dynamic might and influence of the mage division meant they were mobilized in response to things like war and natural disasters.

The woman leading this division was the strongest mage in all of Wenias, her proficiency with the Chapter of Hunting surpassing even Albus’s: Mage Commander Amnir, the Demon Princess of Black Dragon Isle. She was still in her mid-twenties, strands of her long flaxen hair styled up in braids after the aristocratic fashion, and her plate armor and corset were specially made to follow the cut of her dress, hugging the contours of her body. In the depths of her blazing ruddy-brown eyes, the right fixed with a monocle, danced a biting severity and sangfroid, her gaze promising to inflict a wound that would never heal upon any who dared to address her without good reason.

“Your Highness, I assume you’ve already noticed, but aren’t those...?” The horse beastfallen upon whom Amnir rode trailed off. In contrast to Amnir’s crisp demeanor, this voice was so warm and gentle that it bordered on the soporific. But one look at the body from which it had come would cause anyone

to doubt the evidence of their own eyes: where by all rights there should have been a horse's head, there was instead a human form. Though the beastfallen's lower body was unmistakably equine, his upper body was very much that of a beautiful young man, lithe arms extending from his strong shoulders. This was Raul, Amnir's beloved steed of many years.

Amnir generally refused to ride Raul out of principle; only during dangerous battles would she entrust her carriage to him. Faster than any horse and renowned for his skill with the javelin, Raul had a decisive eye for conditions on the battlefield. There could be no better seat from which to command one's forces.

"We need not concern ourselves with superfluous details, Raul. Our role is but to eliminate the approaching threat."

"True enough." Raul gave a wry smile, then lowered the visor of his helm.

Raising her resplendent dagger to the skies, Amnir cried out in a voice loud and clear, "First company, commence Feiram incantation! Reduce our foes to ash!"

At that, half of the mages began to chant in tandem, while the remaining half held back in case they would need to respond to an unexpected turn of events with some other spell. Such was the Mage Battalion's fundamental strategy.

"Bahg doh Wahr, Fel doh Ahr! Great serpent who slumbers in the inferno, awaken now from your cradle of hellfire! Scorch the earth!"

The Remnants of Disaster, which only a heartbeat before had appeared as a dark shadow in the distance, had closed the gap so quickly that the foremost

creature was only a hair's breadth from Raul's nose.

"Chapter of Harvest, Page Seven! Feiram—Heed our call!"

The next moment, a vast sheet of flames spread from the mages' hands, seeming to lick the very ground as it incinerated the monstrous horde. The suffocating heat it emitted was swept away a moment later by a refreshing breeze, but the sense of relief was only momentary—no sooner had the first wave been decimated than another came crawling out of the forest.

"Just as I feared," Raul muttered.

Amnir jabbed his back lightly with her fist. "A much more troublesome foe than we'd expected... Too bad. It would have made for a stunning scene if we'd stopped them in their tracks just like that."

"Your Highness probably could, if you went all out," Raul replied. "Shall we go for it? I'm happy to help."

"No." Amnir closed her eyes. "That is not our role to play."

The wave of swarming insect creatures washed over Raul and Amnir—and engulfed the entire Mage Battalion.

"Retreat! The Mage Battalion has fallen! Get the bishops out of here!"

By this point, only a handful of Church and Mage Brigade soldiers remained around the seven bishops, along with Albus, her bodyguard Holdem, and Prime Minister Torres of the Republic of Creon. Though Albus had finally given the order to retreat, it had come too late. There was no time to run.

“Rally to me, all of you!” At that moment, the Bishop of Ydeämore gathered his fellows close. Albus looked back at him.

“Your Excellency, what are you—?”

“Chief State Mage Albus, the witch in whom you placed so much faith evidently has no scruples about sacrificing all these victims to protect her village. I had my doubts from the very first. And as such, I have prepared countermeasures.”

“Countermeasures...?”

“Do you mean to say you know how to rid us of these monsters?!” Torres asked, shocked beyond belief. “Why did you not mention this sooner?!”

“To the bitter end, I wanted to keep my faith in the virtue of the village witch—and in the capability of Wenias’s Chief State Mage, who vowed to keep us safe. Unfortunately, we must accept this reality. Prime Minister, come, stand beside me. This ward will only protect those within arm’s reach.”

“...A ward,” Albus muttered. “You know, the thing about wards...” She smiled then, a hint of mockery playing about her lips. “...*is that you can’t make them unless you know the name of the demon whose power you want to protect against.* Your Excellency, how is it you come to know which demon these Remnants of Disaster draw their strength from?”

The bishop’s expression stiffened slightly...and for some reason, Torres refused to take the hand Ydeämore had offered. The horde which had threatened to overwhelm them moments before halted just before reaching the group and idled there, almost like they were running in place.

“I procured the information in advance! My suspicions about the witch and her lot led me to redouble my investigations.”

“Remnants of Disaster can only be neutralized by creating wards for each of the innumerable demons and then confirming which they respond to, or by summoning a demon and calling upon its wisdom. Either way, you’d’ve had to know about those vermin from the start—or even to be keeping them yourself,” Albus continued. “Oh, Your Excellency. We know an aristocratic adventurer and his private army unintentionally brought these demonic shadows back from the North, then pleaded with the extremist faction of the Church to destroy them, only for that faction to preserve them in secret. As such, none of the other bishops have so much as laid eyes on them. How is it that *you* got your hands on these monsters?”

The other bishops took a step back from Ydeämore, at which the swarm of insect monsters immediately descended on him.

“H-How do they come so close?! It’s inconceivable! This should have—!” The Bishop fished a talisman out of his pocket and thrust it at the monsters, who scattered as if they’d been flicked away.

Just as a look of relief washed over Ydeämore’s face, a high-pitched girl’s voice rang out. “My, my, what’s this? Such appalling penmanship! I can hardly make it out... ‘The Wailing Child of Gluttony, Choked by Hunger and Thirst,’ is it?”

The insectoid monsters vanished, leaving Bishop Ydeämore thrusting his talisman at nothing, under the watchful eye of a young girl perched atop a staff. Studying the talisman carefully, the ostentatiously dressed lass—the Dawn Witch, Loux Krystas—noticed Ydeämore’s stare and smiled cheerfully.

“Boo! Did I scare thee?” Then she snatched the protective charm out of the bishop’s hand and tossed it to Albus.

She scanned it quickly, then cried, “I now unfold a warding barrier against the

Wailing Child of Gluttony, Choked by Hunger and Thirst! Cal! Deliver this command to the Mage Medic Corps: commence preparations to treat all cursed patients at once!”

“Roger!”

At this sudden voice from the heavens, Bishop Ydeämore looked up. There he saw a hawk beastfallen flapping away toward the pavilion where the mage medics had set up shop. The clergyman looked around and found the soldiers who had been up to their necks in monsters a moment before standing around in a daze, unable to comprehend what had happened.

“Ohohohoh! My, but that gave me a fright! What tremendous showmanship! Even I, Torres, wondered if a real horde of Remnants of Disaster had not closed in on us!” The Prime Minster threw back his head and laughed heartily.

“What a blaring, bombastic, bogglingly big fellow,” Loux Krystas remarked, with just a hint of admiration. Sitting cross-legged atop the Staff of Ludens, she rocked nimbly back and forth. “My little Ludens can replicate anything seen even once, down to the finest detail, you see. The imitations must be uniformly black, but fortunately for us, so were these monsters.”

It had been a trivial task. The Staff of Ludens had merely reproduced several hundred million of the carnivorous insectoids, then unleashed them upon the forces of the Church and Mage Brigade, that was all.

“We had only to stage the very climax prepared by the Church’s extremist faction one scene before they could, then watch the star rush to deliver his lines, thinking his moment in the spotlight had come. Now then, pray share with us, O Bishop of Ydeämore, the daring tale of the lone hero among this vast army with the means to defeat these Remnants of Disaster.”

“H...Hero?”

“I have a great love of cunning pushed to its logical extreme. ’Twould be much more advantageous to raise thee up as the hero who uncovered the extremists’ plans than to string thee up as the principal offender. That way, we might keep thee exactly where we want thee and hear the names and plans of this extremist lot from thine own lips.”

“I-I—”

“Choose thy words carefully. I have a great love of the flexibility humans display in attempting to right their wrongs—so thou wilt give me cause to pardon thee, I trust?”

There was nothing for Bishop Ydeämore to do but nod silently, nothing he could say in his defense. He’d had it all planned out: he would wait until the majority of the Church and Mage Brigade had met their end, then produce a means for miraculous survival. And yet now it had come to light that Ydeämore had in his possession a tool with which to prevent any loss of life from the very beginning, but had only broken his silence once irreparable harm had been done. The “plausible narrative” he had prepared had taken an unexpected turn, one he had not imagined in his wildest dreams.

“Splendid!” Los beamed. The smile then vanished from her face, and she reached her arm into the Staff of Ludens’s jet-black orb. What she pulled out looked like a ball of dirt—baring a set of jagged fangs.

“Th-That’s...”

“Thou hast seen this before, yes? ’Tis the egg-like thing from whence emerge those insect creatures. And by the by, ’tis the genuine article, left over when little Ludens devoured the horde from young Kady’s stomach.” Los leaned

forward and pressed the ball against Ydeämore's lips. "Eat."

"I-Impossible! That...I cannot do...!"

"Why not? Thou and thy fellows did feed them to powerless children with nowhere else to turn, and to impoverished farmers seeking an outlet for their fury. By proclaiming it a 'blessing from the Goddess,' you convinced them to take the creatures inside themselves, did you not? Little Ludens inherits the memories of all whom she devours. Young Kady speaks to me through those recollections. He is most anxious for thee to partake of this 'blessing' as well—so eat. That shall be the condition for thy pardon. Never fear—blasted Albus shall at the very least place a *temporary* binding on the thing to ensure it does not run amok within thee."

Los shoved the egg into the bishop's mouth. "Now then, swallow. Down it goes."

Ydeämore swallowed the thing with an audible gulp, and it slid down his esophagus into his stomach. Peering from her perch at the bishop as he sunk to the ground, Los once more unfurled her endlessly cheerful smile.

"There now, rejoice in my pardon!"

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In the fifth year of the True Saint, an extremist faction of the Church raised a massive army. The Kingdom of Wenias's Chief State Mage rallied a force to defeat the extremists, but the Remnants of Disaster unleashed by the Church's forces on the front lines brought these stalwart troops to the brink of destruction.

Fortunately, Bishop Ydeämore had recognized the threat and independently conducted a preemptive investigation, resulting in the successful neutralization of the Remnants of Disaster.

Many of the farmers who enlisted to defeat the witches had been deceived into infecting themselves with a curse that would eventually consume them. However, the Mage Medic Corps under the command of the Saint of the Holy City of Akdios dispelled this, too.

In appreciation for his heroic efforts, Bishop Ydeämore was presented with a letter of gratitude from the Chief State Mage of the Kingdom of Wenias, though its contents were never publicly disclosed.

The Witch's Village, target of the extremists' attack, neither inflicted nor sustained any casualties save for some beastfallen would-be bandits, and word of their gracious mercy spread throughout the Great Continent.

Headmaster Albus would later recall that the Academy of Magic saw a sudden increase in applicants hailing from the South that year.



Epilogue



With the whole world watching, the extremist fundamentalists' act of war against the Witch's Village ended in farce, a humorous escapade to be told and retold throughout the ages.

People said:

–You know, I just *knew* it would turn out like this. Those incompetent extremists couldn't take down a single village, no matter how many of them there were.

–And the witches didn't let a single person die? What a merciful bunch! Imagine, sparing those soldiers who'd come to kill them.

–I heard the extremists went all the way up North to bring back those "Remnants of Disaster" things. Man, that's terrifying. Probably best to stay away from those lowlife witch-haters.

Reports of such chatter making its way all across the Great Continent were picked up by the Dragon Conqueror King in the course of his travels. As for the beastfallen mercenaries, the half that survived after the demon-bound's defeat had been hired by Holdem on a provisional basis, and organized into a dedicated unit. There had always been plenty of work outside of war to go around for those who could fight; beastfallen simply hadn't been commissioned to do it until recently.

“Whew, that all worked out, huh? As they say, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger! And those elixirs you made will solve all our staffing shortages in a flash, Saybil, plus we won’t have to worry about running dry of mana anymore. Talk about a treasure! I can’t thank you enough for being born!”

Pleased with how smoothly her plans had gone, Albus chuckled gleefully at the mountain of applications from aspiring students in the South as she treated the three apprentices to tea. They were back in Plasta, capital city of the Kingdom of Wenias, in the office of the headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic. Saybil, Hort, and Kudo sat in a nervous row on the sofa, an array of dainties laid out before them.

“Excuse me, Headmaster, but why did you summon us here...?” Saybil asked.

“Huh? Holdem, didn’t you tell them?”

“Wasn’t my place to say.”

Holdem had pulled up in an aggressively ostentatious carriage to fetch the students as they busied themselves diligently clearing the forest of beastfallen corpses and severed limbs, and escorted the three youngsters back to Wenias. Every time they asked him why he’d come for them, the lupine beastfallen had simply responded, “My lady needs to talk to you.” Despite his frivolous demeanor, Holdem evidently took pride in keeping such confidences.

“Right, I see,” Albus said with a smile. She got up from her seat and practically danced over to an apparently seamless wooden box. At her touch a drawer slid silently open, and the headmaster pulled out three pieces of parchment. “So, without further ado! In recognition of your exceptional accomplishments in the Witch’s Village, word of which has spread to every corner of the Great Continent, I’ve decided to bump you three extraordinarily outstanding students up a year and present you with your graduation diplomas right now!”

The headmaster handed the mages their sheep-skin scrolls, emblazoned with lavishly grandiose calligraphy, as if she were on a street corner passing out flyers for a bargain sale. The three students froze, then exchanged a glance.

“...Huh? Aren’t you happy? C’mon, brighten up! This is where you celebrate!”

“Well, we...can’t be sure this isn’t just another test,” explained Saybil.

Hort nodded. “Right? I could totally see you, like, failing us if we got excited.”

“You can’t be serious!! That was the deal all along, right?! That battle was to be your final exam, and you would graduate based on your contributions! *You’re* the ones who convinced us to do it that way!”

“Yeah, and we also know our revered headmaster’s got a thing for messing with her students,” Kudo snapped, tossing his diploma on the table.

Albus screamed. “Aaaaah! Holdem! My precious students have lost their faith in humanity!”

“You realize that’s your fault, right?”

“But it’s true! Those are real diplomas! Don’t just toss them around like that! As long as you’ve got them, you can use and create magic, free of any and all restrictions!”

Saybil once more scrutinized the certificate he’d been handed. The day he’d started at the Academy, Saybil couldn’t even read his own enrollment contract. Now, however, he could read every letter of his diploma with no problem.

Hort was examining hers with similar rigor, and even Kudo dragged his closer with a claw and began reading it out of the corner of his eye, darting suspicious glances at Albus all the while.

“...I guess we...really did graduate,” Saybil said.

“I’ll send you invitations for the graduation ceremony when it comes around, but in the meantime, you don’t need to come to class anymore.”

Finally, it started to sink in.

“Hey, Headmaster! After you graduate from the Academy, you can get a job with the kingdom, right? Is that true for us, too?”

“It sure is. You’re free to decline if there’s something special you want to research instead, of course, but—”

“I’m totally in! Give me a job, pleez!”

“You’re always leaning into life, huh, Hort...”

“That doesn’t exactly sound like a compliment, Sayb. Watch what you say, okay?”

“I’m gonna enlist in the Church and Mage Brigade. How ’bout you?”

“Hmm... I’d like to keep experimenting with elixirs and potions, and I haven’t finished deciphering or editing Thirteen’s book... But I still don’t feel like I know enough to do it justice, so I think I’d rather keep studying instead of taking on a job right now... Hm? Maybe that means it’s better if I don’t graduate yet...? I guess I don’t need this diploma.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Jumping to conclusions is the ultimate folly of youth, Saybil!” Albus said frantically, sensing the young mage might rip up his certificate at any moment. “And there would hardly be anything left for you to learn if you *did* come back to the Academy. But, hmm... What would you say if I told you I could offer you official work for the Kingdom of Wenias that would both connect you to the Church and Mage Brigade *and* give you access to unlimited troves of knowledge?”

The three mages waited quietly to hear what Albus would say next.

“This incident has forced the world to recognize the urgent need to further our research into the Remnants of Disaster, and to prepare countermeasures in advance. So it’s been decided that we’ll put together a special unit to investigate up in the North. The commander of the Brigade’s Mage Battalion has just returned, so I’d like you to tag along with her and head that way—to Niedora Fort, for starters.”

“Niedora Fort... Wait...” muttered Saybil, before all three mages exclaimed in surprised unison: “The Forbidden Library?!”

The Forbidden Library, a tower of wisdom said to be the repository of all knowledge accumulated by witchkind, administered by a demon—and located in the disaster-ravaged North.

“Its official name is now the General Library, actually. But yes. And most people do still call it the Forbidden Library anyway.”

“So basically, you want us to go to the Forbidden Library on official Wenias business, along with the Church and Mage Brigade?”

“Yep. And I want you to find out all you can about the Remnants of Disaster. Honestly, it’s a deadly mission—you could literally lose your life. So I’ll understand if you don’t want t—”

“I’ll go,” declared Saybil.

“Me too!” agreed Hort.

“L-Let me...think about it—”

“The Mage Commander requested you specifically, Kudo. She’s pretty useless with the Chapter of Protection, and she said she’s curious to watch this up-and-coming apprentice mage doctor in action.”

“Sign me up!!”

“Wow...” Saybil stared at Kudo, his expression blank as ever. “That was way too easy, Kudo. Why don’t you think about it a little more?”

“Ughh, now you’ve got me worried you’re gonna fall for all sorts of weird scams. I could see you, like, giving someone all your cash if they told you they needed it...!”

“I ain’t fallin’ for shit and no one’s gettin’ my cash!”

“By the by,” Albus smiled. “Loux Krystas will also be accompanying your unit.”

2

After receiving their mission from Headmaster Albus, the three mages went back to the village one last time. What with packing up their personal effects at the dorm, returning the books they’d borrowed from Zero, and saying their goodbyes to the villagers, there was no shortage of things to do. Loux Krystas did not join them, having apparently already met up with the Mage Battalion.

Feels like I haven’t seen her in forever. “I thought we’d be here for a few years, but it turned out to be only a few months, huh?”

“Yeah. It really flew by.” Hort lovingly surveyed the now spotless dorm with tears in her eyes. “I can hardly remember what it was like when we first got here.”

A funny feeling hit Saybil, too, and he cocked his head. *I was a totally ignorant, helpless, unmotivated kid. But now, I’ve got so much I want to accomplish.*

“Do you think somebody else will use these dorms after we’re gone?” Hort

mused.

“Maybe.”

“Guess they’ll have to take that super sadistic test, too.”

“They should seriously change that shit up.”

“True.”

“True.”

“I’ll consider it.” A voice floated in from the threshold as Saybil and Hort nodded in enthusiastic agreement with Kudo’s critique. All three mages jumped. Turning around, they saw Zero standing in the doorway with a gentle smile on her face, squinting as if against a blinding light.

“Professor! We were just about to come return your books!”

“Take them. I have the contents memorized anyway. If you no longer have need of them, donate them to the Forbidden Library and one day they will surely be of use to someone else.”

Saybil looked down at the thick tome in his hand. It was the book filled with formulae for magic potions, written by Thirteen—by his father.

“But, this one... It’s a memento of your brother, isn’t it?”

“It is. And I could never decipher it, to the very end. I think it should stay with you.”

“...Um, about that.” Saybil rushed over to Zero’s side and opened the book to a scribble on the final page. “It says ‘To my brethren’ in the very back. But this refers to you specifically, doesn’t it?”

Zero chuckled wryly. “That’s the sort of man he was. Somewhat overbearing as an elder brother.”

“That’s not what I mean. Look at the numbers.”

“Hm?”

Saybil flipped to a random page with a long list of ingredients, and next to it, a column with numbers representing the corresponding amounts. He pointed to the number thirteen amid the list, and covered it with his finger.

“From Thirteen ‘to’ Zero. Once you make that change, the proportions in every recipe change, right?”

“Whaaat?!” Zero cried, snatching the book. “P-Preposterous! Was it that simple...?! Who would ever have realized?! Just how focused on me was that ridiculous man?!”

“It’s simple, but interesting. No one who didn’t know both that *you* had this book, and that Thirteen had written it, could ever have cracked the code. He made it so only the people you deemed worthy could ever truly understand it.”

“I knew all of that, yet still could never decipher it.”

“Oh, no...! I wasn’t trying to make you look dumb or anything... I only meant I was glad you had it...” added Saybil, panicking in the face of Zero’s scowl.

“I am only joking.” Zero laughed, then ruffled Saybil’s hair. “Go now. And one day we shall meet again, my dear nephew.”

“Should I call you Aunt Zero?” Saybil cocked his head, and a smiling Zero jabbed him in the forehead with a fingernail. “Ow,” he blurted, pulling away from her and rubbing the spot she had poked. Still smiling, Zero departed.

Saybil turned back to Hort and Kudo, who both looked somewhat troubled. “What’s wrong?”

“...It’s just, if I’d known this would happen...” Hort glanced at her stack of

books. “If I’d known...I would’ve borrowed waaaaay more books!”

“Dude, same! I can’t believe we gotta leave *all* those *amazing* books behiiiiind! I wanna take the whole damn bookcase with me...!”

Kudo and Hort crouched down, cradling their heads in their hands.

Saybil squinted down at them and muttered, “...Pretty cold, guys.”

3

“Are you *sure* you want the Tyrant to stay here? Isn’t that kinda risky?”

“No, it ain’t! C’mon and trust me already.” The Tyrant, having come to see them off, frowned in aggravation.

“Hahaha, never gonna happen,” Hort responded with a cold laugh, then swung her bag into the basket.

The basket in question was, of course, the Dragon Conqueror King’s passenger carriage. To carry the villagers to safety before the battle, he’d used something more akin to an animal cage, but the carriage affixed to the great dragon’s saddle this time around was almost absurdly grand, fitted with seats and everything. As he stood there beside it, the Dragon Conqueror King’s sullen face had *This is my life now. I’m a coachman* written all over it.

“I’m gonna miss you, Lily. Y-Your dinners were the light a my life...!”

“Come back to visit! Promise! Lily will make you a big feast! Here, this is to eat on the way. Lily made it extra specially yummy! And Lily wrote out the recipe for the dish you said you really liked. That’s in there, too...!”

“Do you fancy yourself Kudo’s mother, Lily...? I cannot abide drawn-out

goodbyes. Be on your way now.”

“Nooo! Kudooo!”

“Lily!”

The priest yanked Lily out of her tight embrace with Kudo, almost as if tearing apart two lovers in their last moment together.

Mercenary cast him a sidelong glance and said, “Yer just jealous.”

“Kudo, you’re kind of an over-the-top fanboy for people you admire, huh...” Hort said, looking a little skeptical, which elicited an embarrassed “Shut UP!” from the beastfallen lizard.

Saybil, meanwhile, turned to face a very sulky Laios. “I can’t believe it’s all over, before I even got a chance to grow up...!” In the end, the villagers had spent hardly more than a week in hiding. So Laios had returned to the village with no real concept of war, and still very much a child, only to find that Saybil was about to set off on some journey. “You promised you’d go on adventures with me!”

“And I will, once you’re all grown up.”

“When’ll that be? Tomorrow?”

“Ummm... Maybe...ten years from now?” Saybil cocked his head and frowned in thought.

“Ten years?? How long does *that* take?” Laios asked, looking more and more glum by the second.

“I’ll come back for you. Assuming you haven’t forgotten me by then, that is. So until I do, you think you could train real hard and get super strong for me?”

“...I mean, sure. But I’m tellin’ you now, I’m already, like, half grown up!”

“So you are.” Saybil gave the little boy a fist bump, then caught Uls’s eye. They shrugged at one another.

“Come on, time to go! I don’t want to keep the Mage Commander waiting—that’s a mistake you only make once.” The Dragon Conqueror King looked even more grim than usual. It seemed Amnir was not his favorite person in the world.

As soon as he heard the words “Mage Commander,” Kudo dropped the bit with Lily and practically dove into the passenger carriage. Struck with a look of shock that seemed to say, *He’s left me...!* the mouse beastfallen sought solace from the priest, but was cruelly rebuffed.

Saybil looked up to the sky. *It was only a few months—but the memories I’ve made here beat out everything I’d forgotten from my first thirteen years.*

“Thank you so much. For everything.”

After these parting words of heartfelt gratitude, Saybil climbed into the carriage along with Hort. The three mages pressed their faces against the windows, watching as the village below them dwindled from view.

Saybil felt a certain sense of loss. But realizing it only proved he’d gained something precious in his time at the village, he was glad of the feeling.

“Hort. Kudo.”

“Uh huh?”

“What?”

“I’m so happy I get to stay with you, even after we graduate. I love you guys so much.”

“How the hell’re you sayin’ that sappy shit with a straight face?!”

“Th-That’s so mean, Sayb! Why are you trying to make me fall even *more* in love with you?! Especially when you’ve got *no* intention of loving me back!!”

“Yeah, man!” Kudo chimed in. “It’s straight-up cruel! You philandering lady-killer!”

“But you’re not a lady, Kudo.”

“Fine, people-killer!”

“So, does that mean I philander you, too, Kudo? Wait, what does ‘philander’ even mean?”



“Good question, actually.”

“Who the hell cares?”

“I do. The meanings of words are important, seeing as we use incantations to activate our spells and all—oh crap. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

His expression as blank as ever, Saybil stuck his head out the window and emptied the full contents of his stomach onto the forest below.

“Oh noooo! Kudo! Sayb’s sick!”

“I dunno any spells ta cure motion sickness! Drink some damn water!”

“Hey!! No roughhousing in the carriage, it makes it hard to fly!” The passengers cowered at the Dragon Conqueror King’s angry shout.

And so it was that the three full-fledged mages set off for the North.

“Aahh,” Saybil sighed. “I miss Professor Los...” His heart threatened to burst at the memory of the medicine and handkerchief she’d given him on their initial journey to the village.

Afterword

I can't remember how to write an afterword. Actually, I'm pretty sure I *never* knew how to write an afterword for the first new book in a year and a half. Ever since my debut I've been putting out one volume every four months or so, but due to some family stuff, that all came to a screeching halt. The next thing I knew, two whole years had passed between the second and third installments of this series.

Writing is like a muscle; leave it long enough and your pace inevitably drops. I used to be able to finish a book in about two months, but this time it ended up taking me four. In any event, I'm just glad to be back.

Hello, readers. Kakeru Kobashiri here. It's good to see you again after all this time. I know I've caused you—as well as my esteemed editor, the entire editorial department, and our illustrator Iwasaki-san—a great deal of distress.

But they haven't dropped me yet!!

That said, I was starting to wonder whether, given the state I've been in, they were just publishing this third volume out of kindness, and this would spell the end for the series, but...

Ummm, did you see the news?

That's right.

It's happening.

An anime.

We're getting an anime!!

It's totally insane.

And I'm not talking about a homebrew mish-mash of the Divine Tatsuo's ultra-high-quality illustrations—though honestly, that'd be more than enough for me. But can someone tell me how humanity became capable of putting out such amazing anime ads while the story's still going?!

The news first reached me on a certain day in a certain month in Akihabara. My editor sent me a text saying, "There's something I want to talk to you about in person," to which yours truly, filled with trepidation at the possibility that this talk might be the dreaded death knell of discontinuation, and desperate to rip off the band-aid, replied in a fit of panic, "Please call me. I'm free right now." Unfortunately, my editor was tied up and didn't get back to me for a while.

Insides churning, I went to a café and ordered some tea—but the call came in the second I sat down, so with my tea and all my stuff in hand, I ran out into the pouring rain to answer the phone.

"We've got an offer to do a *Dawn of the Witch* anime."

I remember very clearly bursting out laughing and saying, "You've *got* to be joking."

After all, this series has had a somewhat complicated run: it's a sequel to a series from a certain other publisher, not to mention that the first volume of that previous series was also made into an anime—which saw no second season. So *Grimoire of Zero* ended with a whimper instead of a bang... But then, by some strange twist of fate, I found Kodansha willing to publish this sequel...

On top of all that, even though it's not the same illustrator from the last series, we've been allowed to keep using the character designs from *Grimoire*. In other words, Shizuma-san and Iwasaki-san's character designs coexist in this

book.

So I'm left wondering, like...will this actually work out?

Are we going to be able to get all the permissions and everything?

Nevertheless, this anime ship has already rowed out of harbor on its voyage of development, and there's no turning back now. If the captain says we're good, then we're good. So here I am, standing on the deck watching as the veteran anime seamen raise the sails and batten down the hatches, still wondering, "Is this *really* going to happen?" Until I actually see it on TV, part of me will remain convinced this is some sort of prank.

One of my lifetime goals as an author was to have at least one more anime adaptation before I die—and it looks like I've achieved it much quicker than I expected... Have I wrung out my last drop of luck? Am I about to kick the bucket??

We're only just barely out of the gates, so I can still hardly tell up from down, but the anime production staff I met were all truly, truly lovely people. They kindly invited me to a sort of script conference, and even though I'm a total landlubber, they listened to everything I had to say—thanks to which, the script they're whipping up has zero lines that feel out of place to ol' Kobashiri. Being as this is my second anime adaptation, I can fully appreciate how incredible that is. The original story is the original story; the anime is the anime. They're completely separate works of art, so fundamentally the production team has license to ignore the original work entirely. That's why watching them hew so faithfully to the book gives me this, like, shiver of happiness, this feeling that I'd do anything and everything in my power to help.

That aside, this third volume marks a kind of ending—but the story will continue in volume four. Next comes the Forbidden Library arc. No longer

students, our newly-minted mages will surely face exponentially more life-threatening situations now that they've graduated. They'll meet many more witches. And maybe even learn about Los's past, too.

The fact that this is a story I get to write and deliver to you all is an indescribable pleasure for me. So farewell for now. Until we meet again, in the next volume's afterword.

I know I've been promising an SF story forever, but I haven't written a word yet...!



Afterword

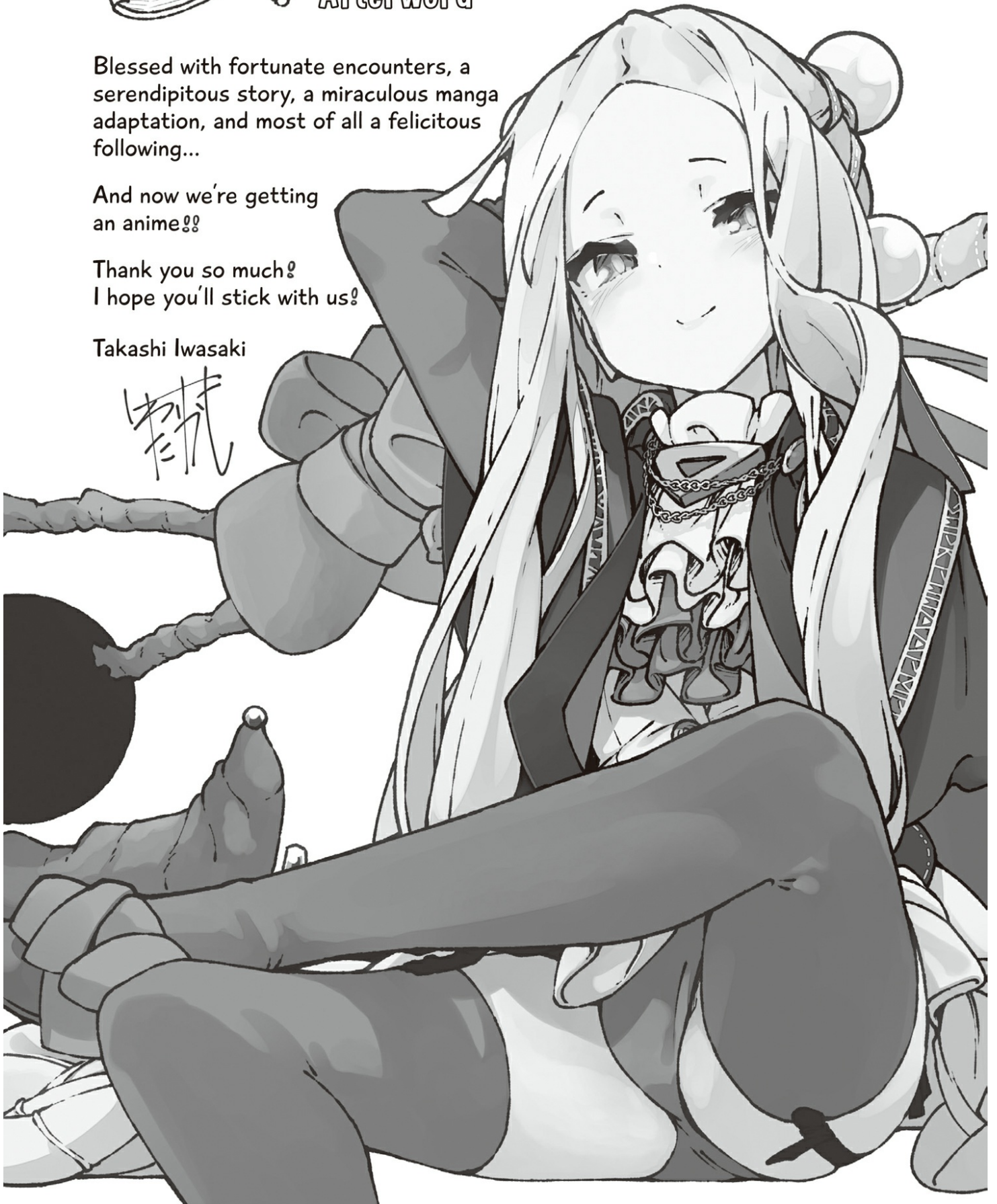
Blessed with fortunate encounters, a serendipitous story, a miraculous manga adaptation, and most of all a felicitous following...

And now we're getting an anime!!

Thank you so much!
I hope you'll stick with us!

Takashi Iwasaki

伊和 貴志



Kakeru Kobashiri An eternal newbie writer who loves fantasy and beauty-and-the-beast stories above all else. I always insist I'm not a furry because I love robots and monsters, too. Really I just love all relationships that involve some kind of difference.

Illustrator **Takashi Iwasaki** We made it to volume 3!

As a fan from the Grimoire days, I'm so excited I get to read this story!

The Dawn of the Witch 3

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