



The Dawn of the Witch

Messenger from the New World

5

By Kakeru Kobashiri
Art by Takashi Iwasaki

Original Design of Select Characters by
Yoshinori Shizuma

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Los got to her feet too,
taking Saybil by the hand as
she raced from the office.

“Come, young Sayb!
'Tis the start of a new
chapter!”

Gazing regally down at the delegation from her throne, Danna Ryl blinked, and an even gentler smile spread across her face. When she tilted her head to the side, her long silver hair—which fell almost to the floor—danced in the air, and the light from the chandelier was refracted through the long, transparent horn protruding from her forehead. The horn was beautiful, entrancing, like a work of art.

The young girl clinging to Danna Ryl's side had a single transparent horn just like her mother's.



“...C'mon. I'll take you
back to the tower.”

“Y-Yaaaay!”

Utsuwa hooked her legs over
Kudo's shoulders and clutched
the back of his head tightly.



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A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

**The
Dawn
of the
Witch**

**Messenger
from the
New World**

NEW PRODUCT! SWEET AND TASTY MANA DROPS, WITH THE STAMP OF
THE FORBIDDEN LIBRARY!

RESTOCK JUST IN! CONCENTRATED MANA POTIONS FROM THE ABYSS
SORCERER HIMSELF!

FINALLY APPROVED FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION BY THE ACADEMY OF
MAGIC! THESE MAGICAL SLEEPING DRAUGHTS WILL HAVE YOU OUT LIKE A
LIGHT! *USE ON OTHERS WILL RESULT IN ARREST BY CHURCH AND MAGE
BRIGADE AUTHORITIES.

The advertisements standing in the center of the tumultuous marketplace really caught my eye. The candies themselves looked like nothing special—but the moment I popped one into my mouth, my body was flooded with mana, replete and reinvigorated, where just seconds before I had been on the verge of crumbling away for good. My withered emotions sprung back to life within me, and tears spilled from my eyes.

So this is possible. Such things, such worlds, really do exist.

I was stunned, plain and simple.

I had crossed the ocean, taken to the sky, chasing a phantom—and it had brought me here.

—Nothing lies across the ocean. The other world is just a dream, a fantasy for the decaying.

I shook off this clinging despair and left my homeland, setting out on an uncertain journey.

...Yet here it is.

It really exists.

A place of dreams, where the mana flows endlessly—

I must take it home with me. Take this whole world.

But where do I begin?

My time is far too limited.

While I stand here, so many lives are being lost back home.

“Which would you like?” asked the smiling clerk.

I answered with a question.

“This Abyss Sorcerer... Where is he?”



Chapter One



The Forbidden Library's specialty was, of course, the countless forbidden books it contained. It was the Church which had designated all these valuable sorcerous works as such, the sole copies of which existed now within the Library's collection.

Any talk of the Library should also include some mention of the funds required to assemble such a collection in the first place—in other words, of the Niedora sovereign. Produced using gold of a high purity, these tremendously valuable coins could almost be called circulating works of art. In a sense, they too were a specialty of the Forbidden Library.

Recently, however, a new product had come to represent the Library: magic potions. The spells they contained could be activated with ease by anyone, offering a broad range of applications: as explosives to be used in construction projects, for instance, or replacing flint and tinder in the kitchen.

As for how they came to be produced at the Forbidden Library, anyone posed the question would likely answer in the same way: "One day it was just like that."

The primary factor would seem to be that someone researching the subject decided to take up residence in the Forbidden Library, which, as a literal tower of knowledge, was the perfect place to engage in such pursuits. It might also be noted that the researcher in question was somewhat eccentric, insofar as he was perfectly happy to share the particulars of his work with anyone who was interested.

An inquisitive “How do you make those?” would be answered with a straightforward “I make them like this,” followed quickly by, “But what I’m really aiming for is more like this. What do you think I should do?” Not only was he happy to answer questions, he was unabashed in seeking input from others.

As a result, the pleasure-seeking, novelty-obsessed witches and sorcerers who came to the library flocked to his side and set up quite a clamor.

“I’ll make some, too!”

“Maybe you should try it like this instead?”

“Count me in.”

“And me, and me!”

Before anyone knew what was happening, a certain room in the Forbidden Library had transformed into a laboratory, with a constant stream of famed witches and sorcerers filing in and out on a daily basis. And the central figure in all this—the researcher who had taken up residence in the Forbidden Library—was named Saybil.

“Young Sayb! Spirited in thy work as ever, I see.”

Following a couple of short knocks on the open laboratory door there came a familiar high-pitched voice—though one Saybil hadn’t heard in some time. He looked up, then rose to his feet. Standing there was a girl in her mid-teens with blond hair down to her waist. Her raiment, almost overflowing with lace, was so splendid it made Saybil’s head spin, but there was nothing incongruous about it—the outfit very much suited her girlish aura. And her eyes, which glittered with all the colors of the rainbow, had a feline playfulness about them.

“Professor Los!”

Saybil’s face was unexpressive to say the least, meaning that even when he

was jumping for joy on the inside, it was hard to tell at a glance whether he was happy or sad. But when he laid eyes on his dear teacher Los—Loux Krystas, to be more precise—he gave the impression of a faithful puppy reunited with its beloved owner.

“I was just about to take a break. Oh, let me clean up a little.”

“Leave it be. What would I care about the state of thy laboratory? I will find comfortable seating wherever space allows. More importantly—”

Los grinned, and heaved a bag onto the floor with a thud. In order to bring the weighty satchel this far, she seemed to have hooked it onto her constant companion, the towering Staff of Ludens.

“Is that for me?”

“’Tis honey.”

Saybil’s expression was completely unchanged, but the air around him began to glow. This was no figure of speech: the spell Solm, which served as the source of illumination in his room, was shining brighter in response to his mana. The brightness of the laboratory on any given day, and even the color of the light itself, depended on Saybil’s mood and physical condition—to such an extent that this fact was on its way to becoming common knowledge for all who frequented the Forbidden Library.

“I’ll make some tea, and I’ve got some tasty treats from Headmaster Albus. They aren’t all that sweet, so I was just thinking a little honey would go great with them.”

“Thou hast quite found thy feet with this potion business, I see,” Los said, scanning the laboratory. She brushed aside a jumble of parchment scrolls and flopped down onto the sofa. Saybil placed the tea and cakes in front of her, and

Los spooned out generous helpings of the honey she had brought.

“It’s been a whole year since you up and vanished, Professor Los—this trip was a long one, huh.”

“One visit a year is more than sufficient for my taste.”

“But you think about it, don’t you? About how I’m developing, how my research is going...”

“Gah—! Thou hast come far indeed, to speak such words to me!”

Loux Krystas was also known as the Dawn Witch—and had lived for over three hundred years. She traveled the world unceasingly, seeking out new and interesting things. Saybil, by contrast, was still not even twenty years of age, and had only graduated from the Academy of Magic a few years earlier. The depth and breadth of his knowledge was still as nothing compared to an ancient witch, and nor was he possessed of any unusual intelligence to compensate—though none of this troubled Saybil himself.

He was constantly puzzling over his magic potions, endlessly experimenting. He failed, made adjustments, and ran his experiments again, but the repetition never grated on him—that was just the kind of person he was.

Saybil was ever in the center of the circle, but the circle around him was constantly in flux. The witches and sorcerers of the Forbidden Library loved novelty, and would devote themselves completely to their pursuit of it—but also had the tendency to grow tired of their new fancies in a trice. These renowned and incredibly talented individuals would, on nothing more than a whim, blithely toss away bits of world-changing technology and technique they had created. Saybil gathered up the pieces of their knowledge and discoveries, compiled them, and made them accessible to all. In so doing, he had advanced

the field of magic potion research by fifty years in the space of just three. As a result, those who desired to study magic potions naturally began to gravitate to the Forbidden Library, and Saybil was at the heart of the cutting-edge techniques being developed there.

It had been three years since he took up residence at the Library. For the first year, Los had stayed with him and done her utmost to make sure Saybil wasn't corrupted by any of the older witches and sorcerers. During the following year she had sometimes drifted away from the library, but had always returned within a month or so. And whenever she did, it would be with someone potentially useful to Saybil's research in tow, or to announce that she had "spread the word of thy wondrous magic potions far and wide!"

But one year ago she had left, saying only that she would "be gone for a little while," and this was the first anyone at the Library had seen of her since. The fact that this didn't make him dejected was exactly what made Saybil Saybil. He simply devoted himself to his research so intently that Los couldn't possibly resist coming back to find out what he had accomplished.

"Well, Sayb, it does appear thine achievements are like to carry to the far corners of the earth. No matter where I go, there are potions bearing the mark of the Forbidden Library for sale. Those magic shops that once quietly served a magic-using clientele now boast long lines of repeat customers of all stripes."

"I mean, that *was* the whole reason Professor Zero invented magic in the first place."

"So it was."

Magic potions were primarily meant to be used by mages, but Saybil was also developing new products which would allow non-spellcasting customers to enjoy the benefits of magic as well. His first project was a potion containing a

spell from the Chapter of Protection. There was fierce resistance from the various medical associations, of course, but Saybil's Chordia potions—which allowed anyone to heal wounds without the need for a physician—spread like wildfire. Leks, a spell used to kindle hearths, campfires, and cooking stoves, also sold extremely well. In both cases Saybil had only prepared the base elixir, and it was the students and staff of the Academy of Magic who actually infused them with the spells.

Indeed, all the magic potions were distributed through the Academy. They were incredibly convenient, yes, but at the same time they were undeniably dangerous. The Academy of Magic only sold potions to shops that kept detailed records of exactly what was sold to whom, and when.

“As it happens, Sayb, I have another gift for thee.”

With a gleeful grin that hinted *this* was the real present, Los drew a small bottle from the bag hanging at her waist.

“What's that?” asked Saybil.

“Well now, what dost thou think it is?”

She tossed it to him, and Saybil saw that it contained a slightly cloudy liquid.

“A magic potion...?”

“Oho, thou canst tell?”

“Yes, I can feel the mana. But this...” He peered at the bottle. “This wasn't made at the Forbidden Library, was it? It doesn't bear the Academy of Magic's seal... Do you mind if I try it out?”

“Be my guest—though I recommend thou directest it outside.”

“Outside? Why?”

“Thou wilt see.”

Saybil went to the open window. There was nothing there but the gray northern sky. He opened the bottle, and tossed its contents out into the empty space.

A flash of light—followed a moment later by a booming roar. Saybil was blown off his feet by the force of the explosion. He stared blankly out the window, then turned to look at Los.

“They don’t teach magic like that at the academy.”

“I checked with Mud-Black,” Los said. “The magic sealed within that bottle was not of her invention.”

“Meaning...someone developed it on their own...? That thing was an illegal magic potion?”

“I happened on it in a rather suspicious alleyway, being sold at an exorbitant price. I squeezed the proprietor and managed to wring out everything he had... but it appears these are not the only potions of their kind making the rounds.” Los began lining up little bottles on the table in front of her. None were engraved with the mark of the Academy. “There is no shortage of witches who create magic of their own without attending the Academy of Magic. Why then should potions be any different? As soon as ’tis put about that they *can* be made, people are bound to do so.”

“But they’ll clamp down on unsanctioned potions and mages. The headmaster will never allow magic to be abused like this.”

“Quite so. I stopped by the Academy on my way here and showed these to that blasted Albus. She grew amusingly enraged at the sight.”

Saybil pictured Headmaster Albus reeling back, stamping her feet in anger,

and screaming in a fit of pique... It gave him an odd and inexplicable feeling.

But as Los said, this wasn't exactly an unexpected development. He had known that illicit potions would make their way to market sooner or later. It would be easy enough for any witch worthy of the name to purchase an above-board potion, analyze its contents, and make something similar without the need for outside instruction.

That was exactly why Saybil hadn't had any real qualms about teaching others how to make them. He knew it would be safer for the world at large if he was always at the forefront of this new technology, rather than hiding it away and letting the techniques stagnate, thereby allowing some outside genius to create revolutionary new potions in his stead. That said, they couldn't just permit the unregulated sale of potions which hadn't gone through the Forbidden Library and Academy of Magic.

"We need to crack down on this...don't we." Saybil sighed.

"Thou art so serious," laughed Los. "Leave such things to Albus and the Church and Mage Brigade."

"But then why..."

Why did you bring these to me in the first place?

"Does it not interest thee? To learn who made these, and to what purpose?"

Saybil reached for another of the magic potions.

A witch somewhere made these... Developed them all on her own. That flash of light, that blast—such power.

It required advanced techniques to stabilize so powerful a spell. An unskilled mage wouldn't be able to properly seal it into the elixir. Magic potions were easy to use, but that didn't mean they were easy to create. Even with all the

knowledge and talent gathered at the Forbidden Library, it was difficult to maintain a stable production line.

Saybil sighed again. “Of course it interests me.”

Los slapped her knee. “Then prepare for a journey! ’Tis time we conducted an inquiry, O Saybil the Abyss Sorcerer!”

2

“Sorry, Ulula. Looks like I’m going to be away from the Library for a little while...”

“Whaaat?! And you don’t even consult me on this sudden decision, when I have condescended to aid you with your work?”

Once Saybil’s preparations to leave were mostly complete, he went to Ulula’s room—where she opened her beak and hooted at him menacingly.

Ulula was a witch—and at the same time, an owl. Three years ago she had resided in the body of a girl, but upon losing her human form, she had possessed the body of her strigine familiar. Ulula and her family had spent two years rushing hither and thither in search of a new body, but a year ago she had returned to the Forbidden Library, almost as if she were trading places with the departing Dawn Witch.

“I *suppose* I’ll help you,” she had said, puffing out her chest.

A letter from her father Fianos had been tied around her neck when she returned. It read:

+++

From the Bondweaver Sorcerer to the Abyss Sorcerer,

In the corner of a small town the other day, I came upon someone selling magic potions. I tried using a few myself, and they're quite convenient little inventions. As I think you know, my daughter Ulula has been conducting some similar research of her own. It seems she's just dying to come and help you with your work—more interested in that than in finding herself a new body, even.

So let me lend you my daughter for a while. Make sure you look after her, okay? I'll keep searching for her new body in the meantime.

P.S.: Tell Mama that... (Here the writing skewed off across the page and stopped—likely Ulula had snatched the letter from Fianos to keep him from finishing his postscript.)

+++

In any case, such were the circumstances under which Ulula had come back to the Forbidden Library.

She silently flapped her wings and landed on Saybil's head. "Who's going to make the potions if you aren't here, anyway?"

"I thought maybe I could leave that up to you, Ulula."

A stunned squawk emanated from atop Saybil's head. He grasped Ulula with both hands and brought her down in front of his face.

“You’ve been helping me for a whole year now. All the other witches and sorcerers just tend to wander off, but you’ve stuck with me all this time... And you know exactly how to produce my magic potions now, don’t you? You know what to pay attention to, what to avoid, who it’s okay to sell to and who it isn’t—because we decided those things together.”

“W-Well, I suppose that’s true...!”

“I don’t think I’ll be away that long. We’re just going to find the people who are making these unsanctioned potions and have a talk with them, that’s all.”

“But I don’t have your bottomless well of mana. You *do* comprehend what that means, don’t you? I might know *how* to make your magic potions, but I couldn’t possibly make them in any great quantity!”

Ulula was right—to make potions in bulk she would need mana to replenish her magical reserves. Most magic-users would be capable of creating a small stock of magic potions for their own use without Saybil’s assistance, but would quickly run out of mana before they could make enough to sell to the nearby townspeople.

“Oh, that shouldn’t be a problem,” replied Saybil without hesitation.

“No? Not a problem? And how exactly do you come to that conclusion, might I ask?”

Without a word, Saybil left Ulula’s room, her avian form still nestled in his arms.

She was glaring at him with narrowed eyes. “What now? What is the meaning of this?! Where in the world are you taking me?!”

“I can’t tell you. I don’t know who might be listening.”

“Then it’s a secret you can’t tell anybody else?”

“It sure is. Only the chief librarian, Professor Los, and Headmaster Albus know.”

“And you’re going to tell *me*?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmph.” Ulula puffed up her feathers until she resembled nothing so much as a ball of cotton fluff. “Not bad. I suppose I must compliment you for realizing how uniquely superb I am at keeping secrets.”

Saybil walked the long hallways of the Library, descending ever further into the lower levels.

“Ulula, did you know that this place isn’t actually called the Forbidden Library? Its real name is Niedora Fort.”

“Why this sudden history lesson? Of *course* I know that. It was originally the Niedora Mint, and only became the Forbidden Library because of the collecting habits of its head. The sole reason this place is allowed to collect forbidden books in the first place is thanks to the massive donations it makes to the Church.”

“I should’ve known you’d be up on all this...”

“So? What does this have to do with your secret?”

“Well, you know how there’s always ash falling around the Fort?”

“Of course. It’s from the underground blast furnaces they use to mint the Niedora sovereign.”

“Well, the source of heat for those blast furnaces is this flame, right? Nobody’s ever given it any fuel, but it’s been burning for over a hundred years... at least according to the chief librarian.”

“I know that, too. *The fires of Niedora Fort burn by their own power*—it’s a well-known fact.”

Saybil stopped before a great set of double doors, shut tight with a sturdy lock. He took a key that was hanging from a string around his neck and inserted it into the keyhole.

“Why do you have that key?” asked Ulula, her eyes wide. “This is the heart of the Forbidden Library!”

“It’s okay. You’ll understand once you see it.”

Ulula said nothing more.

On the other side of the door was a round shaft, with a stair set into the wall, spiraling down. It was open to the air high above, and smoke and ash rose into the sky like backward-falling snow.

In spite of the stifling heat, Saybil started down the stairs. At the very bottom was the smelting works, where a great crucible hung by chains from the ceiling. In it, gold ore was subjected to high temperatures, separating out any impurities and extracting the gold itself. This was then poured into molds and cooled to make the Niedora sovereign.

The production of Niedora sovereigns had ceased when the Disasters of the North struck, and the Remnants of Disaster made further mining all but impossible, but the Library was able to make do with the coins it had minted before the North was ravaged.

In other words, down in the underground blast furnace, lurking on the other side of a shabby wooden door, was an almost unimaginable store of wealth.

Nuggets of high-purity gold ore peeked out of carelessly stacked wooden crates, and sacks stuffed full of coins were packed so tightly that the floor was

barely visible. Strewn about like a child's forgotten toys there were golden objects of art as well, which the workers stuck down in the mint had made to amuse themselves.

Saybil stepped into the room with Ulula in his arms.

"Solm. Heed this call by the power of my name—Saybil."

Saybil spoke the short incantation, and five or six little balls of light appeared in the air around them, lighting up every corner of the cathedral-sized storeroom.

"A...Amazing..." Ulula murmured.

Her reaction was only natural; the scene spread out before her would have taken anyone's breath away. But it wasn't the floor packed with gold coins that Ulula was focused on, nor the glimmering treasures scattered at Saybil's feet—

What commanded Ulula's attention was the giant sphere floating in the middle of the room. It was a bluish-purple color—the same color as Saybil's eyes.

Ulula quietly took flight, circling the sphere. Saybil approached and stretched out his arm. She alit and settled back into place, but never took her eyes off the great orb.

"You know what this is?"

"It isn't a question of knowing... No, it can't be. I don't. I think I do, but I don't. If I accidentally touched that thing, I think I would lose myself entirely—I mean, it's as if the *concept of mana* itself has taken physical form."

"Professor Zero says my mana's unlimited...but maybe that's not true. If

there's a possibility that I could run out, I'd rather find out where that limit is now than have my mana just dry up all of a sudden."

Knowing my limits will make it easier to figure out how much of my mana it's appropriate to share, Saybil had decided. The mana he used would regenerate over time, but even so—he wanted to know how bottomless his stores really were.

"So I thought I'd make a...vessel to pour all my mana into."

"And...this is it?" asked Ulula.

"Not quite—just watch."

Saybil picked up a piece of gold ore that was lying on the floor. He channeled mana into the ore, and *everything that wasn't gold* disintegrated and fell to the floor. The gold in Saybil's hand retained its shape at first, then steadily turned a bluish-purple color before melting and flowing up into the air. It was quickly absorbed into the giant sphere floating in the center of the room.

"That ball's made of mana-infused gold?!" Ulula gasped.

"Uh huh. You know how every substance has a different tolerance for how much mana it can store? Things *break* when you exceed that limit, and all the mana you poured into them disappears."

"But that gold..."

Saybil nodded. "Yeah. It changes color and melts, but the mana's still stored in there. It loses its weight as well, and gets all floaty like that. I tried it with all kinds of materials, but gold's the only one that reacts like this."

"How...much mana did you pour into that gold just now?"

"Enough to kill ten thousand people, more or less."

Ulula fixed her eyes on the sphere.

The gold Saybil had just melted in his hand was maybe enough to fill a small bottle, but the sphere in the center of the storeroom was big enough to fill a spacious bathhouse.

“I’ve been pouring my mana into this gold for three years now, but I still haven’t gotten to the bottom. Even when I think my mana level’s gone down a bit, it comes right back the next day.”

“You truly are a monster.”

“You got that right.” Saybil gave a clumsy smile. “But...I am a little scared.”

“You’ve got so much mana stored up and you still can’t see the bottom of your reserves... Excuse me, but what exactly do you have to be scared of?”

“I should’ve hit my limit by now.” Saybil’s gaze dropped slightly. “It’s too much. Any way you slice it, this is more mana than any one person should be capable of producing. And...I wonder where it’s all coming from. Maybe I’m just some kind of outlet—like I’m unconsciously stealing this power from someone else, or...”

“Hmm—! What an interesting thought!” Ulula chuckled. It wasn’t as if she was laughing off the possibility, though—even she could sense that Saybil’s store of mana was so ridiculously large as to defy reason. “But even if that *is* the case, what are you going to do about it? Go around giving your mana back? To whom? And how? Your magic potions are already being sold at market; why not think of that as your way of giving back what you’ve taken? I’ve never seen a witch die shrieking that she suddenly had all the mana sucked out of her by an unseen power, nor heard any such stories... But I hear a dozen stories a day about the people your potions have helped.”

“Thanks, Ulula. You’re kind.”

“Now, now, that won’t do. I’ve given my love to Father. Fancy me all you like, but I simply don’t have any love to share with you or anyone else.”

Ulula looked up at the ceiling with a harrumph, and Saybil lightly tickled her upturned beak. While her eyes were closed in bliss, Saybil put the key on its string around her neck.

“Here, I’m leaving you in charge. Of the potion making *and* my mana.”

“Fine.” Ulula stretched out her wings, then closed them again. “But watch out. I’m going to make potions *far* more efficiently than you ever could, so this little puddle of mana might not even last me a year.”

“Thanks—I’ll be back as soon as I can!”

Saybil flung out his arm, urging Ulula up into the air. Turning on his heel, he waved to her, then took off running. He sprinted across the storeroom, up the staircase, and out of the Forbidden Library. Los was waiting at the gate. Part of him wanted to stay, of course, but his urge to set off with Los on another of their journeys was far stronger.

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“What was *that* about? Oh, he really is such a child,” Ulula muttered, coming to rest atop a golden statue of a naked woman.

Mere moments after Saybil departed, a boy entered the storeroom, worryingly slim and extravagantly dressed, with white hair down to his waist: the chief librarian of the Forbidden Library.



“So he entrusted you with the key?”

“Why did you not tell me sooner about this wondrous place?”

“Many and more would happily shed their blood to obtain this. Once someone knows of it, they can never look the other way.”

“I don’t mean that, I’m talking about all this treasure! You know how much my father and I love such glittery things!”

The chief librarian cocked his head and repeated himself verbatim. “Many and more would happily shed their blood to obtain this. Once someone knows of it, they can never look the other way.”

Well I suppose he’s right, thought Ulula, flapping over to perch on the chief librarian’s shoulder. “So you mean to say I’ve been entrusted with the key to something quite stupendous?”

“Yes—and I have been entrusted with the door.”

“Hmph. Then I suppose I will call on you whenever I need it opened. That *is* something of a relief. I had been worrying about how I might get the key into the lock with only wings and a beak at my disposal.”

3

With the spread of magic potions, an age had dawned in which anyone could use magic with ease. The potions were a touch expensive, of course, and a certificate from the Academy of Magic was required to stock them—but compared to the techniques of sorcery, which typically took decades of training, “with ease” hardly began to describe it.

There were, of course, incidents and mishaps associated with the new availability of magic potions. The ones responsible for dealing with such cases were the Magical Incident Investigation Division of the Church and Mage Brigade's Mage Battalion. Within the Division there was even a special unit for handling potion-related problems: "Calvacatena"—the Chains of the Deer.

"So why is our unit called the Chains of the Deer, anyway?" the new recruit asked, trying to make small talk.

The man blinked in surprise at his question, then burst out laughing. "So you still haven't met the captain!"

"N-No. I only got my assignment yesterday, and out of the blue they told me to join up with this unit and get myself up to speed, that's all. Will I understand once I meet the captain?"

"That's one way o' puttin' it... Right?"

The man nudged the woman next to him with his elbow, and she shrugged. "Well, this whole unit *was* set up by the captain in the first place."

"So the captain likes deer...?"

"Hey, you're pretty damn funny!"

The man guffawed again, and the new recruit rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. He couldn't help but feel that knowing nothing about the leader of his new unit was an awful lapse.

"I'm sorry... I only found out yesterday that this unit even existed—I had no idea there was a team that specialized in magic potions."

"Don't worry about it. Magic potions have only been around for three years, and Calvacatena has only been together for one. I didn't find out about the unit 'til I got transferred here, either."

“Anyway, I figure you’ll get it the moment you see the captain... Lemme give you a bit o’ background, though. See, there never used to be any specialist unit, but there was this one person who jus’ couldn’t let anyone get away with using potions to cause trouble. Even the insignificant little incidents that anyone else’d kick into the tall grass, she just couldn’t let ’em go... She’d convince her commanding officer she could handle it all on her own, and off she went—and she never came back empty-handed.”

“She must really be something.”

“She sure as hell is. One day her commander looked at the offender she’d brought in, and said, ‘What, another fool caught by the chains of the deer? You know what, take charge of all the magic potion cases from now on. Form a new unit, take whoever you need.’”

The recruit looked puzzled. “But where does the deer part come from? I still don’t get it.”

“Everyone fall in! Captain’s orders!”

Their small talk was cut short. The older soldiers grabbed their gear and dashed off, so the recruit had no choice but to follow. He had no idea why they were assembling, but nevertheless joined the other ten or so members of the unit where they were clustered around a wooden box—on which stood a lone mage.

“Oh...”

The other soldiers had been right: he could see at a glance where the unit had gotten its name. Atop the mage’s head, a pair of magnificent antlers jutted into the sky, the jewels and ornaments that adorned their many branches glittering in the sunlight. She looked terribly young to be leading her own unit—twenty, or

even younger. But the elegant and imposing air with which she gazed out over her troops took the recruit's breath away.

"Is that everyone?" she asked.

A tension gripped the unit the moment she began to speak. It was clear they all stood in awe of her. The more experienced soldiers who had been so casual earlier were now completely frozen in place, giving the captain their full attention.

"Our target today has been making illegal magic potions in large quantities. The Academy has analyzed the contents to try and determine what demon is responsible for the magic they're using, but they weren't able to find a match. In other words, when we charge in, we won't be able to neutralize the potions they use against us."

A small murmur went through the unit.

Ah, right, thought the new recruit. He recalled that every potion sold at market clearly stated which demon's magic was sealed inside. With the right talisman to counter that demon, the potion became nothing more than a bottle of liquid. *But it sounds like this time around, things won't be that easy. I'm getting thrown into the deep end on my first day.*

The recruit cleared his throat, and for an intense moment the captain met his eyes. He gave a start, but she just treated him to a mischievous grin, almost like a child's smile.

"So I figure this time around, maybe we shouldn't just charge in!"

A stir went through the unit.

"Everyone who can cast Etorahk, please step forward!"

At this, the entire unit took one step toward her. Hesitantly, the rookie did

the same.

“Right then, I’ll go over the plan!”

+++

I never intended for this to happen.

I knew they had to be closing in on me, since I was producing so many illegal magic potions—but I have no regrets on that front. The potions I sold allowed me to buy *these*... And *these* are something I absolutely need to take home with me.

I stuffed as many into my bag as I could and dashed out of the cabin...but I didn’t get very far. There was a wall of rock in front of me, just a few paces outside the door. I was completely stunned.

This wasn’t here a minute ago...

The walls stretched in all directions, seemingly encircling the cabin. It wasn’t just that, though—the sky above me was shrinking.

Then the realization hit: *No, the walls are growing.*

The stone walls were rising as if sucking up earth from the ground below. Finally they met, covering the sky completely. The whole cabin was swallowed by darkness.

I panicked. Creating a magical light, I went back inside and grabbed a few bottles.

With my potions in hand, the wall should present no obstacle at all.

Without hesitation, I tossed a potion at the wall, which crumbled like sand... but no light shone from the opening.

I broke through! How can—?

Stepping through the hole I'd made, I found another identical wall beyond.

...It can't be... Have they shut me up in a nesting box?!

I smashed through this second wall, and just as I'd feared, found another identical one awaiting me on the other side.

Trapped—!

You think you can make a fool of me...?!

I tossed every last magic potion I had at the walls.

Doesn't matter how many layers deep they go, I just have to destroy them all. Whoever's waiting on the other side, I'll blow them away, too.

The walls fell with great, thundering booms. I closed my eyes against the sudden flash of light, then looked up, relieved by the sunlight pouring in. I started to make a run for it, but halted myself immediately.

Impossible... A...A cliff?!

After blasting through five walls, I now stood atop a cliff, the earth unexpectedly falling away before me. It was far too high to jump down, and looking around, I saw that the sheer drop now encircled me just as completely as the walls had.

Then:

“Look, they’re out!”

The voice drew my gaze—it sounded out of place, far too cheerful for the situation. On the far side of this newly created rift stood about ten people, all dressed identically. They were led by a young woman—with two antlers sprouting from her head.

...An Exinov? There are Exinov even here, in the Forbidden Land...?!

Suddenly all the tension in my body melted away. I felt completely at ease, as if I’d just met my mother in a faraway land.

“Hey! Are you the kind of criminal we can reason with?!” the horned Exinov called out with a wave.

“O proud and noble Exinov! I welcome your dominion!”

The Exinov looked confused by my words, her eyes briefly meeting those of her underlings. I strained my ears to catch their whispered conversation. I do have excellent hearing, after all.

“What’d they say? ‘Exinov’?”

“New one on me...”

“Think they have me confused with someone else...?”

“Is there anyone besides you with antlers like those?”

“Hmm... Not that I know of, but if there were, I guess it would be an easy mistake to make...? What sh’we do? They say they welcome my dominion or whatever—should I just pretend to be this ‘Exinov’ character?”

I see, so they don’t have the word “Exinov” in the Forbidden Land. There’s no doubt she holds a high position, though.

I raised my voice to be heard.

“I beg your forgiveness for my rudeness and ignorance, as I do not know the proper form of address! I am Har Bell the Ignas, servant to the Exinov! I have come to the Forbidden Land in order to save my home! I humbly request an audience!”

The Exinov exchanged another glance with her underlings, then more whisperings about my nature ensued.

“We don’t seem to be getting anywhere... Might not be the kind of criminal we can reason with after all, huh.”

The Exinov called to me from where she stood. “Um, do you mind just showing us your face—?!”

I obeyed at once, removing my hood. My ears, which had been folded up within, sprung at once to attention.

“It’s...a total bunny babe!”

4

“The culprit has already been apprehended?!”

It had been a long time since Saybil left the Forbidden Library, and Los had taken him to the Academy of Magic to hear the recent news and gather information. Naturally, the Academy was informed about any and all incidents involving magic potions.

They had gone straight to the headmaster’s office, where Los had asked about new developments in the case—to which Albus had casually responded that the one responsible had already been caught. The shock sent Los reeling

backwards, but then she leaned in close, pressing Albus for answers.

“When did this occur?! In what wise was it accomplished?! And just when young Sayb and I had hurried here to solve the case, too! Who was it stole my thunder so?!”

“Seems like the Chains of the Deer took care of it.”

“So this is young Hort’s doiiiiing?! How then can I complaaaaain?!”

Los ruffled her long blonde hair and stamped her feet in impotent rage. The Staff of Ludens stroked her head, trying to calm her down.

“The Chains of the Deer is the unit Hort leads, right?” asked Saybil.

Los nodded. “An elite unit in charge of all incidents involving magic potions. Hort can’t bear to see thy precious inventions being put to ill use, you see.”

“Amazing... I can’t believe Hort caught them so easily, when they were able to make their own magic potions and everything.”

“Actually, there’s something a bit strange about our criminal,” said Albus. “To be honest I’m glad you’re here, Loux Krystas—and that you’ve brought Saybil with you.” She put a hand to her forehead, as if something was weighing on her mind.

“Now this *is* unusual,” Los marveled, her eyes wide. “Thou dost welcome me without irony? How strange can this ne’er-do-well be?”

“She says she came from the north. *Across the ocean.*”

The ocean—Saybil conjured up a blurry map of the world in his head.

First of all, the world had one continent. It was shaped like a fattened crescent moon, and while there was an archipelago in the south, this was still considered part of “the Great Continent.” Generally, anyone claiming to come

from across the ocean would be understood to mean those islands. Even if there were islands to the north, the whole region was at present a land of death overrun by the Remnants of Disaster—there was no way for ships to travel there.

So that must mean...

“She’s...from the New World?” asked Saybil.

Albus nodded. “Yes. She crossed the Ocean of Death, which none can cross.”

Saybil looked at Los, who was sitting bolt upright beside him. She was Loux Krystas, the Dawn Witch, contracted to the Staff of Ludens and seeker of all things new and unique. There was no way she could resist jumping on such an intriguing story. Her silence, then, was somewhat unsettling in its own way...

“Professor Los?”

“Kh... Ah... N...N...New...w-w...oh, oh, ohohohoh...”

“Headmaster, I think Professor Los is...!”

“The news has broken her...”

“This is too much thrill to come so suddenlyyyyyy!” Los shot up from the headmaster’s sofa like a firework. Her rainbow-colored eyes gleamed, her cheeks flushed pink, and the flowers adorning her hair all bloomed magnificently. Saybil didn’t think he’d seen Los this excited since she’d come face to face with the Zero, the very inventor of magic.

“...You’re so cute when you get excited, Professor Los, I almost want to freeze you like that forever.”

“What art...?! Thy choice of words is terrifying!” Los’s cheeks rapidly drained of their rosy blush, and the flowers on her head wilted.

“I was trying to compliment you... Was it really that weird?”

He looked questioningly at Albus, who hmm’d and nodded. “It’s your extra-serious expression that makes it scary—it almost looked like you meant it...”

“But I did mean it.”

“You can’t seriously want to freeze her forever?!”

“How ’bout a statue, then... Bronze, maybe...!”

“Ahhhhh enough! No more, no more!” cried Los suddenly. “There lives no artist with genius enough to properly capture my fair form!”

“But you’re practically immortal, Professor Los, and in theory I’ll live for at least a few hundred years as well. Maybe that genius *will* show up someday.”

“What an eternal bother! Be it Fianos or thee, this is precisely why I detest the affection of those with lifespans on par with my own!”

Rejected so thoroughly and sincerely, Saybil couldn’t help but feel disheartened.

Albus snorted. “You make a habit of sticking your nose into *other* people’s love lives, Loux Krystas, but look how cold you are to this young man who’s fallen for *you*.”

“’Tis only natural. Fires are an interesting spectacle when they spring up on the far bank... Yet when the flames spread to my side of the river, I must rush to put them out.”

“Sounds tough, being pursued by the fires of love.”

“Thou vexeth me so! With that self-satisfied grin plastered across thy face...!”

“I’m on your side you know, Saybil. I’ll get in touch if I come across any genius artists,” said Albus, looking delighted that for once she had the upper hand in

the conversation.

“I am far more interested in hearing of this New World than in continuing such prattle.”

“I’d kind of like to talk about love a little longer.”

“Albus. I have a great antipathy for importunate persistence in the face of refusal. Be mindful of where thou treadest—especially if there is some part of thine own heart which thou dost not want trampled.”

Loux Krystas’s eyes gleamed, and Albus held up her hands in surrender.

“I’m not trying to make an enemy of you with girl talk. After all, you’ve been pursuing the New World for a hundred years now—you’re my expert.”

“Just so. And now my century of searching has borne fruit. Who is this visitor from the New World, anyway? Are they not merely some babbling blowhard?”

“To be honest, given what I’ve heard so far, I think she’s the real deal. But even with the power of the Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten Thousand Leagues, we haven’t been able to confirm the existence of the New World.”

Saybil cocked his head. The Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten Thousand Leagues was the true name of the chief librarian of the Forbidden Library. He was a demon who loved humankind, and had the ability to see what was happening anywhere in the world at any time. And yet...

“He can’t confirm its existence? I thought he could see anything he wanted?”

“The chief librarian’s power isn’t as close to omniscience as you might think. He can’t see inside magical barriers or the Church’s precincts, and if a demon more powerful than himself controls a place, apparently he can’t see there either.”

“So are you saying...the New World is surrounded by some kind of barrier?”

“I can’t deny the possibility. Everyone’s had dreams about taking to the sea and finding the New World, but no one’s ever actually succeeded. I mean, even the Dawn Witch herself has failed time and time again.”

Saybil looked at Los.

“I would hesitate to dub it failure... Well, of a sort, perhaps.” Los flopped down, resting her elbows on the sofa, then gave the table a couple of sharp raps. At this, black liquid began to ooze from the sphere embedded in the tip of the Staff of Ludens, spreading out onto the table and transforming into a map of the world in the blink of an eye. “This is the Great Continent, where we are now. ’Tis surrounded by ocean on all sides, and beyond that—nothing. A few islets that do not find their way onto nautical charts, perhaps, but that is all.”

“Like Black Dragon Isle, you mean?”

“Indeed. The home of the Dragon Conqueror King is just such a place. Legend had it that a dragon was sealed away there—and it was there that the legendary dragon was in fact reborn. The Great Continent abounds with rumors of dragons, but the only one that has ever been seen in flight is Heath, steed to the Dragon Conqueror King. ’Tis strange. No matter how one considers the matter, this world is far too *small*.”

“Small...? What do you mean?”

“I have devoured the legends and ancient texts, and...yes, I believe what we call ‘the world’ is altogether too small to be worthy of the name. *This* is perhaps more appropriate for the area in which we do our deeds.”

The map of the continent shrunk before their eyes, until it occupied only about a quarter of the table. The rest of the space was empty ocean.

“But there’s nothing out there, right? When you actually go and look, I mean.”

“Quite so... There is naught but ocean. Leave a western port and travel straight as an arrow for several months, and thou wilt arrive at a port in the east. ’Tis as if one were traversing the surface of a sphere.”

Los lightly waved her staff, and the map on the table balled itself up into a floating globe.

“Ships departing from ports in the North, however, *sink without exception*. No vessel in history has ever made the voyage around from a northern port to a southern one.”

“So that’s the Ocean of Death... And you’ve been there, Professor Los?”

“Yes. And sunk.”

“You came back safe and sound, though.”

“I prepared for the voyage on the assumption my ship would sink.” Los cackled. “The ocean was dark and deep indeed. No matter how far down I went, I reached not the bottom, nor could I see mine own hand before my face.”

The globe hovering above the table was sucked back into the Staff of Ludens.

“There is one more strange thing to tell about the Ocean of Death.”

“What is it?”

“What dost thou suppose happens to ships that sail from the South?”

“Huh? Umm... Well, if ships from the North always sink, I don’t suppose any from the South could make it there... So I guess they must sink, too?”

“They do not. Ships that leave from the South always return to the South.”

Huh? Saybil thought for a moment. *Something’s off... It sounds less like we*

can't go to the New World, and more like...

"It's like we're...sealed in, isn't it?"

Los snapped her fingers. "I have a great love for discerning eyes that doubt their world. I believe it to be so. That several hundred—or even several thousand—years ago, some entity trapped us on this continent."

A chill ran up Saybil's spine.

"Well?" asked Los, grinning at him. "Does the thought not excite thee?"

"I-It does... Though I'm not sure whether I'm excited or terrified..."

"You shouldn't just accept everything Loux Krystas is saying at face value, Saybil," Albus put in. "It's a theory, nothing more. A fairy tale that can never be proven."

"*Could* never," Los cut in. "Not until now, with the advent of this traveler from the New World."

Albus shrugged, then laughed. "To be honest, it terrifies me, too."

5

THE TESTIMONY OF HAR BELL THE IGNAS

O proud and noble Exinov.

First, please allow me to apologize for breaking your laws. I desperately require a great number of mana potions in order to save my home...

Yes, that's right. It was all to gather the necessary funds.

Luckily those “magic potions” I found for sale were well within even my power to recreate. I thought if such poor-quality products were received so gratefully, customers would be just as happy to buy my “wizard phials”...

Hm? Oh, yes. That’s what they’re called where I come from. There are all different kinds, as well as a plethora of thaumaturgical devices powered by sorcery. Though of course they’re never sold to the Nurabehn [N.B.: name for the outcaste in New World society. Decided against digging any deeper into the class system for the time being].

Huh...?

Ah...aha...!

I see!

S-So that’s why there are so many low-quality products in circulation. It’s true, even an ignorant Nurabehn could use those things without incident. As for the wizard phials I had in my possession, you’re right... They are dangerous. I’m sorry, it was rash of me.

Your mana potions, however! Those are truly wondrous inventions! Where I come from, the mana of the land is drying up, so when we use sorcery, our mana doesn’t really replenish. More elderly wizards [N.B.: this appears to be the term used for both witches and sorcerers in the New World] have it especially tough. All people have mana in their flesh, and once it dries up, they die. Did you know that when the mana of the land gets too scant, people can’t even become spirits after death?

We scrape by from one day to the next, gathering what few fragments of mana we can. And the mana shortage has only accelerated these past few years.

But we had this one ray of hope!

The blank space on our maps of the world—the Forbidden Land. Many wizards theorized that perhaps that sacred realm, which rebuffed our every intrusion, might have some mana left. By “the Forbidden Land,” I mean this continent, of course... And now that I’m here, it turns out their theories were correct! There’s mana here in such plenty that you can sell it on the street.

Yes, of course. We have no wish to plunder your precious mana resources. But if you have enough to sell, I’d like you to trade with us. That’s why I intended to gather funds and purchase a number of mana potions to take home with me. With them, I hoped to open up the possibility of a formal trade agreement. Half of my people believe the wizards’ theories about the Forbidden Land’s mana, but the other half don’t. There won’t be any trade unless I can show them the goods and convince them of the truth.

But it’s no wonder they don’t believe. The Forbidden Land is protected by a barrier; it’s not like you can just stroll right in. The fact is, no one was even sure this place existed... I believed, though.

And now look! Here I am!

—Recorded by Hort, captain of Calvacatena

“So, is there a possibility...that this is...my fault?” Saybil asked, trembling as he looked up at Albus from the paper she had just handed him.

—And the mana shortage has only accelerated these past few years.

That one line—it was exactly what Saybil had been worried about.

“To be honest, I don’t know. All we have is this testimony. We’ve never actually been there.”

“What be this ‘proud and noble Exinov’ she speaketh of?”

“I don’t know that either. That’s what this Har Bell calls Hort. And Hort’s also the only one she’s willing to talk to, so that’s why we had her do the questioning.”

“Exinov... Exinov, eh... In the old tongue it means something to the effect of ‘sage,’ as I recall. Though perhaps, given the context, ’tis an honorable form of address used for one’s betters?”

“So if these Nurabehn are the outcaste, I suppose Har Bell is somewhere right in the middle?” Saybil mused. “She can make wizard phials, and given how little she seems to think of the Nurabehn based on her testimony, I doubt she’s one of them.”

“Thine interpretation seems largely correct. The word Nurabehn is, incidentally, an ancient one meaning ‘unprotected.’”

“Sometimes you get super wise all of a sudden, don’t you...” muttered Albus.

“I am always wise! I have lived for over three centuries!”

Albus offered a perfunctory apology, holding up her hands to mollify the irate Dawn Witch.

“This person’s name is written as Har Bell the Ignas,” Saybil said, pointing at the title of the document. “Do you think Ignas is her social class?”

“Idler,” answered Los calmly.

“Huh? Sorry.” Saybil apologized reflexively, and Los glared at him with

displeasure.

“I wasn’t scolding thee. ’Tis the meaning of the word.”

“Ahh...” Saybil pondered this for a moment. “So Har Bell called herself an idler when she gave her name?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“That’s...kind of weird, isn’t it? It’s not like she slipped some self-deprecation into the conversation; she’s saying it like it’s her official title.”

“Right...” sighed Albus. “The sages, the idlers, and the unprotected—hmm. From what she says, it sounds like a strict social hierarchy, but these Exinov might even be treated like kings or gods.”

“And she refers to this continent as the Forbidden Land... A sacred realm, protected by a barrier...” Los looked up at the ceiling, lost in thought. “We may feel as if we are sealed in, but from the outside I suppose it must seem we are shutting others out. We clearly have differing values, and some small differences of speech... And there is a certain creeping elitism in her way, if she would speak only to Hort, whom she views as a ‘proud and noble Exinov.’” Los nodded then, putting on an air of absolute solemnity...but a moment later there was a grin on her face. “It really does exist, then... The New World.”

“Sure seems like it,” Albus replied.

“Do you think we’ll be able to reach it?” asked Saybil.

Albus gave a thoughtful *hmm*. “I mean, if it’s there, then we’ve got no choice but to go—at least, that’s what I think.”

They aren’t considering whether or not it’s possible—only whether or not to do it. Saybil nodded in comprehension. *I need to change the way I’m asking this question.*

“Can I go with you?”

There was silence. Then Albus clutched her head in her hands.

“There’s no *way* I can go, is there! I’ve got too much work to dooooo!”

“Well, I for one shall be going! Just you try and stop me!”

“We need to form...a diplomatic delegation!”

“Uhm, I... That is, Headmaster Albus, I want to be part of it...!”

“Well, your participation is practically guaranteed, Saybil,” Albus said.

Behind his expressionless mask, Saybil was flooded with joy.

“And what of me, Albus? What of *me*?!”

“Yes, well... Hmm... It’s true that you’re deeply knowledgeable on the subject of New World lore... And there really aren’t any other candidates, so...”

“Right, then—! Come now, Sayb! Yay, I say, yaaay!”

Los raised her hand, and, following her lead, Saybil did the same. She slapped her palm hard against his, and he felt a pleasant tingle begin to spread.

“Hort’s the only one Har Bell will talk to, so she probably has to come along, too, right?”

“That’s gonna be a serious problem... She’s such a go-getter, I’ll really have to dig deep to find the manpower to fill her shoes!” Albus shot to her feet. “All right! Let’s draw up a roster! And letters of appointment! We’ll need to acquire a ship and determine the necessary cargo! Calculate the itinerary! Ah, curses... I’m not even *going* on the trip, and it’s *still* gonna be a ton of work for me! Holdem! Ho-o-oldem!”

Albus marched straight to her desk, loudly calling for her manservant.

Los got to her feet too, taking Saybil by the hand as she raced from the office.

“Come, young Sayb! ’Tis the start of a new chapter!”



Chapter Two



There were no doctors in the hinterlands. And nobody had the money to hire them even if there had been. The people had neither the knowledge to travel nor the books from which to gain that knowledge. And even should those books have been available, no one could read them. Diseases that could be healed within a week in the city often led to death out here.

Life could be terribly unfair—the place of a person’s birth held far too much sway over their fate. Most children born to farming families in the hinterlands would die there, knowing nothing of the world beyond their village.

—There are countless villages of that kind throughout the Great Continent... Villages cut off from medicine, education, and knowledge—and most rulers and politicians take no notice of them at all.

Kudo still sometimes recalled these words Headmaster Albus had said to him three years ago. An infectious disease had swept through this particular village several months earlier, and the lingering stench of decay hung heavy in the air. The people of the village had suffered and died, and nobody had noticed their plight; now they were all Kudo could think about.

—That’s why we take notice. And why you do, too.

Kudo knew there were people no one took any notice of. He also knew the powerful ray of hope it could provide when someone *did* take notice of them, even just for a moment. It was that hope that pushed him onward, that had brought him to where he was today.

With a detachment of just five mage medics, he had been pursuing rumors of disease and reports of conflict all across the continent, foregoing food and sleep to be where they were needed most. They saved many lives, but there were far more that they could not.

“Captain. We need to put the whole village to the torch, or...”

“...Do it.” Kudo nodded and turned away. He had no time to linger over the dead—not when his next patient was waiting.

“It could be that animals are feeding on the corpses and spreading the infection to neighboring communities.”

“Yeah, could be. Let’s do a once-around and leave some potions at each village.”

“We should write to Faeria in the Holy City of Akdios. If this disease spreads to the towns, we may need support from the Mage Medics Corps.”

“You’re right...”

They piled the corpses in the center of the village square. The flame was lit, and white smoke billowed into the air.

Now Flagis to burn the houses, and our work here is done. “Hey... You think we’ll make it in time?” Kudo asked suddenly.

His subordinate immediately understood what he was asking. This village had been decimated several months ago, and if the infection had spread to neighboring settlements, it was possible they had already met a similar fate.

"I still remember a year ago, Captain: you practically tore me a new one when I said, 'We aren't going to make it in time, so why bother?'"

Kudo smirked. "Did I?"

"You said that if there's even one villager left alive, then as far as that person's concerned, we 'made it in time'—isn't that right?"

"...That's right." Kudo raised his eyes. "Let's split up for the time being. Check out the surrounding villages and report back here in two days' time. I'll stay to deal with the remains, and put in a request to Akdios to send a few people to help out."

"Sounds like a plan—especially since you can't ride a horse, huh, Captain?"

"Whaddaya want, I'm a goddessdamn beastfallen!"

Kudo beat the ground with his tail, and his four subordinates galloped off toward their respective destinations with grins on their faces.

Alone now in the village, Kudo began the process of purification. Cremating the corpses and burning down the houses was just the beginning. He had to fill in the well, lest passing travelers accidentally drink from it and contract the infection; he would also need to mark the surrounding trees to indicate that the village had been overrun by disease.

Normally this was work that he and his people would handle together—but right now it was more efficient for him to take care of it alone. Until the Academy of Magic could increase its matriculation rate and graduate more students with a talent for the Chapter of Protection, he and his tiny unit had no choice but to race around the entire continent. But Kudo's mobility was significantly limited by his inability to ride a horse, and without a cart pulled by his subordinates' mounts, it would have been impossible for them to cover long

distances. A properly trained war horse might not balk at a beastfallen rider—but Kudo had neither the time to procure such a horse nor to train it. So whenever they needed to be in more than one place at the same time, Kudo stayed behind.

“Wish I had a dragon,” he sighed, looking up at the sky. “...Wonder what they’re doin’ right about now.”

He conjured memories of three years past, racing madly to escape death with his friends at his side. They had taught him so many invaluable lessons—about believing in other people, working together, relying on others—and from time to time he was overwhelmed with yearning for them. Especially in the moments when it felt like he might be crushed under the weight of his own powerlessness.

Kudo narrowed his eyes. Thin trails of smoke rose from the embers of the burned houses into a sky dyed red by the setting sun, and he could see a flock of birds in the distance.

“...Hm? What’s that?”

It was a little too big to be a bird—and as it gradually descended, the flying shadow became as immense as...

“A dragon...?! What the hell’s the Dragon Conqueror King doing here...?!”

The beating of the dragon’s wings sent the ash and smoke of the burning village swirling up into the air. Kudo instinctively looked away as the dragon landed before him with a booming thud. Its rider looked down at him, clad head to toe in black armor: Ghoda, the Dragon Conqueror King. This great knight rode the only dragon that soared through the skies of the Great Continent, at least as far as anyone knew. He could use no magic, but as part of the Church

and Mage Brigade's Mage Battalion, he took on a wide range of missions that had him flying constantly to every corner of the land.

"You look terrible." With this greeting, the Dragon Conqueror King's scowl turned even more grim. "I saw the smoke from above. No survivors?"

"...No."

"You alone?"

"There's a chance the disease could spread, so I sent my people to the neighboring villages..."

"I see. You'll be asking the Holy City for aid, then?"

"Yes. I was just about to write to Faeria... You got a message for me?"

"An urgent summons. Sorry, but I'll need you to leave your unit a note and come with me at once."

Kudo was taken aback at this sudden turn, and looked up at Ghoda. "An urgent... War broken out or somethin'?"

"No. They're forming a diplomatic delegation."

"A delegation? To where?"

"The New World."

"Look, I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're talkin' about." Kudo's scales turned a confused and doubtful gray.

Ghoda shrugged. "To be honest, I don't really get it either. My job's to follow Chief State Mage Albus's orders and bring you to the Kingdom of Wenias. You'll have to ask her for the particulars."

"But—"

“We’ll stop by the Holy City of Akdios on the way. You can request the aid of the Mage Medic Corps in person. It’ll be faster than sending a letter.”

“That’s not what I...” Kudo looked around at the desolate village, now nothing more than a smoldering black smudge on the land.

“If I accept the summons, I won’t be able to come back for a while, right? I can’t go, no way. I’ve got things to do here, and there are countless sick people waitin’ for me to treat ’em. Whenever we get to big towns, there are letters from all over askin’ us for help...! I won’t be able to help *any* of them if I come with you!”

“You’ve got subordinates, don’t you? And magic potions.”

“But I’m their captain!”

“So what?”

Ghoda gazed down at Kudo with a skeptical look on his face.

Kudo suddenly felt irritated—it seemed like nothing he said was getting through to the knight. “I’m not going.”

“...What?”

That blunt statement finally got the message across, and Ghoda’s expression became terribly stern... Not that he was much prone to smiling anyway. He wore a more or less permanent look of displeasure, glaring at anyone and everyone he spoke with. His tone was always cold as well, which people often mistook for anger. Kudo, however, knew precisely what kind of man the Dragon Conqueror King was—which was why he could tell that, for the first time in his experience, Ghoda really was furious.

“Are you not a member of the Church and Mage Brigade?”

“S-So what if I am?”

“Then you are a part of an organization, a system of cogs meant to turn in concert. One cog moving in the wrong direction disrupts the movement of the entire group.”

“I-I didn’t join the Church and Mage Brigade to obey weird summons I don’t even understand!” Kudo beat the ground with his tail. “More important to me than turnin’ some freakin’ cogs is goin’ out there and saving people who might die tomorrow! If I ain’t a useful cog, go ahead and cast me off!”

Ghoda opened his mouth, then closed it again. He breathed a long, deep sigh. “You aren’t making it in time.”

“...What?”

“Look around you. This village that asked for your help has been wiped out.”

“What are you tryin’ a say?!”

“You have support from the Kingdom of Wenias, you’re a member of the Church and Mage Brigade, and you have four elite medics by your side, and still you didn’t make it in time. So... What? You’re going to give in to a momentary flush of emotion and tell us to cast you off? What will you do then? Run around this continent on your own with nobody to support you? I’m sure you’ll save a lot more folks that way!”

Ghoda leapt down and landed with a clank of his heavy armor, sending up a cloud of ash from the ground. Faced with the rage pouring from this mighty knight, Kudo couldn’t help but take a step back.

“Without you, your subordinates will continue to race around the continent as they have been. They’ll find a new captain and forget all about you. That’s how organizations keep going: by changing out cogs when necessary. Countless

cogs, switched to better places to be more efficient and accomplish more by their deeds.”

Ghoda was drawing closer step by step, but Kudo’s stubborn pride wouldn’t let him retreat any further. He stood his ground.

“So I’m just suppose’ta follow any orders you give me without question?!”

“You’re prepared to disrupt everything, then? Even if it means the ruin of our whole organization?!”

The scales all over Kudo’s body trembled under the Dragon Conqueror King’s browbeating.

“Do you understand what you’re doing? Deciding that these orders from your superiors are worthless, that your current work is more important, prioritizing your personal decision-making over the judgement of the organization...? What do you think would happen if everyone up and down the ranks did the same? What if the people under your command blew off your orders and dashed off on their own personal missions? And when you rebuked them for it, they just up and quit?! That’s exactly what *you’re* doing, Kudo!”

Finally, the two of them were standing face to face, so close that their foreheads were almost touching. Kudo could see his own frightened reflection in Ghoda’s burning eyes.

“Do you belong to an organization so twisted that it needs to be destroyed? If you leave now, someone else will take your place. Or do you think you’re so important that we couldn’t go on without you? Are your subordinates such simpletons that they can’t function without *you* in command?”

“Th-That’s—”

“An organization—is a group that divides responsibility between its members

such that no individual need bear too great a burden! I'll say this one more time, and I want you to respond very carefully. I have an urgent summons for you. Leave a letter for your unit, trust them, trust in the organization, and climb up onto my dragon. Now!"

"Y...Yessir."

"...Don't make me wait any longer. Quickly, now. Write."

Ghoda shoved Kudo in the chest, and he stumbled back. The knight turned around, as if he'd lost interest in the mage. *This* was the Dragon Conqueror King that Kudo knew—resignedly carrying out the tasks he'd been assigned, seemingly uninterested in anyone around him. Recently though, Kudo was starting to become less and less sure he really knew Ghoda. He even wondered if this truly was the man he looked up to, the one who had found Kudo in the North, on the verge of death, and had broken out in a smile like the dawning sun when he discovered that the beastfallen child still lived.

"So... Even you get genuinely pissed off sometimes, huh..."

"What kind of a foolish question is that?"

"Not so much a question as an observation, I guess..."

"I hate making the wrong decisions."

"...Aha."

"When saving one person means abandoning another to their fate, harboring regrets about your decision disrespects both the individual you saved and the one you didn't. If I'm told I can save a hundred lives by flying north, I'll abandon ten needy people standing right in front of me without a moment's hesitation—though these past three years, I've entrusted those people to your unit."

“...Uh huh.” Kudo looked around at the village he couldn’t save—the one Ghoda had asked him to protect. “...I didn’t make it in time. Not even close.”

“So it appears.”

“Not just here, either... There were so many others... So many I couldn’t save.”

“I’ve read the reports.”

“I’m sorry... Of course you’re angry... You left these people to my care, and I...”

Ghoda looked back over his shoulder, and when Kudo saw that the knight’s expression was once again a bitter scowl, he felt lost.

I don’t get it.

He thought he was sensitive to this kind of stuff—that he could read people, at least a little—but in that moment he had no idea what Ghoda was thinking, and Kudo felt he had gotten it all wrong.

Did they always feel this way, too?

His friends, the ones he had parted ways with three years earlier, sprang into his mind once more.

“You may abandon ten to save a hundred, and fail to save the hundred in the end. Even so, you continue onward for the sake of those you have yet to save. Such is our task.”

“So even with a dragon...that still happens...?”

“I have no time to be crushed under the weight of remorse. Prepare yourself. So long as you have the power to save others, you’ll always have to make hard choices. Who will you save? When? How many? In so deciding, you also choose

who you will abandon.”

“Prepare myself, huh...”

“Carry with you those lives you couldn’t save. Use those memories to save the next. With the support of an organization, you will absolutely save more than you could alone. When, and only when, the time comes that you know for a certainty you can save more by acting alone—then *you’ll* be the one to cast *us* off.”

2

“I’m part of the delegation to the New World?! What fool thought that one up?! I absolutely refuse!”

“How the hell were you lecturing *me*...?!”

Ghoda had delivered Kudo to the Kingdom of Wenias, then quickly turned on his heel and strode off to see to his next task...until he was called back by a white wolf beastfallen with a piece of parchment in his hands. This was Holdem, Albus’s personal manservant, head of the Academy’s Defense Forces and commander of the Church and Mage Brigade’s Beastfallen Battalion.

“You’re on the roster,” said Holdem. “Go with Kudo to the assembly hall.”

Ghoda was comically disoriented by this command, and despite his recent lecture on maintaining the order of the organization, he began a steady chorus of “No way, I’m not going.” It took one of his colleagues from the Church and Mage Brigade to finally settle him down: Mage Commander Amnir, who also happened to be Ghoda’s former master. When she appeared before him Ghoda suddenly straightened up, quit his whining, and hurried off toward the hall as if

nothing had happened.

Laaame...! was all Kudo could think, though it went unsaid thanks to the discretion he had cultivated over the past three years. He was finally starting to realize that the Dragon Conqueror King was human, too.

“Who’s on this freakin’ roster, anyway? How many of us are there?”

Holdem was walking a few steps behind the two of them, and Kudo did his best to get a surreptitious peek at the list he was carrying.

“Well, it’s just a small group for now, on one mid-sized vessel. And you know most all the names.”

Delegation Chief: Ghoda

Deputy Chief: Hort

Magic Potion Researcher: Saybil

Mage Medic: Kudo

Magic Analyst: Zero

Bodyguard: Mercenary

Church Representative and Chief Intelligence Officer: The Mask

Deputy Intelligence Officer: Lily

Navigator: Har Bell

Extra: Loux Krystas

“The hell?! I know every single one of these people! How shorthanded are you?!”

“You’re going on an expedition to an unknown land—it’s gonna be safer if you all know each other already!” Holdem growled in response.

“If Professor Zero, Mercenary, the priest, *and* Lily are all going, that pretty much spells the end for the Witch’s Village, don’t it?”

“With a huge stockpile of magic potions and the Tyrant’s traps, nobody’ll *ever* take that place down.”

“Oh, hey, Dragon Conqueror King... Looks like you’re in charge.”

“I’m *what*?!”

Ghoda, who had been hustling along a little ahead of them, jumped back and snatched the roster from Holdem’s hands. It was right there in black and white—“Delegation Chief: Ghoda.”

“Why wasn’t I informed? What’s this all about? I was ordered to bring Kudo here, nothing more...” And just like that, the torrent of grouching began all over again.

“I’ll explain everything later, let’s just get to the hall! We got everyone together as soon as you arrived!”

Holdem snatched the roster back from the Dragon Conqueror King and set off down the corridor. When he opened the doors to the hall, everyone on the list of names was there, standing around in twos and threes.

“Ohhh look, Sayb! Kudo’s here!”

One voice was especially boisterous, carrying over the rest. Kudo didn’t need to look to know who it was—just the general atmosphere in the room was enough to tell him she was there. As he shot Hort an indifferent look, she rushed over, pulling Saybil by the arm.



“Wh-Whoa...? Whooooaa?!” The closer she got to Kudo, the more Hort had to crane her neck to look up at him. “Kudo, haven’t you gotten, like...super huge?!”

“My body’s still growin’. I gotta replace my entire wardrobe every six months or so... It’s startin’ to make even me nervous. Anyway, you’re one to talk—how d’you even get through the door with those antlers?”

“I get through doors just fine! They’re wide, but they aren’t *that* tall!”

“Ain’t they heavy?”

“Not so much, now that I’ve gotten used to them. Plus they’re so cool! Look, I’ve even filed ’em into a nice horndo.”

Hort puffed out her chest, showing off her magnificently branching antlers. They were so striking that she almost looked more like a stag—but there was something delicate about them as well, as if the tips might break off at the slightest twist of a finger.

Kudo noticed the sparkling gemstones studding them in places, and leaned forward. “You put gems in your antlers?”

“Y-Yeah, so what...?! This is just a beastfallen way of being fashionable...!”

“I think they look frikkin’ awesome.”

This honest compliment sent Hort reeling back, where she promptly ducked behind Saybil. “Sayb, this is horrible! Kudo’s brain is broken!”

Saybil stared at Kudo with the same blank face he always wore. “You need someone to talk to?” he asked with solemn concern.

“You ain’t changed a bit these last three years, Saybil... Like, not at all, seriously. How old’re you now?”

“Uhm... Eighteen, maybe nineteen?”

“You’ve obviously stopped growing.”

“Yeah, I made it stop,” Saybil said casually, looking over at a corner of the hall where Loux Krystas was locked in conversation with Zero, frowning as she stacked books one atop the other. “If I grew any more than this, I’d be totally out of whack with Professor Los... And I’m worried it’d impinge on her vanity when we stand next to each other.”

“You...still haven’t given up on her...?!”

“Huh? No, I haven’t. Not now, not ever.”

“And Hort, you still have a thing for this guy?” Kudo asked.

“Huh? Of course!”

“Is it some rule that mages all have to be clingy...?”

Kudo sat down in a nearby chair, and Hort and Saybil sandwiched him. Saybil was left-handed, and Hort and Kudo were right-handed; even after three years apart, they found themselves lining up in the same old way.

Ghoda remained standing by the door as if indicating his refusal to join the group, but at a sign from Holdem, the others took their seats. Lily was the only member of the party not tall enough for the chairs, so Mercenary offered to let her sit on his lap. This provoked a weary “She’s not a child” from the priest, however, and the situation was finally resolved by allowing her to take off her shoes and sit on the table instead.

Kudo wasn’t sure which of the two options actually seemed more mature, but given that Lily was a grown woman, Mercenary’s lap definitely would have been a weird choice.

“Looks like everyone’s present and accounted for,” said Holdem. “Okay then, I’ll be going over the details of the mission. I’m sure all of you aside from Kudo and the Dragon Conqueror King have a rough idea of why you’re here, but listen quietly ‘til I’m done.”

“How come you guys already know what’s goin’ on? ‘Specially *you*, Saybil! You’ve been shut up in the Forbidden Library all this time!”

“There are unregulated magic potions in circulation,” Saybil replied. “So Professor Los came to get me.”

“Hanh?”

“My unit was the one investigating the case,” Hort put in. “That hot bunny babe over there is Har Bell, the one we caught in our sting.”

“Did you hear *anything* I just said...? Do you people have any intention of listening to me at all...?”

Like Ghoda, the “bunny babe” in question had ignored the increasingly dejected Holdem’s signal to sit, and was leaning against the wall watching the proceedings. At Hort’s mention, she straightened up.

Kudo looked over at her. “You’re tellin’ me a beastfallen was making and selling illegal magic potions...? That don’t make sense...”

Beastfallen hated witches because witches hunted them to use as offerings in their sorcery. It had been that way for decades, centuries. It was Kudo who was out of step with the world—he was the only one of his kind to graduate from the Academy of Magic. Even Holdem, while he might’ve been able to assist the headmaster in her sorcerous rituals, wasn’t able to use magic or sorcery himself.

But this Har Bell can make magic potions? How?

“She hails from the New World. Har Bell traversed the Ocean of Death to come here,” said Los, reading Kudo’s doubts and answering the questions forming in his mind as she always did.

“The New World...” He scratched his chin. *All right, come on. What’s this all about?*

Kudo was well aware of the skill and talent possessed by the individuals assembled before him. But now the whole lot of them were suddenly talking about children’s stories.

“Huuuh? You don’t surprise easily, do you, Kudo.” Hort pouted.

“When the shock gets over a certain level, it kinda turns to calm.”

“I figured you’d say all this was ridiculous,” said Saybil.

“In front of *these* people? Though my gray matter and common sense *are* takin’ a real pummelin’ right now, I don’t mind tellin’ ya.” *If they believe in this... then I’ve got no choice but to believe in it, too.*

“And so we’ve decided to send a small, elite group—that’s you—across the Ocean of Death to see if the New World really does exist,” Holdem broke in, forcibly wresting back the reins of the conversation.

Everyone’s eyes finally drifted in his direction.

“It’s well known that the Ocean of Death sinks every ship that sails it. Loux Krystas has first-hand experience with this, in fact—she once went down with a ship seeking the New World. So did you run aground, or...?”

Holdem looked at Los, who put her elbows on the table and closed her eyes, as if calling forth a distant memory.

“Well... That was the official account, true enough... But to be perfectly frank,

I cannot for the life of me say what happened. The entire ship suddenly stood on end and was...swallowed...by the ocean..."

Holdem's ears drooped. "You had the Staff of Ludens with you, right? But you couldn't even see some measly reef or whatever it was?"

"I could have, of course, were it there to see! But I saw nothing, and the cause remains unknown. There was nothing to collide with. The sea was calm, with nary a fish in sight... Yet suddenly the vessel was sucked into the drink."

Holdem looked at Har Bell. "Do you have any records of the Ocean of Death?"

His question met with silence.

Holdem cleared his throat.

At this, Hort sighed. "Har Bell, will you answer Holdem's question?"

"If that is your wish, Exinov."

Kudo looked at Hort and scowled. *The hell was that?*

Hort noticed his questioning gaze and quietly passed him a scrap of paper.

Har Bell seems to think I'm some kind of higher race, and she'll only obey me... It's convenient to let her keep thinking that, so everyone's going along with it. Apparently her goal is to import mana to her home, so as far as she's concerned, Sayb's just "a person who can make mana potions"—keep the "infinite source of mana" part a secret for now!

So that's what's going on. Ghoda definitely needs to know this, too. When Kudo looked up from the note, though, he saw Ghoda with his arms folded, holding his own fluttering scrap of paper lightly between his fingertips.

“I spent a full decade researching this Forbidden Land, but there are very few extant records,” Har Bell explained. “Every one of our ships is likewise sunk by the gatekeepers.”

“Gatekeepers?” Kudo asked.

A faint frown crossed Har Bell’s beautiful face. “The ancient texts give them many names—‘the Watchers’ and ‘the Guardians of the Abyssal Door’ appear frequently. But all accounts agree that on the way to the Forbidden Land there is an invisible door, and that this door is protected by some sort of keepers.”

“Then how’d *you* get here?”

“She flew, apparently,” answered Hort. “Har Bell, will you show everyone?”

Har Bell reached into her pocket and drew out a tiny birdcage. It was almost like a toy, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, and inside it was an equally small bird—which was *moving*. The miniscule creature, no bigger than the tip of Har Bell’s little finger, was calmly preening its feathers. She opened the cage and released the bird out the window. As soon as it left the cage it began to grow before their eyes, and without hesitation Har Bell leapt out the window after it, landing on the bird’s back. Kudo and Ghoda couldn’t help but rush over to watch her wheeling through the sky outside.

“Wh-What is that...? A...dragon?”

“No way, that’s definitely a bird! But there ain’t even any Remnant of Disaster that compares to that thing!”

“The creature *is* similar to a Remnant of Disaster in its nature, though,” Zero said quietly.

Staggeringly beautiful with long silver hair, Zero was the Mud-Black Witch, inventor of magic. She had lived for over a century, and in addition to knowing

more about magic than anyone in the world, she possessed a thoroughgoing knowledge of sorcery and demonology.

Kudo turned to look at her as she continued.

“Witches can indeed use demonic power to transform animals, enhance them, and use them as mounts. Where we would call them ‘familiars,’ however, apparently they’re referred to as ‘thaumatheria’ in the rabbit’s homeland. And they buy and sell them as we might trade in simple livestock.”

“They buy and sell familiars like...livestock...?!”

“It just goes to show how deeply sorcery permeates their society. According to the rabbit, they’ve made huge strides in sorcery in this New World of theirs. War with the Church set our sorcery back five centuries. It seems reasonable to assume that their world never suffered any such stagnation.”

“Five more centuries of progress...?” Kudo was at a loss for words.

“Now we come to the crux of it,” said Holdem, picking up where Zero had left off. “If the New World is so advanced in sorcery, then we would be fools not to establish trade with them. Knowledge, technology, resources—the New World holds a wealth of possibilities for us. And according to Har Bell, they’re facing a severe mana shortage at present.”

“So we’re going to export mana potions?”

“That’s the idea. For now we’ll just be sending one ship loaded with ‘em. You’ll use those to bring back as much information about the New World as you can. The members of this delegation have been chosen for another reason as well: if *you* can’t get through, any other expedition would be wiped out, no matter how many thousands of people we sent.”

Kudo looked around again at the assembled faces. There was Saybil, with his

bottomless well of mana, and Zero, who was supposedly capable of destroying the entire world.

With these two together, I bet we could sink a whole armada in a second flat. But then...

“If everyone here takes off for the New World, ain’t things gonna kinda fall apart around here?” Kudo looked over at the Dragon Conqueror King. “Professor Zero’s been holed up in her village for a long time anyway, so I can understand her coming... But if the Dragon Conqueror King’s comin’ with us, too, what about rapid transport? Like, how’re the Mage Medics gonna get around to handle disease outbreaks and stuff? I mean, we ain’t even on top of the situation as it stands.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Holdem replied. “To be honest, sending Zero and Hort at the same time does hurt our military strength pretty significantly, but thanks to Saybil, we have mountains of magic potions squirreled away. We can even hand ’em out to common soldiers who can’t use magic—in which case ten people should be able to just about cover Hort’s workload. And Har Bell’s thaumatheria will help cover the transportation shortfall.”

“What, you think a bird can replace a *dragon*?”

“We’ll be getting five, and anyone with magical power can ride them. They won’t be as strong or fast as a dragon, but being able to split up the work should compensate for that.”

Just then Har Bell hopped back in through the window. She held out the little birdcage and whistled, and the bird shrunk back down as it was drawn inside.

Holdem continued as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. “But Heath can’t exactly carry everyone here on his back along with all the food and

luggage and whatever else you'll be taking. Either way, you're going to need a ship."

"Even though it'll just sink?"

"Well, you'll just have to make it *not* sink."

"How?!" Kudo spat angrily.

"Cross that bridge when you come to it," said Holdem. "I'm confident we've selected a group who can."

The fierce urge to flee was building inside Kudo, but Hort and Saybil, sitting on either side of him, were clearly excited.

Los seized on a momentary lapse in the conversation and clapped her hands. "In any case, Miss Har Bell has proved that the sky route lies open. If the sea is indeed impassable and the worst befalls, then at the very least the Dragon Conqueror King and I shall venture to the New World!"

+++

"Kudo, c'mere a sec," called Hort after the meeting was over. He followed her into another room while the others dispersed to get on with their various tasks. Even Ghoda, reluctant as he'd been, seemed to have accepted that he was going to the New World.

"Sorry to spring all this on you so suddenly," Hort said when they were alone. "We had to send the Dragon Conqueror King to fetch *someone* just to get him here for the meeting."

"Aha... So that was it."

“I mean, if we’d just asked him to lead the delegation, he definitely would’ve turned us down. And if we tried to strongarm him into it, he just would’ve said, ‘Then count me out entirely.’”

“Yeah he would. I can totally hear it now.”

Earlier that very day, the Dragon Conqueror King had given Kudo a strict lecture about the meaning of “organization,” but Kudo could picture all too vividly Ghoda going against the organization’s wishes. That said, it wasn’t as if it caused him to lose respect for the man.

“We’re just *really* going to need a dragon when we go to the New World is all.”

“It ain’t like Heath is gonna be pulling the ship, though, right?”

“Har Bell says that in the New World, people who aren’t beastfallen don’t have much in the way of rights. Like, it might be hard to establish trade if they look down on the rest of the delegation, you know? So we figured it might help intimidate them a little if we brought a dragon along!”

Kudo blinked at her. “What do you mean by ‘don’t have much in the way of rights’?”

“I can’t really ask Har Bell directly, since it might cause problems if she found out I’m not actually in charge here... But it seems about the same as the status of beastfallen in our world? She says people with horns are called ‘Exinov,’ and they’re, like, born to the ruling class.”

“And bunny ears are the next best thing?”

“Not just bunny ears, any beast ears. They make up a class called ‘Ignas,’ apparently.”

“What about the people without beast ears *or* horns?”

“Nurabehn. They’re like the slave class.”

“Hmm...” Kudo sounded nonplussed. “What about the ones like me?”

For Kudo—as well as Mercenary and Lily—it went beyond ears or horns; their beast souls manifested much more fully.

“Look, I’ll tell you, but I want you to just listen calmly, okay? Don’t get mad,” Hort said, lowering her voice.

“Wait a second. I’ll get myself ready.” Kudo considered every possibility, then took a deep breath. “All right. Go ahead.”

“They call them beastservants... They’re like...um...like pets.”

“...As in...?”

“As in people fawn over them, dress them up, teach them tricks, take them for walks... That kind of stuff.”

Kudo looked up at the ceiling and tried to imagine someone doing all those things with him. He was more unsettled than angry, and his scales turned a dull shade of purple.

“So you mean...they’re not even considered people?”

“It’s kind of like how some of the ancient witches here look at you guys. Like their very own adorable attendants, or marginally more high-quality familiars... But without rights, of course... Because they’re more like pets.”

“What’s got you sounding so smart all of a sudden?”

“That was just how Professor Zero put it,” Hort chuckled.

“So it’s like the way the headmaster sees Holdem, or the way Professor Zero is with Mercenary?”

“Similar, I think, yeah. Here it’s normal to see them as beast soldiers, but over there things went in the opposite direction. They treat them more like animals, I guess.”

“Did you explain to her that ain’t how things are here?”

“Well, y’see...” Hort gave him a strained smile. “Mercenary and Professor Zero are, like, *together*, right? I know they won’t admit it, but she’s constantly telling him how much she loves him.”

“Sure is.”

“And apparently that’s a lot like how they treat their beastservants in the New World. Mercenary’s also a super rare kind of beastfallen to these New Worlders, which makes him super valuable... Ahem...” Hort averted her gaze. “Har Bell just kind of said it to his face: ‘What a wonderful beastservant. He would make a worthy offering even for the Grand Magister.’”

Kudo’s scales turned from a cloudy, poisonous purple to a terrified black. “I... I’m surprised that bunny’s still hoppin’.”

“Mercenary took Professor Zero in his arms and ran out of the room, then gave her tons of snacks to make her feel better... But then Har Bell goes, ‘Oh, he’s so well trained.’ Like, they clearly do treat beastfallen as pets...” Hort sighed. “I mean, her life could literally depend on it, so I got everyone together to tell her that beastfallen and humans are treated equally here... But you might have some unpleasant experiences in the New World, Kudo. When the priest heard about all this he tried to get us to leave Lily behind, and things got pretty heated.”

Kudo scoffed at Hort’s apologetic demeanor. “Whatcha mean, unpleasant experiences? My whole life’s been an unpleasant experience. I was jammed

into a cage as a child and had my fuckin' arms and legs crushed just for the spectacle."

"I think this is going to be a different kind of unpleasant."

"Huh?"

"Har Bell...came and talked to me a little about it... About you, Kudo."

Kudo looked down at Hort. He'd been expecting a simple recap of the situation so far... But that didn't seem to be all she had to tell him.

"That beautifully scaled beastman—anyone back home would drop to their knees and beg for a chance to own him,' she said. 'He could have his own servants, and live a better life than the average noble. I don't suppose you could convince him of the benefits, and ask him to volunteer himself as a gift, do you?'"

Hort's words were so unexpected that Kudo's shifting scales finally returned to their usual shade of green.

"...Hm? Wait, you ain't actually asking me what I think about her offer, are you?"

"Erm, well... Kind of."

"I'll snap yer frikkin' antlers!"

"Come on! She said she'd give you a super comfortable life, and I just felt weird turning her down without talking to you about it first!" Hort gave an exaggerated sob, protecting her antlers with both hands.

Kudo heaved a deep sigh and put his face in his hands. *My own servants... A better life than the average noble—what the hell do I want with any of that?*

"This is ridiculous. Why do I hafta be a pet for some rich asshole in the New

World?”

“Are you still going to come with us, though?” asked Hort.

“Hanh?”

“I figured you’d say no, is all...”

“How come?”

“I ain’t got time to play adventurer with you dumbasses—I gotta save every single goddessdamn person I can, you got me?”

It sounded exactly like the kind of thing Kudo would say. He even felt like he might actually have said it at some point.

“Listen, Hort. I was in this village just now. The whole place was decimated by disease.”

“Huh?! For real?!”

“Yeah. I didn’t make it in time. And it ain’t the first one, either. I can’t even count the times I was too late these past three years. All along I’ve been thinking, if I could just get there sooner I could save so many more people. Like, I wish I had a dragon of my own. So badly.”

That was impossible, of course—Kudo knew that. Dragons chose their riders.

But...

“That Har Bell lady, when she showed us that bird... If she’s gonna leave those in Heath’s place while the delegation’s gone, that means anyone can ride ’em, yeah?”

“Yup. Some of the Mage Battalion have tried riding them, and nobody’s been thrown off.”

“Then I want one, too. Even better if she can teach us how to make ’em. To be honest, until I saw that bird, I didn’t think I had the time for this New World crap.”

But what I do have is a desire. For something lacking inside me. For a kind of hope that I’ll never find here on the Great Continent.

“I was gettin’ tired of runnin’ myself ragged, waitin’ for someone to do something ’bout the situation. So I’m gonna leave things to my medics for now, and get myself a foothold into actually solving the bigger problem.”

“...Meaning?”

“Meaning I’m gettin’ on that ship. I don’t care if they fawn over me like some kinda rare animal, or some super-hot chick tries to seduce me for her own ends—I’m gettin’ what I need then comin’ home.”

“A-All right!! I knew you’d say that!”

“You’re all over the frikkin’ place!”

“Look, there’s the ideal Kudo, and there’s the Kudo I expect to get! Today was the ideal Kudo!” exclaimed Hort, beaming at him.

3

“To be sailing the Ocean of Death so soon! ’Twas but the blink of an eye!”

The delegation’s vessel had set off northward from the port of Ydeäverna in the maritime Republic of Creon, following the course set by Ghoda and Har Bell, who rode together on Heath’s back.

Har Bell had been reluctant before they set off, protesting that she was not

worthy to sit astride a dragon, and asked to ride in a hanging basket at the very least. It was only when they explained to her that the added burden would interfere with the dragon's flight that she begrudgingly agreed to climb into the saddle.

Even in the New World dragons were rare and holy creatures, and Har Bell was constantly expressing her amazement that a mere human such as Ghoda—who couldn't even use magic—was its rider.

"I still can't believe it myself," had been Ghoda's response, at which Heath started giving him little headbutts of disapproval. Since then, Ghoda had maintained his silence on the issue. Heath had been a young dragon then, but now he was fully grown, and had no qualms about expressing his discontent whenever Ghoda said something self-deprecating. Dragons being noble and majestic creatures, it seemed Heath wanted his rider to be brimming with the proper confidence.

As the ship also needed to serve as a perch for Heath, they had been provided with a large three-masted vessel. The crew was very small, however—just five sailors to handle the task of furling and unfurling the sails. The rest of the work of steering the ship fell to Zero—all done by magic, of course. With her power she could call up the winds and control the waves. Under ordinary circumstances she would run out of mana on a long sea voyage like this one, but with Saybil's mana potions in hand, she provided the ideal motive force for the ship.

They sailed north at full speed, sliding through the water, and in no time at all they had reached the Ocean of Death.

"Wow... It's a whole graveyard of ships..." muttered Saybil, standing beside Los at the prow. The wreckage of countless other vessels poked above the

surface of the thoroughly becalmed ocean.

“If we keep going we’re bound to sink, right?”

“As thou canst see. Dragon Conqueror King! Didst espy naught from above?”

“No, nothing. Just a lot of floating debris.”

The dragon was perched regally atop the mainmast, his wings folded, while Ghoda threw fruit into his mouth from the crow’s nest.

“Mud-black. Dost thou sense anything?”

Zero, who had been wandering about the ship and periodically stopping to peer down into the depths, frowned and cocked her head. “I have been searching, but...I can find no hint of magic. This is but ordinary ocean. I do not think there is any sort of barrier here.”

“Then...even a witch of thy prowess detects nothing?” Los knit her brows in disappointment.

“Sorry, this is kind of a basic question,” Saybil began, addressing himself to Zero. “But barriers are a form of sorcery that uses symbols infused with mana to cut off a designated area from the rest of the world, either physically or spiritually, right?”

“Yes. That is the basic idea.”

“Then if there’s a barrier in the ocean, does that mean...there’s a magic symbol somewhere down on the ocean floor?”

“That would be the assumption, yes.”

“But you can’t say for certain...?” Saybil’s shoulders sank.

Zero’s hair fluttered in the faint ocean breeze. “Barriers come in a virtually infinite variety of forms. Some witches are capable of impressing their symbols

upon living creatures, thus allowing the shape of the barriers to change constantly over time. There are even barriers capable of concealing the existence of the symbols controlling other barriers.”

“So even if we searched the whole ocean floor, we still might not find the symbol...?”

“Indeed. And then again, we might. Destroying a barrier amounts to a patient duel of wits with whatever witch set it in the first place.”

“I’m also a little worried about the ‘gatekeepers’ Har Bell mentioned. Everywhere else, ships end up back in harbor, but in the Ocean of Death they all sink. If Har Bell was able to get through in the sky, then I suppose that means there *is* a break in the barrier here...” Saybil looked over at Har Bell.

She in turn looked at Hort, and only began to speak once the mage gave her a nod.

“According to the ancient texts, that seems to be the case. It’s not uncommon to create a deliberate gap in your own barrier and then place something there to guard it. As for the gatekeepers in question, though—I don’t see them anywhere.”

Har Bell looked out over the endless expanse of ocean. It was empty.

Everyone’s eyes dropped back to the water below.

“Does that mean they’re...down there?”

“I would have expected no less of an Exinov such as yourself, Hort. I was just about to tell you exactly that.”

Saybil blinked a few times. “Then what’s sinking the ships isn’t a barrier, but something in the ocean...?”

“We can’t get past here without defeating the gatekeepers? Seems like it’ll be tough, fighting in the water.” Hort let out a grunt as she pondered the situation.

Just then Los leapt up onto the railing of the deck. “My, but this is sluggish work! I shall dive down and take a little peep!”

“Huh? W-Wait a second, Professor Los!!”

Ignoring Hort’s attempts to stop her, Los jumped from the prow and plunged into the water, leaving only a bit of spray on the surface as she sank beneath the blue.

+++

Deeper and deeper she went. Los had no trouble breathing, as the orb embedded in the Staff of Ludens flowed out and enveloped her body in its blackness, bringing air down to her from the surface. She could walk about underwater just as freely as on land. The poor visibility was another story, however. The deeper she sank, the further she got from the light of the sun, and before long she couldn’t even see her hand in front of her face.

‘Twould be quite impossible to explore these depths without Saybil’s potions.

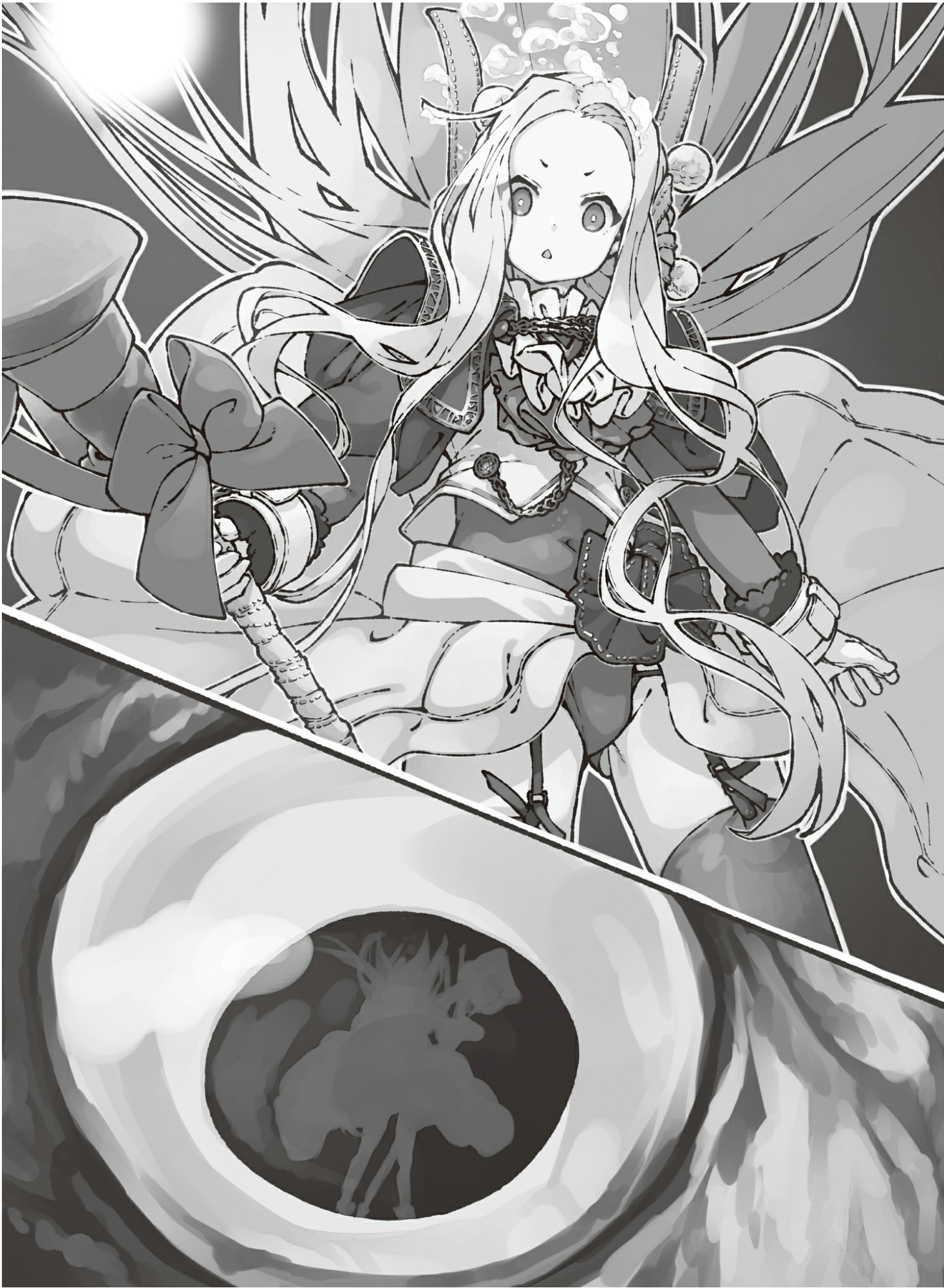
She felt around in the pouch at her waist and took out a stoppered bottle. Inside it was sealed Solm, a spell that would call forth a tiny sun to light up the oppressive gloom of the surrounding ocean in place of the great glowing orb she’d left far above.

She broke open the bottle, and a ball of light drifted out into the water.

Oho—the water is actually quite clear. Mine eyes can see all the way to those...

“Whaa?! What *are* those things...?!” Los cried out in spite of herself, then gulped apprehensively. The sound might not travel as it would through air at this depth, but it *would* travel. Would those things hear her outburst?

They were fish—incredibly large fish, bobbing lazily with their heads pointed toward the surface. Their mouths were stretched so wide that their jaws were almost flat, like traps waiting for prey to enter before springing shut, while their long, thin bodies reached down seemingly to the ocean floor. It was as if they were standing in the water, forming a great wall that blocked Los’s way.



If a ship were to pass above that school of fish—well, Los knew from personal experience exactly what would happen: it would be sucked down into those waiting mouths.

...’Twould appear I’m being watched. But...those eyes.

Their eyeballs alone were as broad as Los was tall, and they rolled about as they tracked Los’s movements through the water.

The fish showed no signs of swimming toward her, however.

Hmm...? Let’s test the waters a little, shall we? As it were...

Los waved the Staff of Ludens, and a blade slid from the inky black orb. Longer and longer it grew—long enough to reach the fish floating in a line before her.

She swung.

The blade sliced crosswise through the water, like to sever the heads from the school of giant fish. But she felt no resistance when the blade passed through. The fish continued as they were, eyes fixed on Los, following her every move.

What in blazes? Have they no physical form...? But then...

Los headed for the surface as if she were rushing up a flight of stairs. Popping her head above water, she found the concerned faces of her shipmates peering down at her. She clutched the life preserver someone threw, and Mercenary showed off his strength by yanking her back up onto the deck with a single pull.

“My, my, now that truly was something...! Without a potion of Solm, I would have lived out my days ignorant of that revelation!”

“So there are giant fish down there, all floating in a row...?” Zero asked, voice cracking. After considering this for a time, she added, “Do you...think they’re edible?”

Mercenary poked her with a claw and muttered, “Take this seriously.”

“Sorry, I should have phrased that differently. From what you have told us, Dawn Witch, these fish are likely thaumatheria themselves. Their size alone might be naturally explicable, but swimming in a line with their mouths open, making no attempt to flee when confronted with the light of Solm... I do not think it plausible that they are creatures of our world.”

“’Tis a fine observation. Little Ludens and I had a bit of a go at them, as it happens”—Los made a sideways chopping motion with her hand—“but we struck nothing. Physical attacks will do naught to affect these beasts. And their eyes...”

Her expression tensed up ever so slightly. Not in one of her usual exaggerated performances, but with a rare show of genuine emotion—though what she was feeling appeared closer to a primal loathing than to fear.

“The varlets barely reacted to my presence, yet never took their eyes from me. With little Ludens by my side I will not die, of course, but to be sucked in, swallowed by those things... I shudder to imagine spending the rest of my days trapped in some monstrous piscine stomach.”

“If they don’t have physical bodies, there’s nothin’ the priest or I can do to ’em.” Mercenary shrugged. “We’ll go make lunch, so handle this however you please. C’mon, pipsqueak.”

With that, the massive beastfallen grabbed Lily by the arm and beat a retreat from the deliberations.

“I should get some rest as well,” said the priest, turning to go. “Please do as you see fit.”

No one took issue with their departure—they all trusted each other, pure and simple. When they weren’t needed for a given task, it was most efficient for each of them to rest or do other work in the meantime.

That left the mage squad. All except—

“Kudo, you can take it easy, too. I don’t think this is going to call for a medic.”

At Deputy Chief Hort’s suggestion, Kudo left. Los, Hort, Zero, and Saybil remained. As chief of the delegation, Ghoda also stayed where he was, and Har Bell would never rest so long as Hort was active.

“Now then, what exactly are we faced with? A lack of material form does not ensure a lack of material harm... I need tell none of you that ’twill be impossible to simply ignore them and proceed onward...”

“Can you freeze the ocean, Professor Zero?” asked Saybil.

She considered this for a moment. “I suppose I *could*... But a frozen ocean would also strand our ship.”

“What about just the *lower* part of the ocean? Could you leave just enough water at the top for our ship to move? If we could freeze the water around the gatekeepers, we wouldn’t need to worry about them swallowing us.”

“Interesting. Setting aside how unrealistic the idea is, it might just be a promising one. Ice will always float to the surface, however. To freeze just the lower part of the water, I would first need to freeze the ocean floor itself and anchor the ice to it.”

“Huh? Is it that unrealistic?”

“Yes, well, to freeze that much water would require so much mana that—” Zero stopped short and furrowed her brow. “...But I suppose that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Not really.”

“Then it should be possible. For me, anyway.”

“Shall we try it?”

Zero and Saybil nodded to each other.

“Monsters discussing monsters...” mused Los.

“W-Wait a minute, Professor Zero! Even if you’ve got the mana for it, there’s no way you can freeze all the way down to the ocean floor, is there...?! I mean, the water’s constantly moving!!”

“As long as I can continuously lower the temperature, the water shall freeze whether it will or no.”

Zero was so nonchalant about it that Hort looked over at Har Bell. “Can you freeze the ocean too, Har Bell?! Can all wizards in the New World do this kind of stuff?!”

“No, not I... And I’m not sure even the Grand Magister could turn the shifting sea to ice.” A faint cloud crossed Har Bell’s face. “To be honest, I don’t believe a mere Nurabehn could be capable of the feat. I don’t mean to insult the one you call teacher, but we have no time to waste with empty—”

“Time?” Zero snapped her fingers, and in an instant the surrounding temperature plummeted. A cracking sound filled the air as ice dropped into the water. At the same time, clumps of shattered ice rose to the surface, sending up a spray of foam.

“Well? Did that take too long?”

Los silently held out the Staff of Ludens. A tentacle slid from its black orb and plunged down into the water.

“’Tis frozen,” she said with a nod. “All the way to the bottom.”

Har Bell’s ears went flat against her head. While she stood rooted to the spot, seemingly unable to compose herself, everyone else set about their respective tasks.

“Dragon Conqueror King. Take Heath and pull a small boat across the Ocean of Death to ensure it is safe to traverse,” said Zero. “If the boat can pass, our ship will follow.”

“Understood—let’s go, Navigator.”

“Huh? A-Ah... Right...”

“Huh?! Wow! Har Bell responded to someone besides me!” At Hort’s astonished cry, Har Bell hurriedly clapped a hand over her mouth. Zero’s extraordinary display of power seemed to have done away with a good measure of the discriminatory sensibility that had led her to ignore everyone but Hort up till now. Her ears still plastered against her head, Har Bell stumbled off after Ghoda, and Zero and Saybil silently high fived. Hort raised her own hands, clearly feeling left out, and Zero and Saybil high fived her as well.

The small boat slid smoothly across the surface of the ocean and passed without incident over the school of monstrous fish lurking beneath. The great

sailing ship followed safely in its wake.

“Wahoo! We’re through! We have escaped that vexatious and ill-omened Ocean of Death!” Los thrust her staff at the sky in celebration.

“But it won’t work without Professor Zero. We need to find some way for other people to get through.” Hort leaned out from the deck and peered down at the frozen depths. It was her job to keep the ship’s log, which was meant to be a guide for those who might follow after them. That said, Hort was aware that “Mud-Black Witch froze ocean for us, passed through Ocean of Death without incident” would serve as a bit of light entertainment and nothing more. There was no way anyone else was ever going to be able to recreate their voyage.

“If only we could destroy the barrier. Then people could just circumvent the gatekeepers altogether.” Standing beside Hort, Saybil looked up at the sky. It was pure blue, with not a cloud in sight. As easy a passage as one could imagine.

Kudo punched Saybil lightly in the shoulder. “You can quit starin’ at the sky to keep yourself from throwing up already.”

“It’s fine... I don’t have anything left to throw up anyway.”

Saybil suffered from deathly motion sickness in carriages, and naturally his seasickness was just as bad. But thanks to Kudo’s constant application of healing magic, Saybil was just about managing to seem like a functioning member of society. If Kudo hadn’t been by his side, Saybil was sure he would’ve vomited up all the moisture in his body and died as a shriveled piece of mage jerky by now. That, or he would’ve thrown himself into the ocean to escape his suffering.

“The sea, the sky—they’re just the same as they were back home.”

“What, you thought they were suddenly gonna turn yellow or somethin’ when we got to the New World?”

“I was talking about changes in the ecosystem... Sorry for getting all sensible on you.”

“Quit it already you’re embarrassing me I’m the sensible one dammit.”

Hort giggled as she watched the two of them. The way Kudo coldly shut down Saybil’s casual remark, then got all flustered by Sayb’s comeback... “It’s been three years, but nothing’s changed.”

“What, you sayin’ I haven’t grown up at all?”

“See! That’s *exactly* the kind of thing you used to say!”

Hort’s giggle turned to a guffaw, drawing a faint smile from Saybil as well.

“It’s weird... We’re going somewhere completely new, but I don’t feel worried at all, you know?”

“Ain’t that the whole reason we got *this* crew together?”

“Well, yeah. But still.”

They were on a voyage to an unfamiliar land—but with familiar friends at their side. The trust they placed in each other’s particular abilities and strengths served to minimize the danger.

“...I wonder how Har Bell felt when she made her way to our world.”

Setting out alone, seeking a Forbidden Land she couldn’t even be sure existed—how brave she must have been.

The three mages’ minds began to race. They were headed to a world

controlled by a Grand Magister, ruled by those with horns—a place where some beastfallen were kept as pets, and normal humans were treated with contempt.

Kudo looked up at the sky as Saybil had done. It looked just the way it always did.

But on the morning of the eleventh day after they crossed the Ocean of Death, it changed.

“Wh-What...?! What the hell’s going on?!”

It started with a cry from one of the sailors.

Every night they dropped anchor and slept so that Heath could rest his wings. So that morning, as every morning, most of the passengers were resting in their cabins. The only one awake was the lookout, stationed in the crow’s nest. It was his shout that roused everyone and brought them running up onto the deck, where they stood open-mouthed, looking at the sky.

“...Fish,” someone mumbled.

The giant fish in the sky were swimming away toward the morning sun, its rays glinting off their lazily swishing tail fins. There was a whole school of them flying through the blue sky above, one after another after another.

“What good fortune! To think we would come upon the gatekeepers going upstream!” Har Bell alone was excited, her bunny ears pricking up at the sight.

“Gatekeepers? Those fish?” asked Hort.

Har Bell nodded. “Those gatekeepers circle the towers in which the Grand Magisters reside. The adults leave when it’s time to spawn, and return with

their children once the eggs have hatched.”

“So those things are thaumatheria, too?”

“They are more sacred than that. They’ve been in the sky since the time of myth. It is said that the more mana there is in the world, the stronger, bigger, and more numerous they become.”

“You said there was a mana shortage, but there’s gotta be at least a hundred of those things up there! You saying there’d be even more?”

“There is more than one tower, and each watches over no small area. One hundred is not enough to rest easy.”

“Um... I have a question, if you don’t mind,” Saybil put in.

Har Bell looked to Hort, who nodded, so Har Bell nodded at Saybil in turn.

“If a hundred gatekeepers are spawned, then there are a hundred more gatekeepers, aren’t there? So if you add them up, there must be a ton.”

“When the new gatekeepers are born, the old ones become clouds. There cannot exist more gatekeepers than there is mana in this world.”

“Huh! So they were supposed to just keep multiplying, but the mana shortage has fixed the number at, like, a hundred?”

“Not fixed... There are fewer now than when I left. And their bodies are much smaller.”

Har Bell’s voice, alive with nostalgia, quickly sank back into concern. For a while nobody spoke as they watched the gatekeepers swim away through the sky. Then the business of the morning intruded on their reverie. Heath unfurled his wings and took flight with Ghoda and Har Bell on his back, at which Los called for a meeting. She had been unusually quiet for some time.

“I thought it best this be discussed,” Los said, tapping the Staff of Ludens against her shoulder. “The gatekeepers we just saw off—were identical to the fish I espied beneath the water.”

“...I see.” Zero nodded as if Los’s words had clarified everything. When she looked around, however, it was clear from their puzzled expressions that no one else seemed to have any idea what it was she saw. “The rabbit-eared one stated that there were gatekeepers in the New World, no? The fish in the sky and those underwater, both she called gatekeepers—and if their form is the same, they must be basically the same creatures.”

“Then, like, those guys don’t have physical forms either?” Hort asked. “They won’t die even if we stab them or cut them up?”

Zero stroked her chin. “That I do not know. Without actually stabbing them...”

“Yet it cannot be that the ocean gatekeepers have *no* physical form. They sucked my ship down into the deep, so are capable of meddling with the currents at the very least. No mere illusion could accomplish such a feat.”

“Hmm... Perhaps our understanding of life does not obtain here. Our error lies in trying to apply our world’s logic to giant fish swimming through the sky.”

“Massive fish who can travel through the sky *and* the ocean... Wonder what they taste like,” said Mercenary, folding his arms and watching the school of fish fly away.

The priest struck him in the buttocks with his staff.

“Ouch!”

“Mind what you say. Har Bell described those fish as sacred, if you’ll recall. Casually suggesting you might *eat* the object of her faith may be just the kind of disrespect that leads us to war.”

“Who cares? Not like she can hear me right now.”

“You should take care at *all* times, so that the wrong words do not slip out when you would do better to remain silent. To do otherwise is the mark of true stupidity. Come now, Lily. Step away from the idiot. His condition may well be contagious.”

“Okaaay.” Lily did as she was told, and Mercenary shot her a betrayed look. When the two of them were working in the kitchen together, no one else could enter their private little world. Outside the kitchen, however, Lily was a slave to her love for the priest.

“Well, this entire expedition is to be an encounter with a culture alien to our own. An abundance of caution is called for, just as the priest says. Doubly so, given that everyone here but Hort is of the ‘lower classes’ in their society. Kudo, Mercenary, and Lily, meanwhile, will be treated as unto adorable kittens.”

“I won’t allow it. Mercenary is my kitten, and mine alone.” A momentary glint of murder flashed in Zero’s eyes.

“I’m nobody’s damn kitten,” said Mercenary, far too battle-hardened to be shaken by such treatment.

“It sounds as if you could be treated to a fine life there, Lily,” said the priest. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“It’s okay, nobody wants Lily,” she replied.

“But you’d go with them if they did?”

“Dunno. Lily’s a pushover.” The little mouse pouted and looked away, and the priest frowned with displeasure.

“W-We aren’t giving Kudo to anybody either, okay?! You got that?!” cried Hort.

“Shut the hell up nobody said anything about it I ain’t yours to give away in the first place!”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what *did* you mean by that, O noble Hort the Exinov?”

“S-Stop it...! I’m already super anxious about whether I can put on a good enough powerful person act!”

Given the circumstances, Hort was probably going to have to take on the bulk of the negotiations. If Har Bell was willing only to talk to her, it was hard to imagine that anyone higher up the food chain would even deign to look at the other members of the delegation.

Los grinned at her. “’Twill be fiiine. Miss Har Bell and the Dragon Conqueror King shall take the lead in our initial negotiations. First the dragon will smash through their emotional fortifications, and then thou wilt march straight in, young Hort. ’Tis a perfect plan.”

“Wahhh... Professor Los, hold my hand, okay...?!”

It was roughly three days later that their ship made port in the New World.



Chapter Three



Utsuwa's *never* going to forget the way the world glittered that day—the day a dragon straight from children's tales appeared in the dreary sky, and dear Har Bell returned with such wonderful news!

The world doesn't have enough mana, so lots of wizards are dying or getting old... It scares me, and it makes me so sad... There are so many fewer Nurabehn now, too. Utsuwa's about to turn ten, but I don't even feel excited about choosing my first beastservant...

The medicine Har Bell brought back from the Forbidden Land restored all of Mother's mana in an instant, though! Everyone's making a huge deal about it! Even though they always said there *was* no Forbidden Land, and even if it *did* exist we would never be able to go there. But Har Bell the Ignas found it! Har Bell is such a wonderful person even though she's an Ignas... Meanwhile the ones who call themselves Exinov just sit around crying and doing nothing... It makes me want to puke. If I told mother that, though, it'd be no more snacks for Utsuwa...

Oh, and that wasn't the only surprise!

Apparently the Nurabehn Har Bell introduced as the dragon's rider isn't even a wizard. He can't use sorcery, but he can ride a dragon?! It says in all the books that dragons are really proud and will only obey the most virtuous of wizards. I was so curious, could barely keep from asking how come this one serves a worthless Nurabehn. When it landed in the square outside the tower, it looked much more magnificent than the other thaumatheria. They didn't even

compare! But Mother wouldn't let me anywhere near the rider, so Utsuwa had to just look out the window at the dragon and pretend I wasn't listening to what Mother and Har Bell were talking about.

Apparently they've got lots and *lots* of medicine, and the Forbidden Land is just overflowing with mana. Har Bell's eyes were shining the whole time she was talking with Mother. She said the Forbidden Land's wizardry hasn't gotten very far and most of the people are Nurabehn who can't use any sorcery at all. She said it was like stepping into a history book!

I wonder if that means they use horse-drawn carriages instead of the thaumaturgical kind?

And do they have to draw their water from wells?

How lovely that must be. Utsuwa wants to visit the Forbidden Land, too! Mother seemed very taken with it all, and Utsuwa overheard Har Bell saying she had brought some people back with her from the Forbidden Land. An Exinov and her most capable servants!

There's a wizard who can freeze the ocean with a snap of her fingers, another one who's been alive for three hundred years—and the researcher who can make mana recovery potions is a *Nurabehn*!

Utsuwa wants to meet them.

Utsuwa wants to talk with them.

Utsuwa almost never asks Mother for anything, but this time I asked and asked and asked...even just to be there in the audience chamber.

And what do you think Mother said to me?

"I suppose there's nothing for it. But you be a good girl, now."

Those exact words—!

Oh, the audience was so spectacular! Utsuwa's never seen such a beautiful beastservant in all her life—those sparkling scales constantly changing colors, those sharp blue eyes, all those pointy white teeth, and that lovely long tail.

Utsuwa tugged at Mother's clothes and tried to get her attention, and Mother turned to look at Utsuwa all dreamy-like. Mother was sitting in the Chair of Intellect, and it was before she had said anything to the people from the Forbidden Land, but she leaned down to listen to Utsuwa. I pressed my lips to Mother's ear and I whispered, "Utsuwa wants that beastservant. The sparkly one with the scales. Utsuwa will take the *best* care of it, so *please* can you give it to me?"

Mother looked kind of surprised, but then she scrunched up her eyes into that tender smile she always gives me.

"Hort the Exinov," Mother said. "Thank you for making the arduous journey here from your home in the distant Forbidden Land. The medicines you have brought will be a great relief to our people. As a mark of our appreciation and friendship, we will accept that lizard as my daughter's beastservant."

Utsuwa put out her hands so the grumpy-looking lizard beastservant could feel safe leaping into my arms. But that's not what happened.

Utsuwa made a terrible blunder.

Oh, how could this be—?!

Who could've imagined that in the Forbidden Land, beastservants are treated the same as *people*...!

“O Grand Magister Danna Ryl the One-Horned, illustrious chief of the Exinov and pinnacle of wizardry, we thank you most humbly for your kindness,” began Har Bell. “Yet I must inform you that in the Forbidden Land there are no beastservants, and I fear this lizard has received none of the requisite training to be worthy of your daughter.”

Her words slipped smoothly into the suddenly icy atmosphere of the room.

Gazing regally down at the delegation from her throne, Danna Ryl blinked, and an even gentler smile spread across her face. When she tilted her head to the side, her long silver hair—which fell almost to the floor—danced in the air, and the light from the chandelier was refracted through the long, transparent horn protruding from her forehead. The horn was beautiful, entrancing, like a work of art. The young girl clinging to Danna Ryl’s side had a single transparent horn just like her mother’s.

“It matters not... We shall handle all of the necessary arrangements. An unspoiled beastservant is rare indeed. So much the better that it has not been contaminated by any of the quirks of another Exinov! I will furnish a personal trainer, and it should be capable of the usual things within the month.”

“Your ears plugged up with wax or somethin’? She just told you we ain’t got any damn ‘beastservants’ where we come from. I’m here as a doctor.”

“K-Kudo! You can’t talk to them like that!” cried Hort. “We need to properly explain our cultural differences to help these people understand us!”

“An’ why’s it feel like they’re *grantin’* us an audience, anyway? They’re the ones dyin’a mana thirst. All it means for us if this trade deal goes south is a little wasted effort.”

“Explaining things carefully and politely so the other party will understand is what trade’s all about, Kudo!”

“Man, this is bullshit. Call me when all this slow, boring etiquette crap is out of the way and we can actually get down to business.” Thumping his tail angrily against the floor, Kudo left the audience chamber.

“Lily,” the priest whispered, and the mouse beastfallen silently slipped out after him.

Hort groaned and put a hand to her head, then turned back to Danna Ryl.

“Erm... Sorry about that, Grand Magister. Given the situation, I’m afraid we’ll have to refuse your kind offer to accept Kudo into your daughter’s service.” Hort forced a nervous laugh, but she was a little worried that her expression wasn’t as apologetic as it was intended to be.

It was all for show, of course. Kudo wasn’t actually foolish enough to venture all the way to a foreign land—one far enough from home that it might as well be on a different planet—and suddenly start insulting their leaders.

There were times when a deliberate display of anger could be useful, however—and given the value of what they had to trade, the delegation had the upper hand, as Kudo had just taken pains to spell out. If they were to pull out of negotiations, the New World would be left with few choices: death, or an invasion to take what they needed by force—

“So it would appear. What a shame... But as he said, my etiquette has been all wrong from the start.” Even when Danna Ryl stood, her long hair trailed across the floor like a veil hanging over her magnificent dress. Rising from her throne, she seemed to glide down from the dais without the slightest movement of her feet, and came to stand before Hort. No—she didn’t simply *seem* to be gliding,

nor were her feet simply hidden by the long folds of her dress.

Behind her, Hort heard Los whisper, "'Twould appear she floats above the ground to move...? Such affectatious airs."

"Hort the Exinov," began Danna Ryl. "Please forgive my innocence of your ways, and the disrespect with which I addressed your companion."

"Ah, no, really...! Just so long as you understand, we're good. I know Kudo didn't put it so well, but we're also really, really interested in your New World technology!"

"New World...?"

"Oh, here, I mean! You call our continent the Forbidden Land, and we call this place the New World."

"Well, now. That...makes me feel quite strange." Danna Ryl covered her mouth to suppress a giggle. Hort smiled at this, and lightly poked Har Bell, who had turned pale and broken out in a cold sweat.

"Har Bell, I want to apologize to you, too. I should have been the one to refuse right off the bat. Sorry for putting you in an awkward position."

"N-Not at all...! I failed to explain the situation properly and brought shame upon the Grand Magister..."

"What is this talk of shame...? Come now, raise your head. You believed when nobody else did, and while everyone spoke ill behind your back, you went out and found our salvation. You have saved us, Har Bell. Let me embrace you now as a friend."

Danna Ryl took Har Bell into her arms.

At length she sighed and released the Ignas from her bosom. "I should like to

apologize to him directly... Utsuwa, perhaps you would like to join—oh?”

Danna Ryl looked around, perplexed.

Her daughter was gone.

Los cleared her throat, and a jet-black finger slid from the Staff of Ludens, pointing toward the imposing double doors through which Kudo and Lily had gone. “Whilst you were deepening your bonds of friendship, the lass slipped out. ’Twould appear she has gone in pursuit of young Kudo.”

“Huh?! Why?!”

“Why indeed. Her eyes sparkled so bright as she passed that while I wished to intervene I was helpless to halt her departure.”

“Wh-Whaa...?! I-Is she gonna be okay...?! Kudo might say something really awful to the poor kid...”

To the daughter of one of the leaders of a country they were trying to build friendly trade relations with, no less.

Har Bell had already explained to them the position Danna Ryl held in their society. There were a few dozen Grand Magisters who controlled the New World, but the one among them known as the Keybinder held supreme authority. She was their noble ruler, a magnificent wizard with a single horn that glimmered like crystal, and she had reigned in the New World for over five hundred years.

Har Bell said she reveres her, thought Hort, and we really need to do our best to forge a friendly relationship here.

Danna Ryl smiled warmly when she saw how flustered the mage was. “Do not fear. My daughter has been spoiled throughout her upbringing, so a little pain and a few tears may be just what she needs. Her days have been filled with

constraints, and she cannot choose the hour of her own end. I'm sure your mana potions will give us more time, but...I still wish to give her such freedom as is possible while I can."

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"Lady Utsuwa has always had a liking for lizards and snakes, so when she lays eyes on you, I suspect she'll want you for her beastservant. To refuse might well upset Lady Danna Ryl, so I think it wise for you to remain on the ship and avoid the audience chamber altogether."

Har Bell had sought out Kudo just before they landed in the New World and offered this advice. It was the first time she had ever spoken to any of them other than Hort of her own volition—a fact which lent extra weight to her proposal.

"Why not rather induce them to offer this supreme insult as a means to gain the advantage in our negotiations?" suggested the priest upon hearing Har Bell's words. Such chicanery was his specialty.

Har Bell balked at the idea, worrying that it would cause the New Worlders to withdraw from the negotiations—a result she was committed to preventing, no matter what. In the end, though, she agreed that Danna Ryl would not be told ahead of time that "beastservants" were treated as people in the Forbidden Land. She predicted that even if Utsuwa didn't want Kudo, the chances were extremely high that Danna Ryl would desire *one* of the three beastfallen among their party.

And indeed, Danna Ryl did try to give a member of the delegation to her

daughter, like a slave or a head of cattle. It was only Kudo's show of anger that brought the Grand Magister down from her throne to negotiate with them on an even footing.

Lily filled Kudo in on everything that had happened after his stormy exit, thanks to reports from her rodent friends back in the audience chamber. He hadn't expected her to come, but was glad she did.

"...I do feel a little bad for the kid, though."

"Her peepers sure lit up when she saw you," Lily replied as they walked together down the main thoroughfare.

Absolutely everything about the town was beyond Kudo's wildest expectations. The carriages they passed weren't pulled by horses but by spheres floating through the air. There was not even a physical connection between the spheres and the vehicles—as the one moved, the other simply followed suit.

What's a horse-drawn carriage without the horse, anyway? Isn't that just a box on wheels?

The houses on either side of the street were all five or six stories high. Someone opened a sixth-floor door, and, before Kudo knew what was happening, the occupant flew up into the sky astride a thaumatherium. There were countless such beasts crisscrossing the sky above their heads, and just as many carriages rolling past them on the ground.

The first floor of every house on the thoroughfare was given over to a shop of some kind, with walls of seamless glass that meant everything within was visible from the street. And the goods for sale were so curious that neither Lily nor Kudo could even hazard a guess as to what they might be used for. The pair

were so baffled, in fact, that they couldn't muster the desire to buy anything.

"Can't even walk around town without a guide to explain everything."

"Let's go back to the ship. This place is so noisy, it's making Lily's ears tired." She let her big mouse ears droop against her head.

"Want me to carry you?"

"You don't mind?"

"Hey, I'm a big guy."

"But you're a lot smaller than Merce."

"Everyone in the world's a shrimp compared to the old man."

Kudo picked Lily up in his arms. The tall lizard and the tiny mouse—they were such a mismatched pair that Kudo couldn't help but laugh when he caught sight of their reflection in one of the glass storefronts. But he caught a glimpse of something else reflected there, too: glittering, gleaming eyes of red and blue, even more dazzling than the long crystalline horn that sat above them.

They were the same as Danna Ryl's eyes.

Then that must be...

"...The old hag's daughter?!"

Kudo spun around so fast it seemed his neck might snap.

"She's been following us this whole time," Lily said lightly.

"You coulda told me!"

"Why?" The little beastfallen seemed genuinely confused.

Fair enough. What's it matter if the daughter of the big cheese is following us around...?

“W-What about Utsuwa...!”

“Huh?”

Upon noticing that Kudo had turned around, Utsuwa’s pale cheeks flushed crimson and she stuck out both hands toward Kudo like she was possessed.

“Utsuwa wants that too...!”

“Wha? Hanh?”

“She wants you to pick her up,” Lily interpreted.

“What for?!”

“Listen, Kudo, you don’t need a reason to want someone to hold you.” The way Lily said it made Kudo feel like a little kid, and there was nothing he could do to argue.

Utsuwa kept her arms outstretched towards him, but a moment later seemed to snap back to reality, and quickly shrank in on herself. “S-Sorry...! Utsuwa didn’t mean it like that... Um... It’s just that Utsuwa said something really rude, and...”

Look at her fidgeting and fretting... Pretty sure Danna Ryl said this girl was ten years old, but she seems younger. There’s nothing grown-up about her at all—that is, she’s more like a fairy from some children’s story.

“Utsuwa came...to say sorry.”

Her glittering eyes were fixed on Kudo. The mage was genuinely awful at dealing with the pure emotions of children; he couldn’t adopt his usual bad attitude to deal with the situation. Kudo sighed, and with Lily still in his arms, crouched down in front of Utsuwa.

“I accept your apology.”

“...!” A smile filled Utsuwa’s face like the sun rising above the horizon.

Lily looked up at Kudo, and pointed to the back of his neck. “That spot’s open.”

Utsuwa’s eyes opened wide, and she stared at Kudo nervously.

Why do I gotta give some kid a ride on my shoulders?

The words got as far as his throat, but seeing Utsuwa so filled with excitement that she might burst, he found they just wouldn’t come out.

“...C’mon. I’ll take you back to the tower.”

“Y-Yaaaay!” Utsuwa hooked her legs over Kudo’s shoulders and clutched the back of his head tightly.

Whoa, she barely weighs a thing. “...Huh? You sure there’s someone on my shoulders?”

“U-Uh huh, Utsuwa’s here.”

“You made of feathers or somethin’, Princess?”

“You sound like a prince, Kudo...”

It was only Lily’s interjection that brought home to Kudo what a princely cliché his comment had been. His scales flushed an embarrassed scarlet, provoking a cry of amazement from Utsuwa.

“Your scales are so pretty. Do they change because of your feelings?”

“Well, that’s...”

“Utsuwa’s so light because of wizardry.”

“Wizardry?” Kudo repeated. *That’s right, here in the New World they call ’em wizards instead of sorcerers.* “You don’t call it sorcery here?”

“Sorcery is the root of wizardry. They made sorcery better and easier to use, and that’s what wizardry is. Shoes and clothes treated with wizardry make your body all light and floaty. There’s no wizardry in the Forbidden Land?”

“Nope... I mean, we’ve got somethin’ similar...but we’ve still got horses pullin’ our carriages and all.”

Utsuwa smiled at him. “Oh, right! Wizard carriages! They float a little above the ground and move with the power of wizardry. They still have wheels, but even the passenger compartment is floating. And walking around all day is tough on your legs, right? That’s why Utsuwa floats, too. So does Mother. Basically all wizards float.”

“Wow. So how heavy are you actually, without the wizardry?”

It was an off-hand question, but Utsuwa couldn’t answer. Kudo caught a glimpse of her in the glass of a storefront, bright red and clammed up tight. He could feel Lily glaring at him, and, flustered, he took off walking as if nothing had happened.

Toward the tower.

No matter where one went in the town, that tall, imposing white rectangle remained in view. It was precisely the lack of any decoration that made it stand out so, like a great religious icon.

Utsuwa became agitated as soon as Kudo headed in its direction, flapping her hands against the top of his head. “Wait, please...! We don’t need to go back yet. Utsuwa wants to talk. Let’s get some snacks and you can tell Utsuwa your story.”

“You know that ain’t gonna fly. We don’t even have any money that’d work in this town.”

“Money?” Utsuwa laughed. “When Utsuwa goes to a shop, the shopkeepers are happy, because everybody else in town will come buy lots of whatever she chooses to eat. That’s why Utsuwa comes into town every few days for a snack. Today can be that day.”

“Thanks but no thanks. What’s that all about anyway, walkin’ around trumpetin’ that you’re the ruler’s daughter? If you think what they got’s worth payin’ for, then you should pay for it. Gonna draw the same crowd if you pay for the food as if you don’t.”

Kudo heard a strange “*Hwaah...*” come from above his head. He couldn’t see Utsuwa’s face, but Lily looked up at her and simply whispered, “Twinkling.” Kudo assumed she was talking about the little girl’s eyes.

“Y-You’re right! How could Utsuwa not realize that?!”

“Cos you’re sheltered on a national treasure level...” Kudo muttered.

“Utsuwa has to pay! Utsuwa *wants* to pay! For everything I’ve ever eaten! Oh, but how... Utsuwa’s never even touched money before...!”

This time Lily whispered, “Dejected.”

Kudo sighed. “Look, Princess. Is there a place around here we could sell some stuff?”

“Hm...? Sell...?”

“No, I mean... Any shop run by a wizard’ll do. The fancier the better.”

“Utsuwa knows just the place. It’s that way!”

Kudo moved off in the direction she was pointing. He always kept four or five of Saybil’s mana potions in his bag as a backup, being the linchpin of restoration magic for the group and all.

They should be worth a fair bit if I can find someone to buy 'em. We are trying to start up trade relations with the damn things, after all. There's a good chance the merchant might think they're fake, but as long as we've got the leader's daughter with us, that oughta take care of any doubts.

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“Th-This is an insane amount of money...”

Kudo had completely underestimated the situation.

The change that came over the shop clerks as soon as Utsuwa appeared had been something of a surprise in itself... But the moment she explained that “these people are from the Forbidden Land and they're willing to sell some medicine that restores mana,” there was such an uproar, it was like the whole place had been turned upside down.

The store faced the main street, and was evidently in the business of wizard carriages. Utsuwa said she'd been there before when her mother bought her a solo wizard carriage as a gift. She ordinarily rode in it anytime she went out, but this time she'd left it behind when she rushed out after Kudo.

While Utsuwa was explaining all this to Kudo, the shop owner examined one of the mana potions with a skeptical eye.

If the guy has even a passing knowledge of sorcery, it should be clear as day that they're the real deal.

“...It's genuine,” the carriage store owner mumbled in blank amazement. “And you're willing to sell this? To *me*...?”

“Yeah, but only three of ‘em.”

“Three?!”

“Well, I’ve only got four on me. I’d like ta hang onto one just in case, but you can take the others off my hands.”

“W-Wait a moment. You almost make it sound as if...you have *more* of these somewhere?”

“There’s five thousand on the ship, so it ain’t like we’ve got a bottomless supply, but yeah. I figure the higher-ups are negotiating with the little princess’s mom about that right now, though. If you’re not interested, don’t worry about it. I can try somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?! You must be joking!” the shopkeeper cried. “Name your price!”

He had his subordinates open the safe straight away, and began piling bundles of paper on the counter in front of Kudo. At first the beastfallen had no idea what they were, but he was informed they represented the currency of the New World. There were coins as well, but for some bizarre reasons these “bills” were much more valuable.

“I got no idea what price to name... Princess, how much do you want?”

“Enough to pay for all the snacks Utsuwa’s ever eaten.”

“Right, you heard her. No idea how much that would be, though.”

The store owner gave him a strange look. “The foodstuffs Lady Utsuwa enjoys are all quite expensive, but even a lifetime’s supply of them would never amount to the value of these medicines. Would you...come with me a moment?”

At his request, Kudo followed the man into the back room. Lily and Utsuwa stayed at the counter, tearing into the treats the shop had provided. One of Lily's mouse friends burrowed into Kudo's clothing in her place. Kudo was in awe of how constantly aware she was of her surroundings.

"You said your name was Kudo? I really do intend to compensate you properly. So please... Even if it's just a small portion of the stock... Couldn't you find some way to accommodate us?"

The shopkeeper was speaking in hushed tones, almost as if he was proposing something criminal.

"Didn't you hear me? Our higher-ups are selling that stuff to the little princess's mother. I'm sure it'll find its way down to you eventual—"

"It won't."

Kudo blinked at him in surprise.

"There are countless wizards here so gravely short of mana that their very lives are in danger. But the Grand Magisters in their towers will monopolize the stock you bring and divide it amongst their disciples. There's a very good chance they won't even let us Ignas know this medicine exists."

There were fox ears atop the shopkeeper's head.

Ignas, right—that's what people with beast ears are called here...while the ones with horns are called Exinov, and revered for it.

Most of the people Kudo had seen walking around town were animal-eared Ignas.

But if even a store this big is run by an Ignas, then the Exinov... Shit, they must be so exalted, they don't hafta work at all. Either way, doesn't seem like these plebeian Ignas have much faith in the ruling class.

“Ain’t much difference between the Forbidden Land and this New World after all, I guess...” With a bitter grin, Kudo took out all the mana potions he had with him and pushed them into the man’s hands.

“I was lyin’ to you before. I’ve actually got five on me—an’ I’ll sell you all five. Just gimme whatever you think is a fair price.”

And so it was that Kudo found himself in possession of the aforementioned “insane amount of money.”

I don’t wanna hafta carry all this around with me, thought Kudo when he saw the bundles of notes spilling out of the bulging bag. So when the shopkeeper said, “You could even buy a wizard carriage with that much,” Kudo decided to do just that.

It was a two-wheeled vehicle with a luggage rack attached to the side. Its shape reminded Kudo a little of a horse, which ultimately sealed the deal for him.

“You’re supposed to have a license, but...well, anyone can drive these things, and they never tip over. I can’t imagine they’d give someone from the Forbidden Land a hard time for driving without a license anyway.”

“I probably shouldn’t let ’em know where I bought this thing if they do, though...”

“Don’t worry about that. The registration number will lead them here either way.”

“It’s fine! So long as Utsuwa says she wanted it, no one will be able to accuse you of anything!”

“Gotcha... So we just hafta leave the mana potions out of it and say we took this for the princess to ride in.”

“Yes. It needs to be a secret that we paid for it. Oh, to be keeping secrets from Mother...! What a wonderful day this is!”

Utsuwa was bouncing up and down as she and Lily climbed onto the side rack, while Kudo straddled the vaguely equine two-wheeler.

“Whoa... It really doesn’t tip over.” The carriage maintained its balance even after Kudo took both feet off the ground.

The fox-eared man gave him a brief explanation of how to operate it. “Thaumaturgical devices are generally made to be easy for anyone to use. As long as you don’t run out of mana, this will never tip over.”

“So it runs on the mana of whoever’s ridin’ it?”

“Sorry, I should’ve been more clear. It’s not your mana, but the mana crystal that makes it move. All wizardly devices use them.”

Opening a side panel, he showed Kudo the glowing bluish-purple crystal housed within.

“The purple fades and turns transparent when the crystal runs out of mana. Top it up and it’ll start moving again. You can actually supply it with mana while you’re riding, but almost no one does.”

“So what do they do?”

“Get their young apprentices to refill them. The ones who won’t die if they run out of mana. For wizards who’ve lived for over a century, mana’s the stuff of life itself.”

“What about you? What do you do?” asked Kudo.

The fox-eared shopkeeper gave him a wry smile. "I walk. That's what the roads are made for, as far as I'm concerned, and it does me just fine. I'll be eighty next year. Better to focus my mana on keeping up my health."

"Kind of ironic."

"Sure is. Here, take hold of this. Turn it to FORWARD and the carriage will go. It'll take you quite some time to get around to all the places Lady Utsuwa's ever eaten."

The two-wheeler slid effortlessly down the road. It was fast, and almost too simple.

"...Man, I need these for my unit... This thing's way better than a horse."

Horses got tired, and they needed food and water—but wizard carriages could run forever, so long as they had mana. They were the height of convenience.

Kudo went wherever Utsuwa directed, stopping at shops to pay up for her lifetime of snacking. Everyone refused at first, of course, but when Utsuwa said, "As I cannot choose the hour of my own end, I wish to do as I please while I'm still alive," the shopkeepers gave in and humbly accepted her payment.

"*Nobody* gets to choose when they die," Kudo said the first time he heard this.

"Is that how it is in the Forbidden Land?" Utsuwa asked him, surprised.

They were clearly talking past each other, so the conversation fizzled for the time being. At the final shop on their itinerary, however, they stayed to try some new treats, and found themselves with their first extended break of the day. It was in searching for subjects of small talk that Kudo decided to bring up the earlier topic once more.

"So in the New World, people can choose when they die?"

“Yesh,” Utsuwa replied through a mouth full of pastry. “Talented wizards won’t die, so long as they have mana.”

“But they could get killed, or die in an accident.”

“That’s fine as long as their souls are safe.”

Kudo recalled Ulula, who had lived on in her familiar’s body after she lost her own. If that was the norm for the wizards of the New World, he could understand how they might be a little weak on the concept of death.

“...That mean you’re gonna grow up to be like your mother, then? You’re just a kid right now, but someday you’ll be a great wizard like her?”

“Utsuwa is going to become Mother.”

“Right? So then—”

“And Mother is going to become Utsuwa.”

“...Huh?” *Man, this conversation really ain’t comin’ together.*

Utsuwa made quick work of the rest of her pastries and smiled at Kudo. “In the end, once Mother has become Utsuwa, she’ll eat the Utsuwa who has become Mother. Then Utsuwa and Mother can be one.”

“So you’re a...vessel?” Lily put in timidly.

Utsuwa nodded. “That’s right. Utsuwa is a vessel for Mother’s soul. When the world’s mana started running out, the Grand Magisters thought up a new way to maintain their bodies, one that doesn’t require mana. It’s called the ‘rite of rebirth.’ You make another self, raise it, then take its body.”

Utsuwa was so matter of fact about it that Kudo and Lily didn’t know what to say.

“...Utsuwa.”

“What is it, Lily?”

“Don’t you mind? Aren’t you scared of disappearing?”

“Utsuwa thinks it’ll be fun,” the girl answered with a grin. “Utsuwa is looking forward to becoming Mother. Becoming one doesn’t mean disappearing. Everything Utsuwa has been will become a part of Mother.”

Neither Kudo nor Lily had strong enough convictions to tell her that was all wrong. One word from Utsuwa—an “I don’t want to,” or an “Utsuwa’s scared”—and they would have brought her to the ship and told the others they had to save her.

“...You’ve got mana potions now, though, right?”

Utsuwa’s eyes went wide. “That’s right! Maybe Utsuwa *will* become a grown-up after all. The rite of rebirth is supposed to happen when Utsuwa turns fifteen, but now I need to think about what I might do after that!”

Her little brow furrowed at the thought.

“Why don’t you come with us, take a trip to the Forbidden Land?”

“What?! Can Utsuwa really come with you?!”

The girl leaned forward excitedly, and Lily wiped some powdered sugar from the corner of her mouth.

“I don’t see why not. Gotta live free.”

The gatekeepers swam lazily through a sky painted with the colors of sunset. Once Kudo and Lily had returned Utsuwa to the tower, they took the road back toward the harbor.

Kudo wasn't on the ship when the others got back, and since they had already sent Lily—their specialist in search and investigation—after him, a vague sense of anxiety gripped the members of the delegation.

“Should we try to track his mana?”

Los and Zero both shook their heads at Hort's suggestion.

“'Tis a fool's errand, I fear. The presence of mana all round us is too strong. 'Twould help somewhat should young Kudo use his magic, but otherwise...”

“And they call this state of affairs a mana shortage—I find myself in awe,” said Zero. “Though I cannot imagine the importation of a few mana potions will have much effect.”

Har Bell had excused herself to go see her family, and had yet to return to the ship. The plan was to meet on board the following morning for a guided trip around town.

Since the question of what they were exporting had been settled from the start, it remained only to determine what the delegation would be importing from the New World in return. Luckily their lands shared a common language, and the writing systems were largely identical. Zero and Los had already procured several books on wizardry, and were scanning their pages even as they spoke.

Hort puffed out her cheeks and waved both hands at them. “Come on, quit reading and listen to me for real! Kudo and Lily are *missing*!! Look at the priest over there! He's doing such a good job pretending not to care that it seems totally suspicious!”

Hort pointed to a corner of the deck, where the priest was sitting with a few

mice in his lap, feeding them bits of fruit. It wasn't an especially strange thing to be doing, but for the ever-vigilant "killer priest," it did seem a little *too* nonchalant—as if he might crack open a book and start reading at any moment, blindfold notwithstanding.

"The two are merely taking a stroll to stave off the boredom. With young Lily in tow, Kudo can hardly lose his way. And should anything go awry with Lily, 'twould cause quite the fuss among those mice 'pon the priest's lap."

Zero nodded in agreement. "Fret if you must, but too much clamor over such trifles will impede our work. There are none traveling aboard this ship who cannot act alone for a single night without arousing concern."

"But—!"

"Look, there's Kudo now."

Just as a disheartened Hort was sinking to the floor, Saybil pointed out at the wharf.

"No way! He's back?!" Hort exclaimed, racing over to the gunwale.

The sun had set completely by this point, but swaying lights dotted the harbor, driving away the darkness. Kudo slipped easily down the path of light aboard a strange two-wheeled vehicle, Lily riding on a rack at his side.

"K...Kudo?! What's that...that...that super cool thing you're riding?!" called Hort, leaning out over the side of the ship.

"Just somethin' I bought," he replied with a straight face.

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With Kudo and Lily's return, the members of the delegation gathered in the captain's cabin. The room would ordinarily serve as private quarters for the captain of the ship, but there was no real captain to speak of on this voyage. The crew was so small relative to the size of the vessel that everyone had been assigned their own first-class cabin, and the captain's quarters had become their makeshift strategy room. Los was completely entranced by the two-wheeled wizard carriage Kudo had brought back with him, and had been riding it around and around the deck until just moments before their meeting.

"So like, I just want to make sure our mana potions make it to the store that sold me the wizard carriage... That is, to all the folks in town."

"I-I can't believe it...! So Danna Ryl's gonna monopolize all the potions we sell her?!" Hort exploded when she heard Kudo's story. "She seemed like a nice person, though... Should we just set up our own shop in the harbor, then?"

"Don't be ridiculous." The Dragon Conqueror King had a harsh scowl plastered across his face. "You want to start doing business in someone else's territory without permission...? That's tantamount to an invasion."

"Even if we're just doing business?"

"You need a lesson in politics?"

"Y-Yes please!"

"I was being sarcastic..." Ghoda heaved a deep sigh, and tossed some round tokens used to plan naval engagements onto the table in front of them. "Let's say these represent all the assets the New World currently has."

"Umm, like money, you mean?"

"Not just money. Assets can mean food, industrial products, all sorts of things. You understand that the people of the New World are trading money, food, and

goods to get by, right?”

“Sure, uh huh.”

“Now here comes a foreign merchant.” Ghoda added a piece shaped like a ship.

“That’s us?” asked Hort.

“That’s us. Now let’s say we set up shop willy-nilly—releasing new assets into the market while collecting the existing assets for ourselves.”

Ghoda added some square tokens to the tabletop marketplace—just a few. In return he took a massive handful of the round tokens and piled them up behind the ship.

“Oh... There they all go.”

The number of round tokens on the market—the New World’s assets, in other words—had decreased significantly.

“But isn’t trade all about an equal exchange of assets?” Saybil interjected. “If you’re going to take so many round tokens, shouldn’t you put in a lot more square ones than that?”

“Kudo got himself that vehicle for just five mana potions. Sounds like he had a lot of cash left over, too. The value of goods isn’t equal. It’s quite possible that the more mana potions we sell in the New World, the more their existing assets will dry up.”

“Huuunh... R-Right, I see.”

“That’s not all.” The crease in Ghoda’s forehead deepened. “What do you think would happen if we sold all our mana potions for cash? Then used that cash to buy up all the farmland? That’d give us a stranglehold on the New

World's food supply, wouldn't it?"

"Th-That...*would* be just like an invasion, wouldn't it...?!"

"And what do you think the leaders of this country might do to prevent that?"

"Umm... Regulate the amount of goods we're allowed to sell, I guess?"

"That's right. But suppose we were to ignore them—suppose we just started up a business in the harbor without permission. What then?"

"Well... They'd need to make us stop...?"

"They would. By force, if necessary."

"Force..." Hort muttered. *If they were to attack us, we'd defend ourselves in kind. And that little act of aggression could lead to war between the New World and the Great Continent.*

"That's why we need to disclose the contents of our cargo to the people in charge here, then negotiate with them to determine how much we'll sell and at what price."

"...Even when it's 'medicine' we're talkin' about?" Kudo's icy voice pierced Ghoda like a knife. "Our mana potions mean the difference between life and death for the longer-lived folks here. We can *save* people with these, but the bigwigs are plannin' on takin' 'em all for themselves, from what I hear. And we're s'posed to just sit back and let that happen?"

"I don't suppose you've considered the possibility that the bigwigs you're talking about might just take all the mana potions we sell by force, have you?"

"Huh?" Kudo's jaw dropped. He took a moment to envision the scenario, then shut his mouth bitterly.

"Don't forget, we aren't here on some charity mission. We've come to get the

lay of the land. And those mana potions we've got on board are meant as a gift—a tool to prove to the rulers of this land that we can be useful to them,” said Ghoda bluntly.

The moment he finished there was a round of applause—from Zero, who had been listening in silence. “Fine work, fine work. A marvelous refutation, Dragon Conqueror King. Now I see why you were chosen to lead this delegation. Come to think of it, you were a statesman once, were you not?”

Zero's praise was sincere, but Ghoda took it as ridicule and scowled fiercely. “...I am the impotent king of a ruined nation.”

“But the strength of your feelings for your people helped you vanquish a dragon. You are a king who led a rebellion of the downtrodden and abused. Tell me now: how are we to smooth over this vexing matter the lizard has brought to our attention?”

“You want me to continue the politics lesson?”

“It is unavoidable. We have come here to engage in politics, after all.”

Ghoda lightly massaged his furrowed brow and looked down at the tokens he'd scattered across the table.

“...We only have to worry about the monopoly if there's no guarantee of continued supply. Suppose we agreed to sell the rulers ten thousand potions a year, on condition that they allow us to sell a thousand more on the open market. And we promise to turn over a third of our profits by way of tax.”

“Huh?! We'd be givin' up so much money!”

“The price of doing business peacefully.”

“One more thing,” the priest said, raising a finger. “We ought to insist on a charter.”

“A charter...?” Ghoda repeated, confused.

The priest raised an eyebrow. “Do you require a lesson in economics?”

“You’re as unpleasant as ever.”

“Please, my dear countryman, you’re embarrassing me.” The priest offered a hint of a smile, then began his lesson in economics.

“At present our only assets are these mana potions, and we have no other means of acquiring New World currency. Ideally, therefore, we secure the right to sell even just a hundred potions a year entirely at our own discretion. With such a charter in hand we would be able to prove the legitimacy of our product, in turn enabling us to travel freely about the New World and conduct our investigations, earning enough to cover our expenses as we go. Money tends to take up a lot of space, and while it seems this nation uses paper currency, the amounts involved would still make it difficult to travel.”

Hort had been listening intently, and now she addressed the priest. “Travel freely... Earn enough to cover our expenses... What do you mean, Father?”

“I mean there is a world one cannot see under the auspices of an official guide.”

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The town sprawled out from the tower at its center. Within the tower itself dwelt the Grand Magister, and in the surrounding houses resided the Exinov with their exquisite horns. The central district was occupied by the Ignas, their various animal ears and tails bobbing and swishing proudly as they went about their business, and around this stood a wall. Outside the wall lived the

Nurabehn, those who lacked divine protection.

Authority derived from lineage. An unprotected man and woman could marry, but would receive neither horns nor ears as a result. There were times, however, very rare times that children were born with protection who by rights should have none.

Such was the case with Har Bell.

Her parents were Nurabehn, humble shoemakers with neither ears nor horns.

Nurabehn were not allowed inside the walls of the town without special permission. Still, they clung to the walls in order to glean some small benefit from the superior waste that made its way out to them. Thus, even outside the walls there was the understanding that being closer to the tower was better. Har Bell's house was right up against the wall.

Her family had originally lived far on the outskirts, but had been able to move closer to the center when Har Bell was born with rabbit ears. She herself was able to work *within* the walls, and as a talented researcher was even allowed into the tower. She had been invited to tutor Utsuwa, who loved history, and she had even been given permission to employ thaumatheria. Har Bell was the pride of her family, and their hope.

She had her reasons for leaving home, however—for departing to find the Forbidden Land.

Now she was going home to see her parents and three younger brothers for the first time in several years, riding a two-wheeled wizard carriage with the luggage rack stuffed full of snacks and toys. She imagined how her perpetually screaming brothers would shout when they saw the gifts she'd brought them, and a grin softened the edges of Har Bell's mouth.

But something was off.

It was quiet.

There were lights in the windows, but Har Bell couldn't hear her brothers fighting, or her mother's voice bellowing at them to quiet down.

Maybe they've just grown up and learned to behave? There's something a little sad about that, too...

Har Bell burst into the house without so much as a knock.

"I'm home! It's me, Har!"

Inside she found her mother and her youngest brother, Tal. Nurabehn had no surnames—Har was the only member of her family allowed to add the "Bell."

"Har... Oh, y...you're home!"

There were tears in her mother's eyes as she hugged Har Bell—no, simply Har. With a bad feeling building in her chest, Har hesitantly returned her mother's embrace as she looked around the silent house.

"Is Dad still at the workshop?"

"Yes. He hardly ever gets back here these days."

"Uh huh... And Hakk and Rola? Is Tal the only one here?"

"S right. Hakk and Rola are out so much I barely see them anymore. They come home after I'm asleep, and by the time I'm awake the two of them are gone again!"

Har held her mother tighter—tight enough to make sure she was there. Then she looked down at Tal, her youngest brother. He was glaring at her with reproach in his eyes.

“I was hoping for some of your pie, Mom. Could you make me some?”

“Oh my. But that’ll take some time.”

“It’s fine, I’ll watch Tal for you. Please?”

“Oh, what am I to do with you!”

Har’s mother smiled and hurried off to the kitchen. From the spring in her step it was clear how happy she was to have her eldest home again.

Har directed her brother outside with a glance. He silently followed her out the door, then started swinging his fists at her the moment it closed behind them. Tal was only ten years old, and still shorter than she was. He was weak, and his punches didn’t hurt at all, but every blow opened a new crack in Har’s heart; she could feel it about to give way inside her.

Har hugged her brother. “...When did it happen?”

Tal’s cheeks were wet with tears. “Two years ago. And then again last year—that’s when they took our brothers.”

His voice was trembling, and he started punching her again.

“It’s all your fault! It’s because you’re an Ignas! You’re an Ignas but you didn’t even protect us! You went searching for the Forbidden Land and abandoned us! That’s how come Dad and Hakk and Rola got fed to the Exinov!”

“Why is this only happening to us...?”

“It’s not just us! Half our people have been eaten since you left! Before long we’ll all be gone!”

With the world running out of mana, the wizards had finally started taking it from others in order to maintain their physical forms. The inferior races clung to the walls, swarming over the cast-off refuse, with none of the divine protection

enjoyed by those inside. If the death of one Nurabehn could extend the life of a single wizard by even a few years, being used thus would be a welcome honor—or so ran the thinking of the wizards.

The first announcement called for those “willing to devote their lives to the Exinov.” Nurabehn were not usually permitted inside the walls, and they answered the call in droves. None who were accepted into the service of the Exinov ever returned.

Naturally, some began to worry for the safety of their friends and family when they couldn’t seem to contact them. Still, the second and third announcements drew small crowds.

When the fourth announcement came, the only applicants were a few aged Nurabehn with no family to speak of. The messengers judged that this was insufficient, and used sorcery to bind whoever was nearby, loading them into wizard carriages and whisking them away.

There was no fifth announcement. Nurabehn were simply chosen and taken away. It was around that time that Har decided to set out for the Forbidden Land. She knew that sooner or later they would come for her family, too. If the problem was a lack of mana, she surmised that the only solution lay in the Forbidden Land.

Nobody believed in her mission. Since all ships bound for the Forbidden Land would sink, she said she would fly there on her thaumatherium—and was met with mocking laughter. Even if she made it alone across the sky, across the ocean, all that awaited her was despair.

And yet she went. Relying on the vaguest of maps, Har Bell soared across the ocean with no land in sight, her mind filled with a singular purpose. When she came across shipwrecked vessels she would land and rest, but never did she

look back toward the home that grew farther and farther away. She endured the storms, seeking a phantom she could not even be sure existed.

“I asked them to look after you...! I implored Danna Ryl...!”

“Danna Ryl ate Dad! She said that because you’re an Ignas, he must have more mana than other Nurabehn! And the bastards left us money! A ‘special allowance’ because we’d ‘lost our breadwinner’—to make sure we wouldn’t suffer and starve!”

Har thought back over the day’s events: landing in the tower square on the back of the dragon, the way Danna Ryl had embraced her, the praise she’d lavished on Har for returning with the mana potions, that fondly affectionate smile—Danny Ryl didn’t think she’d done anything wrong.

“Mom’s broken... She thinks Dad and our brothers are still alive.”

“I’m sorry, Tal... I’m sorry...! But it’s over now. It’ll all be okay.” I’ve brought the mana potions back with me.

Once trade between the worlds commenced, there would be no more need for anyone to take mana from the Nurabehn.

I couldn’t protect Dad, or Hakk, or Rola. But at least Mom and Tal are still safe.

“Did you find the Forbidden Land?”

“I sure did. Almost everyone there’s a Nurabehn. They’ve got Nurabehn kings and Nurabehn wizards, even.”

“You’re full of it.”

“I’m not! There’s an amazing wizard who froze the ocean all the way to the very bottom, right before my eyes. There’s another who’s been alive for

hundreds of years because she made a contract with a demon—and didn't you see the dragon this morning?"

"I didn't see anything. Dragons don't even exist."

"They do, in the Forbidden Land! And the man who rides the dragon is a Nurabehn, too."

"Drop it, already! It's not funny!"

Tal pushed his face into Har's chest and cursed her, laughing feebly. Har started to giggle as well. Neither could stop the torrent of tears.

Nurabehn were unprotected, powerless, and could never hope to learn sorcery. They were useless to society, no better than livestock—such was the world they had lived in all their lives. But if there were Nurabehn wizards in the Forbidden Land who could freeze the ocean, Nurabehn who were permitted to ride dragons—

Then why do we have to live like this?

"I'll bring you tomorrow, and you can ride on the dragon's back. I've been riding him this whole time! The man who usually rides him is a bit gruff, but he's kind. It's not just him, either. I was only willing to speak to the Exinov, but everybody from the Forbidden Land has been so kind to me anyway...!"



Chapter Four



It was night. Zero sat at the writing desk in the captain's quarters, the tip of her quill scratching furiously across the page. Finally she let out a long breath and looked up.

"Finished?" asked Mercenary from where he lounged on the bed behind her.

"I've conveyed everything that needs to be conveyed," she said without turning around. "That to a powerful mage, the gatekeepers of the Ocean of Death have the defenses of sieve."

"Yeah, an' you can get past 'em no problem if you can fly. Should be a piece o' cake for an avian beastfallen, doncha think?"

"If there are any avian beastfallen capable of flying for several weeks at a time without anywhere to rest, yes."

"They could just bring along their own log to perch on when they got tired."

Zero let out a loud laugh and turned in her chair to face Mercenary. "You're right. Those gatekeepers were hardly an obstacle. Were it not for the war between the Church and witchkind, we might have crossed this ocean many centuries ago."

"For all the good it woulda done us. A buncha 'no-horns' without mana potions or even a dragon—it's an open question whether they'da let us leave these docks alive."

"They might even have used it as a pretext to invade."

"What do you think, honestly?"

“Hm?”

“About an invasion. What’re their chances?”

“When will you finally learn to judge the strength of witches at a glance, I wonder?” asked Zero in exasperation, glaring at him through narrowed eyes.

Mercenary’s whiskers twitched. “Sounds like you didn’t have any trouble gettin’ a handle on it. The crystal-horned lady really that weak?”

“Even considering the shortage of mana, our rabbit-eared friend is likely more powerful.”

“Then how come Danna Ryl’s the Keybinder? Doesn’t that make her number one?”

“That is precisely the question Dawn and I had hoped to answer by reading the histories of this New World.”

“Past tense...? So you found out?”

“‘Because she has the most mystical horn of all.’”

“The hell’s that mean?!” Mercenary jerked up in spite of himself.

“It’s not so surprising as all that. Danna Ryl’s bloodline was apparently chosen to be Keybinder in the age of legend, before recorded history. It is written that a wizard with a beautiful mystical horn forecast the weather and allowed the fields to grow, healed the sick, and created the foundation of this world.”

“Then the whole reason these New Worlders are so horn supremacist is...”

“Because their myths tell that the ancient leaders were horned wizards, yes. So it appears. With this ‘Faith of the Horn’ as one might call it, wisdom and knowledge naturally began to converge around those with horns, in turn adding credence to that faith.”

“Hanh...” Just as this doltish sound escaped Mercenary’s lips, the priest entered without so much as a knock.

“Strength in battle is not necessary to lead a nation. The Bishops of the Seven Great Cathedrals cannot fight, but they are revered nonetheless.”

“Guess so, come to think of it... How come people revere ’em like that?”

“For their wisdom and knowledge.”

Mercenary looked quizzically at the priest. “Like how any warrior’ll follow a tactician who helps ’em take down an impregnable castle, even if the tactician’s too damn frail to hold a sword of their own?”

“That will suffice for the bigger picture. Their wisdom and knowledge do seem to be somewhat in decline, however.” The priest put his cane under his arm and leaned against the doorframe. “Har Bell has returned. According to Lily, she has been crying.”

“That thick-skinned rabbit?!”

“Interesting, isn’t it? There is definitely something here I would like to expose.”

It was a slightly perverse way of expressing the thought, but with his blindfold over his eyes, Zero and Mercenary’s condemnatory glares could do nothing to hurt the priest.

“You ain’t gonna be able to expose a thing,” said Mercenary. “Seeing as you’re one a them lesser beings.”

“It appears *her* whole family are made up of lesser beings.”

“Har Bell told you that?”

“Thus spake the mice.” The priest rapped his knuckles against the wall and Lily

popped her head out from behind his legs.

“Lily, um... Lily has lots of friends...”

Lily could speak with mice, and had come across the information about Har Bell’s family while gathering intel from the local rodent population.

Mercenary wrinkled his nose and looked at Zero. “I’ve got a *really* dumb question for ya.”

“Don’t let that concern you, Mercenary. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Somethin’ like beast ears...doesn’t get passed down...?”

“Are you asking whether being a beastfallen is an inherited trait?”

Mercenary looked down at his hands. Both of his parents had been completely normal human beings. It was that very fact, that a beast child could be born to an ordinary couple, which led people to fear what they called the “epitome of depravation.”

“So it...isn’t, right?”

“Well, it is in a way. Beast souls lodge within the witch’s bloodline, after all.”

“Explain it nice and simple so’s I can understand.”

“Well, first off, beast souls serve at a witch’s behest.” Zero leaned over and took a piece of fruit from the table beside her. “Let’s say this apple is the beast soul in question. I give this fruit to a normal human—to you, for instance, little mouse.”

Zero tossed the apple to Lily. The flustered beastfallen somehow managed to catch it, then took a nibble.

“Now let’s say the mouse and the priest marry, and a child is born.”

“That will not happen.”

“Quiet, Father. You’re overcomplicating things.”

At Zero’s scolding, the priest sank into silence, for once offering nothing in the way of a retort.

“Your children will be completely normal human beings, because the mouse still possesses the beast soul.”

“Okay, makes sense,” said Mercenary.

“But someday the mouse will grow old and die—place that apple upon the table, if you would.”

“Oh, sorry, Lily ate some!”

“It’s fine, just set it down.”

Lily anxiously put the partially-eaten apple back on the table.

“Now the beast’s soul has returned to me—but say I died before I could accept it, then this soul would lodge in our children, or our children’s children.”

“Wait, so you and me have kids in this story, too...?”

“Yes. And when the body of the beast soul’s host dies, the soul passes to a later generation.”

“Aha!” Mercenary nodded. “So it *does* get passed down.”

“Though more often to a grandchild or even great-grandchild than directly from parent to child,” the priest broke in. “Such biological atavism occurs more easily, does it not?”

“What’s with the fancy lingo? Quit swingin’ yer smarts around.”

“It would be too time consuming to dumb down every element of the

conversation to suit your level of intelligence.”

“Enough squabbling. The lesson isn’t over.” Zero split the apple in two with a knife, giving the partially-eaten half back to Lily and starting in on the other half herself.

“Now, this rabbit-eared one’s family are what these people call ‘Nurabehn.’ Completely ordinary human beings, in other words.”

Something odd occurred to Mercenary. “How come *everyone* inside the walls has animal ears, then?”

Logic dictated that a child with a beast’s soul would always be unique among their immediate family, surrounded by otherwise normal humans.

“Oh, oh, when Lily was walking around town, Lily thought it was so weird! There were dads with wolf ears who had rabbit-eared kids with them and everything...!”

Zero laughed. “Yes, when the bloodlines of two witches mix, multiple beast souls can be concentrated into a single lineage. The race they call Ignas was most probably created in that manner. And in rare instances a lost beast soul finds its way into a Nurabehn womb—the rabbit-eared one was born to such a household, I presume.”

“So how come Crystal Horn’s daughter also has a crystal horn?”

“Strictly speaking, the girl is not her daughter—she is what you’d call an artificial person.”

“You make it sound like common knowledge, but I got no idea what the hell you’re talkin’ about.”

“The lizard spoke of it, did he not? ‘Create another self, raise it, and use it as a vessel.’”

“Sure, I think he said somethin’ like that, but...”

Kudo’s report had been horrifying, but once they realized their mana potion imports could put an end to the practice, the delegation reached the conclusion that there was no need to kick up a fuss.

“It was obvious at a glance that those two are one and the same entity. Given the daughter’s crystal horn, it is not simply her flesh but also her soul that Danna Ryl has split in two. The girl is a perfect copy, spiritually identical to the original in every way.”

There was a hint of admiration in Zero’s voice. When she noticed Mercenary staring at her with a little grin, she smiled wryly. “Perhaps it is difficult for those who are not witches to understand.”

“Then I take it that as a witch, you *do* understand...?” asked the priest.

Zero nodded. “Yes. No small number of ancient witches choose to split off, propagate, and raise another self.”

“What for?”

“To protect their secrets. Finding a spouse and producing children raises the specter of a child with other allegiances. For witches, who prize secrecy above all and do not trust others, it is safer simply to multiply oneself. As it happened,” Zero continued, “my older brother Thirteen chose the ideal spouse to create a sorcerer with unprecedented stores of mana. But the child was taken away and hidden from him by its mother.”

“Right... Come to think of it, that *was* how Saybil started off.”

“As far as I can tell, the bond between horned parent and child is genuine. The mother loves the daughter as a part of herself—just as the daughter appears to have accepted her role as vessel for the mother she adores and respects.”

“Horrible,” said the priest.

“Then shall we bring this New World to ruin and spread the teachings of the Church here instead?”

The priest shrugged at Zero’s jest. “Let us settle for peaceful missionary work. There seems to be a receptive enough audience.”

He placed a finger to his cheek, and slid it downwards. By the time Mercenary realized he was miming a tear, the priest had already departed with Lily at his side.

2

Saybil was completely unable to understand it. Their ship was in a harbor, which meant there was land right there that *wasn’t* swaying.

So why is everyone trying to spend another night in their cabins—?!

“Their inner ears must be completely screwy...”

He stepped onto the pier, blankets and pillows clutched tightly in his arms. Passing a rope around a couple of nearby lampposts, he hung one blanket over it, then used rocks to hold down the four corners so that it resembled a kind of triangular cave. By putting other blankets over each end, he was able to create a makeshift tent to protect him from the elements. Saybil filled this simple shelter with more blankets and pillows from the ship, until finally he had the perfect bed—one that wouldn’t move beneath him as he slept.

Just as he had nestled in like a moth in its cocoon, the side of the tent flapped open.

“Sayb! How come you didn’t come get us?! You’re hogging all the fun!”

“Damn, it’s actually pretty warm in here.”

It was Hort and Kudo.

Saybil remained resolutely cocooned inside his blankets. “I’m not out here for fun. Didn’t have much of a choice...”

“Never did get over the seasickness, didja? I got booze and milk, which you want?”

“Milk. You drink alcohol now, Kudo?”

“Been startin’ to come around to the stuff. Didn’t drink on the voyage, though. How ’bout you, Hort?”

“Milk all the way!”

Kudo poured out two cups of milk and one of booze, then dropped a tiny ball of fire into each from the tip of his finger. The drinks were warm in an instant, and the three lightly clinked their cups together before taking a sip.

“Wowww! Just getting to sit like this without the ground wobbling underneath me really is awesome!”

“Right? See? How come everyone else won’t come out of their cabins?”

“‘Cause that ship’s fulla nothin’ but monsters, is why. Maybe I’ll make myself a tent, too.”

“But like, but like, I totally figured we’d get to stay in the tower! You know, ‘Please relax and enjoy your stay’... That kind of thing!”

“Just a guess, but I think maybe they don’t have any rooms for visitors in there,” said Saybil, gingerly sipping at his hot milk as he recalled the simple construction of the tower. “Once you get inside, you’re immediately in the

audience chamber, and then it's just open all the way up, isn't it? Didn't look like there were any higher floors or anything..."

"That right?"

"Hmm—I don't really remember... But even if they can't put us up at the tower, how 'bout an inn or something?"

"Ol' Crystal Horn prolly doesn't even have a concept of hospitality. Rule a place for a few hundred years and that's what you get."

"Sounds about right. I bet if we asked them for a place to stay they'd figure it out for us, though—why don't you try tomorrow, Hort?"

"Hmm, I'm pretty comfortable in this tent, though. This'll do for me."

"Not like we're hurtin' for bathing opportunities, either."

Usually, the biggest hardship on any sea voyage was the lack of fresh water—a typical trip would involve going weeks or months without bathing. But with magic, they could create an endless supply of fresh water from the brackish ocean around. They had prepared a large wooden tub on board, heating the water in much the same way Kudo had just warmed their drinks, which meant the passengers and crew could take a bath every day if they wanted to.

Even now, Hort was giving off that wonderful just-out-of-the-bath scent, and there wasn't so much as a speck of dust lingering among Kudo's scales.

"...Hey, so whadja think of the meeting today?" asked Kudo, casually broaching the subject as he sipped at his booze.

"It pissed me off," Hort replied bluntly. "I get that we've gotta accept the rulers' unreasonable demands if we wanna establish trade without starting a war or anything... But the people in town are suffering, aren't they?"

She raised one corner of the “tent” a little and looked out at the two-wheeled wizard carriage parked on the wharf.

“I wonder if we couldn’t just, like, sneak off and sell mana potions around the New World like Har Bell was doing on the Great Continent.”

“Hmm—I wonder if they’ve got any kind of constabulary like we do back home...”

“But they’d never beat me!”

“That’s exactly the kinda invasion we were talkin’ about earlier!”

“Sure, but I know you don’t like this either, Kudo!”

“I don’t like it, but I can wrap my head around it. I ain’t like you, I don’t live by emotion alone.”

“...You know, I never really understood it,” said Saybil.

“Huh?”

“War. I’ve never really understood what it is, or why it happens.”

Hort and Kudo looked at each other.

“It’s just like...a dust-up between two countries, right?” Saybil ventured.

“An’ most of ’em start over land disputes or whatever, don’t they?”

“Like the Dragon Conqueror King explained: stealing resources, protecting them, that kind of thing.”

Saybil nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s true most of the time. But I think some wars maybe start from people thinking they could make everyone happier if they were in charge.”

Wanting to make everyone in the city happy, but seeing with your own eyes

how much they're suffering, and blaming the politicians for it. Thinking, "If only I could kill them and take control myself, I could release the people from their pain"... I bet it happens.

Saybil suddenly thought of the father he had never met. The vision of a world without witch hunts—that was what had led Thirteen to start *his* war. For the non-witches of the world, it had been a witch invasion. For the witches, it was a war to free themselves from persecution. And for Thirteen...it had simply been a war waged to protect his one and only sister. The world saw it as evil. Many innocent lives had been lost.

"A righteous invasion, a righteous war... Can those things exist...?" Saybil sipped his milk. Hort and Kudo fell silent, when suddenly the entrance of their tent was flung open.

"Youth! Such youth! Such a flush of youth did I feel just now, I could not help but make mine entrance!"

"P-Professor Los...?!"

Hort and Kudo half rose and rushed to put themselves between her and Saybil.

"Th-This isn't what it looks like, Professor Los! It's just normal adolescence! Harmless adolescent doubt! It's definitely not dangerous, he's not actually in favor of war and invasion and stuff!"

"It's just a discussion! Just talk! A little thought experiment! This kinda thing's important in growing up!"

Los cackled at Hort and Kudo's panicked response, tapping the Staff of Ludens against her shoulder. "To whom art thou directing these excuses? Dost imagine I am a witch who would scold thee for thy lack of sense simply because thou

didst argue for the necessity of war?”

“N-No, but still—!”

“Then rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of unending debate which seeks to answer the unanswerable! ’Tis as thou didst state, young Sayb: war is a dust-up between one cause and another. History adjudges the victors to be on the side of right, while the losers go down as an evil best destroyed.

“Ah, I will have the booze. Not too hot, now.”

Los produced a wooden cup and held it out toward Kudo, who filled it, warmed it, and handed it back to her.

“Now listen, Sayb. Justice is terribly complicated. Throughout every corner of the world, thou shalt find peace built on *someone’s* suffering. Even if dost attempt to treat everyone with an equal hand, ’twill never go as thou wishest. As for why, well, ’tis simple: because people are not born equal.”

Los looked at Hort, Kudo, and Saybil in turn.

“Each of you hast thine individual strengths, and you all know which tasks are best left to one another. But suppose a terribly inept and powerless individual should join your number—would any of you entrust them with thy work?”

All three shook their heads.

“’Tis what it means to have a monopoly on power. Those who are powerless, and so are tasked with nothing, can decide nothing for themselves. Even should they find themselves dissatisfied with the distribution of rations you three have agreed upon together, they would have no means of opposing you.”

“But I’d give everyone a fair portion!” Hort pouted.

Los grinned at her. “Then what if thy feeble companion asked for more? ’Tis

insufficient! You hoard the best food for yourselves! I have every right to eat the same food as you, and in the same quantity.”

“They could just eat the same food as us. Problem solved, right?”

“As mages, thou and young Kudo are prodigious eaters. And Kudo is quite large. Still wilt thou share the same portion with all, I wonder? What will happen when the stockpiles run low?”

Hort frowned, holding back her frustration. “...Well... To each according to their need, then...is how I guess it might go...”

“’Tis quite the pickle. Suppose that in the end there remains only enough food for three. One of the four must starve that the other three survive.”

“I-I’d just go and find more food somewhere else!”

“A fine idea. The happy little family of three next door has enough for three, why not procure an extra portion from them?”

“But then *they* would starve!”

“So what now? Will the four of you set out together on a quest for provisions that may or may not even exist, splitting your meager rations and risking the death of all?”

Hort jammed her head into the blanket Saybil was wrapped in, writhing about and wailing. Kudo topped up his own cup, and Saybil gazed into his empty one.

“...Is there a right answer?” he asked.

“No, there is not. Each must simply walk the path they think is right. So long as a fresh store of provisions does not appear out of nowhere, of course.”

“And that kind of thing just doesn’t happen, does it...”

“*You* just appeared outta nowhere, though.”

“Huh?” Saybil looked up at Kudo. Then he got it. “So your story... It all ends happily ever after if some huge new source of food suddenly appears, right?”

“Suppose you three were to keep this new food source all for yourselves, handing none over to your fourth companion. They are unnecessary for the functioning of the state, after all, and in truth are nothing but a burden. Providing food only to the capable is good for the stability of the nation—such is the situation in this New World to which we have come.”

“No. The situation’s a little worse than that.”

The tense voice came from outside the tent. Four heads popped out, only to see Har Bell standing there, worry written all over her face. Her long leporine ears seemed to have picked up their conversation even from her cabin on the ship.

“There is not enough even for three, so they’re eating the fourth to survive. *That* is the current state of my homeland.” Har Bell’s face was rigid. “Tell me, Loux Krystas, Dawn Witch, you who have lived for three hundred years. This nation now suddenly has a food source, more than its rulers could ever need—but they have already eaten the fourth. And if that fourth was my family, what then? Would it be evil for me to wish for the rulers’ destruction?”

Saybil half sprang to his feet to ask what she meant by that, but Los silently motioned him back down. She looked straight at Har Bell, whose eyes were twitching wildly, as if she were begging to be pushed over the edge.

“To wish it is not evil... But should thy rage and animosity stain with blood a land where peace is on the horizon—then history will surely name thee evil.”

“So what do I do...?!” Har Bell implored her, voice full of anguish.

Saybil held a hand to his chest.

It can't be... The lack of mana, the strict hierarchy of this society—where are the leaders who rule this place getting their mana? How are they prolonging their lives?

“If thy wish is for revenge, there is naught that I can do. 'Tis a hell through which thou must walk alone. If thy desire is for salvation, however—then I vow that my fledglings and I will do everything in our power to assist thee.”

Har Bell's eyes filled with tears. “...I want you to take my family—the ones who are left. Take them with you back to the Forbidden Land.”

“That request is easily granted. We have cabins and to spare.”

Los grinned, and Hort who was by her side grabbed her own antlers in realization.

“Oh! S-Sor...! Listen, Har Bell! I know I've got horns, but I'm totally not important or anything...! I'm just a regular person! Umm, like a Nurabehn with horns!”

“I've always known. You're far too friendly with the common people,” she replied, smiling through the tears. Suddenly a little pebble hit her on the head. Har Bell looked in the direction it had come from and saw the priest looking down at them from the deck of the ship. He tapped his ear.

“You are not the only one with good hearing, Har Bell the Ignas. If we're to be sharing secrets, come aboard and do it in the captain's quarters, where Zero has set up a barrier.”

For trade to be established, first the merchandise to be exchanged must be decided on—what will be sold, and what will be bought. The delegation had only their mana potions to offer, but the people of the New World wanted them so desperately that they were willing to offer much in return.

The day after the dragon landed in the square outside the tower and the delegation's ship sailed into port, Danna Ryl the One-Horned assembled all the merchants in the city and arranged a great market for her guests.

"I have it in mind that the tower will buy up any items you wish to include in the trade agreement, then exchange them for your mana potions. Please do not concern yourselves with price for the time being—simply choose whatever strikes your fancy."

"Well, umm... The thing is... First I'd really like to know... What's the deal with that door?! Where does it go, and how's it doing that?!"

A single door loomed over the square, massive enough that Hort had to crane her neck to look up at it. Yesterday she'd figured it was a great big statue of a door or something. Today, however, it stood open, and a seemingly endless stream of merchants with fully loaded carts bustled in and out of it.

Danna Ryl cocked her head. "It is just a gate."

"But a gate to what?! There's no building on the other side...!"

"Chill, Hort. That's a witch's path," Kudo said casually. "We learned about 'em in class, remember?"

"That thing?! But witch's paths are supposed to be under beds or hidden behind pillars or whatever. You know, secret passages to connect the witches' hideaways to places in town...!"

"Yup. They can transport you instantaneously. The ritual's really freakin'

complicated, though, and if you mess it up you might come out in the middle of the ocean and drown, so almost nobody actually uses 'em."

"My, my... You're quite knowledgeable on the subject. There are not many wizards who know the history nor the vagaries of the ritual, even among the Exinov."

Kudo shrugged. "Compared to this, the sorcery and magic we use are pretty primitive. Puts us closer to the fundamental principles, though, which means we gotta know things you guys can afford to forget about at this point, that's all."

Danna Ryl narrowed her eyes at Kudo in surprise. "You are not modest, but neither are you arrogant—uncouth, perhaps, but not insolent. It is wonderful. I sincerely apologize for calling you beastservant yesterday."

"Water off a lizard's back—hey, Saybil! The hell are you doing?!" With a shout, Kudo raced off toward where his fellow mage stood with Los.

They were side by side in front of the great door—a gate to goddess only knew where—experimentally poking their hands and heads through it. Hort clenched her fists and resisted the urge to run over and cry, "Let me try," focusing instead on fulfilling her duties as deputy chief of the delegation. Ghoda, for his part, was circling above the square on his dragon and occasionally landing atop the apex of the tower. Danna Ryl had asked that the merchants coming from afar might be "allowed to bear witness to the dragon's grandeur," and Ghoda had obliged.

It would hardly have been possible to do business with a dragon standing in the square, but leaving Heath on the ship would have defeated the point of bringing him along in the first place. Having the dragon circle the sky above the market provided both the perfect display of power and a suitable level of intimidation.

“Ahh... The lad is truly beautiful. If not as a beastservant, do you think he might serve as attendant physician to this tower, perhaps?”

“It wouldn’t be out of the question, if Kudo agreed.”

“Then I will do my utmost to convince him.”

Danna Ryl put a hand to her mouth and giggled. The horn on her forehead sparkled in the sunlight, more mysterious and mystical than ever, attracting the attention of all who beheld it.

This person ate Har Bell’s family.

Hort swallowed back the bile forming in her throat. *It’ll be fine. Smiling is my specialty.*

“The various experts in our party will decide on which items we’re interested in trading for. As for myself... I’d like to talk about some goods that *aren’t* here at the market, if that’s all right.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“The fact is...we need workers. The Forbidden Land has a labor shortage just at the moment, and I was told you had a lot of Nurabehn, as you call them, living outside the city. They aren’t very important to New World society, right? So we’d be grateful if we could take them home with us.”

“Then it is...slaves you seek?”

Hort shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean. We’re just looking for people to emigrate to the Forbidden Land. We’ll offer suitable payment, of course! Say, one mana potion per person?” Hort took a deep breath and

continued, not letting even a hint of malice seep into her voice. “Sucking a Nurabehn dry doesn’t equal the restorative effects of a single mana potion, right? So I think it’s a pretty good deal for both of us.”

“Yes, I quite agree!” Danna Ryl’s smile was radiant. She didn’t seem to think the proposal at all unfair. Quite the reverse, in fact: she was genuinely happy to have found another item of merchandise the delegation was willing to accept in exchange for their mana potions. “Oh, how wonderful. If only I had known you were coming, I would never have rushed to draw mana as I did.”

“Huh...? Um, ‘draw mana’...?”

“Oh? Do you not use the expression? When a superior being receives mana from an inferior one, we call it ‘drawing mana.’”

She really...

...doesn’t think the Nurabehn are human.

“No... It’s... That practice is taboo where we come from...”

“Taboo?”

“Yes. It’s forbidden to take a lethal amount of mana from another witch. It would concentrate too much power into one individual and upset the balance.”

“Upset the...? My apologies, I know nothing of what stands as common knowledge in the Forbidden Land. Why is it wrong to upset the balance?”

“Because the drive for power leads to war.”

“But when only one person is left standing, then surely all that remains is peace?”

“Maybe, as long as that person never dies.”

“Ah...!” Danna Ryl clapped her hands. “I see! Death *is* a troublesome thing, it’s true. Mana resides in the flesh, so when someone dies, all that precious mana they’ve collected is lost.”

“You’ve been alive for over five hundred years now, right...?”

“Yes—though this body is my third.”

“Huh?! You mean this won’t be the first time?!”

“It is more efficient to prepare a vessel than to expend mana maintaining one’s physical form. Soon it will be ten years since I came into this body, so in five more it will be time for a change.”

Danna Ryl showed no sign she was surprised by Hort’s understanding of the “vessel” process. Hort didn’t know if that was because she figured Har Bell had already told her, or if it was just assumed to be common knowledge—but she imagined it was the latter.

“When I create a vessel, my soul is split in two—but by switching bodies through the rite of rebirth and absorbing the mana contained within the old flesh, soul and all, I become whole again.” Danna Ryl brought a hand to her chest. “When that happens, the thoughts and feelings from my time as the vessel enter me as well. I feel so happy and content—it is as if I have lived many childhoods. My present vessel is especially energetic and full of curiosity, so I’m very much looking forward to becoming one with her.”

“But...now that you have our mana potions, you won’t need to use vessels anymore, right...?”

“Death comes for us all in the end. Even with an abundance of mana and a body that never ages, one still might die in a sudden accident someday.”

“Well, yes... That’s true...”

“Some wizards who have lived since ancient days raise their vessels to a certain age and then freeze them. Though I wish for my vessel to enjoy her life until the day comes.”

Hort could feel the affection in the other’s voice—whether she wanted to or not. Danna Ryl’s incomprehensible value system made Hort sick to her stomach, but she couldn’t find it in herself to condemn it as evil.

Plus, Danna Ryl says she keeps the memories of her vessels... That they’re happy memories for her, even. My outside perspective is just totally meaningless here.

“...Um, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, anything you like.”

“When you take mana from a Nurabehn, what happens to *their* memories?”

Danna Ryl gave a light, innocent laugh. “Well, Nurabehn don’t have souls, you see.”

“D-Don’t have...souls...?”

“That’s right... Oh, but please don’t misunderstand. Anyone capable of riding a dragon or brewing mana potions must surely have a soul. I therefore think the people of the Forbidden Land simply *look* like our Nurabehn, but are in fact different beings entirely.”

“I don’t—”

Danna Ryl clapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh dear, oh dear. I shouldn’t be saying such things—not when you so kindly expressed an interest in taking our Nurabehn as laborers. Please, don’t let this affect your opinion of them. I will

choose the most suitable workers and have them brought to you at once.”

“Oh, we’ll do that ourselves...! We want to find people who are actively interested in joining us. Enthusiasm is the most important thing in a worker!” Hort stopped herself, coming to a sudden realization. “Umm—that big door that the merchants have been coming in and out of... It connects to other towns? Or even...other countries?”

“That’s right.”

“Could we put out a call for applicants in those places as well?”

“Yes, yes. We could indeed. It’s just that—” Danna Ryl stopped short.

“Grand Magister?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. I will make the arrangements at once. I’m sure there will be an overwhelming number of applicants, however... And you have but one vessel, I believe? We could prepare additional ships for you, if that would suit.”

“Definitely! That would be a huge help!”

“The ships we can provide at a discount, of course. After all, the more Nurabehn you take, the better this exchange becomes for us.”

That’s so repulsive, it was almost refreshing. I feel like I deserve a medal for not throwing up on the spot.

Hort found herself looking up at the sky. *Maybe people just want to see a dragon in flight at times like these.*

“...Huh? The Dragon Conqueror King’s trying to say something...?”

There was no way they’d be able to hear his voice, but Ghoda was leaning out over Heath’s side and gesturing down at the people on the ground, clearly trying to get something across. Hort looked around and saw that the rest of the

delegation, who had already noticed, were frantically running this way and that.

“What’s the matter?” asked Danna Ryl.

“I don’t know, but...I think the dragon has seen something.”

Even as Hort said this, the dragon swung about in a wide circle and soared away from the tower square.

“Hort! There’s a monster outside the city!”

At Kudo’s cry, Hort finally got some kind of grip on the situation.

“Wh-What do you mean, a monster?!” Hort turned to look at Danna Ryl.

“I do not know,” she replied calmly. “All sorts of things appear outside the walls.”

“A...And you still let people live out there?!”

“The Nurabehn settle there entirely of their own accord. Do not worry. No matter what it is, it won’t be able to penetrate the walls of this city.”

I’m not getting through to her. “I’m going to save them! Those people are our merchandise!” Hort cried, and took off running.

Only then did Danna Ryl clap her hands and murmur, “Oh dear...! *We must protect the cargo.*”

4

From the sky, Ghoda commanded an excellent view of the city and surrounding area. It struck him as a beautiful town, clean, with everything in its place, and everyone who walked its streets looked like a noble. Fanning out

from the tall tower in its center, the city seemed wide enough that it would take from sunrise to sunset to walk from one end to the other. It was protected by the ocean and the surrounding wall.

Outside the wall, the land was desolate. It was a desert, without a hint of green; strangely, Ghoda could see no river of any kind. There were fountains throughout the city, so clearly there was ample clean water welling up from somewhere—but where? Ghoda lightly patted Heath's neck and they flew higher. The moment he looked into the distance, however, he noticed something strange.

Is that a mountain of rock?

But no, it was obviously moving. There were countless legs beneath the craggy form, scrabbling along as it glided over the sand.

There truly are strange creatures in this world.

As the Dragon Conqueror King frowned down at the thing, Har Bell flung herself against his back and cried out, "It's a sakuhrm!"

"Some kind of desert creature?"

"No, they can't survive without fresh water. They're supposed to live only in the central mountain range, so what's one doing here...?"

"Looks like it's heading for the city." Ghoda glanced down at the city's fountains. "...Ah."

"There are Nurabehn settlements all around the walls! I'll chase it away! Please, fly us down there!"

Ghoda leaned out over the side of the dragon and looked down at the bustling market below, searching out his companions. He gave a wave, and it was Lily who noticed him first.

“There’s a monster outside the city! We’re going to drive it away!” he shouted.

Lily immediately hopped off to find the priest, and he in turn informed Mercenary and Zero. Once he saw his message had been delivered, Ghoda pulled on Heath’s reins.

+++

Tal first noticed something was wrong when tiny ripples formed on the surface of the water in the jug he was carrying, small vibrations that slowly but surely grew larger. He dashed outside and began to shout:

“Hunt! It’s a hunt! Everyone get underground!”

Outside the city walls, the weak Nurabehn were easy prey for any and all creatures that came their way. It was said that in the center of the continent there were towns made up entirely of Nurabehn, but they had no way of reaching them. Inside the walls there were ways of traveling instantaneously to far distant places, but Nurabehn weren’t allowed inside the walls. One could safely cross the desolate wasteland surrounding the city with a wizard carriage, but no Nurabehn could ever afford one of those. With a thaumatherium, one could take to the skies and fly away, but Tal wouldn’t even know how to go about buying one of those if he *did* have the money.

Tal was a healthy ten-year-old boy. He got his mother down into the basement, then ran around shouting that a hunt had come. He heard voices here and there calling out the same warning. Those whose homes didn’t have basements would rush to their nearest neighbors and take shelter with them.

That was how it had always been—the Nurabehn looked out for one another. The monsters would come, run amok for a while, destroy some homes, raid the village food supplies, then leave when they got bored. They knew that if they lingered too long near the walls, they would be exterminated.

Sakuhrm had only recently begun attacking their settlements. The massive beasts were carried along on undulating, octopoid legs, and their passage left numerous homes flattened in their wake. Some people got buried by the rubble of their demolished homes, trapped in their basements and unable to dig their way out for days. Even so, it was better than being crushed along with the house—which was the fear that drove everyone underground.

It'll be okay. Har's back now.

She'll come riding on her thaumatherium and use her wizard phials to drive the monster away, no matter how strong it is.

“Tal! Get yourself underground, too! It's almost here!”

Someone patted him on the shoulder as they ran by, and Tal suddenly realized the street was more or less deserted.

His house was close to the wall. The wall meant the protection of the Exinov, so it was much harder to destroy the buildings closest to it. Tal's big sister was an Ignas, which was why they got to live there.

He ran for home. A cloud of sand and dust was already filling the town—the monster was close, almost upon him. His breathing labored, his shoulders heaving, he was just about to slide into his house when he heard the voice.

“Hakk? Rola?! Where are you? Dear! We need to hide, it's dangerous! I can't

find Tal anywhere! Someone, anyone! Please!”

“Mom!” Tal had a powerful sense of responsibility despite his age. The moment he noticed something was wrong, he had taken his mother down to the basement and told her to stay there. It had never occurred to his ten-year-old mind that, convinced Tal’s father was still at his workshop and his two dead brothers were out horsing around, she would leave the basement to search for them.

“Mom! Mom!”

“Tal! This way!”

He followed the voice and found her right away. A few of their neighbors were holding her back, keeping her from running off in search of her family.

“She says she won’t go underground until she’s found her family! She just won’t listen!”

“We thought about carrying her home bodily, but she’s struggling too much...!”

Tal’s mother was tall, well-built, and in her prime. Unfortunately, there was no one there burly enough to run with a struggling adult in their arms.

“Mom! It’s me! Don’t worry, everybody’s taken shelter! You’re the last one!”

She smiled as he raced up, her face flooded with relief.

“Let’s go! Come on, Mom, run!”

The swirling dust was getting in his mouth. Tal could barely see a thing. The sound was deafening.

The sakuhrm must be here already.

Tal looked up at the sky—and in that moment, a huge black shadow passed

overhead.

“Oh!”

He couldn't help but stop and look.

It was a dragon.

The beating of its wings kicked up gusts of wind that swept away the gritty dust clouds. Then he saw the long rabbit ears atop one of the riders' heads.

“Sis!”

Her ears pricked up, and Har turned toward him. She waved him toward the wall with exaggerated sweeps of her arm. “Run! Don't stop!”

Tal ran.

The dragon flew off toward the edge of town. With the dust clouds swept away, Tal had a clear view of what was happening out there. Far in the distance he could see the great sakuhrm's silhouette.

“...What...? It's still so far away...”

“Hey, that girl just now... Was that Har? She was riding on a dragon...!”

Tal nodded and laughed. “Har's come home! She just got back yesterday!” Then he took off running again.

+++

“How do we beat that thing?! It's like fighting a mountain!” Ghoda had to shout to be heard over the wind.

“Get in as close as you can! I'll toss some wizard phials at it!”

“And you’re sure that’s going to work?!”

“Grit your teeth! These things’ll blow you away!”

As the dragon swung perilously low, Har Bell threw one of her wizard phials at the sakuhrm. There was a deafening boom, and Heath was buffeted by a blast of wind. The dragon shook his head and righted himself in midair, then began to circle the halted sakuhrm. The creature’s rocky carapace was cracked, and Ghoda could see inside.

“What...is that, writhing in there?”

“Sakuhrm are aggregate organisms, leech-things that live in colonies inside the rock! Once you smash that, the insides scatter! See, there they go...!”

It was just as Har Bell said: hundreds of long, thin creatures burst forth from the broken rock, leaping so monstrously high that Heath had to climb a little higher to avoid being bitten.

“Do we need to worry about them? They’re headed toward town.”

“Everyone’s taken shelter underground, and these things aren’t smart enough to burrow down there. It’ll take some time, but if we just crush them one by one—” Har Bell stopped mid-sentence and fell silent. They had smashed the sakuhrm’s carapace, scattered its insides, and yet...

“...I hear rumbling.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Ghoda said.

“You think you have better hearing than me?”

“...Take us higher, Heath!”

At Ghoda’s signal, the dragon beat his powerful wings. Rising up, the wastes spread out before them. What they saw there left them speechless. A cloud of

dust, rising in the distance—and a whole swarm of sakuhrm.

“How many of those bottles you have left?”

“Two...”

“Doesn’t seem like that’ll be enough.” Ghoda pulled on the reins and turned to put the advancing swarm at their back.

“Hey, we’re facing the wrong direction! What, are you running away?!”

“Stop and think before you speak! We can’t take all those creatures on our own!”

“Still—!”

“Heath! Find Zero!” Ghoda shouted, and the dragon began winging his way back toward the city. “Keep your body low! The air resistance makes it harder for him to pick up speed!”

Har Bell did as she was told, laying herself flat against the dragon’s back. Heath soared past the houses below at lightning speed, then stopped suddenly. They were looking down the main street of the city, which ran in a straight line from the tower to the outer walls. A single four-wheeled wizard carriage was racing toward them as fast it could go. It was a larger carriage meant for conveying goods, but at present there were five people riding in the bed: the usual trio of Saybil, Hort, and Kudo, plus the inseparable pair, Zero and Mercenary.

“I’m setting you down there! Go explain what’s going on!”

“What?! What do you mean setting me doaaahh!”

Har Bell shrieked as the dragon went into a nosedive. Once they were just about low enough, Ghoda unhesitatingly booted her in the stomach, and she

tumbled awkwardly from the dragon's back—only for Mercenary to deftly catch her in his arms. The world was still spinning as he lowered her to the cargo bed of the carriage. She shook her head and looked up to see Mercenary grinning down at her.

“Got a monster on our hands, huh?”

For a brief moment, Har Bell had been on the verge of despair. Now, though, she felt hope. Her body began to tremble. *So this is what it feels like to have companions, to have people on your side.*

“There's a swarm of sakuhrm on the far side of the Nurabehn settlement! If you break the rocks on their backs, the leech-things inside will disperse!”

Har Bell pursed her lips, fighting back the emotions and explaining the situation as clearly and simply as she could. Only then did it strike her:

“Who's driving this thing?!” she cried, peering around to the driver's seat.

“Oho, Miss Har Bell! Thy New World abounds with such wonderfully amusing toys! And this, what thou callest a wizard carriage, is fast becoming my favorite of all!”

“Loux Krystas?! Do you...have a license?!”

“License? Tch—! Nothing of the sort! I have a great love of the leeway granted in desperate times! Is this any time to be speaking of rules and regulations?”

“No, but...this is a special kind of cart! Let me take over!”

“I say thee nay! Sit back there quietly with the rest!”

The wizard carriage picked up speed, and Har Bell was thrown tumbling backward.

“Professor! This swarm of monsters—what are we gonna *do* about 'em?! Kill

them?!”

In the face of Hort’s panicked request for direction, Zero turned to look at Har Bell, stroking her chin. “A fine question. Incidentally, rabbit-eared one... Can these sakuhrm be eaten?”

“Wh...What?”

“Do they taste good? For how long are they best cooked?”

“Well... Long enough to make the skin crispy on the outside... Roast them like that and they’re a rare delicacy.”

“Then roast them we shall.” Zero grinned. “Antlered one! First we will surround the settlement with walls!”

“Right—secure the safety of all non-combatants! Roger that! Kudo, Har Bell, you search for the injured! You two have the best hearing.”

“O-Okay!” Har Bell nodded.

Kudo leaned toward the driver’s seat. “Professor Los! The two of us are gonna get off, so slow down for a sec once we reach the settlement!”

“I fear I know only how to *increase* the speed.”

“Pull up on the ‘reins’!” Har Bell shouted. “Just like with a horse!”

“To what reins dost thou refer?”

“That round wheel thing you’re holding onto!”

Los cocked her head, then pulled as hard as she could on the “reins.” The carriage swerved and came to a sudden stop, sending Kudo tumbling to the ground with Har Bell right on top of him. The wizard carriage then sped off once more, leaving the two of them sitting in the dust.

“Owww, dammit... I’m *never* gettin’ in another wizard carriage with her behind the wheel so long as I live...!”

“Shit... Shit...! Driving like that she deserves to be permanently banned from the road...! Not to mention Ghoda! He needs his dragon-riding license revoked!”

Cursing and shaking her head, Har Bell picked herself up off the ground—then froze. The contents of the first sakuhm, the one whose shell she had broken, were crawling all over the town.

“...*Those* are the things that taste good when you crisp ’em up...?”

The giant limbless leech-creatures were slowly but steadily approaching, moving to surround the pair on all sides. It seemed as if they might strike at any moment, their round mouths lined with neat rows of fangs that looked tough enough to chisel through solid rock.

“I’m not too good with offensive magic. How ’bout you?”

“I’ve got two phials left, and—”

An impatient creature detached itself from the group and lunged at them. Har Bell fired something at it. Kudo had instantly taken the posture for Steim, but she beat him to the punch—whatever she used was just that fast. Kudo stared at her hands in disbelief.

“And I’ve got two wizard pistols,” she finished, holding up the objects in her hands for Kudo to see. They were long cylindrical tubes with some kind of grip attached. Each had a trigger as well, which seemingly caused them to eject something from the end of the tube when pulled.

“More ‘thaumaturgical devices’...?”

“You need a license for these, too,” Har Bell said casually, then turned and

began to fire shot after shot, taking care of the rest of the leech-things before Kudo even knew what was going on.

After the dust had settled, her ears pricked up. “I can hear someone crying over that way!” And then she was off, sprinting toward the source of the sound.

+++

The rest of the group, minus Kudo and Har Bell, jumped down from the wizard carriage a little ways outside the village. The moment Saybil hit the sand, he was vomiting into it.

“Goddess... Please...”

He was trembling all over, and to the casual observer it might have appeared that he would be of no use whatsoever—though the others knew, of course, that Saybil’s mere presence was their greatest asset.

“I will make the wall! Antlered one, you and the young man stand there! / *leave the rest to you!*”

“R-Right!”

Hort dragged Saybil over to the place Zero had indicated.

The Mud-Black Witch placed both hands flat against the ground. “Sand...? We’ll need a little water. Quicker to bring it from the ocean than to call the clouds, I warrant...”

Before she had even finished speaking, the water was there: seawater, riding upon the wind like a translucent cloth, spreading across the sky then raining down all at once onto the desert sands below. Zero remained still, her hands

never leaving the ground.

Then, with one deep breath:

“Maelim soh Heghans! Rally to me, wall of stones! Spin me a net, O grass, O vines! Seal the gates of heaven and earth! Cradle, take this transgressor into your embrace! Chapter of Hunting, Third Page—Etorahk! Heed me now, for I am Zero!”

She stood, slowly raising both hands as if lifting something to the sky. The earth moved and writhed in accordance with her motion, rising beneath Hort and Saybil’s feet to form a wall that towered above the others’ heads. As they were carried into the sky, Hort looked out over the approaching swarm of sakuhrm.

“Wow... There’s gotta be a hundred of them...” She gulped.

Flagis won’t be nearly enough. I need something that can burn a much larger area all at once.

And Hort knew just the spell. As part of the small elite group bound for the New World, she had been given permission to read the forbidden *Grimoire of Zero* in the name of increasing their combat strength. In it, she had found magic more powerful than anything she had encountered before—the same magic Zero herself used. And now Hort could use it, too.

Plus... “Sayb, do you mind?” She held out her left hand.

Getting carefully to his feet so as not to fall from the high stone wall, Saybil took the proffered hand in his own. He felt the tingle as mana began to flow from his hand into hers, and let out a deep breath. “All right, I’m ready. Go ahead, use as much as you want.”

“Thanks, Sayb! You’re always there when I need you!” She squeezed his hand

and started her incantation. *“Bahg doh Wal Fel doh Al...!”*

Snakes of flames rose around her; this spell called on the same demon as Flagis.

I just need to ask for a little more power than normal.

Flagis could burn a specific target with the desired amount of flame. But where the fire of Flagis did not spread, this spell would spread explosively.

If I were to use this in town, the results would be horrifying. But out here it's desert as far as the eye can see—I'm not scared to use it in a place like this.

“O great serpents who sleep within the scorching heat! From the cradle where gather the flames of Hell, awaken now and reduce all to ash!”

Hort pointed down at the oncoming swarm of sakuhrm, imploring the demon: *Incinerate them all.*

“Chapter of Harvest, Seventh Page—Filam, the Immolating Wind! Heed me now, for I am Hort!”

The flame serpents swelled up and became great dragons of fire, racing through the air above the sakuhrm and dropping a shower of sparks in their wake. These set the sakuhrm ablaze wherever they made contact, and the grating cries of the dying creatures rang out across the desert for what seemed like hours. Saybil and Hort unconsciously let go of each other's hands and covered their ears with them instead, hunching their shoulders against the cacophony.

And, a certain pleasant aroma wafted up to them—

“Th-They really do smell amazing...!” Hort's stomach growled.

As Saybil looked out over the roasting swarm of sakuhrm, something struck

him. “Oh... It smells like clams cooked on the half shell. The kind seasoned with seawater.”

“Th-That’s totally it!”



Chapter Five



“A wall like that... And she made it in a matter of moments... Unbelievable...” Har Bell stood open-mouthed, looking up at what the witch had created with the power of Etorahk. Zero had even left room for a door, which she had likewise fashioned as if it was nothing.

“It is no more than a simple thing, but I have placed a barrier in the wall to convince other creatures that this is the territory of a dragon. The average monster will not even attempt to approach it.”

“Y-You can do that?”

“With the help of a dragon’s scale, yes.”

Zero looked over at Heath, who was wolfing down roast sakuhrm at the foot of the wall. Mercenary was by the dragon’s side, busy using his extraordinary knife skills to prepare the sakuhrm for consumption. Hort had used her own casting of Etorahk to form a long table and furnish it with a row of chairs on either side, such that the area under the impromptu wall had the lively atmosphere of an open-air restaurant. The Nurabehn who had gathered to goggle at the newly-formed wall seemed to have forgotten their earlier panic and fear, and were happily sampling the rare delicacy laid out before them.

“How do I put this...?” Har Bell deftly let one of her rabbit ears drop flat while the other remained upright. “I’m kind of at a loss... Ever since I brought you all here, everything about this world has started to seem different to me.”

The monsters that attacked her village had been repelled, while Har Bell had spent the time racing around with Kudo killing the leech-things and finding

injured people to treat. In the past, it was all work she would have done alone. And it had never been enough—there were always lives she couldn't save. This time it was more than just that, though. Without the members of the delegation by her side, the whole Nurabehn settlement would likely have been destroyed. And the Ignas and Exinov wouldn't have batted an eyelash.

"Still, 'tis a strange thing," Los said through a mouthful of sakuhrm as she popped up suddenly beside Har Bell. The rabbit-eared woman looked down at her, and Los shrugged. "Am I mistaken? The New World runs dry of mana, so its rulers contrive to eat the Nurabehn as a means of restoring their life force. Yet if that be the case, the Nurabehn are a vital resource—would it not then be in the rulers' interest to protect them, that they might proliferate?"

"No... They would use up so much mana defending the Nurabehn that it wouldn't be worth it." Har Bell gave Los a grim smile. "The wizard phials I use are powerful, but I can only make two in a day, and even that's a stretch... The next day my mana's so dried up I can't use any sorcery at all. For older wizards who sustain their bodies with mana, not being able to do sorcery for a day is basically a death sentence."

"Barely scraping by, I see... Well—'tis to be expected in a land such as this. The mana stored in my little Ludens is so thick as to melt away into the very air of this place."

"Ah, that's right! When I was in the Forbidden Land I could make ten phials a day! I felt a terrifying amount of power inside me..." Har Bell looked over at Zero once more. "Not to mention the magic you all use... It's truly incredible. All our thaumaturgical devices have to be prepared in advance—without them, we're really no different from Nurabehn."

"Then you should come and study," said Zero. "The Wenias Academy of Magic

is open and accepting applicants.”

“Though be warned...” Los swallowed a huge hunk of sakuhm and grinned at Har Bell. “Dost require a license to practice magic.”

Har Bell was silent for a moment, then burst out laughing. The laughter left her feeling hungry, so she began tucking into some of Mercenary’s sakuhm surprise as well.

“Come to think of it...” Saybil looked over at Har Bell. “Weren’t we in the middle of trade negotiations?”

The party hurried back to the tower square where they were subjected to a fearsome tongue-lashing from the priest, who had stayed behind to smooth things over after everyone’s sudden disappearance. The list of potential imports he and Lily had drawn up was unimpeachable, however, and they had largely settled the trade agreement itself, so no one felt they could protest in the face of his reprimands.

+++

Preparations progressed without delay. Many Nurabehn wanted to go to the Forbidden Land, but many were also reluctant to leave their familiar home, especially now that Zero had constructed her wall. With their settlement safe, surprisingly few of the Nurabehn in Kuravanuluox—which meant “repository of the Keybinder” in the local tongue—wished to emigrate.

“But their people are being *eaten*... Doesn’t that bother them...?” Hort asked hesitantly as she looked over the list of applicants.

Har Bell shook her head. “A lot of Nurabehn see it as an honor to be consumed and become a source of mana for the Exinov, and there’s some degree of benefit for those left behind as well. And once regular shipments of mana potions start coming in, they won’t have to worry about *more* people being consumed.”

“Still...”

“I get what you’re trying to say. But these are our beliefs. As long as those who want to get on a ship and leave can do so, that’s enough for me. As long as my little brother and my mother can live in that beautiful land of yours...”

“...Right.” Hort swallowed all the things she wanted to say and turned her mind back to her preparations.

“I...am a little worried, though. Isn’t Lady Danna Ryl asking you for an extraordinary number of potions? Won’t the Forbidden Land run out of mana?”

“Oh, uh, no.” It was Saybil who answered her. “She asked for ten times our present cargo—so fifty thousand potions. If that’s the size of each shipment, it won’t be a problem at all right now. Though getting that many bottles together might be kind of a pain.”

“I only hope the exalted Abyss Sorcerer is of the same opinion,” replied Har Bell.

“I’m...pretty sure he will be...” Saybil mumbled, confused. “I mean, I *am* the Abyss Sorcerer, so... Huh? I mean, it’s not like I’ve been hiding it, have I?”

Saybil looked over at Hort in mild consternation.

“You haven’t,” Hort said, “but... Oh! I guess maybe we never told Har Bell about everyone’s other names! Plus, nobody calls you that.”

“Right, makes sense... And since I’m a Nurabehn, you didn’t give me a chance

to introduce myself. It's a little late for this, but I'm Saybil, the Abyss Sorcerer. Professor Zero gave me that name, incidentally, and she's the Mud-Black Witch. Professor Los is called the Dawn Witch."

"I-I see... I had some vague notion that 'Mud-Black' and 'Dawn' might be job titles or something..."

It really was a little late for introductions.

Har Bell looked over at Hort with a start. "Then, do you have another name, too?"

"Huh? I don't think I've got one yet, but..."

"What about Calvacatena?" asked Saybil.

Hort frowned. "That's not exactly me, it's more the name of my unit..."

"Unit... Oh, right... You lead a unit of mages, don't you." Har Bell had taken it as a given that, with her antlers, Hort was a powerful authority figure. Only now did it click that Hort had risen to her position on the strength of her own abilities, and that she just happened to have antlers in the bargain. "So then..." She turned to Saybil. "*You're* the Nurab—my apologies, the person who creates the mana potions."

"I am, yes. Oh, but I can only make mana potions, not *magic* potions. I'm really bad at magic... So I'm interested in the wizard phials you make. There's so much I want to ask you, about that and about the New World."

"Of course! Go ahead, I'll tell you everything I know!"

Everything was going so well.

Har Bell got on her two-wheeled wizard carriage and left the harbor, heading toward the tower in the center of town. Danna Ryl had summoned

her—evidently there was something the Grand Magister wanted to tell her. Once this errand was accomplished, she would head home and help her family pack for the Forbidden Land.

Har Bell drove up the main thoroughfare, parked her vehicle at the turnaround, and walked across the square to the tower. She found Danna Ryl waiting for her in the audience chamber, sitting comfortably on her high seat. Beside her stood a thin man with the twisted horns of a goat sprouting from his head. Har Bell frowned—he was a “key” from one of the other towers. There was something about the horizontal slits of his pupils that she didn’t like.

“I was not aware that Grand Magister Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns was here. Please forgive my impudent intrusion, it was presumptuous of me. I will return at a later time.”

“No, no, I have been waiting for you,” said Danna Ryl. “Now then, Har Bell, approach. I have wonderful news.”

“As you wish.”

When an Exinov said “come,” an Ignas did not hesitate. Har Bell walked up and knelt before Danna Ryl. The Grand Magister wasted no time.

“Your family—there was your father, mother, and three younger brothers, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Yes.”

“And I assume the others told you it was I who received your father?”

“Yes.”

“I am truly, truly grateful. Having consumed a member of your family, you too are like family to me now. Consequently, I have decided to grant your mother and younger brother the honor of serving here in the tower.”

Har Bell raised her head. A servant in the tower was the highest position any Nurabehn could aspire to. It also meant they would be granted a home within the city walls, so she would be able to live together with her family. Just a few days earlier, Har Bell's heart would've been fit to burst at such an honor. But now she couldn't even force her face into the proper expression of gratitude.

"You have Zaza to thank for this. He said it wouldn't do to simply hand over some material reward when I'd eaten the family of the one who brought salvation to our world."

"Not at all...! I'm sure my father could think of no greater honor than being of use to you, my lady. And please, think no more of my remaining family members. Shameful as this is to admit, my brother is ill-mannered and my mother does not have the strength to work. They are but poor and stunted Nurabehn, my lady, not fit to so much as grovel in your presence."

"Oh, that's quite all right. It will be in name only." Danna Ryl smiled. "It is a pretext to allow the two of them to live inside the city walls. As servants of the tower, I will be the one assigning their tasks. And as such, I will order them to protect the house of Har Bell, and nothing more. You see? This solves everything. A wonderful proposal, don't you agree?"

"...Surely you don't mean to imply that this makes you unhappy, Har Bell?" asked Zaza Ryl in an intimidating voice, at which the Ignas lowered her gaze once more. "You didn't, for instance, find yourself taken with the Forbidden Land...? You would never dream of betraying the Keybinder and becoming one of *them*, now would you?"

"I tremble at the very thought."

"Then you will swear yourself to this land that has raised you."

“Of course.”

“In that case, accept the Keybinder’s favor.”

Har Bell’s eyes were glued to the floor. A single sheet of paper slid into her field of vision.

“That is a blood contract, something the Exinov use when we make promises that must never be broken. Danna’s name is already written there, signed in her own blood. It states that your family will be appointed to work as servants of the tower in recompense for your loyalty.”

“Yes. Yes it does.” Danna Ryl picked it up from there. “You can impose this unbreakable promise on me, Har Bell, in return for nothing more than what you have already given. This is what I offer you for saving our world.”

Maybe there’s something wrong with me. But, I saved the world, and in return I get to trade my loyalty for menial employment for my family—all I can think is, are you fucking kidding me?

Surely that thought is proof that something’s broken inside me.

No.

No, no.

Har Bell raised her eyes and, picking up the blood contract, got to her feet.

“...Har Bell?”

She ripped the contract to shreds and let the pieces fall to the ground. Danna Ryl and Zaza Ryl went pale and simply stared at her, speechless.

“Respectfully, I decline. I will take my family to the Forbidden Land,” Har Bell said in a cheery voice.

She left the tower then, her long strides turning first to a trot and then a

sprint, until she sprang onto her two-wheeler and was off.

Ahh—freedom!

2

Even after he returned to his own tower, Grand Magister Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns still harbored a roiling displeasure in the pit of his stomach. He had been called to the Keybinder's tower because the sakuhrm that lived in his own domain had swarmed toward her city in great numbers.

"It wouldn't do for us to lose our merchandise, would it?" Danna Ryl had asked him, her lovely eyes drawn down in concern. "Now the delegation from the Forbidden Land has penned them in for us, and within the safety of those walls I intend to breed and raise them. So I'd like you to take appropriate measures on your end to ensure the pen is not destroyed."

Feh, easy for you to say!

"The mana has dried up, and the land with it! Without fresh water, the sakuhrm will go elsewhere in search...along with all the other monsters! She must know there's no way I can do anything about it without a source of mana!"

As he walked, Zaza Ryl stripped off the finery he'd put on for his meeting with the Keybinder. A beautiful feline beastservant followed quietly behind him, picking up the garments as they fell to the floor.

"That's why I keep asking her for more Nurabehn! But now she's using them

for trade?! In exchange for these mana potions?! There's something wrong with her...! Use those things once and they're gone! And what if the supply gets cut off, what then? Does she intend to make us slaves to the Forbidden Land?!"

"Yes, truly. If their land is so wonderful, why not simply invade it and take everything for ourselves?"

"Quite right! Danna is far too naïve! They're from the Forbidden Land? They can make potions that restore mana? Who gives a damn! Why should we be letting *them* choose the terms of this trade agreement, letting *them* pick and choose to their hearts' content? If they're going to be so stingy, we should simply overwhelm them and take what we need! It's thanks to such weak-kneed indulgence that a mere Ignas can be allowed to show such disrespect!"

"Yes, yes. Truly so. Oh, if only you were Keybinder, Lord Zaza. You would never suffer such foolishness. Lady Danna Ryl is not fit to hold the position."

Zaza Ryl stopped, and the beastservant behind him instantly did likewise. She raised her eyes, expecting perhaps to be stroked, but Zaza Ryl caught her roughly by the neck.

"L-Lord Zaza...!"

"Silence, animal. Danna Ryl the One-Horned is the illustrious chief Grand Magister, the ultimate authority who binds us 'keys' together. We can have no other leader—it can be none but her."

"I'm...s-sor—"

With a dull crack, Zaza Ryl snapped the beastservant's neck. He sucked the mana from her limp body, which withered and turned to dust, leaving nothing but a pile of clothes on the floor.

"You. Clean that up."

More catlike beastservants appeared as if from nowhere to sweep up the fine particles that had been one of their own mere moments before, dumping the little pile out of a nearby window.

Once there had been a great lake here in Ligumuox, and a dense forest that seemed to stretch on forever. But now the green trees were withered, and the lake was all dried up, leaving only patches of muddy bogland in its wake. Just ten years ago there had been tens of thousands of Nurabehn residing in nearby towns, but those now stood ruined and abandoned, and the few survivors lived in hiding from Zaza Ryl.

Nothing could be more galling! Let them alone and they multiply endlessly, yet they balk at the idea of offering their lives to their masters, the Exinov—?!

There were more Ignas than Exinov, of course, and vastly more Nurabehn than Ignas. Even if one culled half their number, as long as enough breeding females were left alive, the population would double or even triple in a few short years. There was no better source of mana in all the world.

For years, Zaza Ryl had been trying to impress upon Danna Ryl the benefits of mana processing factories in order to properly utilize Nurabehn as a natural resource. Half the “keys” who controlled the other towers had already begun to dabble in setting up their own such operations. Gather a thousand females and set aside a hundred males, have them reproduce, and harvest the male offspring—this would reliably provide a substantial source of mana every year.

Just when I thought Danna Ryl was finally coming around to the idea of breeding Nurabehn, she wants to trade them for mana potions?! Mana potions can only be used once and then they’re gone. But Nurabehn multiply! Husband them carefully and the stock can last forever.

To soothe his rage, Zaza Ryl left the tower and made for one of his factories.

He had three in Ligumuox, the management of which he left to the Ignas. Each was a square four-story building, the first story being given over to the harvesting floor.

“Give me this year’s numbers.”

The moment the Grand Magister entered, an Ignas with dog ears rushed over and handed him a ledger. Glancing at it, Zaza Ryl saw that four hundred females had been born, and five hundred males.

“How many child-bearers need to be put down this year?”

“There are around a hundred we can make no further use of.”

“Harvest them. Then select two hundred infants with high levels of mana and take them to the breeding room.”

“What about the males?”

“Retain ten and harvest the rest.”

“Understood.”

Zaza Ryl had turned his hand to this operation two decades ago—it was the first idea he landed on when the mana shortage started to become severe, and it had taken fifteen years to get the factory on track. For the past five, however, he had finally succeeded in turning Nurabehn into a stable source of mana. The use of thaumaturgical devices made the process even more efficient. No blood, no screams, no suffering—harvesting was a calm and peaceful process. The Nurabehn were laid on comfortable beds and returned to a state of pure mana while they slept. Thanks to the resulting magical power, shriveled trees sprouted new leaves and dried up lakes swelled with water.

“If all the ‘keys’ worked together, I know someday mana would return to this land. We have no need of these potions...!”

The “pen” that Danna Ryl spoke of simply involved waiting for the Nurabehn to multiply naturally, without doing anything to spur them along. But leaving the process to the dictates of free will was far too inefficient. Unless properly overseen by the Exinov, the foolish and inferior Nurabehn race would fall ill, even fight amongst themselves. Not to mention that trading in Nurabehn as a source of labor meant waiting until they were sufficiently grown.

Why doesn't Danna Ryl understand that it's far more efficient to process children into mana than it is to deal in full-grown Nurabehn? That placid, generous heart of hers is to blame—!

“Lady Danna Ryl is still opposed to the factories, then?” asked one of the Ignas overseers.

Zaza Ryl hung his head. “It is troubling... Yet it is precisely because she is the sort of benevolent ruler who concerns herself even with the well-being of livestock that she enjoys our love and respect.”

“Word of the delegation from the Forbidden Land had all the merchants on edge... But now we hear that fully half of the foreigners are Nurabehn? I hope Lady Danna Ryl isn't being deceived by the wrong sort.”

“I hope not...” murmured Zaza Ryl, stroking his horns. “I gave her what advice I could... But it worries me. How far will she be willing to go, kind as she is?”

3

The cargo of mana potions had been offloaded, the hold filled with trade goods in their stead, and most all the Nurabehn who wished to emigrate were already aboard ship. All that remained was to wait for the signal to set sail,

when a messenger from Danna Ryl arrived. Dressed in a crisp uniform, her slim, pointed ears suggested the equine. She identified herself as an officer of the law.

Deputy delegation chief Hort was the one who came down to the jetty to deal with her. “You want us to...hand over some criminals?”

“Yes,” the Ignas replied. “Two guilty parties are attempting to take advantage of this opportunity to flee to the Forbidden Land... We have, naturally, found replacements to offer you in exchange.”

“Well, we’ll abide by your laws, of course. But there are so many here, I think it might take us a while to find them.”

“I believe Har Bell will be able to assist you there.”

“Har?” Hort blinked at her. “Do you know her?”

“We’re old friends, yes. We’re also well acquainted with each other’s families.” The uniformed officer smiled, but there was something stiff in her expression.

“Oh, okay... Hey, Har! C’mere a sec!”

Har Bell had been hurrying to and fro up on the ship, but she came at once when Hort called for her.

“Lana...! Did you come to say goodbye?” She hugged her friend, beaming—but Lana didn’t return her embrace.

“I’m here on official business, Har.”

“Business? Constabulary business, you mean?”

“Apparently some criminals have snuck on board,” Hort explained, and Har Bell’s shoulders slumped.

“Yes... Two of the Nurabehn aboard your ship have done harm to Ignas or Exinov, and there’s a warrant for their arrest,” Lana added.

“Will names be enough for you to find them?” Hort asked Har Bell.

“With their names, occupations, and places of birth, I probably can—who is it?”

“The shoemaker Rala and her son Tal, from Kuravanuluox.”

“...Huh?” This was Hort. She had heard those names before. Recently—very recently, in fact. From Har Bell herself. They were the whole reason she had broached the topic of what was basically human trafficking with Danna Ryl in the first place: to take the two of them to the Great Continent.

“You know who I mean, don’t you, Har Bell? I’m talking about your mother and brother.”

“This is ridiculous!” Her earlier affection forgotten, Har Bell roughly pushed Lana away. “This is to get back at me for refusing to sign the blood contract with Danna Ryl, isn’t it? You despicable bastards! Criminals, really? And you think I’ll just accept this arbitrary accusation?”

“Yes. Because it is the will of the Exinov.”

“That’s crazy...! Listen, Lana. You know this isn’t right, don’t you? My family aren’t criminals.”

“The charge is treason.”

“Not a chance... If I hand them over to you, they’ll be executed.”

“Refuse and you’ll be guilty of treason, too.”

“W-Wait a minute now!” A panicky Hort got in between the officer and Har Bell. “Do you mind if I have a word with Har?”

“Not at all, most honorable Exinov. Please, try and talk some sense into this fool. But I can’t wait long.”

Hort dragged Har Bell to the captain’s quarters, where they found Los and Saybil taking shelter from the ruckus outside and stuffing their faces with cake.

“Oh, Hort. I was just about to bring you some of th—”

“They’re accusing Har’s family of treason. They demanded we hand them over.”

Los and Saybil shot to their feet. Where a moment before Har Bell had been trembling with anger, now she turned pale and trembled for a different reason.

“...What hath occurred?”

Har Bell explained in a few words the events of the previous day. She told them about the blood contract—and how she had refused to sign it.

“’Tis harassment, plain as day...”

“The officer said that if Har refuses to hand them over, she’ll be committing treason, too... Wh-What do we do, Sayb?! Professor Los?!”

“I mean... Why don’t we just set sail...?” Saybil sounded completely unconcerned.

“What do you think would happen to our trade relations?!”

“Well, we were able to get pretty much all the stuff we wanted, and with Har Bell’s help I bet we could recreate most of their technology back home. I *was* kind of interested in the unique animals and whatnot they have here, but...” Saybil shrugged. “The land’s so mana-parched that the plants and even the minerals are in rough shape. I could probably get more from old books and specimens than I could walking around collecting new ones.”

“Y-You think so...?” asked Hort.

“Even if that weren’t the case, I mean... Why not just take home what we’ve got and pop back in a decade or so to see if they’re still angry? I don’t think they’d sink our ship so long as we brought more mana potions.”

“Sayb, sometimes you’re, like, *super* reckless! Not that I don’t love that about you!”

Hort looked to Los for help, and the witch answered through a mouthful of cake.

“If you wish to settle this peacefully, the only course would be to hand over the alleged criminals,” she said flatly.

“Professor Los?!”

“You can’t be serious! Those two are the only family I have left!”

“I am well aware of that. Just as I am aware that thou wilt not be convinced. But shouldst choose to defend thy family, thou wilt likewise be marked a criminal. And should we choose to defend thee in turn, we will earn the enmity of those who rule this New World. The question before you now is whether or not you have the necessary resolve to accept such consequences.”

“I *totally* do!” exclaimed Hort.

“Then thou art prepared to go to war?”

Los narrowed her eyes coldly, and Hort flinched.

Standing, the Dawn Witch tapped the Staff of Ludens against her shoulder. “I do not expect they will allow our vessel to depart unless we comply with their demands. Should we attempt to force the issue and set sail without permission, they will use their military might to prevent it. And replying in kind would be an

act of war, pure and simple.”

“But they’re only after Har’s family in order to punish her!” protested Hort.

“Not ‘only.’ With Miss Har Bell’s cooperation, we might steal most all the secrets of the New World and its technology. Indeed, we have many of the items themselves in our possession. This would serve to decrease the value of the New World’s exports. They seek an absolute assurance that Miss Har Bell will not act to the disadvantage of the New World.”

“And you’re saying I...tore up that assurance?”

“Just so,” Los replied, before catching herself and adding, “though I do not mean to blame thee for this. I have a great love of the freedom to choose one’s own path in life. Those who do so can rejoice in my pardon above all others. The mere thought of how it must have felt to rip up a blood contract handed thee by the highest authority in the land has me in ecstasy!”

“But I’ve caused you all so much trouble as a result...”

“’Tis true—but what of it? Wilt thou meekly turn over thy kin to Danna Ryl for our convenience?”

“Well... I...” Har Bell’s long rabbit ears drooped.

“What about a bribe, then?” Saybil suggested. “Can’t we just give that police officer a mana potion so she’ll look the other way?”

Har Bell shook her head gravely. “That won’t work. Lady Danna Ryl ordered the capture of two criminals. If she found out Lana just let us sail away with them, she would definitely be punished.”

“Then maybe we could take her with us?”

“What do you think, Har?” Hort chimed in. “Would she come if we offered?”

“I’m not sure... But considering how Kudo sold those mana potions to that wizard carriage dealer, there do seem to be some Ignas interested in buying mana potions directly, even if it means hiding it from Lady Danna Ryl. If we promise to take Lana to the Forbidden Land, there’s a chance she might be willing to betray her master.”

There was room to negotiate—or at least, there might be. The four of them nodded to each other and left the cabin, making their way down to the pier where the officer waited.

Lana heaved a quiet sigh. “Unfortunate. Very unfortunate.”

“B-But we haven’t even said anything yet...?!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I can’t wait long.”

“Huh...?”

“You’re out of time—the sentence will be carried out.”

Even as she said this, a strange wave of sound set the air and water around them rippling. It was so loud they felt their eardrums might burst. Instinctively they covered their ears and looked up at the sky, where the sound seemed to be coming from.

“Is that...a gatekeeper...?!”

Har Bell began to shake.

The shadow of the great fish blotted out the sun. Its voice began to vibrate, at which the sea grew even more turbulent. Hort peered into the water and reeled back in shock.

“Professor Los, down there...!”

There was a gatekeeper in the ocean, too, its mouth open wide, waiting to

suck their ship down and crush it to flinders with its row upon row of great sharp teeth.

“’Tis the same fish we saw in the Ocean of Death! So it has come all this way?! Ah, but no.” Los glared up at the sky. The giant fish swimming through the firmament had its empty eyes fixed squarely on her. “I see... So that is the thing’s true body.”

“Professor! It’s going to swallow the ship!” Saybil shouted.

“Hey! Are you making it do this?! What do you mean ‘sentence,’ anyway?!” Hort shook the officer by the shoulders.

“I’m not the one doing this. You’re the ones who concealed two people deemed criminals by the Keybinder. Hence the gatekeepers have adjudged you a foreign enemy. The gatekeepers *are* the will of the city.”

“Little Ludens!” Los brandished the Staff of Ludens above her head and a fine thread shot into the sky from its tip, wrapping itself all around the giant fish’s body.

“Time for dinner.”

As Los whipped her staff down, the serenely floating fish was cut to pieces, heavy chunks of moist flesh raining down all around. In the same instant, the fish threatening to swallow the ship disappeared from the ocean without a trace. Los swung the Staff of Ludens again, and it gobbled up every last piece of falling meat.

Silence descended on the pier once more, leaving only a stunned Lana rooted to the spot and a crowd of Nurabehn onlookers thoroughly unable to

comprehend what had just happened.

It was then that the dragon took wing.

“Set sail! NOW!”

The dragon’s roar shook the sky, and everyone sprang into action. As the ships began departing one after another, Har Bell reached out to help Lana up from where she had collapsed to the ground.

“Coming aboard?” she asked.

Lana forced a smile. “As your captive?”

“As my friend.”

“...I can’t. My family is here.” Her grimace collapsed into a rueful smile as she pulled her hand away. Taking the wizard pistol from her belt, she held it out to Har Bell.

“Shoot me, Har.”

“I—”

“Please. I don’t want my family to die because of me.”

Har Bell took the gun and shot Lana in the legs, then clean through both shoulders.

“I’m sorry. I can’t kill you.”

“This’ll be plenty good enough. Thank you.”

Har Bell left her bleeding on the jetty and boarded the ship. As it slid away from the harbor the sails caught the wind, carrying them smoothly out into the open ocean. Only after the port had disappeared over the horizon did Har Bell finally turn to look at the members of the delegation arrayed on the deck

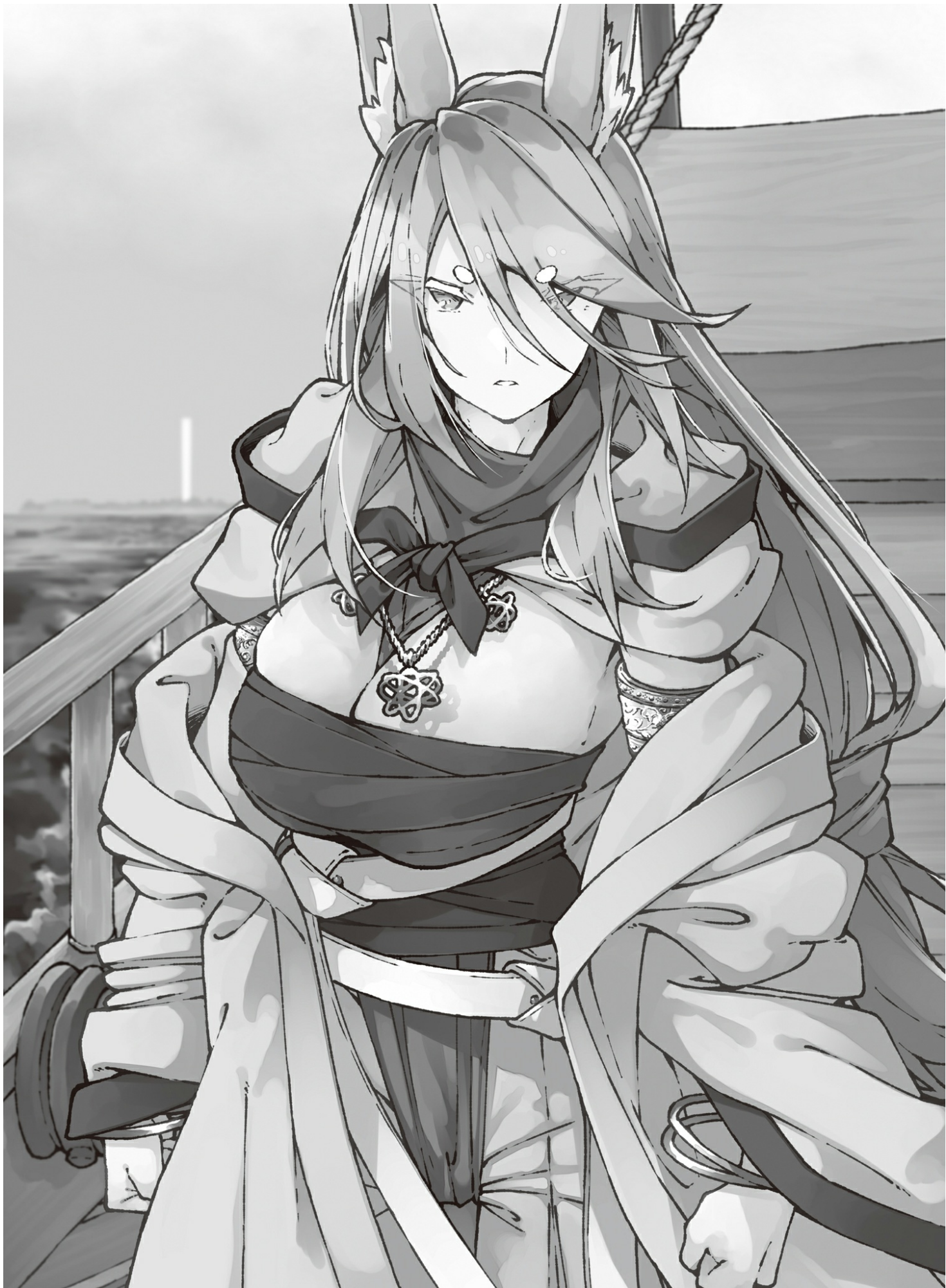
behind her.

“I have a request to make of you.”

The truth is, Har Bell had always thought it was strange.

That having horns made you great.

That having beast ears made you better than others.



That having neither made you worthless.

The land, parched and withering as the mana dried up... And the Exinov, consuming Nurabehn to extend their lifespans by even a year as they neared the end of a centuries-long existence.

Har Bell had prayed for someone to set it all right. She had gone in search of something else, and found the Forbidden Land. If she had wanted to escape, she need only have stayed there and never returned to the New World. She could have loaded her family onto the back of her thaumatherium and brought them with her. But instead she had brought the people of the Forbidden Land to the New World, praying that they could change it, hoping they could bring her people the same freedoms they enjoyed at home. No doubt the land that had birthed her, raised her, would call that an invasion. But now she was ready to accept such infamy.

“Will you come to war with me?”

4

“Har Bell is gone?” asked Danna Ryl in disbelief when she received a report of the disturbance at the docks.

“It can’t be... I even sent one of her friends to speak with her. She wasn’t convinced?”

“Lana’s been shot in all four limbs. She’s in the hospital. And a lone Nurabehn brought down a gatekeeper singlehanded, in front of everyone...!”

More reports were coming in to Danna Ryl, one after another. She didn't know what to call the emotion they caused in her, but she felt her heart might be crushed under its weight. Tears came streaming unbidden down her cheeks.

Why? she asked herself over and over. *I showed her love. I embraced her as a friend. I promised to give her family special treatment. Even Utsuwa was fond of her.*

Danna Ryl really did have a certain affection for Har Bell.

I cared for her, a mere Nurabehn-born Ignas, so why...? How could she do this...?

"It really is just as Zaza said..."

When Har Bell had torn up the blood contract before her eyes, Danna Ryl had felt such pain and sadness that she didn't know what to do. She hadn't been able to comprehend why Har Bell had suddenly become so angry.

"But, to actually commit treason..."

She remembered Zaza's words: "To take such an attitude, she must have resolved herself to go further. I fear treason. We should begin by charging her family on suspicion of such. If she appears with them to speak in her own defense, we need only present her with the blood contract once more. Har Bell has earned that much through her deeds, and we can surely come to a mutual understanding once this has all been cleared up. But if she refuses to hand them over and instead boards ship to depart with them for the Forbidden Land, then it is treason and no mistake. Then we will know the Forbidden Land has no intention of maintaining trade with us, that they plan only on invading us even as we suffer in the throes of this mana shortage."

"It's too horrible... Too cruel to contemplate..."

Danna Ryl couldn't bear the feeling any longer.

I can never forgive her—the one who made me feel this way.

“She won't... Aah... She won't get away with this...!”

I'll never forgive your betrayal, Har Bell—!

Afterword

All of a sudden we're at volume five. And this is only the first half of the story—meaning the second half is still to come. This is all thanks to you, dear readers.

Well then, how did you enjoy diving into a whole new chapter?

You know, I've really been excited to write this New World arc. The idea for the setting has been kicking around ever since I was working on the previous series, *Grimoire of Zero*, and I remember thinking back then, "Someday I really hope I get to take these characters to the New World!" I didn't have the slightest clue how they would get there, but once I started writing *Dawn of the Witch*, I realized that Saybil changing the contours of the old world would ultimately open up a path to the new one.

I'm the kind of author who doesn't really know how the story is going to pan out while I'm writing it, so I'm actually still super hazy on what's going to happen in the second half. There are a bunch of scenes I know I want to do, but there's also a veritable mountain of problems to solve. How are these scenes going to connect, and how can all these issues be resolved? I'm looking forward to finding out myself.

Incidentally, I would rather die than miss a deadline, but I ended up having to ask for a month's extension on this volume, and I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize to everyone involved for the inconvenience I caused them. Sadly, I'll never again be able to say, "You know, I've never once missed a deadline."

Oh, and the anime adaption of *Dawn of the Witch* is coming, but I think this

book will be in print before the show starts broadcasting. I'm really looking forward to seeing it on TV just like everyone else. [The *Dawn of the Witch* anime is currently available to stream on Crunchyroll in the U.S. – Ed.]



The New World arc!

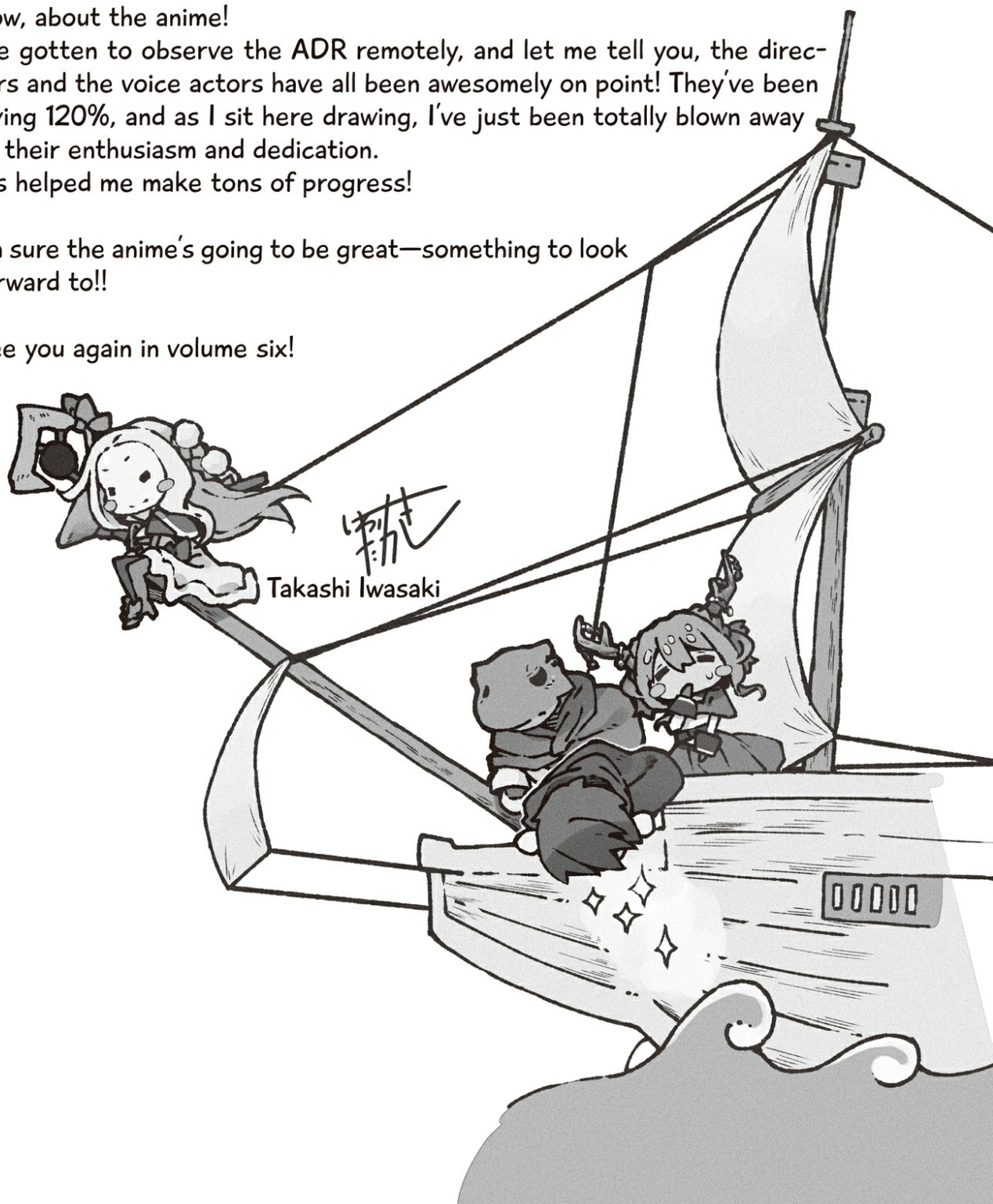
We've got new characters, we've got Professor Los and her ducklings, we've got Zero and co.! I can't believe how much fun I had reading this volume!

Now, about the anime!

I've gotten to observe the ADR remotely, and let me tell you, the directors and the voice actors have all been awesomely on point! They've been giving 120%, and as I sit here drawing, I've just been totally blown away by their enthusiasm and dedication. It's helped me make tons of progress!

I'm sure the anime's going to be great—something to look forward to!!

See you again in volume six!



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

Got ants in my pants.

The Dawn of the Witch 5

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