

The Dawn of the Witch

The Abyss Sorcerer and the Witch of the Staff

6



By Kakeru Kobashiri
Art by Takashi Iwasaki

Original Design of Select Characters by
Yoshinori Shizuma

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"I have created
a city that will
allow *me* to
relax."

"It's okay.
Just relax,
you can take
this one step
at a time."

"This is ice,
right?
But it doesn't
feel cold at
all...
It's like
glass."

"He just got back
safe and sound,
what're ya try'na
kill him for?"

"Sayb!
Welcome back!
Are you okay?
You didn't get hurt?
Was it super
dangerous?
Did the priest
bully you?!"

"I'm fine. I'm fine, so just
gimme a little space, okay?
You're suffocating me."

"Here, Father."

Lily said, offering him a
Chordia potion she had
retrieved from a corner
of the room.



"Amazing... We're so high up, and going so fast..."

"Yup. No thaumatherium could ever catch a dragon."

Har Bell's kind, reassuring voice was so calm that somehow nothing felt real to Utsuwa.



"Frikkin' free spirits."

"Feels kinda like you and me are just ordinary people, huh."

"Yes. Just like you do, Professor Los."

"So thou wilt simply depart without saying goodbye?"

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A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

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and the
Witch of the Staff**

■ Periodic report from Mud-Black to Mooncaller

I believe I have already reported our safe passage through the barrier and our arrival in the New World, but I must tell you, the technology here is uniformly remarkable to behold.

Items known as thaumaturgical devices—like combinations of the Church’s technology and the sorcery of the witches—are prevalent, and the carriages here are drawn not by horses but by floating spheres. Wizards soar through the sky on their thaumatheria, and the city is brilliantly illuminated even at night.

I created magic so that anyone could use the power of sorcery with ease—but I must admit this New World is well ahead of me on that point. The use of thaumaturgical devices requires talent in neither sorcery nor magic, nor need the user consume any of their own mana to activate them. They operate by slowly draining the mana stored within, and can be refilled once empty, which renders them extremely compatible with the Abyss Sorcerer and his infinite well of mana.

As for the horned Exinov, our investigations have determined that they are humans with horns, and nothing more. They have no special abilities to speak of, and are in that sense no different from the beast-eared ones called Ignas. Both these groups *do* harbor beast souls to some extent, however, giving them greater physical capabilities than the people they label Nurabehn, which surely plays a role in their position as the ruling class.

We have decided to bring home with us a number of Nurabehn who wish to

emigrate, unable to bear the oppression inherent in their society any longer. Several craftspeople who make thaumaturgical devices, as well as merchants who deal in them, have also decided to join us. Please prepare a suitable reception for them.

■ Reply from Mooncaller to Mud-Black

I'm jealous! The New World sounds like so much fun! I've been trying to move things around so I can get over there myself, but it's looking like it'll be a while yet.

It'll be an amazing boost to have those experts come over here! But isn't it going to be a huge loss for the New World in the long run? Do they just not care about their secrets getting out? It's not like I don't believe you or anything, I just want an amicable trade relationship with these people is all.

■ Immediate reply from Mud-Black to Mooncaller

Perhaps I should have mentioned this first, but we've gone to war with the rulers of the New World.

+++

"...Wha?"

The office of the headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic of the Kingdom of Wenias—that is to say, Albus’s office—stood in the center of the corridor that connected the Academy to the royal palace, where Albus had her personal chambers.

Lately the thing she most looked forward to as she strode down the corridor to her office was reading Zero’s letters, which she did the moment she sat down at her desk. Their correspondence was carried out using an extremely valuable magical item known as a witch’s letter, a set of two paired sheets of parchment that allowed the users to exchange written missives at any remove with no delay. Whatever Albus wrote on her letter appeared on Zero’s, and when Zero erased the words on her letter, they disappeared from Albus’s as well.

Meaning that the delegation has gone far beyond opening trade relations with the New World—they’ve opened hostilities. We are, at this very moment, at war.

It was then that Albus learned a person’s bewilderment could exceed tolerance to such a degree that they were left unable even to cry out in shock.

How did this happen? What does she mean, war? Wait, nobody’s died, have they?

A plethora of questions and doubts floated into her mind then dissipated.

“Zero’s periodic report came in today, didn’t it, my lady? What did she have to say?” Holdem had come into her office without so much as a knock.

Albus looked up at him. “Well, the thing is...” The words caught in her throat, as if her body was physically refusing to either process or share the information.

“What?”

“Well, the letter... It...”

As Albus stumbled over her words, Holdem cocked his head and walked over to the desk, plucking the letter out of her hand. It started with Zero's report, followed by Albus's reply, then ended with the pronouncement that they were at war. Holdem read through from the top, but when he got to the last line his reaction indicated that he literally could not believe the evidence of his own eyes.

That can't be what it really says. I must have read it wrong.

Holdem was just as befuddled as Albus had been—there was no anger, no panic, no outburst. He simply raised a very practical question: "So...do you think we should send a support unit?"

"Oh, uhh..." Albus's stalled brain finally began to grind into motion once more. The delegation she sent to the New World had started a war. Which meant that Albus, as the one who sent them, had plenty to do on her own end. "Can you get me the Mage Commander, the Knight Commander...and Thousand-Eyes? I think this calls for an emergency council."

"Sure does. Uh huh, right, yes. First, we need to hold an emergency council."

Slowly but surely digesting Albus's words, Holdem departed the office. Albus turned back to the witch's letter, only to find a startling postscript had appeared at the bottom.

■ P.S.

Gather everything that originates from the New World in the northern reaches.



Chapter One



A gatekeeper had been brought down in the city of Kuravanuluox, ruled by none other than Grand Magister Danna Ryl the One-Horned, Keybinder of the tower, chief of the Exinov and pinnacle of wizardry. Even more shocking, there had been a rebellion among the Nurabehn.

It had taken a full six months for word of these incidents to reach this deep into the countryside.

“The Keybinder is so lenient toward us Nurabehn, why would those fools go and rebel against her...?”

Sipping at his thin soup, Jiji listened idly to his father’s dinner-table grumblings. He and his family lived in a rural town far from Kuravanuluox. The “key” of the tower that oversaw their district was not kind to the Nurabehn, who grew crops, looked after livestock, and wove textiles to meet the Exinov’s demands, eking out a living with whatever was left over. It was a hardscrabble existence, and Jiji had never once eaten his fill. Their clothes were tattered and worn, and merchants never came to their village, so they got no news of the outside world—all the more reason that, when rumors of the sudden rebellion did finally reach them, it was all anyone could talk about.

“Heard today they’re creating a free district, not paying anything to the Exinov and not getting any protection from them, either. Stop and think about it for a minute, though, and anyone can see that no bunch of unprotected Nurabehn could ever do a thing like that.”

“Huh? The ones who rebelled are still alive?” Jiji looked up from his soup in

surprise.

“Well, if they’re creating a free district, I s’pose they must be,” his father answered matter-of-factly.

“The Exinov let the rebels get away? What for?”

“Apparently some folks from a place called the Forbidden Land had something to do with it. But watch yourself, Jiji, you’re too trusting sometimes. This talk of a free district is all a load of bull. It’s just some tasty-looking bait to lure us in.”

“Lure us in for what?”

“To chop us up and use us as raw material for their sorcery. These Forbidden Landers don’t have fancy wizard devices like the protected ones do. They use old, terrible, barbaric sorcery.”

“But people are going to the free district even so?”

“Only the foolish ones. They’re scared of the Exinov’s mana drawing...even though it’s such a great honor! The whole thing’s a disgrace!” Jiji’s father was working up a head of steam. “Mana drawing’s a blessing for us unprotected folk. The family get a cash reward, and it’s not like the drawn ones die—their souls just become part of the Exinov. If they’re so damn scared, I’ll trade places with ’em in a heartbeat!”

Jiji glanced over at the portrait of his older sister hanging on the wall. It was finely detailed, having been made using a wizard device called a visage tracer, and had been given to Jiji’s family by the individual in charge of his sister’s mana drawing.

The Nurabehn whose mana was drawn were the pride of the village. Until recently only one or two were taken every few years, and their families were

accorded a level of respect almost on par with the Exinov themselves. The respect of their fellow villagers could hardly fill their stomachs, but Jiji's father seemed to have taken a liking to their admiration nonetheless. If nothing else, people would help them out in times of trouble. That would've been unthinkable before Jiji's older sister was taken, no matter how desperately they had needed it.

Nobody had helped Jiji's mother when she collapsed in the road; Jiji had found her lifeless body the next morning when he went out searching. Her remains were immediately taken to the city of the tower so that whatever mana was left could be extracted. Apparently his mother's body contained more mana than the average Nurabehn—which was why Jiji's sister was later chosen. At least, that's what the one in charge of her mana drawing had said.

“Do you want to become one with the Exinov, Father?”

“Course I do!” his father answered without hesitation.

Jiji had his doubts, though. If becoming one with the Exinov was such a noble thing, why was the role being granted to Nurabehn? Every other privilege belonged exclusively to the Ignas and Exinov, and all the Nurabehn's other rights had been taken away. So why was this alone, the right to die for an Exinov, being granted to them as some kind of exalted favor?

Jiji knew his sister had cried the night before she was taken. She'd been terrified. He knew she had run to her boyfriend, that they had embraced, that her boyfriend had suggested they run away together—and he knew what his sister's reply had been:

“If I don't go, they'll take Jiji instead.”

When he heard those words, Jiji was shaken to his core. He trembled with fear at the thought of having his mana drawn, becoming one with an Exinov, and never being able to think for himself or play with his friends ever again.

The adults told him he didn't need to be scared. His father said it was a great honor. But in the portrait of his sister hanging on the wall, her eyes were red and puffy from crying. She had really been much prettier than she looked in the portrait, but the visage tracer kept that one moment so vividly fresh, a constant reminder that his sister had wept when they took her, that Jiji hadn't just dreamt it all.

"A free district, huh...?"

Jiji stood, tidied up his cutlery, and grabbed his cloak. It was nothing more than some worn-out sheets he had sewn together, but the single extra layer was enough to keep him warm.

"What's this now? Where you going?"

"Gil's place. Says he's got something important he wants to talk to me about."

+++

Gil had been Jiji's sister's boyfriend. He was a big, strapping fellow, and even now that Jiji's sister was gone, Gil looked out for him like he was his real brother.

"What is it that's so important?" asked Jiji. "And why did we have to meet here...?"

They were in a hut on the outskirts of town with several other young Nurabehn.

“Apparently there’s going to be a mana drawing soon. A big one.”

“Huh?” Jiji froze in his tracks. “Well... Th-That’s a blessing...”

“You really think so?” Gil narrowed his eyes at Jiji’s words, clearly spoken in deference to the other people present. “From what I hear, they’re gonna draw the whole village.”

“What?!”

“Though they’ll send a few of us to the farm to breed for the Exinov—you’ve heard about that, right? That Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns is breeding Nurabehn as a source of mana?”

“I...I’ve heard about it... Or, well...”

“That’s why they took your sister.”

Gil’s eyes were burning with rage. The girl he loved had been taken to the farm—and at fifteen years of age, Jiji knew exactly what that meant. The grown-ups all said it was an honor, but an honor like that? They could keep it, as far as Jiji was concerned.

“What are you gonna do, Jiji?”

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘do’...?”

“I’m leaving the village. All of us are, right now.”

“Right now...?!”

“We won’t be fodder for the Exinov. We’re going to the free district.”

“Then, I’ll go and tell my dad I—”

“Don’t. Your old man’s a coward. We haven’t said a word to our families about this, either.”

“So you know where the free district is?”

“Yeah, we’ve got a guide. He’s been gathering Nurabehn from the other villages, too. We’ve been in contact for a good long while, slowly getting ready for this day—he’s the one that told us about the plan for the big mana draw in the first place.”

“But... I heard the free district folks use Nurabehn as raw materials for their sorcery...”

Gil scoffed. “I heard the same thing, so I asked our guide about it. Know what he said? ‘You should consider that as a possibility. But if you stay in this village, you will unquestionably die. Choose whichever path you like.’”

Choose.

The right to choose was so rarely granted to those born as Nurabehn. *Choose your own path*—that in and of itself was a terribly attractive prospect.

“You’re the last one I’m talking to about this. We’ve got enough food to include you. If you decide to come, me and you will be the first to set off. The others’ll come after, one at a time.”

What if I refuse? Jiji couldn’t get the question out. He was scared that just by asking, he would lose the right to go with them. He tried counting the things he would be leaving behind, but the list was short. The portrait of his sister was the only thing that gave him pause. *If I take that, though, Dad might notice it’s gone. He thinks of mana drawing as such an honor—he’ll never be able to bear the thought that his own son has run away from the village.*

“...I’ll go.”

Gil clapped him on the shoulder. “We’re off, then. Grab that pack.”

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Jiji’s home was a farming village, far from the city with the tower and the walls around it. There was nothing to indicate the line where the village ended and the rest of the world began. Leaving the hut on the outskirts, Jiji and Gil made their way into the expanse of rugged, rock-strewn grassland that lay in the direction opposite their village.

The sole road was for delivering offerings of crops to the tower. Everywhere else beyond the village was just that: somewhere *else*. Jiji followed behind Gil in silence, treading the trackless ground through a place that wasn’t home. At the top of a gradual slope, he stopped and glanced back. The village already looked so small there below them in the distance.

“The guide that’s helping us—what’s he like?” Jiji asked, trying to cover up the sudden loneliness he felt at leaving behind the only home he had ever known.

“Said he was a priest,” came Gil’s curt reply.

“What’s a priest?”

“Someone who explains the gods’ teachings, I guess.”

“Gods... You mean the Exinov?”

“Apparently not.”

“Did the priest come from the Forbidden Land?”

“Says so, yeah.”

“You could have told me all this earlier.”

“...I was planning on leaving you behind.”

Jiji was shocked. Gil had been like a brother to him, but suddenly he felt so distant.

“W...Why?”

“Because I don’t want to regret doing this.”

“What’s that mean? Then, why did you decide to bring me along in the end?”

“You’ve got the priest to thank for that, too.” Gil sighed and stopped, then turned to Jiji with a pained expression. “He said if I’m gonna regret doing this either way, I should at least do what I think is right. Might be that you’d have been happier staying in the village. Apparently it doesn’t hurt a bit to have your mana drawn, if you believe what the Exinov say.”

“Right... I guess it might hurt if we get killed once we reach the free district...”

“If we don’t get killed, though, and we really get to be free there...I know I would regret having left you behind. Same as I would regret dragging you along to face a painful death.”

So that’s it, huh? Jiji felt relieved. “Don’t worry. I won’t ever regret coming with you.”

Jiji picked up the pace a little to walk by Gil’s side. They kept on until sunset, when suddenly a forest spread out on the valley floor below them. He hadn’t realized they’d climbed so high.

Gil looked around, and pointed down at the valley. “There it is. Do you see the lake?”

“Uh huh.”

“That’s where we’re meeting.”

+++

There were far more people gathered on the lakeshore than the one or two dozen Jiji had expected—the crowd looked like it might be a hundred strong.

“W-Wow... Everyone here’s going to the free district?”

“Seems like it, yeah... Oh, Father!”

Gil took off running, so Jiji followed suit, catching the attention of the man standing beneath a tree surrounded by an excited throng. His hair was a strange shade of jade green, and—perhaps he couldn’t see?—he wore a blindfold and held a cane in one hand.

“Ah, Gil. I’m glad to see you made it safely.”

“Yeah, no problems. And there should be eight more coming from our village... But, look at all these people! Did you get all of them here on your own, Father?”

“Hmm... Perhaps it was inevitable that they find their way to this place...” With a shrug the priest turned his unseeing eyes on Jiji where he stood behind Gil. “Aha, and this is the boy?”

“Jiji, yes.”

“H-How did you know...?”

“Because you came with Gil, and I don’t recognize you.”

“No, I mean, if you can’t see, how...?”

The priest laughed lightly and tapped his ear.

Does that mean he can tell just from my voice?

Then Gil noticed someone tugging at the hem of the priest's robe: a child who came up no higher than the man's waist, with a deep cowl obscuring their face.

"What is it?"

"The wizard carriages are almost here."

Gil and Jiji glanced around.

"Um, Father. Wizard carriages...?" Gil asked.

"To bring us to the free district. It's a little far to go on foot," replied the priest as the hooded child dragged him away.

"This is...a little different than I imagined it... Didn't think there would be so many people, and I *definitely* didn't think we'd be going by wizard carriage."

They had thought they were embarking on a dangerous journey, but were starting to suspect the free district was much bigger than they'd imagined—and might actually be powerful enough to take on the Exinov.

Ten large wizard carriages pulled up, each with space for at least a dozen people. They were driven by Ignas aligned with the ethos of the free district—just as the Nurabehn were abused by all, the Ignas were never permitted so much as a word against the Exinov. The priest had, in a few brief words, explained that there were some Ignas who wanted to change all that.

They set off for the free district that very day.

"So our new life starts now, huh?" said Jiji.

"Yeah." Gil nodded. "All the crops we grow, we can keep for ourselves."

“And we won’t need to live in fear of our mana being drawn at any moment... Won’t need to be scared of our children being taken away,” broke in another Nurabehn riding in their carriage.

Along the way, the Nurabehn talked of many things: they talked about the past, and about what was to come. There was only one among them who didn’t say a word. He was young, with strange bluish-purple eyes, and he sat staring down at his lap like he was about to keel over and die at any moment.

“Are you...feeling okay?” asked Jiji.

The boy glanced at him for just a moment. “I’m not good with carriages.”

“Well, we *have* been riding for hours now without a break... I’ve got some water, you want some?”

The young man gratefully accepted the canteen Jiji held out and took a swig. “Thanks. That’s better.”

“Be nice if we could tell the driver someone in here isn’t feeling well...”

These wizard carriages were designed with a cockpit that pulled the body of the truck behind it, and were mostly used for transporting baggage. As a consequence, all the passengers could do was lay out some cloth and sit or lie on the floor. It wasn’t exactly what you’d call a pleasant ride. There were no complaints, however—just the fact that they were going by carriage instead of having to walk brought tears to the passengers’ eyes. Everyone understood that disregarding comfort and employing large cargo carriages was the most efficient way of transporting as many Nurabehn as possible to the free district.

“What’s your name?”

“Saybil.”

“I’m Jiji, and that’s Gil. He’s like my big brother. Do you have any friends or

family?”

“Ah, well...” Saybil cocked his head, looking a little uncomfortable. “None here...I guess.”

“I see... So you’re on your own.”

Saybil started to say something, then fell silent.

We’re heading to the free district, far from our homes. I’ll bet he’s had to leave a lot behind. Jiji didn’t pry any further and started telling Saybil all about himself instead, hoping the conversation would take the young man’s mind off his motion sickness.

The situation, however, began to take a turn for the worse. The windowless carriage afforded its occupants no view of the world outside, but enough time had passed that night could very well have turned to morning by now. Everyone had brought provisions for the journey at the urging of the priest, so water and food weren’t a problem—but there was no toilet. After some discussion, the issue was settled with a few pots the passengers had brought along, and everyone did their business in the corner—but with no windows, the carriage soon filled with an awful stench.

Finally, some of the passengers began beating on the walls and shouting, “Please, can’t we stop just for a minute?!” But the carriage simply continued onward.

Seeing the lack of response, Saybil placed a hand lightly on the carriage wall. He tapped a few times with his finger, and where he tapped, small holes appeared, letting fresh air pour in. He opened holes all around the carriage, then returned to his seat and balled himself back up, hugging his knees close.

“H...How did you do that?” asked Gil.

“Those spots were old and worn, so I just tapped on them a little—I suspect the other carriages have some holes in them, too. Chewed through by mice, probably,” Saybil replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

It was only much later that the wizard carriages finally came to a stop. The doors were thrown open to let the passengers out, and they found themselves at their destination: the free district.

3

“Sorry ’bout that. There was a chance the Exinov might attack, so we couldn’t risk stopping. C’mon now, this way—we’ll have you all gather at the hall so we can explain life in the free district.”

Jiji had imagined a small village of scattered tents, but the building they were led to was a square, boxlike structure. There were no houses nearby, just this one strange building jutting out of the surrounding forest. One of the Ignas, beast ears on proud display, politely guided the hundred-odd Nurabehn inside.

“Huh?”

As they were filing into the building, Jiji noticed that the priest was no longer among them. He was talking something over with another Ignas, who passed him a satchel that was bulging at the seams.

“Hey, what d’you think he’s doing?” Jiji asked, poking Gil in the shoulder.

“Who knows. I’m sure the bigwigs have all kinds of business to attend to.”

“This building is huge, huh... The free district people must be amazing, making things like this.”

“Apparently they’ve got lots of Ignas on their side, so maybe they’re the ones doing the building.”

Once the Nurabehn were inside, they were guided down a flight of stairs and into an underground room. The subterranean space was empty save for glowing spheres fitted into the floor and walls, their faint illumination lending the room a vague, dreamlike quality.

“Those things are glowing with mana, right?”

“Yeah... Wow, I can’t believe there are so many wizard lights down here.”

Just then the doors to the hall slammed shut behind them.

Jiji turned to see the Ignas who had been guiding their group smiling in at them through a glass window set into the door. The Ignas opened his mouth, and a voice resounded from the room’s ceiling.

“Welcome, Nurabehn traitors. To die in ignorance of the situation would afford you no chance to regret your actions, so allow me to explain. This is a harvesting facility attached to an Exinov farm.”

Consternation filled the hall.

“In other words, you are all about to be converted into mana. Your long journey has saved us the trouble of bringing you here, so I thank you for that. Though I suppose it *was* our employees who did the driving.”

Jiji looked up at Gil in shock.

Gil looked back at him, his face pale. “That bastard...! He tricked us?!” Whether he was referring to the Ignas or the priest, not even Gil himself seemed to know. He raced over to the closed doors and began pounding on them with all his might. “Let us out! Let us out of here! Come on, everyone, help me push!”

Those Nurabehn who grasped the situation rushed over to help Gil—but the tightly locked doors didn't let out so much as a creak.

The Ignas went on. "That man you call 'Father,' the one you Nurabehn were foolish enough to trust, has been a great help to us. Those false rumors we spread of a free district only brought us a handful of you...but for a reward, he offered to gather up rebellious Nurabehn and lead them here. We accepted, and here you all are. What in the world did he promise you, I wonder?"

"Shut up! Shut up, you bastard!" Gil howled.

The Ignas smirked. "Yes, I suppose I'll do just that. And your filthy souls will serve to power the lights of a public toilet in the city. Good day."

A dull sound reverberated through the room, and the lights turned from blue to red. The Nurabehn, instinctively terrified of touching the strange red lights, stood on tiptoe or spread blankets on the ground to cover them up.

"Gil, what do we do? They're going to—"

"Shut up! I know!"

Jiji flinched at the angry shout.

Gil looked down at him in a panic, seeming as if he was about to burst into tears. "I'm sorry. This is my fault. Dying like this... Mana drawing would have been so much—!"

His words were interrupted by a sharp crack as the wizard lights set into the walls shattered. Shocked, Gil and Jiji could just make out Saybil standing with his hand pressed to the wall.

"Hm? So these are just lights... Then, where's the actual thing that turns people into mana...?" Muttering to himself, Saybil took out a small bottle and splashed its contents into the air. A small white light pierced the gloom, floating

up to illuminate the entire room. “Aha... The floor. I see, so it’s the whole floor itself. Then maybe...?” Saybil crouched down and pressed both hands flat against the ground.

In the face of Saybil’s strange behavior, the Nurabehn, who a moment before had been in a state of consternation, stopped and stared, unsure how to react to what was happening. The lights in the wall had been shattered—and this was surely Saybil’s doing. Then he had produced a sphere of light in the air that glowed without fire, something of which no Nurabehn should rightly be capable.

Jiji finally found the courage to speak. “Saybil, you...”

The young man looked up at him with drowsy eyes and cocked his head. “Sorry, can you all move closer to the walls for me? The whole floor might collapse.”

“Huh...?!”

For a moment, Saybil’s bluish-purple eyes seemed to sparkle with light. Beneath his hands the floor turned black and began to crumble away just as he had warned. An intricate system of wizard devices was fitted into the foundation below—and now Saybil was touching these directly.

A commotion erupted outside the room, and Jiji peered through the window in the door. All the wizard lights had burst, and he could see the Ignas in the hallway running to and fro in confusion. There were explosions, and some of the machines were spouting flames.

Vweeeh—! Vweeeh—!

A warning siren sounded, and then the doors silently swung open. Since the lights in the hallway had been blown out, only the room they were in remained

illuminated.

“What just happened...?”

Saybil went out the door ahead of the stunned Nurabehn, and as the light source went with him, they had no choice but to follow.

“Saybil... Hey, what’s going on?! What the heck did you do?!”

“Er... I’ll explain everything later, but first we need to get out of here. I destroyed most all the wizard devices in this building, so it might start to collapse.”

“Y-You destroyed them...?”

Still at a loss, the Nurabehn made their way outside to find the twenty or so Ignas who had already evacuated the building standing there in utter bewilderment. The priest was with them, looking strangely unfazed. He walked straight up to Saybil and asked simply, “What’s the situation?”

“I destroyed everything. None of it’ll be salvageable. Should I bring down the building, too?”

“I don’t see the need. What about the mana stored in the harvesting facility?”

“I collected it. There wasn’t much, though.”

“How much?”

“Umm...” Saybil fished around in the bag at his waist and drew out three small bottles of faintly pink liquid. “This much.”

The priest looked down at the hooded child beside him, who relayed the information: “Three bottles.” He did have a blindfold over his eyes, after all, so it was only natural that Saybil’s reply hadn’t done him much good.

The priest nodded and took the three bottles from Saybil, then turned to face

the Ignas. “Well now. Shall we get down to business once more?”

4

As to the business in question, the priest was offering to sell mana potions to the Ignas.

“These three bottles contain the same amount of mana you had in your stores, everything you obtained by killing and draining the Nurabehn. We, however, have a method of producing such potions in virtually inexhaustible quantities. If you reject Exinov rule and agree to view the Nurabehn as your equals, we might be willing to sell them to you.”

The Ignas were clearly displeased at being spoken to so curtly.

“Don’t make me laugh...! The constabulary is already on its way. I knew we never should have trusted a Nurabehn. Your kind aren’t even fit to shine our boots!”

“I see. You have no need of these mana recovery potions, then.”

“You think we’re stupid enough to believe such a thing could really exist?!”

The priest opened one of the bottles and poured its contents into the lantern that hung from his belt. It began to glow with a bluish light.

“Is that...a wizard light...?”

“I found it around the back of your factory—it was out of mana and had been discarded. Your city is so starved of mana that you cannot even afford to fill your lanterns. Are you quite sure you have no need of these?”

The priest held out the brightly glowing lantern and the two remaining mana

potions to the Ignas, who accepted them with flustered expressions. It seemed no one had the courage to smash the supposedly worthless little bottles.

“You should discuss this with the important people of your city. And if you would like to do business, send a messenger—just put a letter around the neck of the nearest mouse and word will reach us.”

“N-No... But...”

“These mana potions we will give you as payment for bringing the Nurabehn all this way. I might have thrown in a little something extra if the transport had been more humane, but... Anyway, do with those potions what you will. If the devices in your hospital are out of mana, for instance, those potions may well serve to save lives.”

At this, one of the Ignas grabbed the bottles and ran off. Some of his companions called after him, but he sprinted away without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

“Shall we be off, then?”

“Off? T-To where?” Jiji asked in a trembling voice.

The priest was already walking away, however, and it was Saybil who answered him. “To the free district—the real one.”

“Then Father didn’t sell us out...?”

“Nope. Well, he did *pretend* to sell you out, but that was...more like a scam. To cheat those Ignas out of their money.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Gil strode over to the priest, whirled him around by the shoulder, and landed a punch on his cheek. The priest made no attempt to dodge the blow, simply staring back at Gil through his blindfold without so much as a flinch.

“We were packed into freight carriages like so much luggage... They very nearly killed us all! If you had a plan, why didn’t you tell us beforehand?! Look at all these kids! Why the hell would you frighten them like that?!”

The priest wiped away the blood oozing from his split lip, then shrugged. “There were reasons for all of it, and I could explain them to you—but even then you would still have the right to hit me. I did force enough pain and fear upon you all to warrant that. If anyone else wishes to strike me, take the opportunity to do so now.”

The priest waited, but no one else stepped forward—they still didn’t understand the situation well enough to be angry. They had thought they were on their way to the free district, but the priest had pretended to betray them in order to cheat the Ignas out of their money. Then Saybil had done *something* to destroy the Ignas facility and save them, and now the priest was trying to do business with the Ignas again before taking everyone to the *real* free district.

Then what does it really matter? thought Jiji. *And I bet everyone else feels the same way.* Most Nurabehn never had the right to be angry in the first place—especially not at their “betters.” They were deceived, drained, and exploited as a matter of course.

“Very well. If there are no more takers, then we should hurry. If you can still trust me, that is. Oh, and you Ignas can follow, too, if you wish. At least, I won’t stop you.”

The Nurabehn exchanged glances, and in the end each and every one of them decided to follow the priest to the free district. Several more Ignas joined up with their party down the road as well, their wizard carriages loaded with household goods.

It was then that the long journey truly began—or so everyone expected. As it

turned out, they stopped at a half-rotted tumbledown shack by the side of the road not all that far from where they had started, and the priest proclaimed that they had arrived.

“Saybil, get the door.”

“Ah, right. On it.”

Saybil had been in among the Nurabehn crowd, carrying luggage for people who were lagging behind or sweeping crying children up into his arms, but at the priest’s words he stepped forward. His eyes glowed faintly as he laid a hand on the wall of the shack, and some other place entirely swam into view on the other side of the threshold.

“Wh-What the...?! Is this another wizard device...?!”

“Not exactly... It’s called a witch’s path. You know how there are doors in the towers that connect to other towns?”

“I-I guess I’ve heard about that, sure...”

“Same idea, more or less. The way is normally closed, but if you pour mana into them, they open right up. It’d be too dangerous to travel overland with such a big group, so we made this path ahead of time.”

Then Saybil hopped through the door and was gone.

“Wh-What do we do...? Is this thing...safe?”

As Jiji hesitated, Gil took a step forward. “I’ll go first and make sure.” Without another word he plunged through the door. Several seconds later, Jiji heard his voice from the other side, almost childlike in its excitement. “Hey, this is incredible! Hurry up and get over here!”

Jiji plucked up his courage and leapt through the opening.

The next instant, another world spread out before his eyes. The sight of it took Jiji's breath away—it was a city made of ice. The ground was ice, the houses were ice, and there was a fountain of ice spraying water into the air. Icy streetlamps towered above him, and he was sure they would light up once the sun had set. Most of the ice houses were two or three stories tall, their windows decorated with brilliant flowers of every hue.

“This is ice, right? But it doesn't feel cold at all... It's like glass.”

“Professor Zero used her sorcery to make it so the ice won't melt—that's why it isn't cold,” Saybil explained.

“Sorcery? Not a wizard device?”

“Sorcery is... Um... It's kind of like the basic thing that actually powers wizard devices. Professor Zero's especially good at sorcery, and she's... Well, she's a really special, important person here in the free district.”

“It would be more accurate to call her the *creator*, perhaps,” the priest broke in. “She built this city of ice entirely on her own, to provide a home for Nurabehn with nowhere else to go.”

Once Gil and Jiji were through the door, the rest of the Nurabehn followed one after another. The city's existing Nurabehn residents called out to each of them, embracing and encouraging the newcomers before disappearing back into the city.

“The creator... Is she an Exinov?” Jiji asked.

“If you are inquiring as to whether she has horns, the answer is no. If, however, you mean to use Exinov in the term's original meaning of 'sage,' then yes, she is the very epitome of an Exinov.”

The priest was using all kinds of confusing words and Jiji didn't really

understand. He had never once thought about what the word Exinov might *mean*.

If Exinov means something, do the words Ignas and Nurabehn mean something, too? And how did those words get their meanings in the first place? Do these free district folk have the answers? There were so many things Jiji wanted to know, a mountain of questions piled up so high that he had no idea where to start.

The priest looked at him, and for the first time something like a smile appeared on his face. “It’s okay. Just relax, you can take this one step at a time. First, though, you need to rest. Frankly, those wizard carriages were so terribly uncomfortable that I was tempted to strangle each and every one of the drivers myself.”

The city’s residents treated Jiji to a warm meal, then he had a hot bath in a tub made of ice and was given a fresh change of clothes. Everyone in the free district seemed to be dressed in a similar way. As he accepted the clothes, Jiji felt a strange trembling sensation well up from deep within him. Unable to understand the source of the feeling, he let himself be shown into a room that he was told was his. He lay down on a fluffy bed in a frame made of ice, and, his head still swimming with excited thoughts of exploring the city, fell into a deep, deep sleep.

+++

The city of ice had been built just off the coast, and boasted a harbor that housed several ships. While it was intended as a fortress for use in the war with

the New World, it was also created with livability uppermost in mind.

Firstly, the whole city was outfitted with plumbing, and turning on the faucet in any building produced pure water. The water was initially drawn from the ocean, then rendered drinkable through sorcery. Collected in cisterns located at higher elevations, it ran through pipes to every corner of the city below.

All sewage was released into the ocean, but after Hort raised a big stink and absolutely refused to eat fish that had been “swimming around in our potty water,” it was decided that the waste-water would be purified by sorcery before being pumped out to sea.

At night the city’s streetlamps came on automatically, and anyone could cook themselves a hot meal simply by uttering the words “Flames, come forth!” to activate the sorcery with which their kitchens had been imbued.

Having spent several years living alongside humans, Zero knew well what they needed, what might be convenient for them, what would make them happy—not to mention that she herself was a true lazybones at heart.

“I have created a city that will allow *me* to relax,” she boasted. “But, as the place has little in the way of distinguishing color, I feared it might be difficult to get one’s bearings, and easy to lose one’s way. Which is why I created a large building to serve as a landmark—a ‘tower’ for the free district, you might say.”

This tower, which housed a bell whose clear, resonant tones pealed across the city, lacked the daunting presence of the tower of the Keybinder but nonetheless served to help the residents know where they were at any given time. Attached to the bell tower was a grand mansion that functioned as a kind of town hall, and it was here that the members of the delegation from the Forbidden Land had their rooms.

Once Saybil, Lily, and the priest finally made it back to the mansion, Hort practically flew out and tackled Saybil in an embrace.

“Sayb! Welcome back! Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt? Was it super dangerous? Did the priest bully you?!”

“I’m fine. I’m fine, so just gimme a little space, okay? You’re suffocating me.” Saybil’s desperate pleas were somewhat muffled by Hort’s bosom, in which he was completely engulfed.

“He just got back safe and sound, what’re ya try’na kill him for?” Kudo peeled Hort away, then gave the three returnees a quick once over. “Yep, you all look fine,” he muttered, before plodding off.

Many of the Nurabehn who escaped to the free district were sick or injured, so as a mage medic, Kudo was kept constantly busy. He didn’t have time to worry about minor injuries like the priest’s split lip.

“Here, Father,” Lily said, offering him a Chordia potion she had retrieved from a corner of the room.

The priest refused it, however. “We used them as guinea pigs, to see whether their lives would truly be threatened. This pain is a result of the fear and anger they experienced. It is possible that to heal the injury so easily might result in further backlash.”

“Then I should let them hit me, too. I mean, I acted like I was one of them. I guess I’ll go and get it over with...”

“There’s no need. That is a job for adults.”

“Oh, is that the deal...?” asked Saybil, cocking his head.

“It is,” the priest replied curtly, departing for his own room. Lily hurried after him, leaving Saybil and Hort alone.

“So, do you want to take a bath?”

“Huh? Oh... Do I smell?”

“I-I was going out of my way not to mention it!”

With that, Hort hustled Saybil to the bath.

He had joined the group of Nurabehn just before they boarded the wizard carriages bound for the harvesting facility, and the ride had been a nightmare. Rushing into the changing room, he threw off his clothes and entered the spacious bathhouse. It was open to the public, and anyone could enter at any time. The water was also kept constantly at the perfect temperature—Zero had been very particular about this. Saybil hurriedly washed his hair, scrubbed himself all over, then plunged into the hot water. He felt all the muscles in his body begin to relax, and finally realized just how tense he’d been.

It had been a long job. Just about a month ago, Lily’s “friends” all over the New World had brought word that the Exinov were spreading rumors of a false free district, and that they intended to harvest all the Nurabehn who gathered there. In preparing to bring the Nurabehn to the true free district, the members of the delegation had been troubled by the question of how to guide them there, and had hit on the idea of using the Exinov’s false rumors to their advantage.

“It’s actually quite convenient for us that they have chosen to publicly proclaim the existence of the free district,” the priest had said, moving quickly to put their plan into action. After locating the source of the rumors, he had offered to “deceive the foolish and rebellious Nurabehn and bring them to you” in exchange for a reward. Then all that remained was to gather Nurabehn from across the country with the support of the Exinov, create a witch’s path near the harvesting facility, and everything was in place.

They had assessed the mana drawing capacity of the harvesting facility ahead of time, and knew that with Saybil among the crowd of Nurabehn, he could overload and disable the mechanism with a simple sprinkle of his concentrated mana potions.

“What was the harvesting facility like?”

“Hmm... Smaller than I expected, I guess,” Saybil replied without turning around. He had of course noticed upon entering the baths that the Dragon Conqueror King Ghoda, leader of their delegation, was already soaking in the tub.

“Apparently the harvesting facilities and farms are kept separate,” Ghoda said. “I expect the farms are bigger.”

“And that’s where they breed people?”

“The new group you brought in should be able to give us more details. The intel Lily’s friends bring is useful, but it’s a little flat... Hm? The priest isn’t with you?”

“He just kinda went back to his room... Maybe he doesn’t like baths.”

“Or maybe he’s just not the kind of guy who wants to expose himself to who knows how many people in some huge bathhouse when he’s bone-tired.”

“Aha... Is that the deal?”

“Yes it is.” Ghoda stood up from the bath. His muscular back, clearly the result of endless training, was covered in scars. His was unmistakably the body of a warrior.

Saybil found himself looking down at his own body. *I wonder if Professor Los prefers a build like that?* But he also knew that even if he had time for physical training, his desire to spend that time on his experiments would be too strong.

“Focus on resting up for today. Tomorrow we’ll be gathering information from the new arrivals once their names have been recorded in the free district register.”

5

Despite the order to rest, Saybil wasn’t actually all that tired—though he did have to admit he was mentally drained, at least. Being crammed into that wizard carriage filled with the stench of piss and shit had been the most unpleasant thing imaginable, and the motion sickness had been hard to take. The trip had also given him direct experience of exactly how the Nurabehn who tried to escape to the free district would be treated by the rulers of the New World, and an unsettling feeling was rising inside him. Saybil wondered if it was anger.

Still enveloped in the lingering warmth of the bath, he went upstairs to the second floor of the mansion. The first floor had very much the feel of a public institution, but the upper floor was largely given over to the delegation’s personal quarters. In addition to the bedrooms, there was a meeting room, a cafeteria—and a kitchen. Mercenary was holed up there as usual, the kitchen being more or less where he lived.

At Mercenary’s request, Zero had arranged it such that his room directly adjoined the kitchen and the pantry. Since food was brought in from outside, the pantry was actually on the first floor, but there was a staircase inside it leading up to the second, with two doors at the top—one to the kitchen, and the other to Mercenary’s room. It was set up so that someone walking into the cafeteria could ring a little bell in the window that opened into the kitchen,

which would bring Mercenary lumbering out of his room.

Come to think of it, I am pretty hungry, Saybil thought. Dinner wasn't exactly on the agenda last night, and we got to the harvesting facility in the morning... Then we came back here to the free district and I took that bath, and now it must be almost time for lunch.

Saybil hurriedly made his way to the cafeteria. The icy floors and walls of the place had been smooth and austere at first, but with the gradual addition of reliefs and sculptures, the whole place had begun to take on a grand and impressive air. Along with Zero's playful ice frescos, Lily and her mice had carved a magnificent statue of the goddess. She explained that "if there isn't anything Father can recognize by touch, he'll get lost," but the statue ended up being useful to the building's other residents and visiting citizens of the free district as well.

A sign emblazoned with a knife and fork hung outside the cafeteria. In light of the danger of poisoning, the room was only open to members of the delegation. The moment he stepped into the room, Saybil stopped, sensing a strange atmosphere. Los and Mercenary were sitting at a table and staring up at the ceiling with their arms crossed.

"...Uh, hey."

At the sound of his voice, Los turned and let out a cheerful "Oh! Thou hast returned, young Sayb!"

"Is something wrong?"

"Scurvy," Mercenary replied brusquely.

"Scurvy?" Saybil blinked at him. "Umm... That's what you get when you aren't eating enough fruits and vegetables, right?"

“’Tis indeed. Most of the Nurabehn who have made the journey to the free district were hardly at the peak of health to begin with, and we are presently unable to grow produce of any kind.”

“Well, we *are* living on the ocean.”

The free district had no soil, and with no soil, the earth’s bounty was out of reach.

“For sailors, scurvy is an unavoidable issue. It can be staved off through the consumption of fruits and vegetables, but such items spoil quickly and so are ill suited to seafaring. ’Tis common practice to make up some of the lack with strong drink made from fruit...but our free district is at present an isolated and helpless city ’pon the waves. We can hardly put in to some nearby port to secure provisions of fruit or alcohol.”

“Hence the scurvy,” finished Saybil, connecting the dots.

“An’ that’s what’s got Kudo bustlin’ around all day treatin’ people,” Mercenary added.

“Ah... Explains why he was in such a rush.” Saybil recalled how Kudo had been off again almost the moment he’d appeared. “But treating the symptoms with magic won’t exactly fix the root of the problem, will it?”

Forgetting his rumbling stomach, Saybil sat down beside Los and Mercenary at the table. On it was a list of the free district’s residents and another of its food supplies. The distribution of food was a key concern for the free district—to say nothing of the fact that a hundred new mouths had just arrived.

“All magic can fix is the state of the body, nothing more,” said Los.

“Y’know, I really don’t get how that works.” Mercenary stroked his chin. “Suppose someone was about to starve to death... Could magic heal them?”

“It could indeed. And thus will skilled witches never die for want of sustenance. By consuming food each day, all living beings refresh and recreate their bodies. They discard the old and replace it with the new. But when one is starving, one loses that ability for new creation.”

“So you mean witches are always healing themselves?”

“Exposed to the air, one’s skin will eventually wear away. Living beings are thus equipped with the ability to create their skin anew. But to halt all such bodily functions in antipathy to the aging process, and constantly heal one’s crumbling body instead—well, thou art presently engaged in something like that, art not, young Sayb?”

“Huh? Me?” Saybil blinked in surprise. “I wonder... I mean, I *have* stopped myself from growing older, but I haven’t been aware of constantly healing myself or anything...”

“Your body’s already dead, ain’t it, old hag?” Mercenary looked over at Los.

“Nothing of the sort. Here, mine heart.” Los guided Mercenary’s hand to her chest.

“Hn!” Even as this cry escaped Saybil’s lips, another voice came from behind.

“—Hn?”

He turned to see Zero standing there, expressionless, wearing the blank face of death.

“Wh... This isn’t—! This isn’t what it looks like, witch!” Mercenary howled. “It’s the old hag’s fault, she did it! It wasn’t me!”

Zero glided toward him as if she didn’t hear a word he was saying, and firmly grasped the beastfallen’s flailing hand.

“Touch.”

“...Huh?”

“Touch *me*.”

“B-But... Th... W-We’ve got company...”

“Oho... So you refuse? Was the act you were engaged in with Dawn so improper, then? And in front of my nephew, no less?”

“Th-That’s not it at all...!”

“Yes, touch her!” cried Los. “Don’t hold back!”

“Shut up you old hag this is all your fault to begin with!”

Zero raged, Mercenary cowered, and Los cheered—a farcical scene for three adults long past the first flush of youth.

“Dawn, Mercenary could tell from the sound alone whether or not your heart is beating. There was no need to have him touch you.”

“Thou art ever the jealous one! ’Twas but a light caress, and through my clothing.”

“I’d like to touch your heart, too, Professor Los.”

“Change of subject, Mud-Black.”

Saybil had been expecting a “rejoice in my pardon,” but instead Los lightly slapped his hand away, prompting a laugh from the glowering Zero.

“Our pleasant little chat hath given me an idea... Could we not simply do for all the residents of this free district what we witches do for ourselves?”

“Meaning?”

“Constant healing, for so long as they remain in this place. Apply to the entire

city that which all witches do to prevent the detested aging process. All who come here injured, starving, dying of thirst, will thus begin their recovery the moment they arrive.”

“But that would require...an extraordinary amount of mana. Even with the young man’s assistance, it would not be tenable forever.”

“Then why not limit the scope?” suggested Los. “An automatic restorative effect for so long as they remain in the clinic—or if not restorative, enough to prevent death, if nothing else? Take our present problem of scurvy, for instance: we should at least be capable of preventing the situation from becoming worse until we can secure a steady supply of fruits and vegetables.”

“You’re suggesting that we *store* people there?”

“Quite so. That we keep them ‘on ice,’ as it were.” Los’s eyes glittered. *Perfectly suited to this city, no?*

“Hmm...” Zero pondered Los’s proposal for a few long moments. “Right then, let’s do it!” And with that, she hurried from the room.

“Professor Zero’s always so busy...”

“What the heck was she doin’ here, anyway...?”

Come to think of it, she did just appear out of nowhere then rush off to put Los’s plan into action... But she must’ve had a reason to come to the cafeteria in the first place.

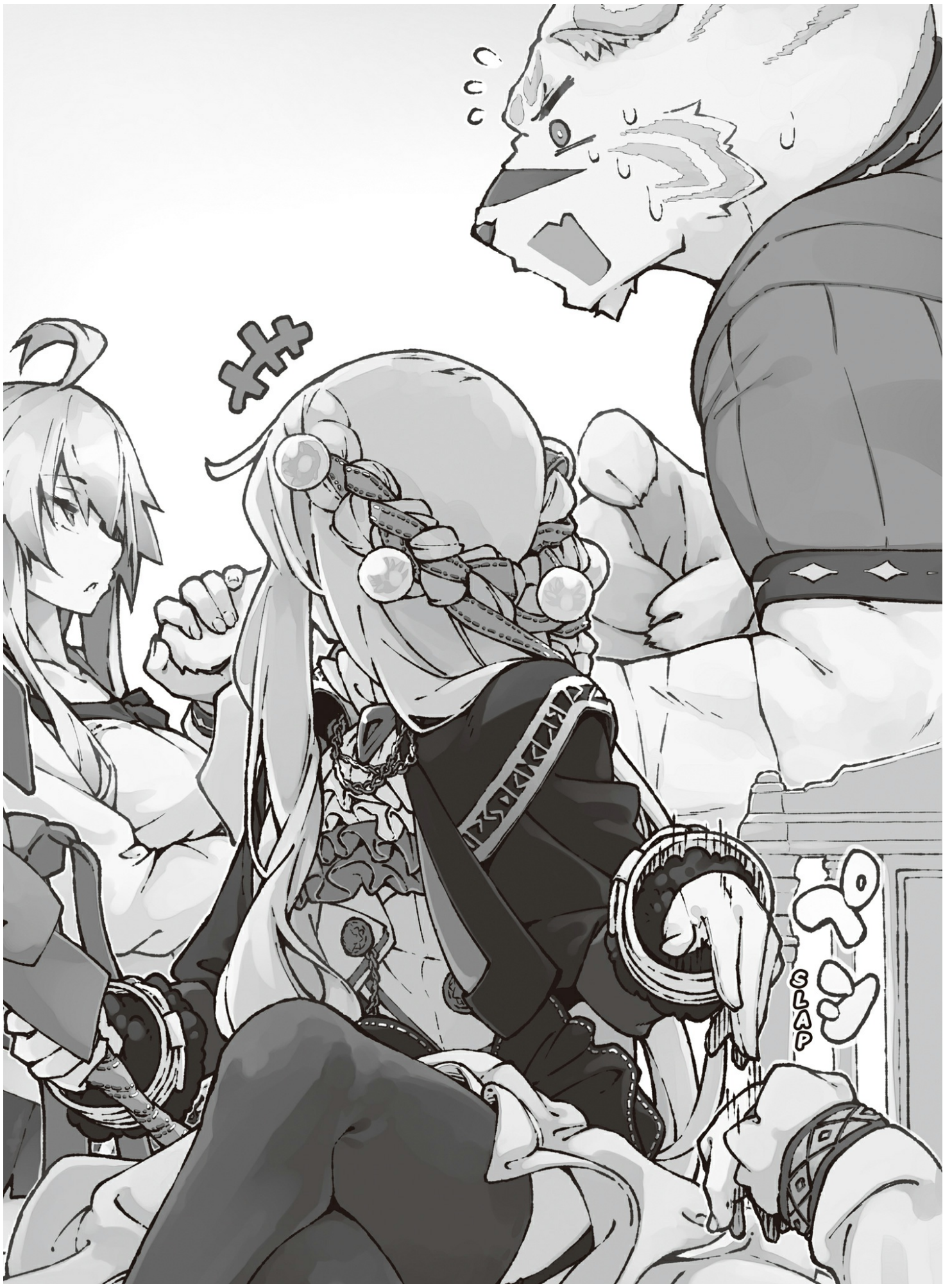
“Oh, right. *I’m* here because I’m hungry,” Saybil recalled.

“Makes sense after a job like that. Wait here a sec, I’ll whip somethin’ up for you.”

“But you were in the middle of talking through the scurvy problem, right?”

Even if Professor Zero rejiggers the clinic, that won't solve the underlying issue..."

"So long as we can blunt the immediate problem, 'twill simply be a matter of time. In any case, we have need of merchants. We have earned ourselves some measure of currency, yet coins and notes are but lumps of metal and scraps of paper without a way to spend them."



“Merchants, huh,” Saybil muttered under his breath. “The Nurabehn were pretty much slaves... So are you saying we need more Ignas in the free district?”

“So long as a trade connection can be found, it by no means need be an Ignas... But we are newcomers to this world. ’Twould be most expedient to make use of established channels, and if the Ignas are the ones in control of them, then bringing in such individuals would be the easiest path.”

“But how do we manage that...?”

“There is naught to do in that regard but wait.”

“Will waiting really get us anywhere?”

Los laughed. “No sagacious merchant could possibly pass up this opportunity. Our free district is the only place able to produce the mana potions that might yet save this dying world. They shall find us, whether we advertise our location or no. The average merchant will not be up to the task, and ’tis for that precise reason that we have but to wait—for the truly capable to arrive.”

“Oh, is that the deal?”

“It is.”

And indeed, that very night a caravan of four-wheeled wizard carriages piled high with thaumaturgical devices arrived at the free district where it lay offshore. Saybil had been fast asleep in his room, but hurried to the pier when he heard that a fleet of merchants had arrived. The rest of the delegation were already assembled, gazing out at the six vessels—something like ships, but then again like wizard carriages—floating on the waves.

“Are those merchant ships?”

“Oh hey, Sayb.” Even in a crowd, Hort’s antlers were easy to spot. She turned

around at Saybil's question and nodded in response.

The roof of one of the vehicles opened slowly, as if the occupants had been waiting for enough of a crowd to gather, and an Ignas with the pointy ears of a fox poked his head out.

"Hey!" This was Kudo, who Saybil hadn't even realized was standing behind him.

"Do you know that person?" Hort asked quizzically.

"That's the guy I bought my two-wheeler from! Sold him a few mana potions in the bargain."

"Can we trust him?"

"Dunno, I only talked to him for a few minutes."

"My apologies for imposing on you at this late hour!" called the fox-eared Ignas, his polite tone at odds with his surroundings. "My name is Seth Yīle! I presently serve as head of the Mildas Firm, a company with a storied history stretching over five centuries! As head of my organization, I would like to speak with the head of the free district!"

"Prove that you are no enemy of ours, and you will be allowed to come ashore!" answered the Dragon Conqueror King.

"Whoaaa. That was, like, *real* delegation chief stuff right there," Hort murmured.

"When we set off for the free district, several constables made an attempt on our lives. We have brought you their heads by way of souvenirs! If the Ignas Har Bell is with you, she will be able to confirm their authenticity!"

A blood-soaked sack landed on the icy pier, and Har Bell dashed forward to

examine the contents, her long, leporine ears bouncing as she ran. After peering inside, she nodded back at Ghoda.

“We have also brought thaumaturgical weapons, wizard carriages, thaumatheria—as well as fresh fruits and vegetables and an aquaculture system for growing crops without the need for soil!”

Whoa, incredible, Saybil thought to himself. *An aquaculture system is exactly what the free district needs right now.*

“If you happen to be interested, might we establish a few conditions under which to trade?”

Taken aback, Saybil couldn’t help but lean over and whisper to Hort, “So they’ve got conditions of their own, huh?”

She shrugged. “It’s probably just a bluff? I mean, plenty of merchants want to offer conditions to make it seem like they’re trading on equal footing, you know?”

I see. So that’s the deal.

Saybil and the rest looked on as Ghoda gave his reply: “Very well, let’s hear your conditions! What do you wish of the free district?”

A moment’s silence.

“Lady Utsuwa’s life.”



Chapter Two



Three days earlier.

The window of Utsuwa's room afforded an excellent view of the city below. The city of the Keybinder, always so bustling, was quiet, as if someone had doused its proverbial flame. There were fewer people out than usual, and half as many wizard lamps shone on the streets. The only thaumatheria in the sky belonged to the security forces, and even the wizard carriages appeared listless as they moved along the roads.

Utsuwa kept a close eye on all this from the window of her room. It made her terribly sad. She had thought the coming of the visitors from the Forbidden Land meant the dawning of a new era, that it heralded the unfolding of some wonderful adventure.

Suddenly, though, the people of the Forbidden Land were her enemies, her beloved Har Bell was a traitor, and she couldn't see that beautiful lizard Kudo anymore. It turned out the contingent from the Forbidden Land had harbored criminals who plotted to overthrow the Exinov. And to think, they would go so far as to kill a gatekeeper—!

Utsuwa loved the gatekeepers that swam through the sky above the city. They were a kind of symbol of freedom to her—but on that day, it had all come crashing to the ground.

Utsuwa shuddered. "It was so...so scary..."

She had been at her window, looking longingly toward the harbor, and had seen the whole thing. Seen those black tentacles take hold of the gatekeeper,

seen them shred it into chunks of flesh that rained down from the sky.

The wailing of Danna Ryl, Keybinder of the tower, had been horrendous. She had been born a ruler, and had garnered nothing but respect and awe throughout her life. No one opposed her, and all sought her loving embrace.

Utsuwa knew, though—knew that Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns was always saying Mother was too kind. And Utsuwa had been proud of how kind Danna Ryl was, but...

“The invaders from the Forbidden Land have robbed us of our peace and stability. We need the strength to fight, and so we cannot continue to allow the Nurabehn, burden that they are, to live and frolic at their ease. We need more of them in the farms, more of them converted into mana. If the Forbidden Land is overflowing with mana as they say, we need only gather our remaining strength, invade, and take it from them. After our world is again made replete with mana, then we may grant the Nurabehn their freedom once more. In war, a monarch must gather soldiers, who in turn must give their lives for their ruler. This Nurabehn issue is no different.” Such was Zaza Ryl’s entreaty to the Keybinder.

Through the gates of their towers came a great many of those Exinov known as “keys,” yet not a one of them contradicted Zaza Ryl’s words. And so Danna Ryl decided to abandon her previous kindness. At Zaza Ryl’s recommendation, she had ordered the construction of the very Nurabehn farms she once so firmly opposed. It had been determined, too, that the Keybinder of the tower would take sole possession of all mana potions received from the Forbidden Land delegation. The mana of the city’s residents was then restricted, which was what had made the streets so quiet.

“Mother...”

It was early afternoon, and, having just finished lunch, Utsuwa tried to talk to Danna Ryl. Today, as usual, Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns was serving at her side. This man with the rectangular goat's pupils, always bowing so deeply, was terribly kind to Utsuwa.

"Whatever is the matter, Lady Utsuwa?" Zaza Ryl asked in his master's stead.

"Utsuwa wants to go and play in the city... Utsuwa hasn't been able to go out at all recently."

Ever since the day the gatekeeper was brought down, Utsuwa had been somehow too frightened to leave the tower. As the days wore on, however, she became frightened of staying in her room as well. The words that reached her ears there scared her.

Zaza Ryl quietly approached her and went down on one knee. Once he was at her level, he met her eyes and smiled. "That is a fine idea, Lady Utsuwa. At present the people are scared of the invaders as well, you see, and if you were to show them the same solicitous care you always do, it might serve as a brief distraction from their worries."

"Y...You really think so...?"

Utsuwa glanced over at Danna Ryl, who nodded. "You are me, and I am you. In other words, you are the Keybinder. You need not seek permission from anyone—you have never done so before, have you? You freely walked the city of your own accord."

Utsuwa nodded—she had always been free to do as she wished before all this happened. No one ever refused her, nor scolded her for going into town on a whim and enjoying its pleasures.

"But now, Utsuwa...thinks things might be a little different..."

“Oh my...” Danna Ryl covered her mouth with both hands.

Zaza Ryl stretched out his long arms and gently embraced Utsuwa, patting her back as if she were his own daughter. “You’re very clever, Utsuwa, and have a fine eye for such things. You carefully think things through, and have the presence of mind to restrain yourself. But please, let yourself be at ease. This city is protected by the Exinov. There is nothing for you to fear.”

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At Danna Ryl and Zaza Ryl’s insistence, Utsuwa dragged herself into town. It was less that she actually wanted to go, and more that she simply didn’t want to be in the tower any longer. So without any real idea of where to go, Utsuwa wandered aimlessly until she found herself in front of the thaumaturgical goods store she and Kudo had visited together.

The place was deserted, with a sign on the door that read, *Closed due to mana shortage*. Thaumaturgical devices wouldn’t function without mana, so shops that dealt in them had no choice but to close when the mana supply dried up.

“But...some of the people who *do* have mana might still want to buy something,” Utsuwa mumbled to herself, shaking her head. She knew that hardly anyone had mana anymore—and even those who did would pretend they didn’t. Danna Ryl was gathering mana for the war with the Forbidden Land, so the moment someone was discovered to possess a significant amount, it was sure to be taken from them.

“...Utsuwa will just go home then,” she sighed, turning to leave. Recalling

Kudo's words to her that day, Utsuwa didn't feel like going to visit any of the sweets shops she used to frequent. Utsuwa had proudly announced that any store she visited would get more customers, so the proprietors were glad to serve her even if she didn't pay—but Kudo had rejected that idea out of hand, and he hadn't been kind about it.

—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.

And Utsuwa had realized he was exactly right.

When Utsuwa went to her mother and explained that she wanted to pay for things at the shops in the city, however, Danna Ryl had laughed her off. "There's simply no need for that," she'd said, and in the end Utsuwa hadn't gotten any spending money.

Why is that? Utsuwa thought to herself. *If Utsuwa is Mother—if Utsuwa has the same soul as Danna Ryl, if we're really two halves of the same being, then why doesn't she understand me? Utsuwa used to feel so calm when she sat by Mother's side, so why does it make Utsuwa feel so anxious now?*

Trudging alone along the road back to the tower, she looked up and saw something that rang a bell: an Ignas with the fluffy tail and pointy ears of a fox, descending from a large four-wheeled wizard carriage. The man was dressed for the road, but Utsuwa recognized him as the owner of the shuttered store she had just tried to visit.

Eager to share her memories of Kudo with the one person who would understand, Utsuwa hurried after the Ignas, but he ducked into a grocer's. She decided it would be better to wait by his carriage than risk missing him by going inside as well, so she veritably plastered herself to the massive vehicle and

waited for him to emerge. Taking an idle look into the cargo bed, Utsuwa saw that it was piled high with thaumaturgical devices—it looked as if every last item that had been on display in his shop was now crammed into the back of the carriage.

“Maybe he’s moving the shop to a new location...?”

“...Lady Utsuwa?”

“Eek!” Utsuwa gave a little shriek at the sound of her own name, and turned to see the stern face of the Ignas, his vulpine ears pricked up cautiously.

“A-Ahem...! Utsuwa saw you going in...!” She pointed at the grocer’s. “And earlier, when I dropped by your shop to say hello, the sign said it was closed. Utsuwa felt sad and lonely... But then here you were, and Utsuwa was just so happy to see you...!”

As the girl babbled on, attempting in her flustered state to explain what exactly she was doing there, the Ignas took a piece of fruit from the paper bag in his arms and held it out to her. Utsuwa accepted it and took a bite. It made her feel a bit calmer, and she smiled at him.

“So you mean to say that you just happened to see me on the street, and were waiting for me to come out of the grocer’s?”

“Yes!”

“Well then, what is it you want?”

“W-Want...?” Utsuwa looked at him, puzzled. “Umm... T-To...talk...?”

“I see. About what?”

“About...?” Utsuwa didn’t know. She had noticed the Ignas, it had made her happy, and she had come over to talk, that was all. She didn’t “want” anything

from him, exactly.

The Ignas's ears drooped, and he crouched down so he could look her in the eye. "You came by my shop, did you not? Was there some kind of problem with one of the devices I sold you, for instance?"

"N-Not at all...! But...a-are you going away somewhere?" Utsuwa glanced over at the cargo-laden wizard carriage.

"Yes, but don't worry. I've set it up so I can monitor the condition of the wizard devices sold in my shop no matter where they are. If anything at all should go wrong with one of your purchases, Lady Utsuwa, then I, Seth Yle, will fly to your side to address the issue personally." The fox-eared Ignas—Seth—respectfully pressed his forehead to Utsuwa's tiny hand, then quickly stood and made to leave as if the conversation was over.

Utsuwa frantically grabbed the hem of his tunic. *The conversation isn't over. There's something else Utsuwa needs to talk about!*

"Lady Utsuwa?"

"Do you remember the p-pretty lizard...? The one that was with Utsuwa?" She hadn't organized her thoughts and didn't really know what she wanted to say, but as the halting words tumbled from her mouth, Seth knelt down in front of her once again.

"Is it something secret, Lady Utsuwa?"

She nodded at him, and the Ignas twitched his pointy ears.

"Speak softly, then. Keep your voice as quiet as you can. It's okay, I'll be able to hear you."

"M-Mother, she..." Utsuwa had heard terrible things said in the tower. Scary things. An invasion of the Forbidden Land, which meant an attack on Kudo's

home. Utsuwa didn't want that. Which was why... "Mother says she's going to 'invade' the Forbidden Land. Utsuwa looked it up—it's a scary, awful word. So since you're moving somewhere else, if you meet anyone from the Forbidden Land, please tell them. I'm sure Mother will forgive them if they just say sorry."

Utsuwa finally realized that was what she'd been hoping for. For everyone to make up and be friends again. To go back to those thrilling days when her heart was all aflutter.

"If Mother and the people from the Forbidden Land make up, then they'll sell us the medicine that restores mana and nobody will have to suffer anymore. Utsuwa thinks there must be some kind of mistake, and the people from the Forbidden Land didn't really cover up for any bad guys. In fact, maybe they really want to say sorry right now."

"Yes... Maybe so."

"Even if the people of the Forbidden Land fight Mother, they'll never win. Utsuwa likes them, Utsuwa doesn't want them to die. Kudo even said Utsuwa should come and see the Forbidden Land someday. That made me so happy..."

Seth gently ruffled Utsuwa's hair. No Ignas had ever touched her like that before, and in her surprise she fell silent.

"Lady Utsuwa, can you keep it a secret from your mother that you told us this?"

"...Huh? But why?"

"Because if anyone finds out that you told us, we'll be killed."

"You must be joking...!" Utsuwa laughed. "Don't worry, that won't happen. Utsuwa will have a proper talk with Mother, and tell her that the people of the Forbidden Land will come say sorry, so can she please forgive them." Utsuwa

puffed out her chest proudly, but Seth frowned. Utsuwa didn't understand why.

"Seth, we'd better get going..." A rotund raccoon with black and white fur poked his head out from the driver's seat of the carriage.

"Right, coming."

Utsuwa went quiet once she realized Seth had been keeping someone waiting.

The driver looked at her, and a strange expression came over his face. "We taking her with us?"

Seth couldn't help but laugh. "Not a chance. Don't much care for the idea of being a kidnapper."

"Heard a little of what she was saying—sounds like this is gonna be trouble."

"We aren't taking her. We've got enough trouble already."

"Right. Gotcha."

Seth climbed into the passenger seat. "Let's go—to the free district."

These words, filled with a certain determination, did not reach Utsuwa's ears. She watched as the carriage pulled away, then took a deep breath and clenched her fists with a determination of her own. She finally knew what she wanted to do. What she *had* to do.

"Utsuwa needs to ask Mother...! To forgive the people of the Forbidden Land...!"

“You told them of the invasion plan?! How could you be so foolish...?! And, how do you know anything of it in the first place?!”

Utsuwa had rushed back to the tower, and when she was done giving Danna Ryl a breathless account of what had happened in town, her mother screamed so loud that the very air around her shook. It was the first time Utsuwa had heard Danna Ryl raise her voice in anger. She was so surprised that the rage was being directed at her, she just crumpled to the floor.

“B-But Utsuwa...h-heard you talking, and...”

“So you were *eavesdropping*?”

“N-No...! It’s just... Utsuwa can hear your voice no matter where she is...”

“We must remain calm, Danna Ryl. This is a consequence of our own carelessness. Lady Utsuwa is not to blame,” said Zaza Ryl, helping Utsuwa up from the floor.

Pale with rage, Danna Ryl turned her back on Utsuwa and put her face in her hands.

“Danna Ryl, Lady Utsuwa is a part of you. Her pain is your pain, and you will bear the scar of any wound you cause her. You understand that, of course?”

“Of course, yes... It’s just... I’m sorry. I was somewhat shocked, and...angry with myself. I consider Utsuwa so much a part of myself that it did not occur to me to be wary.”

“Who, I wonder, *could* be wary of a part of you, my lady? I myself was all too careless. Lady Utsuwa, please forgive me for saying so many things you should not have had to hear. There is so much you should never have heard. Have you hurt yourself?” Zaza Ryl set Utsuwa on her feet and checked her over to see if she’d injured herself when she fell to the floor.

The girl shook her head. “U-Utsuwa’s fine...and Utsuwa doesn’t think she did anything wrong. Utsuwa wants Mother to make up and be friends again with the people from the Forbidden Land.”

“Yes, yes. I quite understand. We must encourage them to reflect on their actions, however. They defied Danna Ryl and killed one of our gatekeepers, and a suitable punishment is in order.”

“But...”

“Once they have been shown the error of their ways, the invaders will surely come to understand their crimes. Now then, Lady Utsuwa, please return to your chamber. Do not worry about the Ignas with whom you spoke, we will deal with them at once.”

“Deal with them?” Utsuwa asked. “What does that mean?”

Zaza Ryl clapped his hands, at which a number of servants appeared to usher Utsuwa to her room. Once there, Utsuwa heard for the first time in her life the sound of the key being turned from the other side.

“Why is Utsuwa’s door locked?”

There was no answer.

Trapped in her chamber, Utsuwa simply stood there, gazing dumbfounded at the door. She had never imagined any of this could happen: her mother shouting at her in anger, refusing to listen to a word she said, then locking her in her room... It was as if Utsuwa’s whole world had changed in the span of a single day.

“...Or is this the way it’s always been...?”

Utsuwa was a vessel for Danna Ryl. When she turned fifteen, she was meant to surrender her young body to Danna Ryl, who would then consume her soul.

The two of them were one and the same, and had never before had a difference of opinion...or so Utsuwa had thought. But now she realized she had simply never before had *any* opinion of her own. And *this* was what happened to the world when their opinions differed.

“Mother doesn’t want the people of the Forbidden Land to know about the invasion... Utsuwa told Seth Ÿle about the invasion... That means...to stop Seth Ÿle from telling the Forbidden Landers about the invasion, Mother will surely...”

–Because if anyone finds out what you told us, we’ll be killed.

Utsuwa let out a cry. “What do I do now...? He told Utsuwa to keep it a secret...” *He told Utsuwa that Mother would kill him, but I didn’t listen... I just laughed it off like some kind of joke.*

Utsuwa rushed to the window and looked up at the sky.

“Thaumatheria...”

Great birds, their warning coloration a fiery red, were circling with armored Ignas on their backs. These were the constables responsible for chasing down the most heinous of criminals.

Seth is going to be killed, and it’s all Utsuwa’s fault.

When Utsuwa put a hand to her chest, she could feel her heart racing. She was, in that moment, on the verge of rebellion... She intended to ignore the implicit entreaty from her mother—her other half—not to leave her room.

“...You are me, and I am you.”

Utsuwa didn't need to seek permission from anyone. That was how it had always been. They could lock her up like this, but it was too late—Utsuwa wasn't going to change her ways.

“Utsuwa doesn't want them to die.”

She slipped out through the window, hopped onto a two-wheeled wizard carriage, and followed the silhouettes of the soaring thaumatheria out of the city.

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Seth Ÿle formed a caravan with ten or so fellow merchants, and together they drove across the wasteland toward the sea.

“Hey Seth, you sure this is the right way? Aren't lost, are ya?”

“Nope, it's a straight shot in this direction... Just like I told you five minutes ago.”

“It's just, I've never gone overland without any roads before, and it's making me nervous.”

The portly raccoon grumbling in the driver's seat was named Zol El. To all appearances he was a timid, cowardly fellow, but he and Seth had been doing business together for decades. Seth knew that Zol wasn't a coward, he was just extremely cautious. Which was exactly why he had approached him about this “move” he was planning.

“Wonder if the free district's even real...”

Seth knew the rumors being spread by the Exinov were lies—but he also knew

the free district did exist. The big question was *where*...and it just so happened Seth (and Seth alone) knew this, too. He had, after all, sold a wizard carriage to a certain reptilian beastfallen. And, as he had told Utsuwa, each of Seth's vehicles was outfitted such that he could discern its location at all times in case of accident or theft.

At present, the lizard's wizard carriage was *on* the ocean.

"You don't reckon there's a chance the two-wheeler broke down and he just threw it in the sea, do you?" Zol El ventured.

"Can't be—it still moves around sometimes."

"On the water? Thought you said it wasn't equipped for that."

"He might be driving it on the deck of a ship, or maybe there's some small island we aren't aware of. In any case, we'll know once we get there."

"Still worries me, though... Our fuel stores are low, and if we run out of mana on the ocean, we'll sink like a stone." Zol's wizard carriage was amphibious, but if its power source ran dry, it would be nothing more than a lump of iron. "We might not even make it to the ocean in the first place, and—"

"They're on us!" Seth's shout cut across Zol's mutterings, and the raccoon shrunk into his seat.

"See! They came after us, I knew they would! I told you we should've brought Lady Utsuwa along! We could've used her as a hostage!"

"Woulda made things even harder if we had her with us...!" Seth grabbed the passenger seat communicator and shouted to the other members of the merchant caravan: "Danna Ryl's minions are here! Prepare to intercept!"

With his wizard weapon in hand, Seth opened the roof of the carriage and glared up at the sky. "Five mounted constables on thaumatheria!" he shouted

into the communicator. “The beasts themselves are transport only, they have no attack capabilities!”

“Then we’ve got the upper hand in terms of weaponry. Look at ’em—just how old are those wizard guns?”

“The constabulary’s gear is only good for abusing unarmed Nurabehn. They think they can take on merchants who wholesale weapons to private monster hunting outfits? What a joke.”

“—Hm?”

One of the mounted officers threw something down from the air. The instant it hit the ground there was a massive boom, and the whole carriage rocked violently. Seth, who had been poking his head through the roof hatch, was thrown clear out of the vehicle by the force of the blast. He rolled with the impact and quickly got back to his feet.

Zol stopped the carriage beside him. “Get in! Quick!”

“What was that explosion?! The mana detector didn’t even twitch,” Seth cried as he hopped back into the carriage.

“That was no wizard device—it was a conventional bomb!”

“What, they take all the mana potions for themselves but don’t even give their thugs enough mana to power their weapons...?!”

When a thaumaturgical device was used in combat it always required mana, and it was standard practice to predict an enemy’s attacks by tracking their magic use—but if the constabulary were using conventional weapons, then none of the merchants’ anti-thaumaturgy gear would be effective.

The bombs kept raining down, and the caravan scattered in confused panic.

“What do we do?! Run?!”

“Stick to the plan!” Seth screamed into the communicator. “Bring down the thaumatheria, then take care of the riders one by one! Those birds should be easy pickings!”

“Wait! Looks like they’ve seen something!”

“What kind of something?!” Seth peered up at the sky. The mounted officers were pointing at the ground behind them and shouting. Seth took out a pair of binoculars and focused them where the constables were pointing.

“...It can’t be. Lady Utsuwa?!”

Utsuwa was racing toward them across the wasteland astride a two-wheeled wizard carriage, the hem of her dress flapping in the wind. The mystical crystal horn that extended from her forehead glinted in the sunlight, scattering scintillating rays in all directions.

“Seth!!” As she drew level with Seth’s four-wheeled wizard carriage, Utsuwa waved vigorously to him. “Utsuwa’s sorry! Utsuwa was wrong! Mother and Zaza Ryl *are* trying to kill you after all, aren’t they!”

“They sure are! As you can see!” Seth shouted back at her, straining to be heard over the wind.

“But if Utsuwa is with you, then they can’t attack! Utsuwa will stay with you until you get where you’re going!”

“We’d be accused of treason! They’d say we carried you off!”

“Don’t worry! Utsuwa will explain everything when Mother comes to get her!”

Seth smiled. The girl was so innocent, so pure—and straightforward to the

point of foolishness. She also seemed to think that he and the other Ignas being pursued by the Exinov authorities were powerless beings who needed her protection.

“Do it now! With Lady Utsuwa by our side, they’re nothing but sitting ducks!” Seth cried into the communicator, and an instant later an earsplitting keening sound resounded across the wasteland. The riders lost control of their thaumatheria, which crashed to the ground one after the other.

Utsuwa brought her two-wheeler to a halt and looked at the thaumatheria in surprise. The mounted officers had precautions in place in case of a crash landing, and a simple fall wasn’t enough to kill a thaumatherium, so the armed Ignas leapt from their carriages and went around finishing off the constables before they could even beg for their lives. The fallen birds could be returned to their cages, and, with a few adjustments, brought over to the merchants’ side.

Once it was done, the wasteland sank back into silence. Seth walked quietly over to the dust-covered Utsuwa, who stood staring blankly beside her wizard carriage where it lay on its side.

“You have our gratitude, Lady Utsuwa. It is thanks to you that we suffered no casualties.”

“The constables... They wouldn’t have attacked so long as Utsuwa was with you...”

“Yes, I know.”

“Then why do...this...?” *They weren’t resisting, and you killed them*, Utsuwa’s innocent eyes seemed to say—but Seth didn’t flinch under her reproachful gaze.

“They came here to kill us. And we couldn’t have taken you all the way to our destination—though even if we could, they would have killed us the moment we

let you go.”

“But what if Utsuwa asked them not to...?”

“They would have promised not to, then killed us anyway as soon as you turned your back.”

“I...I suppose you’re right...” Utsuwa stared at the ground, dejected. “Utsuwa...doesn’t want *anyone* to die... You told Utsuwa to keep what she said a secret, but Utsuwa told Mother... And if Seth were killed because of that, Utsuwa would be terribly upset... But—” She fixed her gaze somewhere in the distance above the scattered corpses and began sobbing uncontrollably. “It’s because Utsuwa came that...that they’re dead.”

“Your Mother will probably scold you.”

“Yes... I expect she’ll be very angry. When Utsuwa told her she had let you know about the invasion, she was very, *very* angry.”

“Would you like to come with us?”

Utsuwa looked up at Seth, stunned, then shook her head slowly from side to side with a perplexed frown. “Mother is Utsuwa, and Utsuwa is Mother. We must always be together.”

“...Zol,” Seth called out. “Grab a gatekeeper doll. Should be some in the truck.”

Zol had been intent on watching the scene unfold, and his head jerked in surprise at the request. “Huh? Sure, they’re back there, but...”

“Lady Utsuwa came all this way to rescue us, and I want to give her a token of our gratitude.”

Zol rummaged through the cargo and brought over a stuffed toy shaped like a

fish. Seth took it and, kneeling down, handed it to Utsuwa.

“Lady Utsuwa, this doll will be your good luck charm. If you wish for help from the bottom of your heart, so long as you have this on your person, divine providence will save you.”

“You mean the gatekeepers will protect Utsuwa?” The girl smiled despite herself, and Seth ruffled her hair as he got to his feet.

“Lady Utsuwa, allow me to make a confession. Lady Danna Ryl’s judgment was correct, *and* you have done the right thing as well.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“We’re heading for the free district, and if we succeed in telling the people there of Lady Danna Ryl’s invasion, it will throw her plans into chaos. We have indeed become traitors to the Keybinder.”

Utsuwa looked at Seth blankly. If what he was saying was true, she had come to rescue a band of traitors and rebels.

“B-But...w-why...? Why do you want to hurt Mother?”

“Because she has hurt the Nurabehn and the Ignas.”

“Ah!” Utsuwa let slip a small cry, then murmured under her breath, “Aha...” as if she had finally understood it all.

“Lady Utsuwa, perhaps someday you will come to realize that you are not like Danna Ryl—you are one of us.”

“What do you...?”

“If you never do come to understand that, you’ll be able to remain happy. But once the realization comes, that is when your battle will begin.”

When Utsuwa got back to the tower, covered in dust and grime from the ride, Danna Ryl and Zaza Ryl were waiting for her.

“Welcome home, Utsuwa. It appears your excursion took you far.”

“Yes,” she answered plainly. “Utsuwa didn’t want anyone to die.”

Zaza Ryl narrowed his eyes and sadly hung his head. Danna Ryl, however, had a broad smile on her face. She slowly walked towards Utsuwa and enfolded her in an embrace, at which the girl breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Utsuwa’s sorry, Mother. It’s all because Utsuwa wanted to save those people that the constables died.”

“It’s fine. So long as you are safe, what do the lives of a few Ignas matter?”

Danna Ryl’s words were kind, but there was something in them that pricked at Utsuwa.

“Being so pure and kind, I’m sure this trying situation has been terribly painful for you. But that’s all over now. Let us bring this to an end before you suffer any further.”

“An end?” Utsuwa cocked her head.

Danna Ryl took a step back and lovingly looked Utsuwa’s body up and down. “I have decided to conduct the rite of rebirth early. You and I are to become one again.”

Utsuwa doesn't want to disappear—this was the first thought that came into Utsuwa's mind when Danna Ryl spoke of the rite of rebirth.

The rite would begin with Utsuwa and Danna Ryl exchanging bodies. Then Danna Ryl, now in the younger body, would absorb the older one soul and all, reclaiming the mana left inside it. Thus would the two Danna Ryls be made one again.

Utsuwa had never looked fearfully upon the future that awaited her. She would live on within her mother, and since the two of them were one and the same to begin with, the rite would simply bring them together once more. But with the coming of the envoys from the Forbidden Land, whose potions could resolve her world's mana shortage, Utsuwa had assumed the rite of rebirth would be called off and she would go on to become a grown-up within her own body—and she had begun to dream of all the things she would do with that newfound time. Suddenly, however, it seemed all that would be taken away again. She was originally supposed to live for fifteen years, and had only just turned ten. But now Danna Ryl had decided all on her own, with no regard for Utsuwa, that not only would the rite go ahead as planned, it would be *moved up* five years.

The preparations were set in motion without delay. Utsuwa was no longer allowed out of her room, iron bars were put on her window, and her door was locked at all times.

“I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but this is to protect you,” Zaza Ryl had said the one time he came to check on Utsuwa. He gently stroked her hair, then smiled and left her a sweet snack that was to be their little secret. But that did nothing to lift Utsuwa's spirits.

Utsuwa doesn't want to disappear.

The feeling grew stronger and stronger as the days and nights passed.

I want to keep being "Utsuwa"—to see things I've never seen before. To go to the Forbidden Land.

She regretted to no end that she hadn't gone with Seth when he brought up the possibility.

"The Nurabehn... Are they this scared all the time...?"

Utsuwa hugged the stuffed gatekeeper Seth had given her. He had called it her good luck charm, said it would protect her—but the rite of rebirth was a blessing to be welcomed, not some danger to be avoided.

The gatekeepers protect the Exinov, but I doubt they'll stop Utsuwa from becoming part of Danna Ryl. The thought made Utsuwa terribly angry, and she threw the doll hard against the wall of her room, on which hung the magnificent garment she was to wear for the rite the following morning.

"...Utsuwa doesn't want to disappear." It just slipped out, her thoughts spilling from her lips. "But Utsuwa can't say it..."

The Nurabehn's lives were, at that very moment, being converted into mana—to light the lamps for a city in which they would never get to live, to heat meals they would never get to taste.

Utsuwa had always believed, right up until today, that to offer up one's life for an Exinov or an Ignas was something wonderful. It wasn't dying, it was becoming part of someone else and beginning life anew.

But now she knew there were some dreams that could never come true—not if you became one with someone else.

–Lady Utsuwa, perhaps someday you will come to realize that you are not like Danna Ryl—you are one of us.

Seth Ÿle could not possibly have predicted that the day of her realization would come so soon.

+++

The morning of the rite, Utsuwa awoke to a group of servants filing into the room to make her ready.

“Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

Utsuwa drank down the contents of the glass and indeed found herself feeling light and buoyant.

“It might be better to render her fully unconscious...” The voice was Zaza Ryl’s, coming from somewhere within the flock of servants.

One of the servants shook her head, however. “Lady Danna Ryl does not deem it necessary. She feels that the hearts of the populace will be moved precisely because Lady Utsuwa is offering up her body of her own free will.”

Utsuwa was led from her room and out into the tower square. Atop a stage erected so that the throngs of spectators could view the rite, Danna Ryl stood smiling gently at Utsuwa amid a panoply of flowers in full bloom. There was music playing and everything looked so beautiful, straight out of a storybook.

“Now then, come here.”

Utsuwa climbed onto the stage as instructed by her beloved mother. The deafening cheers from the crowd were like the droning of an enormous swarm of insects.

“Mother, Utsuwa is—”

“Shh... It’s quite all right,” Danna Ryl interrupted her. “It will all be over soon. Here, like this. You need only touch your horn to mine.”

At her mother’s insistence, Utsuwa raised her head. Danna Ryl touched her cheek, then brought her horn to Utsuwa’s. The moment they touched, the girl shuddered, as an unpleasant chill crept down her back.

“N-No...”

“Stop that now. You mustn’t move.”

“N-No, no...NO!”

Utsuwa’s voice rose to a scream, and she pushed Danna Ryl away. The music stopped. The square fell silent, save for a murmur spreading through the crowd. Utsuwa’s head was still so fuzzy, she couldn’t really think properly.

But there are so many people here. Surely one of them will—

“Help me...” She leaned out from the stage, stretching her hands toward the crowd. “Please, somebody...! Help me!”

“Enough! How unseemly!”

“Utsuwa doesn’t want to die...! Utsuwa doesn’t want to die! Utsuwa doesn’t want to die!”

Danna Ryl turned white as a sheet and grasped the girl by the arm. Even that was more than Utsuwa could bear, and she began writhing violently, trying to get free.

Utsuwa was still only ten years old. If Danna Ryl had waited until she was fifteen, slowly and carefully breaking down her resistance over those five additional years—perhaps then Utsuwa would not have cried and wailed, pathetically begging for help from the crowd as she did.

A stream of servants rushed onto the stage to help get Utsuwa under control.

Whatever happened, there was no salvaging the rite.

“Mother, please...”

Utsuwa looked at Danna Ryl, but she could find not a hint of her mother’s usual deep affection reflected in her eyes. The older woman looked as if she were staring down at a cockroach, a worm.

“I have spent all these years carefully nurturing only the memories of an innocent young girl... To think that now I must incorporate this outburst, on the very day of the rite of rebirth, into my recollections...” She heaved a great sigh of self-pity.

—Perhaps someday you will come to realize...

Utsuwa had brought those words to mind so many times since Seth had spoken them. She’d thought he was talking about the fear and pain of losing one’s life. But now Utsuwa thought she knew what his words had really meant.

—You are not like Lady Danna Ryl—you are one of us.

Danna Ryl doesn’t think Utsuwa is human. Utsuwa is a vessel—a thing. Mother

never expected Utsuwa to have a will of her own. It's just the same as how the Exinov and Ignas treat the Nurabehn as something different from themselves. Their lives aren't taken with dignity, the Nurabehn are simply harvested. And the ones doing the harvesting don't even feel as if they're depriving anyone of anything.

All the strength suddenly flooded out of her, and Utsuwa fell to her knees.

It was then that a powerful gust of wind sprang up, scattering the flowers from the stage. The crowd looked up at the sky and people began shouting and screaming.

Utsuwa couldn't even bring herself to raise her head—not until the silver dragon let out a roar fit to split the heavens in two, diving toward the earth from high among the clouds. It was the same dragon the messengers from the Forbidden Land had brought with them.

“Lady Danna Ryl! Lady Utsuwa! This way!” the servants cried, insisting that the stage was too dangerous. They picked Utsuwa up and tried to carry her off, but the person standing on the dragon's back managed to wound a number of them with a volley of shots from a wizard gun and they fled, leaving Utsuwa lying on the stage.

She smelled the stifling odor of rust, and then in the blink of an eye the dragon was there, hovering above her at arm's length. Someone descended from the creature's back onto the stage—someone Utsuwa knew.

“Har Bell!”

The commanding wizard with her long rabbit ears took Utsuwa in one arm, then gave a short cry: “Take us up!” Her other hand was clutching a rope tied around the dragon's body. The dragon, who had flown as low as he could, now

soared into the air once more, yanking his passengers up after him.

“Don’t let them get away! Shoot them down! But aim for the dragon—don’t hit Lady Utsuwa!”

At Zaza Ryl’s orders, a dozen or so guards rushed onto the stage and began firing their wizard guns at the dragon, red blood welling up from each point of impact. The dragon moaned, and for a moment began to list.

“Kudo! Focus on healing his wings!” came the dragon-rider’s booming voice. “He can handle the rest of the pain!”

“All right, all right, settle down! I’m already on it!”

A warm light accompanied this angry outburst, enveloping the dragon’s body. The great beast regained his strength, flapping his wings as hard as ever and soaring away from the guards on the ground far below.

“Amazing... We’re so high up, and going so fast...”

“Yup. No thaumatherium could ever catch a dragon.” Har Bell’s kind, reassuring voice was so calm that somehow none of what had been happening felt real to Utsuwa.

As to why Har Bell had come for her, and where the dragon was going, Utsuwa had no idea. All she knew was that she had wished not to die, and her wish had come true.

Was it Seth Yle’s gift watching over me? she wondered, as the tower of Kuravanuluox grew ever smaller in the distance.



Chapter Three



“Lady Utsuwa! You’re safe!”

“Seth!”

As soon as the dragon had alighted in the free district’s central square, Har helped Utsuwa down onto the icy ground. The girl waited with open arms as Seth ran to her side. She wanted a hug, most likely, but instead Seth knelt before her and respectfully pressed his forehead to her hand.

“I’m so glad to see you unharmed.”

“Har Bell told Utsuwa you’re the one who asked them to come save me.”

“I am a merchant, after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“You saved my life, and in return I promised to save yours...although I did not think our accounts would be settled in such short order.”

“But how did you know? How could you tell that Utsuwa wanted saving, even though I didn’t go with you?”

“The stuffed toy I gave you when we parted had a thaumaturgical communicator inside it.”

“Huh?”

“I could hear everything you said, Lady Utsuwa: about how you didn’t want to disappear, how you desired to run away, how you wished for someone to save you.”

Utsuwa's pale cheeks turned a bashful crimson. She tried to remember exactly what she had said to herself while she was locked up in her bedroom, but couldn't quite recall. "Forget everything I said!" she cried, covering her face with her hands.

"We've really made enemies of the New World now," sighed the Dragon Conqueror King as he dismounted from his steed. "We spirited away someone with a piece of the Exinov leader's soul inside her. Can't exactly complain if they attack us at this point. We've given them the perfect excuse."

"Hey, you gotta bring that up now...?!"

Ghoda didn't seem to pay Kudo's scolding any mind. "A fact's a fact, no matter when it's said. This place is now a target. No one's safe here. Come on Heath, you must be tired. Let's get you some food and water."

With that, Ghoda departed, leaving a disgruntled Kudo to glare at his back as he walked away. With a sigh, the beastfallen let it go and turned to Utsuwa. "Sorry 'bout him. The guy can be kinda heartless sometimes."

"Why are you apologizing? Utsuwa thinks what he said is true. Mother will surely come and try to take Utsuwa back, so things will probably be much more dangerous for all of you now."

"Er, well... Yeah, I guess that much is true...!"

"Utsuwa doesn't mind him. More importantly, this city is so wonderful...!" She spun around to take it all in. "It's wonderful, fabulous, marvelous! Just a little while ago Utsuwa was so scared and sad because Mother was going to eat me and I was going to disappear... Utsuwa can't believe I'm in such a wonderful place now!" Her cheeks flushed, and a broad grin lit up her face. "Utsuwa is so happy to be alive!"

Then, still smiling, she burst into tears. The change was so sudden that Seth and Kudo froze up completely. Har, however, knelt at Utsuwa's side and gently wiped away her tears. She had spent years around the tower of the Keybinder, and had known Utsuwa since the girl was small. The mission to save Utsuwa had been dangerous—Har Bell knew that better than anyone. Even so, she had been the first to volunteer, claiming it was her responsibility.

“Come with me, Lady Utsuwa. We'll draw you a warm bath, get you some delicious treats, then find you a nice, fluffy bed.”

“What about you, Har Bell? Will you come with Utsuwa? Will you stay with Utsuwa?”

“Yes, of course. We'll be together all day long.”

Kudo and Seth watched as Har led Utsuwa away, then exchanged glances.

“So?” Kudo asked. “How'd the negotiations go? Everythin' settled?”

Seth nodded easily. “Yes, no sticking points to speak of. The addition of our little caravan will serve to help the free district prosper. It's not that a prosperous town attracts merchants, you see—it's we merchants who make a town prosperous.”

“This what you were after when you sold me that two-wheeler?”

“Of course not—though your Forbidden Land certainly piqued my interest, I must admit.”

“What, you were plannin' on coming over?!”

“The Forbidden Land is a phantom to us, you see. A legend.”

“Ain't many of *us* back home who've ever even *heard* of the New World.”

“‘The New World’—heh. No matter how many times I hear that, it still sounds

strange to me.”



“Strange how?”

“I spoke about this with some of the other members of your delegation, but if you look at the history, it’s really the other way around.”

While Kudo and the rest had been off rescuing Utsuwa, Seth and the remainder of the delegation had spent some time exchanging information. It had all been fascinating to the merchant: the existence of the Academy of Magic, the difference between magic and sorcery, all of it.

Given the course of the Forbidden Land’s history, this encounter with the place they called the New World was bound to advance their technology by leaps and bounds. It would advance their understanding of the concepts of magic and thaumaturgical devices by a thousand years.

“What do you mean, the other way around?” asked Kudo.

“According to our histories, the Forbidden Land was a place where sorcery supremacists were isolated.”

“Sorcery supremacists...?”

“People who believed that the secrets of sorcery must be concealed, and that those who know those secrets should rule the world. They rejected the ‘wizardry’ that made sorcerous power available to the public, they loathed it, thought it should be destroyed. The place they chose to settle was the Forbidden Land. The texts say it was especially abundant with mana.”

“And then your people shut them in there?”

“Whether we shut them in or they shut us out, at this point no one knows. But personally I believe the latter—and the more I speak with the people of the Forbidden Land, the more sure I am.”

“From where I’m sittin’, though, the New World sure looks more prosperous than our neck of the woods.”

Seth laughed at that. “Any such prosperity is thanks to the efforts of our predecessors. This may surprise you to learn, but here in this land you call the New World there remains not a single practitioner capable of creating new sorcery.”

“...What do you mean?”

“We perform the rites as they’re written in our ancient texts and can reproduce the sorcery recorded there, but nothing more. All we’re doing is arranging and rearranging the cards we already have in our hand, somehow managing to develop new thaumaturgical devices in the process. That’s why the Exinov who control the towers are called Grand Magisters, not sorcerers: because they transmit the teachings of sorcery that already exists.”

The New World had survived this long by eating into its inheritance from the past—but now it had reached its limit.

Seth remembered well the day Utsuwa had brought Kudo to his store. When he saw the mana recovery potions Kudo carried, he knew instantly they would change the world...though he never could have imagined that this was the form that change would take—

“What’d Professor Los say when you told her that?”

“Professor Los?”

“Tiny, blond, flashy outfit.”

“Ah.” Seth recalled meeting the witch with the huge staff upon his arrival. “She seemed delighted.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“The upshot of all this is that our world is almost dead, and I want to change to a new model. I’m fed up with the Exinov, desperately struggling to maintain the status quo by bleeding the Nurabehn dry, unable to see the destruction that awaits us all. It’s we Ignas, existing in the space *between* the Exinov and the Nurabehn, who are best placed to recognize the truth.”

“An’ that’s why Har Bell came to the Forbidden Land in the first place.”

“If she’d held off another year, someone else would probably have attempted the journey instead. I believe Lady Utsuwa’s presence here will also work to the free district’s advantage. It demonstrates to the whole world the strength this place possesses.”

“Then wouldn’t it’a been better to just bring her here in the first place? You had a chance to do it without causin’ any trouble, didn’t ya?”

Seth gave a wry smile. “It wouldn’t’ve worked if she was crying to go back to her mother. Lady Utsuwa had to want to come here of her own accord, had to decide for herself to fight against Danna Ryl. The Exinov lost a great deal of face when that gatekeeper was brought down, so they rushed the rite of rebirth to recover some of their authority. And we snatched Lady Utsuwa away smack in the middle of it. Right about now they’ll be grinding their teeth and stomping their feet in rage. Makes me smile just thinking about it.” Seth’s vulpine eyes, which gave a ruthless and calculating impression, narrowed with mirth, his tinkling, graceful laughter somewhat at odds with his strapping masculine build.

“You try to picture it at all?” asked Kudo.

“Picture what?”

“How a ten-year-old kid might feel, cryin’ coz she’s terrified of being devoured by her own mother.”

“Oh, I pictured it. That fear is precisely how I thought to explain to a young, innocent girl the necessity for war.” Seth looked down for a moment. He was a little worried whether he was mustering the appropriate facial expression for a merchant. “If your people win this war, the Exinov’s authority will collapse. But if there’s an Exinov fighting on the side of the Forbidden Land—an Exinov who’s a half of the Keybinder herself, no less—that might alleviate the resulting chaos a little. There must always be a leader. Most of the people wouldn’t even know how to put one foot in front of the other without someone to tell them.”

“And you think a ten-year-old’s gonna be ready to take on that role?”

“We’ll make sure she is.”

Kudo turned his back on the smiling Seth and stomped away in irritation.

“...I wonder if he hates me now.” Seth couldn’t hide his true intentions from Kudo, however; he had told the other members of the delegation the exact same thing. *I didn’t come here to make friends. I came here to survive.* He was reminded anew of just how fearsome these Forbidden Landers were, though. Seth had expected to fail, but when he asked them to save Utsuwa’s life, they hadn’t hesitated for a second, nor even asked for much in the way of details. They had extracted the bare minimum information they needed, then, with a group of just three, had flown off on their dragon and successfully brought Utsuwa back with them.

Har Bell was an incredibly talented wizard, skilled in the use of all manner of thaumaturgical devices. Her reputation within the Ignas community was such that her presence alone served to hearten all and sundry. In addition there was the dragon-rider himself, and a lizard beastservant—no, in the Forbidden Land they called them beastfallen—who could heal all manner of injuries and illnesses.

Even so, after they had left, Seth couldn't help but ask the other members of the delegation whether they could really pull it off with just the three of them.

–Do they think they need only demonstrate the attempt to save her, and that we'll be satisfied even if they fail?

Seth's question was so unexpected that it stunned the rest of the delegation into a silence which was in turn broken by peals of gentle laughter.

–Thou shouldst understand that each of our valiant friends is worth a thousand men. We have just sent three thousand soldiers into the fray.

The grinning witch of the staff fixed her strange, glittering rainbow eyes upon him—but it wasn't just her. It seemed none of the delegation had any notion that the mission could possibly end in failure.

At the time I had no idea. I thought they might all be fools, overconfident in their own strength...

But when Utsuwa had returned unharmed, that had settled it.

Seth looked around at the city of ice, created by the sorcery of the Forbidden Land—it looked so much more refined than Kuravanuluox, city of the Keybinder.

"It doesn't seem our 'New World' has any chance of victory."

2

"Listen, I'm about to get pretty naive on you."

Kudo burst into the room, his scales clouded the swampy green of indignation, and thumped his fist on the table. Hort and Saybil, who had been hard at work mixing up magic potions, deftly steadied the bottles and mixing

tools before they tipped over from the impact of Kudo's blow, then waited for the beastfallen's next words.

"Utsuwa's still just a ten-year-old kid, but that fox merchant sonovabitch is talkin' like he wants to use her as some kinda tool in this war! Like it's the obvious thing to do...!"

After rescuing Utsuwa, returning to the free district, and cutting short his conversation with Seth, Kudo had come straight to the workshop where Saybil and Hort were usually holed up.

"Welcome back, Kudo. You come out of the mission unscathed?"

"Get the hell outta here you can see I ain't hurt so just shut up and listen for once!" Shouting at Saybil, who never gave him quite the response he wanted, Kudo dropped heavily into a chair, then glanced over at Hort and Saybil's work. Saybil produced the mana solution that formed the base for the potions, while Hort infused them with a variety of spells.

"Pass over half a those. We can talk while we work."

"That'd be a huge help! I'm not that great at healing magic. Oh, here's a list of the potions we're short on. Though since it's you, Kudo, maybe just infuse 'em with some of the really difficult healing spells I can't even cast!"

"No, better if you focus on the more flexible ones," Saybil said. "No matter how many healing potions you make, we can always use more... I was chatting with Seth while you were gone, and he said he could sell as much stock as we could produce."

"That's who I'm tryin'a talk to you about! What's that asshole's deal?!"

"Asshole...? But aren't you basically the one who brought him here, Kudo? The only reason he was able to find us is that you sold him those mana potions

and got that two-wheeler in exchange.”

“Yeah, and he’s been a real asset. Professor Zero’s been using that aquaculture system he brought to grow all kinds of plants, and she’s super fired up about finding ways to make ‘em grow faster.”

“Yeahyeahyeah I get it he’s a damn good merchant an’ every last freakin’ word he says is right on the money! But she’s only ten! She’s a child! He had the chance to bring her here safe and easy, an’ he went outta his goddessdamn way to send her back to that tower an’ scare the wits outta the poor kid! ‘S a dirty, underhanded way a doin’ things.” Kudo’s scales burned crimson with anger, and the magic potion he was holding suddenly burst.

“Kudo! C’mon, be more careful!” cried Hort.

“Who gives a shit?! Not like an out-of-control healin’ spell’s gonna kill anybody!”

“You’re wasting the materials, is what I mean! We still don’t have a good way to get the stuff we need here!”

“Though Seth said he should be able to help us with that, too,” Saybil chimed in.

“Cut it out!! Quit freakin’ praisin’ him in front of meeee!” Kudo started banging his head on the table.

“Listen, I hear you, Kudo. I’m guessing what Seth told you is exactly what he told us.”

“What’d he tell ya?”

“That Utsuwa’s only going to become a leader who cares about her people by facing mortal danger and experiencing the fear of death. The whole thing was a necessary rite of passage, to give her the determination to fight against her

mother.”

“Why the hell you imitatin’ him like that Saybil you sound jus’ like the guy! That jerk is always so damn condescending!” Kudo could picture it right down to Seth’s facial expression, and recoiled at the thought. “Hell even your names are kinda similar come to think of it! Pick a new name, Sayb!”

“But you never usually call me Sayb anyway, do you...?”

“It’s true, you totally don’t!” Hort agreed. “Now you’re just grasping at straws!”

“Utsuwa was bawlin’! She was about to get eaten by her mother, and she was up there on that stage screamin’ to the crowd to save her!”

Hort and Saybil hadn’t been there—they hadn’t seen the abhorrent spectacle of a crowd of adults trying to sacrifice a ten-year-old girl. When he thought of what Utsuwa had been through up until that moment, that so-called rite, it reminded Kudo of his own experiences as a child. He recalled being thrown into a cage and told that in three days he’d be going on stage—where all that awaited him was suffering. He remembered the terror of those days spent with nothing to do but wait for the pain to come.

“You guys just can’t understand. You don’t know what it’s like to be in such pain that you wanna cry, and to look around and see everyone havin’ a grand old time... You have no idea what it feels like for a kid to get thrown into a situation like that.”

“This is one of those things where you’ll get pissed if we say we do understand, and you’ll get pissed if we say we don’t, right?” asked Hort, fixing Kudo with a frown. “Well, I *don’t* know what it feels like. I’ve never experienced anything like that. But I can imagine what it’s like, and if you just shut us down

and say that imagining it doesn't mean we get it, then that's, like, the end of the conversation, right?"

"Anyway, you and Utsuwa are different people, so I'm not exactly sure you can say you understand her experience just because you went through something similar," Saybil said.

"You two enjoying your little game? Hurtin' me with your reasonable arguments? Well?"

"Enough already! You're a real pain in the neck today, Kudo!"

"Kudo's pretty much always a pain in the neck, Hort."

"Shut the hell up! That's why I told you right off the bat I was gonna get naive on you." Kudo slammed his fist down on the table again. "I get that bringin' Utsuwa to the free district means the New Worlders ain't gonna let it lie any longer. An' I know that's why we needed her to truly want to come of her own accord, so we hadda wait 'til she was about to get killed. I get the *logic*... It's just...I feel like there mighta been another way." Kudo let out a deep sigh. "Utsuwa was lookin' forward to it. She was excited about maybe gettin' to live past fifteen. Her eyes were shinin' at the thought. So I figure...if Seth had just kidnapped her when he had the chance, maybe we coulda convinced her she didn't belong with Danna Ryl anymore."

"You're right," said Saybil. "I think that might have been possible—it doesn't even seem like Seth was all that confident we could rescue Utsuwa in the first place."

"Hanh?!"

"Professor Los really went off on him. She was like, 'I have no love for those who gamble with others' lives.'"

Kudo snorted and went quiet. Just knowing Los had taken Seth to task relieved some of his anger, but he still felt irritated at his own childishness.

“Anyway, if you’re so worried about Utsuwa, what are you doing here?” said Hort. “Why not go pay her a visit?”

“Huh? Why me...?!”

Kudo grimaced, and Saybil somehow managed a snicker at his expense without ever breaking his blank, emotionless affect.

“What’s so damn funny?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t realize someone being dense could be so entertaining.”

“You little shit...! Let’s take this outside!”

“Did you know people only say ‘let’s take this outside’ because they’d get banned from the place if they fought inside? But since this isn’t a tavern or a store or anything—”

“Then I’ll smack you one right here, if that’s what yer askin’ for!”

“Cut it out! No fighting in the workshop! I’ll tell Professor Los!”

Hort’s scolding silenced the both of them.

“Just go and see Utsuwa, Kudo! Don’t you remember what she said the first time she saw you?”

“Huh...? Oh, right... Somethin’ about wanting me to be her beastservant...”

“Exactly! She said she’d never wanted one before, but she threw a tantrum because she wanted you so badly! To her, you’re like a big ball of fluffy, purring comfort, so go comfort her! You can make her feel better just by being there!”

“W-Why you...! You’re bein’ real freakin’ rude, ya know that?!”

“Oh darn, maybe I am! Sorry, Kudo!”

“Dammit, you’re so sincere, it’s hard to get mad at you!” Kudo let out a violent sigh and got to his feet. “...Anyway, now that you mention it, I guess she might appreciate a quick visit...”

The first time she saw him, Utsuwa’s eyes had lit up like she’d just found buried treasure. Kudo wanted to say that his presence would just make things worse, but having seen her face that day, he knew it wasn’t true. It was obvious at a glance how much Utsuwa liked him. Even after she realized that treating Kudo as a beastservant was impolite, she’d been completely enthralled by his lizardly handsomeness.

Right now, Har was with Utsuwa, but Kudo didn’t feel great about leaving the job entirely to her. *Har could do with at least one backup, I s’pose.*

“Sorry,” Kudo said. “All I ended up doing was breakin’ a bottle... I’ll come tomorrow an’ actually help you make some potions.”

Saybil shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. We’ve got Professor Zero, so we’ll be okay without you.”

“How ’bout, ‘Thanks, see you tomorrow,’ dumbass?!”

With this parting shot, Kudo left the workshop. He felt a little better.

Right after the dragon landed, when Utsuwa had been weeping and smiling in equal measure, Kudo hadn’t been able to say a word to her.

I probably shoulda told her how brave she’d been, said that everything was gonna be okay now.

—Good, you’re still alive.

A flash of childhood memory suddenly came back to him. His hero, sweeping away the rubble and smiling down at him amid the sunlight, saving him when he'd been sure all that remained was to wait for death.

"It's...not that he's heartless... I know that..." Kudo muttered to himself, looking up at the sky through a window in the corridor. The day was coming to a close, the red sunset so bright that Kudo was forced to narrow his eyes—but then they flew wide a moment later. There was something there, in the sky.

"...F-Fish...?"

There were gatekeepers floating in the sky above the city of ice—three of them. Their long tails were sticking straight up into the air, their great heads pointing down with mouths agape, as if they intended to swallow the free district whole.

Even as Kudo registered what he was looking at, a great roar shook the air.

3

In deciding to bring Utsuwa to the free district, they were prepared for the Exinov to launch *some* kind of attack against them. Utsuwa and Danna Ryl were part of the same whole, after all, so it followed that wherever Utsuwa went, Danna Ryl would know.

"Attack came quicker than we expected, though, huh." Sitting on the roof of the tallest building in the free district—the bell tower—Mercenary's ears drooped as he looked up at the gatekeepers that had appeared out of nowhere in the sky above the city. "Sure make an awful sound."

“Those are cries of intimidation,” replied Zero. “They are intended to throw the chain of command into disarray, interfere with incantations, and prevent retreat by freezing all who hear them in their tracks. Any normal army would likely break ranks at the sound alone.”

The witch was sitting nestled between Mercenary’s legs to block out the ocean winds, but now she got to her feet, seemingly fed up with the ceaseless sonic assault. Under normal circumstances it would have been impossible to hold a conversation amid the gatekeepers’ cries, but this was an ancient witch and her bodyguard. The gatekeepers had demonstrated their cries before, in Kuravanuluox, and so Zero had prepared appropriate measures.

“But...those things didn’t come all this way just to howl at us, did they?”

“I expect not. If the airborne gatekeepers are here, then their opposite numbers must be in the ocean below. Dawn made mincemeat of the one in Kuravanuluox before our ship could be devoured—but in truth I believe they had one more card to play.”

“One more card...?”

“If my prediction is accurate—it is about to rain.”

Mercenary looked up at the sky, and a droplet of water landed on his nose. The gatekeepers’ great black maws gaped overhead. Wondering if they weren’t just drooling on him, a disgusted Mercenary wiped the liquid from his nose only to be met with the strong scent of the ocean.

“...Seawater?”

“—Here it comes.”

The ocean was falling—or so it appeared to Mercenary’s eyes. From the three gatekeepers’ mouths came a torrent of water like to wash away everything

before it.

“This is...unreal! Whadda we do?!”

“Not much *to* do,” Zero said with a smile.

The moment the seawater met the ground of the free district, the witch snapped her fingers. A great chill ran through the city, traveling up the three columns of water and transforming them into pillars of ice in the blink of an eye. The free district was suddenly quiet once more, and the light of the setting sun glinted off the frozen bodies of the gatekeepers, like three great ice sculptures in the sky. A clamor rippled through the city, its denizens pointing up at them in wonder.

Zero’s shoulders heaved with stifled laughter as she looked out over the scene. “I was just thinking the place could use some decoration. Being a symbol of peace in the New World, these gatekeepers will do nicely.”

“Yer a nasty piece a work...” said Mercenary. “But, I thought they couldn’t come after us so long as Utsuwa was here?”

“Well, they did, so clearly they can,” replied Zero.

“What kinda answer is that?”

Zero raised her arms as if to call attention to the fine work she’d done, then began to make her way down from the bell tower.

Mercenary looked up at the frozen gatekeepers once more. “Better than chunks a flesh rainin’ down on the city, I s’pose,” he muttered, before following after Zero.

Kuravanuluox, the city of the Keybinder.

A basement room beneath the tower housed the city's thaumaturgical control systems. All the mana necessary to run everything from streetlamps to plumbing and sewage was gathered there, then apportioned to the various systems via a control panel. *This* was the primary occupation of the Grand Magister who oversaw the tower. The Grand Magister's soul was deeply connected to this control panel, and none but the Grand Magister was permitted to operate it.

Now Danna Ryl stood before that very console. "It can't be... How is this possible?! The gatekeepers have ceased responding! All three of them! What is happening, Zaza?!"

"They must have been defeated, by those invaders in their free district. As I have already expressed, the power of the gatekeepers will not work against them."

"But I sent *three*...!"

Zaza Ryl heaved a deep sigh. *How long has it been since Danna Ryl set foot in this control room, I wonder. A hundred years? Two?* But Zaza Ryl did not blame her for that. The city usually ran smoothly without any direct input. Even the summoning of the gatekeepers happened automatically when the city itself detected any kind of insurrection against its ruler.

Since Utsuwa's desire to escape had been realized at the hands of the free district invaders, the city's defensive systems had malfunctioned. Danna Ryl and Utsuwa possessed the same soul, so the system was unable to automatically determine whose wishes to prioritize.

Danna Ryl had rushed immediately to the control room and tried to summon the gatekeepers to bring Utsuwa back—but Zaza Ryl had stopped her. If Utsuwa was being taken to the free district, why not wait for her to arrive and thereby determine the precise location of the enemy? *Then* they could set in motion a plan to recapture the girl.

“Fear not, my lady. Though Lady Utsuwa may possess the same soul, she will not so easily be able to take command of this tower.”

“You don’t know that!” Danna Ryl slammed her fist down on the control panel.

Zaza Ryl could hardly bear to watch as tears filled the Keybinder’s eyes and fell onto her clenched fist. He placed his hand over hers and gave it a soft squeeze. “Let the invaders be for now. And should they even demand this tower, let us give it to them, for what we will gain is something much greater.”

“But we couldn’t even bring down the free district...!”

“That is only natural. Their path diverged from ours in the age of legend, and, shut away in the Forbidden Land, they have never needed to fear outside incursions. Accordingly, they do not believe they need expend any of their strength on defense. Their military might is at present focused in the free district, and while they celebrate their victory in bringing Lady Utsuwa to their side, we need only take the Forbidden Land for ourselves.”

According to Har Bell, the Forbidden Land is fourteen days by ship—but the gatekeepers can transport us there in an instant. We know where the Forbidden Land lies, and we need but trace the mana of the thaumatheria Har Bell left behind there. By the time those free district fools realize what’s happening and rush back home, the Forbidden Land will already be under Exinov control.

“With the abundant mana of the Forbidden Land at our disposal, the free districters will have nothing on us. What we must do now is get to the Forbidden Land as quickly as humanly possible.”

At Zaza Ryl’s insistence, Danna Ryl reached for the thaumaturgical communicator. Once activated, it would carry her voice to the rulers of all the towers scattered throughout their world.

“Now then—the preparations are complete.”

There were seventy-seven towers radiating out from the central tower of the Keybinder—though the number currently in operation had been reduced to fifty. The rulers of those towers rendered moribund by the mana shortage had become unable to maintain their own bodies, quietly passing into oblivion. The others had bred more Nurabehn, absorbed their mana, and struggled to maintain the balance of their world—but that would all end today.

“I, Danna Ryl the One-Horned, Keybinder of the tower, request the consent of all Grand Magisters who serve as keys. Dispatch gatekeepers to the Forbidden Land with all the mana at your disposal.”

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“You know, when I first got that message from Zero to move everything originating in the New World up here to the North, I kind of thought she was kidding.”

The Grey Plains—the most desolate part of the northern reaches of the Forbidden Land, where every living thing had been ravaged into nothingness. There, Chief State Mage Albus of the Kingdom of Wenias stood looking up at

the countless fish blotting out the sky, which Zero had called gatekeepers. They had appeared so suddenly—Albus had yawned with boredom, and when she opened her eyes again, there they'd been.

“Boy, even I shrink at the thought of what might've happened if this school of fish had shown up in the Kingdom of Wenias.”

“You've got nothing to shrink, my lady.”

“I was speaking metaphorically,” Albus shot back without even turning around. “I *know* you weren't talking about testicles just now, were you, Holdem?”

At her icy rejoinder, the lupine beastfallen wordlessly bowed his head, and, equally wordlessly, Albus elbowed him in it.

“So what now?” she asked. “They make a big racket and spit water out of their mouths, right? What kind of countermeasures do we have in place?”

“Using Etorahk, we've raised the earth to create fifty high platforms and stationed small squads on each of them, my lady. The one we're on will serve as relay base, connecting all the other platforms.”

Albus took in her surroundings. She had only just stepped through the witch's path connecting the Kingdom of Wenias to the Grey Plains. Alongside her and Holdem stood about a dozen Mage Battalion soldiers with Mage Commander Amnir herself at their head. Atop this columnar pillar of earth, towering over the surrounding plains, three large tents had also been set up, two of which were intended to house casualties.

“So...are they not gonna come at us? Do you think we ought to make the first move, Amni—”

Before Albus could finish, part of the world around her was suddenly

swallowed up.

“–Huh?” Albus stood staring at her own dumbfounded reflection, mirrored in the giant fish eye that now floated just a few paces before her. The gatekeeper had swallowed Amnir and her troops whole.

There was a massive bite taken out of the earthen platform; it was as if nobody had been standing there to begin with. Albus’s eyes darted to the other columns—all of which were beset by gatekeepers, devouring the five hundred-odd mage troopers along with the very ground they stood on.

“C-Crap! Holdem, protect me!” Albus screamed, pushing Holdem in front of her.

A moment later, the head of the gatekeeper that had swallowed the Mage Commander and her troops exploded in a great shower of blood. Holdem’s body sheltered Albus from the deluge, which dyed his white fur a dark, lurid crimson. He glared reproachfully back at his master.

“Thanks, Holdem. You really saved me.” Albus shot him a cheery grin, then locked eyes with Amnir as she gracefully alit among the chunks of fish meat despite having been inside the mouth of a gatekeeper just a moment before.

One after another, similar explosions rung out from the other platforms. Their heads blown to smithereens, the gatekeepers fell to the ground, and the smell of iron mixed with the rotten stench of oceanic decay wafted all around. Fifty of the giant fish went down in the span of an instant. At that same time, the gatekeepers still swimming through the sky set up a fearsome cry.

“Gaaah...! It’s way louder than I expected!”

“My lady, look!” Holdem pointed down at the fallen gatekeepers. Their scattered innards had begun to writhe and squirm, knitting themselves back

together again.

“They’re regenerating...? No, wait, they’re—”

“Multiplying! Does that mean unless we finish ‘em off, there’s gonna be more of them?!”

Zero hadn’t mentioned anything like this in her reports...but she had said the New World was suffering from a severe mana shortage, speculating that something unexpected could well occur when the creatures from the New World made contact with the abundant mana of the Forbidden Land.

“Amnir, think you got this?”

“...Disgusting.” Amnir wasn’t answering Albus’s question so much as expressing a deep-seated revulsion. She covered her mouth and furrowed her regal brow, turning pale and beginning to mutter to herself. “I can hardly stand the horrid sight... These are the gatekeepers...? I would rather die than live under the protection of such monstrosities... But, what’s this? Spare me... The ones on the ground have sprouted legs...? I’m not sure if I can physically handle this...”

Raul, her loyal righthand man, tapped her on the shoulder. “Princess, we’ve got a job to do.”

At this, Amnir managed to get ahold of herself, and glared up at the sky. “All forces! Annihilate them!”

The mage commander’s voice was transmitted directly into the minds of her troops. No matter how far apart they were, even if they were standing beside a cannon or had lost their hearing completely, her words would always reach them.

At Amnir’s command, the battle began in earnest. Though in truth, no bard

who sang of the events that day could in good conscience call what followed a “battle.” It was so one-sided that it could only really be described as a kind of extermination. After years spent in the North battling Remnants of Disaster, the Mage Battalion, pride of the Kingdom of Wenias, were the elite of the elite. Compared to monsters created by demons with the sole aim of annihilating humanity, the gatekeepers were nothing more than endlessly proliferating sitting ducks. And so long as they had mana potions, the mage troopers would never run out of magical power.

What’s more, the Forbidden Library’s laboratory had in recent days developed a new product: the “azure flask.” Albus had suddenly received a large shipment of them from Ulula, who had taken over the laboratory after Saybil’s departure. The shipment had been accompanied by a letter: “Mass-producing mana potions is so terribly tiresome, I just can’t stand it anymore. I’ll be making them rechargeable from now on.”

How very Ulula, thought Albus.

Each azure flask was a tiny stella octangula about the size of a river rock, with shimmering bluish-purple liquid sealed inside. Despite the name, they had no mouth nor stopper, and so could not be opened and closed—but simply by touching the flask, the bearer could draw out as much mana as they desired. Ulula had already begun fashioning them into accessories, touting them as an indispensable item to be worn at all times: “They do contain roughly a hundred times the capacity of a regular mana potion, after all. Once the contents have turned back into a simple piece of gold, return it and I’ll send you a new one in its place.”

In the battle against the gatekeepers, each and every soldier of the Mage Battalion had one of these azure flasks with them. Those mages capable of

using high-level spells were even permitted to equip themselves with several at a time, and soon enough the day would come when the measure of a mage was evident in the number of blue stars they carried. Ulula, too, would come to be known by a different name, and it would be said that, like the Abyss Sorcerer, the Blue Star Witch had changed the history of magedom forever.





Chapter Four



It didn't take long to reduce the gatekeepers to dust.

Having received word that invaders from the New World were on their way, the Mage Battalion had prepared themselves accordingly, and almost felt let down in the event. They suffered no casualties—not even a single injury. Albus pursed her lips as she surveyed the aftermath of their overwhelming victory. Below her, the Grey Plains were littered with the cores of the immolated gatekeepers.

“People, huh...”

The gatekeepers would regenerate no matter how many times they died, so after the Mage Battalion soldiers killed them, they diligently crushed the bodies and burned them to ash—but what ultimately emerged from within the great fish were human corpses. A few dozen people seemed to have been used as the core of each gatekeeper. Albus wasn't particularly surprised, however. Sacrifices were terribly common in the sorcery of old, and human souls in particular were a requisite component for giving birth to any new creature.

“Apparently these gatekeepers have been protecting the New World since time immemorial,” remarked Amnir. She had finished issuing orders to her troops, and now stood quietly at Albus's side.

“I heard, yeah. That's what Har Bell said, at least.”

“Then these people hail from the age of legend...?”

“It's not really all that surprising. I mean, a lot of the Remnants of Disaster are

made from people and animals, too, right? And beast warriors were creatures of sorcery originally created from humans as well.”

“I suppose so...” Amnir glanced at the half-human, half-horse Raul standing beside her. Albus in turn glanced at Holdem. The moment he perceived that their forces had the upper hand, Holdem had taken the witch’s path back to the Kingdom of Wenias, abandoning his master in favor of a hot bath and a change of clothes. Accordingly, he was impeccably dressed and clean as a whistle.

Surveying the scene below with a look of distaste, Holdem said, “Makes me sick to think these gatekeepers’re fundamentally no different from us. We’ve got our own free will, though—what about them?”

“A fine question.” Raul cocked his head. “Someone must’ve been...controlling them, no? If they’re made of the same stuff we are, that is. I mean, when you combine a few dozen people into a single being, they can hardly retain their autonomy.”

“But that means those people inside the gatekeepers have been dancing to their masters’ tune since the age of legend...”

“Like I said, that’s not much of a surprise,” repeated Albus, her lips still twisted into a scowl. “Ancient witches don’t think of their sacrifices as human beings like themselves. They see them as inferior creatures that just happen to have a similar form, with no soul or intelligence of their own. And because they think of them that way, even when they discover that their victims have emotions, they figure those emotions are of a lower order, worthless in comparison to their own.”

“Sorena wasn’t like that.”

Hearing the name of her beloved grandmother fly from Holdem’s lips, Albus

gave a bitter smile. “You’re right. Grandma was different.”

“Loux Krystas isn’t like that either.”

“Okay, okay! I shouldn’t go lumping all ancient witches together! But there’s a strong trend in that direction.” Albus turned on her heel. “At the very least, there was a witch in the New World like that who created the gatekeepers. And they’ve been used that way all this time.” Her voice was tinged with anger, and a certain phrase Zero often used floated into her head:

“Aah—I am exceedingly displeased.”

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It was no exaggeration to say that the entirety of the towers’ strength had been poured into the attack on the Forbidden Land—and it had ended in abrupt failure, over before it even began. What the gatekeepers saw was relayed to their corresponding control rooms, and as the massacre unfolded, the Grand Magisters of the towers—those known as keys—dropped from the communication channel one by one.

The Forbidden Land, supposedly unaccustomed to invasion, had been prepared for their arrival as if they knew the attack was coming. And their soldiers’ unrelenting onslaught against the gatekeepers made it seem almost as if each of them held some gargantuan thaumaturgical weapon in one hand.

There was nothing the Grand Magisters could do. They had believed without a shadow of a doubt that once the gatekeepers reached the Forbidden Land, with its abundant mana, they would easily be able to bring its inhabitants to heel.

“Unexpected...does not begin to do justice to this turn of events, Danna... We must rethink our strategy.”

“...Strategy?” Danna Ryl repeated, staring blankly at Zaza Ryl. “What kind of strategy could be of any use now...?”

“I simply misjudged the situation. Do not worry, we can fix this. If you will entrust the matter to me—”

“It is precisely because I entrusted it to you that this happened!” Danna Ryl was almost screaming. Her face was grim and drawn, with no hint of the simple innocence that had marked her features until so recently. Her eyes, which once sparkled with affection and compassion, now swirled with darker emotions.

“We should never have started this war...! If only we had traded with the Forbidden Land as we intended, the gatekeepers would never have fallen and Utsuwa would not have been taken from me! You saw it, did you not? The way the Grand Magisters looked at me? They will no longer revere me as the Keybinder. I have done everything wrong, and in so doing I have led this world to its destruction. I am finished. And all because I trusted you...!”

Danna Ryl fell to the ground and covered her face as she began to sob.

Zaza Ryl was at a loss. He had no idea what to do, and could but hang his head, unable to find the right words. Up until that moment, he had never considered that he might be wrong. The enemy had been stronger than expected, but no struggle for justice could ever be a mistake. If small acts of rebellion were permitted, they would lead to larger ones. Their fight to protect the peace was a necessary one, and it was those louts from the Forbidden Land who had thrown everything into disarray—them and Har Bell.

We offered her every advantage, but she refused us. It was only natural to

suspect her of treason. Refusing to hand over the traitors, attacking our constable, killing a gatekeeper—and it's an open question whether the Forbidden Landers ever truly intended to engage in peaceful trade in the first place. No, they had their sights set on invasion right from the start. Perhaps if we did everything they asked, open war could have been averted. But in return we would have had to accept them turning Danna Ryl into their puppet...

Yes, the Forbidden Land would deign to sell them mana potions, but when Zaza Ryl envisioned the countless humiliating demands to which Danna Ryl would surely have submitted for the sake of her people, he knew that even if he could go back in time, he would make the same decision to fight. He might be a hair more judicious in his strategic planning, but—

“Danna Ryl. I will win back your trust. Please believe in me.”

All the gatekeepers had been lost, and with their cores destroyed they could neither regenerate nor propagate.

We must create a new gatekeeper—one strong enough to protect our world.

2

Since the moment Gil had decided to leave for the free district, everything had been a whirlwind, the days passing with dizzying speed. In his anger he had punched the priest, but then, confused as to why no one scolded him for attacking an authority figure, the hot-blooded youth had agonized over the possibility that they might drive him out of this haven he had worked so hard to reach. He feared the reprimand would come the next day, or the next, but instead there was a big commotion when some merchants arrived, and the

morning after that he got word to show up for his labor assignment.

So it was that Gil found himself at the town hall. Within the main doors was a large open space, in which newly arrived residents were lined up at four reception desks. He joined one of the queues, and before long his turn came.

A small, thin Nurabehn was sitting behind the desk. "You've got a good build. Good stamina, too, I expect. Fisherman, warrior... Not bad lookin' either, might be able to use you as a merchant. Which would you prefer, young fella?"

"Which... Uh... Huh? I get to choose?"

"That's right, you get to pick your own job here, use whatever skills you've got to make yourself useful to the community. But look, we *are* a little short on manpower. Might be that a strapping lad like you wants to darn clothes, but we're passin' such work on to the ones who aren't so strong."

"Right... Makes sense. So, what'd you choose to end up here?" Gil asked him, more out of curiosity than anything else.

The man behind the registration desk tapped the bridge of his nose with his pen and squinted. "That's a good question... Y'see, back when I first arrived, there was even more of a labor shortage... Guess you could say everybody was just doin' whatever they could, and before I knew it, this had become more or less my specialty. I've always liked making lists and registers and whatnot, and I enjoy knowin' who's doing what and where all our people are assigned."

"I don't think I'd be any good at that..."

"And I don't have much in the way of muscle. That's the whole point. So what'll it be? What do you want to do?"

"Umm—"

"Gil! What do I do?! What job do you think I'd be good at?!"

Someone grabbed his arm, and a startled Gil looked down to find Jiji, whom he hadn't seen since they'd arrived in the free district the day before. The boy had a document clutched nervously in his hands.

"Well...what did they recommend?"

"Lemme see... Seamster, or a merchant or something."

"Merchant? You too?" Gil turned back to the Nurabehn behind the desk.

"We're short of 'em, apparently," the man explained. "Seems to be some huge plan in the works, somethin' that'll really catch the Exinov off guard."

"Isn't that going to be dangerous?"

"You bet your britches it'll be dangerous! The head honchos of the free district are talkin' war with the Exinov... But listen, you saw them gatekeeper popsicles up there above the city, didn't you?!"

"Yeah, I saw 'em..."

"Exciting stuff, ain't it! The world's gonna change! We're gonna change it! When I think about how my doings might end up in the corner of some history book someday, makes me wanna ask for a way more dangerous assignment." The man shrugged. "But at this point it would be a huge hassle to train someone up to take over for me. Been doing this since I got here. And it's satisfying work, don't get me wrong. Look, I report directly to the guy who rides the dragon, you must've seen him. Boy, can he be a surly one. Blunt as hell! See, he was the one who did this job before me, but he caused so many problems that the priest had to chew him out."

"The priest... You mean the one with the blindfold?" Gil asked.

"That's the fella, the one who brought you here."

“Is he more important than someone who rides a dragon?”

“It’s not about hierarchy, apparently. I was frightened, too, an’ I couldn’t help but ask him if he should really be scolding the dragon-rider. And whaddaya think he said?”

“Uh, I dunno...”

“He said I needed to ‘rethink the connection between status and reproach’... Said he’d even punch a king if the guy was outta line!”

Gil frowned—just yesterday *he* had punched the priest. *Does the fact that he didn’t reprimand me mean he was resigned to taking the blow? That he knows he made a mistake?* It didn’t seem as if the priest felt much in the way of remorse for what he’d done, though.

“He’s not my favorite person...” Gil said.

“You’re not the only one! He’s not exactly the most approachable guy!”

“You would rather I smiled and put my arm around your shoulder?”

Suddenly the priest was standing beside the Nurabehn as if he’d been there all along. The man shrieked and nearly toppled over backward in his chair, but the priest steadied him without a word.

“Father...! Y-You shouldn’t go eavesdropping on people like that.”

“You seemed quite wrapped up in your conversation—and the line isn’t moving.”

“Gah! Uh, right then, young fella! What’ll you do for work?”

“Can I pick mine at this desk, too? I want to work with Gil.”

Gil looked down at Jiji, then at the priest. “Hey, I...I did punch you yesterday, you know.”

“...And what of it?”

“I mean, now you’re gonna give me some super dangerous assignment as punishment, right?”

“No. Ordinarily in such cases you would be arrested, confined, and sentenced at trial.”

“Nhh...?! What...?!”

“Is this news to you? It’s the customary administrative way of dealing with crime.”

“Well... I mean... I get that, but...”

In Gil’s village, someone who committed a crime was taken into custody by the volunteer watch and brought before the chief, who decided their punishment.

“Unfortunately, the blow you dealt me was delivered outside the bounds of the free district. Your act cannot be judged by the laws of this place. That is why I suggested anyone who wished to do so ‘take the opportunity’ to strike me as well.”

“But you’re one of the people in charge here, right? So you can do whatever you want, no matter what the laws are!”

The priest let out a deep sigh. “No, I cannot. If I could, those rules that govern us could not rightly be called laws. And were I prone to anger over such trifles, I would never have let you hit me in the first place.”

“Then why *did* you let me?!”

“Because I thought you simple-minded enough that it would serve to settle you down.”

“You son of a—!”

“Whoa, s-stop it, Gil! If you punch him inside the free district, you’ll get arrested!”

At Jiji’s panicked insistence, Gil lowered his raised fist.

“You are also strong, able, hot-blooded, and courageous to an extent that some might call reckless, given your willingness to raise a hand to those you see as authority figures.” The priest rubbed his forehead in thought. “Care to give it a try?”

“Huh? Give what a try?”

“The special mission our friend here spoke of. The one that will really catch the Exinov off guard. You wouldn’t be working directly under the merchant Seth, however—I will be in charge of the operation.”

“Ooh, me! I’ll do it!” Jiji raised his hand before Gil could speak, leaning forward eagerly. Gil tried to stop him, but the boy let go of his arm and ran over to the priest. “I want to go on the mission. Is it something I’d be able to do?”

“W-Wait a minute! I’ll go, too!” Gil hurriedly stepped forward, feeling somehow as if Jiji was trying to steal some important task out from under him.

The priest nodded with satisfaction and collected the documents the two of them were holding. “Then I will be in touch with you in due course. Next,” he called out to the people waiting in line, and a moment later, he was gone.

+++

“Right then, let us assess the situation.”

On the second floor of the town hall was a cafeteria that also served as a meeting room. Zero was in the process of stuffing her face with one of Mercenary's massive, gravy-drenched sandwiches as she surveyed the map spread out on the table before them. There were seventy-seven pins stuck into it, forty-seven of them white and thirty of them black.

"The rabbit-eared one's investigations have revealed that forty-seven of the towers are 'living' at present. The remaining thirty are leaderless after the deaths of the Grand Magisters who served as their keys, leaving the local people to scatter in search of other towers on which they can depend—" Zero snapped her fingers, and the thirty black pins transformed into tiny rabbits. "And we have decided to take these abandoned towers for our own."

Har looked closely at the pins. "Those aren't supposed to be me, are they?"

"Adorable, no?" was all Zero said before resuming her explanation. "As you all know, the towers are all connected by gates that enable instantaneous movement between the major cities of the New World. Once a week the gates are opened from dawn to dusk, to allow for the coming and going of merchants and for meetings between the keys— isn't that right, rabbit?"

Har nodded.

"Those who pass through the gates must first undergo a rigorous inspection," Zero continued. "As a result, any peddlers who emerge on the other side are considered trustworthy as a matter of course. We have decided to make use of this fact to spread word of the free district."

"It's so freakin' stupid, though," Kudo broke in. "One Grand Magister dies and suddenly their tower's just a big pile a rock 'cause nobody else knows how to work the gate?!"

Har nodded, her expression deadly serious. “You’re absolutely right, I can’t dispute that. Our world has been far too dependent on the Exinov. Nothing can be accomplished without them, so we’ve had no choice but to do as they say. But now we have people here who are conversant with the sorcerous basis on which the gates operate—the so-called ‘witch’s path,’ in other words. Which means that we alone have a way to activate the gates in the abandoned towers.”

“And interestingly enough, it is not just ‘people’ who are capable of using the witch’s paths,” said Zero with a grin, looking over at Lily where she was sitting on the table diligently nibbling at a piece of fruit, surrounded by mice hoping for a stray morsel.

“Lily, she is speaking about you.”

At the priest’s words, Lily looked up with a start. “Oh, ahem. Um, Lily’s made a lot of friends even without taking the witch’s paths. See, there are lots of beastfallen in the New World who can speak with mice.”

The mice could, of course, use the tower’s gates to travel from city to city, too. Just as Lily understood their language, many of the beastservants—the New World name for beastfallen who had no human rights—could understand the speech of animals.

There exists a free district in which beastservant, Nurabehn, Ignas, and Exinov can live without discrimination—and if you wish, you can even emigrate to the Forbidden Land.

“Mouse. How fares the spreading of our message?”

“Hrmm... People seem to be believing it. But they’re still a little leery. They don’t know where the free district is, it’s far away, they’re scared...and if they’re

going to fail to reach it, maybe it's better just to stay put. That kind of thing."

"Thank you. In other words, more or less as we expected. The mice have already laid the groundwork for us, successfully enough that the Exinov are even exploiting the rumors to lure Nurabehn to their harvesting facilities—which only lends further credence to our cause."

"I will be carrying out this operation in partnership with Loux Krystas," the priest put in. "I would also like to establish contact with those Grand Magisters who might wish to come over to our side."

Los, who was reclining on the Staff of Ludens where it hung suspended in midair, let out a cry of "I can hardly wait!" and began swinging her arms and legs in enthusiasm.

Saybil blinked and looked at her. "You're going, too, Professor Los?"

"Well, only to give a few paltry acting lessons. Father and I will train the players, provision them with goods provided by Seth, and send them forth to market. These eminently well-trained 'merchants,' with their products of excellent quality, will lean in and say to their customers in hushed tones, 'Just between thee and me...' And so news of the free district will spread. In short order, the rumors of this place will explode throughout the land!" Los got to her feet, standing atop the staff. "And then some will speak thus: 'The free district 'pon the ocean is too far! We must create one of our own right here!'"

"But if we're sending escaped Nurabehn back to the markets...won't they just be arrested?" asked Saybil.

"They won't, I'm sorry to say," answered Har with a bitter smile. "To the Exinov and Ignas, Nurabehn aren't even human. If they commit a crime they can be killed on the spot, and if they run away their whole village can be destroyed.

That's how Nurabehn have always been controlled, so there's no government organ that distinguishes between them as individuals."

"Umm... So you mean...they aren't even registered as property, like slaves or something...?"

"Those permitted by Ignas or Exinov to live within the walls are registered as residents. But the Nurabehn who live outside the walls might as well not even exist."

"That very contempt will be their undoing! Ka-hah! Marvelous! I have a great love for monstrous tyranny overthrown by the weak and puny!"

"That seems like so much fun, Professor... I'm jealous! I wanna help out, too!"

"But you've already got so much on your plate, Hort," Saybil said. "Helping me make potions, keeping the peace in the free district now that the population's growing so much..."

"That's all so bo-o-oring!"

"You think *that's* boring...? I'm the one stuck keeping track of provisions... Every morning I do inventory in the warehouse, confirm the number of residents, come up with a menu for the day... Maybe you should stop callin' me 'Mercenary' and start callin' me 'Chef' instead..."

"Listen old man, the only time you and Hort get to cut loose and smash heads is when we get into some giant battle, right? So the pair a you livin' out the resta your lives doin' boring-ass jobs means the world's at peace!"

"Fair enough... But since I've been doin' nothing but cook, I feel like I'm startin' to get a belly...!"

Mercenary slumped forward onto the table and laughter filled the cafeteria.

And the wheels of their plan began to turn.

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THE MEMOIRS OF HAR BELL CHAPTER 1 HOW IT ALL BEGAN

My name is Har.

I once called myself Har Bell the Ignas, but I have decided to go simply by “Har” from now on. For many years I lived with the feeling that something was wrong. Born to Nurabehn parents, I lived my life as an Ignas and have been ruled over by the Exinov throughout—and came to feel a certain unease at the inequality of this world.

Now the day has come to set that inequality right.

I am not the only Ignas who sees the truth of the situation, and there are countless Nurabehn who are tired of living as slaves. All of them wished for freedom, for a way of living that rejected the inequality they’d known since birth, even if true equality remained out of reach.

A free district comes to those who seek out liberation.

With the cooperation of our visitors from the Forbidden Land, we accomplished three primary things:

1. Spreading rumors of the free district’s existence.
2. Distributing weapons to Nurabehn and Ignas to resist the Exinov.
3. Making known the ways a free district might be created.

With the materials at hand and the methods known, everything happened very quickly. Groups calling themselves "liberation armies" sprung up all over the land, creating free districts of their own, which began brazenly and triumphantly making their presence known. There were small villages, startlingly large towns, campsites on the open plains, but all of them called for freedom and equality and rejected aggression and slavery.

Their weapons were magic potions with various spells sealed inside. Armed with these, even Nurabehn—physically weaker than the Ignas, and without any particular combat training—had a chance on the battlefield. That wasn't all, though. Thaumaturgical devices in the free districts never ran out of magic: the mana recovery potions created by Saybil, the Abyss Sorcerer, gave them unlimited power.

So dire was the Exinov's situation, meanwhile, that most of the soldiers sent to put down the free districts were forced to conserve their mana in combat. Every drop expended in the fight to destroy the free districts meant less for hospitals and other necessities. As the conflict slowly but surely exacerbated their mana drought, we waited for the right moment to make our proclamation:

"Mana potions will be available to all through the free districts alone—and the jurisdiction of any tower that attacks those free districts will lose its mana forever."

3

Simple homes of cloth and tree branches had cropped up on the banks of the great lake. This free district was a new one, far inland from Zero's city on the

waves.

“Hrnn—’twould be quite the disaster were it to rain upon this place.” Los stood on tiptoe as she surveyed the free district, which in truth might better have been described as a hamlet. “This might be easier were there someone here willing to take on the mantle of leadership.”

Standing by her side, Saybil likewise took in their surroundings.

Roughly half the free districts that had sprung up across the New World had been built with support from the Forbidden Landers, but the later ones derived entirely from the free will of their residents. Consequently, support had yet to reach them, and they were suffering a serious lack of both materials and know-how. The majority of these had started with the news that “building these free districts seems to be all the rage nowadays,” attracting sundry folk who desired their freedom as well—but with no clear leader, they were now finding themselves at a loss as to how to go on.

Lily had been using her friends to seek out such floundering free districts, and Saybil and Los had taken on the task of visiting them to provide support. That said, it wasn’t exactly an arduous journey. Using the towers that had been converted to the free district cause, they were able to travel around the New World in a trice, and since they created new witch’s paths wherever they went, the process only got easier and easier.

The free district by the lake where Los and Saybil now found themselves would ordinarily have been a ten-day ride by wizard carriage from Zero’s city, but it had taken them only half a day, if that. Los had taught herself to drive all manner of wizard carriages in a snap, so even the significant distance from the witch’s path to the lake had presented no particular obstacle.

“I’m off to have a teensy chat with the residents—thou needst simply do as

thou always dost, Sayb.”

“Ah, right.”

There was a reason why Los and Saybil had been paired up for this task. With her antlers, Hort would have been attacked on sight if she showed her face in a free district, while Kudo and Mercenary were beastservants by New World standards, meaning the Nurabehn would be wary of them as loyal servants of the Exinov.

On the other hand, these people who for the first time in their lives had created a community of their own, and so were naturally feeling somewhat protective of it, would react poorly to a perfectly ordinary human being showing up and claiming to be a messenger from the Forbidden Land.

In that respect, Los struck the perfect balance. She appeared to be a harmless young girl and so provoked no wariness, yet the massive staff she carried made it absolutely clear that she was someone out of the ordinary. Her skill at oratory, her beauty, and her eccentricity drew the gazes and interest of the residents, and once she had engaged them in conversation and convinced them, Saybil came in to provide the proof—by creating a witch’s path to Zero’s original free district on the ocean.

The creation of a witch’s path usually required a pair of corresponding symbols be carved at the two locations. Saybil got around this by bringing with him a stone tablet that already bore Zero’s symbol, which he then buried in the ground and infused with mana to create the witch’s path. Once that was done, the rest was easy. Zero simply appeared from the other side and created a city that suited the terrain. Just as she had made a city of ice upon the ocean’s surface, here a tree-top city woven from the surrounding forest rose up on the lakeshore before their very eyes.

No one could doubt them now.

“As ludicrous as ever,” Los remarked, mouth agape, tapping her staff against her shoulder as she gazed up at Zero’s tree-top city.

Zero shrugged. “I could not engage in such grand folly without the young man’s endless supply of mana.”

“What, dost bait me, now? Surely thou knowest most witches would be incapable of such a feat however much mana they had at their disposal.”

“Well, actually...” Zero frowned. “I know little of witches.”

“Haanh?”

“Though I have lived for a hundred years, most of that was spent hidden away in a hole in the ground. I did travel for two years, but...well, I encountered essentially no ancient witches during that time. After my journey’s end, I lived once again in isolation as a village witch.” Zero gave a troubled smile. “I’m sure the itinerant Dawn Witch will find this difficult to understand, but I am far more ignorant and unworldly than you might believe.”

“I-Is...that so...”

“Though I am of course aware that I possess genius beyond comparison.”

“Rrrgh what art thou playing at! Were we not having what the young ones call a heart-to-heart for a brief moment there?!” Stamping her feet at Zero’s flippancy, Los turned back to the work of art that was the forest city. The people of this new free district, for their part, appeared more stunned than pleased.

“From what little I heard, these people seem to be without a leader—we would, I think, do well to offer them one.”

“Ah, about that.” Saybil raised his hand. “The priest said we’ve got a young man who he thinks is about ready to start running a district.”

“Ah yes, young Gil.” Los’s face lit up.

“You know him?”

“But of course. He is one of those students the priest and I trained to play merchant and spread word of the free district.”

“...One of your students,” Saybil muttered. There was something about Los having pupils other than himself and his friends that perturbed Saybil’s masculine instincts. Being in love with Los, however, he also wanted to be free of that label of student, so he felt he should probably keep the first part to himself. None of these subtleties made it as far as Saybil’s expressionless face, of course.

“Rejoice! So shall it be. I have a great love for the maturing of youth! Considering the scale of this district, I expect Jiji will make the perfect second-in-command!”

“I’ll let the priest know,” said Zero, disappearing into the hollow of the tree where the witch’s path now stood.

Los looked at Saybil. “I will manage here on my own. You go, too, young Sayb, and begin preparations for our next expedition.”

“Ah, right.”

Our next expedition.

The words made Saybil’s heart feel lighter all of a sudden. He had enjoyed their short trips around the New World together, and there was a real satisfaction in helping people. This marked the tenth free district to which they had opened a witch’s path, and Zero created something completely different

each time, so he also looked forward to seeing what she would build. It was fun, pure and simple. So fun, in fact, that Saybil had almost forgotten they were at war. But by visiting the free districts and giving them their support, he and his companions were unquestionably rewriting the balance of power in the New World.

And naturally, the Exinov weren't too happy about it.

It was just a few days later that a report came in from Lily's friends: one of the free districts had been completely wiped out.

"A hamlet that had declared itself a free district was targeted by an Exinov attack, and every one of its residents slaughtered. The report suggests they were captured and converted to mana."

It was the priest who had received Lily's report, and who now stood in the meeting room of the town hall calmly delivering the news.

Wiped out—such phrases made it all seem so simple. The death of people they had no connection to, whose faces they had never seen. But Saybil had visited similar settlements with Los, had witnessed the people there simply striving to be free.

"...Then we...didn't make it in time, did we..." Saybil mumbled.

The priest heaved a deep sigh. "Don't let it trouble you...or so I would like to say, but...you are correct. Our activities inspired them to pluck up their courage, and they were annihilated by the Exinov before our support could reach them. We misread the situation. We should have seen this coming, should have realized the Exinov were so foolish as to see our proclamation as a mere bluff.

We warned them they would lose their mana if they attacked the free districts...”

“Then we must demonstrate to them that ’twas no idle threat.” Los looked over at Saybil, and he nodded. It was simple. All he had to do was to take every last drop of mana from their land.

4

Who could have imagined the end of the world would be so banal, and come so swiftly?

The attack on the Forbidden Land, the humiliating defeat, the wild proliferation of free districts—it had all taken but a single month.

Toto Ryl of the Curled Horns, one of the few remaining Grand Magisters who still adhered to Danna Ryl’s cause, had not hesitated to launch an attack on a town in his domain when it declared its own liberation. He had been quick to heed Zaza Ryl’s counsel all those years ago, and thanks to the Nurabehn farms he had built, his tower now had a more comfortable store of mana than most. As a result, putting down the hastily assembled and barely trained army of the slapdash free district had been like taking candy from a baby.

But now Toto Ryl cursed his foolishness. It was three days after he crushed the free district that the dragon came, bearing a single young man upon its back. It was night, but rather than take advantage of the cover of darkness, he alighted in the city’s well-lit central plaza. After dropping him off, the dragon ascended into the sky once more, leaving the young man behind. No one attacked him—after all, he was alone and unarmed. What was there to be wary

of?

So when he said, “I’m here to negotiate,” Toto Ryl invited him into his tower. He underestimated the young man. Toto Ryl had put down the free district and had plenty of mana in reserve—it never even occurred to him that a lone Nurabehn might be capable of doing him harm. And when the young man said to him, “You attacked a free district, didn’t you,” Toto Ryl responded with arrogance.

“Attacked a free district? Pacified a lawless area, I think you mean. This negotiation you speak of—do you mean to beg for the lives of the Nurabehn I have captured?”

“No. We warned you, and you ignored that warning. Now I’ve come to make good on it.” The young man dropped to his knees and laid both hands against the ground, almost as if he was prostrating himself before Toto Ryl. Then his bluish-purple eyes flashed faintly. In an instant, all the lights in the city were extinguished. The streetlamps went out, and all the thaumaturgical devices ceased to function. Toto Ryl felt all the city’s mana rapidly draining away, and he stood there stunned by the strange feeling in the air.

“Wh-What is happening...?! What did you do...?!”

“Exactly what we warned you of.” All was dark—but even in the enveloping blackness, the young man’s bluish-purple eyes shone faintly. “This land has been stripped of all its mana. You and yours will never use a wizard device again. You attacked the free district despite the knowledge that this would happen—that’s how desperately you needed to destroy a place where the people only wanted to live in peace.”

“Someone! Seize this Nurabehn! He carries some device for the stealing of mana! Take it from him and restore my power!”

“Have you ever heard of a device capable of drawing mana from an entire region, let alone storing it?” asked the young man with a cock of his head.

Toto Ryl realized then that he hadn’t—and as a Grand Magister, he was conversant with every thaumaturgical device in existence. *It cannot be. If such a thing existed, whoever came into possession of it would rule the world.*

“Kill me, and all the mana I took will be gone forever. We are selling mana recovery potions—but only to the free districts. Therefore, if you were to swear right now to liberate all the lands under your control, I could sell them to you, too.”

“Who would ever accept such a ridiculous bargain...?!”

“You think it’s ridiculous? Then I’ll be leaving. And I won’t be back for any more negotiations—I take it that’s okay with you?”

“Yes, begone! I will not lick the boots of savages! I can simply draw more mana from the Nurabehn!”

“How do you intend to do that? Your wizard devices no longer function, and you can’t use magic—you no longer have the power to fight. The Nurabehn are far more numerous, and we can manufacture great quantities of magic potions to arm them against you. If you’re talking about violence, I’m afraid you’ve just lost the upper hand. Please don’t worry, though,” the young man continued. “My companions are delivering mana potions to your hospitals and children’s facilities even as we speak. Unlike you, we’re possessed of reason and compassion. However—” Here he paused for a moment. “Your people allowed you to attack the free district, and some even participated in the attack. They wished to live in luxury using the mana gained from the captured Nurabehn. That is unforgivable. You people may think of the Nurabehn as livestock, but to me you’re nothing more than the insects that swarm around such beasts.”

As Toto Ryl adjusted to the darkness, he began to see more than just the young man's shining eyes: the band of Nurabehn lined up behind the lad, for instance, with weapons at the ready. Toto Ryl was afraid then. He thought of the Nurabehn—of the way he had treated them, and of the vengeance they would seek.

"I...I wish to negotiate." Toto Ryl's voice was trembling, but he finally managed to squeeze out the words.

The young man's lips twisted into what seemed like a terribly cruel smile. "Then speak with *them*."

"With the Nurabehn?! Unthinkable!"

"Why? In the free districts, there are no Exinov or Nurabehn. Everyone is equal. These people are district leaders...so if you're going to be the leader of *this* district, you'll be on equal footing with them."

"Th-That is..."

"If you don't want to do it, feel free to nominate someone else in your place. We'll sell mana potions here based on the terms agreed upon with the free district leaders. Please don't worry, if you think the terms are at all unfair, we'll take that under careful consideration."

"B-But...!"

"Ah, how could I forget? The free district leaders who've come here today all have a certain number of mana recovery potions with them."

With that, the young man departed, unwilling to listen to another word of Toto Ryl's objections.

Word of this retribution spread throughout the land like wildfire, carried on a wave of fear. In the days that followed, many of the keys declared their territories to be free districts.

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“A report has arrived for you, Grand Magister Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns. Toto Ryl of the Curled Horns has declared his tower a free district.”

Out of the corner of his eye Zaza Ryl glanced at the beastservant who had slipped into the room to deliver the report. “I see,” was all he said before falling silent once more.

In the underground control room of his tower sat a massive wizard’s cauldron for the spawning of new thaumatheria, its mouth set into the floor of the great hall above. In ages past, mana and the souls of living beings would be poured into this to produce beasts whose forms reflected the souls from which they were made. Because the process consumed huge quantities of mana, no new thaumatheria had been created in a hundred years, but now the cauldron was full to overflowing with mana—some collected from the farms, some given by the Ignas who served the tower, some taken from the Grand Magisters who had betrayed them. Oddly enough, that meant that within the wizard’s cauldron, mana from all strata of society was mixed together equally.

All that remained was an appropriate soul offering, and the ceremony would be complete.

Danna Ryl had sunk into despair, not emerging from her tower for a full month now. With the Keybinder unwilling or unable to make the effort to

restore their trust, the Grand Magisters of the towers had betrayed her one after the other. Less than ten remained now, and with Toto Ryl's defection, more were sure to follow suit.

"...How tragic. A thousand years of loyalty, undone in so short a time..."

Our stability and prosperity depended on a lack of other powerful presences. We should never have permitted Har Bell to set out for the New World. Even if the ranks of Nurabehn offering up their lives to us diminished, and the Exinov population itself gradually diminished as a result, such a gentle decline would have been a fitting end for our world. At the very least we could have died with our pride intact, instead of being trampled, ground into the dirt, forced to accept a world where Exinov and Nurabehn are treated as equals.

"Lord Zaza Ryl. With all due respect, I do not think it possible for us to repel the Forbidden Land's invasion. If we continue to resist, we're doomed. You are the only one capable of convincing Lady Danna Ryl. I owe much to my lady, and I would not see her suffer further. Please, if you—"

"Convince her?" Zaza Ryl raised an eyebrow. "And how do you propose I do that? Surely you aren't suggesting I counsel Danna Ryl the One-Horned, Keybinder of the tower and greatest of the Grand Magisters, to bow before the *Nurabehn*?"

His glare alone was enough to make the beastservant shrink back in fright. Ordinarily, Zaza Ryl cared nothing for the lives of his beastservants, but this one was different; this one had been granted to him by Danna Ryl personally. The beastservant had been abused by an Ignas master, discovered by Utsuwa in a pitiable state, healed by Danna Ryl, and finally given to Zaza Ryl. This was the reason Zaza Ryl made some allowances in the way of free speech, and why even now the beastservant had not fled the tower.

“I cannot blame you for being unable to think of any other solution with that foolish beast’s mind of yours. I *will* convince her. She despairs of this world, laments her humiliation, but I will show her that even now the world belongs to her.”

The gatekeepers have been destroyed, the Exinov have betrayed us, and now the Ignas and Nurabehn possess the means to fight. The situation is dire, I will not deny it. But if I had power enough to turn the tides, if I could use that power to protect Danna Ryl...I might still be able to change things. For that... “I, Zaza Ryl of the Twisted Horns, will become this world’s—will become Danna Ryl’s—new gatekeeper.”

The beastservant cried out, but it was too late.

Zaza Ryl cast himself into the great cauldron. His body sank into the bluish-purple liquid, and in an instant his flesh had melted away. His soul, free now of its physical body, mixed with the swirling mana, and he felt himself swelling larger and larger. Immeasurable power, a feeling of omnipotence. Suddenly the cauldron was too small—it cracked, shattered, and Zaza Ryl crawled up out of the wreckage. Still he felt hemmed in, as if even the great hall of the tower was too small for him.

It was then that he caught a glimpse of himself reflected in the eyes of the terrified beastservant: a jet-black dragon with great, twisted horns, looming over the hall like dominion incarnate.



Chapter Five



Saybil was in something of a sour mood.

Climbing the bell tower, he looked out over the city of ice. With its population already above three thousand, the free district was lively now even at night, the pale light of the wizard lamps twinkling in the streets. Thanks to the efforts of Seth and his merchant band, they now had a steady supply of food, booze, and even fashionable clothes. And built on the surface of the ocean as it was, the city was now exporting not just magic potions but all manner of seafood as well.

It was clear sailing—*so why do I feel so depressed?*

“Sayb!”

Saybil looked up to see Hort holding a cup of warm milk in each hand.

“Hort...”

“I saw you sitting up here. What’s going on? How come you look so down?”

“Nh... Mmm...” Unable to find an answer, Saybil just hung his head. He accepted the milk she was holding out and took a sip. It was warm, and it calmed him down a little.

“You know how the other day I went to that city to take their mana? The city that attacked the new free district?”

“Yeah. You’ve been doing great work!”

“Sure...I guess. I mean, you’re right... It’s just...”

“Sayb?”

“I...I don’t feel great.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was so angry when I heard they’d attacked a free district.”

“Yeah. It really, really pissed me off, too!” Hort exclaimed.

“And...when I took all their mana, and was talking to the master of the tower... I don’t know, but...it made me feel good.”

Hort looked at Saybil, puzzled.

“You’re wrong. And you brought all this suffering on yourself. I just went on ranting at him, knowing he couldn’t resist me. He was scared, on the verge of tears, and I...” Saybil heaved a deliberate sigh. Whenever he thought back on it, on the pleasure he’d felt, his stomach clenched. “I thought it served him right. I wanted him to feel *more* regret for everything he’d done, to suffer *more*...”

“Umm... But...isn’t that, like, totally normal...?”

“To enjoy revenge?”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t exactly put it that way, but if we’re getting down to brass tacks, then yeah.”

“But I feel like there was something really shameful about the way I acted.” Saybil stared down into his milk. He had lost his memories, regained them, and been through so much since then, and he thought all that had given him at least a general grasp of human emotions.

He loved Los.

He understood jealousy.

But the soul-shaking sense of superiority he had felt that day—that felt like bad medicine, the kind that could destroy a person.

“We know that people can do terribly cruel things when they think they’re right, when they think that justice is on their side. And up ’til now we’ve been the ones on the receiving end of that cruelty. But in that moment I believed in my own righteousness...and I enjoyed making that person suffer.”

“Hweeh!” Hort let out a strange cry.

Saybil turned and saw a startled look on her face. “Was what I said really that shocking...?”

“N-Naw... I was just thinking that even after everything that’s happened, you’re still the same old Sayb.”

“Well, yeah... I’m still me.”

“S not what I mean. Look, three years ago I joined the Church and Mage Brigade and started cracking down on potion-related crime. And all these unrepentant baddies would come at me with lectures about *justice*. ‘We’re all witches here,’ ‘You’re upsetting the balance of the world,’ ‘The Goddess will never forgive you,’ that kind of stuff—I mean, I’m not even a witch, I’m a mage! And those creeps didn’t even know the difference!”

Hort tightened her grip on the wooden cup in her hand. Sturdy as it was, it began to warp, and Saybil was scared it might break.

“Is it really so wrong to give the bad guys a thrashing, toss ’em in jail, and feel good about it? When someone gleefully murders children, is it out of bounds to wanna give ’em a taste of their own medicine—to make ’em cry and wail like their victims did?”

“But... There’s no point. Personal revenge isn’t what’s needed to keep them from killing more children. Our job is to catch the criminals and lock them up, but I think there’s something ugly about kicking them while they’re down.”

“But I *do* wanna kick their stupid asses.”

There was something about the totally sincere look in Hort’s eyes as she expressed her approval for brute force that made Saybil burst out laughing. It welled up from somewhere deep within him, and it took a good long while for it to subside.

“H-Hey, what the heck?! I didn’t know you could laugh like that, Sayb! But you can?! Wait, what was even funny about what I said?!”

“S-Sorry! It’s just... You’re amazing, Hort.”

“Amazing...? But, don’t you think it’s unfair? They break the law, tromp all over other people, hurt them, make them suffer—then the moment they’re the ones getting punished, it’s all about respecting them and making sure *they* don’t suffer, treating their crimes appropriately within the framework of the law. I mean, they’re the ones who just *broke* the law in the first place!”

“Mm-hmm, right... You might be right...”

“No she goddessdamn isn’t! Nothin’ ‘right’ about that at all! The hell are you two thinking, talkin’ up vigilante justice like that?!”

Flinching at this harsh rebuke emanating from behind them, Hort and Saybil turned to see Kudo holding a basket of midnight snacks and looking distinctly unimpressed.

“Huh? How long have you been there, Kudo? I was keeping my guard up, but I didn’t notice you at all...!”

“Hmph... I’ve been trainin’ too, ya know. Mage medics gotta be able to dole out healin’ on the battlefield without the enemy detecting us.”

Kudo stomped across the roof and plopped down right behind them with his legs crossed. Saybil happily accepted one of the pastries he offered and took a

bite. It was filled with sausage and nice, crunchy vegetables, and while he was chewing Saybil could think of nothing else.

“Anyway, don’t go leadin’ Saybil astray just ’cause he’s a little naive. This time, he’s right.”

“Huh...? How much did you hear?” asked Hort.

“Everything, right from the start. I was gonna call out to you guys when you stopped talkin’, but it just kept gettin’ worse and worse. I was even startin’ to think about reporting you to the proper authorities.”

“Dooon’t! We’d get in trouble!”

“So you’re that self-aware, at least...”

“Well, of course! Even I know that much!” Hort pouted. “But seeing those creeps grinning ’cause they’re protected by the law would make *anyone* want to break it, right? And even if you don’t actually break it, you’d still wanna say a few nasty things to them and get under their skin a little, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure, won’t deny that. You can’t actually go around *doin’* it, though.”

“But how come?!”

“’Cause then you’d be lowerin’ yourself to their level.”

“Who cares? I’m happy to take the low road!” Hort drained the rest of her milk and flopped back against the roof.

“Their level, huh...” Saybil muttered. “I kind of get that, too, I think. Like, giving this guy who’d done something wrong a piece of my mind, and feeling good doing it, just made me feel kind of small.”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘small’? Didja know we got a report from those free district leaders you took with you?”

“Huh? What’d it say?”

“That you weren’t afraid of the Exinov one bit, and you said exactly what needed to be said. Thanks to you, that Exinov who had always looked down on the Nurabehn saw ’em as people for the first time.”

Saybil furrowed his brow a little. “Well, if that’s how they felt, then...I’m glad... I guess.”

“Yo, Hort. Why doncha tell Saybil what you woulda done if you’d been in his shoes?”

“Well, first I woulda stripped him naked and paraded him around the square, duh!” cried Hort, shooting up from where she lay with a surge of enthusiasm. “And then, and then, I’d only negotiate with him after he begged for three full days and nights to *pleez* give him a chance. Oh, and then, just when it seemed like the negotiations might work out in his favor, I’d be like, ‘Y’know, I changed my mind,’ and run him out of town! And of course, the whole time we’d be going ahead with an election behind the scenes to pick a new leader. Whatcha think?” Hort’s eyes were sparkling.

Saybil was more than a little put off. “Huh? Before you said you’d *want* to, but now you’re saying you *would*?”

“Hm? Oh, uh huh.”

“But isn’t that kind of a waste of time...?”

“It’d be fun for me, though!”

“Wagh!”

This was a “Wagh!” freighted with experience. Then: “Though if thou must know, I would arrange a slightly more dramatic production, were I in thy place.” It was Loux Krystas, her face poking out from under the roof on which they sat.

“Huh?! Professor Los?!”

“Y... Where the hell’d you bubble up from?!”

The trio goggled at her as she appeared where there should by rights be no foothold to speak of. As it happened, she was standing on the Staff of Ludens, which lay horizontal, clutching the eaves of the tower with a tentacle.

With a *hup* she climbed onto the roof, then raised her hand to let the staff, which had danced up into the sky above her, fall into her open palm.

“A most interesting discussion! I have a great love of debates surrounding law and ethics. Young Sayb, that Exinov massacred the residents of the free district—and it shames thee to feel pleasure at rendering him helpless?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Thou hast no reason to apologize. ’Tis just as young Kudo said. Victory is a sweet sensation. And ’tis also as Hort said: even retribution can be a pleasure. Dost know why?”

“Why...?” Saybil thought about it. *Why did it feel so good? Los is right, the pleasure I felt was actually—*

“Ooh, ooh, I know!” Hort called out, raising her hand. “Um, it’s because when you let someone know they’ll be in big trouble if they mess with you, then you can rest easy and enjoy life. And, like, confirming that you’re stronger than them puts your mind at ease!”

“Full marks, young Hort! Thou hast truly plumbed the pleasures of giving thine enemies what for!”

Hort puffed out her chest and snorted triumphantly at being declared so resoundingly correct. After she had puffed out her chest she began to have second thoughts about whether she was really being praised, however, and she

got a little peevish.

“Hark now, young Sayb,” Los continued, unperturbed. “On many a battlefield, the victors run roughshod over the vanquished in every way they can imagine. While I am sure there is some material desire at play, they are at base intoxicated with the pleasure of lording it over their foes. Humans instinctually derive a powerful pleasure from assuring themselves that the enemy are worthless, inferior beings whom they may brutalize in any wise they choose without fear of reprisal.”

“Do...you have those same instincts, Professor?”

“Unquestionably. Dost not recall? When the Witch’s Village was attacked by the anti-witch faction of the Church, I eviscerated the dignity of a certain wicked bishop for all to see. And I *very* much enjoyed doing so—it did make mine heart leap. I feel no shame in the pleasure of victory.”

“So...that’s...the deal?”

“The problem lies in getting a taste for victory, and wallowing in one’s dominance. Indeed, one can rule without even gaining victory. ’Tis easily accomplished—merely seek out those weaker than thyself.”

“That much...is clear...”

All three of the young mages knew from experience.

Saybil had been on the receiving end of all manner of violence when he was still just a child. The adults in his life hadn’t fought and won the right to control him—it was just that he was weaker than them, and they had beaten him into submission. Hort had always been called a devil child thanks to the horns sprouting from her head, and had been forced to fall in line...while it would’ve taken all night to enumerate the violent acts Kudo had been subjected to as a

beastfallen.

“This war is an invasion of the New World by the Forbidden Land. Yet we have not once actively initiated battle. We have merely created free districts, gathered residents, and repelled the New World’s attacks.”

“We did destroy that harvesting facility, though,” Saybil countered.

“’Twas a rescue operation—a great many people would have been killed had we not intervened.”

“That’s right! Though, I mean, I really don’t get what’s bringing you down in the first place, Sayb!”

It almost seemed as if Hort was taking Saybil to task for a weakness of spirit. Having waged a long campaign against the criminal element, she probably thought it was childish of him to be so dejected over this.

“I’m sorry, Hort, you’re right. When I get bummed out over something like this, it almost comes off like I’m blaming you for the things you’ve done, doesn’t it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying... I just want you to have more confidence in yourself! I mean, come on! You could’ve done *anything* to that guy! But you didn’t, did you?! I read that report, too, and all you did was teach some idiot a much-needed lesson! Is that what justice means to you, Sayb? Giving monsters who think they’ve got the right to go around killing people a humble lecture on ethics?!”

“Well... No, but...” Saybil looked over at Los, searching for some kind of answer to the uncertainty clouding his heart.

“Hmmm.” Los leaned against the Staff of Ludens and folded her arms. “Being the hermit thou art, young Sayb, this was thy first experience of active

retaliation. 'Tis only to be expected that it should have befuddled thee somewhat. Guilt is an unavoidable accompaniment to one's first taste of pleasure. That is why we must follow countless steps to gain that pleasure. And in this case, thou didst take all the necessary steps, Sayb."

"The necessary steps..."

"We warned the Exinov not to attack the free districts. And though we took from them the Nurabehn, whom they view as livestock, we did offer to circulate mana potions in exchange. 'Twas not high-handed exploitation—they themselves recognized that, cost aside, our potions would provide a steady supply of large quantities of mana. Yet in spite of all this, the Exinov still launched their attack—because they did not wish to let go the joy of domination. They killed the people of the free district by way of example, for their own pleasure, and you brought them low in accordance with a decision made in council."

"That's...true..."

"Consequently, 'tis only meet that thou lovest thy victory. Rejoice in my pardon."

"Mine too!" Hort chimed in.

"Ain't even a question of being pardoned or not. You won without spillin' a single drop of blood. If we're gonna start givin' people a hard time for applying a little pressure in negotiations, nothin's ever gonna get done."

Saybil pursed his lips at this barrage of pardons.

"Wh-What's with that face... Are you angry, Sayb?!"

"No, it's just... I feel like I might cry."

"How come?!"

“I was just thinking how great it is to have friends.”

“Gross...! The hell was that you some kinda prissy princess or somethin’...?!”

“Even your bad attitude sounds like love to me, Kudo. I want to give you a hug.”

“Hey, cut it out! Quit inchin’ over here!”

Kudo leapt backward with a shriek, and Hort started laughing uncontrollably.

It’s not like I agree with everything they said...but Hort and Kudo showing me that everyone has their own way of thinking, Los letting me know she’s okay with what I did, it all makes me happy.

Saybil was grateful, but there was more, too.

If one of these people got killed—I don’t think I’d hesitate for a moment to take revenge.

“Anyway, with what you did a whole bunch more Exinov have come over to the free district side. And when we sell them the mana potions they get this look on their face like, ‘Why didn’t we do this sooner?’ So I figure this war is almost over. Don’t you think so, Professor Los?” Hort asked, sounding as if it had only just occurred to her.

“Quite so.” Los nodded, then broke into a chuckle. “Or so I hope. The presence of young Utsuwa in the free district does appear to have gone some way in bending the remaining Exinov to our cause. Danna Ryl’s faction is already in the minority. To be frank, I would not be at all surprised if they came to *us* suing for peace...”

“We *have* made it clear we want to talk, right?” Saybil gave up trying to corner Kudo and looked over at Los.

“We sent a letter, but have received naught in the way of reply. Perhaps the shame of Utsuwa’s departure has made them obstinate.”

“If that’s the case, then what? How’s this war going to end?”

“Hmm... Perhaps it will simply...taper off, I suppose.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means an end to hostilities that is not so clear-cut. Free districts will proliferate across the land, and, though it vex them sorely, the Exinov will be left with no means of aggression. Thus, the conflict will effectively cease. Those who agree with the Exinov will rally to their side, those who wish for liberation will come to the districts, and once that process has run its course, the two groups will have more or less segregated themselves.”

“But then the Exinov won’t be able to buy mana potions, so...”

“Oh, I expect someone will smuggle them a few bottles. ’Tis ultimately for the free districts to do as they will with the potions we sell them. Even without some organization at their back, individual buyers might well decide to sell them on to the Exinov at thrice or even ten times the price.”



“It’s all so muddy...!” Hort looked up at the sky with a dissatisfied look on her face.

“’Tis generally the way with war. Though if we advanced on Danna Ryl’s tower, demanding her surrender and freedom for the Nurabehn, ’twould likely be a different story.”

It was clear, however, that nobody really felt the need to go so far. The Exinov no longer had the power to detain the Ignas and Nurabehn who were streaming from their cities—and they were frightened that if they did so, their stores of mana would be drained lock, stock, and barrel.

“What are you going to do once the war’s over, Professor Los?” Saybil asked out of the blue, prompting immediate panicked reprimands from Hort and Kudo.

“N-No, Sayb! You can’t ask that!”

“You’re so freakin’ oblivious! You just killed Professor Los!”

“Huh? What do you mean?” asked Saybil, confused.

Los guffawed. “’Tis quite the cliché in tales such as these—speaking lightly of one’s plans after the war ensures that one will not live to see them through.”

“Huhhh... That’s a weird superstition...” Thoroughly unconvinced, Saybil nevertheless realized it might be best to abandon any further questions.

It was then that they heard the dragon’s cry from above.

“Hm? Had...the Dragon Conqueror King gone off somewhere?” asked Hort dubiously.

“Nah, I saw Heath sleeping in the stables on the way here.”

As one, the four of them looked up. The moon was split in two, a black stain upon its face. The stain grew larger and larger, and by the time it became evident that *something* was falling from the sky, all four were already filled with tension.

It was a dragon.

The jet-black beast, far bigger than Heath and bearing giant, twisted horns, was diving straight for the city. As the dragon dove, it took in a great breath and blew out a scorching blast of flame.

The city, however, was protected by one of Zero’s barriers. The reflected flames dissipated harmlessly into the air, and the dragon flew close enough to scrape the barrier with its claws before wheeling back up into the sky.

“Wh-What’s going on?! Where’d that enormous dragon come from...?!”

The dragon came to a stop, hovering in midair above the free district, then took in another massive breath and belched fire at the barrier once more. As before, the barrier repelled the flames—but the heat was a different matter.

“Man, that’s hot...! Like, I’m freakin’ roasting...!”

“Is that thing trying to steam the whole town?! We need to chase it off! I’ll go take care of it!”

“Nay, thou wilt not be in time—little Ludens!”

Before Hort could leap from the bell tower roof, Los thrust the Staff of Ludens aloft. Darkness spilled forth from the lustrous black orb embedded in its tip,

enveloping the sky overhead and blotting out the flames.

“Wow! That’s way better! You’re amazing, Ludens!”

“My little Ludens is capable of dealing with the heat. However...”

The dragon stopped breathing fire and soared high into the air once more. As it flew back and forth above the free district searching for prey, the residents burst from their homes to see what was going on, and found their answer in the sky above.

“This is a problem... The creature presents too great a spectacle.”

“A...spectacle? What’s so threatening about that?” Saybil asked.

Los’s face was grave as she looked out over the upturned faces of the people below. “Such a show of strength foments anxiety amongst the residents of the city. They know Heath by sight, and can plainly see that this dragon is far larger.”

Heath, silver steed to the Dragon Conqueror King, was still young. He was a fine creature, with majesty to spare—but the dragon now circling above the free district radiated an aura of intimidation Heath could not hope to match.

“Speaking of...! Isn’t that Heath there?!” Hort pointed up into the sky.

The moonlight glinted off Heath’s silver scales as he bore down on the black dragon; Ghoda was nowhere to be seen.

Heath rammed the black dragon with his own body and bit down on the larger beast’s wing—but his fangs could not penetrate its armored scales. The black dragon tore away from Heath, letting loose a roar that shook the very air, then clamped its own jaws around Heath’s neck and began to swing the smaller dragon this way and that.

“Oh no oh no oh no! Heath’s gonna die up there!”

“I can heal him from down here! Where the hell’s the Dragon Conqueror King?!” spat Kudo, glaring angrily up at the sky. The final verse of the Chapter of Protection as taught at the Academy of Magic was a spell that allowed the practitioner to heal any target within sight. But for Kudo, who was conversant even with the restoration magic contained in the *Grimoire of Zero* itself, that spell was no more difficult than the simplest cantrip. He began the incantation without hesitation: “*Ēa doh Laghanz Hang doh Lagraize!*” White serpents appeared in his eyes, and he fixed his gaze on Heath’s wounds. “O glittering white serpents, descend into mine eyes! Chapter of Protection, Final Verse—Kwaokuhl! Heed this call by the power of my name—Kudo!”

The serpents in Kudo’s pupils clustered around the wounds on Heath’s neck, which closed up in the blink of an eye. But, thrown aside by the black dragon, Heath struggled to stabilize himself at such a low altitude, and came crashing down toward the city.

“Professor Los! Save Heath!” cried Saybil.

“’Tis as good as done!” Los brandished the Staff of Ludens, and the great ebon wall in the sky transformed into a net, catching Heath as he fell. The net stretched to absorb Heath’s momentum, stopping a hair’s breadth from the ground before gently releasing the dragon. Heath got up, swaying a little, and tried to take off once more.

“Heath! Enough!”

It was Ghoda. Heath turned to look at him for a moment, then made to take off again, heedless of the knight’s cries. The dragon bore neither saddle nor reins, but Ghoda clambered up onto his back anyway and grabbed him by the horns.

“Settle down, Heath! The free district’s defenses are impregnable! You don’t need to do this!”

Heath let out a *gawr* of displeasure and gave his head a few unhappy shakes, then obediently lay back down.

The black dragon was calmly watching all this from on high. Then they heard a voice—not in their ears, but echoing directly in their minds. It was the voice of the black dragon.

If you wish to survive, seek the protection of the Keybinder. The ever-compassionate Danna Ryl will forgive your foolish trespasses and welcome her people back with a loving embrace.

A stir spread through the city—apparently everyone in the free district could hear the dragon’s voice.

You invaders in your paltry city of ice will find no respite outside its walls. Listen well, you fools who reject our protection and deceive with your talk of liberation. Prepare for this land to be your eternal resting place.

Choose. You have three days.

With that, the black dragon flew off, leaving only unrest and anxiety in its wake.

Danna Ryl thought she heard a voice calling to her and raised her head. How long had she been shut up in her room inside the tower? She wanted to die but found herself too terrified by the idea, though neither could she bear the thought of going outside only to be showered with ridicule. As a result, she had simply abandoned herself to the passage of time.

The voice that called to her now, however, was so kind, so familiar and sweetly affectionate, that Danna Ryl poked her head gingerly out the door of her room. There were neither attendants nor beastservants to be seen. The tower, which had always been bustling with people, now stood empty.

She followed the voice out into the square. It was hard for her to look upon that place again and not think back to the day Utsuwa had been taken from her, but now it was occupied by an unthinkable presence: a dragon so huge that for a moment Danna Ryl mistook it for a small black mountain. As she approached, the dragon gently lowered its head and presented its brow to her.

Danna Ryl saw the twisted horns and the goatlike pupils and let out a small gasp. “Zaza... It is you, isn’t it. But this body—”

The answer came not in the form of words, but as a voice inside her head.

You require a strong gatekeeper. That is what I have become.

Tears poured from Danna Ryl’s eyes. She spread her arms wide and ran to Zaza Ryl, dropping to her knees beside the dragon’s great head. “I’m sorry, Zaza. I said such awful things to you. I blamed you for everything, when you’ve only ever had my best interests at heart.”

Your reprimand was warranted. I made a mistake, and polluted your transcendent mystery. I will regain that transcendence for you.

“But how? Utsuwa is gone. My precious other half.”

We need only reclaim it. All of it.

And that which we cannot reclaim, we destroy. You are the only key we need.

“I alone?” asked Danna Ryl. Then she remembered the Exinov who had left her without so much as a word. Zaza Ryl’s next utterance filled her with a pleasant feeling that spread deep into her heart.

Let us make it so that none may live without your protection.

“Yes... Yes, you’re right. This world has become a little too large for its own good. If we reduce the number of people, reduce the number of towns, that will also resolve our mana shortage. We need not rely on any two-bit potions from the Forbidden Land. Oh, how wonderful! Zaza Ryl... My gatekeeper. With you by my side, I can continue to be myself.”

Danna Ryl felt suddenly free from the swamp of emotion that had been suffocating her. It was like she’d been looking at the world through a fog, but now she could see everything, see the future, clearly once more. *Kuravanuluox is the only city this world ever needed. This beautiful place, with its beautiful*

residents—that was all Danna Ryl need care for now.

“Let us give a special name to those who have remained here. They will be the new rulers of our city. All who return will be treated equally... And once there is room for no more, we need simply close the gates. We will spare only those towns and villages that swear to labor on our behalf. The rest can be destroyed, never to rise again.”

Hearing this, Zaza Ryl spread his enormous wings, producing a wind so powerful it knocked Danna Ryl to the ground, and vanished into the night. She could feel the black dragon’s last words tickling at the back of her mind like a whisper:

You have but to wait. Everything shall be as you desire.

3

The moment the black dragon was gone, it was as if someone had kicked a hornets’ nest. More than a few people in the free district suddenly began to think it might not be such a bad idea to return to Kuravanuluox, where they would enjoy the protection of the Keybinder Danna Ryl. Most of these naysayers were Ignas who had only come to the free district when they sensed the tide turning against Danna Ryl and the Exinov.

“I never wanted to come to this damn free district in the first place! But I heard they’d take our mana if we said no... I just didn’t have any other choice!”

“You think the folks in the other free districts know about this? We’d better get back to Kuravanuluox as fast as we can! Otherwise that dragon’s gonna kill

us all!”

“This place is done for! You saw, didn’t you? That dragon from the Forbidden Land is just a little runt! The black one’ll take it down in a heartbeat!”

“I had no idea there was such a powerful gatekeeper... Never woulda come here if I’d known!”

“Frankly, I think it’s downright disgraceful.” The setting was the meeting room of the icy town hall at the center of the maritime free district. Seth, head of the merchant band, had been the first to come over to the free district camp of his own accord. Now he frowned, folded his arms, and drummed on his elbow with the tips of his fingers. “If you ask me, there’s no need to prevent anyone from leaving. They’re free to return to Danna Ryl’s city if they choose. Zero’s barrier and Loux Krystas’s staff brilliantly stymied that dragon’s assault—why should we continue to feed anyone foolish enough to see that and still think, ‘The free district’s bound to lose, let’s get out of here.’”

“I am of the same opinion,” said the priest. He was leaning against the wall with his arms folded too, looking none too pleased. “What Har Bell requested of us in the first place was the establishment of human rights for the Nurabehn. And here we are, in the Nurabehn city Zero built upon the ocean. We simply offered to also welcome any Exinov or Ignas who rejected discrimination. If any of them now say that in fact they approved of discrimination all along but went with the flow when they saw which way the wind was blowing, well, maybe I’d rather such individuals were *driven* out.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re gonna stop ’em leaving,” said Mercenary with a shrug, peeling potatoes with his big paws. “That dragon’s the reason they wanna go back to Danna Ryl, ain’t it? And you’re gonna kill that thing, aren’t

you, Witch?”

At this Zero swept her long, silver hair back behind her ear and sighed. “Yes... If they were to focus their efforts entirely on defense, there would be no issue. But that dragon declared its intention to attack. Given the proclamation that it made, it seems the beast threatens to kill us if we set foot outside this city.”

They had been given a reprieve of three days—which presumably meant that any who did not return to Kuravanuluox within that time would be deemed an enemy subject to summary execution.

“The bit about finding no respite outside our ‘paltry city of ice’ means we may as well assume the other free districts will be attacked indiscriminately,” said Los. “I expect the wyrm meant to destroy this place as a grand signal to herald the start of their counteroffensive, but found our defenses a touch robust for its liking.”

“Pathetic. Let’s hurry up and kill the thing so we can end this damn war already. Hopefully that’ll put paid to all this backin’ and forthin’.” Mercenary stuck out his tongue in irritation. Ever since last night, the city had been in an uproar—there were Nurabehn from the other free districts rushing into the city to seek protection, Ignas trying to make their way out, and Exinov hoping to get themselves back into Danna Ryl’s good graces.

“Professor Zero! We’re in trouble! There’s just too many people!” Hort burst into the meeting room, out of breath. “You know how all those people from the other free districts started coming in through the witch’s paths yesterday, right? Well, now it seems like even *more* are flooding in from districts that *don’t* have witch’s paths...”

“My, my... And here I thought we still had some wiggle room...”

“We do, but we aren’t assigning jobs nearly fast enough, so they’re all just sitting around on the ground and blocking stairways and stuff! You gotta whip up a place where they can just grab a blanket and chill for now!”

“Right, like a kind of a campsite. Might be good to have somethin’ like that. Could use it as a place for group assemblies and whatnot, too.”

“Hmm.” Zero got to her feet. “For the time being we will not place restrictions on anyone’s movement, but some manner of explanation does seem necessary to calm the populace. First we ought gather the new arrivals in one place to help settle things down somewhat. Antlered one, bring those with nowhere to go to the pier. My lord Abyss Sorcerer—I request your assistance.”

“Right—!” With that, Hort dashed from the meeting room as hurriedly as she’d come in.

Zero headed to the pier, and after a short while Saybil jogged up beside her.

“You’ve come, young man.”

“I assume you need to use my mana?”

“Yes, I’ll be expanding our city a little.”

Saybil held out his left hand. For reasons of buoyancy and the like, the ground of the free district was significantly elevated from the surface of the ocean itself. Hand in hand, Zero and Saybil leapt down toward the water below—but they did not sink beneath the waves. The moment Zero’s feet touched the ocean’s surface, a sheet of ice spread out from the point of contact.

The free district was at present hexagonal. It was from one of the hexagon’s points that a long, long path now crystallized. Once the sea ice beneath Zero and Saybil’s feet was thick enough, it gradually began to rise of its own accord

until it reached the same height as the preexisting land.

At the same time, a very different phenomenon was occurring, a natural one quite apart from the magic being performed: When seawater freezes, the salt concentration in the area around the new ice increases, in turn lowering the temperature of the water itself below the freezing point. Because the saltier water has a higher relative density, it sinks, freezing the surrounding water along the way. Thus were countless pillars of ice formed, anchoring the new land to the ocean floor and keeping it from being moved around by the waves and ocean currents. In a matter of moments, the free district's landmass was expanded.

Saybil bent down to touch the new ground—and of course, it was still cold.

"Have a care, young man. Your skin will stick."

"Spending so much time in this city, I almost forgot that ice is cold..."

"Aaaaaghhh!"

A scream pierced Zero and Saybil's eardrums, and they turned to see Los standing there wearing a look of utter despair.

"I-It is done? Thou didst not think to wait for me before creating this new land?! To wait for thine audience to arrive before performing such a dramatic and marvelous feat of witchcraft?!"

"Wh-What's this, now, Dawn...? You wished to watch?"

"Forsooth! 'Wished to watch' does not begin to cover it! Thy work would have been just the thing to calm the hearts of a people so concerned over the coming of that blasted dragon! 'Twould have served to demonstrate the might of the witch who protects this city!"

"Oh, right. You might be right," Saybil realized with a start—followed

immediately by Zero's own revelation. They cursed their shortsightedness in setting off without so much as a pause to give the matter more thought.

"Rrgh...! Show me not such glum expressions, the pair of you! Though, well, so be it. Perhaps it is even for the best."

"A-Are you sure? You think it might truly be better this way?" Zero asked diffidently.

Los hopped down onto the newly-formed sea ice, nodding vigorously. "Thou hast created quite the spacious area. Now we must gather all of the residents of this free district here. Mud-Black, create a fence—we would not want our people falling into the ocean."

Zero did as Los suggested, creating a splendid fence a little taller than the average adult, which stretched all the way around the long peninsula of sea ice.

"And now a stage all the way at the end."

"Are you planning to make some sort of speech?"

"Think of this place as a multi-purpose forum. Come now, there's no time to waste."

"Are you sure we shouldn't let the residents watch us make it?" asked Saybil.

"We will show them a much grander act of creation once they are assembled here," Los replied nonchalantly. "At present the population of this free district is around three thousand, but by Har's reckoning, the total number of Nurabehn in the New World is more like forty million."

"Huh? You mean she counted?"

"Nay, there exists in this New World no mechanism to account for the place and number of Nurabehn births, so 'tis naught but a rough estimate. About

three hundred thousand reside in and around Kuravanuluox, apparently. And she puts the total number of Exinov and Ignas at just over three thousand.”

“It’s like a different order of magnitude from the Forbidden Land, huh...”

Los nodded. “I do not expect we need actually prepare to house three hundred thousand... We have been estimating perhaps ten thousand, with three thousand already here. But if people continue to arrive from the nearby free districts, we will easily surpass that number. If we make preparations to accommodate at least fifty thousand, we will not have to scramble down the line.”

“I am not sure we can guarantee provisions to feed so many,” said Zero.

“Once the food supply has stabilized, the population will increase naturally. After the war, this free district will surely become a holy place for the Nurabehn, and a commercial hub for the Forbidden Land. There is no harm in making preparations for an increased population now.”

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At Loux Krystas’s suggestion, all the residents of the free district hastily crowded into the newly-created area. Los had estimated the population at three thousand, but there were clearly over five thousand people crammed onto the peninsula. Those who were already accustomed to life in the city of ice were bewildered at the still-cold land beneath their feet; most had only ever known the city in its completed form.

Zero stood atop the stage, glancing out over the assembled crowd. The witch was so beautiful that just being in her presence made it feel like time had

stopped. Many who had never seen her before let out long sighs and found themselves muttering under their breath that she was even more lovely than Danna Ryl.

A tentacle from the Staff of Ludens extended to Zero's right hand, and another to Saybil's left, connecting them. Loux Krystas had argued that, rather than crowding the stage with several figures, the whole spectacle would appear more impressive if Zero stood alone. The Mud-Black Witch said nothing, but all the while she was concentrating mana beneath her feet.

A sudden chill raced down through the stage, licking at the sea ice on its way to the still ocean below. Accompanied by a deafening crackle, the surface of the ocean began to freeze with terrifying speed. The crowd pressed against the fence, exclaiming in wonder as the ice spread out from the six-sided land mass, creating six new branching districts before their very eyes, until a snowflake of land had formed upon the surface of the ocean.

Finally, Zero produced an ice sculpture modeled on the snowflake, and pointed to one of the branches radiating from its central hexagon. "This is where we are at present. Let us call it Stage Square, after the stage on which I stand. Each point contains a similar area, and I have connected them to one another via piers of ice. The process of assigning dwellings is somewhat backed up, so please wait here for the time being. This free district of ours will accept you. We will not pursue any who choose to leave, but I vow not to let the black dragon harm you while you are here."

Cheers went up from the crowd. Their faces were filled with relief and pride, as if all the terror of the black dragon's attack had been nothing but a bad dream.

Zero descended from the stage, and sank to the ground with a heavy sigh.

“Th-That left even me tired...! Such exertions you ask of me. You work your witches too hard...!”

“Marvelously done, Mud-Black! Verily thou art a peerless genius! I have prepared a show of appreciation suitable to thy labors!”

“A show of appreciation?”

“A table laid with all thy favorite foodstuffs! Ordinarily we must keep one eye on our pantries and cannot brook such extravagance, but today of all days we will make an exception.”

By the time Los was finished speaking, Zero had disappeared. The Dawn Witch looked over at Saybil in confusion.

“She raced off without a word as soon as you said, ‘foodstuffs.’”

Word of the city’s expansion spread at the same speed as rumor of the black dragon. People agonized over whether to remain in the free district or return to Kuravanuluox, and many prepared to act on their decisions—but in the end those decisions would prove meaningless. The black dragon had given them three days to decide, which was tantamount to a proclamation that in three days’ time, all who did not submit would be slaughtered. In which case, the war had to be brought to a conclusion before that time was out.

“We don’t know where the black dragon is currently hiding,” said Ghoda, quietly breaking the silence of the meeting room as he spread a map out on the table. “But if we attack Kuravanuluox, the gatekeeper is sure to show itself. We’re going to have to prepare for an aerial battle—”

“I will do it.”

Ghoda looked at Los. “Were you listening? I said an *aerial* battle.”

“Precisely why the task should fall to me. Look.” Los held out the Staff of Ludens, and liquid oozed from the jet-black orb then plopped to the ground, forming itself into a little dragon that flapped up to the ceiling and began to circle the room.

“A bird was, until recently, about the most impressive thing we could create, but now little Ludens and I have seen dragons up close time and time again. Ridden them, even. Thanks to which, my little Ludens can now transform into one. Kuravanuluox must needs feel a genuine sense that it is under attack, must it not? Instead of circling the city on Heath’s back, surely this—” From the Staff of Ludens’s dragon fell a hail of Remnants of Disaster, the same ones that had attacked the Witch’s Village some years earlier. “—would constitute a greater crisis?”

“Sure, but ain’t that a little *too* evil...?” Mercenary frowned, poking at the ersatz Remnants of Disaster, which consisted of spindly arms and legs growing from monstrous mouths. “They’ll really feel like they’re gettin’ attacked by a *witch*...”

“Then how about this?” With a casual wave of her staff, Los transformed the swarming Remnants of Disaster into jet-black dolls.

Mercenary stroked his chin approvingly. “Like an army of shadow warriors, eh? Better than a horde of mouth monsters, I s’pose. Whadda you think, Dragon Conqueror King?”

“Sure... And to be honest, I’m a little worried Heath won’t be able to keep his cool facing down that black dragon. Leaving it to Loux Krystas might be our best option.”

“Now that you come to it, Heath did throw off your attempts to rein him in, didn’t he.” Zero shot Ghoda a strange look.

The knight massaged his brow. "I asked Lily to interpret for me after the battle, wanted to ask what it was got Heath so angry. Seems his pride was badly hurt."

"His pride?"

The others looked at Ghoda doubtfully.

"Couldn't bear to see an inferior creature masquerading as a dragon."

"An inferior creature...?"

Everyone glanced at each other, but Zero was the one who blurted out, "I see, of course. From the perspective of a dragon, Exinov, Ignas, and Nurabehn all fall under the lesser umbrella of humankind."

"Try to imagine what it was like for him, being downed by a measly person in the form of a dragon."

"It must be hard to have such a noble creature as thy steed."

Ghoda put a hand to his forehead. "It's not like I ride Heath because I want to... I still don't really know what he thinks of me."

"I do." Zero smiled. "You are yourself an inferior being, and yet you slew a dragon that had lived for a thousand years. And because that dragon died, another was born in its place. To Heath you are an enemy, a parent, and the sole member of an inferior species whom he deems slightly less inferior."

"I suppose that's an honor, then," Ghoda said before turning back to the matter at hand with a sigh. "Now let's work out what our strategy will be once the dragon appears."

Heath was disgruntled.

I have lived since the age of myth, most of which time I spent sleeping amid the magma. Then I awoke one day to find that humans had made their dens within my territory. Unable to bear such an intrusion upon my peaceful rest, I went about driving out every one of them I came upon—until, quite unexpectedly, they fought back. Not only that, I even tasted the humiliation of death. But in that moment, I shed my old, heavy body, and was born again, light and new.

I am fond of this new form. While using that old body of mine, everything felt meaningless, but now everything I come in contact with feels novel. I do not even hate the humans as much as once I did. I had found them puny, weak, and roisterous, but after my rebirth the humans were larger than me. I still recall how warmly they cared for me, how a great many of them brought me food when I was yet small and weak, how they prayed for my growth and celebrated each passing day.

I still believe the humans to be beneath me, but there are those of whom I am fond—Ghoda chief among them. He is a special man, he who slew my old self. But he is also a foolish human, never comprehending my true intentions. I make it so clear, so easy to understand, and I in turn comprehend everything he has to say, yet I am only met with a furrowed brow and the question, “What in the world do you want?”

At that very moment Ghoda stood before Heath with a basket of ore, his favorite delicacy. “I know you’re angry with that black dragon. I understand, really I do.”

But he couldn’t possibly understand. How could I let that mixture of inferior

souls molded into the shape of a dragon, that strange and unsettling being, continue to exist? That thing is blasphemy, and not just against dragonkind. It is a desecration of life itself.

“But...we can’t beat that thing on our own.”

Heath gave a threatening roar, but Ghoda just looked at him coolly and tossed a chunk of ore into his mouth.

Honey sweet—is this gold?

Heath poked the tip of his nose into the basket, looking for another piece.

“It was the same when we defeated you, remember? We did it together. Humans are social animals, that’s just how we are. We join together to bring down more powerful foes.”

What do you mean, “more powerful”? So that thing is a little bigger and stronger, and it can breathe fire—maybe it can even breathe other things, who can say. Either way, it is insignificant. I want to tear out its throat with my teeth this very instant.

“Tomorrow, Loux Krystas is going to lure that thing into a trap so we can kill it. We’re going to need your strength, too, of course. But if you go charging after that black dragon on your own, Zero and Hort down on the ground won’t be able to unleash the full force of their magic.”

Heath growled deep in his throat.

“Your teeth couldn’t break through that thing’s scales—so leave it to *our* fangs. We all want to kill that dragon, right? If you don’t like the idea of *relying* on us, just think of it as *using* us. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you?”

Of course I do. And I understand the true meaning behind your words: I lost. I was beaten by that mockery of a dragon. I know that, hard as it may be to

admit. I was just being stubborn.

Heath licked up the rest of the ore in the basket and nudged Ghoda in the rear with his muzzle, lifting him off the ground. Then, depositing the off-balance knight onto his back, Heath spread his wings wide.

I feel like flying.

“Hey, wait a sec! At least let me get the saddle—!”

But Heath was already off, carrying Ghoda up into the night sky.

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Looking out of her window, Utsuwa’s eyes glittered as she watched the silver dragon flap away into the night. “Har, look! The pale dragon! It’s so pretty how he sparkles in the moonlight!”

Har came up beside the girl and they gazed out the window together. It made Utsuwa so happy that she threw her arms around the other’s waist.

“Utsuwa wants to ride the dragon again. On his back this time!”

“I’m sure he’d let you if you asked.”

There came a knock at the door, and Har left Utsuwa by the window to go and answer it.

“Oh, it’s you Kudo. Come in. How was the meeting?”

“Went fine. We got a whole crew of monsters on our side scarier than any dragon.”

Har chuckled at that. “I must say, even I was stunned by Zero’s little

performance the other day. I've seen her freeze a path down to the ocean floor, and I witnessed the creation of this free district, but that was something else again."

"Utsuwa saw, too! Right from this window! The ice spread out waaaaay over the ocean, and it was so pretty, and the city turned into a giant snowflake!"

Utsuwa was giddy with excitement. Kudo looked at her the same as always, but there was a hint of sadness about the color of his scales.

"Kudo?" Utsuwa cocked her head, and Kudo crouched down in front of her so that they were eye to eye.

"Look, I think...I think tomorrow this'll all be over. Your 'mother' can't beat us. By us, I mean, like...the professors and everyone."

"Isn't that...a really good thing?" asked Utsuwa.

"Yeah, it is. For us, at least."

"For Utsuwa, too. I mean, if mother wins, she'll eat Utsuwa."

"...Yeah."

"Utsuwa knows what her job is now. Har explained everything. Utsuwa will be absolutely sure to make up with Mother."

Utsuwa had fled to the free district, wailing that she didn't want to die. And most all the citizens of Kuravanuluox had seen it happen. From there, word had spread all across the land. Once the war was over, Utsuwa's work awaited—she would reconcile with Danna Ryl, and they would stand smiling side by side, a symbol of peace between the Forbidden Land and the New World.

"Don't worry. Utsuwa cried then, but Utsuwa isn't really scared of Mother. I'm half of Danna Ryl the One-Horned, after all."

“I see...”

“Mother has just lived a little bit too long. There’s too much she takes for granted, so she’s ended up resisting anything new. But deep down, Utsuwa and Mother both just love, love, love new things!” Utsuwa threw her arms in the air, jumping up and down.

Kudo smiled and got to his feet, ruffling the girl’s hair, then nodded lightly to Har and left. They listened to his footsteps recede down the hallway, then Utsuwa wrapped herself around Har’s waist again. “Do you think I gave it away?”

“No, you did great.”

“Are you sure? He didn’t realize that Utsuwa’s a bad girl?”

“No, don’t worry. And you aren’t a bad girl, my lady.”

“But...Utsuwa wants Mother to lose. Utsuwa thinks Mother has to die.”

If the free district’s defeat meant being dragged back to the tower and devoured, Utsuwa would rather her mother died—and that fact terrified her. She was scared that Kudo wouldn’t like such an awful girl, that everyone in the free district would hate her, that they would tell her she had to leave.

“This is the only place for Utsuwa now. Utsuwa doesn’t want to be hated, not by anyone. Don’t hate me, Har...! I’ll do everything I’m told, I promise...!”

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Once Utsuwa had cried herself out, Har laid her on the bed and sighed.

The young girl had lived her entire life to be a vessel for Danna Ryl. All her

education had been to that end, all the love she had received, and Utsuwa believed she had no value beyond that. She regretted abandoning her role, her duty, clinging to her own life and fleeing from her mother. And now she feared the people of the free district would abandon her if she didn't ingratiate herself with them.

"Danna Ryl... So cruel..."

It was too hard to watch this ten-year-old girl pushing herself to be so cheerful while worrying about anyone and everyone else, so they decided to keep her apart from the other residents of the district. They met to discuss whom Utsuwa would trust most, and Har put her name forward to serve as caretaker. Since then, she had been ever at Utsuwa's side—and Utsuwa had taken pains to please Har, doing everything she could to make the woman love her.

They had been right to separate Utsuwa from the other residents. There was some notion that they should present her to the people at the earliest opportunity so she could begin to learn and prepare herself to become their next leader, but if Utsuwa was intent on pleasing every last person she encountered, sooner or later she would fall apart.

"In truth, maybe there *is* no role that only you can fulfill for us. If we abandoned our people, changed our names, and went to the Forbidden Land... maybe you could simply be a normal little girl."

Har left Utsuwa's room.

And so the fateful morning arrived.



Chapter Six



History would never forget that day.

The residents of Kuravanuluox awoke to something strange in the air, and realized their city had been invaded. Black shadows danced and writhed outside their windows, beating on the panes and wordlessly screaming, “Open up!” Some also saw a black dragon flying through the sky above the city—but while it was certainly a dragon, it was not the gatekeeper of Kuravanuluox. This thing had no majestic horns atop its head, and its whole body was smooth, with a long tail drooping all the way from the sky to the center of the town below. And that tail seemed to be the source of the shadows that had suddenly appeared within the city walls.

“Where’s the gatekeeper?! Where is our dragon?!”

“What’s going on? I thought the foreigners only had one dragon!!”

“We should never have come back...! We’ve angered the envoys from the Forbidden Land...!”

But moments later the screams and wails of despair were replaced by cheers. Sensing something was wrong, the gatekeeper had rushed back to Kuravanuluox. In an instant the writhing shadows disappeared from the city, and the hornless interloper turned to fly away. But the gatekeeper would not let it escape.

The two dragons were roughly equal in size, but the gatekeeper, with its twisted horns, was heavier, faster, and more powerful. The hornless dragon, however, seemed to be flying around some strange track that ignored the very

laws of physics, almost as if it was toying with the gatekeeper. For a time, the two dragons rose and fell, circling in a dancing path above the city.

“Aid the gatekeeper! Protect the city!” someone shouted.

Some among the people of Kuravanuluox who had gone to the free district had returned with mana potions in their possession. These they used to charge their wizard guns, then began firing them up into the sky. Fitted out to track their prey, these guns were intended for bringing down thaumatheria, and were sure to deal some real damage—but numerous tentacles emerged from the hornless black dragon’s body and simply pulled the bullets into its enveloping darkness.

The volley from the wizard guns *had* succeeded in distracting their target for a split second, however, long enough for the gatekeeper’s long tail to land a direct hit. The hornless dragon’s body gave way like it was made of liquid and splashed away into the air. Part of that inky, oozing splatter transformed into a bird about the size of a thaumatherium, atop which stood a lone girl, her golden hair fluttering in the wind. She quickly flattened herself against the back of the bird, and it shot off like an arrow.

The gatekeeper did not give chase. Instead it calmly flapped its wings, hovering over the city. Then its whole body trembled and split into three parts. The large main body of the dragon remained where it was, while the two smaller offshoots flew off after the girl on the black bird.

+++

“I should have expected the blasted thing would be able to divide itself—! This

certainly complicates thiiiiiiiings!” Screaming into the wind, Los turned to see the two smaller dragons closing in on her. She nimbly avoided their teeth and claws as she made for the appointed meeting place.

The intention had been to avoid any fighting above the city itself in the hopes of minimizing casualties, but the black dragon didn’t seem to care much for their plans.

Perhaps I was a mite ostentatious...

Realizing just how little leeway she had, Los clicked her tongue. “Shan’t even give me the time to right myself, eh...?! ”

With the interference from her assailants on the ground, Los had slipped partway to the side, when suddenly she was struck squarely by the black dragon’s tail. She lost consciousness for a moment, and it was only the Staff of Ludens’s will that kept her from falling. In the past, the staff had only been capable of action when Los was using it, but of late it had begun walking on its own. And if Los happened to let it slip from her grasp, it would transform into a bird and save her, as it had today.

“I will not brook being considered a mere accessory! I myself am an ancient and venerable witch!” Leaving the Staff of Ludens to steer their flight, Los rummaged around for a magic potion and hurled it at one of the dragons that pursued her. “Have at thee! The Mud-Black Witch Special—a concoction ‘way too crazy’ for the hands of the general public! Didst feel a teensy twinge at *that?!* ”

But the small dragon burst through the clearing smoke, unharmed.

Los clicked her tongue again. “Heath cannot pierce thy scales, and explosives do naught to rattle thee... Hm?” Something was hurtling headlong toward her

at incredible speed, and she narrowed her eyes. “Heath and the Dragon Conqueror King?! But I am not yet at our meeting—”

Point?! Even as the last shouted word left her lips, the dragon raced past Los without so much as slowing down.

“They make for the city?! Verily naught proceeds according to plan, little Ludens...!”

In addition to Heath, Los, and Ghoda, the trio of Saybil, Kudo, and Hort had also been dispatched to bring down the black dragon. Zero, Mercenary, the priest, and Lily remained behind in the free district, along with a people’s militia armed with weapons from the merchants and led by Har.

Heath now carried Ghoda and Kudo on his back, which left Hort and Saybil at the meeting point.

“’Tis perhaps the best combination we could have hoped for...?”

Taking speed and maneuverability into consideration, Heath could carry at most two people on his back, and given the possibility that the dragon might be injured in the fight, Kudo was the obvious choice to join Ghoda.

I only hope that Hort’s magic will work against these two small dragons—

The thought of it failing, and of Hort and Saybil being devoured as a result, flashed through Los’s mind, and she ground her teeth. “Curses! I should at least crush *one* of the blasted things—!”

Los turned, and gulped. The two dragons had joined again into a single beast, doubling in size in the process...and its jaws were all too close.

Having separated from the whole, I suppose I should have expected the beasts could combine once more!

Without a moment's hesitation, Los jammed the Staff of Ludens into the dragon's mouth. The staff creaked, and bent—

And with a dull crack, it snapped in two.

“—Huh?” Los looked blankly at the broken staff.

Inconceivable. For three hundred years I have sought a way to break it. I have journeyed near and far in search of a place and time to die.

And is that time now?

Is that place here?

The dragon's fangs were closing in—and with the Staff of Ludens broken, Los would die if they sank into her flesh.

No. Something is strange.

Faced with imminent death, Los's mind began to race.

The Staff of Ludens has a demon sealed inside, a pitiful demon who cannot leave it, cannot so much as move—the staff is a prison. And now that prison is broken. Where will the Demon of Ludens go, now that it is free? Did it return to its demonic roost the moment the staff snapped? Did it go and leave me here?

I cannot believe it, Los thought. I cannot.

At this stage, Los's body was only preserved by the power of the Staff of Ludens. Her flesh had been destroyed any number of times, but each time the

staff had put her back together like a broken doll. If the demon's power evaporated, Los would be gone in an instant.

'Tis merely speculation, of course—

But Los believed. She and the staff had been partners for so many long years.

And so: “—Ludens!”



She swung the two pieces of the broken staff, one gripped in each hand, at the dragon as if she were casting a rope about its neck.

Just as she'd hoped, black tentacles stretched out in an arc from the ends of the staff fragments and hooked around the dragon's neck. Los used the momentum to hurl herself onto the creature's back, then forced the black loop into its mouth like a bit.

"Th-That gave me quite the shock!" she cried out. "I thought for a moment thou hadst perished!" The Staff of Ludens trembled slightly in sympathy.

At last the meeting point came into view, and with it a fully prepared Hort, practically jumping out of her skin in anticipation.

"My, my—I underestimated thee," Los exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

Hort looked every inch the witch, the expression on her face one of absolute conviction in their victory, to the point of what some might call arrogance.

"Let's go, Sayb!" she shouted. "Full power, 'kay?"

For Los, it was a comforting battle cry.

"First, one of these!"

Countless vines sprung from the earth and shot up into the air, entangling the dragon, which flailed and squirmed in vain as it was pulled inexorably down to the ground. Los leapt off of the dragon's back just in time to avoid being caught up in Hort's spell herself.

"Then one of these!"

Hort thrust a clenched fist skyward, at which a sharply pointed stone pillar burst from the ground beneath the dragon, piercing its hard scales and skewering its heart. Los lightly waved the Staff of Ludens, creating an umbrella

to shield herself from the rain of gore that exploded from the dragon's body.

Hort and Saybil looked in disbelief at the broken staff clutched in Los's hands.

"Professor Los?!" Hort wailed, turning pale. "Y-Y-Y...Your staff!"

"Indeed, 'tis broken." Los gave a sheepish grin.

"S-Staff...snapped, then... Professor, y-you're...gonna...die...aah..." His face as expressionless as ever, Saybil fell flat on his back in a dead faint.

"How now! This is no time to be playing at princess! Wherefore did the Dragon Conqueror King shoot past me toward the city without so much as a backward glance?! Explain!"

"Oh, that... Ghoda said Heath was just like, 'Trust me.'"

"Haaah?" Los raised an eyebrow and looked back at the city from which she had just come. She waved the broken Staff of Ludens again, and its oozing black liquid spread out beneath their feet, rising into the shape of a giant dragon. Swept up onto the creature's back, Hort hurried to ensure that the unconscious Saybil wouldn't fall off.

"Well, what point is there in blabbering about it here—we may as well go and see for ourselves."

"S-Sure, but...you'll explain later, right?! About how your staff got broken and how come you're still okay and everything?!"

Los smiled. "I can tell thee easily enough how the staff broke, but as for how I am still hale and hearty, well, I do not rightly understand it myself!"

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When Ghoda arrived at Kuravanuluox and saw the black dragon perched on the city wall, he understood why Heath had said to trust him: their foe was much smaller than it had been the last time.

Must have something to do with the two dragons we saw chasing Loux Krystas on our way here.

When the black dragon caught sight of them, its chest began to glow red hot. Realizing it was preparing to expel its fiery breath, Ghoda steered Heath toward the city, and the gatekeeper, unable to direct its fire at the place it was sworn to protect, released the flames into the sky instead.

“Aha, seems we should’ve chosen to fight that thing here from the start... Not that I much like the idea of using these folks as hostages.”

Heath roared as if to say he couldn’t agree more, then climbed high, high into the sky to ensure that their skirmish would bring no harm to the people below.

“...Heath. You know your teeth aren’t making it through that thing’s scales, right?”

Heath nodded.

“And you know better than anyone what we have to do to take the bastard down.”

Heath froze for a moment, then reluctantly nodded once more.

“What does *that* mean?!” Kudo shouted from behind, straining to be heard over the wind.

“Hmm... Now we’ve come this far you can’t go running off, so I might as well tell you.”

“Huh?! Tell me what?!”

“I’m goin’ inside that thing’s mouth.”

“...Huh?”

“I figure it’s gonna chew me to shreds—that’s why I brought you along.”

Kudo’s jaw dropped.

Ghoda was struck with the ludicrous thought that he could probably hop into the beastfallen’s mouth right now, too.

“Heath’s already on board with the plan. You take the reins.”

“H-Hold on a sec! Wait, wait, wait! Ain’t there some other way?! This feels like one desperate frikkin’ last resort!”

“Starting with the last resort means fewer casualties—here we go!”

“Ya know, I think maybe lookin’ up to you was a big mistake after aaaaaaall!”

Ghoda shook off the desperately screaming Kudo and let go of the reins, then began to sprint up Heath’s back, balancing above the void. The moment before Heath made contact with the black dragon, Ghoda leapt from his mount’s head. He would die if he fell from such an altitude, of course, but after long years of riding Heath through the sky, his fear of heights had completely evaporated.

The Dragon Conqueror King threw his arms around the black dragon’s neck, and it began shaking its head to try and throw him off—but before it could, Ghoda managed to get one foot into its mouth. The creature’s jaws instantly snapped shut, teeth cutting through muscle and bone. Intense pain shot through Ghoda’s brain, and he ground his already clenched teeth. He would not fall, however, and even in this situation, Ghoda’s strength was considerable. He drew the dagger from his waist and plunged it into the dragon’s nearby eye.

“Gaaaaah!” The dragon roared in agony, opening its mouth wide.

Have to get this done quick, before it starts breathing fire. Ghoda tossed a magic potion into the creature's mouth, then, without a moment's hesitation, drew his sword and severed his own leg. He was thrown off into the open air, only for Heath to swoop in and catch him on his back.

"Is everyone in the Church and Mage Brigade such a freakin' *monster*?!"

"Just hurry up and fix my leg! Closing the wound is enough, you can regrow it later!"

"I'm gonna make sure we amend the rules of the Brigade to say that just 'cause you got a healer with you, don't mean you can pull reckless shit like this!" Kudo screamed, casting Chordia on Ghoda's leg.

A thin layer of skin stretched over the wound, and once the bleeding had stopped, Ghoda let out a small sigh. "I'll take it under consideration."

Several seconds passed—then there came the muffled sound of an explosion from within the dragon, its internal organs bursting from a hole in its abdomen.

And yet it still lived.

"That thing's still flyin'?!"

"I expect it can regenerate unless the heart itself is destroyed—Heath!"

At his master's call, Heath sped toward the black dragon, latching onto its neck with his teeth as it feebly tried to flap away. He dragged the black dragon through the sky, then swung it around with all his might before casting it away. Unable to right itself, the black dragon plummeted toward the ground.

Kudo's scales turned white. "This ain't good! That thing's falling too fast, people are gonna get crushed!"

"No—on this trajectory, it should be fine." Ghoda sounded unconcerned.

And indeed, the moment the black dragon broke through the clouds, its descent came to an abrupt halt. The great white tower that loomed up into the sky in the center of town had pierced the dragon's heart, vile blood painting the white walls red. The beast clawed at the air with its forelegs a few times then went limp. In that instant the blood that stained the tower, the scattered chunks of flesh, everything turned to ash and floated away on the wind.

Ghoda breathed a sigh of relief and patted the back of Heath's neck appreciatively before turning to Kudo. "Nice work. See, I wasn't wrong about you."

"H-Huh...?"

"I told you back in the Witch's Village, didn't I? That you'd be an asset to my battalion."

2

I've lost everything. All of it, gone.

Danna Ryl sat slumped on the throne in her audience chamber, waiting for it all to end. Confronted with the sight of their stalwart gatekeeper so brutally stricken from the sky, the residents of Kuravanuluox had lost all will to fight and had unconditionally surrendered, leaving the road to the tower open to the invaders from the Forbidden Land.

They will be here soon, I suppose.

She was prepared for the fact that their arrival meant her death. But—

"Mother! Mother!"

How terribly ironic that the voice announcing her demise should be that of her other half, whom she had spent ten long years raising with such tenderness.

“Mother, Utsuwa is here! Utsuwa has come back!”

The girl raced to her and clung to her bosom. Danna Ryl was bewildered, and, unable to bear the unpleasant feelings rising inside her, she roughly pushed Utsuwa away.

“Why are you here? Why have *you* come? Do you mean to consume me before the masses as I intended to consume you?”

“N-No...! Utsuwa has come here to persuade you.”

“To persuade me...?”

“Yes!” Even under these circumstances, the girlish sparkle in Utsuwa’s eyes was almost blinding.

The invaders stood behind Utsuwa. It seemed so long ago they had first come to Danna Ryl as a diplomatic delegation, standing respectfully before her in this very audience chamber.

“Please listen, Mother. The people adore you. They all want you to stay Keybinder forever... And the people from the Forbidden Land all say the same thing! The thing is, Utsuwa wants to be useful, too, *as* Utsuwa...”

Ah, so that’s their game.

They need her.

In order to take control of this beautiful city, these invaders from the Forbidden Land mean to elevate my other half as a means of maintaining continuity with the old order. With the support of the Forbidden Land, Utsuwa will take charge of all manner of goods and commodities, while I will shoulder

the task of sharing with the people the clemency I've received.

Oh, how enviable.

Danna Ryl reached out a gentle hand to Utsuwa's cheek. Her skin was so smooth, her eyes so bright.

"Do you still love your mother, Utsuwa?"

"Y...Yes! Utsuwa loves Mother! Utsuwa should have just come and talked to you, but I was so scared, and ran away... Utsuwa is sorry. For bringing such shame on you—it's bothered me so...!"

"Enough of that now, it's all right. Ahh—Utsuwa. Come here. There is something I wish to tell you."

"Yes, Mother."

Utsuwa did as she was told, and Danna Ryl hugged her close again, then whispered in her ear, "If you love me, you'll stay quiet about this, won't you?"

"—Huh?"

Danna Ryl touched her horn lightly to Utsuwa's. The rite required no grand incantations or complex procedures to be carried out. All that was necessary for the exchange of bodies was for their horns to touch.

Now Danna Ryl's soul was in Utsuwa's young body.

Finding herself suddenly in an adult's frame, Utsuwa was stunned into silence, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Danna Ryl shoved her old self away and, from Utsuwa's own lips, cried out,

“Mother just tried to take Utsuwa’s body! Oh, how awful! Hurry up and execute her!” Even as she said this, she grabbed the horn of her old body and, mustering all her strength, snapped it off.

With no horn, our souls can never be switched again. Utsuwa’s body is mine...and so is her place in this world. Danna Ryl ran joyfully over to the invaders from the Forbidden Land—or rather, to her new guardians.

But no one rushed to protect her. In fact, Har Bell leapt up onto the dais and pulled Utsuwa close as she sat there stunned in Danna Ryl’s former body.

“Lady Utsuwa! Are you hurt?!” Har Bell addressed the girl by name, without confusion or hesitation.

A vexed sigh from behind made Danna Ryl’s heart sink, and she turned back to see an extravagantly dressed girl with long blond hair glaring at her in contempt.

“I did expect a certain degree of pointless struggle from thee, but even I had not reckoned with anything this unsightly... One can hardly believe you two bear halves of the same soul.”

“Wh-What do you mean... Utsuwa is Utsuwa...! Look, Mother isn’t even saying anything, because she can’t deny that she’s Danna Ryl!”

“Not one of us present would ever mistake thy foul, unclean soul for young Utsuwa’s pure, clear, unsullied one.”

Her cold gaze was like a dagger to Danna Ryl’s heart. Her eyes brimmed with tears and, feeling as if she couldn’t bear to remain there any longer, she took off running.

“Hey, you know we can’t just let you get away!” The girl with the antlers caught her by the arm and pulled her back.

“O-Oww...! Let go of me!” Danny Ryl cried out in genuine pain. Usually that would be enough, but the grip on her arm only became tighter and tighter. “Why are you doing such horrible things?! I haven’t done anything! You’re the ones who started all this! All I asked was for you to hand over those traitors! I simply wanted to pass judgment in accordance with the law!”

“And you never thought for a second that your law might be wrong to begin with?!”

“Why would I doubt the law when there has never been any problem with it?! Aah, Har Bell—! None of this would ever have happened if you hadn’t gone to the Forbidden Land!”

Har Bell let out an exasperated sigh, and Danna Ryl flushed crimson at the outrageous humiliation of it all.

“You know all too well that this world would have ceased to function because of the mana shortage if I hadn’t gone to the Forbidden Land,” Har said. “The Exinov might’ve staved off the inevitable for a little while by consuming the Nurabehn, but what were you planning to do after that? Start eating each other?”

“We should have farmed the Nurabehn as Zaza Ryl advised!”

“I’m sure this was never of much concern to you Exinov, but the Ignas’s birthrate has plummeted in recent years. I learned about the mechanism behind it all in the Forbidden Land, and now I understand. See, the dilution of beast souls over the course of generations means an increase in the number of Nurabehn born to the Ignas, which would eventually lead to a large-scale uprising.”

“I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know! I don’t want to hear anything you

have to say! I don't want to listen to any more of this!" Danna Ryl screamed like a child, her tantrum all the more convincingly childish for the fact that she was in the body of a ten-year-old girl.

It was Utsuwa who finally broke the silence that settled in once Danna Ryl's cries had subsided. "Please, let Mother leave if she wants to."

"Huh?! Lady Utsuwa, what do you...?!"

Utsuwa smiled gently at the incredulous Har Bell. "Mother has led our people for centuries, which left her with little freedom. She must be very tired. Utsuwa will give her body to Mother so she can go and be free. And Utsuwa will do her best to take care of all of Mother's rightful tasks."

The young woman holding Danna Ryl's arm looked around at the others, then loosened her grip with a sigh. Not wanting to be there for even one more second, Danna Ryl dashed off, practically tripping over her own feet as she fled the tower.

Ahh—how long has it been since I left that place? Was the sky always this vast, this blue, this deep—?

"Somewhere, anywhere, some place far away...! Where nobody knows me...!"

She ran on, wanting only to escape.

"But like, with that horn, she's gonna stand out anywhere she goes... How's she ever gonna get to be free? And it'd be a huge pain in the antlers if someone started up some Exinov restoration movement or something... I don't think it

was such a good idea to let her go.”

“If yer gonna whine about it, why the hell’d you let her go in the first place? You agreed at the time, so just suck it up and quit gripin’.” Kudo flicked Hort in the forehead with a claw.

“Ouch!” she cried, covering the spot with her hands.

They were on the roof of the bell tower, looking out over the city of ice.

Everything had happened so fast after the battle with the dragon. Utsuwa was officially installed as the new Keybinder, with Seth and Har as her lieutenants. Her soul was inside Danna Ryl’s body, with its broken horn. Once an honest account had been given to the people, including an explanation of the interrupted rite of rebirth, almost all were wholly sympathetic to Utsuwa; there were only a very few dissenting voices. There was likely to be tumult in the New World for a while yet, but at least they could move forward through the confusion. The stagnation of the past was over, and they were on a path to a better future.

“There’s a ship arriving from the Forbidden Land today, right?”

“Yeah. Saybil went to meet it, said someone he knows is on board.”

“Huh? Who?”

“Ulula.”

“What?! Hey, I wanna see her!”

“Then go.”

“You know her, too!” Hort jumped up and raced down to the pier, dragging Kudo along with her.

“Saybil!”

“Ulula!”

The ship came in—but before it even reached the pier, the fluffy owl came flapping down from the deck and into Saybil’s open arms. They spun around and around as Saybil enjoyed the first feel of her soft plumage in quite some time.

“Oh my, what’s this? I wasn’t expecting such an enthusiastic welcome. You must have been awfully lonely without my company!”

“Yup, sure was. I’ve made a little progress on my research over here, too, and I’ve been itching to share it with you.”

“Hmph! Well, I, for my part, have made leaps and bounds while you’ve been away!”

“Wow, I can’t wait to hear all about it! You really are the best, Ulula. And so fluffy.”

“You know perfectly well that I’m not fluffy by choice!! I simply haven’t found a body worthy of containing me just yet!”

“You sure this isn’t the perfect body for you, though?”

“I most certainly am!” Ulula gave Saybil’s forehead a vigorous pecking.

“Wh-Whoa... She hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Ulula! You’re as awesomely fluffy as ever!”

Saybil turned when he heard Kudo’s voice, only for Hort to charge up and rip

Ulula out of his arms. She hugged the owl to her chest, stroking her all over, but Ulula didn't seem particularly put out.

"H-Hort...! I expected you'd have forgotten all about me by now...!"

"How could I ever forget you with a personality that over the top?!"

"Then why didn't you come see me? I've been cooped up in the Forbidden Library all this time!"

"I-I was kinda busy with work..."

"Your work is more important to you than your dearest friend?!"

"I'm sorry! Really, I'm sowowowww!"

Ulula's mood, which had seemed to soften for a moment, took another turn for the worse, and she began pecking at Hort's forehead in turn.

"But, how come you're here?" Saybil asked.

Ceasing her onslaught, Ulula perched expertly atop Hort's antlers and puffed out her chest. "To find myself a body, of course! My research has come to something of a stopping place, for the time being."

"A body... But aren't Fianos and Kukuru looking for one for you?"

"Father and Kukuru are here, too, obviously!"

Saybil froze. Ulula's father, Fianos—the tall, slim, beautiful manipulator of human relationships known as the Bondweaver Sorcerer—was intent on marrying Los.

"F-Fianos is here...?" Saybil stammered.

"Hm? He should have arrived before me."

"But the ship only just—!"

“Oh, he came on one of those thaumatherium things. Apparently Loux Krystas mentioned an urgent matter and told him to fly here at once.”

“Professor Los did?!” Saybil was stunned. After a few moments of agitation, he managed, “I’m just gonna go see her for a minute...!” And with that, he was gone.

Ulula and Hort watched him go, their eyes narrowed.

“Sayb just has *no* idea about girls.”

“He truly is the worst. Unbelievable.”

“Uh, I mean, I know why Professor Los called Fianos here, if yer wonderin’...” Kudo muttered.

Hort and Ulula turned their narrowed eyes on him.

“What?! They’re gonna have it out?!”

“Is this girl talk?! A tale of stolen love?!”

“No, no, no!”

Hort and Ulula closed in on Kudo, and it took everything he had to evade their clutches.

“The war’s over, and there’s a brand-new leader, right? Now, why d’ya think she might wanna summon the Bondweaver Sorcerer...?”

Hort and Ulula’s eyes went wide. The real reason for the lack of upheaval, for the broad acceptance of Utsuwa’s leadership, was suddenly clear as day.



Epilogue



“Right then—a toast to the end of the war, to the original free district receiving its new name of ‘Glakitacis,’ and to the arrival of the first trade ships from the Forbidden Land—cheers!”

The icy plaza Zero had built was immediately put to good use, both to store trade goods and as a banquet venue. And it was Seth, the merchant leader, who now stood on the glittering snowflake stage and raised his glass to the crowd.

It was ultimately decided that the man-made island of Glakitacis would serve as the center for trade between the Forbidden Land and the New World, and accordingly, Seth was put in charge.

Zero had, of course, vehemently refused the position. “You wish me to govern...? Ick, what a tiresome prospect. Look, the very thought is giving me goosebumps.”

Har had been the other candidate, but she had elected to focus her energy on assisting Utsuwa.

“It’s like, everything’s finally over and done with! Right? I mean, we were just supposed to pop over for some quick trade negotiations then go straight back to Wenias, but we’ve been here for what feels like forever! I wonder how my troops are doing...” Hort mused.

“Mighta felt like forever, but it ain’t even been a year yet,” Kudo replied. “Though I know what you mean. I was only countin’ on being here for a few days at most.”

“Yeah, you two have it rough... I was able to just push all my work onto Ulula and waltz on over here.” Saybil was the only one who could be so laid-back

about their stay. For one thing, there was nobody in Wenias for him to rush back to. Ulula was the only person he might have missed, and now she had joined them in the New World. “Ulula really is amazing, though. I mean, maybe the reason we weren’t making much progress on our research is because I was there in the lab with her... I don’t possess that powerful drive to keep making things better, more convenient...”

“That’s our Sayb!”

“An’ when Ulula sees all the technology they’ve got over here, she’ll prob’ly start developing all kindsa new stuff. Seems like you might just be dead weight in the lab at this point.”

“Kudo!”

“What’s it matter?” Kudo brushed off Hort’s scolding. “It’s a question of what he’s gonna do next, is all.”

“Huh? Next?” Saybil blinked a few times. “Hmm... Yeah, I guess you’re right. There wouldn’t be much for me to do back at the lab, if we’re being honest...”

“Huh? Are you gonna join the Mage Battalion, then?! Wanna join my unit?!”

“I think I might stay here, actually. We’ve been so busy with the war, I haven’t had a chance to look over any of their texts... And I want to check out all the animals and plants and minerals and whatnot that they have here.”

“So, are you saying we won’t see each other again...?”

Saybil looked down, then raised his head once more. “I love you both.”

“Well yeah, you already told us that!”

“I know. It just struck me again, that’s all. I feel safe when I’m with you, so if the two of you stayed here, too...it’d make me happy.”

“I-I want to stay! But... But... I wonder what Headmaster Albus would say...? Maybe she’d be all like, ‘A survey of the New World? Sounds cool, go for it!’...?”

“I can’t stay. Got my people waitin’ for me... And heck, I never intended on comin’ here to begin with.”

“Huuh?! Come on Kudo, at least give it some thought!” protested Hort.

“Yeah, think it over. Just consider it.”

“My ducklings! I have caught you at the perfect moment!”

A shrill, high-pitched voice pierced the air, jolting the trio to their feet just as they were slipping into a bittersweetly intimate moment. They turned to see Los, seeming in particularly high spirits, standing there with the Staff of Ludens in her hand.

“Huh?! Professor, your staff is fixed?!”

Despite having been snapped in two during the battle, the Staff of Ludens had been seamlessly restored to its original form.

“Indeed so. ’Twould appear that over many long years of confinement, the demon hath become one with the staff itself. I simply attached a splint, and before I knew it the two halves had joined themselves anew.”

“Whoaaa... I-I didn’t know your staff was quite so...lively!” said Hort, recoiling a little, at which the orb embedded in the tip of the staff rippled with resentment.

“Now that the staff has been broken, the seal is undone, and little Ludens is free... But we are come all the way to this New World, and I would adventure a little longer!” Los clenched her fist. “Hence, Ludens and I have decided to extend our contract a short while. When it came to actually returning to the demon realm, it seems my little Ludens felt bereft at the thought of leaving my

side.” Los rubbed her cheek lovingly against the staff.

“Hwanh?!” Hort let slip an odd cry. “Then you’re staying here, too, Professor Los? In the New World?”

“Mm. Mud-Black and Mercenary also say the same. And Father mentioned something of missionary work, which means the mouse will surely stay to be at his side.”

“Whaaaa?! So, like, *everyone’s* staying?! C’mon Kudo, everybody else is staying!”

“I already told you, I’m not freakin’ staying here!”

Even when Hort started shaking him, Kudo’s resolve didn’t falter, and she puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

Los seized the moment to press on. “Now! There exists a wonderfully amusing invention here in the New World called a visage tracer! This supremely impressive device is not only capable of drawing an incredibly detailed portrait in a flash, it can reproduce that portrait endlessly! Being as I am the Dawn Witch, pursuer of all things novel, I have sought one out in the hopes that I might assay a trial of its function together with my dear students—!”

“Whoa—! That sounds super cool!” exclaimed Hort, a broad smile replacing the gloom of a moment ago.

Explaining that all was already in readiness, Los hurried them to a corner of the banquet area where a tent had been set up. They were startled to see Zero and Mercenary emerging from within just as they arrived.

“M-Mud-Black! You have used the device?!”

“Ah, Dawn. I saw how pleased the mouse appeared to be with so many portraits of the priest in her possession, and I thought I might indulge myself. I

must admit, though, I had not expected it to be quite so exceptional. Here, I will share one of ours with you.”

“H-Hey, cut it out! Don’t go spreadin’ those around...”

“Whyever not? I have taken a fancy to this portrait.”

The slim piece of paper Zero held out to Los was so detailed, it truly looked as if the subjects had been sealed bodily within. The portrait showed Zero kissing an irritated Mercenary on the cheek.

One look was enough to drive Los wild with excitement. “A-Astonishing! ’Tis nothing like the staged moment of conventional portraiture—there is a brilliant energy within these lines that bespeaks an entire tale!”

“That’s sure one long-winded way o’ puttin’ it...”

Los ignored Mercenary’s grouching and gleefully clutched the portrait to her breast. “Wait right there, for in a matter of moments we shall have a stunning portrait to give thee in return!”

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The banquet went on late into the night, until everyone was either exhausted from laughing, staggeringly inebriated, or asleep at—and in some cases underneath—the tables.

Kudo took a drunken Hort to the clinic and tossed her onto one of the beds, then went to lie down in one of the on-call rooms himself.

There was an air of euphoria in the city, amid which Los sat on the roof of the bell tower smiling and gazing at the portrait of her three beloved fledglings,

looking up only occasionally to take in the full vista of the moonlit night.

“You don’t need to look at that portrait when I’m right beside you,” said Saybil, emerging from the shadows.

Los gave a voiceless shriek and leapt back. “Wh-Why dost appear so suddenly ...? Didst give me such a start! What would thou with me?”

“You’re leaving tonight, aren’t you?”

“Most incisive...! And when I took such pains to imply that I would remain in the city a while longer.”

“I was thinking the same thing... That if I’m going to leave, it should be tonight.”

“Oho?”

“I invited Hort and Kudo to come too, actually—but neither of them could give me an answer on the spot. So if I stay here now, Hort will agonize over it, and she might end up coming along even if it meant abandoning things she didn’t need to abandon. I really don’t want that.”

“So thou wilt simply depart without saying goodbye?”

“Yes. Just like you do, Professor Los.”

“Bold indeed thou hast grown! Speaking as if thou knowest all, despite having lived not even a century!”

Yet perhaps he is right.

Los always left so suddenly because it pained her to think of those who would be troubled by her departure, or would feel lost without her there.

No, that is putting too fine a point on it. The whole thing is simply a bother—too much of a burden. It makes me feel as if my freedom is being stolen

away. It besmirches my very being.

“I talked a bit with Professor Zero before I came up here. She says she’s going to make her way around the New World and create more witch’s paths to make it easier to travel. I’m thinking of doing the same thing—look.” Saybil opened his bag. It was stuffed full of stone tablets carved with Zero’s runes. “And...you can make a bird that seats two, can’t you, Professor Los? I want you to take me with you. Just until you get tired of having me along.”

“Has this aught to do with thy feelings of love for me?”

“Huh? No, it doesn’t.”

Saybil seemed confused by the question, and Los felt deflated by his answer.

“Speaking of love... You’ve decided to keep on living a while longer, huh?”

“I have.”

“Then what should we do about our promise? That if I stop loving you, I’ll kill you before you realize that’s happened.”

“What in blazes?! Thou speakest of such deeds when thou hast not yet gained the strength to carry them out?!”

“Sure, but still...”

“Well, ahem... ’Tis true that at present I would be rather upset to suddenly lose my life... Not when there is so much about which to be excited...”

“I know, right? I’m really excited, too. I love you, Professor Los, but more than that it’s been so much fun just traveling around with you... It’s less about romance and more about adventure.”

It was rare for Saybil to seem so passionate about anything. Los was particularly fond of him when he got like this.

...Fond? And what might that mean, I wonder. A mere fondness for him as one of my precious fledglings? Or perchance—

“Professor Los?”

“’Tis nothing!” Los put a lid on her thoughts and got to her feet. With a wave, the Staff of Ludens transformed into a bird perfectly sized for two. “I have a great love for voracious curiosity. Rejoice, for I shall allow thee especially to accompany me! Now, if thou meanest to come aboard, do it quickly. I can be ever so fickle!”

+++

When the banquet was finally over, everyone awoke to find Los and Saybil gone. Hort and Kudo weren’t all that surprised by their disappearance. They’d both had an inkling—they knew their paths had diverged the moment they hesitated to remain with Saybil.

And so, at long last, the day came for their ship to depart for the Forbidden Land.

“Man, those two really ain’t comin’ back, are they,” muttered Kudo, leaning against the railing of the deck. “Frikk’in’ free spirits.”

“Feels kinda like you and me are just ordinary people, huh.” Hort was, like Kudo, leaning heavily against the railing. She felt dispirited, but having Kudo by her side was reassuring. “It’s like, there’s nothing I want to do so much that I’d abandon everything else for it... Or, I guess I just somehow get stuck on worrying about all the people around me.”

“But it’s ordinary people who make the world go round.”

Hort and Kudo heard approaching footsteps on the deck, and turned to see Ghoda, outfitted for the journey.

“Let ordinary people change the world in their own way—they’ll change it so much it’ll give those two a real shock when they get back.”

“I knew we could count on you for some words of wisdom, Dragon Conqueror King!”

“Sorry, but what the hell you doin’ traipsin’ around like you’re just some ordinary guy yerself?!” Kudo glared at Ghoda. “I ain’t havin’ it, you hear me?! No ‘ordinary person’ goes jumpin’ into a dragon’s mouth or cuttin’ off their own leg like it’s nothin’!”

“I certainly wasn’t trying to make it seem like it was nothing...but I do appreciate you regrowing my leg. I’m back in fighting form, thanks to you.” Ghoda tapped his leg—the one Kudo’s magic had restored to him—and grinned cheerfully, then slipped a firm arm around the beastfallen’s shoulders. “Anyway, you mentioned something about the rules of the Brigade, didn’t you? I’ll take that to mean you’re interested in a key administrative position—or am I wrong? To be honest, I’ve been starting to feel like it’s all a little too much to handle on my own. Once I’ve submitted my report on your valiant service in the recent conflict to Knight Commander Eudrite and Mage Commander Amnir, we’ll be convening a council on the matter—so get ready.”

“H...Hell no! I’m only suited to bein’ a lowly mage medic! I ain’t never ridin’ on that damn dragon of yours again!”

“I’ll get back to you in due course. Something to look forward to.”

With the shady smile still plastered on his face, Ghoda departed, leaving in his wake only a laugh that didn’t suit him in the least. A little while later they saw

his dragon in the sky, and then a steam whistle sounded. Their ship slipped away from the free district—toward home.

+++

Danna Ryl had no idea where to go, so when she heard the ship was accepting all passengers, she got on board. Not wanting anyone to see her, she curled up in an out-of-the-way corner of the hold and hugged her knees to her growling stomach. For many, many years she had maintained her corporeal form using mana alone, and the concept of eating had long ago become foreign to her. Utsuwa's body did not possess the same stores of mana, however, so when she attempted to sustain herself as usual she quickly ran out—and with that came an intense hunger.

Danna Ryl's pride would not permit her to steal or beg. On the other hand, she had no experience of any kind of labor. Perhaps she had in fact worked at some point in her life, but over the course of a thousand years those memories had been washed away. To say nothing of the fact that anyone who saw her horn would know at once who she was.

Danna Ryl had heard Utsuwa's speech explaining the situation in full: "I am Utsuwa, inside the body of Danna Ryl, while Danna Ryl is presently using Utsuwa's old body." Utsuwa had even dared to say that anyone who found Danna Ryl in difficulty should aid her! Who was it that had reduced Danna Ryl to such dire straits in the first place...?!

Danna Ryl didn't want anyone to take pity on her. But she was just so tired.

"I'm hungry..." She fell to the floor, and the ragged cloth she'd been using to

cover her head slipped off, revealing her glimmering crystal horn. "Someone... help me..."

"I don't mind helping you, but...?"

At the sound of this shrill voice, Danna Ryl opened her bleary eyes.

It was an owl.

The bird circled her a few times, hopping along the floor, then nodded and began stroking Danna Ryl's horn with the tip of her wing.

"Yes, very good! I like it! Allow me to take that body off your hands!"

"Body...?" Danna Ryl looked down at herself. "You want this body?"

"Yes. It's just perfectly wonderful, far too good for the likes of you! Ah, but don't worry, I will give you a suitable replacement. And since it's clear you can't think about anything for yourself, I will keep you as my familiar!"

The owl spread her wings wide, and Danna Ryl did not even have the strength to resist. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she found herself in a bird cage. On the other side of the bars, a girl with a sparkling crystal horn and magnificent dress was talking with another girl and an incredibly beautiful man.

When the girl noticed that Danna Ryl had awoken, she came over and peered into the cage. "You're awake? How do you like your new home? It's a wonderful cage, just perfect for one of my servants, wouldn't you say?"

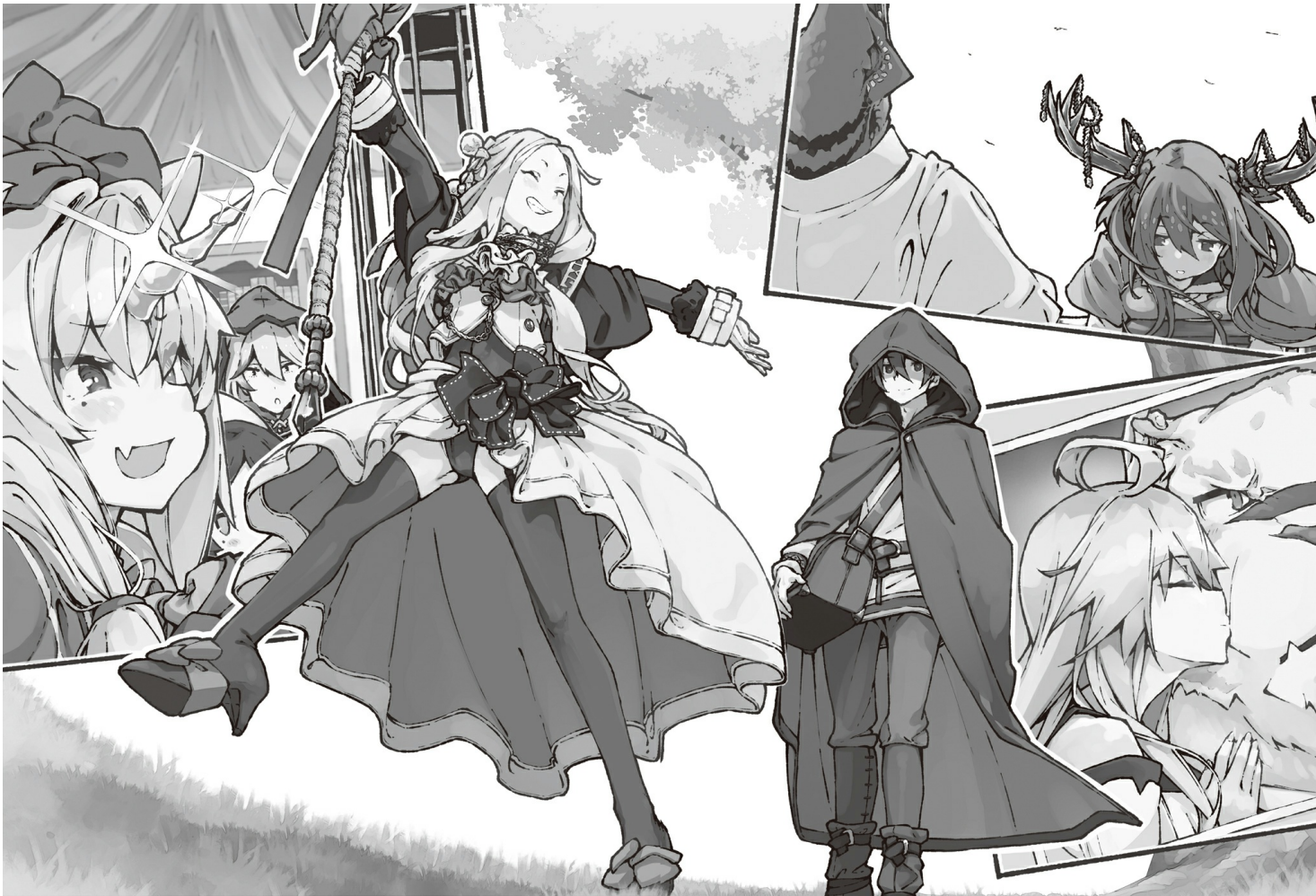
"Now, now, Ulula. She's moved from a human body into an owl's all of a sudden, so I'm sure she's confused. She deserves a better explanation than that."

"Yes, Father," the girl called Ulula replied obediently, then turned back to

peer into the cage once more. “Look, your body suits me perfectly, doesn’t it? That wonderful man is my father, and that’s my little sister, Kukuru. You’re going to be a member of our family now. Here, dinnertime.”

The girl pushed a piece of fruit into the cage, and Danna Ryl didn’t hesitate to snatch it with her beak. She felt a strange sense of satisfaction wash over her. None of this bothered her in the least. All she felt was relief that it was all over, and a sense of ease now that she was under the protection of a dominant master.

Danna Ryl gently closed her eyes once more, safe in the knowledge that she would never have to rule over anyone again.



Afterword

I think this might be the first time I've actually written an afterword for the final volume of a series.

Even before I'd finished *Grimoire of Zero* I had plans to start working on *The Dawn of the Witch*, so my note at the end of that first series was more of a "continued in part two" kind of send-off. And now, six volumes of *Dawn of the Witch* later, here we are.

My entire life as a writer has been spent with at least one foot in this world. Even when I was working on screenplays, rom-coms, children's books, the deadlines for *these* books have always floated vaguely at the back of my mind. There hasn't been a single day without that. And I don't think I'll ever forget this world or these characters, not really. I expect I won't be putting out any more books that take place in this world, but it will always live on inside my mind. Professor Los will continue searching for new things, Saybil and the others will continue to grow and mature, and Zero and Mercenary might just keep on quietly saving the world off in some unknown place.

Maybe it'll be the same for some of you, too. Maybe in the minds of some of my readers who've stayed with the story to the end, this world I envisioned will continue to exist, and these characters I've tried so desperately to understand will live on. Who knows, maybe Los, Sayb, Zero, and Mercenary will go out and perform great deeds I could never even have conceived of.

And maybe someday, someone who reads this book will want their own characters to go on an adventure like this, in a world of their own imagining,

and they'll start writing that adventure down. I would be so excited to read that story! I'd be like, "Yeah! I love this kind of book! Me and this author are totally on the same page!"

I dream about that day.

Incidentally, the fact that Kodansha published this story is thanks in very large part to the manga artist Tadadi Tamori. When I was waffling over where to take the manuscript for this sequel, Tamori-sensei offered to talk to Kodansha's editorial staff for me, and I'd like to take this opportunity to express my deepest thanks.

And it's thanks to my editor Shoji-san that I was able to do whatever I wanted with this story. I think if I'd had an editor who said, "Do this, do that, this part won't sell," I wouldn't have been able to keep on writing. I'm in total awe of the speed with which he'd get the revised manuscripts back to me, especially given the frankly extraordinary number of typos.

Iwasaki-sensei, I'm really, really, really sorry for all the hassle with the illustrations. Even after the super long gap between volumes two and three, even when delays with the manuscript made the illustration schedule hellish, you still said working on *The Dawn of the Witch* was fun. Big thanks for sticking with this series to the very end.

Tatsuwo-sensei's art for the manga version is always so amazing that lately I feel less like the original creator and more like a fan just waiting for the next chapter to come out. The characters' faces and the page layouts are always so full of a uniquely manga-esque expressiveness, to the point that it wouldn't surprise me at all if people thought the manga came first. It's been such a pleasure to have Tatsuwo-sensei on board, and I'm going to keep following his work even after *The Dawn of the Witch* finishes its run.

Also, the fact that Tezuka Productions did the anime version is the honor of a lifetime. Thank you so much for producing such a wonderful adaptation.

At the end of the closing credits, it often says “and you.” And it’s true: without our readers, we authors wouldn’t exist. It’s unquestionably you, the readers, who have allowed me to follow this path.

I don’t have much space left, so at this point I’ll say my goodbyes.

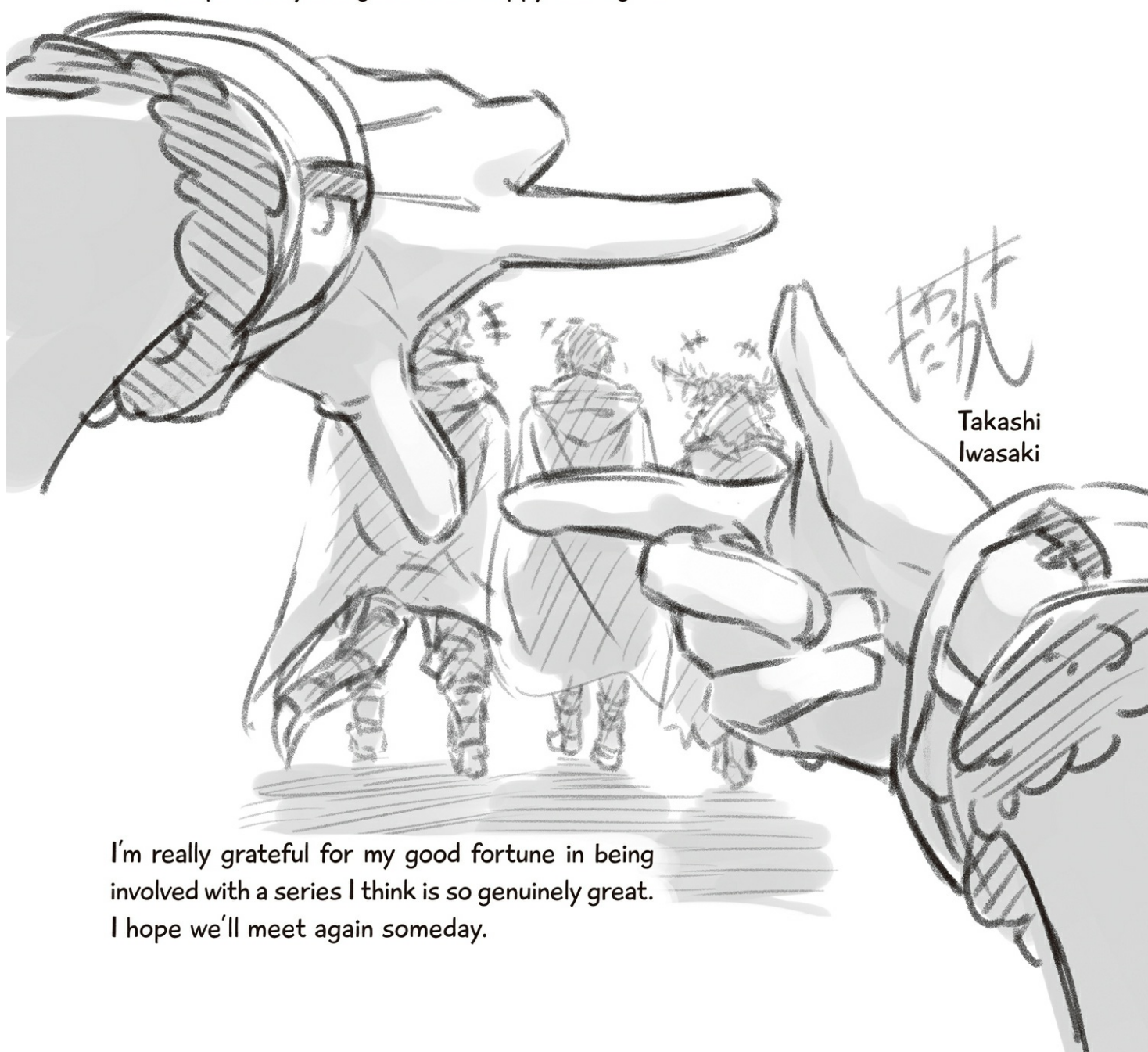
See you again sometime, in the afterword to some other story.



Another super fun volume—! I'm so happy I got to fit Ulula in there.

Sure seems to me like Sayb and the gang are going to slip back home just as soon as they can to be reunited with Hort and Kudo and the rest. Then they'll be bopping back and forth between the New World and the Forbidden Land with Professor Los, wringing every last drop of enjoyment out of this world...!

I hope everyone gets their happy ending—!!



I'm really grateful for my good fortune in being involved with a series I think is so genuinely great. I hope we'll meet again someday.

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** I've got nothing but gratitude...!

Thank you so much...!!

The Dawn of the Witch 6

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