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**SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEU^N
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY**

2. OBEY MY COMMAND, DOLL!



SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

A manga-style illustration featuring a woman with long, wavy orange hair and blue eyes, wearing a yellow bikini, standing on a rocky beach. She is looking towards the right with a slight smile. In the foreground, a man with spiky orange hair and blue eyes, wearing a black suit, is peeking from behind a rock, holding his finger to his lips in a 'shh' gesture. The background shows a green, hilly landscape and a rocky coastline with waves crashing against the rocks.

"I think I can feel someone peeping on me..."

"You're just being paranoid.

You sure it's not just a wild animal?"

Majic went on humming his tune.



"Wahaha, wahahahahah!"
The stone behemoth was
half-submerged beneath
the water, but it was still
menacingly huge.
It was a Golem!



Below the portrait hung a plaque with writing engraved upon it in some ancient language. Dortin read the plaque as Sister Istersiva, and figured that this must be the woman's name and title.

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Prologue

Pitch black. The stone corridor was pitch black, but faint traces of light leaked out from within the room at the end. What faint illumination this light provided made it clear that the walls and floors were thick with peat moss.

A group of people were chattering amongst themselves inside the room.

“H-hey... What *is* this thing?”

“It’s some kind of doll... right?”

“It’s creepy as hell is what it is. How many decades do you think it’s been here? Heck, how many *centuries*?”

“The writing ain’t any more modern, either. Hey, Stephanie, think you can make out what any of this says?”

“Let’s see here... ‘They exist only to execute their commands. Even should —’” said the woman called Stephanie, but the men continued speaking right over her.

“It’s still pretty crazy to think that these ruins have been here under the city this whole time, and nobody even noticed.”

“Well, yeah. Nobody really expected to find the entrance to them in a place like the —”

“Even should the future be out of our hands... Even should the hourglass run out of sands —”

“But man, just think of how famous we’ll be once we publish our papers about it!”

“You said it, this discovery’s gonna make our careers for sure. I damn sure can’t wait to move as far away from this hellhole of a city as possible!”

“Even should the hourglass run out of sands... They shall not forget what they were taught by my hands.”

"I know for sure where I'm headin' after this. Totokanta. Now *there's* a city what knows how to treat their Sorcerers right. Wouldn't mind takin' up a job teachin' at the Tower of Fangs, either."

"You, a teacher? Ha! You couldn't teach a fish how to swim!"

"Would you boys please be quiet while I'm translating?! Now, where was I... 'They exist only to execute their commands...' Well, it looks like it just starts repeating from there. It's almost as if this inscription is meant to be some kind of spell."

"Yeah, right. As if a spell like that exists. Sounds more to me like some teenager's poetry got preserved down here for a few hundred years."

"Aight, I've decided. Soon as we're done with this project I'm movin' straight to Totokanta."

"Alright, slackers, that's enough chatter for now. C'mon, help me haul this thing out of its casket."

...



"Your existence is bound in the chains of my commands, even with your intelligence to tell that this should not be so," spoke a voice that chilled even the mausoleum.

The coldness of this voice had nothing to do with the speaker's temperament, however. It was more the frozen tones of one lost in the depths of despair, of a person lamenting the unfair cruelty of their fate.

The mausoleum itself was dark and damp, and because of this the air was thick with a foul stench — the stench of rotting corpses that had not been preserved under the proper conditions.

The speaker was the only one present, seemingly unaffected by the sickening odor.

"Even with our 'Sorcery,' I am afraid I was unable to grant you true life. Had we the ways of 'Magic,' I wonder if not things would have turned out differently..." it wrung out the words with regret. "I choose to believe so. Alas,

my ancestor — indeed, our very ‘First’ — simply did not have the capacity for a power so great. And now, simply because we lacked the means and the ability to make it entirely our own, our disgrace has been carved into the history of the world... A disgrace we cannot wipe clean even now, our power a mere shadow of what it should be.”

The figure that the voice belonged to was a person clad in robes of gentle green. Their silhouette was just barely visible in the darkness.

“Yours, too, is but a shadow of the power you deserved. Nay, mayhap your situation is far more unfair... For I cannot even grant you the life you deserve. *Words* are the only thing I can ever bestow upon you. By my talent of Wyrdography, I grant you these runes,” the voice said even as its breath grew short.

“And now even my own power reaches its limits. I am not long for this world. I could not save our race, no matter how I struggled to change our fate... With my passing, we truly will become a race of the past. As my life draws to a close, so does all our centuries of history... Huhuhu...” The voice’s laughter was thick with self-derision.

“What absurdity. The smell of my fellow brethren rotting in their graves bothers me not in the least. My nose should be offended, yet it takes the stench as though t’were only natural... Is it because my own body rots me alive to produce the same odor? Or could it be —” the figure slumped their shoulders before continuing, their robes breathing a tiny gust of air into the room. “Could it be because I find this stench *comforting* to my senses? Am I *pleased* that there still remains enough of what we once were for the body’s senses to register our existence? Whatever the case, even that small mercy will be robbed from us over the years. Rodents will feast on our corpses until no flesh remains to stink up the air, and when the time comes that the last of us is picked clean to the bone, every last trace of us will truly be gone from the world evermore...”

The figure grew silent as though it had fallen into eternal slumber. The silence permeated the room and seemed to deepen the darkness, the robed figure appearing to sink into the shadows like a person drowning as they sank to the bottom of a lake.

Then, out of the shadowy depths, the sinking figure struggled to the surface once more.

"I refuse to accept this cruel jest!" it screamed in sudden outraged desperation. Then the scream escalated into a ghastly shriek. "I won't let it end like this! The flame of my life may burn out, my body may rot, and my bones may turn to dust, but I refuse to *disappear*! That is the one thing I refuse to allow!" and then beyond a ghastly shriek into a death rattle. "I WILL NOT DISAPPEAR! I CARVE IT INTO THE WORLD HERE AND NOW! UNDENIABLE PROOF OF MY EXISTENCE!"

And as if the figure had used up the last embers of its life in a rebellious last stand, its voice lost all strength, and something fell to the ground. Apparently its voice was not the only thing that had lost all of its strength.

With its dying breath, the robed figure left one final message: "If this is how it must be... then you know what to do. Obey my command... and execute your mission."

"...Understood, my master," said a second voice. "All in due time..."

Though the voice spoke in the same tongue, something about it made it clear that it was not normal. Much like the robed figure, it spoke in unnervingly inhuman tones. Indeed, it was the sort of voice that could only belong to something not of the realm of the living...

Chapter I: The Guardian of the Treasury

The time it took for spring to change fully to summer in Kiesalhima was incredibly brief.

Most people didn't know why the seasons changed so quickly this time of year, nor did they very much care. Majic was one such person who neither knew nor cared about the hows or whys of it. All he cared to know was that as brief as it was, it was one of the most pleasantly comfortable times of the year.

On this pleasant day with midsummer just around the corner, Majic sat by the riverbank leaning his back against a large boulder. He stared into space and began humming a little tune to himself.

"Hey, Majic," came a girl's voice from the other side of the boulder, in the direction of the river. "What's that song you keep humming called?"

Majic felt his breath catch in his throat as this question caught him completely off-guard. He took a moment to try and come up with an excuse, and then said "Doesn't have a name, I'm just humming at random" before picking up where he had left off.

The girl across the boulder could be heard saying "Oh, s'that so" before splashing water over herself. Majic couldn't figure out why she constantly chose to bathe herself in the river in the middle of the day like that. Even more baffling to him was the fact that *he* was invariably the one who had to be her lookout to stop any potential peeping toms.

Just what's her deal, anyway? he thought to himself, still humming away. *Come to think of it, she's always been like this, huh?* he realized, scratching his nose. *She's been using me as her own personal errand boy ever since we got put into the same class in school. Who the hell does she think I am? I'm Majic the Black Sorcerer, dammit!* he declared proudly to himself, then realized that he had gotten ahead of himself and chose to correct this. *Well, okay, maybe I'm still just a fledgling Sorcerer, but still. I know Sorcerers aren't as high society as knights or anything, but we're still a cut above the commoners of the world.* So

why should I have to play guard dog for a bratty little merchant's daughter like Claiomh? It's not fair.

His thoughts drifted slightly and he took a look down at the clothes he was wearing. He had bought this outfit to replace his old clothes when the group had stopped in town just a few days prior. He had basically chosen to emulate his mentor's style and chosen a black shirt, slightly large-fitting leather trousers, and his own personal touch, a black cloak slung over his shoulders. Truth be told, he had wanted to purchase a dagger or something and hang it from his belt, but his master had strictly forbidden him from arming himself with weapons of any kind.

I can't believe Master Orphen is still treating me like a little kid. I'm fourteen years old already — nearly fifteen! It's only six months until my birthday. I don't see what the big deal is, but Master Orphen had to be all like "I'd never trust a person who doesn't know the right way to hold a kitchen knife with something as dangerous as a dagger." As if I'm gonna be stupid enough to grab it by the pointy end!

Frustrated at the thought of being treated like a child by those around him, Majic turned his impromptu humming to a slightly more aggressive, fast-paced tune. He swept back his blond hair out of his eyes as he did so, revealing his boyishly handsome face in its entirety. Even scrunched up in irritation, his smooth skin and pretty-boy features made him look more charming than intimidating.

"Hey, Majic," said Claiomh once more. "You *are* keeping watch over there, right? I think I can feel someone peeping on me."

He shouldn't have been able to see Claiomh from his position behind the large rock, yet he somehow just *knew* how she had reacted just now. He knew that she covered herself with her long, wet hair, and he knew that she gazed around looking for the one she thought was peeping on her.

"You're just being paranoid. We're hundreds of meters from the nearest road, remember? You really think anyone's gonna follow us all the way out to the middle of nowhere just so they can peep on you while you're bathing?"

"But what if someone else just happened to be nearby already when we got

here?"

The girl who refused to relent so easily was Claiomh Everlasting. Her name had an unusual spelling, being pronounced like 'Clee-oh.' At seventeen years old, she was the youngest member of her family. The Everlastings' family tree could be traced back to a bloodline of nobles who had fallen from grace, but Claiomh's naturally beautiful figure would make one think that she were a noble's daughter even now. The slender curves of her body and unblemished skin that showed not a hint of sunburn despite days of traveling under constant sunlight in the prelude of summer could be called pretty by any standards. Her eyes were clear like imitation aquamarine gemstones, and her delicate fingers nevertheless seemed deft enough to snatch a feather from a bird in mid-flight.

Again, it was physically impossible for Majic to make out any of these features from behind the large boulder. Nevertheless, he turned his gaze to the naked Claiomh he had just examined so thoroughly in his mind, and spoke to placate her — without even turning his face in her direction. "You sure it's not just a wild animal? This is probably where they get their drinking water, you know."

"If you say so..." said Claiomh. Though her suspicions hadn't been cleared away entirely, she nevertheless returned to her bath.

Majic, too, returned to humming his tune... and what appeared before his eyes was not the image he had hoped for.

Indeed, the sole of a boot is what filled his vision. With no time to dodge, the boot crashed into his face and pressed his head against the rock behind him.

"Mrph!" came the finale of Majic's humming concerto. He struggled beneath the boot to try and break free, but its owner skillfully managed to shift the weight of their foot to keep him from doing so. He spent some time struggling before he surrendered to his captor. "Alright, Master! I get it already! Could you please stop now?"

"I've been standing here a while now, kiddo. It's your own fault for being where my foot was going. Note that one down as a lesson about paying attention to your surroundings; it's on the house," said Majic's so-called *Master* as he removed his foot from his disciple's face.

The man stood arrogantly above Majic, staring down at the lad like he was

summing him up. His outfit closely resembled Majic's clothes, and indeed, it was because they fit his master so well that Majic too had chosen to imitate the style — a style which looked slightly more out of place on the handsome young boy's adolescent frame. Perhaps because the man's dark clothes matched his dark eyes and dark hair better than Majic's blond locks, or perhaps because the twenty year old carried himself with all the confidence of an actual professional Sorcerer that he was able to pull the look off.

And speaking of sorcery, this man was not just any old professional of the field. The silver pendant around his neck bore the design of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword; the proof that his skills had been officially recognized by the most prestigious Sorcerers' Academy on the Continent, the Tower of Fangs.

"That's not a real lesson, you just felt like—" Majic started to say, but Orphen quickly shushed him.

"Keep your voice down unless you want Claiomh to notice."

"Oh, okay. If you wanted to peep on her then you should've just said so."

"Careful with all that projecting you're doing there, kid," said Orphen, and his choice of words made Majic gulp in surprise. A sadistic smile crossed Orphen's face, and he leaned forwards drawing his face closer to Majic's. "See? I knew it. You were casting a spell to refract light, letting you sneak a peek at something you wouldn't normally be able to see for any obstacles in the way. What's more, you disguised the chant by pretending you were just humming a random tune. You might be able to fool Claiomh with a trick like that, but you'll need to come up with something a bit more clever if you wanna pull the wool over *my* eyes."

"Ahaha, I should've known you'd figure it out," said Majic, his attempt at singing Orphen's praises laden with the slim hope he could weasel his way out of trouble.

"Wanna know how I figured all that out so fast?" Orphen nodded and placed his index finger to his temple before explaining, "It's because I once did the exact same thing back when *I* was still a student."

"Oh, really? I guess great minds think alike, huh?" Majic was relieved as

Orphen's attitude seemed to suggest that he had safely avoided getting into too much trouble... until he felt the force of Orphen's fist come crashing down on his head.

"Just because I used to do it doesn't make it okay for *you* to do it, too."



“That’s no fair...”

“Oh, shut up. I don’t care if it’s fair or not. Next time you pull that prank, you can bet your ass I’ll be telling Claiomh about it. And just between you and me, I wouldn’t risk pissing that girl off if you wanna keep your eyeballs.”

“Y-yeah, if she found out I was peeping on her she’d rip them out with her bare hands...” said Majic, who knew full well how frightening Claiomh could be when she lost her temper.

“Good,” said Orphen, apparently satisfied. “Now behave yourself from now on,” he added, just to make sure his disciple really did get the point.

His discreet little lecture over, Orphen pulled himself back upright and turned to walk away. Only when Majic was certain that his master was out of earshot, he muttered to himself, “...What was that all about? I didn’t think Master Orphen would be such a killjoy,” and shrugged his shoulders before completely ignoring his master’s advice only to break out humming his peep-spell once more.



Are you fucking kidding me? thought Orphen. He tried desperately to slow his racing heart while walking away from Majic at a brisk pace. He made a beeline back to their wagon, cursing internally all the while. *That little brat was using sorcery! Actual, working sorcery! I’ve only been teaching him for two damn weeks!*

Common sense dictated that this should have been utterly impossible. Most Sorcerers took anywhere from a few years to a few decades of studying before they could cast even the simplest of spells. Naturally those with a talent for the art would pick it up slightly quicker than others, but even then it should only reduce the time it took them to get the hang of it by a year or two at most. For a total beginner who had never studied a day of sorcery before in their life, it should take at *least* five years for them to even grasp the sensation of mana flowing through their body, which was the most basic prerequisite for casting any spell at all. And this was using the Tower of Fangs — where only the most gifted Sorcerers on the Continent gathered — as a baseline. Orphen himself had

taken three years and four months to be able to finally cast his first spell, and back then he was lauded as a prodigy for how quickly he had taken to it.

And you're telling me that kid picked it up in two freaking WEEKS?

Still, he reasoned, what Majic had just displayed was merely the basics of the basics. One spell does not a Sorcerer make. With only that at his disposal, Majic was still very much an apprentice and no more.

The way Orphen had been taught was that there were three classes of Sorcerer in the world. Third-rate Sorcerers could recognize the sensation of mana as a natural force, and control the flow of it within themselves to some degree in order to cast simple spells. Second-rate Sorcerers could then control this newfound power much more adeptly, and had the judgment and reasoning skills to know which spell best suited which situation, as well as keep their concentration focused no matter what situation they found themselves in. This was the level at which the Tower of Fangs would bestow a person with the pendant that marked them as no longer just an apprentice, but a Sorcerer in their own right.

First-rate Sorcerers, however, were not judged solely on their talent for spells and sorcery, but also for any contributions to ongoing research or general all-around knowledge of sorcery as a literary subject. Even a Sorcerer who was useless in combat situations could still be called first-rate if they happened to be particularly well-versed on the subject.

Majic was still at the stage where he was just beginning to get a grasp on his newfound abilities, Orphen surmised. The boy could probably peek on girls in the bath, or slide a matchbox across a table without touching it, but he didn't have the mental strength yet to even boil a kettle of water. He still had a lot of training to do before he'd be able to focus his concentration on an extremely specific desired effect, amplify it enough for the spell to have any kick to it, and then control it well enough to actually make the spell succeed at all.

All that said, to have gone from common teenager to third-rate Apprentice Sorcerer in a mere two weeks was phenomenally impressive beyond words.

If he keeps advancing this quickly, he'll be a proper Sorcerer before the year is out.

And if that were to happen...

"I won't be able to charge him his lesson fees anymore!" said Orphen as quietly as he could, driven to the very depths of despair at the thought.



"...And that is how I, the fearless and peerless Bulldog of Masmaturia, the valiant Vulcano Volkan, risked my life to take back the Sword of Balds-and-Lewds from those evil Sorcerers and thwart their wicked schemes!" said Volkan.

"Baldanders," Dortin corrected.

"That's what I said. Bald-Banders," Volkan wrongly corrected himself, barely even listening to his brother.

Dortin shook his head out of Volkan's sight, then stole a look at the large robed man in black who sat before them.

"..." the man sat staring at the two of them with a blank look on his face. Volkan had already told his story several times, and yet still he sat there completely unmoving. It was almost like words were lost on him altogether.

The place that the dwarf brothers had brought the Sword of Baldanders to was the kind of Sorcerers' Association building that could be found in just about any large city — one of Damsel's Orisons' branch offices. It had been over an hour since they had stepped through the front door, and in that time Volkan had told the full heroic tale of how he had come to acquire the Sword of Baldanders to the bulky receptionist several times. Not one of those times did the receptionist's blank expression change in the slightest.

Even Volkan, who could not read social cues to save his life, had started to grow slightly concerned.

"...You listening?"

"...Yessir," the receptionist murmured.

"Dortin, this man is a nincompoop," said Volkan as he turned to face his brother.

"Shh. He can hear you," said Dortin, though when he looked back up at the receptionist himself it was clear that the man had not actually been listening, or

if he had then he made no signs of showing it, simply staring off into space as he had been since they had arrived.

The brothers sighed in unison. Volkan chose to start his story once more from the beginning, but Dortin had already grown tired of trying to get a reaction out of the man, and so turned to examine the interior of the building instead.

The Sorcerers' Alliance was named Damsel's Orisons — *The Ancient Prayers of the Maidens* — after the crest it had been given upon its foundation. The crest was of a praying young woman's face in portrait in the center of a circular shield (although Dortin had always secretly felt that the lady in the crest looked too old to be called either a 'maiden' or a 'damsel'), and this same crest decorated the wall behind the reception desk.

The building itself was far smaller than the one they had seen at Totokanta a mere two weeks prior, being perhaps a fraction of the size at most. Instead of a workplace for Sorcerers, it looked more like a repurposed elementary school building. It was far too well-lit to imagine that those darkness-loving Sorcerers had installed the lighting, and while the floor was linoleum it was also cracked in several places. The walls were covered in scratches, graffiti that had only been half-erased, and child-sized hand prints. Even the roof bore dirty footprints as though some of the less well-behaved children had made up a game that involved throwing their dirty shoes at the ceiling. All in all, it looked as though the place had not been properly cleaned in a long time.

Another unusual thing was that the building had not a single person guarding the front door. This was the only reason that a pair of teenage dwarfs like Volkan and Dortin were able to waltz right into a building that should otherwise have been strictly off-limits to anyone except Sorcerers. Then again, the first person they had run into after walking through the front door was this bulky receptionist with whom it was impossible to hold a conversation. Not only would he not let them any further into the building, he also made no attempts to drive them away — much to Dortin's dismay.

Indeed, while Volkan was doing his damnedest to sell the sword, Dortin would much rather have been kicked out of the building after his brother's first sales pitch had failed. As he thought about how he wanted nothing more than to leave this very second, he stared as his brothers back through the thick lenses

of his glasses. Vulcano Volkan stood at 130 centimeters in height — slightly more at the moment as he stood on his tiptoes to be able to talk with the receptionist on the other side of the counter — wore a fur cloak wrapped around himself as was the preferred outfit of most dwarfs, and the scabbard of a somewhat bulky sword could be seen peeking out from under his cloak. This was Volkan's own sword, while the Sword of Baldanders that he was trying to pawn off currently sat on the counter in front of him as he recounted the tale of how he had come to acquire it once again.

“When I found out that a band of dastardly evil Sorcerers had wicked plans for the blade, I, Vulcano Volkan—”

“Just then, a woman screamed for help. Being the hero that I, Vulcano Volkan, am—”

“And then a giant hideous beast came out of nowhere and split the ground in half! But I, Vulcano Volkan, am not one to retreat against overwhelming odds, and so—”

Volkan's tale had evolved with every repetition, and while it had initially started off loosely based on true events, by now Volkan had managed to twist it entirely out of shape and turn himself into the one and only protagonist. None of this seemed to matter to the glassy-eyed receptionist, however. Dortin wondered for a moment if maybe his glasses had simply fogged up and if the man were in fact growing impatient with the two, so he took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt.

I knew we shouldn't have come here... Dortin thought to himself as he put his glasses back on. He craned his neck to look up at the two meter giant of a receptionist, and the height difference between them even when he was sitting behind the desk made Dortin feel slightly dizzy.

Volkan finished his story, so vigorously had he told it to try and get his point across that he was out of breath having been talking for over an hour straight. He looked up and smiled at the man with as innocent a smile as his villainous face could muster, and as politely as possible, he asked “Does my explanation satisfy you, my good man?”

“Yessir,” said the receptionist again. The look on his face had not changed in

the slightest.

Volkan, undeterred, continued: “Very good then! Now, how much would you be willing to pay to take this pricelessly valuable sword off our hands?”

“Yessir,” the man repeated, still staring off into space.

“...”

Volkan turned to face his brother. “Dortin, this man is thick as a brick,” he said.

“He’s literally right there...” said Dortin trying to keep his brother in check. In truth, though, Dortin had been thinking that the man must be somewhat of a dumb person for a while now, too.

“Whadda we do now, Dortin? Talking with this dolt isn’t gonna get us anywhere. Never mind understanding the value of the sword, it looks like he doesn’t even recognize my own brilliance staring him in the face!”

“How should I know what to do next? It was *your* idea to sell the sword to the Sorcerers’ Association, not mine.”

“You dare try to make this my fault?!” Volkan fumed and grabbed his brother by the collar. “You didn’t disagree, so that makes it *your* fault we’re not making any progress, got it?!”

“I *did* disagree! The first thing I told you was that these people wouldn’t even take us seriously!”

“Take us seriously?! They’re acting like we don’t even exist!” yelled Volkan, waving his free arm at the receptionist who still refused to budge even when a fight had broken out in front of him.

“I mean, sure, but that’s technically still...” Dortin tried to say, but Volkan continued accusing him of all the evils in the world.

“It’s not that this guy’s not taking us seriously, it’s that he’s too brain-dead to hold a conversation! That means you’re both wrong *and* at fault! Now do something about it!”

“Like what?!” Dortin complained, begging for someone to give him a hint as to what he was supposed to do next. He turned to face the receptionist, but the

large man sat still as a statue.

Knowing fully well how futile it would be, he nevertheless turned to the only person in the room who had yet to attack him and asked for assistance. “Excuse me, mister receptionist? Umm, I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job or anything, but when a fight breaks out in your workplace you really should step in to put a stop to it...”

“Yessir.” Contrary to everyone’s expectations, the receptionist rose from his chair, leaped right over the counter, and separated Volkan from Dortin by lifting him off the ground by the nape of the neck.

Volkan kicked and struggled in midair, utterly confused as to what had just happened. “What the hell?! Dortin, the fuck did you do?! And *you*, what is the meaning of this, you bumbling, brain-dead buffoon?! I’ll cover your head with a bucket until you suffocate to death, you bastard!”

“...” Dortin stood utterly speechless at the sight before him. He considered what either he or his brother might have said that led to this, and then it hit him.

He coughed once to clear his throat, then chose to test out his theory. “Umm... Drop my brother, please,” he said.

The receptionist reacted to Dortin’s words and let go of Volkan, sending the dwarf boy tumbling helplessly to the ground from nearly two meters in the air.

“Why the hell did you tell him to *drop* me? You could’ve just told him to put me down normally...” complained Volkan.

Dortin ignored his brother’s complaints and continued. “Raise your arms,” he commanded.

“Yessir,” replied the receptionist, raising both arms above his head. The bizarre sight made Volkan completely forget that he had just been assaulted, and he abruptly stopped whining.

Dortin, meanwhile, occupied himself with testing the limits of how far his commands could go. “Make your nose run,” he said.

“Yessir.” With no choice but to carry out his orders, the receptionist took his

index finger and thrust it up his nose all the way up to his finger's second joint. He pulled it out again the next instant, and while snot was not something he could bring out on command like that, a waterfall of blood came gushing out instead.

"Wh-what the hell is *wrong* with this guy?" said Volkan, drawing closer to his brother to get away from the freakish receptionist.

Dortin, too, had realized that something was very wrong with this situation, but he was nevertheless able to keep himself more composed than his older brother. He took one last look at the black-robed receptionist whose face and clothes were now soaked with blood still pouring from his nose, and having come to a logical conclusion, stated the obvious: "Something really weird is going on here."

In the end, Volkan and Dortin realized that the receptionist would only do as he was told, and so wouldn't do anything to stop them from exploring the rest of the building. Dortin wanted more than ever to leave the creepy place behind, but Volkan was having none of that nonsense. Volkan marched down the corridor with the Sword of Baldanders in hand, and Dortin had no choice but to follow after him even though he knew nothing good could come of it.

I wonder if I'm gonna live out the rest of my life as my brother's slave, thought Dortin. I'll probably never be able to go home... I'll have to keep sleeping in the wild... I'll be forced to run around the Continent being chased by that Sorcerer demanding I pay my brother's debt... My brother will keep hitting me with his sword every time something annoys him... And if I get injured because of that, I won't even be able to go to a hospital because I don't have any money...

Dortin kept counting the horrible things that would probably continue for the rest of his unfortunate life. When he looked up at Volkan walking in front of him, he noticed that his brother had apparently been cursing his own poor fortune as well.

"Shit, why does this always happen to me? Just when I thought I could pawn off this—" he paused to heft up the sword for emphasis, "stupid, big-ass hunk of metal for some good cash, the only guy who should know how valuable it is

turns out to be a damn meat-puppet! Why do Sorcerers have to be such a weird bunch, every last one of them? Sorcerers, humans, they can all go to hell! They're all swindlers and killers and brainless apes anyways! Not like anyone would miss a rotten lot like that!"

...Humans might be swindlers, but you're a lot worse, if you ask me. You're a cheat and a liar and a thug and a terrible person. I don't understand why you expect anybody to put up with you, said Dortin internally, knowing that if his brother ever heard him talking like that he'd seriously be beaten half to death. Luckily for Dortin, Volkan wasn't exactly perceptive enough to tell when someone not-so-secretly hated him. Bonds between brothers? Dortin would rather see his own brother bound in chains.

Still, Volkan had plenty of reasons for his dislike of humans. Dwarfs like Volkan and Dortin would normally only keep to their home village of Masmaturia, deep in the year-round frozen wastes at the southernmost point of the Continent. Dwarfs very rarely ever left these lands, so these dwarf brothers out traveling from city to city was a rare sight for humans. In fact, the only reason that they were even on this journey was because their parents had disowned them (rather, they had disowned Volkan, who then retaliated by kidnapping his younger brother Dortin).

Because they looked like bulky little children to humans, they were often looked down upon (both figuratively and literally). Because they tended to be clumsy and incapable of work that required good hand-eye coordination, it was hard for them to find decent work. Plus they had a natural aversion to bathing, because dwarfs did not float in water — they sank straight to the bottom like rocks, making drowning a very real danger for them even in relatively shallow water.

All of this added up to dwarfs essentially being racially discriminated against by humans. Unable to find any decent work, never taken seriously by anybody, and having to resort to borrowing money from a shady Black Sorcerer, Dortin had come to understand over the past year and a half that life was not easy for dwarfs out in human society. Still, if a human were to wander into the dwarf village of Masmaturia one day, they would most likely be equally discriminated against, and Dortin was clever enough to understand this. Neither side had any

particular ill will against the other, it was simply a matter of their respective cultures being far too incompatible with each other.

Having summed up his experiences with humans in his head, Dortin let out a little yawn, the exhaustion of the past couple of weeks finally starting to get to him. He could hear his brother muttering something under his breath, but he was too tired to bother trying to keep up.

If there was one thing Dortin knew for sure about his brother, it was that nothing he said was ever worth listening to. Not only was he ignorant, he was stupid and also just plain wrong about just about everything. And yet he had to put up with him anyway, because if Volkan found out that his brother hadn't been listening to him, he would flip his lid for sure.

"Don't you think it's horrible the way those humans treat me? They won't let me stay at their inns, they won't give me any decent work, and when that stray dog attacked me on the street they just pretended like they didn't see anything! What did I ever do to deserve any of that?!" Volkan complained loudly as he swaggered his way down the halls of the Alenhatam branch Sorcerers' Association building like he had just bought the place out.

All of those things were your own fault, said Dortin internally.

As a matter of fact, every single one of those examples *had* been Volkan's fault. The reason they were turned away at the inn was because Volkan had been waving his sword around in plain view of everyone, frightening the staff and the customers. The reason he had been refused work was because he had cut in line and then demanded that they hire him on the spot. And even the stray dogs that attacked him frequently had their reasons, for Volkan kept stealing the food scraps right out of their mouths to eat for himself.

Speaking of swords, Dortin had tried many times and with every method he could think of to try and convince his brother to stop carrying a sword around everywhere he went. This was an age where war was a thing of history, a peaceful age where people's biggest worries were food, water, and stable employment. There was absolutely no reason for most people to own a weapon at all, unless they were a soldier, a Sorcerer, or an eccentric whose hobby just happened to be swords. And from the average person's point of view, Sorcerers

could easily be grouped in with the eccentrics, meaning the only two types of people on the Continent who openly carried swords were soldiers and eccentrics.

Since Volkán was very clearly not a soldier, this made him one of those eccentric weirdos who just carried around a sword for the hell of it. Anyone who met him would confirm as much, and so it was understandable that he was constantly treated like the nuisance that he was.

“It’s blatant discrimination, and I demand that it be put to a stop!” yelled the dwarf boy who had done everything in his ability to be hated by everyone around him, whether he had been human, dwarf, or wild animal. Naturally the empty corridor he had yelled at was powerless to do anything to solve any sort of discrimination, racial or otherwise.

Dortin heaved a sigh and took a look around the hallway as Volkán continued to vocally abuse it. He could see buckets on the floor and mops leaning against the walls here and there, but the building was so sparsely furnished as to be utterly bare. Dortin had of course never seen the inside of a Sorcerers’ Association building before, so he couldn’t say for sure if all of them were as bare-bones as this one was — but if they were, then Sorcerers truly must be as eccentric as he had come to expect.

Apart from the lack of furnishings, Dortin noticed the absence of something else — something that one would naturally expect to find in a Sorcerers’ Association office building.

...Where are all the Sorcerers? he wondered to himself.

The time was about half past two in the afternoon; decidedly not the time of day that the staff would be on their lunch break. And yet the building was as empty of people as it was of furniture. They had yet to meet another staff member since the strangely puppet-like receptionist. Dortin had never heard of Sorcerers being in short supply anywhere, and the Sorcerers’ Association was a large organization that spread all across the Continent, which made the lack of staff in this particular building seem all the more unusual.

Dortin’s image of Sorcerers was that their offices must be like constant war zones 24/7. If a door was slightly stiff, they would surely blow it off its hinges

with a blast of lightning. If their scissors didn't cut a piece of paper properly, they would undoubtedly conjure up razor sharp winds to slice the sheet of paper up, desk and all. And if they were to so much as bump shoulders when passing each other in a hallway, it would definitely turn into a large-scale duel to the death.

In stark contrast to these expectations, the building was utterly peaceful. In fact, never mind peaceful, it was practically deserted.

Just as Dortin was thinking that there might not be any people here at all, Volkan came to a halt staring wide-eyed through an open doorway to his left.

Dortin stepped forwards to read the sign on the door which said *CHANGING ROOM*. Below that he noticed something else which had previously been carved into the wood of the door itself and then haphazardly scrawled over, but still clearly read *First Years, Classroom C*. Apparently the place really was a repurposed school building.

He followed his brother's gaze and noticed that inside the classroom was a beautiful woman sitting in a chair. She was half-naked and apparently in the middle of changing clothes, her hands reached around her back to unhook her bra. She did not finish undressing, however, for she sat still as a statue just as the receptionist had been when they first met him, the same blank look on her face.

"Umm..." Dortin spoke up, "won't your arms get tired if you sit like that? You can relax if you want, you know."

"Yes..." the lady responded without a hint of emotion in her voice. Following Dortin's orders, she slumped down off of her chair and onto the floor, then made herself comfortable and was fast asleep within seconds.

"...That was just plain creepy," said Volkan, very clearly weirded out by the whole situation.

Dortin agreed wholeheartedly. "I wonder if everyone in the building is like this. It's like... It's almost as if they've had their souls sucked right out of their bodies."

"Maybe the summer heat's just fried their brains," said Volkan, oblivious as

ever.

Dortin, on the other hand, had a much worse feeling about it. *This reminds me of those old legends about the Beastking of the Sands, the monstrous Basiltrice...* he thought to himself.

The Beastking, the Basiltrice. According to the legends, its sight was like a lethal poison that killed with a single glance. Its power was so great that it could split boulders simply by looking at them, shatter trees the moment they entered its vision... and even blast the soul right out of a person's body, literally petrifying them. If it had truly ever existed, then it was one of the most fearsome creatures ever to have walked the Continent.

Of course, there was no way that the Beastking could exist — at least not in the modern age. For one thing, such a conspicuous monster would never go unnoticed, and for another, there was no desert in all of Kiesalhima large enough to house the creature. More accurately, the Basiltrice would instantly reduce its own habitat to an endlessly vast wasteland simply by existing.

As such, Dortin concluded that while this seemed like something right out of the Basiltrice legends, the idea that a beast of legend had popped back up out of nowhere and chosen an old school building to live in was downright preposterous. So there had to be another explanation.

But before Dortin could come up with an alternate explanation...

“*Ghwaaaaah!!*” a scream echoed throughout the building.

The sound surprised Volkan so hard that he fell to his backside, clinging to the Sword of Baldanders for dear life. Dortin panicked and started looking for an escape route, but of course he would find no such thing in a straight corridor. He realized that the only place he could run was back the way they had come, but just as he turned to flee, something grabbed him by the ankle.

“Stop right there!”

“Wh-what the hell are you doing, bro?! We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Fool! Have you forgotten who I am?!” yelled Volkan, who clung desperately to his brother’s leg. “I’m the Bulldog of Masmaturia! The fearless warrior of whom legends are told! The one and only Vulcano Volkan! I cannot simply turn

my back on an enemy, no matter how many Sorcerers they've slain or how fearsome they may be!"

"If those Sorcerers didn't stand a chance, then neither will we! We've gotta get out of here!"

"You coward!" Volkан continued. He crawled his way up Dortin's leg like a snake and grabbed him by the belt, using that as leverage to force him to the ground. "Might makes right! And I am mighty! Therefore as long as I beat my enemies, I will always be in the right!"

"...That's some really twisted logic."

"Like I give a damn! Listen to me and listen good, twerp! You've got one job here, and that job is *not* to run away with your tail between your legs!"

"Then what am I *supposed* to do?"

"Solve this mystery! Use that big-ass brain of yours and find what really matters! I know you can do it!"

"Volkан..." said Dortin, taking a good hard look at his brother's face. "...You're acting weird. Did you hit your head or something?"

"Don't mock me, fool!" yelled Volkан as he punched his brother square in the face. "What I'm trying to say is... Umm, err, it would take some time to explain, but..." he paused to think about what to say next, before yelling abruptly, "If you're my little brother, then you should already know what I'm thinking without me having to say it! Do I have to spell out *everything* for you? Can't you think for yourself a little?!"

"Don't be ridiculous," moaned Dortin. Then he had a sudden terrible realization. "...You're telling *me* to look for the Basilrice? The legendary *Beastking*?"

Volkан, however, seemed to have no idea what Dortin was talking about. "Beastking? Basil Brush? What the hell are you on about *this* time?"

"Never mind, forget I brought it up..."

"Very well, I'll overlook your foolish mistake just this once. Anyway, what you need to search for isn't some 'Basil Brush' or whatever it's called. What you

need to find is something much more important than that!"

"...How important are we talking here?"

Happy that he had gotten his brother's attention, Volkhan spread both arms and began his lecture. "Tell me, my foolish baby brother. What do you think we need most right now?"

What I think we need most right now is to run away, said Dortin internally. "...I don't know, what?" he asked instead.

"I'll give you a hint. It's something we're currently lacking in our lives. Something I need a lot of, right now."

"Umm..." Dortin tried to think of all the things his brother was lacking in, when Volkhan suddenly yelled out the answer.

"It's money, you dolt! *I need money!*"

"Money... Right..." Dortin fixed the position of his glasses and stared blankly at the ceiling. *Someone get me out of here*, he prayed to nobody in particular.

"Think back to why we even came here," Volkhan continued. "We came here so we could pawn off this Sword of Baldanders—"

"Oh, you actually got something's name right for once. Good for you, bro."

"Silence, smartass! Now, where was I... Right, right, the Sword of Baldies. We came all the way here so we could sell it for money, but do you see anyone here with enough brains to conduct a proper trade? I think not! Still, the sword is valuable to these Sorcerers, even if they're too dumb to realize that."

"...Where are you going with this?" inquired Dortin, though he was fairly certain he already knew what his brother was about to say next.

And he was right on the money. Volkhan closed his eyes, held up one finger, and put on an act that he was certain would convince absolutely anyone that he was undoubtedly the very picture of an honest man. "In this situation, we would be doing them a *favor* by proceeding with the trade ourselves! We'll simply collect the money and ditch this hunk of junk, and when these Sorcerers come to their senses, they'll see the sword and be thanking their lucky stars for such a stroke of good fortune! Aren't I such a thoughtful guy?"

In other words, Dortin thought, you just want to take advantage of this situation to steal as much money as you can carry since nobody will chase after you.

“I would never do anything to wrong these people!” yelled Volkan as though he had read Dortin’s thoughts. “I know what you’re thinking, idiot. And you’re wrong. This isn’t theft, it’s merely a one-sided *trade*.”

...How come you’re only sharp when it comes to wronging people? asked Dortin internally. “So, what do you expect *me* to do?” he asked aloud.

“I want you to find out where they’re hiding their safe, of course. If we can find their safe and crack it open, we can make off with all the money we can carry,” said Volkan with a perfectly straight face.

...That’s not even a one-sided trade, it’s straight-up theft, said Dortin to himself. Knowing that at this point he had no choice in the matter, he stood up and looked down at his brother who for some reason remained sitting on the floor.

“...What are you doing? If you wanna go look for that safe, then we should probably hurry up and get moving.”

“Of course we should,” said Volkan, still sitting where he was. “But the thing is, Dortin, my chronic illness is acting up. I’ve got a slipped disk in my back and I simply cannot walk.”

“...In other words, you’re so scared you can’t even stand?”

“Don’t be a fool! How could I, the very picture of bravery, have been so scared by that scream just now and this creepy old building and all the weird shit going on that I’m too terrified to move at the thought of what might be waiting for us just around the corner?! How dare you accuse me of telling you to go brave these terrors on your own just because I’m too scared to go myself! I won’t put up with such blatantly false accusations!”

“...”

“Alright, fine, I’ll come along too. But you’ll need to carry me. As I just explained, I’ve slipped a disk and cannot move. Well, what are you waiting for? I swear, you’re such an inconsiderate little bastard, you know that?”

“...”

Dortin gave up, heaved a sigh, and lifted his brother onto his back.

In this world, there are a number of places where anyone with common sense wouldn't normally want to just casually walk around. Such places include graveyards, hospital wards, dried out wells, your parent's bedroom at night, and that frail looking branch at the top of a tree you've just climbed, to name a few. But far more dangerous than any of these... is the inside of a Sorcerers' Association building when you're not even a Sorcerer.

Having been strong-armed into the latter, Dortin imagined what it must be like to be a slave being made to push a heavy boulder uphill on a scorching summer day. Hauling his brother around the inside of this creepy building felt like he could empathize with any such slave and possibly even win an argument with them over who had it worse.

“Is that the best you can do?!” cried Volkan from his back. “Someone might've heard that scream from outside and called the police already! Are you *trying* to get me thrown in the slammer *again*?!”

For the first time in his life, Dortin felt that he understood the kind of feeling that drove people into becoming murderers.

The building that Dortin was now convinced was formerly a school had a rather simple structure, so navigating it was quite easy — walking through it dragging his brother the whole way, however, was not. The old schoolhouse was actually two buildings with a connecting corridor, and each building had three floors with a staircase leading up on the east side of each. On the west side of each was a doorway that would lead to an emergency staircase in case of fires or accidents. The hallways on each floor were perfectly straight, with a series of rooms lined up on one side and windows looking out onto the courtyard on the other. One building was slightly taller than the other, and at the bottom of it was a room that probably used to be some kind of office. Said office now appeared to be a storage room for filing away old documents and such.

“Where do you think that scream came from?” asked Dortin.

"Who cares?" replied Volkhan. "It's not a big building, I'm sure we'll find out sooner or later whether we want to or not."

It only seems small to you because you're riding on my back, Dortin complained to himself. His brother's words bothered him though, and he felt like something bad was going to happen if they stuck around here any longer.

Dortin hauled his very brother up the stairs and finally reached the third floor. He had skipped the second floor entirely because a single glance into one of the rooms told him that the entire floor had most likely been converted into the Sorcerers' living quarters. Dortin reasoned that if any sort of trouble were to break out in a den full of Sorcerers, it would undoubtedly originate in a laboratory.

And upon reaching the third floor of the building, Dortin found that all of the rooms on this floor had been converted into laboratories.

The rooms were numbered from 1 to 6, and a single glance down the corridor showed that the first five of these rooms were shut tight with curtains drawn over the windows. The door of the sixth room at the very end of the hallway, however, was slightly ajar. Dortin took one look at the doorway and instinctively felt that they were being led straight into a trap.

Nevertheless, his legs carried him straight towards that open door. Against his own will.

...Wait a minute, he thought to himself, what am I doing? I'm supposed to be searching for the safe, not marching straight into the Beastking's lair!

Alas, his legs no longer obeyed him. Before he knew it, the exhaustion of hauling his brother around the building had vanished without a trace, along with most every other sensation in his body. He found himself walking down the hallway, utterly powerless to stop himself.

"...! ...!" He tried to scream, but no voice came out. He tried to stop, but his body refused to obey. The closer he got to that open doorway, the fogger his thoughts became.

What's going on? I can't think straight!

Volkhan's head slumped over his shoulder and into sight, and just as Dortin had

suspected, his brother now wore the same blank expression as the receptionist had shown. He grew desperate and focused every fiber of his being into commanding his legs to stop, and finally succeeded mid-step. One foot in the air, he lost his balance and crashed face-first into the floor.

“Oww...” he moaned, rubbing his nose. And then he heard a voice.

“Do not resist.”

“...Huh?” he looked up in shock. Of all the legends that spoke of the Basiltrice, he had never once read anything about it being able to speak.

Dortin peeked into the laboratory and noticed a figure standing in the shadows. A naked man with abnormally pale skin stared back at him. The man was eerily thin, like a corpse that had died of starvation. Upon closer inspection, Dortin realized that it was not a man at all.

“...A doll?”

In fact, the man’s skin was not only pale, but seemed to be entirely inorganic. There could not possibly be blood flowing through that thing’s veins — veins that it probably didn’t even have to begin with. It didn’t even seem to be breathing, but it stood there anyway, human in shape only. Its skin appeared smooth as glass, and its joints seemed abnormally swollen compared to the rest of its lean figure. It was only slightly taller than the average human. Its short hair was thin and light, and this was the only hair to be seen anywhere on its body. It gripped a blood-red cloth in its right hand, making the sight of the doll all the more creepy.

“...I am still not used to the language of this age, but as far as I can tell from the image you associate with that word in your mind, your assessment of my appearance is accurate enough for me to accept,” said the doll-man.

“...Huh? Oh, when I called you a doll?” Dortin sat up and tried to gather his thoughts. His legs that had refused to stop marching forward mere moments ago now sat limp beneath him. “Umm... Is it okay if I ask who you are?” asked Dortin, ignoring the fact that Volkan was still passed out at his side.

The doll lifted the red cloth and draped it around itself like a toga, then introduced itself as “The Guardian of the Treasury.”

“The Guardian of the Treasury?”

“That is correct. From time immemorial, I have guarded my master’s most treasured knowledge and possessions.”

Dortin had no idea how to approach the self-proclaimed Guardian of the Treasury, but he didn’t have to — the Guardian stepped forward first. Terrified, Dortin tried to run away, but his legs would not obey.

What’s going on? he thought. Why can’t I move...?

“You are all under my control.”

“Wha—”

“Every human in this building is under my spell. I have sealed their minds with my sorcery.”

“Wh-what about me?”

“It would appear that my sorcery was unable to seal your mind completely.”

“How’s that possible? I’m nobody special...”

“I do not know. However, sorcery is not the only tool at my disposal.”

“...What kind of tools are we talking here? The peaceful kind, I hope?” said Dortin, his voice laden with terror. In response, the Guardian reached out its right hand, and with a sharp noise grew a ten centimeter blade from its middle finger.

“Y-you know, if you’re gonna torture me anyway, could you at least maybe make it a little less... painful...?”

Dortin’s pleas made the doll stop and think for a moment. He retracted his blade and balled up his fist — then bent it unnaturally, and with his left hand pulled out what looked like a steel wire from the gap between its fist and its wrist. Seemingly pleased with its new tool of choice, it took another step forwards.

“I don’t see how that’s any less painful than being stabbed...” cried Dortin through fearful tears, and tried once more to force his body to move. He managed to slide back just the tiniest amount, and his cloak fell slightly to the

side revealing an object that made the Guardian freeze in his tracks.



“...Huh?”

Dortin noticed that the Guardian had stopped, and saw that he was looking under his cloak. Dortin turned his gaze to check for what had apparently saved his life, and there he noticed the Sword of Baldanders that Volkan had entrusted to him before demanding to be carried. He had latched the sword onto his belt and had been dragging it across the floor this whole time, but his cloak had been mostly covering it until now.

“That sword... Those runes... Are those Wyrd Glyphs...?” The Guardian seemed surprised to see a dwarf carrying around such an object.

“Y-you know what this is?” asked Dortin, still shaking in his boots. Trusting his instincts, he brushed his cloak aside and brought the sword into full view for the Guardian to get a better look at. In response, the Guardian took a few steps closer until both dwarf and sword were within arm’s reach.

“Of course I do. I see. Now it makes sense. The power dwelling within that sword would certainly be strong enough to ward off my own sorcery.”

“...” Dortin remained frozen in fear, unsure as to whether he had just escaped with his life or put himself into even more danger.

The Guardian simply stared at the sword, bringing his face closer and closer without so much as a shift in his facial expression. Dortin gazed into the doll’s glassy blue eyes, and realized only that it seemed to be thinking quite intently about something.

“The name of the sword reads as *Baldanders*. I see. It does not appear to be all that powerful, but it is still not the sort of object a human could create or control,” said the Guardian with a tilt of the head. He retracted the wire into his wrist and continued, “You are no Sorcerer, either. Tell me. How did you come into possession of such an object?”

And you’re not even alive! Never mind how I got this sword, how did you get into this Sorcerers’ den, what are you doing here, and where did you even come from?! Dortin wanted to ask, but he daren’t risk provoking the doll.

He had no idea what was going on. He couldn’t even begin to fathom what had happened in this seemingly ordinary Sorcerers’ Association office building,

he had no clue what had turned all of the Sorcerers inside into zombies, and he had never even heard of anything remotely resembling the self-proclaimed Guardian of the Treasury that had just emerged from the laboratory. And worst of all, the one who had dragged him into this mess — his own brother, Volkan — was zombified like everyone else, laying there peacefully, quite literally without a care in the world. *Who the hell do you think dragged you this far, dammit? Wake up and suffer with me! Hell, let's trade places!* he complained internally, but deep down he knew fully well that blaming his brother wasn't going to change anything.

Here he was, alone and confused. Nobody was coming to save him, and nobody could tell him what the right thing to do next was.

And so, he did the only thing he knew how to. He did exactly what Volkan would have done.

“W-well you see, that’s actually a funny story...”

He recalled the story that Volkan had recited to the receptionist over and over, and repeated it back to the Guardian. “Okay, so, there’s this wicked Sorcerer who calls himself Orphen, and...”

He forced himself to keep a smile on his face even as cold sweat ran down his spine. His life depended on how convincing he could make this tall tale sound.

I’m sorry, Mom, he apologized internally. *I’m turning into a big fat liar just like Volkan...*

At this time, Dortin had no way of knowing just how much trouble his lie would end up causing for everyone. He had no way of knowing, but he still got the feeling that he’d gotten himself wrapped up into yet another ridiculous mess.

Chapter II: The Beautiful City of Alenhatam

“The city as rich with water as it is with people!”

“A place so rich with history that it could make a historian blush!”

And then, as though they had rehearsed it, “The beautiful city of Alenhatam!” sang Claiomh and Majic in perfect harmony. They even struck a pose with both hands raised in the air, Majic’s left hand clasped in Claiomh’s right. Orphen watched them getting all excited like a pair of children out of the corner of his eye.

“So, how long’ve you two been practicing that skit?” he grumbled.

“C’mon, don’t be like that,” pouted Claiomh.

“It’s not like we have anything else to do,” pouted Majic too. It almost seemed like they were rehearsing even this part.

Orphen gave an exaggerated sigh as he turned to face the line of people before them. “What’d you expect? I told you before we got here that we were gonna have to wait in a long-ass line for hours. This place is a crazy popular tourist spot, it’s flooded with people all year round. You two were the ones who wanted to stop here along the way, so shut up and behave yourselves.”

“Ahaha. Master, you know what you sound like right now? A grumpy old dad whose kids forced him to take them on a trip.”

“At least you realize you’re being a pair of annoying brats,” spat Orphen as he threw all of his luggage into Majic’s arms. Majic, not seeing this coming, barely managed to catch the bags, but the sudden shift in weight made him lose his balance and fall flat on his backside. Orphen didn’t even bother to help his student back to his feet.

Since they couldn’t take their carriage into town, they had to leave it at a stable just outside instead. What this meant was that everyone had to carry their own luggage into town. One reason for Orphen’s particularly bad mood was that Claiomh had forced her luggage onto him instead.

"If you're really that bored, then we can walk right out of this line and get back on the road right this minute," said Orphen, scowling even more than usual.

"Why do you gotta be such a stick in the mud?" said Claiomh. Her outfit today was one that she had been wearing a lot lately: A plain white T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Both of these had originally belonged to Majic, and Claiomh insisted that they only happened to fit her perfectly by sheer coincidence. Orphen knew this wasn't true, though. He had seen her resewing the shirt when she thought nobody was looking.

"Don't you know that a journey's all about having fun along the way? It's booring just sitting in a wagon the whole time," she protested.

"I'm not traveling for fun right now, you know," said Orphen.

"Then why *are* you traveling?"

"I'm a moneylender, remember?" said the *illegal* moneylender. "And I'm doing it out of my own pocket, of my own accord. I can hike up the interest on any money I lend as high as I want, and I don't have to pay any taxes on it, so it all goes straight into my own pocket. But because of that, if any of my customers run off without paying me back, I can't take any legal action against them. I can't even ask the police to help look for them because technically I only *lent* them the money with no actual legal obligations for them to pay it back, so it's down to me to track down anyone who tries to screw me over and beat the money outta them if I have to."

"Sounds like a real nasty business. Also, isn't that called tax evasion?" Claiomh pointed out.

Orphen sneered at this remark, but didn't bother trying to refute it. "Anyway, that's why I've gotta hunt down that pair of dickhead dwarfs and wring their necks until they cough up every last coin they've got. Otherwise I'm gonna be broke for the rest of my life at this rate. So I'm not really feeling the *fun* in this journey."

To make matters worse, the money that Orphen had lent out to Volkhan was money that he, himself, had borrowed. He had to at least break even, otherwise he would be the one being chased down by debt collectors next.

"Majic's paying you to teach him sorcery, isn't he?" said Claiomh with a puffed-out chest, almost as if she were the one paying him instead.

"Well, yeah, but you seriously think that's enough to cover food and lodgings for three whole people?" said Orphen, kneading his brow. "Shit, I thought you were supposed to be rich. If you were gonna tag along, the least you could've done is bring some of that fortune of yours along with you."

Orphen caught Claiomh sticking her tongue out at him when she thought he wasn't looking, but he pretended not to notice.

"Umm, would it help if I got some part-time work, Master?" Majic had finally managed to pull himself back to his feet, somehow managing to carry everyone's luggage in his slender arms. Even Claiomh's ridiculously large bag.

"Sure, go for it," Orphen half-sighed. *I'll probably end up having to get a job myself anyway, though*, he thought to himself.

"Whoa..."

Claiomh's mood improved drastically the moment they set foot into the city proper, her frustration at being made to wait in a line for so long evaporating instantly. She ran left and right amidst the throng of people while taking in as much of the scenery as possible. Alenhatam was exactly as scenic as one would expect from the most popular tourist destination on the Continent. The ground of the plaza at the entrance was built with a mosaic of multicolored bricks in some geometrical design or other. The fountain at the plaza's center appeared to have been carved from a single large rock, which was no mean feat. Atop a three meter high stone pillar stood the majestic statue of a howling lion, its mane bigger than the rest of its body. The fountain's water came flowing out from behind the lion's mane.

All sorts of different people were gathered in the plaza. Even at a glance Orphen could make out people who appeared to live here, sightseers, people running food stands, students on their afternoon break, a young girl selling flowers, and that was just counting the people in his immediate field of view.

"Orphen, Orphen!" yelled Claiomh out of nowhere.

“What is it now?” asked Orphen, turning away from the fountain to see what had gotten her so worked up. She was pointing at something off in the distance, moving slowly above the roof of a cozy-looking little inn.

“Someone’s been tied to a post!”

Sure enough, in the direction she pointed was a man tied in place to a wooden post roughly five meters tall. He was holding a pair of binoculars and looking around attentively. The wooden post was moving slowly in one direction, as if it was affixed to the top of a wagon.

“...That’s not a post, it’s a mast,” said Orphen, yawning to show how little he cared to explain something so obvious. “That guy’s the lookout, and he’s tied to the mast so that the wind doesn’t knock him off.”

“A mast? You mean like a ship’s mast?” asked Claiomh, apparently still slightly baffled.

“Obviously. It just means there’s a waterway on the other side of those buildings.”

“A waterway?” she repeated, and then it seemed to hit her. “Oh right, this city has canals built into it, huh?”

“Technically the canals were built first so that a harbor could be made here, and that harbor eventually turned into the city everyone knows today,” said Orphen. He stared at the mast moving slowly by and then began to mutter something like he was reading out of a tourist guide. “The ancient city of Alenhatam. Famous for its numerous canals, it’s one of the largest cities in Kiesalhima. That said, half of that is due to the fact that there are so many historic ruins around here.”

“It’s still more populated than Totokanta though, right?”

“Well, yeah. Although nearly a third of the people here at any given time are just sightseers.”

“Can we go see the canals?” asked Claiomh, but Orphen shook his head.

“Save it for later. We’ve gotta find lodgings first. And don’t go running off on your own, because you don’t know your way around and I really don’t feel like

exploring the whole damn city trying to find you when you get lost.”

“But...” Claiomh made no effort to hide her disappointment, to which Orphen responded by patting her on the head.

“I’ll show you around the place later. I know my way around a little.”

“Really? Thanks! But, hang on...” she made a puzzled face. “How come you know your way around? You’ve been here before?”

“This was the first real city I came to after I ran away from the Tower of Fangs.”

Right after Orphen said this, Majic called out to them from behind. “Masteeer!” he whined, not particularly happy about having been left to carry everyone’s luggage.

“What’s the matter?” Orphen saw Majic coming and was kind enough to at least stop and wait for his pack mule to fight his way through the crowds.

When Majic finally caught up to them, he dumped everyone’s luggage on the ground. “That was just mean!” he complained.

“What was?” asked Orphen, utterly oblivious.

“Leaving me with everyone’s bags like that! I had to wait for them to investigate everyone’s things while you two ran off without me!”

“It was just a quick little baggage check.”

“It wasn’t quick at all!” said Majic furiously, stamping his feet in frustration. “I’m your number one disciple, aren’t I? Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Not really,” replied Orphen bluntly. Majic was so stunned by this that he decided to explain, “It’d be one thing if you were a cute girl, but why the hell should I give a brat like *you* preferential treatment?”

“B-but I’m your first and only disciple! I mean sure, I’m not a pretty girl, but don’t we have, like, some kind of special bond as teacher and student or whatever? At least a hint of friendship, even?”

“Hey there, young lady. Those are pretty flowers. How much for a bouquet?”

“Please don’t just ignore me and walk away like that! And you could’ve at

least taken your own luggage with you!!”

And so Majic was once again left to carry everyone’s bags, meanwhile Orphen had already gone off ahead to buy a bouquet of flowers that looked like a bundle of purple butterflies from a ten year old girl with a basket full of them.

“Master!” yelled Majic, now so furious that spittle came flying out of his mouth. “Fine, I get it. You don’t have to give me any special treatment, but you could at least carry your own —”

“Oh, Majic, good timing. Carry this for me,” said Orphen as he lay the bouquet he had just bought on top of the pile of luggage in Majic’s arms.



“You’re not even listening!” his poor student screamed, only to be utterly ignored once more.

The trio began walking down the road again when Claiomh, who had remained silent during this entire one-sided exchange, poked her head in from the side and looked from Orphen’s face to the bouquet of flowers and then back again.

“...What?” asked Orphen, to which Claiomh picked up the bouquet and said “...I just didn’t really picture you as the type to ever buy flowers for another person.”

“Hey, even I buy flowers every now and then.”

“Well sure, but what brought it on all of a sudden?”

“I’m thinking of stopping in to visit an old acquaintance who’s been hospitalized for the longest time,” he explained, which only seemed to shock Claiomh even more.

“You mean you didn’t buy them for me?”

“Why the hell would I ever buy *you* flowers?” he sighed as he lifted the bouquet right out of Claiomh’s hands. She jumped to try and snatch them back, but Orphen was swift enough to dodge her.

Unfortunately, he dodged straight into Majic, which made the boy lose his balance and fall flat on his backside for the umpteenth time that day. And this time he even dropped all of their luggage all over the street, too.

“Try and watch where you’re going, Master.”

“Hey!” yelled Claiomh. “Try not to drop my bag, alright?! If you break any of my stuff, you’re paying to replace it!”

“But that wasn’t even my fault just now...” Majic tried to explain, but she ignored him completely. She picked her own bag up off the ground, and for the briefest moment Majic thought that she was actually going to carry it, but this hope was shattered when she tossed it right back into his arms. He didn’t even have the will left to argue at this point.

“Just don’t drop it again, you got that?!” commanded Claiomh with her hands

on her hips.

She turned back to Orphen and asked “Well if those flowers aren’t for me, then who *are* they for?” while pouting.

Orphen didn’t answer, and instead stopped to think about something. “Hmm...” he muttered to himself, “Come to think of it, it’s been three years since then. She was probably discharged ages ago...”

“Hey, are you even listening to me?”

Orphen, sick and fed up of Claiomh pestering him, took the flowers and tossed them over to her.

“I changed my mind,” he said as she caught them. “You can have them if you want. I’m pretty sure those are the sort you can boil to make pretty decent soup.”

Leaving Claiomh with those words, he turned around and started walking off ahead again. He caught sight of Claiomh’s face turning bright red from rage, but decided he could safely ignore this since Majic was closer to her.

“Hmph!” Orphen could hear Claiomh throwing the bouquet to the ground behind him. He peeked back over his shoulder only to catch sight of Claiomh kicking Majic in the leg as hard as she could. Majic yelped in pain and dropped to his knees clutching his leg, and Orphen simply thought to himself *poor kid* before turning back around and carrying on down the road.

Alenhatam, the city of water.

Besides its famous canals, Alenhatam was also one of the four great cities representing human civilization: The Royal Capital of Mebrenst; The Commercial Capital of Totokanta; The Self-Governed Commune of Urbanrama; and The Old Capital of Alenhatam.

Once the royal capital itself, Alenhatam lost this status some few hundred years prior. Even now, though, its canals bustled with the life of tourists and merchant vessels. In the dead center of the high street, the former royal castle now stood open to the public, converted into a museum-cum-library.

As a matter of fact, the city's income was entirely dependent on tourists. Every year, hundreds of thousands of tourists of all ages and backgrounds came to visit one of the oldest known city structures on the Continent — so old was it, in fact, that it was said to have existed on the Continent since before even humans themselves had. Not a single tourist was left disappointed by the experience of the city itself, though the astronomical prices driven by all the souvenir stores was a different matter entirely. Most people simply couldn't afford to pay such sums on trinkets with some vague connection to the place. Yet the sheer number of tourists guaranteed that for every ten who couldn't afford souvenirs, there would be at least one who could, and this was more than enough to keep the economy afloat.

"Master, are you really sure that's such a good idea?" asked Majic in a quiet voice, so as not to be overheard.

"Huh? The hell are you talking about?" came Orphen's reply, flippant as ever.

"I'm talking about Claiomh, you know, *Claiomh*? The one fuming behind us like an active volcano?"

Majic turned around to check on her and, sure enough, Claiomh was following some ways behind the two, pouting so hard that she looked like a different person. He turned his gaze back to Orphen and lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper.

"...It can take days for her to get over a mood like this. Trust me, I know."

"You think I should give her some flowers? Maybe with a kindly-written apology note?"

"Oh sure, maybe if you want to make the volcano erupt in the middle of the street," said Majic scowling, to which Orphen could only shrug his shoulders.

"She'll get over it. She's just being a spoiled brat."

"You make her sound so harmless, when she's really, really not..."

Orphen ignored Majic mumbling away at his side and instead scanned the street for any familiar signs. They had already been walking in a straight line for twenty minutes since entering the city, but had yet to find an inn where they could actually spend the night. All of the inns near the city entrance were

exclusive to laborers, contractors, or merchants, meaning that travelers and tourists had to head much deeper into the city proper before they could find any establishments that were even open to them.

We should be getting pretty close to the tourist lodgings by now, thought Orphen. But damn, it's been a long time since I was last here. I only wish I could've made it even longer. I'm really not comfortable walking these streets, but those brats would've bitched my ears off otherwise, and that's honestly worse than anything this city could do to me.

Truth be told, Orphen didn't have *any* pleasant memories of Alenhatam. The only other time he had been here was when he first left the Tower of Fangs, and having lived in those dorms for most of his life, he had been completely unfamiliar with the outside world. Never mind being able to cook for himself, he hadn't even known what to buy when out shopping for groceries. Not only that, but this city was home to a rather cruel practice...

"...Alright," Orphen nodded to himself. He pulled a bitter face as he turned to Majic, and said "We'll put off finding an inn for now. I've got business elsewhere first."

"...*Excuse me?*" said Majic incredulously. His legs wobbled uncertainly under the weight of three people's luggage. "I dunno how important it is to you, but right now nothing is higher priority for me than finding *anywhere* to drop these bags so I can rest for a bit. Heck, I'll sleep in a stable if I can just put down a single one of these bags."

"Less bitching, more lifting. You'll never be a proper Sorcerer if you can't even carry some bags down the street."

"Oh right, I'm sure *you* carried *everyone's* things around the Tower of Fangs *all the time*. I've already been following the training schedule you set out for me every single day, didn't you give me that regimen because you decided it was good enough?"

"Here's a trade secret for you: Don't ever settle for just *good enough*. When someone asks if you can run a kilometer, you run ten. That's the key to success."

Majic eyed his master suspiciously. "...If you hate me that much, then just

come out and say it already.”

Orphen cleared his throat uncomfortably and rethought what he’d just said. “Alright, it’s not like you *have* to tag along. Lemme see... There should be an inn about a kilometer down this road with a cheap-looking gaudy sign hanging above the door. You and Claiomh can go ahead and book a couple rooms and drop off the stuff—” Orphen tried to say, but Majic’s shrill screech cut him off.

“*Go with Claiomh?* That’s suicide!” he protested. “If my options are torture or exercise, then I choose exercise. I’ll carry the bags.”

“You sure? I just said you don’t have to.”

“I’m sure, trust me.” Orphen’s sudden change of heart only served to make Majic regret ever complaining about the luggage. “So where are we headed, anyway?”

“The Alenhatam Branch Office of Damsels’ Orisons.”

“The Sorcerers’ Association?” asked Majic, just to make sure he hadn’t misheard.

“Yeah,” said Orphen, not stopping for a moment on the crowded highway. “You’ll be in for a surprise if you think it’s anything like the branch office back in Totokanta, though.”

“...Whaddya mean?” asked Majic, apparently already confused.

“You’ve never left Totokanta so you probably don’t know this, but Sorcerers are treated differently from town to town, city to city. While Totokanta treats us like nobles, the attitude towards us here is on... the other extreme.”

“It really varies that much?” asked Majic, shifting the luggage in his hands against the oncoming crowds of people.

“It does. For example, the branch office in Totokanta was pretty much the uppermost echelons of society, right? They could even afford to bar anyone but associated Sorcerers from entering the property. The entire organization is Sorcerers from the ground up. And while this next part has a lot to do with how far it is from the royal capital, even the King himself doesn’t have much, if any, influence over them.”

“...And things are different here in Alenhatam?”

“Not just here, actually. Hell, Totokanta’s unique among all the branch offices. You wouldn’t get away with treating Sorcerers that highly in any other city, and there are at *least* three Sorcerer-hating organizations who’ll make sure of that. In cities where any of these three organizations have a large influence, Sorcerers can even be persecuted, discriminated against, abused, or in extreme cases strung up and put to death by the locals.”

“Th—that’s ridiculous!” yelped Majic, who froze in his tracks upon hearing this.

Such was his surprise that even Claiomh drew to a halt some distance away, wondering what had just caused the boy to freak out like that. Orphen smiled and gestured with his hands for Majic to calm down a little.

“I did say *extreme* cases, didn’t I? It’s not exactly a daily occurrence, it’s just something that you should really know now that you’re an apprentice yourself. Sleep with one eye open and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring... but alright. So, what are these three organizations that hate us so badly?”

“The royal family, for a start,” said Orphen, walking down the street again while explaining this to his apprentice. “And when I say that, I mean the Union of Lords based in the royal capital of Mebrenst. The city itself is like a gigantic fortress, and everything from their army to their purses are a world apart from the rest of the Continent. They’re one of the most powerful organizations in — actually, no, it’s wrong to even call them an organization. They’re basically the state itself, after all.”

“Right...”

“Anyway, they hate the idea of Sorcerers having any kind of political power. No surprise, really. From their point of view, we’re commoners by all rights. So for commoners to hold the same kind of influence as aristocrats is out of the question, as far as they’re concerned. That’s why, while we’re under their rule anyway, they do as much as possible to divide our organizations into more manageable parts.”

“For example?”

"Well, White Sorcerers, feared for their incredibly potent powers, are basically confined to an institution known only as the Misty Falls. The institution's location is known only to the King himself as well as the handful of knights who directly govern it, or so I've been told. Another example would be the Thirteen Apostles residing in the royal castle, who are basically an army of court Sorcerers. By the way, while they're called the Thirteen Apostles, there are a hell of a lot more than thirteen of them. Last I heard there were close to a hundred, and they're all, without exception, Black Sorcerers of unparalleled ability. Nobody's stupid enough to make an enemy out of them — hell, they could wipe a city the size of Alenhatam right off the maps overnight."

Orphen could see the pure terror in Majic's eyes, and he made sure that his apprentice fully understood just how dangerous the Thirteen Apostles were.

"The second Sorcerer-hating organization is none other than the Kimluck Church," said Orphen, holding up a second finger. "They worship the three Weird Sisters said to represent the Fates, and while their main church is located in the northernmost reaches of the Continent, they have church buildings set up all over the place. They're extremely secretive though, to the point where outsiders — much less Sorcerers like us — know virtually nothing about them. We know that they hate Sorcerers for some reason, but we don't know what that reason is. Hell, we don't even know if *they* know the reason for it, that's how much of an enigma they are."

"There was a church building near where I used to go to school. Claiomh would often, uh..." Majic paused to cast a cautious glance over his shoulder, just to make sure Claiomh wouldn't overhear, before continuing. "She used to throw stones at their windows."

"...I'm long since convinced that that girl was born just to cause people trouble," said Orphen, stealing a glance in Claiomh's direction himself. "I guess it's no big deal, though. Luckily the church's influence is pretty much nonexistent in Totokanta. It's the north you've gotta be careful of. If you learn one important thing today, make it this: Don't ever go any further north than the Tower of Fangs unless you've got a death wish. It's an open secret that the Kimluck Church have got a hit squad of assassins working directly for them. I think most people know them as the Killer Priests."

Majic frowned when he heard this. “Wait, the Church sends assassins after people? *Killer Priests*? That doesn’t even make any sense! Doesn’t that, like, go directly against their beliefs or something?”

“Not really. Remember, they worship the Weird Sisters, after all. They believe in the Fates.”

“...What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, all men are ‘Fated’ to die someday, right?” said Orphen with a sarcastic grin. “Anyway, that’s all we know about the Kimluck Church. Now we come to the third group you’re gonna wanna remember, because this is the one that applies to Alenhatam. Care to take a guess?”

“I really don’t know... What other organizations are there, and why would this apply to Alenhatam...?”

“I said group this time, not organization,” said Orphen, raising a third finger. “More accurately, this one’s a race — and the answer is, Dragons.”

“*Dragons*?”

“That’s right. You know the legends about how this city predates humanity itself, right? Well, among those legends is one that says dragons used to inhabit the Continent long before humans ever showed up.”

Majic chewed over these words in his mind, confused. “But that doesn’t make any sense. If humans didn’t exist back then, then who built this city? And who originally lived in it?”

“Like I just said, kid. Dragons.”

This only served to confuse the boy even further. “But... the size of the buildings! The canals! None of it looks very dragon-y to me.”

“Well, yeah,” said Orphen with a little smile, fully aware of the misunderstanding and deliberately drawing it out. “That’s because you don’t know what actual dragons look like.”

“...Huh?” Majic was completely lost at this point.

“Want me to take a guess at the kind of image the word ‘dragon’ brings to mind for you? You’re probably thinking that dragons are huge, scaly, fire-

breathing lizards with wings, guarding mountains of treasure beyond man's wildest dreams. A little something like... this," said Orphen as he took the dragon pendant out from underneath his shirt. He had been hiding it ever since they had reached Alenhatam, and for good reason, having taken it out right now simply to help with his explanation.

"Yeah, that's the kind of thing I think of when you talk about dragons. Wouldn't anyone else think the same?"

"They might, but they'd be wrong, too. The dragon used in this pendant's design is simply the form we associate most with Sorcery, which is why the Tower of Fangs adopted it for their own purposes. These types of dragons don't actually exist in the real world, and never have. The closest thing to them would be dinosaurs, and those neither breathe fire nor protect mountains of treasure. They're just really fuckin' big lizards."

"But... the legends about dragons paint them as—"

"Incredibly wise creatures, who use advanced sorcery and sometimes even talk in human tongue."

"Then the legends lied?"

"Not quite," said Orphen, still smiling for all he could get away with. "The legends didn't really *lie*, since that description just now was pretty accurate. The key point is, those are the *only* traits shared amongst all dragons. The rest came about as a problem of interpretation, but basically if it's intelligent, uses sorcery, and can understand words, then no matter what it looks like, it's already a dragon."

Majic thought this over for a moment before realizing the implications. "But you're intelligent, you use sorcery, and we're talking right now. Which means..."

"No, I'm not a dragon. I'm very much human. Same goes for all other human Sorcerers."

"...So anything *besides humans* that meets those criteria is a dragon, then."

"Alright, that was a fault with my explanation right now. I'll start from the very beginning, and hopefully this time it'll make a bit more sense. Now," said Orphen, "a long, long time ago, before humans ever came to be, there was no

such thing as sorcery in the world. Oh, and it'll get confusing otherwise, so whenever I say 'sorcery,' I'm referring specifically to the type of spells that you or I can use."

"Okay. Why make the distinction, though? Don't words like 'magic' and 'witchcraft' basically just mean the same thing?"

"That's a good question. That's actually the distinction I wanted to make. While some people might use words like 'magic' or 'witchcraft' when talking about our abilities, technically they're wrong, and this mistake comes about because they don't know what those words actually refer to. It can get pretty complicated, so I'll sum it up as simply as possible: Sorcery refers to the powers belonging to dragons, Magic refers to the powers of the Gods, and words like witchcraft or voodoo don't refer to any real power. The latter are just superstitions."

"Superstitions?"

"Primitive beliefs, born from a lack of knowledge on sorcery and magic. Basically, it's a bunch of make-believe. Anyway, since there's no such thing as witchcraft or voodoo, and since sorcery didn't used to exist, this leaves True Magic — the power of the Gods. All that existed in this age was the Gods with their unfathomably powerful magic, nature itself, and a bunch of wild animals. Humans did exist, sure, but they were basically on the same level as any other wild animal back in those days. They couldn't use sorcery because sorcery didn't exist, and they sure as hell couldn't use magic, since that was the privilege of the Gods."

"Hmm..." nodded Majic, following so far.

"Now, this is where things changed forever," explained Orphen. He made sure to hide his pendant again before continuing. "Among all these wild animals were six species that were a lot smarter, a lot more cunning than the rest. You remember that statue we saw at the city entrance, right?"

"Yeah. It looked like some kinda lion with a really big mane."

"That's a depiction of one of the six species I mentioned just now. Specifically, that one was a Fairy Dragon. There are others like the Deep Dragons, but basically these races saw the Gods with their magic and grew to crave it for

themselves. So the dragons stole the divine secrets of True Magic, and from that knowledge they crafted sorcery for their own use. That's how the six species of dragons came to be directly associated with sorcery like they are today. But obviously since humans can use sorcery too, the story doesn't quite end there. Among these six species was one exceptionally powerful race, the Celestials."

"Celestials?"

"They had other names, like Witches, or Nornir, but these names all refer to the same race — and if you've never heard any of these names, then you might better know them as the ancestors of all Sorcerers. Half-mortal, half-god, and said to be a race of only women, their Sorcery was unbelievably powerful. Anyway, these Celestials were practically indistinguishable from humans apart from their brilliant emerald-green eyes, but that's just another trait common to all the dragon races. Besides, it's just abnormally green eyes, not like they had extra limbs or anything. So these Celestials reached out to humankind, and they began to live together in harmony... And, well, that's where human Sorcerers came from."

"...I don't get it. How does the two races living in harmony mean humans could suddenly use sorcery, too?"

Orphen paused to think for a moment, slowing his walking pace. After a while he decided to just state the facts as plainly as possible.

"Sorcerers are literally the children of Celestials and humans," he said.

"...Oh. Now I get it."

"Yup. Strictly speaking, Sorcerers aren't a hundred percent human. We've got some dragon blood in our veins, and that's why we can use sorcery like the other dragon races. This is also why people with no talent for sorcery will never be able to use it no matter how hard they try — it's a problem of genetics. Their bodies just don't have the capacity for it."

"I see, so that's how it is."

"Right, but that doesn't mean we're as good at it as pure-blooded Celestials were," Orphen continued. "There's a fundamental difference between the

sorcery we use, and the sorcery they used.”

“Which is?”

“Well, this might sound like common sense, but whether you’re a Black Sorcerer or a White Sorcerer, the way you channel that energy remains the same. You’ve gotta cast a spell, using your voice as a medium. Since your medium is your own voice, your sorcery will only ever reach as far as your voice does. And because even echoes die down eventually, this makes our sorcery transient by nature.”

He paused for a moment to reach both hands out in front of himself, mimicking a pair of scales.

“On the other hand, Celestials didn’t use their voice to cast spells. They used writing instead, which is why some people call it ‘Silent Sorcery’. That’s why you’ll sometimes find items in the world with Runes — Wyrd Glyphs — engraved on them. These are called Celestial Artifacts, and because writing allows for much more information to be conveyed than spoken words, it meant that they could craft much more potent and varied spells. And because writing sticks around a lot longer than spoken words, the effects could be made long-lasting or stored for future use. Basically, their sorcery was superior in every single way.”

“How strong was it, though? Like, I get that you could make more complex spells through writing, but I can’t think of any solid examples.”

Majic’s question was completely sensible and one that any Sorcerer might ask at some point in their life, but the answer wasn’t quite that simple.

“...Well, keep in mind that I’ve never seen a Celestial with my own two eyes, so I couldn’t actually say for sure. But I have seen a handful of Celestial Artifacts; I’ve even used a couple myself. That ring I got from Claiomh was one of them, and the Sword of Baldanders that the dickhead dwarf brothers ran off with was another. Anyway, put as simply as possible, these kinds of artifacts are just way too powerful for most people to handle. Plenty of people have tried to make the power of the Celestials their own... only to fail spectacularly.”

Majic considered Orphen’s words for a moment, then drew his own conclusion. “Even so, some people just crave more power. No matter how many

people fail right before our eyes, we'll probably never stop trying to make the Celestials' power entirely our own."

"Pretty much," smirked Orphen. "Hell, I'm not one to talk. If I ever needed more power, and there was a Celestial Artifact that could help me do that, then I'd find a way to use it no matter how crazy it was. It's just in our nature as Sorcerers to aim for ever greater heights."

Though Orphen said this with absolute confidence, Majic still seemed to be mulling over something.

Then again, it's probably better to let him draw his own conclusions, thought Orphen. Though he shrugged his shoulders like the conversation was over, Majic pointed out the reason why his explanation wasn't quite over yet.

"Okay, so I get everything about the relationship between dragons and sorcery and stuff, but what does that have to do with Sorcerers being discriminated against in Alenhatam?"

"Shit, you're right. I completely skipped that part, didn't I? Well, it all comes down to the Dragon Faith. The six races of dragons are the Fairy Dragons, Red Dragons, Mist Dragons, Deep Dragons, War Dragons, and Weird Dragons — this last one being what we call the Celestials. The Dragon Faith came about when ordinary humans were invited into Celestial society for the first time. Initially humans couldn't use sorcery, so the Celestials were a race they could never hope to match. While the Celestials were the ones who originally built Alenhatam, humans were only invited into the society two or three hundred years ago. At first it seemed like the powerless humans would have no choice but to rely on the Celestials and their advanced civilization, and this respect eventually turned into a form of worship. With this city being where the faith originated, it's like a holy land for the believers. That's why the normally sparse and scattered Dragon Faith is still alive here today, and their worship of the Celestials along with it."

"Okay, I get how it came about, but why did things end up the way they did?" asked Majic.

They had long since turned onto a road with much fewer people, so Orphen was finally able to skip the roundabout explanations and get straight to the

point without drawing too much unwanted attention.

“Just like how the dragons stole magic from the Gods and made it their own, so too did humans steal sorcery in the form of mixed bloodlines. When the Celestials first discovered this, they grew terrified of the new Sorcerers who threatened the power that humans had once thought to be absolute. So to stop the new race from shaking the humans’ faith in them, the Celestials ordered that all Sorcerers be killed on sight. This was the start of a century of Sorcerer Hunts, though what drove the Celestials to fear this new race so much that they’d try to massacre the lot is anyone’s guess.”

“How many people fell victim to these Sorcerer Hunts?”

“Who knows? But if you stop and think about it, it couldn’t have been *that* many. I mean, we’re talking about ordinary humans with no sorcery going up against spell-casting warriors. Sorcerers were persecuted because they were powerful — powerful enough to still be alive despite the Celestials wanting them extinct. Time went on, and the Celestials eventually vanished from the Continent altogether.”

“What made them just up and disappear like that?”

“Who knows? All we can say for sure is that no Celestials have been spotted for the past two, three hundred years, and that their disappearance was abrupt with no known cause. Not known to us, at least. And, well, with the ringleaders gone, the Sorcerer Hunts just naturally died down over time. It’s finally reached the point where nobody’d be stupid enough to try that kind of thing in broad daylight in the middle of one of the Continent’s most bustling cities, at least. Still, the Dragon Faith hasn’t died out, and those believers still pretty openly discriminate against Sorcerers, which is what I was trying to say. They’re the reason that the Alenhatam Branch Office of Damsels’ Orisons is nowhere near as grand as Totokanta’s, or most anywhere else’s for that matter.”

“...I wonder what made the Celestials so desperate that they’d try to murder anyone human with the tiniest bit of their blood mixed in,” Majic muttered to himself, and Orphen didn’t answer. He didn’t answer, because he understood the feeling well enough himself.

When faced with the very real threat that someone less experienced than you

might overpower you one day, anyone would get a little anxious, he reasoned. That vague fear and understanding that these children might one day turn your own weapons against you, using them better than you ever could, is a far more potent form of envy than any other. At least, that's how I feel looking at you sometimes, Majic.

The Alenhatam Branch Office of Damsels' Orisons was a sorry sight to behold.

There were many tall buildings in Alenhatam, especially in the southern residential district where apartment buildings easily stood five to six stories in height. All it took was a casual glance from the branch office, to the residential district and back, and the difference was clear as day. The Sorcerers' Association could barely even afford to keep the grounds properly maintained.

"It really looks like they just slapped this place together in a rush, huh," said Majic.

"This used to be an elementary school," sighed Orphen. "Apparently they got it on the cheap when a new school building was erected elsewhere in town. Still, this is a pretty huge step up from where they used to be located."

He looked around and caught sight of Claiomh standing by the gate some ten meters away. She was quite clearly looking over at them, but refused to take a single step closer.

Orphen lost his patience and called out first. "How long are you gonna run off pouting like that?" he said, but Claiomh ignored him, turning her her to the side with a little "Hmph," her blond hair blowing gently in the breeze.

"I already gave you the damned flowers you wanted, didn't I?"

At this, Claiomh couldn't restrain herself any longer. She stomped her foot and cried, "Gave them to me? You *threw* them at me!"

"Yeah, and?" quipped Orphen. "What difference does that make? You wanted the flowers and you got them, so what's got your panties in a bunch?"

"How can you even ask that when—" Claiomh started to say, but she couldn't find the right words to express her frustration. Instead she just ground her teeth and glared at Orphen, which he took as a sign that he'd already won the

argument.

“See? I knew it. You’re just being a selfish, fussy brat, and you’re taking out your bad mood on everyone around you instead. You think stomping your feet’s gonna make things go your way all your life? Eat shit or grow up, those are your choices. Don’t like them? Tough, because you’re gonna have to get used to it.”

“...Wasn’t that a little harsh, Master?”

“I just said what we’re both thinking,” shrugged Orphen without even turning to face his apprentice. His reaction just infuriated Claiomh even further, making her bite down on her lip and ball her hands up into fists. “Guess it had the opposite effect,” he shrugged.

“Did you seriously think that was gonna help calm her down?”

“I thought I summed it up pretty well,” said Orphen. Instead of following up on this, though, he decided it was better to give up on Claiomh for now and focus on what he’d come here for instead.

Orphen stepped out onto the field between the gate and the building’s front door, and for the first time noticed that there was absolutely nobody else around. This was strange. As run-down as the Sorcerers’ Association in this city was, they still should have at least had someone patrolling the grounds for security reasons.

“Why did we come here, anyway? I thought you left that organization behind,” asked Majic, still carrying everyone’s luggage around.

Orphen scratched the tip of his nose with his finger. “It’s hard to explain... Let’s just say I came here to tie up some loose ends. Hell, it’s been so long it might not even matter anymore.”

“Are you gonna give an actual explanation, or is this turning into another lecture?”

“I came to meet someone I used to know, but I don’t even know if she’ll be here. The last time I saw her, she was hospitalized with some pretty serious injuries, after all.”

“If she was hospitalized, then why did we come here instead of the hospital?”

“Because she’s a Sorceress,” he said plainly. “I already told you what it’s like for people like us in the city proper, so if I’m likely to find her anywhere, then it’d be here.”

Orphen turned around to face Claiomh when he was about halfway to the building’s entrance, but she stood even now by the gate scratching her leg with her other foot. He thought it’d be funny to see her reaction if he were to wave at her from this distance, and reasoned that she’d probably just throw a stone at him. He knew it wouldn’t reach from that distance with her strength and suddenly felt like seeing this play out, so he raised his hand to wave to her.

His hand froze in midair, though. From behind him — from within the office building — he suddenly felt an overwhelming presence watching him.

The wind picked up, and he could feel his hair standing on end. This wasn’t the vague feeling of having someone’s eyes on the back of his head, but a much more ordinary, much more physical sensation.

“M-Master, what is that?!” screamed Majic.

Orphen spun around and came face to face with some kind of tornado wrapping itself around the office building. Rather than a single tornado, it felt like a bunch of small, extremely powerful bursts of wind gradually closing in on each other. Chunks of the ground were lifted right into the air, and the remains of what was probably once a metal slide were ripped mercilessly from the ground, like weeds being uprooted. The building itself was far too frail to withstand a storm like this, gradually caving in under the pressure and being torn to pieces by the gales.

That was when Orphen understood that this was no freak weather phenomenon. It was a vortex of raw energy — and it was heading straight for them.

Shit! he swore to himself. *I have no idea what the hell’s going on, but this can’t be good!*

He grabbed Majic by the collar and dragged the boy to his side to shield him, then focused his mana and took deep breaths so that he could cast protective spells at a moment’s notice.

The tornado drew close enough that it began throwing stones and debris at them. He waited until the very last second to put up his shield, not wanting to waste a scrap on energy when he really needed it.

“I spin thee thus—” he cried out, seeing large shards of broken glass flying straight towards them. “—Halo Armor!”

There was a loud *Ting!* like someone had just flicked a wine glass with their finger, and a halo shield sent the broken glass flying to the side not a moment too soon. Some kind of wooden signboard came flying at them from another direction, collided with the halo of light, and burst into a hundred tiny fragments. The wind continued to kick up dirt and stones at them, and Orphen could hear Majic cowering by his side.

“Wh-what the heck’s going on?!” asked the boy, completely panicked.

“The hell should I know?” came Orphen’s reply.

He turned his head to search for Claiomh, and was relieved to find that the tornado hadn’t expanded as far as the gate, leaving the girl to stand there wide-mouthed at the disaster unfolding on the grounds. Whatever the cause of this storm was, it was aiming specifically for Orphen and Majic.

While the storm had stopped expanding, it refused to die down, either. It simply roared away, chipping down Orphen’s stamina little by little.

“This is ridiculous. This storm’s clearly not natural, but it’s way too powerful to be any one person’s sorcery, either. I dunno how much longer my shield will be able to protect us.”

“Wh-what happens if we’re still in the middle when it falls apart?” asked Majic, terror apparent in his voice.

“We end up like *that*,” replied Orphen, pointing his chin at the remains of some playground equipment that had been completely uprooted, steel bars, concrete block beneath, and all. The tornado was so powerful that it lifted the entire wreckage off the ground with ease.

“I’m too young to die!” his apprentice screamed at the sight.

Orphen’s barrier had already grown drastically weaker by this point. As short-

lived as Black Sorcerers' spells were by nature, it should still have been possible to keep up a barrier like this for at least a couple more minutes. That was when Orphen noticed that in addition to the tornado's abnormal might, he could feel the mana within him slowly being drained away by something.

He rubbed his hands together to try and keep his focus, and that was when something entered the corner of his eye.

He hadn't been searching for it, he simply tilted his head back from the fatigue of maintaining the barrier. Nevertheless, his eyes settled on a human-shaped silhouette up on the third floor of one of the office buildings, still barely standing amidst the raging storm.

It was a curious sight, to say the least. While it was impossible to make out any details from this distance, it looked to be a man's figure standing calmly in front of the window.

Then Orphen noticed something odd about the shape of its body, and realized that whatever it was, it definitely couldn't be called human.

What the hell is that thing? he asked himself. He focused on trying to make out its shape, and found a number of things that struck him as immediately out of place.

That slender body, lacking any fat or muscles of any kind. Swollen joints. Pale, inorganic skin. A single clump of hair on the top of its head. Slits carved out where its eyes should have been. No nose. Its mouth moved as though it was talking to someone, and while Orphen was no professional lipreader, he had been forced to pick up the basics of the skill as part of his training as a Sorcerer.

He tried to piece together what it was talking about.

"VERY WELL. I WILL COOPERATE WITH YOU."

Whatever the thing was, it was apparently talking to someone nearby.

Then, it held up a familiar object. An old-fashioned sword that Orphen knew all too well. It paused for a moment, and then crushed the sword into pieces with a single hand. The blade shattered like glass, and Orphen was forced to come to the only conclusion that made any sense.

That was the Sword of Baldanders, no mistaking it, he told himself. Which means whatever that thing is, it's probably talking with Volkan and Dortin right about now!

His concentration broken, the halo barrier crumbled under the force of the tornado. Majic screamed in despair. A large chunk of wood came flying up out of nowhere...

...And crashed into the side of Orphen's head.

“——!” he screamed voicelessly, forcing himself to stay conscious with every last ounce of willpower he could muster. He pressed one hand to the wound on his head, then gave in to his boiling temper. “God fucking dammit, Volkan, you lousy son of a bitch! What the *hell* have you gotten us wrapped up in *this time*?!”

A chunk of the building's wall was ripped out and sent flying straight at Orphen. He lifted his right arm, and in a dignified, determined voice,

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A beam of light shot forth from his fingertips and obliterated the chunk of wall before it could reach him. The next thing that came flying at him looked like the playground slide's metal ladder, and this too was easily incinerated by the onslaught of Orphen's offensive spells.

Unfortunately, the ladder wasn't the only thing that had been flying towards him. Several metal bolts that had probably been used to hold the playground equipment together managed to sneak past among the smaller pieces of dirt and debris, and hit him in the shoulder with tremendous force. Orphen screamed in pain and fell to his knees. The pain lasted only a moment before it gave way to a dull, numb sensation spreading through his whole arm. He knew instantly that it was broken.

“Dammit, why's my body so weak? If you're just gonna break right when I need you, then don't bother holding yourself together in the first place!” he cursed unreasonably.

“Master!” he could hear Majic yelling from nearby. He turned to find the boy laying on the ground, staring up at him. “You weren't my teacher for very long,

but I'll never forget the time we've spent together!"

"Oh, shut up! Like hell I'm kicking the bucket in a place like this!"

Orphen grabbed Majic by the collar with his left hand, and desperately searched for a way to escape from the tornado assaulting them from all sides. The winds were so fierce that if he moved without thinking, he could easily be swept off his feet like so much of the debris that had already been hurled at them. He knew that if he lost his footing here, he was as good as dead.

Right then, he heard Claiomh yelling his name — at least, he thought he did. He knew it should be impossible to hear her voice over the raging winds, but when he looked over at where the voice came from, he could see a series of afterimages of Claiomh standing there in her white T-shirt, his eyes spinning from the pain in his broken arm. Eventually the images all focused together, and right as he turned to rush in her direction, there came a bright flash of light.

The explosion happened in utter silence. It came from inside the office building, expanded outwards, and burst out into flames in all directions. It all happened so suddenly that Orphen assumed his eardrums must have burst from the noise. All he could feel was the explosion searing his skin for a brief moment, then he lost all sensation in his body altogether.

When he came to his senses, he was laying on the ground some distance away. He could feel something shaking his body, probably trying to wake him up. Whatever it was, it tossed him around like a piece of clothing being hung out to dry, and he finally found the strength to put a stop to whatever it was.

His feeble resistance seemed to have worked, because his body grew still once more and his consciousness returned to him. Somehow, he was still alive.

He sat up and moaned "Shit, that hurts," finding that his entire body hurt — his broken right arm most of all, though.

"Orphen!"

"AUGH!"

Claiomh grabbed his arms and shook him roughly to make sure he was fully conscious, ignoring his tormented screams as the tremors revived the pain in his broken arm.

“Orphen, are you alright? What the heck happened just now?! Hey — your arm’s broken!”

“I know it’s broken, now for the love of the Gods, *stop shaking it!*”

Orphen just barely managed to shake Claiomh off of himself before the pain reduced him to tears, and he nursed his poor arm so that it might never have to go through anything like that ever again.

That was when he finally noticed that he could hear Claiomh’s voice just fine. “Huh? I thought that explosion burst my eardrums, but I can hear my voice and your voice just fine. What the hell’s going on?”

“Huh? Why’d you think your eardrums were burst?”

“Well, I mean... I couldn’t hear a thing in that explosion just now,” he said, turning his gaze to the remains of the Damsels’ Orisons office building. The explosion had apparently sent him flying in a straight line over to the gate.

“I never heard it either, y’know. I saw the explosion, sure, but it was completely silent.”

“...It was *what*?”

Orphen quickly noticed that this wasn’t the only abnormal thing about the explosion. For how powerful it had been, its blast radius was abnormally small — almost deliberately limited, even. The office building itself had been reduced to rubble, and the property grounds were left scorched wastelands, but all signs that the explosion had even happened stopped as soon as they reached the inner side of the gate. There was barely even any debris outside of that zone, which shouldn’t have been possible considering how Orphen himself had been flung that far, and he certainly wasn’t the only thing in that tornado.

Whatever had caused the explosion had aimed specifically at the building and the grounds, and *only* at that specific area. Even setting aside the abnormally limited blast radius and focused output, he knew that whatever had caused it couldn’t possibly have been human sorcery. He knew this because the explosion had been utterly silent — he hadn’t even heard the spell being cast. There was no Sorcerer alive who could launch an attack of that magnitude without being in direct earshot.

His mouth hung open as he looked around the ruins of what had once been the Alenhatam Branch Office of Damsels' Orisons. It had been completely leveled. Even the dust had begun to settle, which was when Orphen noticed the absence of something else that should have been there.

"...Claiomh, where's Majic? Don't tell me he's—" he cut his words short, too afraid of finishing that sentence.

He turned back to the scorched pile of rubble and took a step forward, fending off the tears even as his heart threatened to burst inside his chest. No matter where he looked, he couldn't see any trace of Majic's body anywhere.

"Umm..." muttered Claiomh, putting her hand on Orphen's left arm to get his attention.

"What, where is he? Do you know where he is? Why can't I find him, Claiomh?" asked Orphen, to which the girl's response was brief and simple.

She raised one arm and pointed into the air. "Up there," she said.

"...What?" Orphen screwed up his eyes and then turned to face the sky, then clutched his head with one hand and screamed at the sight.

Around two, three hundred meters in the air, Majic tumbled helplessly towards the ground at terrific speeds. The blast must have sent Orphen flying along the ground, and Majic straight up into the air. Hopefully he hadn't died of shock, but that wouldn't make a difference if he hit the ground anyway.



“Into my embrace... uh... fuck it, just *work!*”

Because Orphen had panicked, he failed to come up with a proper spell off the top of his head. The spell itself didn’t matter — he just had to prevent Majic from hitting the ground. He formed a vague image in his mind of Majic not hitting the ground, then yelled the first thing that came to mind to put it into practice.

“Be safe! Majic!”

Orphen could feel the spell activating, and he saw Majic’s speed decreasing even as he drew closer. At least his voice had reached in time. Orphen wiped the sweat from his brow as his apprentice floated gently to the ground.

By the time he landed, it became apparent that Majic had passed out. Claiomh patted him on the cheeks to try and wake him up, while Orphen went over the damaged grounds in a calmer state of mind this time.

“...This is ridiculous,” he said to himself. He recalled the humanoid figure that he had caught a glimpse of right before the explosion, and wondered if this had all been its doing. If that was the case, then whatever it was, it had probably escaped right before the blast. Surely it couldn’t have been foolish enough to blow itself up while failing to finish off its enemies. He could only pray that Volkhan and Dortin had made it out safe, as well.

When everything had finally calmed down, people began to show up apparently having noticed the commotion. Because of how far it was from any sightseeing spots, they all seemed to be city residents. Not a single one of them showed any concern towards anyone who might have been involved in the incident, however.

Orphen sighed at the sight, knowing fully well what the cause of this curious crowd of onlookers’ odd lack of concern was. They were, all of them, *relieved* that it had been the Sorcerers’ Association that had been attacked.

One man stepped forward from the crowd and came over to Orphen’s side. He was a middle-aged bald man, and while he showed some apprehension towards Orphen, he still spoke as menacingly as he could. “You’re a Sorcerer, aren’t you?”

"Yeah, from out of town," replied Orphen, trying his best to hide the anger in his voice.

"We all knew this was going to happen someday."

"...You *knew*? What's that supposed to mean?"

In response, the man closed his eyes and shook his head. "It's divine punishment against your wicked kind."

Neither side said a word after that. The only thing Orphen could hear from nearby was Claiomh trying more desperately now to wake Majic up.

Orphen turned as if he had something to say to the man and the rest of the crowd, when he noticed a sound coming from where the explosion had happened. He turned to see what it was and the crowd noticed it as well, someone moaning in pain underneath the rubble.

Something stood up amidst the wreckage. It was uncertain on its feet, and for a moment Orphen worried that it might be the strange, pale, inhuman creature he'd seen before. It didn't take long for him to figure out that this was wrong, though.

"..."

The person who crawled their way out of the rubble was unmistakably human. It was a woman with black hair down to her waist, clad in the robes of the lowest ranking Black Sorcerers affiliated with Damsels' Orisons. She looked to be in her early twenties, and the scratches and scrapes all over her arms were likely the result of having clawed her way out of the collapsed building on her own. Her broken glasses hung limp from her left ear, and whether or not she had noticed the crowd of onlookers, she walked towards Orphen on unsteady feet.

The fact that she didn't call out for help even in this state was proof that she knew not to rely on the townspeople for assistance.

It took her a good ten minutes to limp towards the gate, and when Orphen was at last within arm's reach, she raised her face and looked him in the eyes as though she were hallucinating. "O-Orphen?" she said, her voice shaking with uncertainty.

“Steph...”

Upon hearing her own name, the Sorceress called Steph lost all the strength left in her body and her knees gave way beneath her. Orphen moved to catch her with his left arm.

“Steph... Why did I just know you’d still be here?!”

Orphen heard a thud behind him as something fell to the ground. Claiomh’s expression had gone completely stiff, and she had dropped Majic’s unconscious head onto the hard ground underneath.



“And so he was all, like, ‘If you want better grades that bad, then keep me company tonight!’ Like, thanks, but no thanks, you pervy teacher.”

A man and a woman, apparently students, were walking the streets some time past midnight. It was a deserted road in the middle of Alenhatam’s residential district, with many large apartment buildings lining both sides of the road. The bright moonlight lit up the streets, and while it was an odd atmosphere for outsiders, those who lived here had long since gotten used to it.

“Man, who does that guy think he is, y’know?” said the man.

The woman shrugged her shoulders. “Like, uh, please, a little space, old man? But he wouldn’t take no for an answer, so uh, I totally broke his nose with a wooden plank.”

“A wooden plank?”

“It was the architecture workroom.”

The man pretended to be listening, focusing more intently on how he could wrap his arm around the woman’s shoulder. Then, without warning, a suspicious figure appeared before them both.

“Hu hu hu...” it laughed eerily.

“Wh-who the hell are you, bro?” the man asked, throwing himself in front of the girl to protect her.

The suspicious man folded his arms and stood before them without

answering. It stood at around 130 centimeters tall, appearing rather round and squat for a teenager, but too short to be an adult man.

“Foolish humans,” it said out of nowhere.

“You hit your head, bro?” the student asked, but the suspicious figure ignored him completely.

“Pitiful creature. Not only do you block my path, but you would dare to insult my greatness? Bow before your rightful master!”

“Our rightful *what*?” the couple asked in perfect unison.

“I am your master, and you will bow before me!” the suspicious man yelled, flinging aside his fur cloak to reveal a sword at his side. He continued completely unabated, “You would do well to pay your respects to me — if you wish to live to see the morrow, that is!”

“It’s a mugger!”

“I AM NO MUGGER! I AM—”

“Steia! You hold him off, I’ll go find the police!”

“Totally not cool, yo! Why you runnin’ away, huh? Does the big bad man’s sword scare you that much?”

“Like hell am I putting my life on the line just to be your human shield!”

“But, like, you promised we’d get married once we graduated! I thought you’d totally put your life on the line for me?!”

“I didn’t mean that literally!”

“Then, like, maybe don’t say it at all?! Hey, quit shoving! You’re totally trying to trip me up and make a break for it, aren’t you?!”

“I don’t give a shit anymore! If you wanna get stabbed then be my guest, you crazy bitch! I’m legging it!”

“*SHUT UUUP!*” the suspicious man yelled, drawing his sword. The couple were too terrified of what he might do if they kept arguing, so they did as he said and stood petrified to the spot. The suspicious man swung his sword horizontally to show off, then continued. “Don’t you dare ignore my brilliance when I’m

standing right in front of you! Now clean out those ears and listen good, because you're speaking to the great, the all-powerful, the one and only, Vo—”

“Be quiet down there! Do you have any idea what time it is?! Some of us have work in the morning!” yelled a furious neighbor. The very next moment, a flowerpot came dropping out of the sky and hit the suspicious man square on the head. The force of the impact made him drop to the ground, lifeless.

The male student took a step forward to see if his attempted mugger was still alive beneath the flowerpot (which had miraculously remained intact even after landing on his head) only out of fear of being witness to manslaughter.

The very next instant, though, like a jack-in-the-box, the mugger leaped to his tiny feet and began yelling in the direction the flowerpot had come falling from. “Who the hell’s throwing flowers?!” he demanded to know.

“Uwah, it’s a monster!” the man screamed, and ran away before the suspicious creature could make to attack him a second time. The girl yelled something after the man before following suit.

The only one left on the scene was now the would-be mugger, flowerpot still adorning his head like the world’s silliest hat. He bent down to pick up the sword that he had dropped, complaining all the while.

“Dammit, curse these blasted humans. They can’t sit still long enough for you to make a decent threatening impression these days! I’ll clog your toilets to death, you bastards,” he mumbled to himself.

Another boy of similar stature walked out from behind a corner, the moonlight reflecting off his ridiculously thick glasses making his eyes appear abnormally huge. “Is it okay, bro?” he asked, less concerned for his older brother than he was for the flowerpot in all honesty.

“Is what okay, fool?”

“The flowerpot.”

“It’s fine,” the older boy grumbled. What, exactly, was fine, was anyone’s guess, but both the dwarf and the flowerpot appeared to be intact and none the worse for wear. It was actually miraculous that the flowerpot remained intact, having just collided with a skull harder than steel.

“So what was the tough-guy act all about, anyway?”

“Hmph. Not that I expect your puny brain to comprehend my cunning plans, but I’m trying to get my name out in the open so that people know who their rightful master is!”

“By attacking couples in the middle of the night?”

“...It was just a trial run!” yelled the older dwarf boy, shaking his head to drop the flowerpot. It shattered ever so simply as soon as it made contact with the ground, scattering dirt, flowers, and broken ceramic across the road.

“This is just my brilliant intuition talking here, but I’m pretty sure I’ve come across a weapon great enough to conquer the entire Continent! That no-good, dirty, rotten, moneylending Sorcerer will be shaking in his boots the next time we meet, I’d bet my life’s fortune on it!”

“I’m already worried for my own safety...”

“Quiet, you! I’ll get the hang of it soon enough!” the older boy yelled, whacking his brother across the head with his sword and knocking the poor boy out. He ground the tulip buds under his boots and continued, “I just need to figure out how it works! By tomorrow I’ll have it down, and then the Continent will be in the palm of my hand! I’ll be the overlord of all reality! And if anyone dares defy me, I’ll peel tape off them until I skin them to death!”

So proclaimed the overlord of all reality as he struck his proudest pose, only to be met with immediate defiance in the form of a second falling flowerpot. Instead of flowers, though, this one was full of rocks.

“I told you to shut the hell up!!”

Volkan, however, was no longer listening. The force of the second flowerpot had knocked him unconscious on his feet, and he fell face-first to the ground right next to the unconscious Dortin.

The moonlit streets of Alenhatam grew silent, the source of all the earlier commotion now perfectly KO’d in a heap in the middle of the road.

Chapter III: “Fight me” — Volkán

“The thief went that way! You lot, block the other side!” a voice chased from behind.

I had to run away. I knew I had to run... but my body couldn't keep up. It took all the strength I had just to stay standing.

Every inch of my body was in pain. My wounds only increased by the day. Whenever one wound healed, I'd just end up with two more. The pain sometimes receded briefly, but always came back like the tide of the sea.

“Heads up! That wicked Sorcerer went your way,” closer this time.

My vision grew hazy. I could barely see three meters in front of me. All I could make out for sure were the walls sliding past on either side of me. Sliding past? That meant I was still running. On my own two legs. But how? My thoughts raced. I was sure that my right leg was broken. One of those people had caught me before and beaten it with a steel pipe. Was I running on a broken leg...?

“Don’t let that pickpocket Sorcerer escape! We’ve gotta show those Sorcerers who’s boss!”

I recalled the wallet in my hand. As much as I wanted to just throw it away and run, I couldn’t afford to do that. I needed this money for food. This was my only way to survive without starving to death.

My hand won’t let go of the wallet. My legs refuse to stop running. I just want to give up, but my body refuses to let me. I tell it to stop. It doesn’t respond.

This must be a dream. I don’t have the strength left to run like this. I’m only managing to run away into my dreams. I guess it’s all over for me now... I’ll probably never get the chance to wake up again after this.

I went through the worst case scenario in my head, but that didn’t change the fact that I was still alive, here and now, and running for my life.

I had long since lost track of time when it happened. Something — *someone*

had entered my vision.

Have they caught me? I wonder. Is this where it ends? Or has it already ended, and this man is the Reaper come for my soul...?

The person before me spread their arms wide, as if to embrace an injured child. In that moment I knew my life was up.

I had no strength left to resist. I accepted the Reaper's embrace, free from everything at last—

“Hey, are you alright? Can you hear me? You look terrible! Who did this to you? I’ll—”

The Reaper's voice was drowned out by those of my pursuers. Something seemed off. The Reaper's rough hands pulled me close, and he positioned himself between me and the angry mob.

He started yelling at them. My Reaper, protesting my own death.

“Hey, back off! Does ganging up on people make you feel so superior?! Leave this person alo—” he said, but his voice cut off abruptly. Something must have hit him, because he suddenly got really angry. “That freaking *hurt*, dammit! I was gonna go easy on you because you’re just civilians, but the gloves are off now!”

My Reaper raised his hand and chanted a beautiful spell of salvation.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

I remember a beam of light. I remember an explosion in the distance. I remember people screaming... and I remember passing out...

...And so the woman awoke to find that she could not move. Either she had been tied down to the bed to avoid injuring herself, or her soul had awoken, still inhabiting her corpse.

She dismissed the latter idea when she realized that breath still flowed into her lungs.

I know they say that when you’re dying your whole life flashes before your eyes, she thought, but I saw him again right before I passed out, and I heard him

calling my name... Was that just a hallucination?

As her consciousness slowly returned, so too did her sense of pain. Her muscles cramped and her limbs ached, but they were mostly surface wounds. They had to be, or else a number of her organs would be in trouble.

No — she knew what damaged organs felt like. She was familiar with that agony, and these dull wounds didn't come close to that. Even still, her vision was blurry and she felt like she might pass out again at any second.

“Master!” someone nearby shouted.

It was a boy’s voice, but it was nothing like the voice she had heard before passing out. This boy sounded much younger, almost childlike. It seemed that he wasn’t alone, either.

“Master, she’s waking up!”

She heard someone replying to the boy, but she couldn’t make out what had been said. The boy seemed to have understood, though.

“Alright. So I just give her the injection, and that’s it?”

Injection? That word elicited nothing but painful memories for her. She panicked, but her body wouldn’t move. She put all the strength in her body into her throat, and in a hoarse voice, she managed to wring out the words “Please don’t...”

It was barely louder than a whisper, but the boy holding her arm seemed to understand what she was trying to say, and that she was afraid.

“Master, come here!” the boy said.

The door swung open, and the boy’s master stepped into the room. “What’s wrong, Majic?” he asked. “Can’t even find a vein by yourself?”

She knew that voice. She would recognize it anywhere. Her eyes shot open and she tried to leap out of bed and into his arms, but moving her body still proved to be an impossible task. So, she screamed his name instead.

“Orphen!” she yelled, so loudly that it surprised everyone including herself.

The first thing her eyes found was the familiar gas lantern hanging from the

roof. She scanned the cramped room from top to bottom, noting the peeling wallpaper and cheap wooden cupboard in the corner. She could make out the starry night sky through the tiny little window looking out onto the street. When she turned her head, she noticed that she was lying atop a pipe-frame bed. All of this could only mean one thing — she was home, at her own apartment, resting in her own bedroom.

Once she'd regained her bearings, she turned her attention back to the other two in the room.

"Orphen..." she said again, much quieter this time.

"Yo, Stephanie. It's been a while," said Orphen in a totally carefree tone of voice — even as he massaged his own bandaged arm.

The girl called Stephanie tried again to get her body to move, and while her painful muscles actually responded this time, it wasn't enough for her to even sit upright. This didn't matter too much, though. The fact that she could move at all told her that she didn't appear to have any serious nerve damage. Broken bones and external wounds could be healed or patched back together with sorcery, but any damage to the nerves was permanent and irreversible. She was just relieved to still be alive and in one piece.

"...Call me Steph. Like you used to," she said.

Orphen shrugged. "You got it, Steph."

"...Formality never was your strong suit."

"How do you two know each other, anyway?" asked Majic, who was sitting on the bed still holding Stephanie's arm out.

"It was back when I stayed in this city for about a year," explained Orphen. "I was working odd jobs in a little clinic just to make ends meet at the time."

"I was one of the patients he worked with," finished Stephanie.

"S-sorry," blurted Majic. "I didn't mean to stick my nose where it doesn't belong..."

"Why are you apologizing?" asked Stephanie, and Majic suddenly got all flustered.

"W-well, I mean, it was a clinic that master worked at, right? There's no doubt it was a shady place with unlicensed doctors performing illegal experiments on their own patients."

"You pickin' a fight, brat?" snarled Orphen, but Stephanie's gentle laughter calmed him before he could follow up on that.

"Orphen saved my life," she said to Majic. "He found me on the streets with serious injuries, and so he carried me all the way back to the clinic he was working at."

Orphen looked away from Steph, recalling what had happened after that. "Looking back, I should never have taken you to that quack's place, because—"

Right then, someone in the doorway coughed to announce their presence. It was a young teenage girl, fit-looking and dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt.

While she looked like a nice enough girl, Stephanie noticed that she was being glared at. Had she done something for this girl to hate her? She was fairly certain they had never met before.



"Well? This is the part where you introduce me, blockhead," the girl said to Orphen.

"...You really oughta learn some manners, or the only people I'm gonna be introducing you to from now on are the staff of a boarding school," Orphen scolded her. "This is Stephanie, and she's... well, she's an old friend."

"And *that*," he threw his thumb out in the young girl's direction, "is Claiomh. She's... tagging along with me at the minute. Oh right, and this one's my student. He's Majic."

"What am I, an afterthought?" groused Majic, but Stephanie seemed more interested in the other.

"Tagging along with you?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Orphen. "Her family helped me out just before I came here, and this one decided to just tag along."

"You're making it sound like I'm just an extra set of bags!" complained Claiomh.

Orphen smiled at Stephanie. "And there you have it straight from the horses' mouths, my afterthought and my extra pair of bags."

"Maaasteeeer..." groaned Majic pathetically.

"You're just twisting our words!" snapped Claiomh, who then marched straight out of the room in a huff.

"It certainly seems like you've picked up some..." *troublesome companions*, Stephanie almost said, but she reconsidered and spent a moment trying to come up with a polite way of wording it. Eventually she settled on "...*lively* companions."

"They're just a pair of selfish brats," said Orphen without a passing thought for *politeness*.

"I bought you some flowers earlier, but I threw them away because I figured you'd probably be better by now. Never expected to run into you in a place like that, much less under a pile of rubble this time."

“I’m just happy that you remembered me,” said Stephanie with a smile.

“Speaking of flowers, master...”

“Oh yeah, thanks for reminding me. Sorry Steph, you know those tulips you had out on the veranda? I had to, uh, *use them* for something.”

“My... tulips?” asked Stephanie, confused.

Orphen shrugged like it was barely worth mentioning. “Some clown was kicking up a fuss down on the street, in the middle of the damn night. So I chucked a flowerpot at ‘em to shut him up.”

“The word ‘restraint’ just isn’t in your dictionary, master... That was really dangerous, you know?”

“Dangerous? It’s a flowerpot. I didn’t even aim the damn thing, the odds of it hitting anyone are like a thousand to one.”

“But the second one you threw was full of *rocks*! There’s a one in a thousand chance you just killed somebody!”

“Then that’d be their fault for not shutting up after I yelled at them the first time. Look, the way I see it, if a dick like that gets hit by a flowerpot full of rocks thrown into the air at random, then they literally had it coming. It’s just one of those things that can’t be helped.”

“But—” Majic tried to muster a counter-argument, but it was clear that Orphen didn’t really care one way or the other.

“I’ll miss the tulips...” said Stephanie, “but, well, they were grown out of season anyway. Still, try not to do anything *too* dangerous, alright, Orphen?”

She reached her arm out to him, and noticed that the pain had receded. Majic noticed her confusion and made to explain.

“Looks like the anesthesia’s set in,” he said. “Master cast some healing spells on you while you were passed out. He sat there with a broken arm and insisted on healing you first.”

Stephanie smiled at Orphen like she did the first time he had saved her. Orphen awkwardly averted his gaze, and tried to force a smile to his own face.

"It's about all I can do to try and repent, really..."

While Stephanie was relieved that she could still move, she knew that she still hadn't yet recovered enough to be getting out of bed anytime soon. Still exhausted even after sleeping for half the day, she sank back down into her bed and drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

The next morning, Stephanie was able to pull herself out of bed with a bit of effort. It was a little before noon. Her body still ached in places, but she knew that the fact she'd already recovered even this much was entirely thanks to Orphen's superhuman sorcery. She stretched her arms above her head, and while her muscles all felt exhausted, it wasn't to an uncomfortable extent.

She reached for her glasses sitting on her bedside table (these, too, had been repaired; probably also Orphen's doing) and put them on as she walked over to her bedroom mirror.

She took one look at her face, then muttered "I look terrible."

Her left cheek that had been torn up by the rubble now had gauze applied to it, and on her forehead by her hairline was a huge, darkly bruised bump. While maybe not noticeable at a distance, it definitely stood out from this close.

"...Well, I guess this just means he prioritized my more serious wounds. I mean, this is nothing I can't deal with myself."

Instead of dwelling on it, Stephanie decided that breakfast was more important. She walked out into the adjacent room — an open kitchen-cum-living room — and immediately found Claiomh sitting cross-legged on the couch, looking just about as irritated as she could.

She was still wearing the same clothes she had been last night, meaning she must have lost all of her luggage in the school explosion incident. Her intense demeanor made Stephanie feel like the stranger in her own home.

"Good morning," said Stephanie awkwardly, in an attempt to make a decent impression.

Claiomh didn't respond. The silence lasted over a minute, and just when Stephanie was convinced that she was being ignored, the younger girl suddenly

spoke up.

“I’m sorry... about yesterday,” she said with slumped shoulders. “I was acting way out of line. I didn’t mean to be rude, and I hope you don’t think badly of me...”

“Please, don’t worry about it,” replied Stephanie. “I don’t see Orphen or that other boy anywhere... Majic, was it? Have they gone out somewhere?”

“They went to work. We didn’t have enough money left to live off after what happened yesterday.”

Claiomh hung her head like she was depressed about something.

“Did Orphen scold you after that?” guessed Stephanie.

“He didn’t!” said Claiomh almost immediately. She looked up and met Stephanie’s gaze, and, while choking back tears, explained: “That is, umm... He didn’t get angry, but... I heard everything from him. About what happened to you... when you two first met.”

Unable to hold it back any longer, Claiomh started crying again. Stephanie held out her arms and Claiomh leapt into them with enough force to knock the wind out of her. The pain in her side made it feel like she was going to pass out again, but she endured it, forcing herself to act strong in front of Claiomh.

She had to in order to calm the girl down, because no doubt Orphen had exaggerated large parts of that story. If the way he told it was enough to reduce this young girl to tears, then it just showed that Orphen still hadn’t forgiven himself for how things had ended up.



Orphen listened to the gentle sounds of the water drifting by on the wind. He was sitting on a wharf, watching as ships floated past along the canals. The opposite bank was so far off that the water vapor in the air made it difficult to see clearly.

“The hell you starin’ at, rookie?!” came both a voice and a kettle from behind. They bashed into the back of Orphen’s head, and the kettle made a noise like a frog being run over by a wagon as it fell to the ground. “We only get one hour

per ship to unload everything! Now quit slackin' or I'll throw ya in the river with your share of the goods!"

Orphen rubbed the back of his head with his now-healed right hand and walked over to the ship that had just pulled in. It was a cargo ship carrying carved out rocks and other building materials.

"Yes, sir," he said to the large, one-eyed man with a tower of rocks in hand. He had zero intention of actually taking this job seriously, and his one-eyed boss seemed to realize this as he cursed under his breath, deciding to at least get his own share of the work done.

As soon as the man was out of sight, Orphen sat right back down on the ship's deck, sighing.

He cast his gaze back out over the canal, but instead caught sight of his disciple hauling a large rock off the ship. The boy was soaked in sweat and had been working virtually non-stop.

"Masteeer," whined Majic, "please do your job! It's not fair that I should have to do your share of the work, too!"

Orphen ignored the boy's pleas and instead sighed deeply. "Oh forget it, what would a brat like you understand?"

"...Well, nothing if you just say something like *that* out of the blue," his disciple replied, setting the rocks down at his feet. He rubbed his aching hands together to massage them, and stretched his poor back.

Orphen looked his disciple in the eyes and said, "I'm talking about love."

...

Silence.

Majic took a couple of steps backwards, confused. Then the confusion turned to panic, and he yelled "Someone, come quick! My master's lost his mind!"

"I wasn't talking about *you*!" yelled Orphen. He sprung to his feet and kicked his disciple to the ground, then thrust his finger into the boy's forehead. "I was talking about something that happened a long time ago, alright?!"

"...Oh, you were actually trying to say something serious just now?"

Majic rubbed his chin which Orphen had high-kicked, and his sarcastic comment seemed to have actually stung Orphen's pride a little bit.

"Oh, shut up... Fine, it was stupid of me to bring it up any—"

Orphen's words were cut off by a deep, loud rumbling sound.

It sounded like an earthquake, but the ground wasn't shaking. What shook instead was the surface of the canal — as well as the boat which was rocked by the sudden waves. Orphen struggled to keep his balance while the ship rocked around like it was caught in the middle of a tsunami.

"What the hell's going on?"

A tower of water leaped up out of the canal and stretched to the sky. It easily reached ten meters in height, scattering a light shower of water all about the immediate area. Laborers on both ship and shore panicked, and one of the smaller unloading boats was capsized by the waves.

And this chaos was accompanied by... a familiar haughty laugh.

"Wah ha ha ha ha!"

"What the—?!"

Orphen was at a complete loss for words. The ship had stopped rocking, but his head was still caught up in a storm.

"Wah, hahahahahahahahahaha!" the laughter continued. "Wahaha, wahahahahah!"

But Orphen didn't even register the laughter. Something else had completely stolen all of his attention.

The ten meter tall statue before him was carved out in the shape of an extremely muscular man with four arms, both sets crossed in front of its chest. Its lower half was submerged beneath the water, but it was still menacingly huge. In place of any facial features it had a single strip of cloth with a large character emblazoned on it.

Is that... a rune on its face? wondered Orphen to himself. If his guess was correct, then that was a Wyrd Glyph — which meant that the thing before him was something he'd read about before in books.

“Wh-what *is* that thing?!” screamed Majic.

“I’ve only ever read about them,” said Orphen without turning around, “but from the looks of things... it’s a stone soldier. A golem!”

“Wah ha ha ha!”

“A *what*?”

“A golem. It’s a—”

“Hahahaha, hah, haha, wahahaha!”

“—A type of weapon made by the Celestials centuries ago. There’ve been partially intact ones uncovered in ruins every now and then, but—”

“Hah, hahaha!”

“—But you’ll rarely see one in as good condition as this. Plus, this one still moves, which is practically unheard—”

“HAH HA HA HA HA HA HA HAH!”

“Give it a rest already!” snapped Orphen at the creature riding atop the golem’s head.

The little creature was sopping wet with canal water, and dried itself off with all the grace of a wet stray dog. Indeed, that utterly graceless figure was unmistakably the one and only Vulcano Volkan. The dwarf boy stopped laughing and yelled back at Orphen himself.

“Well it’s about time you noticed me! Were you trying to make me laugh myself to death, bastard?!”

Orphen’s face twitched.

“Laugh yourself to death for all I care! Did you seriously drag that thing all the way along the bottom of the canal just to ambush me here?! We’d all have been better off if your dumb ass had drowned down there!”

“Say that again you little bitch, I dare you! I’ll squash you like the bug you are, you moral-less moneylender!”

“I’m *flattered* you finally remember all that money I lent you! Now if only you could remember to *pay it back*, we’d be seeing some real character

development from you!"

"My character is perfectly well-developed! I'll turn you into a stain on the bottom of my shoes for that, you slimy Sorcerer!"

"I'd love to see you try, worm! Step down here for two seconds so I can shove that blunt-ass sword through your ear right and splatter what little brains you have all over the pavement!"

"Umm, master...?" said Majic from behind.

"The hell you want?" replied Orphen without bothering to turn around.

"People are watching..." the boy sighed. "Can we at least *try* to look like intelligent, civilized people in front of the townsfolk?"

"...Sure, I can do that," nodded Orphen. He took a deep breath, and then: "Volkan, you cerebrally inadequate excuse of an intelligent biological lifeform! Get down here so I can lobotomize you!"

Majic could only groan in resignation.

Orphen and Volkan's duel of insults continued for a while, until both of them exhausted their entire scathing vocabulary on the other. Volkan, from atop the golem's head, said through ragged breaths, "Hu hu hu... I'll let your insults slide just this once... because it won't matter when you're squashed under my first golem — Volk Han's — gigantic fist!"

The dwarf boy proudly rubbed his golem's head, and the huge rock puppet reacted to its name and the key words by raising two of its fists high into the air.

"...Where the hell did you dig up this antique, anyway?" asked Orphen after putting the question off for as long as he possibly could.

"Hoh hohoho! Finally recognizing the might of my fantastic weapon, are we?! Seems you're not as blind as you pretend to be! But your astute observations won't save you now!"

"Shit..." swore Orphen. He struck a battle pose, but simply screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. "I can't do it, Majic."

"Master?!"

“Haaah, hahahah! Finally you admit your defeat, you stupid spineless Sorcerer! Very well! Out of respect for your bravery in admitting your own loss, I’ll scrub you to death quickly and painlessly with a steel brush! You’re lucky I’m such a nice guy!”

“Master, what’s wrong with you?!” yelled Majic in an attempt to encourage Orphen. “It’s not like you to just give up before the fight like this! What happened to all that grit you showed when we were attacked by that hurricane?!”

“Look, it’s not that simple...” said Orphen with clenched fists.

“This isn’t like you at all! Why won’t you fight like you usually do?! If you give up now, *I’m gonna get killed by that thing, too!*”

“...I should’ve known you were only trying to cover your own ass,” he muttered. He turned to face the golem, Volk Han, and cried out in sorrow: “I wanted to take that golem back in one piece! *It would’ve sold for an absolute fortune!!*”

“...Huh?” came Volkhan’s stunned voice.

Orphen held his hands out in front of him and chanted his go-to offensive spell.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

“You wha—?” but Volkhan wasn’t even left with enough time to be surprised. Orphen’s attack hit the golem square in the head, and the explosion sent Volkhan flying while blasting the golem’s entire torso to smithereens. The force of the attack sent more waves crashing over the side of the wharf.

“AAAaaaahhh...” echoed Volkhan’s scream in the distance, cut off when he plopped down into the center of the canal like a pebble being tossed into a well.

Orphen stood with a face full of regret as he examined the remains of the golem, Volk Han. A full golem would have been worth a fortune, but a golem’s legs were utterly worthless piles of rock on their own.

“Umm... master? Volkhan isn’t floating back up...” noted Majic. Orphen was

still torn up over the loss of the golem, though.

“Dwarfs sink in water. I’d be more worried if he *was* floating.”

“...He’s going to drown.”

“Don’t worry about it, that brat wouldn’t die even if you killed him.”

“I don’t know a lot about dwarfs, but I’m pretty sure they’d drown just like anyone else...”

“Can’t a guy even suffer from heartbreak in peace? Both women and money keep slipping out of my grasp... I just wanna be left alone right now,” muttered Orphen.

He got off the boat and walked onto the wharf, where his one-eyed employer stood waiting for him with a nasty look in his eyes.

“You’re fired. I never would’ve hired you if I’d known you were one of those blasted Sorcerers.”

“I know, trust me. It’s not my first time in town. Sorry for hiding it, though.”

Orphen didn’t have the spirit left to argue with anyone after having to deal with Volkан.

“By the way,” he added, lazily pointing to the boat, “looks like that blast just now ripped a hole in that boat’s hull. Well, it’s nothing to do with me, seeing as how I don’t work for you.”

“Patch it up!!” the burly man yelled, but it was far too late. The boat, still full of rocks, sank faster than an anchor. Its mast disappeared beneath the surface of the canal faster than anyone could make it on board to seal the hole.

“Goddammit! Why do *I* always get the worst luck?!”

Orphen’s mood couldn’t possibly have been any worse. He stomped his way along the road as if he’d just been told to demolish it without a trace. He turned off into an alleyway wide enough to have its own street name and seemed intent on grumping for the whole ten minute walk back to Stephanie’s apartment.

“Are you alright, Master?” asked Majic from a safe distance behind him.

“You’ve been acting weird since we left for work this morning.”

“Dammit. Dammit. Dammit!” swore Orphen. He noticed a discarded sandal on the roadside and made it his boot’s next victim. Right when he was bullying the footwear, it came to him.

“Majic, of course! You were going on about bonds or students or whatever, right? This is the perfect time to show that that wasn’t just words! Go find me some buried treasure, or some pawn shop with loose security, or an unlocked safe on the side of the road.”

“...Who in their right mind would agree to get a part-time job if they had an amazing talent like that?”

“Fine, then go find some dwarfs that’re down on their luck — and make sure they’ll pay me back right away this time!”

“...You’re being dead serious right now, aren’t you?”

“C’mon Majic, what’re friends for, eh? I don’t mind if you have to take out a loan, I’ll co-sign it. Promise. Just help me find money, kiddo! I’ll teach you more sorcery!”

“...”

Majic was utterly disgusted by his master’s disgraceful behavior, looking at the man the way he would any other con artist or town drunk.

Orphen couldn’t stand being looked at like that by his own student. He heaved a great sigh and curled up into a ball on the spot. “Why does this *always* have to happen to me?” he moaned.

“Please stop throwing a fuss,” said Majic, “and at least tell me *what* keeps happening to you.”

Majic’s words were like a fishing hook that ripped into Orphen’s upper lip and made his face twitch involuntarily. He stood up slowly and, turning to face Majic, he gripped the boy by the shoulder and said, “Tell me what you think of Steph.”

“Wh-what?” Majic stood, not knowing what his master was getting at. “Does it have something to do with Stephanie?”

"Just tell me your first impression of Steph — whatever comes to mind."

"Uh, umm..."

Majic paused to think for a moment. Then, off the top of his head: "My first impression was to check whether her wounds were anything serious or just surface injuries. Beneath all of that she was a beautiful person and it's a good thing none of the wounds will leave any lasting scars. The cake in her kitchen didn't appear to be store-bought, meaning she must have baked it herself. To be honest, it tasted like she'd used too much wheat flour, or it might just be that she's concerned about using too many eggs since they can get quite pricey. My mother taught me a trick for using fresh cream instead to prevent it getting too powdery, but it spoils within the day if you do that so you have to eat it immediately.

"I didn't get to check the contents of the bathroom, but from the contents of her dressing room she didn't seem the type to spend much on makeup either. We already know she's a Sorcerer so it's not like she's secretly a wanted criminal or anything. I managed to sneak a peek at her account book and she has quite a bit of money saved up from daily work, and her bills were organized neatly enough. Overall I'd say she's a pretty good catch, wouldn't you?"

Majic gave a thumbs-up, and Orphen lost all the strength in his grip.

"...You might be amazing at more than just sorcery," commented Orphen.

"Really?"

"I was beatin' myself up pretty bad over nothing, apparently. Alright. So that's how Steph looks *to you, too*, huh?"

"Yeah, but... From the sounds of things, there's something I'm missing."

Orphen broke out into a cold sweat. "No, your observations were pretty impressive, frankly," he said. "It's not the kind of thing you can just *observe*, though, because Steph is—"

Before Orphen could finish speaking, something flew past his head. It was a sharp, black object. If he hadn't dodged at the last second, it would've taken his left ear clean off.

"Who's there?" he yelled over his shoulder.

He was certain he'd looked straight at where the object had flown from, but there was nobody there. The alleyway was quiet, without even a hint of a breeze.

Out of nowhere, a bright, sharp light pierced Orphen's eyes. The blinding heat threatened to boil his brain, and he reflexively reeled back while covering his face. The attack had been so abrupt that he'd almost screamed, but he managed to keep himself under control.

"I see you hold back your screams," said a voice from nearby. "A wise move for a Sorcerer. You'll need all the strength you can get..."

Orphen's vision returned in patches, but there was no body on the other end of the voice.

"...So try not to scream *this time*, either."

The attack came without warning or spell. Orphen's arms were ripped away from his face and twisted behind his body by some invisible grip, and whatever had grabbed him dragged him off his feet. He tumbled through the air unable to tell up from down. The ground whooshed past his eyes; then the apartment building; then Majic's face; and finally the ground again.

When Orphen's senses returned to him, he was collapsed on the ground. He hadn't screamed, but he might not have been able to even if he had tried. The air had been forced from his lungs, and he was barely able to catch his breath. He tried to pull himself to his feet through a coughing fit, still gasping for air even as another object hit him in the neck.

"If I had not held back, I might have accidentally beheaded you."

The voice taunting Orphen was perfectly clear like the person were right next to him, but to him it felt like he was being beaten up by thin air.

Whoever it is, they're using sorcery, thought Orphen. But not human sorcery. I can't feel a trace of power from that voice — I almost can't feel any life at all from it. Whoever this opponent is, they're skipping the incantations!

"Master, what happened?!" yelled Majic.

The boy reached his hand out to help Orphen back to his feet. Orphen struggled back up using Majic's shoulder for balance.

"...That's what I wanna know. Majic, tell me everything you saw just now."

"I didn't see anything, you just suddenly flew a good ten meters across the ground. But then when you tried to get up a black lump hit you in the neck faster than a speeding bullet," the boy said, searching for the object in question. "There it is, that thing over there."

"Where...?"

Orphen scanned the area and found the thing Majic was talking about. It was a balled-up human fist, with no arm or owner. Its skin was pale and unearthly, and its narrow digits had strangely protruding joints...

Before he could get a better look, the hand sprung to life. It was then that Orphen noticed the thin steel wire trailing from its severed wrist. His assailant had to be controlling it from the other end.

He grabbed the wire and let out a yelp of pain, then quickly turned to face the direction he felt the wire grow taught.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" chanted Orphen.

A beam of light flew out with tremendous ferocity and swallowed the faceless assailant whole. The explosion was huge, but unnaturally brief.

So brief, in fact, that one would be right to question if it had ever happened at all. For indeed, the spell had faded *too quickly*, leaving a human-shaped silhouette standing in its wake.

The silhouette was unnaturally thin for a human, and its skin was eerily pale. It was 'naked,' if it could even be said to need clothes. It lacked any defining physical traits or features — never mind gender, it didn't even appear to have any hint of musculature. Every inch of its body was smooth as glass, and even seemed to glitter faintly in the light.

The bare figure had nothing worth hiding, and yet something about it screamed that this was even *more* dangerous than had it been armed to the teeth. Nothing about the thing made sense. A glass man with a more dangerous

glint than any blade.

“...What the hell *are* you?” Orphen asked.

“I am the Guardian of the Treasury,” said the man-shaped doll. Even its mouth lacked lips, teeth, and throat — it resembled nothing more than a gash ripped into the side of a rubber ball.

“The Guardian of the... Treasury?”

“I once had another name,” it continued, “hundreds of years ago. It was given to me by you human Sorcerers. I believe they called me... ‘Killing Doll.’”

“That can’t be right—!”

Orphen’s voice was cut short by a horrible grating noise. It was like being trapped in a giant net full of a thousand agitated beetles screeching in his ears from all sides.

‘*What’s going on?!*’ he tried to yell, but no sound passed his lips.

He faltered for a moment before turning to see if Majic was having the same problem. A quick glance at the boy’s mouth flapping wordlessly told him everything he needed to know.

Is this sound canceling out our voices? wondered Orphen as the noise grew ever louder.

Killing Doll smirked with satisfaction as it watched its prey flounder around helplessly. “That’s right,” it said. “And it is fine-tuned to cancel out *only* human voices.”

Orphen and Majic both took a step back in shock, realizing the implications the moment they laid eyes on the thing once more. What had been a featureless abdomen until mere moments ago now reflected a single strange character glowing with an eerie light.

That glow, that shape... Wyrd Runes! Though Wyrdography — the study of these runes — was one of Orphen’s weaker subjects, he was nevertheless knowledgeable enough about them to make the connection immediately. Whatever that character meant, there could be no doubt that it was the source of this voice-canceling noise.

"I see you are quick to comprehend the situation, Sorcerer."

Did that thing just read my mind...? wondered Orphen.

"I am no telepath, but I can indeed trace your thoughts — those of a Sorcerer are especially easy to read," said the doll, placing a hand to its abdomen. "It is no bluff — you think this rune the source of the strange phenomenon, and you are correct. And this is but one of countless similar tools at my disposal. Every inch of my body is adorned with Wyrd Runes that all share a similar, absolute purpose. The extinction of human sorcery from the face of the Continent."

Killing Doll extended its right hand, and its middle finger extended to ten centimeters in length, a gruesome blade less a weapon and more a clear instrument of torture.

It held this blade upright in a threatening manner and continued. "This sound field renders your spells powerless. Feel your helplessness, let the fear soak into your bones. And know that, had I the inclination, you would have been dead at my hands several times by now."

Killing Doll's blade swung back and forth like a conductor of silence. "Be thankful that I am allowing you to live, *for now*."

Why go out of your way to do that? Orphen asked wordlessly.

Killing Doll answered as though it had heard the question perfectly. "Because my orders were to kill all Sorcerers. Specifically, I was ordered to *leave no survivors*."

...What've we done to deserve that? We only just arrived here. I can guess you were the one to wipe out the Damsels' Orisons branch office... but why? Why did you murder them all?

"I exist simply to execute my orders."

Right, almost forgot I was talking to a puppet, said Orphen sarcastically, but Killing Doll didn't respond to the provocation. Either it saw Orphen as a creature far below itself... or it simply didn't have enough humanity to understand the concept of sarcasm.

"My orders stated *no survivors*... Yet one escaped from that building alive, did

she not?"

...Dammit, you stuck around after that?!

"Indeed I did. I watched the girl escape — and I watched you flee with her. This has become a problem, as I find myself unable to track her down now. The reason you are still alive... is because you are the perfect bait to lead me straight to her."

If you couldn't find the girl, then how did you find me? asked Orphen.

"Your sorcery is abnormally powerful, for a human. Its traces are potent in the air, clinging to you like a putrid stench. One of my runes allows me to trace this strength wherever in the city you might flee — the stronger your powers, the more difficult it will be for you to hide."

Orphen drew a number of conclusions from the doll's explanation. First, it was only capable of tracing Orphen himself due to all the powerful spells he had fired off these past few days. Next, while his every movement had been tracked, the doll had not realized that it was Stephanie's house he had been staying at. And finally, while the doll could apparently read surface thoughts, its power didn't extend into the deeper psyche.

If it hadn't found Stephanie yet, then it was deliberately trying to make him think of her whereabouts right now. Orphen had been trained to conceal his thoughts from enemy Sorcerers, and put this skill to use so that he might protect Stephanie from the monster before him.

"...I see. It would appear you have been trained in concealing important information from your opponents."

Orphen cleared his mind completely, as if it were the tranquil surface of a lake.

"An impressive display of willpower, for a human. To think that you can *consciously force yourself to think about nothing*, and for an extended amount of time at that. Most lesser men would have leaked the information the moment I touched upon the subject..."

Orphen's mental stillness continued.

“...But how long can you hold out on willpower alone, I wonder?” the thing said cruelly.

Orphen could feel its emotionless eyes peering into his silenced mind, and knew on an instinctive level that he couldn’t hold out much longer.

His concentration would break in just a few more moments. But just as he felt his concentration wavering, the doll laughed.

It wasn’t a cruel laugh. It hadn’t acquired the information it sought from this exchange — of that, Orphen was certain.

This did nothing to put his mind at ease, though. Even as the rune on its abdomen faded out and the deafening silence gradually receded, he kept his guard up both physically and mentally.

“Very well,” said Killing Doll through loud laughter. “I did not intend to kill you today, even had I acquired the information I sought.”

“Son of a *bitch*!” was the first thing to leave Orphen’s mouth when his voice returned.

“My appearance today is not as a killer, but as a messenger.”

Saying this, Killing Doll brought out a folded-up piece of paper — from where was anyone’s guess — and tossed it at Orphen’s feet.



The letter sat there silently, without biting or snapping at him. Whatever it was, it wasn't a trap.

"It is a letter," grinned Killing Doll, "from a *dear friend* of yours."

"...Say what?"

Orphen picked up the scrap of paper. As harmless as it seemed, he stole another glance at Killing Doll to be certain that it wasn't a trap. The doll made no signs of moving, so he spread the letter out and read its contents.

He knew the sender before even reaching the name scrawled at the bottom. He crushed the paper up into a ball and threw it back to the ground, which was all the response he felt the thing deserved.

"I challenge your lily-livered loins to a duel by the Basilitrice. Fight me — Vulcano Volkan'?! I'll break that weasel's fingers so bad he'll be writing letters with his feet from now on!"

"The 'weasel' you speak of is my current master," said Killing Doll without a hint of jest.

"Your master?!" yelled Orphen hysterically. "No wonder he came at me with a freaking *golem* earlier today!"

"That golem was but one of many. My master now possesses the entire Treasury over which I have stood guard these long centuries."

"Fuck that! What kind of 'Guardian' just gives his treasury away to a pair of teenage brats?! You can't fool me, I know you're plotting somethi—" Orphen didn't even need to finish that sentence before he realized his misunderstanding.

"Master?" asked a concerned Majic.

Orphen didn't reply. He simply bit his lip as he stared into Killing Doll's eyes.

"It is as you fear," the doll said. "I read the minds of those dwarf brothers — neither of them a Sorcerer, but with plenty of information on where to find one. I did not even need to pry for the details. The boys told me all about you with their own mouths, *Orphen*."

“...”

“Not only that, but I have heard of your many exploits. You are no ordinary Sorcerer. In accordance with my orders, you must be exterminated.”

“And... I’m... asking... why!” yelled Orphen, calling up every last scrap of power within him for a desperate attack.

Another beam of light shot from his hand, but Killing Doll made no efforts to dodge it. It simply raised its hand and absorbed every trace of the attack into a glimmering rune on its palm. The spell vanished as if it had never been cast.

“Shit,” he swore, and the doll shrugged its shoulders.

“You are no fool. You already understand that as great as your power as a *human* is, you are but a child with a knife trying to hold your ground against a tornado. Your sword does not faze me, but I *am* concerned that you survived my ultimate attack. The Rune of Destruction which destroyed that building was no ordinary attack, as I am sure you are aware. Your *survivability* is somewhat of a problem for an exterminator like myself.”

“What am I, a cockroach?!”

“Were a human to find a cockroach, they would try to kill the thing on the spot. You are far more of a pest than any insect could be, and so I cannot quite rely on that approach to your extermination. That is why I have taken the liberty of preparing a situation where you cannot flee... A challenge you could not ignore, *due to your very own conscience*.”

“A challenge that master’s conscience can’t ignore...” Majic wondered aloud. The boy had no idea what the Killing Doll was getting at, but Orphen was finally able to put the pieces together.

“This bastard’s taken hostages,” he explained.

“Indeed. You are free to ignore the dwarf children’s challenge — at the forfeit of their lives.”

Orphen ground his teeth. “Why would you go that far just to kill a few Sorcerers?!”

“I was created by one of the Nornir — a Celestial, as you call them,” answered

Killing Doll as though this explained everything.

“Then why did *they* want to exterminate all Sorcerers this badly?!”

“The wrath of one betrayed is not so simple that words can convey — much less those betrayed by the world itself.”

“What...?”

Orphen tried to decipher the meaning behind those words, but it was no use. Killing Doll had left before he had a chance to ask any more questions.

“Where did he go?” asked Majic. “He was right there a second ago...”

Indeed, Killing Doll had not simply *left*, but vanished like a mirage.

“I have relayed the message,” came its disembodied voice once more. “Tomorrow, at the site of Basilitrice.”

“Wait until you fossilize, see if I care!” yelled Orphen. He swung his fist at thin air, knowing that Killing Doll was long gone by now.

In spite of his words, Orphen was left wondering what would happen once every last Sorcerer was exterminated from the streets of Alenhatam as Killing Doll had been ordered. What would its next move be after that? The rest of the Continent?

The thought sent chills down his spine...

Chapter IV: To Basilitrice

“Basilitrice?” Stephanie clearly recognized the word, though she made an attempt to hide it.

Orphen stood opposite her, wrapping his arm in bandages.

“I really should’ve asked what was going on in more detail, shouldn’t I?” he sighed. “Why did that Killing Doll thing target Damsels’ Orisons? How did it know where to find the place? What even *is* a Killing Doll? And what’s all this about Basilitrice now?”

Stephanie’s apartment wasn’t very spacious, and with Orphen, Stephanie, Majic, and Claiomh all packed into the same room, it was downright cramped. Orphen continued bandaging his own arm, while Majic stood behind him applying bandages to all the scrapes on his head. He was covered in scratches after his run-in with the Killing Doll.

Claiomh sat on the sofa on the other side of the room, trying to decide whose side to take when things inevitably went south.

“What makes you think I can answer any of those questions?” was Stephanie’s immediate response. She stroked her long black hair from her shoulder to her chest, whether to calm her nerves or to distract herself, perhaps even she wasn’t entirely sure.

“I know you can, because apparently not a single thing I’ve said is news to you. Whatever’s going on in this city, you’re directly involved in it,” explained Orphen, getting straight to the point. “The Damsels’ Orisons branch office was outright annihilated, staff and all — hell, you almost died yourself. Then the very next day, you crawl out of bed without even asking ‘What happened back there?’ It doesn’t take a detective to solve two plus two.”

“...There was a gas leak in the building,” bluffed Stephanie, but Orphen was having none of it.

“That so? Then I guess I just hallucinated the tornado that ripped park slides

out of the ground. And I suppose I made up the broken arm, and I just bashed my own head against a flying signpost, right?"

"...It wasn't a signpost, it was a scrap of broken wood. And it barely even left a bruise." Majic threw his lot into the conversation, but Orphen ignored the boy completely.

Drawing closer to Stephanie, Orphen said "Don't play dumb with me, Steph. That was sorcery — and not your garden variety human sorcery, either. C'mon, Steph. Do you have to lie to me every time we meet each other?"

Orphen's words seemed to touch a sore spot with Stephanie, because she could only respond with "I've never lied to you since the day we met."

"That so," sighed Orphen, his voice twisted with sarcasm.

Stephanie hid her face behind her bangs. Claiomh sensed her cue. The young girl ran up to the Sorceress' side and gripped her hands tightly. Stephanie met Claiomh's gaze and knew that, while the girl was telling her that it was fine if she didn't want to talk, she felt that she owed it to her new friends to explain herself.

"...We just wanted to move to the Capital," she muttered, barely audible.

"And?" was all Orphen replied with.

Stephanie felt a pain in her heart but repeated herself. Louder this time.

"We just wanted to move to the capital. We'd all gotten sick and tired of this city."

Orphen realized that Stephanie was about to explain everything from the very beginning, so he chose not to interrupt this time. He simply kept his gaze locked on Stephanie's face, just in case she tried to slip anything past him.

Stephanie returned Claiomh's grip and took comfort in having at least one ally in the room before continuing.

"We can't all be geniuses like you, Orphen. Not all of us are talented enough to survive at the Tower of Fangs for as long as you did. Do you remember when we first met?"

"Yeah," Orphen nodded. "I remember. I even remember what the doctor's

diagnosis was. Twenty-four broken bones. Too many external bruises to count. Eighty percent of your skin was covered in severe lacerations. The damage to your face was permanent — part of your skull had been basically destroyed. The fact that your heart and central nervous system were mostly intact was a silver lining. Those are things that no amount of sorcery would've been able to heal. Even then, you were lucky to be alive. Hell, when I hauled your body into the clinic, some of the staff thought you were already dead.”

“I was lynched by the townspeople,” said Stephanie to Majic, the only one present who hadn’t heard this story before. Claiomh rested one hand on Stephanie’s shoulder to comfort her.

Majic almost leaped out of his chair. “L-lynched?” he squealed. “Master, I thought you said that kind of thing doesn’t happen anymore!”

“Not in broad daylight. Hell, this is a tourist city. You think tourists would take kindly to seeing public executions on the main street? But I wouldn’t have warned you if there was no danger at all. To be honest, if you or I were to wander into a back alley, the city folks would come at us in numbers now that they know we’re Sorcerers.”

“But—” Majic stepped out in front of Orphen, spreading his arms wide. “Why would they do that? What’s the point? I mean, I get that the Celestials used to live here a long time ago, but they’re long gone by now, right? I dunno how much the Celestials hated human Sorcerers, but it’s been *hundreds of years* since then! The townspeople have no reason to lynch Sorcerers these days, right?!”

“Majic, do you remember what I told you about those old Sorcerer Hunts? About how there were probably more dead pursuers than Sorcerers themselves?”

“Orphen, I’ll explain this to him. You see, Majic, Sorcerers aren’t like ordinary humans. The dragon blood in our veins basically makes us literal monsters to the rest of society. You can bring all the people and weapons you like, but it would be like one of us trying to stand up to a dragon one-on-one. We wouldn’t stand a chance. They’d slaughter us.

“It’s not just the royal family who are afraid of an existence like that gaining

influence in society. More than the royals, it's the citizens of this town who are terrified of what would happen if the Sorcerers they had persecuted for centuries turned and bared their fangs in earnest. That fear drives them to never let the Sorcerers' Association take root here."

"But that's just—"

"Oh, shut up!" said Orphen, pushing Majic aside. "Steph, you said you wanted to leave town, but I'm more surprised that you've stayed here for as long as you have. When I saw you crawling out of the rubble of the Sorcerers' Association office, I hoped I was just hallucinating. After everything you've been through, why would you *choose* to stay here?"

"...I had surgery bills to pay. And besides..." she paused, considering how best to explain herself.

"Yeah?"

She looked Orphen in the eyes and continued, "I would have gone with you when you left town all those years ago, but you vanished right before I was discharged from hospital..."

"Believe it or not, I had important shit to deal with in my life. I couldn't afford to just hang around this dump forever. The six months I spent hanging around waiting for you to recover was already a waste of precious time for me."

Even Orphen himself knew that his attitude was out of order, but Stephanie didn't blame him for it. "I suppose you're right..." was all she could say to him.

"Why do you have to be such a bully, Orphen?!" snapped Claiomh, who had completely taken Stephanie's side by now.

Orphen ignored Claiomh and brought the conversation back on topic. "Look, Steph," he said, "I'm not here to open old wounds. That Killing Doll is dead set on exterminating every last Sorcerer from this city, which by now is down to the people in this room. We're gonna need to join forces if we wanna stand a chance."

"You don't need my help. I haven't had combat training like you have, and my sorcery isn't very powerful to begin with—"

“Brute force is only useful when you know what you’re up against, which I sure as hell don’t,” explained an irritated Orphen. “Knowledge is power too, and I need your help. Like hell am I dying for nothing in a ditch way out here, but if we run away and leave that Killing Doll to its devices who knows what’ll happen to the Continent as a whole.”

“...”

Stephanie let go of Claiomh’s hand and rose to her feet. She walked slowly over to the window on unsteady feet, almost as though she were sleepwalking. She ran her finger along the windowsill and gazed at the dust that now clung to her skin.

“...I can’t even clean the place up properly, because the window’s broken and won’t open.”

Orphen didn’t say a word. He simply stood with his arms crossed, not taking his eyes off Stephanie for a second.

“I’ve always hated living here,” she continued. “There’s no place for me in a city like this. I want to get out of here... I want to be free, and—”

“Steph!” snapped Orphen, his strong tone of voice commanding Stephanie to turn around. Her eyes burned with newfound determination.

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” she said. “So please, promise me something.”

“Only if it’s a promise I can keep.”

“Please... Promise you won’t abandon me this time.”



Dortin traced his finger along the wall and let out a sigh. The damp air clung to the back of his throat, and his nose felt stuffy. *I’ve probably caught a cold*, he thought to himself.

“Something’s very wrong here,” he muttered, resting his forehead against the wall. “Something about this whole situation is just... wrong.”

“Wah, ha ha ha ha hah!” his brother cackled loudly from the center of the open room. “What a wonderful sight! Just look at all these stone puppets! That crooked conman will crap himself when he sees my amazing army! I’ll squash

him like a bug! And if anyone else dares oppose me on my path to brilliance, I'll whisper sweet nothings in their ears until they die in their sleep!"

Dortin, too, turned to examine the numerous golems standing at attention around the chamber, far less optimistically than Volkан now that he'd seen how easily Orphen could destroy one of them.

Volkан, still sopping wet from that encounter, nevertheless stuck his hands on his hips and laughed like a crazed war maniac.

My throat hurts, moaned Dortin internally. He coughed a few times, and Volkан thought his brother was trying to get his attention.

Looking back over one shoulder, "What is it, hmm?" he asked rhetorically. "That better not be a cold you've caught. I can't afford medicine. You're gonna die."

Ever the optimist, Dortin sighed to himself as he slumped down onto the cold stone floor. The chill went right through his clothes and chased its way up his spine.

Volkан laughed all his cares away, confident that his golem army would solve any problem he might ever have forevermore.

"Quit moping about, Dortin! C'mon, get over here and admire my loyal soldiers! And you, men! Salute me when I call your names!"

Although the golems looked virtually identical at a glance, Volkан had gone and named every one of them. He pointed at the rightmost golem and moved counter-clockwise through them in order.

"Deep-Fry! Zcattick! Tylor! Mike Stack! Kevin Pepperer! Monsieur Mittens!"

Each saluted Volkан as its name was called.

"Umm..."

Dortin's voice couldn't even reach Volkан, who was now lost in his own little world.

"And you, Dakada! I have high hopes for you, lad! Heider, he's the one you lost an arm to! I'm gonna have you work to make up for that! But by far the best of the lot is my prized student, Monkey 1000! His strength is unparalleled

—”

“Could you keep it down a little?!” yelled Dortin as he sprung to his feet.

Volkan shut his mouth and made a face that said ‘B-but my golem army...’ to which Dortin was having none of.



"Sorry, but I think I really have caught a cold. My head's aching, so could you please keep it down?"

"How'd you catch a cold on such a nice day?" was the worst thing Volkán could have asked.

"How did I catch a cold? *How did I catch a cold?* We crawled along the canal floor riding your stupid golem, surfaced for two minutes, then got blasted right back into the water! There isn't anywhere to light a fire down here, and neither of us owns so much as a single towel! Of course I'm gonna catch a cold, genius!"

Volkán didn't seem to follow. "Then how come I'm feeling just fine?" he asked.

"There isn't a germ on the Continent stupid enough to let itself get infected by *you*," spat Dörtin, but Volkán seemed to think this was a compliment.

"Indeed. The common cold is no threat to Vulcano Volkán, Bulldog of Masmaturia!"

"...Though you did make yourself sick when you cooked and ate those weird-looking insects the other day. You were clutching your stomach and screaming like a man being tortured to death."

"I don't remember that happening, which means you're making it up!" snapped Volkán. He crossed his arms and stood as proudly as he could in his damp clothes.

Dörtin sighed. He could feel his headache growing worse the longer he spent around his brother.

Instead of letting his brains fester around his brother, Dörtin decided to examine the room more closely to take his mind off it. It was about 100 meters square in size, and the walls were an eerie shade of white. As large and spacious as the room was though, there was something suffocating about it.

It was illuminated by neither gas lantern nor sunlight, but instead an unusual sphere on the roof. The light that the sphere gave off looked almost like the beams of light that sorcerous moneylender fired off as attacks, but frozen in place. At the center of the strange object, Dörtin could just barely make out

some kind of letter, a single character glowing faintly like some kind of energy source.

The altar at one end of the room was a thing that seemed to be depicting a fairy tale. Atop it stood six statues depicting six different creatures, in varying states of decay. One of the creatures was a lion with an abnormally huge mane, another resembled a rhinoceros with a bath heater on its back, and yet a third appeared to be an incredibly beautiful human woman.

On the wall behind the altar was a huge portrait of a different woman, no less beautiful than the one depicted by the statue. The woman in the portrait had brilliant green hair, captivating green eyes, and wore a robe greener than the grass. Her brilliant features seemed somewhat worn out, not because of how old the painting was, and certainly not because the lady herself looked unhealthy. It was more to do with her facial expression and the general atmosphere around her.

Below the portrait hung a plaque with writing engraved upon it in some ancient language. Dortin read the plaque as *Sister Istersiva*, and figured that this must be the woman's name and title.

If they called her 'Sister,' then maybe she was some kinda priest? he wondered. At the same time though, he knew it wasn't even worth wondering about. The very fact that her portrait was hung above an altar meant that she was probably long departed. There were more important things for him to be worrying about than some dead woman's job.

Namely, the 'ruins' themselves — at least, according to the self-proclaimed Guardian of the Treasury, they were ruins. In fact, the place was remarkably clean considering it was supposed to be hundreds of years old. There was a thin carpet of dust and the portrait and altar indeed showed the kind of deterioration one might expect from rather more well-conserved ruins, but it was just *too* clean.

... It's as if someone was conducting research here until fairly recently, Dortin surmised. If that was the case, then he and his brother could be in for all kinds of trouble when those researchers came back.

His brother had been fed all those lines about how he was the so-called

Guardian's new master, and by extension ownership of all the treasures had been transferred to him, but Dortin was slightly more worried that sensible human beings wouldn't accept the words of an overgrown puppet in a legal property dispute. Even worse, if it turned out that those golems had already belonged to someone else then they wouldn't even have the 'a doll told me to' excuse to fall back on.

With nothing else to do, Dortin decided to count the number of laws he and his brother were potentially breaking at that precise moment. For the sake of his own sanity, he stopped counting when he ran out of fingers.

"By the by, my baby brother," said Volkan all of a sudden, "wherever is our old friend the Guardian, anyhow? Now that I've named every member of my own personal army, I can't get them to follow orders as a group without calling their names one by one."



The surface of the canals at night was like someone had taken a mirror and fashioned it into a sheet of silk before draping it over all the waterways. The starlight was reflected so beautifully that the city itself seemed to be a living, breathing work of art. If one were to jump into the water at that precise moment, they might have found themselves floating along billions of light years away in their own miniature universe.

The ships moored along the canals were mostly absent of any crew members. Nobody was out doing manual labor this time of night, that was for sure.

Somewhere off to the south, a clock tower bell chimed a single time before returning the city to utter silence.

"One in the morning, hell of a time for a leisurely walk," said Orphen, thrusting his hands into his pockets. The gentle night breeze stroked his hair, but did nothing to calm his fury towards the drooling dwarf dimwits.

Claiomh walked not far behind, her brilliant blond ponytail trailing elegantly behind her. She kept shifting her gaze from side to side, apparently on the lookout for any would-be midnight muggers.

She kept adjusting her white dress shirt, trying to get it to fit more

comfortably. She had lost all of her spare clothing in the Damsels' Orisons explosion, and so had been driven to borrowing money from Orphen to buy a new set of clothes. So brand new were they that they sat uncomfortably stiff on her slender frame.

"I feel really bad for her..." she said abruptly.

"For who?"

"Stephanie, you insensitive dolt."

Orphen sighed for the umpteenth time that day. "Steph's not the only one who's experienced that kinda shit first-hand. Hell, I've been chased around by my share of people with literal torches and pitchforks, too."

"Right, but you're strong enough to deal with it."

"Deal with it? Have you ever been stabbed before? Physical strength means jack shit with a knife sticking out of your gut, lemme tell ya."

"Not the kind of strength I was talking about, but thanks for proving my point — someone as strong as you just won't ever get it. You'll probably never understand what it means to live life as a mentally weak person, always worried that your next innocent mistake might be your last. There are plenty of people who are weak to pressure, who're just trying to float on by in life without struggling against the currents around them. Problem is, the people around them don't see or understand that. When someone isn't keeping up with the crowd, they'll lash out against that person. They'll tell them to suck it up, that they can do it if they just try, that they're deliberately slacking off — it's really mean to force the expectations you have of yourself onto other people like that."

"Steph isn't that kind of person. She's a Sorcerer, not a sickly flower girl."

"See? You don't get it at all," Claiomh shrugged. "There's different kinds of mental strength, just like muscle strength. Not all muscly people become pro wrestlers, and not all smart people become scholars. They might be strong, but strong in the wrong ways for those jobs. Steph told me something. She said she lost most of her sorcery after all those operations she had."

"Yeah, that'll happen after what Steph went through."

“...You knew about it?”

Orphen didn’t even bother to carry the conversation, since it was clear that Claiomh didn’t have the full story like he did. Instead, he found something else to pick at.

“I wasn’t expecting you to start going on about ‘how the weak and oppressed feel,’ to be totally honest.”

“...When I was a kid, I used to be pretty frail. This one time I got really sick and couldn’t get out of bed, but even after I’d gotten all better and the doctor said I was just fine, I was still too weak to drag myself outside. My mother and sister said it was fine, that I could still afford to rest a little longer... but I felt awful about it and just wanted to get back on my own two feet.”

“And look at you now — you’re healthier than the horses that brought us here.”

“Missing the point...” she muttered before turning to look back down the road behind her.

“Finally.”

Orphen turned to look as well, and a shadowy figure approached the two of them on unsteady feet. It was Majic, carrying everyone’s luggage yet again. Orphen could see the scowl on his apprentice’s face even through the dark of night. The boy wandered over to Orphen’s side and immediately voiced his complaints.

“How come I always have to be the one to carry everything?” he spat, dropping everything to the ground in a big messy heap.

The luggage he’d been made to lug around this time included a pair of swords, a gas lantern, a length of rope, emergency food supplies, and other battle/exploration necessities. He’d needed to go all the way back to the cart parked outside of town just to get these things, which was quite the distance on foot.

“Hey, at least I’m not making you fight,” smirked Orphen.

“I think I’d *rather* be fighting,” sighed Majic.

Orphen dug around through the pile of luggage and noticed something that absolutely should not have been there.

“...I sure as hell didn’t tell you to bring Claiomh’s sword, dumbass.”

“You’re right. *I* did,” said Claiomh, snatching the weapon right out of Orphen’s hands. “You didn’t really think I was gonna let you have all the fun *again*, did you? I’m the only one you can count on to have your back out there—”

“Sure, whatever,” said Orphen with a lazy wave of his hand. He ignored Claiomh completely and continued sorting through the pile of items to make sure everything he needed was there.

Majic watched him out of the corner of his eyes and spoke up. “So, where’s my weapon?”

“What weapon?” was all Orphen said.

As if this wasn’t already enough for Majic to get the message, he was soon saddled with the bags once more.

“I’m counting on ya, kiddo.”

“...I had a feeling this would happen.”

“Carry this too, *kiddo*,” added Claiomh, handing her sheathed sword back to Majic. The poor pack mule was beaten so one-sidedly that he just gave up and resigned himself to his fate.

“Now, where’s our final party member?”

Orphen put his hands on his knees and started stretching, checking to see that all of his wounds had recovered properly.

Majic turned to look behind them, and sure enough, there was nobody else in sight. Just bare streets lit by the odd street lamp here and there. Majic felt like he understood why their fourth member wasn’t present. “It’s because you kept bullying her,” he said plainly.

Orphen couldn’t respond to that. He knew fully well that he had been far harsher than he needed to be.

Not long passed before their fourth and final member showed up, though.

"Here she comes," said Claiomh.

Walking down the street with only her upper body visible under the street lamps came an almost ghostly Stephanie. Her arms hung limp by her sides, and her gait was still fairly uncertain. A shadow hung over her face as she tried to steel herself for what was to come...

"...I'd have preferred never to get involved in this ever again. My mistakes have already gotten every Sorcerer in this city killed. Must we really risk increasing those casualties further?"

"You weren't the only one who fucked up. You were just lucky enough to survive. That's not a bad thing, and you shouldn't feel too guilty about it."

"I'm as much to blame as anyone else involved," sighed Stephanie. She peered down into the dark canal and brushed her hair back over her shoulder, and Orphen tried to follow her gaze to see what she was looking at so intently.

"Alenhatam..." she began to explain, "was a city first built by the Celestials. But if you look at any old Celestial maps, you'll find no such city by that name. The only thing that used to exist in this area was a much smaller structure. A fort by the name of Basilitrice."

"Basilitrice as in, the legendary Beastking of the Sands?" asked Orphen. "*That* Basilitrice?"

"The very same. There's actually a story linking the two, for that matter. Long ago, when the Dragons first stole the secrets of Magic from the Gods, the Gods decided that only one form of punishment was reasonable: total genocide of the traitorous Dragons. And one of the monsters they employed in the role of executioner was the Basilitrice. The Celestials fought back against the Basilitrice with all the knowledge and might at their disposal, and this fort was created for the sole purpose of slaying the Beastking once and for all. But... they underestimated their foe. Fort Basilitrice was destroyed by the very beast itself, and the surrounding area was reduced to a barren desert wasteland that stretched literally as far as the eye could see. In the end, though, roughly a thousand years ago, they finally succeeded in slaying the Beastking once and for all."

"Sure doesn't look like a barren desert wasteland to me," muttered Orphen as

he scanned his surroundings. The countless canals and large population made him wonder if maybe the Celestials had just been really bad at this whole ‘maps’ thing.

Stephanie giggled, having read Orphen’s thoughts.

“It’s true. In the battle against the Basilitrice, the Celestials lost their fort and this entire area was completely razed to the ground. You wouldn’t have been able to spy so much as a cactus in the whole region. The surviving Celestials weren’t overly troubled by this, though. They used their wisdom and sorcery to create a series of canals throughout the entire area, and literally rebuilt the entire environment from the ground up — and down, for that matter. So successful were their efforts that they even decided to build a city on top of the old battleground. A city that would one day come to carry the name Alenhatam. Some time later, our human ancestors were invited to live here with the Celestials...”

“...And then a few hundred years later, the Celestials suddenly vanished off the face of the Continent altogether,” finished Orphen, familiar with this part of the tale. He stood up straight and shifted his gaze from the water back to Stephanie, who still sat there staring at something deep below.

“Alright,” he continued, “then does this fort still exist somewhere? Even just as ruins, or whatever? Maybe a landmark somewhere in the city? That Killing Doll told us to meet it at ‘Basilitrice,’ but you said the fort was destroyed in the battle over a thousand years ago.”

“It was destroyed. Wiped off the surface of the Continent, actually,” said Stephanie, changing her phrasing slightly.

“Then why would the puppet tell us to meet it somewhere that hasn’t existed for a millennium?”

Stephanie turned to face Orphen, but she didn’t immediately respond.

“Are you really taking those children with you to your battle with that horrible Killing Doll?” she asked, looking worriedly over at Majic and Claiomh.

“They won’t take no for an answer,” shrugged Orphen. “Well, Majic might, but Claiomh? If she learned how dangerous it was, she’d start smiling so

brightly you'd go blind from looking straight at her."

"They sound like such brave children. Much braver than the likes of me. I almost didn't come along at all. Just thinking about it terrifies me even now, and yet—"

"There's a thin line between 'brave' and 'stupid,' and neither of *those* dolts are on the right side of that line," said Orphen seriously, looking straight at Claiomh.

"I think you give them less credit than they deserve," said Stephanie. She paused to think for a moment, her fingers interlaced before her stomach, before picking up where she had left off earlier.

"Well," she said, "Fort Basilitrice wasn't *completely* destroyed. The Beastking's primary weapon was its destructive gaze... and since it couldn't see *underground*, things hidden away cleverly enough could survive even a direct assault from it. Fort Basilitrice's underground facilities remain relatively unscathed even now — and they're right under our feet."

"Wait, then—"

"You guessed it. Fort Basilitrice is standing strong... right at the bottom of the canals."

Orphen peered into the depths of the canal once more, finally having figured out what Stephanie was staring so intently at. It was too dark to make anything out, though. If Stephanie hadn't just told him, he probably would have never pieced it together.

"...So you've actually been down there once before?"

"Once? Every Sorcerer in Alenhatam has been there dozens of times. You have no idea how many ancient weapons, murals, artifacts, and documents were hidden away down there. We cried tears of joy when we first uncovered the place. It was our ticket out of here, and we all knew it. We spent every waking minute compiling papers and reports of everything we found... losing sight of our surroundings and throwing caution to the wind." Stephanie paused for a moment before adding, "Which was when we discovered *that*."

"Yeah?"

“...We thought it was just some doll at first. We had no idea what it could possibly have been used for, so we just hauled it back to the lab without giving it much thought. We thought it was just like any other relic we’d unearthed, but we couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Did you figure out what that damned freak actually is?”

“A human body, possibly. A weapon, most likely. An ancient Sorcerer-exterminator, definitely. Of course, you could also argue that it *was* just a doll — it even introduced itself as such, didn’t it? Whatever it was, it was terrifying.”

“Wait, so Damsels’ Orisons was wiped off the map because...”

“Because, like idiots, we woke it up,” said Stephanie, cursing her own foolishness. “That Killing Doll has been sleeping for over two hundred years, since the day the Celestials disappeared. Deep below ground, it’s been waiting patiently for the day that mankind forgot all about the Celestials... all so that it could strike us when we were least prepared.”

“Alright... but *why*? Why is it so obsessed with slaughtering Sorcerers? It wasn’t just a killing machine — it took a twisted, sadistic *pleasure* in torturing me. Toying with me like a wildcat would toy with a mouse.”

“I’m afraid I really don’t know. All I remember is seeing it waking up, then tracing a rune on its body with the tip of its finger... and I lost my senses as soon as that rune started glowing. The next thing I knew, the whole building had exploded and buried me beneath the rubble.”

“Wyrd Glyph runes... Sorcery of the Celestials.”

“The very same. You know what that means, don’t you? It’s our natural enemy — it can manipulate Celestial sorcery at will. We can barely even *read* the words, but this thing is *fluent*. Even worse, it’s a specialist. Every last rune in its body is specifically designed to make it impossible for a human Sorcerer to stand a chance.”

“Trust me, I figured out that much when it beat me senseless,” grumbled Orphen.

Having acquired all the information he needed, he waved over to Majic and Claiomh who had been waiting just out of earshot.

“Alright, we’re done talking! Get your asses over here!” he yelled.

Claiomh’s ears shot upright and she dashed over to where they were, not wanting to let another second go to waste. Majic was mostly just sad that he hadn’t been able to take a longer break from carrying everyone’s bags all over town.

“Done scheming, you mean?” pouted Claiomh.

“Scheming? Wouldn’t dream of it. Now, plotting, on the other hand...”

“...Makes it sound *even shadier*. I must commend you for not trying to leave me behind this time, though,” she added, turning to look him in the face just to be doubly sure.

...Which was when it happened. Orphen suddenly wrapped his arms around Claiomh, and hugged her tightly. He stroked her silky hair with one hand, resting his head gently against hers.

“Wha— Eh? O-Orphen...?” she cried weakly, completely taken off guard.



“Claiomh,” he whispered into the girl’s ear, “there’s something I need to tell you...”

“W-wait, not here...!”

“Claiomh, I really—”

Orphen shot his student a sharp glance. Their eyes met. Majic sighed. The boy knew what came next, and he wanted as little involvement as possible.

Still, he couldn’t defy his master. Making sure he was in Claiomh’s blind spot, he quietly took the rope out of the bag and handed it over to Orphen’s free hand.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. With the deftness of a spider capturing its prey, Orphen tied Claiomh up so that she couldn’t move a muscle. He tied her ankles together, her arms behind her back, and looped the rope between each as tightly as she could so that she couldn’t even hop or roll around.

Claiomh flipped her lid. “Hey, what the hell was *that* for?!”

She tried to struggle free, upon which Orphen just dropped her to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

“I really... cannot stand you sometimes, you know that?” he finished, satisfied with his handiwork. “Good work, Majic. I’m glad you figured it out.”

“...You wrote up the whole plan on the back of the list you sent me off to the wagon with. I’d have to be blind to miss it,” grumbled Majic, unhappy for the praise in this case. He knew it would come back to bite him in the ass, as it always did whenever Claiomh was involved.

The girl in question tried to struggle to her feet, but quickly realized how futile this was. Instead, she shot the most menacing look she could in Majic’s general direction. “I’ll get you for this!” And then, to Orphen, “You lied to me!”

“The hell I did. I let you tag along this far, but I never said a word about letting you fight the Killing Doll.”

“You liar! Swindler! Conman! Rotten thug!”

“I should probably gag you too, huh? Majic, got any towels or cloth in one of

those bags?"

"Somebody, help me! It's a kidnapper! A murderer! I'm being raped! Call the poli— Mmmrph!!"

Orphen gagged Claiomh before she actually did draw enough attention to get him reported to the police. He clapped his hands together, satisfied that he'd rendered his biggest pain in the ass completely and utterly harmless.

"That look really suits you, Claiomh. Sexy as hell."

"I didn't know you were into bondage..." groaned Majic, disgusted with his master for the umpteenth time that day.

"I was making a joke!" yelled Orphen, punching Majic in the temple.

"Oww... Yeesh, fine then. So, what now? We can't just leave her tied up in the middle of the street."

"...Good point, I never thought about that. You wanna stay behind and keep an eye on her, then?"

Majic crossed his arms in front of his chest and rejected the idea with more enthusiasm than he'd shown all day. "Not even if you carried your own bags! I've known Claiomh a lot longer than you have, so I know that she's far from *harmless* even in that state."

"...No, I made sure to tie her up as tightly as I could. A double-jointed acrobat with no thumbs couldn't struggle their way out of that."

"Poor, clueless master... You really *don't* know the first thing about her. You could tie Claiomh up, gag her, blindfold her, lock her in a cage, and then dangle that cage over the mouth of an active volcano, and she'd *still* find a way to get back at you."

"I remember our teacher once strung her up from a tree branch to punish her, and she started spitting on me and kicking her shoes at me. And to make it worse, it was a chestnut tree, so every time she struggled she sent a whole shower of chestnuts raining down on top of everyone..."

Majic turned bright red — from embarrassment, anger, or both — as he recalled all the similar times she'd managed to cause trouble while being

punished for causing trouble.

“...I’ve known some troublemakers in my time, but you make every last one of them look like saints, you know that?” said Orphen in dumb amazement.

“Mrrph!” protested Claiomh.

“Whatever. Nobody’s shown up yet, and we’re in the middle of the industrial district, so I doubt anyone’s gonna show up until their work shifts start in the morning. She should be fine right there.”

“...What if an actual kidnapper shows up? We basically did most of the work, so that’d make us accomplices.”

“Fine, then chuck her down a back alley or something.”

“She might get attacked by stray dogs.”

“Mrrgh! Mrrphrrphrr!”

“Alright, then we’ll dangle her over the side of the canal.”

“...What kind of monster are you trying to hook with bait that size?”

“Nmrrrphr!”

“Erm...” Stephanie sheepishly raised one hand, having been totally taken aback by the flow of events until now. “Would you like me to stay behind and keep her company?”

“Hell no. You’re the only one who knows the way to the remains of Fort Basilatrice. Look, she’ll be fine if we just chuck her on one of those merchant boats moored nearby, right?”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. If a single roach crawls over her, we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“M-mgh mrrph?!”

“...Then we’ll just have to leave her right here.”

“I guess so.”

“Mrgh mn mrnphn!”

“So, Steph. Where do we go from here? Volkhan might’ve been stupid enough

to crawl up out of the bed of the canal, but we've got luggage that we can't get wet. There's gotta be another entrance, right?"

"Mrrrgh!"

"Well, umm... There are, uh... Sewers around here. The tunnels have partially collapsed with age, and it turns out they were built right next to the remains of the fort. We found it completely by accident..."

"So, master, you feel like carrying any of these bags? You know, to make sure nothing gets wet?"

"MRPH! MRRRGH!!"

Orphen ignored the whining children and followed Stephanie's directions. Claiomh kept moaning and wailing through her gag so loudly that it almost caused an echo, but eventually her futile struggle faded out into background noise, before becoming entirely inaudible in the distance.

Orphen heaved a sigh of relief when he realized that Claiomh, for once, really wasn't chasing after him. Still, better safe than sorry, he decided, picking up the pace slightly.



Claiomh kept wailing away with the gag in her mouth, and eventually her struggles bore fruit. Apparently the gag wasn't tied as tightly as the ropes. When she noticed it loosening, she struggled in every way possible until it finally came undone and fell to the ground.

"I'll get you for this!!" she screamed at the top of her voice.

She had meant to bang her fist against the ground, but momentarily lost herself in rage and forgot she was still hogtied like a squealing pig, so she ended up just crashing into the ground with her shoulder.

"I've never been so humiliated in my entire life! You're gonna pay for this! I'll tie *you* up and drag you around the city streets from the back of a raging bull! I'll rip your fingernails off one by one with a pair of pliers! Why, I'll, I'll...!"

She paused for a moment, considering more realistic ways of getting back at Orphen.

“I’ll never stand a chance against that battle-freak... I’m gonna have to play it smarter than that. A sneak attack should work. Let’s see... I could fill his bed with needles and drawing pins, or toss boiling water on top of him from the window...” she mumbled. “I’ll fill his boots with pig’s blood, and scribble all over his face with a permanent marker while he’s asleep. Then I’ll soak his towel in lemon juice for when he tries to wash it off. I could smash a window while he’s walking under it and shower him in broken glass... Or heck, maybe I’ll just push him down the stairs when he least expects it.”

She managed to calm down just enough to go from outright impossible plans to more realistic, petty ones.

“Alright, time to take the usual approach. I’ll test them all out in order, using Majic as a guinea pig.”

She grinned at the thought, but then realized something. “...Where am I supposed to get pig’s blood?” she wondered.

—*Blub, blub, blub...*—

Claiomh turned her head at the strange noise, noticing that the previously still water of the canal’s surface was now bubbling away furiously. She rolled side to side, edging herself closer to the water little by little, trying to figure out what was going on.

She finally got herself around to an angle where she could see what was going on... and regretted it almost immediately.

“Gwaaah ha ha ha ha haaa!” roared an explosively huge column of water.

The water rained down upon the surroundings, revealing a ten-meter-tall stone soldier at the center of all the commotion. Riding atop the golem’s shoulder was a familiar face, one that Claiomh would never forget as long as she lived.

She dreaded what was to happen next. She knew fully well what kind of a dwarf he was, and could pretty much guess what was coming next.

“Why does this always happen to me?” she sighed.

Chapter V: The Doll Obeyed Its Commands

“You don’t really think this plan of yours is gonna work, do you?!” screamed Claiomh, her hair and clothes still dripping wet from her abrupt trip underwater.

She tried to wiggle her way out of the huge golem’s grip, but it was a futile struggle. Knowing when she’d met her physical limits, Claiomh had always been one to turn to her verbal weaponry.

“You stink, you low-life kidnappers! You’re so wet behind the ears you’d think you’d know what a bath was by now!”

“...Why does everyone who gets involved with that Sorcerer turn foul-mouthed before the day is out?” wondered Dortin.

He and his brother had kidnapped the hostage that had been so thoughtfully prepared for them, and immediately retreated back to the altar in Fort Basilitrice. The golem stood as ordered by Volkan, with the portrait of the green-haired lady to its back and Claiomh squirming in its grip.

“You think you can win because you tamed a bunch of *rocks*?! Maybe if you’re trying to make us laugh to death!”

“I’m the one who’ll be laughing to death, wench!” said Volkan with Dorthin safely between them as a human shield just in case. For added effect, Volkan had made a little throne for himself, atop which he struck (what he thought was) an intimidating pose.

“This time for sure, I’m gonna put an end to that sketchy Sorcerer!”

“Why do you keep trying to kill Orphen, anyway?!” Claiomh demanded to know.

“Because circumstances allow for it!” snapped Volkan. “And because I hate living in debt!!”

“You’d become a murderer because of *that*?!”

“You sure talk big for someone who lost to my *pet rock*!”

“I was tied up! It wasn’t even a fight!”

“Hmph. Make whatever excuse you like, you *lost* to me and that’s that! And I didn’t even need you tied up, I’d still have beat you anyway!”

“...”

Dortin merely watched the two of them arguing away, nursing his headache. For he knew fully well what would happen to him if he were to butt in.



Every city tends to have its own share of hidden spots. Vacant plots of land hidden away at the end of narrow alleyways off the front streets, small open fields overgrown with weeds across the other side of little brooks or rivers, or in this case, a narrow little stone stairwell leading down under one of the bridges in town. Orphen and Majic followed Stephanie down these stone steps, at the base of which was a large round metal disc.

Stephanie moved the disc aside to reveal a passage leading straight down. On one side of the passage was a single narrow iron ladder.

“...Sure doesn’t look like ancient ruins to me.”

“I told you, the way in is through the sewers. It’s still a bit of a walk from here.”

“I don’t mind the walk, but do I really need to carry our luggage all the way down there, too...?”

The reason for Majic’s concern should have been obvious. The stench emanating from the sewers was unbearable.

The group had to try and stifle off the smell with either a handkerchief or their shirt collar, and roughly an hour passed before they came to another apparent dead end. The only difference from the rest of the tunnels so far was that one of the walls had a huge crack in it, which someone had clearly used tools to widen enough to allow two people to pass through shoulder-to-shoulder.

“...You sure the air’s safe to breath in there?” asked Orphen. “It’s been sealed

from the world for a thousand years, right?"

"It's fine, see?" said Stephanie, wrapping her arms around her sides and taking deep breaths of the air coming through the gap in the wall. "The air's even healthier in there than it is out here. Fort Basilitrice was built so that the soldiers would survive even if they were buried alive. There are runes carved into the walls constantly managing the internal air flow. Plus there's some kind of barrier between the levels, which is what's stopping all the water from flooding in. It's awfully specific, though... Whatever spell is keeping the water out doesn't keep living organisms out, so you get fish falling out of the roof every now and then."

"As long as we can breathe down there, I don't mind putting up with it raining fish. Hell, the sewers wouldn't even bother me much if not for the smell."

The group squeezed their way into the crack in the wall only to find that it continued far longer than they had thought. It was about a hundred meters of pitch blackness across damp, muddy ground before they finally emerged into bright light as though they had emerged above ground rather than an open space at the bottom of a canal.

Orphen took a moment to readjust his balance on the stone floor after all the mud they had just trailed through. The sensation of solid ground beneath his feet made it feel all the more real — ground zero of the battle between the demi-gods and the Beastking sent to exterminate them. It felt like uncovering a forbidden, sealed tomb.

The ruins themselves were nothing so grand, however. The fort interior was as sparse as could be — which made sense, since it was a military facility that had been destroyed in the midst of an actual battle.

The fort's corridor was about five meters wide, a welcome open space compared to the claustrophobic hole that had been carved out to connect it to the sewers. For as spacious as the corridor was though, it was just nondescript walls stretching from one end to the other. No doorways, no other side passages, just a seemingly endless hallway in either direction.

"We've taken to calling this part the 'spine,'" explained Stephanie, walking out behind Orphen.

“The ‘spine?’”

“We named it that way because of how the fort is shaped. It’s like the Celestials designed it around a living creature, with this part being the spine. One way leads across to the ‘head,’ and the ‘tail’ is at the other end.”

“...Doesn’t mean a whole lot to me, Steph.”

“They’re both stairwells. Either one will take you down to the lowest floor, or if you felt like going up then you could climb up through the barrier and come out on the bed of the canal.”

Majic finally managed to drag all of their bags out of the crack in the wall just as Stephanie had finished explaining.

“Majic,” said Orphen, “heads or tails?”

“Is this about women again?” his apprentice asked, before following up with, “If that’s what this is, then I like a woman with nice legs.”

“...Hearing you say it like that pisses me off, so we’ll go with the head this time. Which way, Steph.”

“The head is off to our right.”

Orphen made his way down the path as Stephanie instructed, with her and Majic trailing along behind. The hallway hadn’t been constructed in a perfectly straight line, which made it hard for them to tell if they were even making any progress.

“The wrath of the betrayed, huh...” muttered Orphen under his breath.

“Come again, master?”

Orphen answered without stopping or turning around. “The wrath of one betrayed is not so simple that words can convey — much less those betrayed by the world itself. That’s what Killing Doll told us, remember? I was just thinking, I might’ve figured out what those words mean.”

“...You have?” asked Stephanie, but Orphen didn’t answer immediately. He rubbed his chin and went over things in his head, just to be sure he wasn’t jumping to conclusions.

“Yeah. Although I could be wrong.”

“Speaking of betrayals,” said Majic, “you know *you’re* the one who’s gonna have to explain this to Claiomh later, right? I’m already gonna have it the worst no matter what I say, so please don’t drag me down along with you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Orphen with a wave of the hand, with absolutely no intention of upholding that promise.

They finally reached the end of the corridor and came out at the stairway that Stephanie had called the ‘head.’ It was a spiral staircase with steps about as wide as the corridor had been, stretching both up and down several stories. There was no landing at the top, though — the stairs led straight out into the canal itself, the water being held up with an invisible barrier like Stephanie had said.

“...This must be how Volkans got the golem outside,” said Orphen, as an unfortunate fish slipped through the barrier and flopped down onto the staircase.

“Not unless it doubled in size when it reached the water,” said Majic.

“I didn’t mean the stairs. Look over there — see that huge support pillar? I don’t doubt for a second he made the poor thing climb up it like a monkey would climb a tree.”

“...All it would take is one slip and he’s have been squashed to bits at the bottom of the shaft.”

“Volkans not the type to think about consequences. He once boiled and ate a random frog that he caught in the river without even checking to see if it was poisonous. ‘Course, he only did that because I’d taken his lunch money to pay off some of the debt he owes me.”

“Master, that’s just evil,” said Majic, who had come to a bit of a revelation over the past few days. “Sometimes I wonder why I’m still traveling with you, you know that?”

“It’s ‘cause ya love me. You’re starting to grow on me too, for what it’s worth.”

“...”

This banter continued until the group finally reached the bottom of the staircase. There was only one steel door at the bottom, and between that and the plain stone walls, it made the whole place look more like an underground prison than part of a fortress.

Orphen looked over cautiously at Stephanie, and she nodded to assuage his fears.

“It’s fine,” she said, “there aren’t any traps this far in. The Celestials may have had a different culture, but even they wouldn’t go as far as to booby trap the inside of their own fortress.”

“I guess you’re right. It’d be pretty stupid to slay the beast only to die to one of your own traps.”

Orphen gripped the doorknob and prepared himself for the whole place to come crashing down behind him anyway.

“...Before we go in, let’s take bets.”

“Bets?” came Majic’s dumbfounded response.

Orphen grinned. “If the Killing Doll’s on the other side, then I win and you lose. If it’s Volkán, then you win and I lose. Sound fair?”

“...What if it’s something worse than either of those?”

“Then we both lose!” said Orphen, vigorously bursting the door open.

He groaned from the bottom of his heart when the answer made itself clear. On the other side of the door stood a large golem similar to the one from earlier that day, with the portrait of a green-haired woman framed behind it. It glared down at him, standing to attention behind its new master. Its previous masters, Volkán and Dörtin, lay bound up in ropes on the floor behind her.

“No winners here tonight, then,” said Orphen, trying his best not to turn tail and flee before Claiomh who stood soaking wet and shaking with rage.

“I’ve been waiting for you, *Orphen*,” spat Claiomh.

Orphen held up his hands as if trying to calm Claiomh down, while also trying

to piece together how things had turned out like this so abruptly. “Okay, uh, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but you don’t have to explain. It’s pretty clear what happened down here.”

“Oh? Go ahead then,” said Claiomh, “impress me.”

“Well, you probably managed to convince the dimwit dwarfs to untie you and then easily kicked their asses... but that look on your face tells me you didn’t do that for my sake, huh?”

“Who would ever do *you* a favor?! They work for me now. I had them spare the golem army, too. Call it an alignment of interests.”

Orphen turned his attention to Volkан next.

“Tell ya what, Volkан. Since I’m such a nice guy, I’m gonna let you beg for your life.”

“Good,” said Volkан, who had never been one to defy expectations under these circumstances. “Please save my humble hide.”

“What’s in it for me?” Orphen teased the boy.

Volkан knew he was going to have to make an impressive offer, but was rather reluctant to part with any of his treasures. “This is all your fault,” he grumbled to Dortin.

“You’re the one who untied the girl,” Dortin snapped.

“*You’re* the one who told me to untie the gorilla!”

“Who’re you calling a gorilla?!?”

“Cut it out, we’re gonna be here all night. If you want me to save your ass, twerp, then give me a good reason to.”

“Hrmm... Fine. That doll gave me some magic treasures. I’ll split them with you, so please save me.”

“Sorcerous artifacts? Like what?”

Volkан looked down at his chest pocket, since he couldn’t display the items himself due to being tied up. “Magical cotton buds.”

Strangely enough, it didn’t look like he was lying.

“Alright. What do they do?”

“If you clean out your ears with them...”

“Yeah?”

“...It feels so good, it’ll put you to sleep— Ow! Hey, what’re you throwing rocks at me for?! Fine! Then how about this magical kettle?! No matter how much you heat it up, the water inside will stay cool forever!”

“Give it up, Orphen. My followers won’t be tempted over to your side so easily,” said Claiomh proudly.

“Tempt them?” sighed Orphen. “Why bother with that when I can just intimidate them?”

“ANYWAY! I’m gonna show you what happens when you treat people like garbage! Now grovel and beg for forgiveness, if you know what’s good for you!”

“...You’re starting to sound like my brother,” mumbled Dortsin.

This enraged Claiomh, who stomped on the poor boy’s head and squashed his face against the ground. Keeping that position, she picked up Volkán by the sides of his head and started shaking him around in the air.

“You know what to do, slave! Give Orphen what he deserves!”

“Why do I have to listen to *your* orders...” he grumbled.

Claiomh held her sharp thumbnails as close to the boy’s eyeballs as she could. “Do what I tell you, or I’ll gouge your eyes out.”

“Oi, you crazy Sorcerer! Try keeping your rabid bitch on a leash, would ya?!”

Orphen shrugged. “I would, but then I might lose *my* eyeballs.”

“That’s it, that’s the last straw! Golem number two, Deep-Fry! I order you to squash Orphen like the annoying little insect he is!”

One of the golems responded to Claiomh’s command. The rune on the cloth dangling from its face lit up, and the next moment it dashed across the ground making straight for Orphen.

Majic and Stephanie panicked.

“Master!”

“Orphen, look out!”

Orphen didn’t panic in the slightest. He aimed his right hand at the golem and chanted the first attack spell that came to mind.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The blast reduced the golem to rubble in an instant, but Claiomh was not deterred.

“I’m not done yet! Golem number three, Zcattick! Show him what you’re made of!”

“I gaze upon thee, Princess of Chaos!”

The slightly thinner golem, Zcattick, was assailed by a swirling black torrent of energy, which reduced not only the stone soldier itself but also a portion of the altar directly behind it to pebbles in a super-high-gravity press attack.

“I choose you, Tylor!” yelled Claiomh, and the golem followed obediently, blissfully unaware of the fate that awaited it.

Orphen had chosen to use a variety of different attack spells, almost as if gloating about how easy these opponents were to defeat.

“My left hand paints thus, Scene of Hades!”

“Then try this on for size! Mike Stack! Kevin Pepperer! Monsieur Mittens! Gang up on him!”

“I release thee, Sword! Of! Light!”

“Dakada! Monkey 1000! Blowfish! Smithy!”

“Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!”

Every last one of Orphen’s spells obliterated the oncoming golems with enough force to shake the entire room, and Claiomh finally started to reach her limits.

“Fine, you asked for it! Have a taste of my final weapon! Crush him into paste, Champloo Gesundheit!”

The golem that stepped forth this time was a head taller and much more heavily built than any of the other golems. Orphen pointed one finger at this one and decided to finish it off with style befitting its impressive size.

“By the ancient pledge I end thee...”

The buildup of the spell charged the air with static electricity, causing Orphen’s hair to stand on end.

“Climax of the Crusade!”

—KA-SHAK!—

A small bolt of lightning shot out of Orphen’s fingertip and across the room with blinding speed. It hit its target dead in the chest and traveled straight to the golem’s core, and for a second nothing else happened. Then, in the next instant, the golem shattered into equal-sized tiny chunks which hung in the air still holding the golem’s shape, which was then sucked into itself like a black hole had been ripped open inside of the thing. Every last pebble collided in the exact same spot all at once, and nothing was left of the hulking giant but a cloud of dust.

The room grew silent.

Claiomh stared blankly at the spot where her final golem had been so easily pulverized into dust. Her determination gone, she collapsed to the ground and burst out into tears with both hands pressed against her face.

Volkan and Dortin shared a knowing glance at each other. They had no idea what had just happened, but they both knew that this was their best chance to escape. They managed to wiggle themselves to their feet like a pair of chubby worms standing upright, and then wiggled their way across the room and out of sight of Orphen and co.

“Aww. You made her cry,” poked Majic.

“I didn’t mean to, y’know.”

Seeing Claiomh crying like a little girl was enough to make even Orphen feel a little bad about showing off like that.

Majic wagged his finger and told Orphen off. “You could try holding back a

little every now and then, you know. Everything you do, you do it at full-pelt. Maybe that's just what seems natural to *you*, but us common folk don't usually kick women when they're down."

"Like I said, that's not what I—"

"It doesn't matter what you meant, just look at her! Don't you feel bad at all about reducing a young girl to tears like that?"

Orphen did as he was told and looked down at Claiomh wailing away on the floor. He felt that he was being blamed unfairly — he had been attacked by an army of golems, what was he *supposed* to do? — but he did feel bad for her... at first.

While at first she looked like a poor little girl who had been beaten up by a big bully Sorcerer, she was in fact mumbling something that utterly shattered that image.

"S'not fair... I was finally... my revenge... ditch him... all his fault... tie him up... feed him to stray dogs... rip off his fingernails... pig's blood..."

Orphen shook his head. "You know what, actually? I really *don't* feel sorry for her."

"Oh, don't say that. This is where you're supposed to try and make up with her. I need you to make up with her, otherwise she's gonna torture me for this later. Did you even *hear* some of the things she was mumbling about? I don't wanna go through that!"

"...I was wondering why you were taking her side. Now it all makes sense."

"You know, Orphen," said Stephanie with a frown, "it *was* you who pushed her this far. You could've been nice and at least let her hit you once."

"Let a golem flatten me? Yeah, that'll be the day. I get that you guys think I'm some kinda invincible, heartless demon king, but only a cockroach or a dwarf could survive being slapped by one of those things."

Orphen was about to start grumbling about everyone ganging up on him, when suddenly someone started laughing from the other side of the room.

"Waaah hah hah hah hah hah ha!"

“Huh?”

Orphen turned around to face the altar, to find the source of the laughter which rose in volume by the moment.

“Graaah hah hah hah hah hahahahaaaa! Ladies and gentlemen, the farce ends here!”

“...About damn time.”

Orphen scanned the altar. Standing in the center was Volkán, cackling like a madman as he always did. He and his brother Dórtin had somehow escaped from their bonds, but Dórtin was in decidedly lower spirits about it than Volkán was.

Behind the dwarf brothers stood the true threat — the Killing Doll, with its middle finger extended out in blade form. That explained how the dwarfs had gotten free, but exactly when it had shown up and how long it had been watching was anyone’s guess.

Volkán whipped out his sword and pointed it at Orphen. “The end is nigh, you marauding money-mad magician! Let’s settle this once and for all!”

“...The only way this is gonna end is if you’ve finally decided to pay me back, brat,” said Orphen’s mouth, but his attention was completely elsewhere. He was entirely focused on the Killing Doll, which stood grinning at him from atop the altar.

The Doll stood directly behind Volkán. While this could easily be interpreted as it protecting him...

Shit, thought Orphen. That son of a bitch isn’t playing around. It’ll really murder those kids if I don’t do something about it.

Volkán, sadly, remained totally oblivious to this danger.

“Play strong all you want, bastard! Did you really think my army of pet rocks was all I had in store for you?!”

“I thought they were the whole point,” sighed Dórtin. Volkán did not like to be interrupted, and so cracked his brother across the head with his bare sword as he always did.

"There are still plenty of weapons left! You wanna try some of them on for size?! I say bring it!"

"I'll 'bring it' alright, you little prick! Bring out the fucking Basilitrice, why don't you! I'll wring that money out of you even if I have to bring you back from the dead!"

Orphen's words were laced with powerful sorcery, firing a beam of light at the portrait on the altar behind dwarfs and doll. The portrait burst into flames and burning fragments began to rain down on Volkans head. The boy screamed and spun his head rapidly searching for an escape route, but soon found that he didn't need to.

The whole fortress seemed to shake and writhe for a moment. Orphen sensed the thing aiming at him and moved purely on instinct. He rolled to one side, just barely avoiding a bolt of lightning that shot down out of the roof.

"Kyahahahahaha!" came the eerily shrill laughter of the Killing Doll.

It withdrew the blade into its finger and held its hands out at its sides, signaling the start of the battle proper.

"Come, Sorcerer! Dodge my attacks, and you might just get to hear my tale to the end!"

Orphen was the first to react. "Majic! I'm leaving Claiomh to you!"

With that, he took to scanning the area. There was virtually nowhere to hide in the big, open room. Volkans little throne had been destroyed in the battle with the golems, and the remains of some of the golems were littered around the floor, but nothing large enough to act as cover. Part of the altar had also been destroyed in the commotion, leaving several half-broken dragon statues in a pile. The portrait had been lit aflame by Orphen himself, and now less than half of it remained.

Majic and Stephanie stood stock still near the entrance to the room, too stunned to move. Claiomh was still laying on the floor in tears. Volkans was panicking and running around in circles atop the altar, while Dortin had all but given up on figuring out what was going on and simply sat there sighing. There

was only one among them enjoying the chaos of the situation — the Killing Doll itself.

Behind the Killing Doll, Orphen noticed something strange. A small crack had opened in the ceiling, down from which floated a number of curious objects.

“What the hell are those?” he wondered aloud.

There were several large metallic spheres with a diameter of fifty centimeters, without any kind of distinctive patterns or descriptive features. Orphen couldn’t figure out what purpose they might serve, as they seemed to simply float lazily through the air.

One of them shone slightly. What followed was another abrupt bolt of lightning, this time catching Orphen completely off-guard. The blast struck right at his feet and sent him flying. Panicking, he fired his own spell in retaliation.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

He shot it off while still tumbling through the air, but nevertheless managed to hit his target. Or so he had thought, at least.

The moment the beam of light connected with the floating ball, it seemed to pass straight through without interacting with the object whatsoever. The beam continued on its path and collided with the ceiling, meanwhile the floating sphere was completely unscathed.

“That can’t be right! I hit it straight on!”

“Did you really now?” said Killing Doll teasingly.

Orphen glared at the doll, understanding that he had just deliberately been given his one and only hint to fighting the strange new foes.

‘Did you really now?’ Orphen repeated to himself. If I’m to take that doll at its word, that means my attack didn’t connect like I thought it did. Shit, why am I relying on hints from the enemy?

Orphen scrambled to his feet and made a mad dash across the room — and of course, the metal spheres followed close behind, spewing forth lightning as they gave chase.

“Haaah hah hah! That’s right! Run, coward! Run away with your tail between

your legs!" screeched Volkan.

Fuck you, brat! swore Orphen.

"Master!"

Orphen turned to look for Majic, and found both him and Stephanie helping Claiomh to her feet, the young girl still rubbing tears out of her eyes.

"Orphen, we've got Claiomh! What now?!" yelled Stephanie.

"Get down, idiots!"

Orphen twisted his body and ran straight for the three. He threw his arms out and dived at them, knocking all three to the ground. Not a moment too soon, as a bolt of lightning shot through the air where Majic's head would have been.

Majic yelped, his head still luckily attached. Orphen pulled Claiomh to her feet and shoved her into Majic's arms.

"Don't just stand there, dumbass! Run for it!"

"R-run?"

"Yes! Run! None of you stand a chance against an enemy like this. That Killing Doll could take any one of you hostage. This is exactly why I didn't wanna bring Claiomh along! You listening?!"

He turned to Claiomh and made sure she was paying attention.

"I know you love danger, but how about trying to keep yourself *out* of trouble for a change, huh?! How the fuck am I supposed to fight if I'm worried sick about you the whole damn time?!"

"I'm sorry..." said Claiomh weakly. Her hair had mostly dried off, only to have gotten wet with her tears this time.

"Wait," said Majic, noticing something. "So it's fine if *I* get taken hostage then, is it?"

"Oh, shut up. Do we really have time for this?"

"I think now's exactly the time for this..."

"Just shut up and do as you're told. Run. Away. Steph, you know your way

around. Get these kids outta here!"

Orphen pushed Majic forward to force him and Claiomh to run away with Stephanie. All three of them made for the room's exit, but things never went that smoothly.

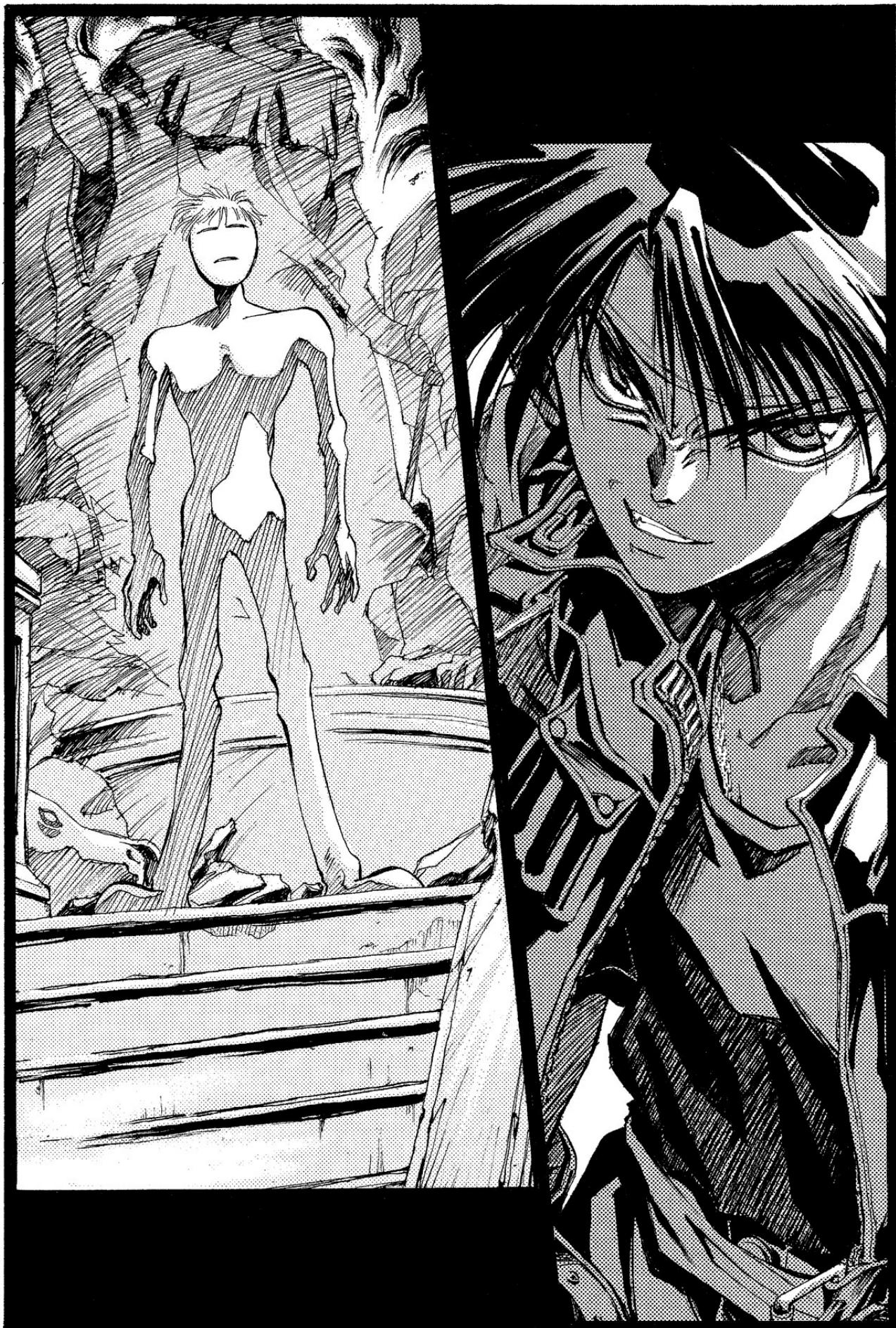
Before they made it to the door, a glowing character floated in the air before them and abruptly transformed into a massive pillar of pure white flames. Killing Doll burst out into maniacal laughter atop the altar. A rune had lit up on its right elbow, the very same character that had brought forth the flames.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Sorcerer."

Majic froze before the wall of flames, staring at it in blank terror. Claiomh almost had a mental breakdown when she realized that there was no escape for any of them. Stephanie managed to keep her wits about her, but wits weren't enough to cut a path through raging flames. She shook her head and ran over to Orphen's side, grabbing him by the arm.

"It's no use, Orphen! There's no way you can beat that thing!"

"Oh, shut up!" he yelled in turn. He shook her off and turned around, glaring at the Killing Doll.



“You said you’d let me hear your tale, right? Well you can shove that tale up your ass! I’ve already got you figured out.”

“Amuse me,” said the doll, with a perfectly composed expression.

Orphen smirked angrily at the puppet. “Steph said she woke you up by accident. But you know what? I think that’s a load of bullshit.”

“Go on...”

“Doesn’t matter if it was by accident or deliberate — Steph wouldn’t be able to activate you, period. If you’re really what you say you are, then you were created by the Celestials hundreds of years ago.”

“Orphen, what are you talking about...?” asked Stephanie, utterly confused.

Orphen wrung out a pained sigh before he continued.

“Sure, we human Sorcerers have managed to decipher a few of the Celestials’ runes. *Some of us* have, at least. But so what? They’re not *just words*, they’re *spells*. It’s not like reading an ancient language — knowing the spell is only half of the process. You need to be able to *cast* it, too. That’s what sets Wyrdography apart as a subject among Sorcerers. Only a handful of people at the Tower of Fangs — the elite of the elite — are halfway competent at it, and even that’s just the tiny fraction that we’ve figured out so far. I’m not putting you down, Steph, but *you couldn’t activate any Celestial runes even if you tried*. It’s literally impossible for you to have woken that thing up.”

“But it’s right there, active and moving around!” she yelled, pointing at the Killing Doll atop the altar.

The doll began to laugh. “What is your point, human Sorcerer?”

“You were only pretending that Steph and the others woke you up by accident. The truth is, you were never asleep, never sealed. You’ve been down here all these hundreds of years. Awake, and waiting. Waiting for the day when those above ground forgot the truth behind the legends. Waiting for *this very day and age*. And I’m just taking a guess here, but...”

Orphen grinned fearlessly and brushed his hair back out of his face.

“If I’m not wrong, then every last legend that this city has is one big pack of lies!”

The Killing Doll burst out into hysterical laughter. It bent backwards with the force of the laughter, locking eyes with the burning portrait at its back.

"Kyahahahaha! Hah! Haha! Oh, my master. My pitiful, clueless master! Your will was not strong enough! You were far too unprepared!" it yelled, swinging its arm in an arc to point at Orphen.

“This man!”

It held its other hand to its head.

“This single, human man figured out everything! Two hundred years pass, and still he finds the contradiction even *you* could not see! My poor, hopeless master! You were no god; you were a fool!”

“...What’s going on, Orphen?” asked Stephanie.

Orphen shook his head and wiped the sweat from his brow. "You're about to find out," he said.

"Indeed," said the Killing Doll, regaining its composure as abruptly as it had lost it. Even the dwarf brothers could tell that the truth was gonna be worse than expected.

“Since you figured out that much, I will tell you the whole tale *free of falsehoods*. Let us cast our gaze back to a thousand years ago. The Celestials, as you call them, did indeed exist once upon a time, and they did, indeed, do battle with the great Beastking of the Sands, the Basilitrice. And legend has it that they won this battle...”

The doll waved its hand as if to dismiss this notion.

“But the legends were wrong. Those women lost the battle that day, without even realizing it. Now, it is true that they slayed the beast even as their fortress was destroyed, but *that is all they did.*”

“...I’ve read up on the legends surrounding the Basilitrice myself,” said Orphen.

Amused, the Killing Doll shrugged its shoulders. “Let me guess — the beast was recorded as ‘its gaze was its weapon, and its very existence a plague upon the land,’ yes? Indeed, that is the true form of the Basilitrice — a plague like no other. The Celestials did battle with the beast, blissfully unaware that merely being near the creature was doing its own job for it! Every last Celestial was infected with its plague!”

“I figured that’s what it was. Still, the Celestials were strong enough to be called demi-gods. They probably didn’t even notice that they’d been infected. So they went about their lives, unaware that they were housing the Continent’s deadliest plague within their very bodies. Over the hundreds of years they lived, they dug out canals and rebuilt the land destroyed in the battle...”

“And created a city upon the new land. Indeed, that is how it went. Then, one day, they noticed the humans with such a similar appearance to their own, and invited them into their land. The two races began living together in harmony.”

“And it wasn’t long before some humans fell in love with Celestials and vice versa. Which is where us human Sorcerers came from, right?”

“Correct. That is the true history leading up to the events of three hundred years ago,” finished the doll.

Standing behind Orphen, Majic joined in the conversation. “...So wait, which side was betrayed by which, then?”

Orphen turned to face his student. “So you remembered this time, huh? That’s the only part I’m not a hundred percent clear on myself.”

“Is that all?” said the doll, an eerie crescent grin adorning its face. “Pitiful humans. Surely you have your answer by now. *Everyone betrayed each other.*”

“...What do you mean by that?” asked Orphen for confirmation.

The Killing Doll spoke as though reciting a story passed down throughout the generations.

“The Celestials were infected with a vicious plague. But being as powerful as they were, they lived many centuries without once noticing the infection. They were able to resist the disease — but the much frailer humans were not. Ordinary humans who came in contact with the infected Celestials were

infected in turn, and began to die under queer circumstances one after another. The rest of humanity grew suspicious. Might the Celestials not be trying to exterminate them? As human Sorcerers were born, the ignorant humans began to suspect jealousy from the Celestials. It made sense, as the human Sorcerers grew in number as the Celestials remained few in number, with no births adding to their ranks. Before long, human Sorcerers completely outnumbered the Celestials."

"And since more Sorcerers being born meant that more people had been coming into contact with the Celestials..."

"Indeed. Humanity's death toll continued to rise. The humans reached their limit and revolted. They sought to drive the Celestials from their own city, fearing for their lives. What went down in human history was an age of 'Sorcerer Hunts' instigated by the Celestials, but this was the product of a gross misunderstanding. The truth was the reverse — humans had begun *Witch Hunts* against the Celestials in earnest. But the gap in power between the Celestials and human Sorcerers was too great for mere numbers to overcome. Human Sorcerers dropped like flies. This truth combined with their own perceived persecution is likely what led to the event being mistakenly recorded as 'Sorcerer Hunts.' Amidst all of this, we were created. Tools to efficiently deal with our masters' persecutors. The Killing Dolls."

"..."

Every human in the room had grown silent. The Killing Doll felt its story gripping them, and continued in elevated tones.

"The humans believed they had been betrayed by the Celestials! The Celestials believed that the humans had turned on them! While the simple truth was a plague afflicting both sides! What it all came down to... was a simple lack of trust on both sides."

"...It almost sounds like you Killing Dolls had it all figured out from the start."

"Indeed. We were calm enough to objectively analyze the facts, after all."

The doll let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Besides, what would you have us do? We exist merely to carry out our

commands. Our commands at the time were to exterminate all human Sorcerers — no more, and no less.”

“...But then how come the Celestials just up and disappeared one day? It sounds like they were winning!” yelled Majic, who hadn’t grasped the implication.

The Killing Doll’s eyes snapped open. “Did you not hear me? The plague assailed *both sides*. While the Celestials resisted it better than the humans, their fierce exhaustion brought about by overusing their sorcery in self-defense accelerated the plague’s effects. They grew old, and weak, and withered. Their already scant numbers began to decline further... and never recovered. The final Celestial to remain was my poor, ignorant master. The one called Sister Istersiva. Her portrait was formerly above this altar, but it was set ablaze by the human Sorcerer. Her dying wish was that her existence be carved into history.”

The doll raised its arm and gestured towards the smoldering remains of the portrait.

“She was a powerful woman. Before she died, she issued us one final command. We were to execute her commands exactly as she had laid them out. Her plan was born of her despair in her final moments. An ultimatum — complete human genocide. In order for this to happen, we must first exterminate all Sorcerers, the only ones who could possibly become an obstacle. And we must do it discreetly, lest they retaliate in numbers. So we waited for an age where the humans forgot the truth, watching for our chance. When the last Sorcerer is erased from this city, that is the trigger for the rest of us to awaken and advance upon the Continent. Just ask that woman behind you — she knows how many hundreds of my kind still lay dormant even now.”

“Is that true, Steph?”

Orphen made to confirm the details while also taking careful aim at one of the spherical metal objects floating near the ceiling.

“It’s true,” she answered in a shaky voice. “I’ve seen it myself... A room just beyond this one, like a giant mausoleum full to bursting with dolls... dolls just like...” the thought of them all awakening at once left her unable to even finish her sentence.

Orphen let out a little sigh, scanning the sphere in his sights for something that he had noticed earlier. He caught sight of a tiny little flash, and attacked in that exact moment.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A beam of light shot out of his hand and soared through the air, hitting the sphere right as it was about to unleash another bolt of lightning. His attack hit the shining little shape on it, this time connecting perfectly and destroying the sphere entirely. It was reduced to tiny metal shards which rained down onto the floor.

Orphen dodged the falling debris and confirmed his theory with the doll. “Now I get it,” he said. “I was wondering why my attacks were passing right through it, but that wasn’t the case at all. The thing was just spinning so fast that it *deflected* my attack. It was all part of a defensive function to protect the rune holding the thing together. As long as I break that rune, I can destroy the ball easily enough.”

“Haha. So you’ve finally learned how to break my toys. What of it? They were a simple distraction. My own way of holding back so that I did not break you immediately from playing too rough.”

Dortin, realizing that the Killing Doll’s final command of ‘total human genocide’ would inevitably include dwarfs too, finally spoke up. “Hey, bro...?” he said, “Wh-what’re we gonna do? At this rate, we’re gonna be killed as soon as those Sorcerers are taken out, and... huh? Hey, where’d you go?”

“Dortin, you pest! I am absolutely ashamed of you!”

“Whuh?” the boy said, rather dumbly.

It was then that he noticed, his brother had taken the initiative and run away first, to position himself safely behind Orphen.

Volkan cupped his hands around his mouth and emphasized every word. “I cannot believe that you would let yourself be taken over with vengeance and dare to lay a finger on my lifelong best friend, Sir Orphen! You are a devil, lad! A heartless monster! I’ll have to beat you into a decent person, it seems!”

“...I can’t believe you, bro.”

“Fucking hell,” swore Orphen, kicking Volkan in the face to shut him up. He turned to Dortin and said, “Look, kid, not much point standing over there anymore. Just get over here, would ya?”

“Huh? But...”

The little dwarf boy looked over at the Killing Doll, now understanding that he had been taken hostage all along. The doll didn’t seem to care about the dwarfs in the least anymore, its gaze fixed solidly on Orphen.

Orphen, too, kept his gaze locked with the doll’s as he spoke. “It’s fine,” he said, “the doll doesn’t need hostages anymore. It’s got us all down here where we can’t run away, just like it wanted.”

“W-well, alright then...”

Dortin dashed over to Orphen’s side, almost tripping over his own feet in his panic. Orphen, meanwhile, kept the Killing Doll in his sights the entire time. It looked exactly as it had when they had first met face-to-face. Its naked form containing hundreds of powerful sorcerous runes specifically designed to torture and kill human Sorcerers. It was by no means an opponent that Orphen would win against head-on.

But of course, Orphen didn’t plan on trying to win head-on anymore.

“Hey, buddy. I know you call yourself a ‘Doll’ and all, but there’s a lot more truth to that than even you know.”

“...Oh?” said the doll, its interest piqued.

Orphen smirked, deliberately making sure to draw all of his opponent’s senses onto him.

“Oh, y’know, like how you only ever seem to focus on one thing at a time, channeling out all information you deem irrelevant. You just do what you need to, no more and no less.”

“I exist to execute my given commands.”

“Right, that’s what I’m talking about. You’ve prioritized your precious ‘commands’ so much...”

Orphen turned his gaze up to the Celestial statue standing directly behind the

Killing Doll, a few meters taller than it in height.

“...That you’ve taken your eyes off the most ferocious person in the room.”

“What?” the doll exclaimed, turning to look where Orphen was staring. It was too late, though — the mysterious figure had been given ample time to make its move.

She dropped down from atop the statue of the Celestial, swinging her sword down with as much force as she could muster. Her blond hair trailed down beautifully behind her, making the slash seem all the more elegant for it.

“You—!” the doll yelled, making to trace the shape of one of the runes on its body just a moment too late.

Claiomh’s sword sunk into the Killing Doll’s shoulder, cutting all the way through its torso and down to its abdomen. No blood spurted from the wound, but it appeared that the doll still at least had a sense of pain, as its face was contorted in agony.

“Oww...” said Claiomh. She seemed to have twisted her ankle when she messed up her landing.

The injured Killing Doll glared down at the girl laying at its feet. Its eyes burned with an intense anger entirely unlike its usual calm demeanor.

“Loathsome wench! I allowed you to live because you were not a Sorcerer, but no more mercy!”

“I release thee, Sword of Light!” chanted Orphen, and his attack hit true.

“Rrrraaaaagh!” yelled the doll as the explosion sent it flying across the altar.

Orphen rushed up the altar’s staircase and ran to Claiomh’s side. He patted her on the shoulder and grinned.

“Nice teamwork, Claiomh. I knew you could pull it off.”

Claiomh turned to look Orphen in the eyes. “Teamwork...” she repeated, taking in Orphen’s brilliant smile.

The moment didn’t last long. A bright, white flash came from where the Killing Doll had landed, and the force of the winds knocked Orphen and Claiomh

flying off the altar.

“Shit,” swore Orphen.

He pulled himself back to his feet, but the Killing Doll had already returned to its position atop the altar. It glared down at him from what felt like a far greater height now, its icy gaze sending a chill down his spine. Apart from the gash through its torso, the Killing Doll was mostly unharmed even by the previous blast.

The Killing Doll spoke in tones of subdued rage, its face cold and expressionless.

“You broke me,” it said.

“I can see that,” quipped Orphen. He moved to protect Claiomh, then grinned and laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. We broke you — and in a pretty good place, too. That cut’s deep enough to have destroyed the rune you used to silence human voices. Claiomh’s got pretty damn good aim, doesn’t she?”

“...What of it? My body houses far more than a mere one or two runes. I have hundreds more specifically designed for killing insolent Sorcerers like you. A mere loss of one or two of those—”

“Is enough to reduce your power by one or two levels out of a few hundred, at least,” said Orphen, cutting the doll short. “And if we broke part of you, then we can break the rest of you!”

Orphen reached into his shirt and pulled out his pendant for the Killing Doll to see — a one-legged dragon coiled around a sword.

“Bring it on, Doll Man! I’ll turn you into firewood!”

“Very well! No more games!” yelled the doll, tracing a shape on its right shoulder. A rune shone to life, and floated into the air. In an instant, the shape transformed into hundreds of arrows of light, raining down upon Orphen.

“I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!”

Orphen’s spell created a barrier large enough to protect himself and those behind him from the attack. But the barrier crumbled easily beneath the weight of the arrows, which lodged themselves into the ground and rent the ground in

a violent explosion.

The blast knocked Orphen soaring through the air, but at least the barrier had shifted the arrows' course slightly, allowing him to avoid taking a direct hit. He did several somersaults before crashing to the ground, pain assailing his body. He didn't have time to think about that, though. He pulled himself upright and tried to make sure everyone else was safe.

What he saw left him speechless. In a single attack, the entire room had been destroyed. The ground had been torn to shreds, what had once been level floor now a wasteland of rocks and rubble. Great big holes had been ripped open in the walls, so deep that they had pierced clean through the stone to expose the soil beyond. The altar had been absolutely obliterated, apart from the statue of the Celestial which remained conspicuously intact. So much of the structure had been torn away that water now leaked down through some of the cracks in the roof.

The resulting dust cloud had left Orphen unable to confirm Claiomh, Majic, or anyone else's safety. Hopefully they were somewhere *amidst* the rubble and not *under* it.

"Shit," he swore. He tried to climb to his feet and rush to confirm everyone's safety, but his body wouldn't obey. He tried again — it wasn't an injury. He had been deliberately paralyzed.

"Your skills are not as sharp as you thought, Sorcerer."

The doll's voice was calm and cruel. Orphen had had his neck seized from behind.

It paralyzed me...? he thought to himself, and the doll's answer was immediate.

"I used one of my poison needles, located in the palm of my hand. I've taken the liberty of paralyzing every muscle below your neck. It's a fast-acting poison, but it won't rob you of your movement permanently. A clever little concoction, is it not? A cruel poison designed to rob you of your freedom, without letting you die so easily."

"..."

"Huhu... You can try to block your thoughts if you wish, but you're far too mentally exhausted for that to work anymore. I can see your every thought. You're counting on that girl even now. Best discard that idea, Sorcerer. The girl is already unconscious at my feet."

Orphen was able to move his eyeballs down just enough to gaze at his own feet. Sure enough, Claiomh's wrist came into view, her hand still gripping her sword even as she lay knocked out.

The doll continued. "Now you would turn to the other Black Sorcerer — I see, Stephanie is her name. That, too, is futile. I will save you the trouble of searching for her. She's passed out, crushed beneath the rubble of the altar."

"..."

"You would even turn to those dwarf siblings? Now this *is* comical."

"..."

"Ah yes, your precious student. Your precious, *powerless* student."

"...Majic. Can you hear me?" called Orphen. He spoke slowly, trying to ignore the doll's words.

He could hear the doll mocking him from behind, but he persisted anyway.

"I need your help to beat this damn Doll Man. Listen to me — I know the truth. *You can already cast spells*, can't you?"

No response. Utter silence.

He continued anyway, sweat tickling his brow from the mere effort of trying to speak.

"Special lesson, free of charge. Listen to me. Stare straight at your target. Focus on it. Focus so hard you can't see anything else. Now inhale. Don't stop inhaling. Any breath that leaks out of your lungs will drain your power with it."

No response.

Can he even hear me...? wondered Orphen, growing desperate.

"Keep inhaling and eventually you'll reach your limit. Everyone has their limit, and it's different for us all. Once you're at your limit, picture your target as if it's

right in front of you. So close you could reach out and touch it. Solidify that mental image. Nothing else matters to you. Now yell it out, from the pit of your soul. Put everything you've got into it. If you've been practicing your chants, then you can already do it. Link your incantation to a firm image of the spell you want. Make sure the image is flawless and complete. Picture it as vibrantly as you can, and the spell will follow."

When Orphen stopped talking, a new, crystal clear voice filled the entire room.

"I r-release thee—"

"Huh...?"

Orphen blinked. The voice continued.

"Sword of Light!"

—FWOOM!—



Orphen could barely believe what he was witnessing. A tremendous beam of light rent the very air asunder. It was many times — many *dozens* of times — stronger than Orphen's own strongest attack. It flew straight past Orphen and the Killing Doll, a brilliantly huge torrent of heat and flames like a super-condensed explosion raging forth without end. It bored through the fortress walls like a hot knife through butter. The force of the impact shook the entirety of Fort Basilitrice to its foundations, the very same fort built to withstand a direct assault from the legendary Beastking itself.

"Wh-what...?" the doll trembled in fear at the sight. "What power...! What mutations have you creatures undergone over the centuries?!"

The ridiculous beam of light finally died down, and water began to flood in through the great hole in the wall.

The doll had loosened its grip on Orphen's neck in its shock. Orphen could feel the tiny needle slipping out of his skin. Seeing his chance, he tried to force his body to move with every ounce of willpower he could muster.

C'mon, dammit! Move!

Focusing all his strength, he moved swiftly. He grabbed Claiomh's sword and swung it diagonally upwards, straight into the Killing Doll's neck. There was a loud clang as it sunk in about halfway before stopping short, but this was enough for him. The force of the attack knocked the Killing Doll off balance, and Orphen took his chance.

He let go of the sword leaving it lodged in the doll's neck and spun himself into a better position poised to strike again.

"I brandish thee, Blade of Demons!" he chanted.

He gripped the invisible sword, feeling its weight in his hand. This time he struck from the other side, so that the physical and sorcerous swords met right in the middle. He locked eyes with the Killing Doll and drove the blade as far as it would go.

The two blades acted like a pair of scissors, tearing the doll's head from its body. It danced through the air and fell to the ground.

The severed head bounced once, twice off the rubble, then rolled to a halt at the foot of the Celestial statue.

“...”

Orphen fell to his knees. He stroked the unconscious Claiomh’s hair without thinking about it.

“It’s finally over...”

Thud.

The headless body dropped lifelessly to the ground. Orphen gazed down at the thing, glad that the battle was finally over at last.

Then he turned his gaze to the wall that Majic’s attack had ripped a massive gaping hole in. Water flooded in with tremendous vigor. The whole structure would probably be submerged underwater before the hour was out.

That son of a bitch really did it, he said to himself. I only gave him the one real lesson, and he tore a hole in a fortress. What kind of monster is he? Fucking hell.

“M-m-m-m-master!” squealed Majic.

“...What is it?”

Orphen turned to look at the boy, crawling out of the rubble and dashing blindly across the room.

“That was amazing! Do you think I might be some kind of prodigy?!”

“As if, you lunatic!” he snapped, throwing a large rock at the boy for good measure.

“What was that for?!”

“Take a look at what’s left of your hands, *Mister Prodigy!*”

Majic followed Orphen’s instructions and looked down at what was left of his hands. The sight made him scream in both shock and pain.

“Oh gods! It burns! My hands are like charcoal!”

“Not only did you lose your concentration halfway through the incantation and injure yourself, but *you missed completely!* I hereby forbid you to ever use

sorcery ever again, you walking disaster!"

"B-but I still pulled it off!"

"The only thing you pulled off was *your own skin!* You can't call it a success until you can *control* the spells you're casting! This is basic fucking stuff, kiddo!"

Orphen's yelling brought the others back to their senses. Stephanie crawled her way out from beneath the rubble of the altar, staggering to her feet. Much closer to the entrance, Volkhan and Dortin poked their heads up out of the water. Claiomh tossed and turned on the ground, mumbling something in her sleep.

"Is it over, Orphen?" asked Stephanie as she hobbled over. Orphen nodded.

Alas, it was not quite over yet. "Kyahahahahahaha!" the doll's laughter rang out.

From the feet of the Celestial statue, the doll's head laughed as though it had lost the battle, but won the war. Everyone present turned to face it, not knowing what to expect next.

"Do you truly believe this to be over?!" the head sneered. "I believe I told you! There are close to a thousand more Killing Dolls in the room just beyond! Should my functions cease, the next doll will awaken according to its program! You beat *one* of us, but can you destroy close to a thousand?! Your sneak attacks won't work a second time, humans!"

Orphen stared wordlessly down at the gloating severed head and sighed.

"Lemme teach you a useful human phrase. When we inadvertently reveal our own weaknesses to our enemies, we tend to follow it up with 'Me and my big mouth.'"

"...What are you plotting, bastard?!"

Orphen grabbed Dortin by the arm and dragged him over to where the Killing Doll's main body lay lifeless on the ground. The boy put up zero resistance, still quite dazed from how quickly everything had escalated from a scuffle to a war zone. When they reached the body, Orphen held it up and inquired something requiring Dortin's memory and intellect.

"Alright kid, you should've been right there with this puppet when it blew the Sorcerers' Association sky high. Do you remember what happened back then?"

"Eh? Uh, yeah, I remember."

"I was passed out, by the way," said Volkan, eager to be as useless as ever. Orphen silenced the boy by throwing a rock at his face, then turned back to Dortin.

"Do you remember what the rune the doll used back then looked like, and where on its body it was located?"

"Y-yeah, why...?"

"Y-you bastard! Stop right there!" the doll's head yelled in a panic.

"Zip it, firewood. Alright then Dortin, I've got a job only you can do. I want you to take this finger and use it like a pencil, and draw the rune exactly as you remember it on the doll's body. As long as the body's still intact, we should be able to use the doll's own mana to activate the spell once more. An attack like that should be enough to reduce these ruins to dust."

Dortin sheepishly traced the rune just above where the doll's heart would have been if it had had one. The character floated awkwardly into the air, then activated. The very same explosion from before engulfed the mausoleum beyond with an earthquake, tornado, and ensuing soundless explosion.

Volkan and Dortin were the first to flee the room following the blast. Majic and Claiomh dashed out next, and Orphen followed behind them. But right when Orphen was about to dash through the door, someone grabbed his arm from behind.

"...Steph?" he said, looking back at her over his shoulder. "What are you thinking? If we don't get the hell outta here, we're gonna be sleeping with the fishes for sure this time."

"...There's something I need to ask you," she said. "Didn't you feel a thing when you heard that doll's story?"

"Like what?"

"You... The Celestials. Don't you feel anything for them? If that doll's story was true, then it's all just far too tragic. A simple misunderstanding led to the extinction of an entire race, as well as the persecution of Sorcerers that's endured for centuries!"

Stephanie looked like she was on the verge of tears, but Orphen just shrugged listlessly.

"It's all down to how you interpret it," he said. "Besides..."

He stopped and turned around, looking straight at the severed doll head which was still yelling away in the corner even now.

"I'm not stupid enough to take anything *that* thing says at face value. Plus it's not like jealousy or outrage had to have been the only deciding factors in trying to wipe out human Sorcerers."

"...What do you mean?"

"Think about it like this. What if the Celestials actually *had* noticed that they were carrying a deadly plague within them? What if they figured out that the reason humans kept dying around them was because of this infection spreading to them? It's highly possible then that the plague would spread through the blood of their descendants — the human Sorcerers — too. Maybe the power of sorcery bestowed upon human Sorcerers was strong enough to counteract the plague and keep them alive. But what if the disease ever mutated and started spreading across the entire human race? It might well have been that they tried to kill off all human Sorcerers to prevent this from ever happening, even if it meant resigning themselves to the role of villain in the eyes of humankind."

"...But then why would Sister Istersiva have ordered the Killing Dolls to wipe out all of humanity with her dying breath?"

"Nobody ever said the Celestials all shared the same thoughts and opinions. Some of them probably *did* resent humanity to the bitter end, and maybe it was just one of those spiteful types that happened to live the longest."

Orphen wrapped the conversation up and shoved Stephanie out of the room, following right after her. He stopped for a brief moment, and turned around to face the remains of the portrait one final time.

“Either way, all’s well that ends well. Right now, *we’re alive*, and that’s what counts,” he said, giving the enraged doll’s head one last playful jab.

He also had one final thing to say to the statue of the Celestial still standing. “There’s no proof that you were ever completely wiped out, either. If I ever meet a Celestial, maybe I’ll ask them to help clear up our remaining doubts. There’s no need for us to make the same mistakes as our ancestors, basing our entire perception of them around misunderstandings that could easily be cleared up just by asking the right questions.”

The tremors throughout the ruins grew more violent by the second. Orphen clicked his tongue and left the flooding room behind, the last human to ever walk its halls.

Epilogue

“...We’ve been running around in circles ever since we met back up again, so we haven’t actually had a chance to sit down and talk like this for years, have we?” said Orphen. He sat with one elbow resting on the table, facing Stephanie who sat across from him.

Stephanie giggled and took a sip from the cup in front of her. “Back then I was bedridden the entire time, though,” she said with a gentle little smile.

Orphen’s expression stiffened just slightly, having been made to remember something unpleasant yet again.

The two of them were sitting at a white wooden table in the outdoor area of a cafe bar aimed at local students. The cafe itself was in the student housing district, a little ways off from the main street. With nothing else to do, Orphen had been toying around with the empty cup in his hand.

He cleared his throat, preparing to dig up the past in earnest this time.

“Y’know... When I first came back to this city, you were the first person that came to mind.”

“Really? I’m glad you remembered me.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. Three years ago, I was still so busy trying to get my own bearings that I couldn’t really do much to help you at all.”

“That’s true.”

“But now, well, I’ve got a bit more time on my hands. So I was thinking I might be able to, you know...”

Orphen stumbled over his words, but Stephanie seemed to know what he was getting at. She lay her cup down on the table and rested her chin in her hands. She leaned forward on her elbows, bringing her face closer to his.

“You might be able to help me out a little this time, then?” she finished his sentence for him.

"No, that's not really... Well, actually, I guess it kinda is what I'm trying to say," admitted Orphen, still chewing over his words awkwardly in his mouth.

Stephanie's eyes lit up slightly — at least, that was how it seemed to Orphen — and she asked him a question she had been meaning to for a little while.

"What did you tell Claiomh about me, by the way?"

"Huh?"

Stephanie grinned and continued. "She suddenly went from treating me like a thief to apologizing to me with tears in her eyes. When I asked her about it, she said she'd heard about my 'condition' from you. What did you tell her about *that*? I'm curious."

"Urk..." mumbled Orphen. "Actually, that was what I meant when I said I wanted to help you out if I could."

"How so?"

"Sorry, I keep jumping between points here. What I told Claiomh basically amounts to your... symptoms... and that it was all connected to that time I found you collapsed on the street after the townspeople had lynched you. I told her that I brought you to the doctor and that he saved your life, but that you were still suffering from the... after-effects of the treatment. Anyway, I wanna help you now the way I couldn't back then, and—"

"I'll just say this now to clear up any misunderstandings, but I'm not suffering anymore at all," she said, cutting Orphen short. "Looking back on it now, I feel like I was reborn that day. I've been enjoying my second shot at life, so I'm thankful things turned out the way they did."

"Reborn? Second life? Horse shit!" swore Orphen. Then, slightly more delicately: "It was just a fuck-up on that quack doctor's part. He couldn't figure out what your face was supposed to look like after you'd been beaten so brutally... and so he accidentally remade it into a *woman's* face."

"A *woman's face*?!" yelled Stephanie, suddenly slapping the table out of nowhere and rising to her feet. "I got a lot more work done than just that! See these breast implants?! See this silky smooth facial skin?! I even had surgery done on my bone structure to make me look more feminine! And for that

matter, I even took my ox☆ and had them turn it into a ♦◎¤! There was no accident, I took my chance to get a body I felt right in!"

"Alright! Fine! I don't need to hear the details, geez! My point is, I never got to see what your face looked like *before* the surgery, so I thought you'd been a woman all along! That's the only reason I felt like that towards you! I felt like I'd been deceived."

"I did *not* trick you! That was your own misunderstanding!"

Now even Orphen rose to his feet. "My own *misunderstanding*? That's rich, coming from the lady who didn't even bother *trying* to clear it up! Anyway, I've been meaning to get this off my chest for three years now! Why the hell'd you introduce yourself as *Stephanie* when your name was *Stephen*?!"

"I was *lynched*! Of course I was going to start using a new name after that!"

"You didn't need to use a fake name with *me*, especially after I *saved* you! And what's all this that you told Claiomh — your sorcery weakened drastically after your surgery? Of fucking course it did! Sorcery's related to your own mental image of yourself! Modify your body *that* much and it'd be more surprising if you *didn't* lose most of your abilities!"

"My body isn't *modified*, I told you I've been reborn! My mental image is just fine, because this is the body I wanted."

With three years' worth of venting finally off their chests, both Orphen and Stephanie stood panting for breath. Orphen let out an exaggerated sigh and sank back down into his own chair.

He picked up his cup with a shaking hand, only to remember that it was already empty. He tried to calm himself down.

"...Well, it's all in the past now. I just wanted to get that all off my chest. Sorry."

"...You're right. What's done is done," sighed Stephanie, fixing her hair before she sat back down in her own chair.

Orphen gazed over at Stephanie and continued talking to her like the good friends that they now were.

"So, what's life got in store for you from here? You're not actually gonna stay in this city any longer, right?"

"Of course not. Even the Damsels' Orisons branch office was blown sky high. I'm thinking of moving back to my hometown with my parents."

"Where's that?"

"To the south of the Continent. I've already vacated the apartment that I'd been renting here in Alenhatam."

"...Won't your parents be surprised to see you the way you are now? They might pass out from shock."

"It's fine. They're both so old that they're half-blind by now. They'll never notice the difference."

"No, they'll *definitely* notice that their son has turned into a daughter..."

"I'll figure something out. What about you, Orphen?"

Stephanie changed the subject, and Orphen nodded as though he had just remembered something.

"I leave town tomorrow. I'll be continuing on my way north."

"Why north?"

"Because those bastard dwarfs skipped town before I could wring any money out of them. Their debt's now high enough that if I ever get the full amount back, I'd be able to buy a city with it. Plus, if you're heading south, then I might as well go north," he added, stepping out of his chair. "Anyway, I'd better get going. Claiomh's mood seems to have improved since last night, so I wouldn't wanna get her angry again just because I left her waiting for too long. She said she was gonna borrow the kitchen at the inn we're staying at and make dinner for me. Did you know she's actually a lot better at that kind of thing than she looks? Apparently she's even worked as a babysitter before."

Orphen raised one hand and waved goodbye to Stephanie.

Stephanie didn't say another word, instead taking a sip from her cup with a gentle smile on her face.

“Dinner’s ready, thanks for waiting♥”

“R-right, thanks...”

Orphen took the tray that Claiomh offered him, slightly off-put by how carefree her smile was. The only thing on the tray was a small cheesecake-shaped object.

“I wanted to make a full meal, but the old man downstairs had already closed up the diner and opened the bar instead, so I couldn’t use most of the stuff in the kitchen.”

“Y-yeah, sorry about that. I meant to get back sooner, but I had a lot of catching up to do with Steph,” said Orphen awkwardly. “Anyway, uh... Sorry about last night. But, like, you understand now that I was only doing that for your own safety, right?”

“Yup, I get it. No hard feelings.”

Claiomh smiled innocently to prove that she really didn’t mind anymore.

This just made Orphen feel even more guilty about the whole thing. Without really paying much attention, he stuck his fork into the cheesecake.

“To make up for it, I’ll take you out sometime. Someplace a lot less dangerous, though. That said, we’re leaving town tomorrow, so it’d need to be in some other place that we stop off at along the way. I’m sure we’ll find other places as nice as Alenhatam, probably with a lot less tourists, too. Like, uh... Oh, you’ve never been to the royal capital, have you? There’s a place there called Andon Park, it’s someplace you’ve really gotta visit at least once in your life. I’m sure it’ll become a good memory for—”

Orphen cut his words short as he slipped the whole cheesecake into his mouth, the sensation of which was enough to temporarily paralyze him.

In that moment, Orphen’s body suffered from total sensory overload. The flavor was *not* that of an edible product. Not even a badly made one. The taste was so overwhelming that his eyes rolled back into his skull, and he blacked out for a moment. He came back to his senses, the ‘cake’ still dissolving slowly inside his mouth as Claiomh looked on with the smile of an angel.

"Claiomh, this... cake... it's..." he struggled to ask, finding it a challenge to even string words together. The distinct texture of the object spread out in his mouth, and it was so disgusting that Orphen began shivering involuntarily.

"Well I certainly wasn't going to let you off the hook with *no punishment at all*, now was I?" she said happily. "It's just what you need. A nice clean bar of soap to wash out that mouth of yours. Make sure not to leave a single bite now, alright? ♥"

Orphen turned to look at Majic, who had been lying dead silent in the room the whole time. The boy stuck out his tongue at Orphen. It seemed that — as usual — Majic had already been subject to this new torture method for the trial run.

"What... else... do I have... to look forward to, Claiomh?" asked Orphen in a shaky voice, already dreading the answer.

In that moment, Claiomh's smile turned absolutely radiant. "I've left your underwear soaking in the bathtub, so have fun dealing with the damp smell all day tomorrow♥ Oh, and for all the clothes I lost since we arrived here, I went out and bought new outfits while putting it on your tab, so be a good boy and pay for all of that♥ Oh, and this one's still a work in progress, but I'll be taking out some life insurance for you, with me as the recipient in case anything *unfortunate* ever happens to you♥ That's all fine, right?"

"...This is well beyond the level of some common pranks now," Orphen protested rather weakly. He still had the soap in his mouth — too afraid of what worse might happen if he were to spit it out, but not yet mentally prepared to swallow the thing. He held his hands up in front of his face in despair, and noticed his vision beginning to blur.

Claiomh didn't stop smiling for an instant. Orphen figured that at least nothing worse would happen as long as he could keep the girl smiling like that. He steeled himself for the ultimate challenge he had faced thus far in his life... and swallowed the bar of soap with a single gulp.

Afterword

“...From the shadows, that man draws ever nearer. Yes, *that man*. The man who’s been looking a lot meaner recently. The man who’s stopped letting people in his room. And indeed, the man about whom there are various other such rumors floating about recently... And bringing you the commentary for the end of this volume is none other than I, the global idol and wandervogel of the fin de siècle! The one destined to defeat Gracie! (Getting a little off-track here) It’s-a me, Stephanie! Ohh, here he comes! The man we’ve all been waiting for! He’s about to take center stage!”

“(Appearing on stage) ...Hi. It is I, the author.”

“...An author with no sense for the dramatic, it would seem...”

“I might normally be a bit happier to play along, but I’m actually quite exhausted right now...”

“Ahaha. Well, it took you a whole year to write up the first serialization of your debut work! After that, you spent two years working on your next project! But this time, against all expectations, you wrote up the whole volume in a mere eight days!”

“It’s no laughing matter.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s entirely your fault for convincing your editor, M, that you could pull it off somehow.”

“Well, eight days was just the base of the work. That doesn’t include the re-written parts, or fixing up the mistakes, or pretty much any of the work to actually make it publishable. Plus I had to work on weekdays, so I could only work on it every now and then. Altogether, it took me about the same span of time as the previous volume to actually get done. That being about a month and a half.”

“Such is the terrible talent of being a writer on the side.”

“...I wouldn’t really call it a ‘terrible talent.’”

“You’re right. I just felt like saying that. Anyway, how long are you planning to spend working on the next volume? Considering how much you shortened your writing time compared to the first volume... I’m guessing it’ll be eight hours next?”

“Not happening! I’d like to work on the next volume at a more comfortably stable pace (I hope).”

“I wonder about that. Can you even *do* a comfortable pace? It sounds to me like if you try that, you’ll be working on ten pages a day, every single day.”

“W-well, yeah. I get nervous if I’m not constantly writing something.”

“Goodness, you’re such a coward... Anyway, do you have anything to tell the readers about your plans for the story going forwards?”

“Naturally, I do have some ideas in mind. Like, for example, the Protagonist O and his Companion C will get into a big argument, Disciple M will get bullied by everyone, then the Protagonist will lose his temper and snap at everyone, and before I know it I’m cutting it close to my upper page limit...”

“Who asked you to work us through your thought processes?!”

“Every time I try to write a story, I find myself drawn to the allure of the two-volumes-per-arc format.”

“You’re incorrigible (mumble grumble)... So basically what you’re telling us is, you haven’t planned it out yet at all?”

“Sorry about that♥”

“An apology isn’t really helping anyone... And stop trying to look all cutesy by punctuating your sentences with hearts.”

“For this series, I’d really like to take each volume as it comes. I feel like it will be more interesting if I let the story grow a bit more organically instead of planning the whole thing out from the beginning.”

“Really?”

“It’s also partly because I keep procrastinating whenever I need to come up with what happens next.”

“You’re incorrigible...”

“W-well alright, but in exchange, I *have* been putting a lot of thought into the grander scale of the setting. Stuff that I could use for a different series, or one-shots or the like...”

“I’m curious what counts as ‘putting in a lot of thought’ for you...”

“(Urk...) Anyway, that’s enough of that. For the next volume, I’d like to try out something a little bit different. So far we’ve had two back-to-back stories with major plot elements tied to the ancient Sorcerers, so for the people who were expecting the rest of the series to continue the way it’s been going thus far...”

“?”

“Don’t get your hopes up♥”

“Wouldja cut that out, mate?!”

“Anyway, that’s the plan! I hope to see you all next afterward, too!”

“Seeya, folks!”

— Akita Yoshinobu



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 2

by Yoshinobu Akita

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