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SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

8. RAIN ON MY HOLY CITY, TEARS OF BLOOD!



"Daaaaaaaaaaaaah!"
Majic screamed, rolling away.



"Claiomh!"
Orphen uttered the girl's name,
hopelessness in his voice.





Water rushed in and flung the
four of them through the tunnels!

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Prologue

She looked deeply and quietly tired. That's what the man thought, looking at her. Or rather, he couldn't stop thinking it.

"You have been forced to accompany me for too long. I do feel guilt for this."

The woman spoke, but he couldn't look at her, and he couldn't respond. Instead, he directed his gaze to the ceiling. The black robes he wore shifted with a soft sound.

The woman seemed to raise her face, perhaps reacting to the sound. "Why do you look up?" Her voice was quiet, contemplative. Not puzzled or suspicious, but as if she had an idea of the answer she would receive.

Why indeed, he wondered. He wasn't sure himself. It wasn't as if there was anything on the ceiling for him to see.

They were in a fortress. An ancient fortress with the name Basilitrice—the underground part of it that had survived, anyway. He had heard that the aboveground part had been destroyed in a battle with a gigantic beast long in the past. Long, long in the past. Long enough that he—his ancestors, rather—had yet to even exist on this continent. The age of myths.

And she... has lived all this time, since that age of myths. That was why she was so tired. It had to be. He steeled himself and returned his gaze to her, clenching his fists at the same time.

"It is so stifling here..." The woman groaned, a sour expression on her face, hand pressed to the chest of her green robes in annoyance. The woman clearly held no affection for the place they found themselves in. She glanced about the area, eyes stern. There was an altar, around which stood six statues representing the six types of dragons, and behind it, a giant portrait of herself hung up on the wall.

By his estimation, the portrait was quite well done. It perfectly replicated the appearance of the woman who stood before it. If it had one fault, it was that it failed to capture her essence, and because of that, the woman in the portrait

was all the more beautiful.

But what was the point of a portrait that had none of her anguish and despair? He continued to gaze at her—the real, living her. There was no blush to her cheeks. Her mouth was a tight line, since she had a tendency to clench her teeth when it was closed. There was a gentle curve to her pale lips. She had green hair, and eyes that always seemed puzzled or restless—green eyes. The green eyes that signified the most powerful beings in existence... dragons.

She was an ultimate being. The most powerful living creature on the continent.

Beneath the portrait, and thus high above the woman herself, her name was written on a metal plate. If the rest of Fort Basiltrice was reduced to cinders, this plate alone would likely survive. Only the name of the lone priestess of the Weird Dragons, Sister Isterviva.

“If it pains you—” He spoke for the first time, lowering his eyelids slightly. “—then you should have fled from here.”

“I no longer have the strength...” The words escaped Isterviva’s lips, a pitiful groan.

He listened silently to her groans for a moment before coming to a sudden realization. “What is it you plan to do?” He hissed. He intended to take a step toward her, but found his feet rooted firmly in place.

She shook her head only enough for her bangs to sway slightly and said, “There are one thousand Killing Dolls here... the final weapon we created. Soon... I plan to give them an order.”

“An order?”

“I have not yet given up. I cannot accept that our existence has all been for naught...” Isterviva’s green eyes hardened, her brow knitting. “It is true that we committed many taboos. But must we still pay for them...?”

The man responded quietly, “I’ve made contact with the giants’ continent.”

“About the World-Seeing Tower...? Why? The goddesses are surely long aware of this continent.”

“And what about the underground theater? That was far too dangerous.”

“The dolls stationed there are under strict orders to thoroughly select only those worthy of the knowledge. They will stand by those orders even if they’re destroyed.”

The man’s throat trembled as if he would open his mouth to rebuke her, but it was only for a second. He swiftly swallowed the words that had been about to escape him.

For a time, neither of them spoke, the silence stretching between them. But the man eventually broke it after carefully choosing his words—or rather, he opened his mouth, intending to break it, but found he was unable to fully do so.

He told her dispassionately, “...You have betrayed the orders of the ‘sanctuary’ on other occasions as well.”

“That is not a sin.”

At the woman’s quick counter, the man felt a smile come unbidden to his lips, and pointed to his chest, the smile hardening. “You created us...”

“That is unequivocally not a sin!” She made the declaration even quicker this time and the man smiled once again, though this time it had a tinge of self-deprecation to it.

The woman’s head had snapped up to meet the man’s waiting eyes, but it was less a clash between their gazes and more an entwining of them—and the woman was the first to let her face fall powerlessly, breaking the connection.

Her shoulders slumped and she said with a trembling voice, “I see. So even you will name that a sin...”

“Sister. You... Your brethren...” The man moved forward as he spoke, black robes billowing slowly. “Your brethren saved our ancestors from destruction. They had become nomads and you welcomed them into your cities without hesitation and educated them. More than anything, I thank you for this—you did not make slaves of them.” His self-directed sneer became a sad smile. “You were not cold to them, but you did not coddle them. You gave the human race its independence. You put your lives at risk to protect us. You were the ideal leaders, never letting us grow too arrogant, nor letting us succumb to despair.

We loved you. Revered and admired you.” He slowly drew a silver blade from his robes. “But... there was a reason for your actions. Wasn’t there?”

“Does that displease you?” Isterviva murmured without sparing a glance to the blade now in the man’s hand. “Does it displease you that we birthed you into this world?!”

“It does not displease me. I was the one who decided I would love you, no matter your plans. However...” The man took one step toward Isterviva, then another. “The vast majority would not say the same. They were not given the opportunity to choose for themselves. No... they thought that they had made their own decisions, but they were betrayed. And they chose me. On the surface, I am merely meant to represent them in making their displeasure apparent to you. But what they really desire... is for me to take revenge against you.”

He proceeded swiftly, though not too swiftly. Just like a priest carrying out his rites in an official capacity, with quiet, but swift steps.

“That’s right. You betrayed us.”

Chapter I: “We Betrayed You?!”

Wham!

This was not the sound of a foot hitting the ground. When moving, the foot has only two roles: to leave the ground, and to descend once more upon it. When it leaves the ground, the body is propelled on the momentum of this action, and if nothing is done after this, it would fall, so the foot must once again find purchase on the ground.

Only the first motion must be a forceful one. If too much force is applied to the second, it's essentially pumping the brakes too hard. So, in accordance with this reasoning, Orphen used force to kick off the ground and sent his apprentice flying with a well-aimed punch as he slid his feet on the landing to maintain his balance.

“DAAaaAAaaAAaah!” His apprentice fell with a spectacular scream, landing in an even more spectacular fashion. It wasn't simply a tumble to the ground. There was a whole rolling motion involved. It probably took about two seconds, with the volume of his voice increasing and decreasing as he went. After a journey of about three meters, the apprentice—a blond, blue-eyed boy of about fourteen—finally came to rest face-up on the ground, limbs splayed out, eyes still rolling.

Orphen announced expressionlessly, “If you don't get up in ten seconds, I'm coming over there to stomp on you.” He pulled back his fist and stood still, looking down at his pupil.

His appearance didn't particularly suggest the sort of strength he'd just utilized to knock the boy down. In fact, his build was average at best, though there was a quiet darkness in his dull gaze. He had dark hair and dark eyes. Average looks. If anything, the only distinguishing feature he could be said to have was the slight squint to his eyes.

He was dressed almost completely in black and wore a silver pendant that hung at his chest. The pendant was a crest depicting a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword, and it was proof that he was a Black Sorcerer—not

only that, but one of the most powerful ones on the continent, educated at the Tower of Fangs, the highest authority on Black Sorcery on the continent.

He fiddled with the pendant, since his hands were now unoccupied, but eventually dropped that hand to his side and formed a fist with a short sigh. Then he strolled over to the boy.

He was only a few steps away, so he quickly reached the boy, who was still on the ground panting. As soon as he did, he lifted his right leg up swiftly—and sent it hurtling down toward the boy’s body!

“Daaaaaaaaaah!” he screamed again, rolling away. Again, Orphen merely watched him in silence. After tumbling another few meters, the boy came to a stop with a fearful look on his face. Orphen’s boot had only missed the boy by a hair.

“Y—You were serious just now, weren’t you, Master?!” The boy shrieked, panicked, his eyes bloodshot.

Orphen’s response was casual. “What do you mean, serious? I told you I was gonna stomp on you, Majic.”

“That’s not what I meant!” The boy, Majic, rolled around, looking rather worse for wear. His still-undeveloped body was covered in wounds. Majic pointed at Orphen and shouted, almost crying, “Hold back a little, why don’t you?! Those boots have got steel in them, don’t they?! It’s not gonna be pretty if you stomp on me with them!”

“Well yeah, that’s kinda why it’s there. They were custom-made, you know? Cost a pretty penny.”

“Don’t say that so casually! I know I asked for combat training, but what are you gonna do if I die during my lessons?!”

“Probably nothing,” Orphen told him casually. Even more casually than he already was.

For a second, Majic didn’t seem to understand what he’d just said, and his mouth was moving to make his next complaint, but when the words sank in, his shout turned into a pathetic groan instead. Orphen looked down at him for long enough that Majic was able to catch his breath before the boy exclaimed

hysterically, "...Huh?!"

"I said I probably wouldn't do anything," Orphen repeated with no change in tone. He folded his arms, looked up at the sky, and thought to himself, *Did I say something strange?* then answered himself. "Yeah. I wouldn't do anything. There aren't too many people who have come back from the dead, as far as I know."

".....Umm....." Majic narrowed his eyes, letting a lengthy silence accompany his utterance. And he finally said, less like he'd thought of something and more like he was squeezing it out of himself, "You wouldn't make, like, a grave for me?"

"Oh! That's an idea, isn't it?" Orphen smiled in realization. "And I can make sure I put a dead dog's body or something on top of yours so I don't get in trouble with the authorities."

"I don't think that really counts as a grave..."

"Oh, don't sweat the small stuff. Whatever. If you can talk that much, you can stand up again, right? How long are you gonna stay on the ground?"

"Right..." Majic stood slowly, reluctantly.

Seeing him take an awkward stance, Orphen asked him quietly, "Majic."

"Yes?" Majic returned his gaze nervously. Twice now, he'd gotten the boy's attention by speaking and then launched a surprise attack at him.

"Why'd you suddenly want combat training?"

"Huh?" Majic's voice was surprised, the question unexpected. "Well, 'cause... you know, lately... whenever we get into trouble, I'm always the one who's completely useless..."

"Hmm." Orphen got into a stance himself after that half-hearted response. It wasn't anything showy. His "stance" was merely turning the side of his body toward his opponent.

This time, Majic was the one to suddenly rush forward. He wasn't very fast, though of course he wasn't *slow*. His individual movements weren't sluggish, but he didn't have a good grip on his footing and that was tripping him up in

ways that he himself wasn't aware of.

Orphen held his breath, watching him. As he got closer, Majic took shorter and shorter steps. *The pressure's getting to him, huh? Not that I blame him...* Orphen thought to himself, and took action.

He took a step forward, and in the next instant, his shoulder was against Majic's chest.

With a clueless "Huh?" Majic was once again sent flying. After rolling a considerable distance again, Majic groaned unsteadily. "Auuugh..."

Orphen looked down at Majic once again. "Come on, you can't get completely knocked out every time you fall down. Get up already."

"Maybe I'm just not cut out for this..." Majic muttered, sitting up. From how he was rubbing his head, he might have hit it when he fell—which meant he hadn't controlled his fall at all.

Orphen crossed his arms and thought about that, then responded, "I don't think that's true."

"R-Really?" Majic sent him a dubious look. He patted the dust off of his clothes and asked a follow-up question. "But, doesn't it kind of seem like I'm not improving at all?"

"Well, yeah. You've pretty much just been rolling around on the ground for the last two hours."

The words were said so nonchalantly that Majic seemed not to comprehend them for a moment. He stood, looking unbothered, until his expression suddenly changed. "What?" he said, screwing up his face in confusion.

Orphen spoke at almost the same time. "So, since you haven't learned anything meaningful yet, there's no need to feel bad about your lack of improvement."

"Th-This isn't meaningful?!"

Orphen looked around, ignoring Majic's consternation. They were standing in an empty lot behind a small shed. All around them was a field of black soil that had probably belonged to a farm once. To the north was another plot of land

with a different color—a dried-out gold.

That was where forbidden territory for sorcerers began, the Gate Lock region which was home to the Church's Holy City of Kimluck.

Orphen finally returned his gaze to Majic. The blond boy was giving him an accusatory glare. Orphen took a moment to recall what the topic of conversation had been before shaking his head. "Nope."

"That's terrible!" Majic shouted, stomping his feet. "If you're joking, it's not funny! You're doing things to me that might kill me and you say it doesn't even mean anything?!"

"Listen, Majic." Orphen huffed. "I'm gonna spell this out for you, since it doesn't seem like you're gonna figure it out on your own." He didn't really want to do this, but he began to speak, nonetheless. He looked over at his pupil as he did, who was giving him a rather miffed look in return. It wasn't as if he wasn't focusing on their conversation, but Majic blurred in his vision as he pointed his eyes behind the boy at the landscape far in the distance. Gazing at the far north region, he continued, "This is combat training."

"Yes." Majic nodded with pursed lips, still looking rather peeved.

Orphen ran a hand through his hair and went on, "So, what I want to know, Majic, is what do you think this training is for?"

"Well, for fighting. Obviously."

"Mhm," Orphen easily agreed and looked up at the sky, choosing his next words carefully. He knew what he had to tell the boy, but explaining it would be pretty difficult. "What I've been wondering for a while now is, what exactly do you think you're going to be fighting?"



Majic furrowed his brow, confused. “What do you mean...? We’re going to the Church’s Holy City now, right? Won’t it be full of enemies?”

“It’s not like I’m planning on bringing you guys with me.” In the end, Orphen just stated the facts.

“Hwha?” came Majic’s disheartened response. His mouth hung open. “A... Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. I’m only going to Kimluck for personal business in the first place. I can’t bring you guys to a dangerous place like that.”

“Is this about... this ‘Azalie’ person?”

Orphen frowned at the unexpected question. “How do you know that name?”

“You showed me a photo album once. And back at the Tower, Forte gave me two crests, one for you and one for her, remember? I sort of assumed there was something between you from that...” Majic answered hesitantly. He looked guilty, as if he had heard something he shouldn’t have.

As he listened, Orphen silently took the dragon crest out of his pocket. This one wasn’t his. On the back of the dragon, its wings unfurled, was engraved the name of his sister. “Well, you’re right about that, I guess. I could’ve left you guys with Tish, but then you came back from the tower and all this stuff happened, and before long, we were just leaving, I guess.”

“But—” Majic interrupted, determined. “But still, when the time comes, I don’t just want to be useless.”

“You know, combat training...” Orphen got back to the subject at hand, putting the crest back in his pocket. “...is training for combat.”

“Well, obviously.”

“Right. So, here’s another obvious thing: When people are hit, they hit back.”

“...Uh huh.” Majic started to lower his tone, Orphen’s point starting to dawn on him.

Orphen continued in a matter-of-fact manner, putting a finger to his chin. “Say you fire a spell at someone in an attack—well, they’re not just going to

take it lying down. Sorcery is a powerful weapon. It's unquestionably the strongest method of attack an unarmed person has."

He spread his arms. "You attack with that and your enemy is going to come at you with everything he's got, to kill you. Right? I mean, how else do you neutralize a sorcerer? Tie us up and as long as we can still use our voices, we can use any magic we want. To neutralize a sorcerer, you have to either kill them, or wound them enough that they can't even make a sound anymore. And when someone's that hurt, they tend to die pretty soon after anyway."

Looking the silent Majic in the eye, he brought his hands back together softly. "And once you die, that's it. You don't get a second chance. So what do you think the difference between dying in training and dying in the real thing is?"

"That's—"

Orphen cut off whatever argument Majic was about to make with a look. "You think there's a difference, right? That's what I thought at first, too. At least until one time, when I was about your age, and I got beaten half to death. Don't assume there's a world after death. It'd be nice to think there was, but if there isn't, you're out of luck. How much difference do you think there really is in losing your life trying to take down a bandit who's holed up with a hostage and falling down some stairs and breaking your skull? Either way, somebody who's almost dying during training like this isn't gonna make it through any kind of real battle. I can guarantee you that."

He approached his pupil, who was standing stock-still, after his speech. Once he was close enough to reach him, Orphen grabbed Majic by the shirt. He got his face closer and looked into his eyes. "At the very least, teaching somebody with such weak resolve a few cheap tricks and knocking him around for a few months? Who knows if any of it'd even sink in. Listen up. Since this seems to be a sticking point in particular with you, I'm gonna be clear about it."

He lifted his voice there. "What foolishness is—it's many things, of course—but basically, it's doing something that you can't take back. An idiot is someone who starts walking without knowing the way back. Can you jump off a cliff without being able to fly? Can you kill someone even though there's no way to bring them back? Do you even know the answer? I do. You're not capable of

that, not the way you are now. If you don't know how frightening that is, then turn around right now. It's not too late. Go back to the Tower of Fangs or wherever you want to. I've got one more thing to say to you, and I want you to make sure you hear this, okay?"

Still holding him by the shirt, Orphen jabbed a finger between Majic's eyes and shouted, "Don't take this lightly! I want you to think about it all night without sleeping. Your training is over for today."

Foolishness. That's exactly what a sorcerer trying to infiltrate the Holy City of Kimluck would be. Orphen was depressingly aware of that fact. He made sure that it wasn't showing on his face, not that anyone was watching him, and thought to himself, *I'm really not one to talk.*

He walked off through the field at a quick pace, not sparing a glance at Majic, who merely stood there in silence. He assumed the land had been used for farming due to the precisely divided lots of dirt, though with no one to till them, patches of dirt was all they were now.

After a short walk, he came to a shed that looked fairly unused. He circled around it and saw the farmhouse. This too hardly looked lived-in and was rather shabbily constructed. It wasn't quite dilapidated, but he would have assumed it was completely abandoned if not for the windows being intact and the dirty curtains being half-open. He headed for the door, walking over the not-quite-dry though not-damp earth, when—

"Orphen!"

He stopped when he heard his name coming from the direction of the shed. With the pitter-patter of her feet, a girl with long blonde hair whirling in the wind ran out to meet him.

"Claiomh, eh?"

"Yep." It wasn't really a question that needed answering, but she answered it anyway. The girl had a delicate frame—really she was just small. She had a black puppy on her head, just like usual, and was wearing a skirt (this was not like usual).

She gave a quick glance in the direction of the shed (the direction Majic was,

in other words), and then turned back and sent an accusatory glare at Orphen. “You’re just terrible. ...At least, I think so. You went a little far at least, don’t you think?”

“Why am I terrible?” Orphen asked, miffed, and Claiomh frowned in thought.

“Well...” She took a moment, then concluded, “It’s rare for you to be that strict with Majic, isn’t it?” She nodded in agreement with herself after this statement. She looked strangely out of place in this neglected farmland.

Orphen sighed deeply and then groaned. “I’m not being ‘strict.’ In fact, I should be doing more, before it’s too late,” he added, fed up. “Who do you think it was who half-killed me when I was fourteen, anyway? When my master taught me that lesson, he did a lot more than just knock me down a couple times. I couldn’t even say anything to him because my mouth wouldn’t open. He’d broken my jaw. Though maybe *he* actually felt like he’d gone too far with me. I think he brought me bananas and melons when he visited me after.” Of course, he had no way of eating them, so they were all eaten by his sister, who was taking care of him.

Suddenly realizing something, Orphen glared at the girl. “...More importantly, you were eavesdropping on that whole thing?”

“Mhm. Always do.”

“Uh huh...” *Well, whatever,* Orphen thought as he gave her little blonde head—and the puppy on top of it—a pat and walked past them. It was tiring talking to this girl and he wasn’t particularly in the mood to be tired right now.

From behind, she said to him, “Oh yeah, more importantly, Orphen.”

“What?” He looked over his shoulder at her and Claiomh gave one look back at Majic again before continuing:

“The old man wanted to talk to you.”



An amateur might think this: “A sword is a piercing tool.” Of course, they might be right. If they’re in a position where their enemy’s wearing armor that covers their whole body and carrying a shield that weighs twenty kilos, that is.

But heavily armored infantry tactics had gone out of fashion some 200 years ago on the continent. In fact, large-scale battle itself had become rather rare of late.

This was just common sense. There was no particular reason to think about it... but she found herself absentmindedly considering such things as she performed some maintenance on her trusty blade.

The blade was eighty centimeters, the grip, thirty. She'd had it custom-made with that somewhat odd ratio. It was a single-edged, curved blade, thin, and specialized for cutting through flesh and blood vessels. That gave it a rather troublesome flaw, of course. If it dulled at all, it instantly became much less effective. In a one-on-one battle, though, the sword was an extremely practical weapon.

She—Mädchen—stared down at the blade's cold luster and ran a piece of cotton covered in powder across it.

Just then...

"...It's a nice breeze. You still can't even enjoy the breeze in the Holy City, can you?"

She raised her head at the sudden question. She was a young woman, twenty-five or so. Her build was not particularly impressive, nor bad, for a swordsman, that is. Her hair was brown, not enough done with it to really say she had a particular "hairstyle." Of course, it wasn't like she didn't take care of it at all. If there was an aspect of her that seemed deliberately not maintained, it was the focus of her eyes. She was wide-awake, but there was something sleepy, dangerous, about the gaze she turned to the source of the voice.

She was in a room. The screams and shouts and lousy lectures she could hear through the open window had just ended. That sorcerer had been training his pupil or something, but she hadn't been paying much attention. On an armchair near that window, a small man sat. It was just him and her in the room.

The room had a small table with a tea set on it, an unused coal stove, and some tidy little pictures on the walls, but it wasn't a room to be lived in. It was just a space where they could meet. If a person lived here, they wouldn't come to this room if they didn't have business here. It was that sort of room.

It was on the second floor. Tree branches from the backyard filled about half of the window frame.

Looking at the man over the blade of her sword, Mädchen responded, “What do you mean, ‘still’? It’ll be that way forever, won’t it?” She smiled wryly. “And we’re inside. You can’t feel the breeze in here anyway.”

“It’s a figure of speech. Don’t take it literally, Mädchen Amick.” The man chuckled, his back sliding against the chair he was snugly seated in. He was... *Forty-something? I don’t think he’s fifty yet...* He was in his sixties, but Mädchen didn’t know that. And she didn’t care either, naturally.

Mädchen frowned a little, giving an impression that she was searching for a response. Only an impression, of course. “I love the Holy City... really.”

“I’m sure you do,” the man said quietly, almost to himself, and nodded, again to himself.

Mädchen watched him, nodding herself. “Are you concerned about the Holy City, Master?”

“I am not your master.”

Mädchan slowly lowered the sword from her view at his response. She looked back at him and started, “Quo—”

“You will obey Quo. Carl, Name, and you all learned the basics from him. That much is certainly true. And...” The man’s mustache and the white hairs mixed into it twisted into a self-deriding smirk. “Quo Vadis Pater is in the Holy City, and I, Oleyl Salidon, am here. In this little hut. This, too, is true.” The man—Oleyl—hardly moved besides that smirk, completely relaxed against his chair, though Mädchen also noticed that one of his bony hands had clenched into a fist at some point.

“Then it’s also true that you trained Salua,” she said quietly, continuing to pretend that she wasn’t watching him.

“That was just him drawing the short end of the stick, in many ways.” Oleyl’s lengthy sigh cut across the room, reaching all the way to Mädchen.

She gripped the hilt of her sword without disagreeing with him. “Salua thinks

Quo is dangerous.”

“Then don’t disobey him.”

“But we can’t just leave him be!” Mädchen raised her voice for the first time —then quickly came to her senses. She hurriedly covered her mouth with her free hand. “...I apologize, Oleyl.”

“Don’t worry about it. But don’t misunderstand either.” Oleyl continued to speak softly. His small frame was completely relaxed. His body probably barely weighed fifty kilos. He went on, stroking his chin, “Quo Vadis is dangerous, but it’s not the type of danger that would suddenly explode while you’re not looking, right?”

“But...”

“You intend to have that sorcerer kill him?”

This time Mädchen couldn’t stop herself from freezing in shock. She could feel one of her eyes twitching.



She stood her sword up against the wall and answered him once her hands were empty. “That is... one idea, yes.”

“Oh?” Oleyl was more interested in the subtext of her words than the fact that she’d admitted it so readily. He sat up slightly in the aged chair and focused his eyes once more on her. “So... you have other plans, Mädchen?”

“...A few,” she said, barely above a whisper.

Oleyl didn’t press her to continue... but he didn’t stop her either, “*Go on*,” in other words.

Swallowing the saliva gathering under her tongue, Mädchen continued, “Firstly... using him—Krylancelo—alone to assassinate Quo won’t be enough. Quo Vadis Pater fought off Master Childman ten years ago. With you, Oleyl.”

“Yes.” The word sounded slightly bitter when it came from him, but Mädchen didn’t pay that too much attention.

She continued, focused on her plans. “And right now, Quo has Name Only and Carlotta Mausen with him. The other two are basically the strongest among us Death Instructors, not to mention Quo. Even if I can meet up with Salua in the Holy City, I’m frankly not confident in our chances no matter how we use Krylancelo.”

“I would say that’s an apt analysis.” Oleyl put his hand to his nose as if to stifle the ironic smile coming to his lips. “Add the two thousand priests in the Holy City of Kimluck and the 170,000 faithful in the city to Quo’s defenses and they’re pretty much perfect. I’m sure you’ve accounted for that, though.”

“Please don’t be sarcastic. I’m aware that there’s a fundamental difference in our starting positions. That’s why—” Just when Mädchen was starting to get more enthusiastic, there was a knock on the door. She swallowed her words and turned toward it. When she looked back at Oleyl, she found he hadn’t moved an inch. He knew who it was.

“Who is it?” he said, feigning ignorance.

The voice that came back through the door, dried varnish peeling off of it in places, was a young man’s, tinged with a healthy amount of cynicism.

“What do you mean, ‘who is it’? I heard *you* wanted to talk to *me*.”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s unlocked.”

The door opened, revealing, of course, the sorcerer in black. The aforementioned cynicism was very much present in his expression, along with a slight nervous tension. This was not sorcerer territory. He was right to be wary. His name was Krylancelo—though he went by Orphen now.

Mädchen was staring at him when Oleyl suddenly spoke up.

“‘That’s why’ what?”

“Huh?” she bleated.

Oleyl slowly repeated himself. “What were you going to say after ‘that’s why,’ Mädchen?”

“W-Well...” She shot a look at the black sorcerer, then cleared her throat noisily. Oleyl was relaxing deep into his chair again. After the black sorcerer entered the room and shut the door, she finally continued. “No matter what moves we make, we won’t be able to win playing fairly. That’s why...” She paused once more. “That’s why we’ll flip the entire board over. It’s our only option.”



Soon after he entered the room, Mädchen left it, giving him a silent nod without meeting his eyes. She seemed to have forgotten her sword, though. It was cast aside next to the seat she’d been sitting in, along with the tools she’d been using to do her maintenance on it.

Orphen didn’t notice that until she’d already closed the door behind her. He turned around, but it was too late to say anything. He could hear her thundering down the hallway.

“...What’s she in such a hurry for?” Orphen muttered, slightly annoyed for whatever reason, and picked up the sword. The shape of her hand had been gradually worn into the metal hilt, making it a very strange fit in his.

Studying the reflection of light in the blade, he murmured, “The quality isn’t bad, but it’s just a normal sword, huh?”

“And what do you know of swords?” The teasing question naturally came from the small old man sitting in the chair in the back of the room. This man, Oleyl, had taken Orphen in for these last few days.

Orphen picked up the sheath from beside where the sword was sitting and slid the blade inside it. “It’s like when you see a pair of scissors and you can tell whether they’ll cut or not. I know that much, at least. With tools, you have the same sense for all of them. You’re not, like, one of those people who thinks a sword has a soul in it, are you, gramps?”

“I’ve broken dozens of swords in my time,” the man responded with a chuckle, looking amused. “Yet I live. Still...” He rubbed his hands together. “I can’t say my survival means I haven’t been broken, too. But no... I have no particular attachment to the tools I wield.”

Orphen put the sword back where it was while he listened. He put a hand on his hip and slowly turned back to the old man. “So... I heard you wanted to see me.”

“I have a very simple question.” Oleyl looked straight at him as he spoke. “You’re going to the Holy City of Kimluck, yes?”

“No can do,” Orphen said, his gaze just as direct. Glancing at the door Mädchen had just left through, he corrected himself. “I know I need your help to get in and I’m taking quite an attitude with you, that being the case... but I’ve got my own objectives and I don’t intend to change them.”

“Even if Mädchen has ulterior motives...?”

“I’m well aware. I’m not naive enough to think a Kimluck Death Instructor’s going to help me out without any strings attached.”

“I think it’s plenty naive to know the person you’re dealing with has ulterior motives and go along with them anyway.”

Orphen thought about agreeing with Oleyl’s muttering, but decided to keep his mouth shut. He shrugged, turning his head away from the old man. “I’m ready. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“That’s rather sudden.” He’d intended to take the old man by surprise, but Oleyl didn’t seem at all perturbed by this information. There was even a hint of

a smile on his lips.

Orphen inwardly clucked in irritation and continued, "I've waited too long already. It's not like I've got any preparations left to do here. If I'd headed out sooner, I wouldn't have to deal with your threats and your ulterior motives."

"Staying here for a few days may just have extended your lifespan by as much time."

Ignoring Oleyl's mocking tone, Orphen took a few long strides over to the window. He looked outside and saw Majic in the same location Orphen had left him in, in the same pose he'd been in when his teacher left. He could see Claiomh meandering about a short distance away, too. Maybe she was trying to work herself up to cheering the boy up, but was finding it hard to approach him since he wasn't moving.

Orphen looked down at the unmoving boy. There were signs on the ground all around him from where he'd been rolling around. They'd probably be around for a while yet, until the wind gradually wore them away.

"You heard what I said to him, right?" Orphen murmured listlessly. He'd been so quiet, he wasn't sure Oleyl had heard him, but he didn't want to say it again.

He did get a reply from Oleyl, however. "I did."

"No matter how you die or what you die for, it's the same thing. Doesn't matter when it happens either. There's no meaning in postponing death a few days. Once you die, it's all over. Doesn't make much difference if you died years ago or if you live fifty years more to old age and then die." Orphen went on indifferently until Oleyl cut in, sounding rather exasperated.

"A nihilist at your young age?"

"No. If it's all the same no matter when you die, it means you've got to resist death at all times. So I'm not going to die, no matter what it takes. Even now, I'm terrified of dying. I know it's insane to be going to Kimluck." Orphen shot a look at Oleyl over his shoulder and clenched his fist. His small fist trembled. "Once he catches on to this fear, I think it'll be fine to start teaching him to fight."

He looked back out the window and found Claiomh making her way over to

Majic, having made up her mind to talk to him.



“We betrayed you?!” She was clearly at a loss for words. At a loss for words, yet shouting. But what she shouted was less words, and more just screams that resembled words to him. He knew there was no way she was composed enough to speak.

“Betrayed you... we did? You say that we betrayed you?” she groaned, slender fingers at her chest as if her heart would leap from it at any moment.

Her expression just happened to be reflected in the blade the man was holding. The man was suddenly possessed by the strange sensation that he could seal her away in the short sword he held. Of course, that was far from reality. If it were possible, he’d have done it long ago.

Flipping the blade around, he set his sights on the real her again. The portrait. And her reflection in the blade. Was he trying to distance himself by seeing only an image of her? Another thought that came unbidden to him. Without coming to any sort of conclusion, he spoke. “If you say you did not, then why did you hide it?”

“You know the answer to that!” Isterviva sent a look crazed with rage at him, shouting in a frenzied voice. “The ‘sanctuary’... The founders wanted to eradicate you! We fought to protect you—”

“I’m aware of that. Please don’t change the subject.” The man sadly shook his head. “What I want to know is why you hid it.”

“Just as you loved us, we loved you. That is why we could not tell you. Is that not answer enough?”

“That love is now forfeit, is it not?”

“Those words are much too tragic.”

“Which is why I would prefer speaking of this in a different way.”

Isterviva was silent for a long while—five minutes, perhaps. The two were trapped inside a silence neither of them could break, but the cage was of their own making.

As the silence continued, their hearts seemed to beat louder, all the noises raging inside them building to a fever pitch. *It's like singing inside a storm*, the man thought to himself. *No one can hear the song, not even you. Yet still, I sing! And I want to be heard!*

He could see Isterviva parting her dry lips...

Chapter II: “It’s Because...”

“Melon would be good right about now.”

The words came with the same absurd randomness as pulling a thermometer out of your mouth to discover it had praying mantis eggs stuck to the end of it. Normally—that is, if he weren’t used to sudden declarations like this—he might have stopped and blinked a few times in confusion. But Dortin continued walking along, not bothered in the least.

Getting a better grip on the shopping bags in both of his hands, he decided he may as well reply. “Oh yeah?” He threw in an additional comment to himself, under his breath. “So, you want to eat some melon. Either that or there’s a Mr. Melon who for some reason you would like to have around now?” Even as he said the words, he had no idea what they meant.

“Mhm.” His brother, who walked beside him, nodded with an utter lack of fanfare. “There was a famous legend about tomatoes growing to giant sizes and attacking humans as retribution for their suffering, right? It’s not impossible. But in this case, what I mean is, I want to eat melon.”

“Thanks. I get it now. But why?” Dortin asked without saying more than necessary.

The brothers stood at 130 centimeters in height—they were dwarves, members of a not very populous race of people who lived in the south of the continent. They walked along at a casual pace, wearing fur cloaks which were traditional among their people.

All the while bothered by the bags he was carrying shifting his glasses away from his eyes, Dortin waited for his brother to answer his question.

Volkan answered easily. Incidentally, his hands were empty, though he did have a sword at his waist. “It’s just a whim, really.”

“And how many times have I ended up crying thanks to those whims of yours?” Dortin muttered, quiet enough that his brother couldn’t hear, and sighed.

The two of them were walking down a street, and a pretty big one, too. This town didn't have stores, so all shopping was done at street stalls. Instead of one store in a fixed location, these stalls could be found on just about any street. They were very well-stocked, too. It was almost enough to make him forget that just outside of the town there were sandstorms raging for half the day every day.

In any case, the streets were jam-packed with these stalls and the pedestrians between them, and the two dwarves were walking through them, pushing their way through people at their waist level. In addition to the crowds, all the humans here wore white cloths around their heads to protect against the sand, which just made everyone seem bulkier.

Through all this, Volkan continued to mutter as he walked. "Melon, melon, melon."

"We can't buy any. We're already getting close to the time we were given."

"*That's* what the problem is," Volkan suddenly muttered.

Dortin had a bad feeling about that, but he tried not to let it show on his face and asked, "Problem?"

"Mhm." Volkan nodded emphatically and stopped.

Having no choice, Dortin came to a stop as well. Now the two of them were frozen in place among the moving throng.

"Basically..." Volkan closed his eyes and declared with much gusto, "Why do I have to be ordered around by that woman and sent out on a shopping trip?!"

"Well, you got money from her, didn't you?"

"That is true! It is! However!" He swung his fist around—attracting annoyed glares from the passersby around them—and declared even louder, "I am not a money-grubber, so even if I'm paid for it, I will not run errands!"

"I'm not sure that that logic exactly follows..."

"It follows all over the place!" Volkan shouting, finally striking a grand pose of all things. "Now that it's come to this! Our best bet is to hang that woman in black from her suspenders and wring more of a reward out of her!"

“That would be mugging.” Dorton walked off with a sigh, leaving his brother behind, all the while lamenting the fact that there was no one he could talk to without having to sigh. “Besides, you really think you’d be able to beat her?” *She’s a sorcerer*, he was about to continue, before rethinking his words. “...She’s clearly not normal.”



The Chaos Witch. Calamity. Death. Evil. Her name was synonymous with disaster. Though she’d never let that bother her.

These were things anyone and everyone had called her. That might be why she’d even sometimes thought they were true.

She lay stretched out straight atop the bed, calling her own name. She called her own name and went inside herself. Confined inside her body, she found yet another small self. She entered again, and again found another self. At some point, she was divided into countless selves, and the world faded far away...

It was said that the human race on the continent of Kiesalhima gaining the power of sorcery was nothing but a trick of fate. When humans drifted to this continent 300 years ago, they met the dragon races who possessed incredible magic power, and their blood intermingled with that of one of these dragon races, the Celestials, also known as the Weird Dragons, or Nornir. The descendants of these humans and dragons are the people who are currently called sorcerers on the continent.

Azalie had her eyes closed. She had always been distant from the world—even before diving deep into herself, she had no way of seeing a glimpse of the outside world.

After venturing deep inside herself, she quietly reached out, stretching into the same position that her sleeping body on the bed occupied. She began forming some sorcery, working the magic out into an incredibly complex composition. It wasn’t unlike endlessly weaving silk. Forming the magic, at least, was something she could do inside her head, but activating the spell would take external action. Sorcery required magic power. And releasing a spell required an incantation.

She finished her composition. And she shouted, *Leap*— but it wasn’t with her

voice. It was only her will that was shouting.

In an instant, the her inside switched with her body on the outside. *The light...!* She squinted her eyes at the bright light and prepared for the impact she was about to feel, but neither the light nor the impact were real physical sensations. Inside the explosion of her consciousness, she leapt outside of her body...

The magic that humans could use in Kiesalhima was sometimes called Vocal Sorcery. That was because it required the voice, an incantation, as a medium for a spell. A sorcerer forms magic in their imagination and uses their voice to realize that magic. That was fundamentally how sorcery worked. Composing the magic was different for every sorcerer. Some could instantly form powerful spells, while others couldn't. These individual differences gave way to a more fundamental disparity between sorcerers as well. That would be Black Sorcery and White Sorcery.

While Black Sorcery manipulated force and substance, White Sorcery was the manipulation of time and the mind. White Sorcery was overwhelmingly powerful, on an entirely different level than Black. It was so powerful, even, that it didn't necessarily require the vocal component that Black Sorcery did. There were fewer White Sorcerers than Black, and even fewer of those sorcerers who could fully utilize the magic.

She—Azalie, who was called the Chaos Witch—was an even rarer breed with talent in both Black and White Sorcery. She was flying through the world, all the while feeling as though the sound of the wind might burst her eardrums. She climbed higher and higher on a path straight up.

How fast was she going... not even she knew. But just as she wished, she could climb as high as she wanted. She pierced the canopy of dust that hung above the earth and kept climbing. It wasn't her body that was flying, of course. It was her mind. Thus, she didn't have to worry about people seeing her.

The sky was a world of gusting winds. It wasn't as if the wind presented any sort of barrier to her, but she suddenly stopped her ascent nonetheless, glancing down instead. She was high enough up that the place she was supposed to be—the hideout where her body was sleeping, that is—was buried

among the many buildings in the miniature view she now had of the town and she couldn't tell where it was. She had a giant map of the town laid out underneath her, and she muttered to herself, *This is...*

It was her destination. She looked down at the town. It was surrounded by arid, yellow earth. Harsh winds blew dust up into the air and then sent it right back down to the ground. With a view of the whole thing, it was easy to see that the town was divided into two strata. "Inner" and "outer."

The inner section was surrounded by tall walls, and the outer was whatever was outside of those walls stretching out to the edge of town. Some people described the shape of it as "like a fried egg." A fried egg 100 kilometers in diameter.

Needless to say, the "inner" section was affluent, the "outer," poor. In the center of the town was a gigantic cathedral surrounded by both gaudy streets and walls to protect them. Everything past those walls was an endless sprawl of slums.

This was the northernmost reaches of the continent—go ten kilometers north of the city and you'd hit the cliffs that jut out over the ocean—and the town was the Holy City called Kimluck.

And right there... is... She focused on the center of the city. It was a giant building that resembled a monument, and it easily took up several blocks' worth of space. This was the dead center of the Church, beyond the Walls of Learning. Yggdrasil Cathedral, where the Weird Sisters, the three goddesses of fate that the Kimluck Church worshiped, were said to reside.

All members of the Kimluck Church throughout the continent were under the jurisdiction of this Holy City. All the Church's teachings began here. It was the birthplace of the Church, as decreed by Pope Ramonirok. The promised land... the Holy Land! And its center was without a doubt Yggdrasil Cathedral.

But... I should be able to... She steeled herself and this time descended with all her might. The ground approached, much too slowly. If not for the roar of the wind around her, she wouldn't have believed she was falling at a much higher speed than gravity dictated.

Her lips tightened into a thin line as she continued her descent. Kimluck

expanded in her view more and more as she fell until she couldn't see outside the city even if she turned her head. Not that she was doing much looking around. She was focused on just one point in the city. Her one goal. Yggdrasil Cathedral.

She hurtled toward the cathedral. Her speed was higher than it had been at any point previously now, but she had no fear. She was used to this. She'd done this several times since coming to this town, but just as many times, she'd failed.

The cathedral was right before her eyes now. It was enormous and white. Almost like a headstone. But it was bigger than a castle.

What are you mourning, to build a headstone this big? The nonsensical thought went through her head before she could stop it. *Come to think of it, I wonder if my grave is still out there in the cemetery behind the Tower of Fangs.* It was an empty grave, of course. Just a headstone with her name carved into it.

That was when she crashed into the wall of the cathedral and was smashed to pieces.

Azalie lurched up with a scream, the frame of her old bed creaking. She groaned as her heart hammered in her chest, wrapping trembling arms around her knees. She couldn't quite move how she wanted to due to the fear she felt—or maybe it was just an overpowering chill.

Her whole body was drenched in sweat. Not just damp, *wet*. That was probably the reason for the chill. The center of her body, her organs, really, were painfully feverish. She was panting, out of breath. She squeezed her eyes shut, assailed by some overwhelming terror. She quickly remembered the crash, the impact as her senses were smashed and shattered, and shivered.



Slowly... she opened her eyes. As she did, the tension in her slowly faded. When she could let go of her knees, she was also able to take a deep breath for the first time. Moving the black hair sticking to her face with sweat out of the way, she shifted positions and put her feet down on the floor.

She looked around wordlessly. She was, of course, still in the same room as before. She'd never left it, after all. But as her breath caught with yet another twinge of fear, she shook her head.

"I'm this close and I still can't get my spirit form inside... what the heck kind of defenses do they have?" Grumbling bitterly to herself, she pushed her toes lazily into her shoes and stood up.

The room was small. It was something she was just renting as a place to hide herself. There was no furniture inside it other than the bed. Food packages and other garbage were scattered across the bare floor. The things she'd brought with her were left lying in a corner.

She was still a little dizzy after standing, so she waited for her consciousness to fully stabilize. All the while muttering to herself. "I couldn't use the Celestial teleportation device to get inside either... which means the cathedral has defenses that rival Nornir magic. But the Kimluck Church denies the Dragon Faith, so there's no way..."

She was wearing a plain shirt and slacks. She'd had to abandon her usual black outfit when she entered this town. It stood out too much, and standing out here only meant she'd meet a terrible fate.

"But my mental division is just separating my senses from my body, so maybe it wasn't even worth trying. I might be able to do it if I discard my body completely, but... can't say I'd like to try that." She tried to convince herself.

She looked up, out the window. The room was on the third floor. All she could see was the wall of the apartment building next door.

A bead of sweat dripped from her forehead down her nose and into her mouth. She bit her lip, tasting the salt on it, and murmured, "Guess I'll just have to sneak in on my own two feet..."



Orphen's head shot up as he swayed to and fro on the cart. He thought a farmer passing them by had given him a look...

"...There's no need to be so high-strung," Mädchen remarked from the driver's seat of the small wagon.

Orphen turned to her to find her fiddling with the reins, not even looking at him.

"Long as you don't do anything stupid, you'll be fine."

"How the hell am I supposed to stay calm?" Orphen scowled, grumbling. "People who wouldn't think twice about burning me at the stake if they so much as saw me are living civilized lives here like it's completely normal."

"I didn't tell you to stay calm. I told you not to do anything stupid. Like being unnaturally twitchy and calling attention to yourself, for example." She finally looked over her shoulder at him. That blue cloth she was always wearing was wrapped around her head, and Orphen belatedly realized that it was there to protect against the dust. She'd removed her armor and sword at this point, of course. Though the sword was still nearby, hidden under the mountain of cargo (empty boxes) on the cart.

Orphen was sitting cross-legged on the cart bed. The roads outside town were not paved, needless to say, so the cart was clattering awfully as they traveled. He'd been changing positions fairly rapidly for a while now, since his butt couldn't take much more of this.

Orphen had stayed at Oleyl's house for a few days, and now the two of them had been traveling on this rickety cart for about a week—the horse was getting on in years, so it trudged along rather sluggishly—slowly but surely closing in on the Holy City of Kimluck. They were already inside the Church-controlled region of Gate Lock with its dusty, dry air.

"At this rate... we'll make it to Kimluck... tomorrow, I guess," Orphen muttered, looking up at the yellow-tinged sky. He pushed aside the white hood he was wearing to protect against the dust. It kept slipping down over his eyes.

He was also differently dressed, his leather jacket and other things hidden away in one of the boxes. He was in baggy hemp on top and bottom—and both

white. "...It just doesn't feel right wearing white like this."

"It'll stand out less than black. That's a formal color in Kimluck."

"Does it really look that bad on me? Claiomh burst out laughing..." Orphen grumbled, looking down at himself.

A moment later, a quiet question came from Mädchen. "...Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Orphen nodded, his chin in his hand, not looking at her.

Mädchen continued casually, "Why aren't you bringing those kids?"

The wind—the dust blowing about, rather—was so shrill, he almost couldn't hear her. He *could*, of course, but he held his tongue anyway.

While he sat there looking glum, Mädchen proposed her own answer to the question. "Can't trust me?" She smirked as she said the words. "You think I'm gonna sell you to the pope as soon as we get to Kimluck?"

Orphen had no choice but to sigh at that. *Ulterior motives, huh...?* Remembering Oleyl's words, he groaned, annoyed. "I wouldn't come with you myself if I didn't trust you."

"Guess that's true."

At her easy answer, Orphen added, "But as long as the possibility exists, I can't bring them with me into something dangerous, right?"

"If that's the case, what proof do you have that Oleyl's not gonna execute them? He's a faithful member of the Kimluck Church himself, you know?"

At that, Orphen looked up in thought, but he quickly gave up on it and looked back at her instead. After making sure the farmers they'd passed were far enough away from them, he asked her, "Who *is* that Oleyl guy, anyway?"

Though he was looking at her now, she'd long since turned her back to him. She answered without turning around. "He's something like my guardian. To Salua, he'd be his master." She lowered her voice and added, "...He's a Death Instructor, too."

That old man Oleyl was a Death Instructor... the same as Salua Solude, the

Death Instructor Orphen had met in Fenrir's Forest. Thinking back on him, Orphen asked, "Death Instructors... They're the Kimluck Church's assassin force. Just how many of you are there, anyway?"

"I don't think I'm under any obligation to tell you that. But it's six, including me." She let out a self-deprecating laugh, quiet enough that she had probably intended to hide it, but Orphen was listening closely.

"So if a sorcerer spy sneaks into Kimluck, just the six of us are supposed to stop them. Real reassuring, right?"

"But those aren't your only orders, right?"

"That they're not." She shrugged, holding the reins. "We're to eliminate heretical Instructors—that includes people that have incurred the displeasure of the pope. And we investigate ruins that are kept secret from the nobility, and sometimes infiltrate towns like Tefurem or the capital for investigations. Pretty much anything a regular Instructor couldn't do falls to us."

"Your role is kept secret from the public, right?" Orphen asked, curious.

She nodded easily. "Of course it is. Officially, we're nothing more than regular Instructors, the priests of the Kimluck Church. We've got licenses to preach, too."

The cart lurched with a *thunk*, and she fell silent for a time... she must have bit her tongue.

"Along with the licenses, we're put through combat training and such. And then when it's over, we receive our swords from the pope. That's all it is."

"Those glass swords, huh..." The weapons were representative of the Death Instructors. It was said there were only eight of them on the continent.

She snorted at that. "Yep. Those stupidly heavy, hard-to-use swords. The pope's got it easy, just telling us we can go up against sorcerers with those things." Before Orphen could respond, Mädchen went on on her own, "No matter how we're trained... we're only human. We can't win against you guys. Not against sorcerers."

"...Not very confident, are you? And you make us sound like we're *not*

human.”

“Don’t hold it against me. You don’t know what our doctrines actually are, do you?”

“Nope.”

She smiled at his admission. “Well, I don’t plan on explaining them. I’m sure we’re never going to agree either way.”

“Can’t say I’m all that interested anyway,” Orphen told her bluntly. He really was not particularly interested.

He looked up, spying clouds beyond the eddies of dust. The yellow tinge to the sky made it seem all that lower to the ground.

Maybe acting indifferent had actually backfired, as Mädchen went on, “...To be perfectly honest, I don’t want to go up against you right now.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing you’ve got your own plans. I’d figured that much out, at least. Escorting me to Kimluck just because I saved your life struck me as a bit much.”

“Too good a deal? Well, that could be.” She laughed a little forcefully over the sound of the clattering cart, then changed her tone as if they were just making small talk. “About those kids—your companions.”

“...Yeah?”

“You looked pretty threatening when you told them you were leaving them behind... Don’t you think they might just follow behind you anyway? What would you do if they did?”

“Even taking the shortest route to Kimluck from that old man’s house, it’d still take them over a week on foot,” Orphen replied, gazing lazily up at the sky. “We’ll get there in four days. Take the remaining three and I’ll have finished my business, and if I have to sneak around in that town for more than three days, I can’t imagine I’ll make it out anyway. I just have to scoop them up on my way back.”

“...What is your business, anyway?”

“Can’t tell you. I don’t want to go up against you just yet, after all. Not right

now.” He wasn’t being sardonic; it was how he really felt. Orphen forced himself to lie down on the uncomfortable cart bed. He took a deep breath... then had a coughing fit after inhaling some sand.

“Ack!—Pt!—Dammit, what is this sand?”

“Sand is sand. It’s always been here.”

He realized Mädchen wasn’t breathing in any sand no matter how much she opened her mouth and figured it must have been because she was a native of the region.

“Don’t you think it’s strange, though? The sand is clearly a different color than the dirt here, right? And the soil in Gate Lock isn’t arid at all—there’s no sign it’s becoming a desert. We’ve got plenty of water and trees. But this sand is always blowing about.”

“You sound like you’re asking a question you know the answer to,” Orphen pointed out, and she smiled again, going silent.

He went quiet as well, and when a significant amount of time had passed, he heard her whisper in a voice almost too quiet for him to pick up, “These sandstorms have been blowing in this region for 200 years...” Then she continued, even quieter, “This sand is dead. Sow anything in it and nothing will grow, and people who breathe it in for too long will get sick, too.”

“Yellow fever, right? It’s endemic to Kimluck.”

“Yeah. I had it three times when I was a kid. It’s pretty rare to survive it three times... I ended up not being able to get married, though. Maybe that was a good thing.”

“Maybe I should take some precautions, too,” Orphen ventured, less out of actual worry than a simple attempt to keep the conversation going. His actual attention was focused on the swirling dust in the air.

Mädchen also seemed rather casual in her tone, but the fact that she wasn’t—and that went for both of them—became apparent with her next words.

“What you should watch out for... is Quo,” she said simply.

Orphen, who’d heard those words clearly, was forced to remember then: he

was not in a place where he could afford to let his guard down. Any small mistake could easily lead to his death here.

“...Quo?”

“Quo Vadis Pater. Our leader.” There was clearly no adoration for the man in her voice. “If I described him as the man who fought off a Black Sorcerer who infiltrated Kimluck ten years ago, does that give you an idea of who I mean?”

He *did* have an idea when he heard that, a slight one, at least. Orphen sat up on his elbows and started, “Do you mean...”

“I do,” she affirmed quietly. “He fought your master, Childman Powderfield, and held his own. That was when Quo Vadis Pater became the leader of the Death Instructors.”

Orphen stared at her without responding. Beyond her, far in the distance of the path the cart was proceeding on, he could see the shape of a vast city, and the deep shadows it cast...

“What is it?” Mädchen said teasingly. “Getting scared?”

Once again he found himself unable to respond, just ruminating on the avalanche of thoughts in his head. He wasn’t sure at first what it was he was thinking, but when it suddenly became clear to him, he smirked at the ridiculousness of it. “I was just thinking something really stupid.”

“...Oh yeah?” Mädchen inquired, face blank.

Orphen looked up at her and took a deep breath. “Well, it makes sense. Even my master...”

“Even your master...?”

He smirked. “Even my master’s capable of making mistakes.”



Incidentally, at that moment, Claiomh and Majic were inside a cramped box, complaining about how dull the trip they were on was.



“It’s because...” Isterviva bitterly formed the words. “We didn’t have any

time... Our future... ran out.”

It was dead silent inside the fort, as if to make sure her words could be heard.

Inside that silence, his voice trembled quietly as well. “...That doesn’t mean you had to steal our future as well!”

“We didn’t!”

Chapter III: She Looked Up at Him “What’s the cargo?” A guard in a red uniform casually asked.

Mädchen shrugged atop the driver’s seat. “The spoils from our last campaign. I imagine you were contacted about this...”

“Yes. That’s true.” The young guard looked down at the clipboard in his hand, scratching a thick eyebrow as he did. The clipboard had a hefty stack of documents attached to it. “It’s just...”

As he hesitated to continue, Mädchen gave him a magnanimous smile. “Just...?”

“Well, the notice we got was from the Cathedral Instructor Group, so... if possible, I think it would be best to use the regular gate...”

“It’s too crowded over there,” Mädchen objected flatly, plucking the clipboard from the guard’s hand when he wasn’t paying attention.

“Ah, Instructor Mädchen!”

Ignoring his protests, she licked her finger and flipped through the pages. She licked her lips and then gave the stack of documents a pat. “Alright. I’ll tell the cathedral about it myself. Don’t worry, I won’t cause you any trouble.”

“But, umm...” The guard frowned.

Watching this exchange from the cart bed, Orphen felt a yawn coming on and hastily bit his lip.

The cart had arrived at the outskirts of the vast city of Kimluck. Which is to say, the slums. Just from the outlines of the roofs, it was easy to picture the countless makeshift huts that composed this area of the city. And they were packed so closely together, it was difficult to tell where one building ended to allow for a path between them. Orphen could neither see nor hear any people nearby, but the presence of them all hiding in their huts seemed to hang in the air.

Outside the slums, there was a carelessly constructed wooden fence, and this

was one of the few entrances inside it. Beside the slipshod gate was a guard station, also made rather sloppily of wood. It was more like a shed with a window in it, really. Orphen couldn't imagine there was more than one guard stationed here, meaning this man was it.

The fence around the town was hardly two meters tall, easily climbable if one should attempt it. ...Not that he particularly wanted to make the attempt. Those were the sorts of thoughts Orphen was having.

As far as he could tell, there was really nothing to see here. Just rows and rows of ugly huts. But the true Kimluck was beyond these huts. He couldn't yet see the Walls of Learning that surrounded the cathedral sector in the town's center, but the cathedral itself, with its towering spires, he could sort of make out through the dust clouds. Just then— "Oh?"

Orphen turned his attention back to Mädchen when she made a surprised sound. She was looking at the clipboard, an expression of mild shock on her face.

"What is it?"

At the guard's question, Mädchen opened the clip and pulled a sheet from the stack. "Instructor Salua's out of town?"

"Huh? Well... if there's a document that says so, then I suppose he must be."

"It says he's out for training..."

"Is that so? Hmm... Instructor Salua usually uses this gate, but I haven't seen him... He must have left while someone else was on duty."

"Huh..." Mädchen frowned thoughtfully.

But with no regard for her consternation, the guard asked her accusingly, "Anyway, will you give me my papers back, please? I can't do my duties like this."

"Oh, you hardly ever have anything to do anyway, right?" Mädchen joked, handing back the papers. With a wink, she added, "Well, I wouldn't want to prevent you from doing your duties, so if you could just let me through...?"

"Very well. I'll contact you when I've confirmed about Instructor Salua..."

That's when he finally seemed to notice the man staring down at him from the bed of the cart. "...Who is that, by the way?" he asked, indicating Orphen.

Mädchen had a quick answer ready. "The owner of this cart. I had to commandeer it from him."

"Is that so?"

...*The logic of a swindler.* Orphen put on a wry smile on the inside as he listened. If you want to tell a lie that sounds true, there's no need to say something close to the truth. You just have to say something that could be possible. Either that or something so absurd that the person hearing would be completely blindsided. Even if you try to come up with a completely flawless story, it'll just make the liar exhausted, and the more perfect you try to make it, the more easily its flaws can be seen.

Missionaries from Kimluck don't have the authority to commandeer anything, and it's doubtful they'd ever need to anyway, but a guard who lives in the city probably had no idea what a missionary's work actually entailed. In other words, he'd just think, *I guess that must happen*. Put another way, she was using a sort of reverse psychology by making him think there was no way she'd tell an obvious lie.

"But you won't be able to get the cart in through the Walls."

"I know. I'm gonna unload the cargo right outside the Walls, then when that's done, he'll come back out with his cart." She indicated Orphen.

The guard looked puzzled for a moment, then all too quickly gave her a nod. "Ah, I see."

Mädchen smiled cheerfully at him.

"Are you going to just carry all this cargo into the cathedral though, Instructor Mädchen?"

"Of course not." Mädchen waved her hand, laughing goodnaturedly. "Most of the boxes are empty. There's only one I'll need to take with me. I can handle that." That would be the one with her sword and Orphen's clothes in it.

"If that's the case, I wouldn't mind helping."

“Your job here’s important, isn’t it? You’re as good as dead if you leave your post.”

“The next shift begins soon, and then I’ll have to go back beyond the Walls anyway.” The guard was getting a little heated in his desire to help, but Mädchen wasn’t giving in.

She gripped the reins, gave them a light crack, and shrugged her shoulders. “Sorry, but I’m in a hurry. You understand, right?”

“Yes, ma’am...” was the guard’s disappointed response as the cart set off again, leaving him behind.

They entered the streets between the foul-smelling huts without issue. Orphen was feeling a little strange on the bed of the cart. *That was easier than I thought...*

They were already inside Kimluck. Through the whirling dust, he could faintly see the city of those who did not accept the existence of sorcerers. But, watching the guard station fade into the distance, the guard standing stock-still next to it, Orphen said something completely different than what he was thinking. “That guard...” He lowered his voice and asked Mädchen, “He’s got a real thing for you, huh?”

“Of course not,” Mädchen said with a loud laugh. “He’s a married man, and in Kimluck, unlike Tefurem, marriage is a sacred thing that’s taken very seriously.” She disparaged Tefurem’s lack of a marriage system, but before Orphen could make a counterargument, she kept going. “He’s just trying to be helpful because I’m an Instructor. Back at the Tower—I mean, in your hometown, you were treated pretty well too, right?”

Orphen thought quietly at that for a while before answering, “Actually, I don’t think things were very good for me there, for whatever reason.”

“...Oh, I see...” She looked at him with pitying eyes.

Orphen changed the subject. “Anyway, that gate guard acted like he knows the face of every person who leaves or enters through that gate. It’s pretty amazing if he does. He’d be the ideal gate guard, huh?”

“He deserves much respect then, I suppose. I’m sure he does know everyone

who uses that gate." Mädchen smirked. "The names and faces of every single person who has the authority to leave this city. All six of them."

"...Six?" Orphen repeated, not understanding.

She gave him another mocking smile, then turned her eyes to the city around her and said something seemingly unrelated. "From what I heard about you, you left... you know... five years ago, and since then you've been traveling around the continent to all sorts of places, right?"

"...Yeah." Orphen nodded.

She turned to face him and asked, "In all that time, have you ever met a single person from Kimluck?"

"Well, of course I have." Orphen pursed his lips, sensing that she was ridiculing him somehow.



She raised her finger and stated simply, “No you haven’t. You’ve met Kimluck faithful. But people who have actually lived there?”

“Come to think of it, I guess I haven’t,” Orphen muttered to himself without letting her finish. He looked up. “Then, most of the people who live here never leave?”

“Yep. They don’t even give merchants the right to own shops so that they don’t get any ideas about settling down here. People passing through aren’t allowed to stay, and residents aren’t allowed to leave. Even among the Instructors, the only ones given missions that allow them to leave the city... are us,” she said quietly, with a faint smile.

Death Instructors... Orphen thought to himself.

The cart rolled along, slowly putting the shabby huts behind it. Even as far as they’d come now, they still hadn’t seen a single resident of the town.

Orphen thought of something unrelated once again. “Why was that gate guard dressed like a soldier, though?” he asked, recalling the sight of the guard.

Mädchen seemed unconcerned, but still answered. “It’s the opposite. They have soldiers guarding the gates. Though it’s really just that they have fancy uniforms and not like they go through any particular training. So maybe it is right to say he’s a guard dressed like a soldier. It’s just a question of appearances, basically.”

“This is kind of a weird town.” Orphen sighed. He was still trying to avoid notice, glancing around and speaking quietly. “How come we haven’t seen any townspeople yet?”

“Because they’re hiding.”

“Hiding... What?” Orphen didn’t have anything intelligent to say in response to that.

Mädchen went on before giving him a chance to come up with anything. “Don’t worry. They won’t come out yet.”

“Yet...?”

“We’ve got another ten minutes, maybe. It’s nothing you need to worry

about. If you're bored, how about some small talk?"

"Small talk, huh..." Orphen muttered, pulling his hood down over his eyes. It wasn't as if the sand was so abundant that he couldn't open his eyes in it, but the volume of it hadn't decreased at all since entering the town. They weren't on paved streets or anything, but with all the huts squeezed together nearby, the buildings should be blocking some of it.

He narrowed his eyes and asked, "Should I not ask about this Quo guy?"

"He's 190 centimeters tall and weighs about 80 kilos—slimmer than Oleyl. For a forty-year-old guy, anyway." She kept her eyes focused ahead of them and listed off those facts dispassionately. "He's always got this look on his face like he's mad about something. He never gets mad, though. He's got these really bulky shoulders... I think I heard someone say he looks like he has three heads once. His muscles aren't just for show, though. I couldn't believe my eyes when I once saw him snap a bat in two like it was nothing..." Her words suddenly stopped there.

"Hm?" Orphen looked up, curious. "What is it?"

"Guess they didn't need ten minutes," Mädchen said, tone resigned. She pulled the reins, and with a dissatisfied whinny, the horse drawing the cart stopped.

"What—" *happened?* Orphen was going to ask, when the sound of dragging footsteps suddenly reached his ears. "What the...?" He stood on the cart bed and looked down, then froze at what he saw. He was terrified.

Out of nowhere... people's heads started to poke out of whatever doors and windows the huts all around them had. The people didn't have any sort of distinguishing characteristics. There were more men, but there were some women, too. Their ages were all over the place; he caught some in their 30s and 40s. Even inside their houses, they wore hoods and hats to protect against the sand. Everywhere he looked, there were faces, faces, faces... and they were all looking at him.

All the paths in between the huts were blocked off by them. The last thing Orphen noticed was that most of them were carrying shafts of wood, 50 centimeters long and just wide enough to grip, maybe three centimeters. They

were very simple, but effective... weapons. For having less lethality than blades, they were all that much easier to use. These were probably the best choice for untrained civilians to wield.

Not that I know whether or not they've been trained. Orphen's and Mädchen's weapons were inside a box on the bottom of the pile. Cursing on the inside, Orphen shot a look at Mädchen.

"...Don't do anything rash," she said simply, standing on the driver's seat.

Now the hut doors were opening and people were filing out from inside. In no time at all, there were dozens of people surrounding the cart, and Orphen noticed that none of them had said a word, all of them merely staring silently at Mädchen.

These aren't... thieves...

The horse was starting to fidget, uncomfortable with the situation. Eventually...

"Miss Instructor..." An old man stepped forward from the throng. He was solidly built, and not holding a rod. From how the others around him reacted, he seemed to be some sort of negotiator for them. But what he heard next was more surprising to Orphen.

"What do you ask of me?" It was Mädchen who spoke, but it didn't sound like her. There was none of her usual affect.

Orphen looked and was taken aback to see her face completely even—expressionless.

She spoke with empty eyes, voice just as empty. "You know that I cannot grant your request."

As he listened, Orphen wearily remembered. *Right... She's technically a Kimluck Instructor, too. Or at least someone who can pretend to be one. This must be her Instructor face. Yeah, I guess most people who preach look like this when they're doing it...* As he thought to himself, he backed up, but no one was paying him the slightest attention.

"This time, you will grant it," the old man spoke slowly, enunciating each

word.

Mädchen shook her head. “You have no ‘proof.’ Those without proof cannot enter the Holy City. I’ve made this clear to you before.”

“Then what about him?!” It wasn’t the old man who had shouted, but someone from the crowd—a youth with a shaved head. His hood was flung back, probably because he didn’t really need it. The youth was thick with muscle, holding a rod thicker than most were holding. He had pointed at Orphen on top of the cart, naturally.

“He...” Mädchen’s eyes were half-lidded, her gaze powerless, but she still stated clearly, “He is not entering the Holy City. He’s merely helping me transport some cargo.”

“You’re lying!” another person piped up.

This started a chain reaction as more of the crowd began to jeer.

“You think you can fool us again?!”

“You’re always doing this! Preaching about only mixing good blood or whatever and letting outsiders into the capital while you ignore us!”

“You’re all lies!”

“Do you know how long we’ve been waiting?!”

“How much longer are we supposed to wait?!”

Mädchen merely looked down quietly at the crowd, unmoved by their ceaseless rebukes. Her gaze was calm and cold.

Orphen tuned out the commotion—if he listened to each and every one of their complaints, he was likely to lose his temper and start shouting back at them—and focused instead on Mädchen’s reaction.

She was merely waiting in silence. That might have been the smartest play here. Smarter than arguing with them and adding fuel to the fire, at least.

Either her forceful silence won out or the crowd simply grew tired of screaming, because it gradually quieted.

The old man who’d first spoken then stepped forward again. “We simply

cannot accept this.”

“You say you cannot accept my words. If this is the case...” Mädchen stated with no hesitation, “Then I’m sure you’re prepared to accept the consequences. Am I correct?”

With that short phrase, the faces in the crowd, which had all been red with anger a few seconds ago, immediately paled.

Seeing that, Orphen finally realized. *These are all Kimluck faithful who live here. So she threatens them with the consequences of going against an Instructor, eh? Pretty smart*, he thought to himself, looking at Mädchen’s back. *But if they’re Kimluck faithful... What was that?* he asked himself. *Something about not being allowed inside the Holy City...* Phrases like “chosen few” and “class system” floated through his head before his thoughts were abruptly cut off by a danger signal going off in his brain.

Whap! Orphen hurriedly raised his hand to catch the wooden shaft that had come flying at him. He looked down and found the bald youth raising his fists at him, a look of pure rage on his face.

“Pull him down!” That shout was the trigger.

A shout went up in the crowd, and once incited, it would merely continue to grow until the people were satisfied or exhausted. Not that there was much difference between the two. In any case, the throng of people all rushed at the cart at once.

You’ve gotta be kidding me! was Orphen’s first reaction, before his momentary panic turned to true terror. As the enraged crowd, men and women of all ages, pushed in closer, Orphen reflexively began forming some sorcery, but there was no way he could release the spell. For one, this wasn’t an amount of people he could clear away with one or two spells, and if he didn’t go all out, he couldn’t imagine they’d just up and leave. Actually, show these people magic and they were liable to get even more heated. The Kimluck Church’s hostility for sorcerers, though it didn’t make much sense to an outsider, was not something to make light of.

Orphen shot a look at Mädchen, furiously turning the gears in his head. He didn’t have much time to think—a few seconds more, maybe. The crowd would

clamber up the wagon or flip the whole thing over pretty soon. And once that happened, he'd be stomped over by so many people's shoes that there wouldn't be anything of him left. He had a choice that was incredibly easy to make, but that was completely out of the question to go through with.

Mädchen's earlier calm was nowhere to be seen now—she must not have thought she wouldn't be able to placate them with her words. Her expression wasn't exactly hopeless, but regret was plain on her face.

What do we do?! For the time being, Orphen glared back at the bald man and took a fighting stance. *I don't plan on dying here!* He couldn't give up. And the moment he steeled his resolve— *Wham!* There was an explosion, and Orphen was in the air.

If he was being honest, it felt good. He had to admit it.

In a split second, his view had changed from the bald man's wrinkled nose to a sky that was a mix of yellow tinged with blue, like dried paint. He had to admit it was beautiful, too.

When his body started falling, all he felt was the pleasure of weightlessness, of escaping reality. Falling never hurt. It felt great, in fact. What killed you was the sudden stop at the end. No fault in the drop itself...

At the end of his fall, when he crashed head-first into the crowd, Orphen took back all of his previous thoughts. He sat up. Apparently he'd fallen right on top of the bald man—his head was throbbing from the collision. The bald man lay under him, bleeding from his stupid bald head. Ignoring him, Orphen slowly rose...

The target of the crowd's ire had fallen right on top of them, so he supposed now would be the time to start the lynching (not that he personally desired that to start at any time), but as he looked around with his mouth hanging open, he found that they were all merely standing around dumbfounded. The crowd all had their eyes focused on one spot—atop the cart.

Orphen looked fearfully at the expressions of the men around him, then followed their gazes to see what they were all looking at. In that instant, a shrill voice rang out.

“What do you all think you’re doing?!”

Orphen froze in place. He understood perfectly why he’d suddenly gone flying now.

On the bed of the cart... right where Orphen had been standing... one of the boxes was now open. It had been opened with such extreme force that it had knocked him from the cart. And inside the open box, a girl with blonde hair fluttering in the wind and blue eyes gleaming stood at her full, not very imposing height. She wore a black puppy on her head in place of a crown, like usual.

“Claiomh!” Orphen uttered the girl’s name, hopelessness in his voice.

She didn’t seem to have heard him. Ignoring Mädchen, whose mouth was hanging open, Claiomh raised her voice so that it would carry far and wide and declared, “Why don’t you think about the people who are holed up in this cramped little space and doing their best to stay quiet and hide?!” She was saying something absurd, but it was so absurd that no one was really able to react to it. “We can’t see what’s happening outside, so how do you think we feel when you start screaming about killing people or whatever?! Come on, Majic, don’t you have anything to say about this?!”

“I’m so hungryyy...” The girl had dragged an emaciated blond boy from the box by one arm. He was younger than her and looked small just like she did. The boy groaned quietly as tears spilled from his eyes. “I only had one piece of chocolate to eat a day, and there was nothing to do, and the cart shook a lot... It was really hard...”

“See! Majic’s mad, too!” With the non sequitur of “See!” the girl spoke with much more confidence than the situation called for. When she let go, the boy fell right back into the box with a limp *thunk*. However, she paid him no mind and turned back to the crowd, yelling, “By the way, I only had two pieces of chocolate at a time!” She put her hands on her hips and went on confidently, “And after about three days in the box, when I realized, you know, couldn’t I just have had Leki make us invisible and then we could just follow the cart on foot? I got so sad about that that I cried! I’d like you to really understand that part!”

“...So...?” The quiet—really, very quiet—word came from the old man who had been the first to speak up. His eyes were unfocused, so complete was his bewilderment. He likely hadn’t thought at all before speaking.

But apparently that was enough to shut the girl up. After a very, very long pause, the girl clapped her hands together as if she’d suddenly thought of something. “That’s right! So, in other words...” She took the black dog on her head, Leki, and held him to her chest instead. “What I wanted to say was, if it’s a fight you’re looking for, I’ll take you on!”

“W—” Finally freed from the paralysis of confusion, Orphen attempted to stop Claiomh. “Wait a second, Claiomh! What are you—”

“Leki! Show ’em who’s boss!” With the girl’s shout, the black puppy turned its green eyes to the crowd—and that was including Orphen.

In that split second, there was only one thing Orphen could do. “I spin thee—” He spread both arms in desperation and chanted a spell. “Halo Armor!” Just past his thrust-out arms, a barrier like a net woven of light spread out.

A second later, that barrier vanished. It had been blasted away by Leki’s wide-range shockwave.

“Agh!” Orphen’s breath caught at the impact. He hadn’t taken a direct hit thanks to his barrier, but it was still a great amount of force coming his way. The explosive burst sent him flying once again, horizontally this time. He hit the ground after being flung several meters back.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” A great scream came from the crowd. Three or so of the nearby shacks had been blown to shreds by the blast.

Claiomh’s voice stood out among the tumult of the crowd, somehow even louder than the mass of fleeing people. “Oh, honestly, Leki! I can see a bleeding bald head running away right over there!”

“Wait a secoond!” Orphen managed to sit up and scream at her, but his voice didn’t seem to reach her.

The explosions continued. As Leki’s eyes swept over the line of huts, his magic set them ablaze effortlessly. Flames erupted in the slums of Kimluck as Leki’s heat rays cut through the area.

Amid all this, Orphen clutched at his head, all too aware... he was now heading into a Kimluck at its highest state of alert, on absolute guard for the sorcerer who had just snuck through its gates.



She looked up at him and repeated weakly, “We didn’t...” Istersiva shook her head, exhaustion plain on her face. She looked almost like an apparition, so lacking in vitality was she.

“We didn’t,” she repeated again.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded, irritated.

Istersiva’s long eyelashes fell and rose as she blinked. Her green eyes, the proof of her status as a sublime being, flashed, and then her eyes closed. Her voice trembled as she said, “We knew we were making a mistake, but we did not intend to commit a sin.”

“But our brethren have all perished. We will be eradicated, just like them.” The man put his hand on his chest, his voice anguished. He could feel how his chest was trembling. “Tefurem was obliterated. It wasn’t occupied or simply destroyed, it was erased as if it had never been there in the first place! It can never be rebuilt. The only thing that survived was... the World-Seeing Tower that you built. Just that worthless tower!” he spat out bitterly.

“...You’re wrong.” Istersiva’s eyes met his, regaining her calm just as he lost his. She extended her slim frame and he almost felt like he could see a beam of moonlight as she did so.

He had no choice but to admit to himself how beautiful she was, even in the darkness of his own heart. But still, he had to ask her. “What am I wrong about?”

“The World-Seeing Tower... Your descendants will need it. You cannot allow it to fall into anyone else’s hands. The sorcerers must not be allowed to control it. That was what Tefurem existed for.”

“What value could it possibly have?”

Istersiva’s gaze turned harsh at his question. Or maybe she was just mustering

the last of her willpower, her resolve showing in her eyes. “What does the giants’ continent look like now... what has happened to magic? You might be able to find out. But the World Book will probably not appear within the tower for several more decades.”

“And what good is that supposed to do for us when we very well may be annihilated tomorrow?”

“You will...” Isterviva’s beautiful lips curled into a sardonic smile that looked out of place on her face.

Chapter IV: “You Will Not Be Annihilated.”

The center of Kimluck was commonly known as the cathedral district. The reason was simple enough. It was because the area surrounded the cathedral. All who lived there were, without exception, born there, and would die there. And they all believed that the place where they lived alone was the center of the Church, Kimluck. They may have known what was outside the walls surrounding the cathedral district, but they made no effort to relate to it.

There were, however, exceptions. Exactly six people in this town were allowed to know what existed outside of it.

“Why not use my personal forces, then?” Carlotta proposed, grasping the white curtains and gazing out through the window.

A quiet, scornful laugh answered her. “Your personal forces, eh?”

“Oh?” Carlotta chuckled and turned back toward the room, the blonde hair framing her attractive features bouncing slightly as she did. She hid her mouth with her hand as she continued to giggle. “That makes me sound like a villain, doesn’t it? ‘Personal forces’...” She gazed at her conversation partner with a carefree smile. She was probably at least thirty, definitely no younger, but there was a youthful innocence to her expression. Her skin was even paler than the white, lace-embroidered blouse she wore. She didn’t look sickly at all, but it was like her skin was utterly devoid of pigment.

With the relaxed air wild animals sometimes display, Carlotta picked up a bright red folding fan from a small table near the window. She touched it to her cheek without opening it. “But you know, Quo... it doesn’t feel quite right to call them my ‘children’ either.”

“...‘Personal forces’ is fine.”

Carlotta was satisfied with Quo Vadis Pater’s terse response. She wasn’t exactly sure why. Take this man, Quo. It was fine being tall, but it actually made you look awkward if you took it too far, or so Carlotta thought. Especially if you had a build you could probably wrestle bears with. He had sharp eyes... to the point where he just had a nasty look to him. His eyelids were too thick. It didn’t

help that he had a big forehead, either. Basically, taking him out somewhere (or, as it was proper to say, him taking you out somewhere) wouldn't be any fun, and, more importantly, you couldn't brag about him to anyone.

Then there was this room. It was in the southernmost of her four properties. She just called it the southern house. It was the only property her late father had built without any servants' quarters so that he wouldn't be bothered by them here. There was really no reason for her to have to avoid people enough to use the southern house, but if Quo Vadis requested it, there was nothing she could do. He didn't like being seen by people. It was one of his more irritating preferences.

In the end, there was really nothing about him that should satisfy her, yet a strange sense of pleasure throbbed in Carlotta's breast. Strong enough that it wasn't even fazed by the man's voice, which sounded like it had received a divine decree to rain on people's parades whenever possible.

"How many can you get together?"

"Eight, I'd say," she responded, meeting his dark gaze. As she expected, Quo Vadis's eyes only narrowed more unpleasantly.

"That's not a lot."

"Well, it's unverified information. I'd say it's enough." She flicked the fan open and ran a hand over the arc of its rim. Taking a step back from the window, she toed the room's reddish-brown carpet.

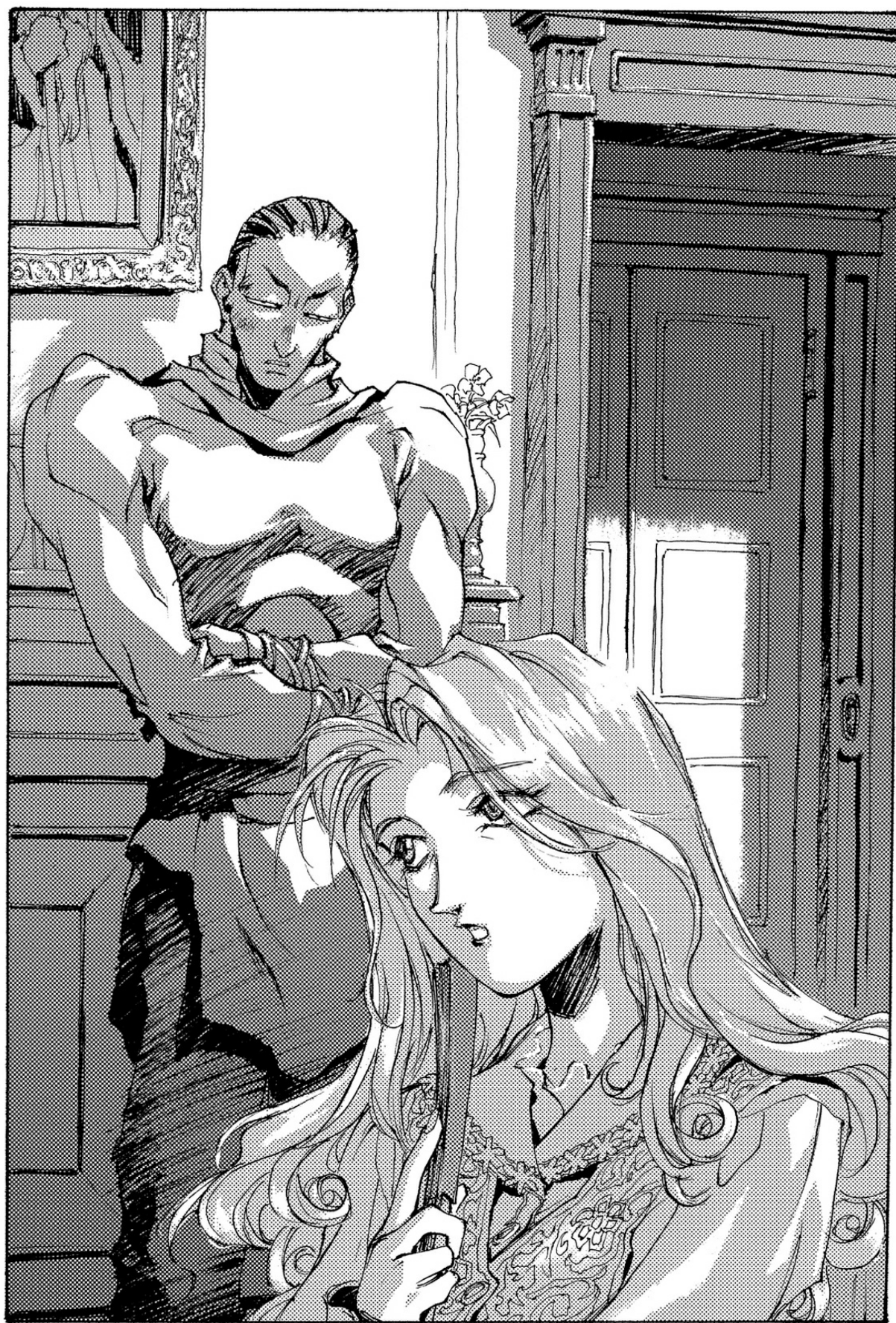
Carlotta walked toward Quo, then turned to the left. She passed a vase left next to the window, her feet making no sound as she walked. "It could just be a childish prank of Salua's."

"We have no need to worry if it's just a prank. But if it's real..." Quo gave a hostile snort.

"That's very cowardly of you." Carlotta smiled teasingly, then suddenly remembered his age—40... no, 39? Either way, too old to be so timid.

"I prefer 'faithful to my duties,'" Quo muttered, forcing his arms, which were like ugly vegetables, to fold at his chest.

I don't know about that... she thought to herself, but didn't say anything out loud. After a while, seemingly considering something, she closed the fan again.



“Explosions thought to be caused by sorcery... I mean, this was in the outer city, and the witness accounts are ambiguous. Plus, it’s already been two hours since we got the report. If it really was a sorcerer, I’d hope they’d be smart enough to have fled by now...” Letting a huff of laughter escape from her dainty nose, she continued, “In fact, a smart sorcerer wouldn’t have wasted any time leaving the city. They know perfectly well what we’re capable of. Don’t you think?”

“We have no proof that they’ve left the city,” was Quo’s response, a glum—which is to say, the usual—look on his face.

Carlotta had her next words ready. “Of course, but it’s not as if we can check every single person who enters and leaves the outer city. I mean, those guards; no matter how many times we tell them not to let in unregistered people—”

“Exactly. That’s why we have to investigate,” Quo said quietly.

It wasn’t as if he’d tripped her up or anything, but Carlotta still felt slightly annoyed by that. “I’m not saying I won’t send people. I’m just saying I don’t think we need to send that many.”

“I suppose that’s fine... I’ll leave this matter to you, then.”

“Yes, Quo. I know I complain a lot, but I don’t want you to misunderstand. I’m actually quite satisfied.” Carlotta put a hand to her chest. “...Do you remember Salua’s last words?” she asked, but Quo neither answered nor reacted. She didn’t let that bother her and continued, “I was so very bored.” She smiled, then tapped the bell sitting on the small table.

The servant she’d summoned—for if you have no servants’ quarters, you can simply have them wait outside the room—led Quo Vadis Pater away and she sighed with a smile still on her face.

Outside the window was her nicest looking courtyard. Its lawn was perfectly trimmed and it contained a rose garden large enough that it could be called a small forest. She could see a sullen gardener tending to those roses. If she could, she wanted to have a pool built somewhere where you could see the roses, but if she did that, it’d become a sand pit in no time at all. These sandstorms irritated her to no end—but there was nothing she could do about

that. If the sand actually stopped, then the cathedral would really be in trouble.

So there was nothing she could do. About any of it. She couldn't disobey Quo's orders, so she would just have to dispatch her personal forces.

But couldn't something be done about that man's foolishness?

"Honestly... Does he really think there's a woman out there who would hand over everything she had just because he told her to?"



"Roundoff Kangaroo Kick!" Claiomh shouted an incomprehensible skill name, performing a nonsensical kick to break an expensive-looking vase.

"Hahaha! You're such a handful!" Orphen started to pick up the pieces of the vase, laughing. He reimbursed the clerk for the vase while he was at it.

"Sky Twister Press (Self-destruct)!"

"Hahaha! You're gonna hurt yourself doing that!" Orphen gently picked Claiomh up after she did a drilling spin headfirst into the ground. Her head was split wide open and her neck was broken too, so he chanted a spell to heal her.

"Thanks, Orphen!" Claiomh yelled loudly, standing at attention... "Thanks for healing me with sorcery! Thanks for healing me with sorcery! Thanks for—"

"Aww, don't mention it! Haha!" Orphen put his hand to his head, smiling cheerfully. Claiomh continued to thank him as he did, until...

"With sorcery?" Those words cut her off.

Orphen looked around and found himself surrounded by people in hoods and kerchiefs.

"With sorcery...?" they all muttered, and as they spoke, they each took a step forward to tighten the circle around him. As he watched dazedly, their numbers grew and grew. Or it could just be that they were pushing closer together, so it looked like there were more of them.

"With sorcery...?"

"And after I warned them so many times..." He couldn't remember her name, but there was a woman in the crowd with a blue cloth around her head. She

wore leather armor and held a large sword. A sword with a blade made of glass. A most frightening weapon. “Oh well. This one’s already dead, too.”

With a dull thud, an emaciated blond boy—he couldn’t remember this one’s name either—rolled over to his feet. “I’m so hungry...” the corpse groaned.

“With sorcery...” the crowd muttered. This time, it wasn’t a question.

When he looked up, the crowd was all a bunch of bald men. They all had wounds on their heads that were dripping blood.

Claiomh was gone now. And...

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Orphen awoke to his own scream. His eyes snapped open and he punched away the closest thing to him, which happened to be Majic’s face.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!” This scream didn’t come from Majic, but Orphen once again. He leapt up in the bed and grabbed Majic, who’d fallen to the floor, throwing him at the wall. At the same time, he backflipped, so that when Majic hit the wall and bounced back toward him, his foot was in the perfect position from the backflip to give the boy a flying kick.

“Awriiiiiight!” Seeing Majic completely knocked out on the floor, Orphen launched into his finishing blow, but he couldn’t find the ring post... that’s where he stopped.

Regaining his senses, he looked around... and found several dazed faces staring back at him.

But first of all, he was inside a room. The thing that immediately came to mind was a ship’s cabin, but of course, they weren’t on a ship. It was just that small. The sunlight filtering in through the room’s one window glittered as it reflected off the sand in the air.

Inside the room, there was the bed he had been sleeping on and a big table pushed up against the opposite wall. He could also see a chest with clothes inside (there was no lid). In the center of the room, there was a metal stand. At its top, it had a recess that was full of ash. It must have been some sort of simple stove.

Orphen stared at the stove for a moment, then looked up. He ran his eyes over the wooden walls, which were scratched up from the sand, and tried not to let the low ceiling bother him. Or the fact that there was a crack in one corner that made it look like it could come down on him at any moment.

Majic was collapsed on the floor. He wasn't wearing his usual black. He must have figured out that it would be a bad idea to sneak into this town dressed as a typical Black Sorcerer and was wearing a white outfit that looked somewhat traditional, like Orphen's. However, unlike Orphen, Majic only seemed to be wearing the baggy clothes over his usual outfit, so his black shirt could be seen poking out from under the white clothes.

The one who was just dressed completely as usual was Claiomh, who was holding a pitcher in one hand and had her mouth hanging open. She had her usual jeans on, which were good for mobility, and an olive-brown jacket, though he had no idea where she'd bought that (or whose money she'd used, for that matter). He had no idea why she was wearing it, since it wasn't cold. Maybe for the sand, but she wasn't covering her head at all, which seemed more important to him. If you got sand in your hair, you'd really have to wash hard to get it all out. It was probably too late for her, he mused. There was sand in the air even inside this room.

Leki, who was on top of her head, must have found the sand itchy, because he was constantly scratching under his chin with a hind leg. This baby dragon was the only being in the room who was fidgeting like that.

The last person in the room was a bald man with a bandage wrapped around his head.

"You're—!" At the same time Orphen pointed at him and shouted—

"W-Wait, Orphen!" Claiomh stepped in front of him, getting in between the two of them.

Backing up behind her, the bald man made some nervous noises.

Orphen balled his hand into a fist and made to leap at him, but Claiomh spread her arms out to protect the man.

"This person saved you, Orphen!"

Orphen froze with his right hand in the air. He had to slam his foot down to stop his momentum.

The man gave him a weak smile from behind Claiomh. "A-Ahaha, hello."

"HellooOOoo'?! " Orphen repeated with a strange tone, stomping over to the two of them. He got the feeling he stepped on Majic as he did, but he ignored that. "You were the one who *started* that riot! I know damn well I had pieces of wood thrown at me out there because of you!"

"W-Well, umm... if you could just calm down..." The bald man raised his hands in capitulation, his timid voice a complete mismatch for his large frame and scary-looking face.



Orphen ignored Claiomh and reached over her to grab the man's collar, looking up at him intimidatingly. Of course, since Claiomh was still in between them, he only ended up meeting Leki's green eyes instead.

“‘Calm *down*’? Pretty easygoing for a guy with an ostrich egg sitting on top of his torso.”

“That's uhh, my head...”

“Oh, *is* it? Guess I can't crack it open, then. Or *can* I?”

“Aaaaah... That's actually pretty scary...” The man's voice trembled.

Orphen let go of his collar and moved his hand to grab the man's head instead. He squeezed his fingers and went on, “I'm trying right now, probably the fifth hardest I've ever tried in my life. And the top four took about two months to make a complete recovery, incidentally.”

“A-a-a-a-a-ah...!” The man's voice cut in and out until Claiomh gave a short sigh in front of him.

“Come on, Orphen, will you calm down already?”

.....

Orphen—without relaxing his fingers—looked down at her. As she looked up at him, he asked her hoarsely, “Hey, Claiomh.”

“Yeah?” she responded blankly.

Orphen gave her a toothy smile. As his body tensed, his hand trembled, the jitters spreading throughout him after passing through his arm and his shoulder. “As far as I remember...”

“Mhm?”

Finally, his whole body was shaking. “*You* were the one who made things get as bad as they did!” As he screamed, Orphen tried to grab Claiomh with his free hand, but she crouched down nimbly and fled, leaving the bald man there as her shield.

After clambering over to the corner of the room, she called back to him, “What are you mad at *me* for?!”

“Shut up! Today’s the day I finally—”

“Well... calm down...”

“I’m not gonna calm down! If I don’t teach this little bitch a lesson, she’s gonna...” Orphen suddenly stopped there and looked down at his hands in surprise. Both of them. The bald man had escaped his clutches without him noticing. He looked to his side and found the man standing there, smiling jovially.

“Really, just settle down for a moment.”

“You...” Orphen groaned in shock. He squeezed his now empty hands and asked, “When’d you get out?”

“Before having to go to the hospital, I’d say.” The man pointed to his bandaged head. He must have slipped out while Orphen was distracted by Claiomh, but... he hadn’t noticed at all. The man’s bandages hadn’t even come off, meaning he hadn’t simply pulled his head out forcefully but had deftly escaped while Orphen was momentarily distracted. It would probably be easy enough to pull off such a thing, but to do it so smoothly that he hadn’t noticed at all was rather impressive.

“Anyway, I’m hoping you’ll listen to what I have to say. Oh, but first, I suppose we should apologize to each other.”

“Apologize?” Orphen asked dubiously, observing the man.

He twisted his thick lips into a smile and said confidently, “That’s right. We both almost killed one of our own, after all.”

Frankly, Orphen wasn’t even sure he could calm down, and he didn’t have the slightest desire to try doing so, but regardless of what he wanted... everything had calmed down a few minutes later. The room was tidied up, Orphen was sitting on the bed, exhausted, and Claiomh had set about making some coffee (though she never did become at all aware of what her own actions had caused). The reason the room had been tidied up so quickly was because it didn’t have that much in it to begin with, and the reason Orphen was so tired was because of the psychological stress of the situation, just like always. And it was nothing new for Claiomh to be unaware of the trouble she was causing

either.

Basically, as much as it was possible to calm down, it had calmed down. And, incidentally, since it didn't seem like Majic would be waking up any time soon, he'd been laid out on the bed.

Claiomh was clattering some dishes about noisily, and just as noisily, explaining the course of events, her voice loud enough to easily be heard outside, despite repeated warnings from the bald man.

"...So then it became this huge thing, and you kind of became collateral damage to Leki's magic, but the one who dug you out of the rubble was this guy!"

"There was nothing 'kind of' about it," Orphen cursed indignantly from the bed. He gave a light kick at Claiomh's back as she placed the coffee pot on that simple stove.

"Hey! Stop that, Orphen!"

"Shut up." He pursed his lips and moved his gaze to the bald man. The more he observed him, the nastier the man's face looked. He wasn't really in a position to judge, but getting a good look at him now, Orphen came to a definite conclusion—his first impression: the man had an evil face.

Before the bald man could open his mouth, Orphen asked him a question. He wanted to make sure he held the reins of the conversation, as much as he could. "...So, why'd you help me? You knew I was a sorcerer." He spoke quietly, fully knowing that the walls had ears.

The bald man answered equally quietly. "I told you, it's because we're on the same side."

"The same side...?" Orphen suddenly realized what he meant.

"Yes." The man nodded amicably. "I'm a sorcerer, too."

"Whaaat?!" The scream had come from Claiomh. She leapt up, her foot kicking the coffee pot on the fire right off of it as if she'd been aiming for it.

The pot leapt toward the bald man, who screamed with the same expression Claiomh was making.

Orphen hurried and covered her mouth from behind.

“Fmmgmmh, zmmgh, mmgh!” As she spewed meaningless groans, Orphen looked down coldly on her from behind, waiting for her to stop. Eventually, after a good minute of muffled shouting, Claiomh finally quieted. When she stopped moving and started looking up at him silently, Orphen finally took his hand away.

“What was that for, Orphen?” she asked, disgruntled. “I can’t scream when you do that!”

“I don’t want you to scream!” Orphen muttered, irritated, wiping his spit-covered hand on the back of his pants. He pointed down at the floor with his other hand. “Look! This egg-headed guy is prostrating himself to try to get you to stop!”

“No, I was just a little dead from getting hit with the boiling water!” the bald man protested, completely red (maybe from the burns). He picked up the pot from the floor, stood it up, and then stood up himself.

Pushing Claiomh to the side, Orphen thought to himself for a moment. Every time someone moved in here, he could see the sand clearly in the air from how it sparkled. It was almost like there was a tiny sandstorm blowing about in the little room.

He looked around the room once more. There were only four people inside, including Majic, who was sleeping on the bed. “What happened to Mädchen?” She wasn’t there.

The bald man responded coolly, “Mädchen Amick?” He rubbed his hands together and then lowered his voice, being even more careful. “I was actually hoping to capture her.”

“Is that why you started that riot?” Orphen asked, recalling how he’d incited the crowd to violence.

The bald man nodded and removed his bandages, taking a cloth out from somewhere and wiping his wet head. “She would be worth the risk... After all, she’s an active Death Instructor.” He peered at him from underneath the cloth and added, “Why were you with her, anyway? That was why I had no idea you

were one of us.”

“What are you guys talking about, Orphen?” Claiomh interjected, unable to follow the conversation at all.

Orphen glanced at her, decided it was too much trouble to answer her question, and ignored her. He decided to make the bald man explain instead. Turning back to him, Orphen asked, “What are *you* doing here, though?”

“Well... I live here. I’m stationed here as part of an ongoing investigation. I’ve been here two years now.” He smiled self-derisively. “I’m freelance. Name’s Laniote.”

Orphen frowned at that. “Freelance... Who hired you?”

“If you don’t know about me, you must be working for somebody else.”

“I’m freelance, too. So, who hired you?” Orphen pressed him, side-eyeing Claiomh, who was looking around restlessly.

The bald man—Laniote, apparently—put the cloth down and re-wrapped his bandages. It would probably be hard to wrap bandages around your head, since you can’t see it, but his thick fingers accomplished the task rather deftly. When he finished, he responded, “Someone from the royal court... That’s all I can say.”

“The Thirteen Apostles?” Orphen asked, surprised. That was what the sorcerers of the royal court in the capital were called.

Laniote nodded forthcomingly. “Since the royal capital is so far away from here, they can’t help but be interested in any developments from the region. I shouldn’t be the only one who’s infiltrated the city, either.”

“So you’re a spy,” Orphen said, mostly for Claiomh’s benefit. He put his hand to his chin and continued, “Hmm... I see. Now that I think about it, maybe it was stupid of me to try to sneak in without looking for other sorcerers who were already inside.”

“Maybe. So, who hired you...?”

“Huh? Oh, I’m also self-employed.”

“Yes, but...”

“I mean...” Orphen stated plainly: “I really just work for myself. I’m not here on anyone’s orders, just for my own personal business.”

“Same here.” Claiomh pointed to herself, probably feeling left out of the conversation.

“I see...” Laniote didn’t seem all that satisfied by their explanation, but he didn’t press them about it. Instead, wiping his wet clothes, he asked them, “So, not to repeat myself, but... I’d like to know what you were doing with that Death Instructor. She’s a real assassin who’s killed plenty of sorcerers before. She’s even wanted in the capital.”

“It just worked out that way. There’s not really any other way to put it. Oh, that’s right...” Orphen shrugged, then suddenly thought of something. He spread his arms and indicated his appearance. “Hey, she said white was like the uniform here. Is there something weird about how I look? I don’t look like I’m faking it, do I?”

“It’s not that. It’s just that white looks terrible on you.”

Ignoring Claiomh’s opinion, Orphen watched Laniote, who began to consider the question with a groan.

“Well... The part about it being like a uniform isn’t wrong, at least.”

“Really? If it looks that bad on me, though, isn’t that just a different way I’ll be standing out? Come on, take a look, would you?” Orphen insisted, carefully observing Laniote.

He looked Orphen over in turn, from head to toe, then sighed. “I don’t really know what to say. I don’t think you should let it bother you.”

“Huh...” Orphen gave up, opting to ask something else. “Well, not to repeat myself either, but where *did* Mädchen go?”

“Seems she took off on the cart when the commotion started.”

“Then she’s still got my clothes...”

“If they were hidden on that cart, then yes, I suppose. By the way, I never got your names.”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right,” Orphen realized. He pointed at Claiomh and

Majic and told him, “These two would be Troublesome Dead Weight and Annoying Dead Weight.”

“Hey, Orphen!” Claiomh exclaimed, but he ignored her.

Dodging Claiomh’s hands as she lunged at him, Orphen plucked Leki from her head. He’d been scratching himself all over during that whole conversation.

“This one’s Switch-Activated Danger.”

“Orphen! Why am I dead weight?! I’m working really hard, you know!”

“The one who flips the switch is also dangerous, by the way.”

“At least tell me which one of me and Majic is troublesome and which one is annoying!”

Dodging all around the room as Claiomh lunged at him, Orphen turned to Laniote, who was watching him dazedly, and finally indicated himself. “As for me...”

He told him straight-up. “I’m Krylancelo, from the Tower of Fangs.”



“It’s terrible!”

In response to that scream, all she did was open one eye as she lay on the bed. Just that. Her arms and chest felt weighed down heavily by fatigue. Feeling an invisible, but heavy pressure pushing down on her, Azalie somehow managed to fill her lungs with air. Then, trembling, she expelled it.

That was when the door opened. “It’s terrible!” It was the voice of that dwarf—she could never remember their names—the younger one. As they rushed in, they kicked up the sand that had accumulated on the floor, sending it whirling back up into the air of the room.

“It’s terrible!” He dropped the big shopping bags he was carrying and turned to face her.

“You’re exactly right!” The older brother then leapt in, too. He shouted, rattling his sword, “How could this be?! There’s nowhere in this whole town where they sell melon!”

Thunk! “Stop being an idiot.” Taking a large coconut out of one of the shopping bags, the younger brother beamed the older brother with it and continued quietly, “The town’s in a huge panic. It sounds like something happened. The streets are crawling with soldiers!”

“What...?” Since she couldn’t really ignore them anymore, Azalie sat up, eyes half-lidded (though, honestly, she wanted to just go back to bed). She realized something then, and asked, “Why’d you buy a coconut, anyway?”

“Well, I just figured this might happen,” the younger one admitted, peering down at his brother as blood gushed from his head.

“Say, Dortin...” The older brother stood up abruptly, and thanks to his calling the younger one’s name, Azalie finally recalled what it was. He looked around dazedly and muttered, “My memories of getting hit are sort of vague... You didn’t just do something really drastic, did you?”

“Of course not. What are you saying, Bro?” As he answered, Dortin slipped the bloodstained coconut back into the bag.



“Uhh...” Azalie rubbed her sleepy eyes and addressed the older one. She waved him over to her.

“Hm?”

When he looked her way, she rooted around in her memories for his name and produced something. “What was it... Ah, right. Ponkan.”

“That’s a flat mandarin!” Ponkan yelled, stretching himself up as tall as he could. He marched toward Azalie, rapidly spewing words at her, “Forgetting the name of one of the greatest men in history and cramming your head full of useless other stuff’s just going to open your brain up for white ants to get into it! By the way, they call me the Bulldog of Masmaturia, you know! The name’s Vulcano Volkan, and don’t you forget it, even if somebody stuffs you into a crate and kills you!”

“Right, right... I got it,” Azalie groaned languidly as the dwarf drew close enough that she could reach out and touch him. She waved her hand at the same time. When she did, the blood spurting from Volkan’s head suddenly vanished along with his wound.

“Whooooa!” Volkan shouted in exaggerated surprise. “I-I didn’t know you could do that!”

“It’s really not difficult,” she said with complete honesty, but Volkan still seemed surprised.

He nodded to himself earnestly. “But this is the first time this has ever happened. It’s completely unprecedented.”

“...You were with Krylancelo, weren’t you? Then how could you have never seen sorcery like this?” Azalie rubbed at her eyes again, trying to keep herself awake. It didn’t have much of an effect, but she at least managed to convince half of her brain to pay attention to the conversation. Volkan’s amazed voice echoed in that awakened half.

“What I’m trying to say is that that debt collector would never do something as humane as heal somebody’s wounds.”

“Ah...” was the only response she could muster. After a moment, she also

managed, “By the way, aren’t you getting sleepy?”

“Hunh?” Volkan cocked his head, face blank. “Now that you mention it, I kinda... am...” Before he could finish, he collapsed to the floor and started snoring.

“Was that... sorcery, too?” Dortin asked, surprised. Azalie looked at him, eyes wide open, and he said, “Huh?” sounding even more surprised. “Are you awake now?”

“Yep. I had Ponkan here take on my fatigue for me,” she replied, lowering her feet from the bed. She still didn’t feel like standing, but her head was clear now, at least. “So? What’s this panic? What happened?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly... I just heard something like a riot broke out in the slums outside the walls.”

“No details?”

“Not in the rumors, no...”

Azalie hummed indifferently, pondering whether this would present some hindrance to her plans or not. She couldn’t come to much of a conclusion with the majority of the details being unknown to her, but there was one thing she was fairly sure of: she hadn’t been discovered. “Well, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” she said casually, lying back down on the bed.

Dortin was taken aback by her response. “Is that really alright?”

“I don’t need to worry about the guards. When they’re not out in town, they’re probably just strengthening security around the cathedral, so it doesn’t really make a difference to me.”

“I see...”

“If there’s one thing I am curious about, I suppose...” She stopped and reached under her pillow, rooting around until she found something hard. She grabbed it and pulled it out. It was a book with a pitch-black cover and no title.

“Oh. That book...” Dortin asked curiously, “Have you read most of it by now?”

“Yeah. It was pretty rough since I haven’t read ancient script like this in years, though.” Azalie gave an indifferent response and closed her eyes. A sentence

from the book went through her mind. *“The emergence flooded the world.” And the changes that occurred then destroyed the old world. We’re likely still seeing their effects today...*

She mentally reviewed the contents of the book. *The World Book records the history of the giants’ continent, Jötunheimr. But I don’t even know where this “giants’ continent” is. No one knows of any continents other than Kiesalhima. It’s irrefutable fact that our ancestors migrated here from another continent, so logically it would follow that there would be humans or other species on this other continent, but in hundreds of years, there’s never once been a ship or anything from outside the continent...*

It was ridiculous. Three hundred years ago, humans had come to this continent on ships, so they clearly had seafaring technology, though it was a lost art now on Kiesalhima. *There is the possibility that all life on other continents died out...*

The World Book contained writings on the changes that had occurred in the world and the destruction that accompanied those changes. *I’ve seen writings left behind in the Nornir ruins I’ve discovered, too. According to them, the dragons made some terrible mistake in the past... and because of that, they had to retreat to the sanctuary. They were also very concerned about the north. About Kimluck. Including Asraliel in Fenrir’s Forest...*

Recalling the Deep Dragon warrior who defended the sanctuary and the forest, Azalie squinted up at the ceiling. *Even Master Childman... Why did you have to infiltrate this city ten years ago, Master...?*

Even with those thoughts going through her head, she said something completely different out loud. Suddenly raising her head and looking down at Volkan who was still lying on the floor, snoring, she muttered, “I really shouldn’t have used such a weird spell.” She sat up reluctantly. “Now I’m not gonna get any sleep.”



“You will not be annihilated.” There was a quiet, miserable confidence in her voice. “Not even those in the sanctuary... still have the strength.”

Chapter V: The Tip of the Gleaming Blade was Already...

“So that’s where you were.”

At the sudden carefree words, Orphen looked down from where he was sitting on the roof—Claiomh and Majic were staring up at him from the alley in front of the hut.

Orphen nodded and looked back up at the sky. Before entering the Church-controlled region of Gate Lock, he’d thought that he wouldn’t be able to see the stars through the sands that whirled through the air, but that wasn’t the case. In fact, the golden grains of sand dancing in the air looked like countless shooting stars soaring through the starry sky. From one end to the other, on and on forever. But it was hardly a beautiful spectacle. The sight to him seemed like some sort of eerie fetal movement. One that had been going on for the last 200 years...

“Come on up, you two. We need to talk,” Orphen told them, still looking up at the sky.

Even before his invitation, Claiomh was already looking for a route to climb up to the roof. In the end, she settled on the same way Orphen had gotten up, and she and Majic climbed up a barrel of water in between the huts.

“Ack... There’s a hole here.” As the two nervously made their way over to Orphen, he quietly turned to face them.

Claiomh had her jacket fastened shut in front, Leki poking his head out of the collar. Majic still wasn’t back at one hundred percent, but he’d at least recovered from the weakened state he’d been in earlier.

Orphen suddenly recalled Claiomh mentioning that they’d emptied their canteens when they were hiding in those boxes for days on end. “Didn’t you know humans can only go two days without any fluid intake?”

Claiomh laughed bashfully when he asked her that. “We snuck out of the boxes at night. I mean, we had to go to the bathroom, right? You didn’t notice?”

“...I’m sure you had Leki erase your footsteps or make you invisible, right?”

“Yep. Since he could do that, there wasn’t really any point in hiding in the boxes, was there?” She sat down next to Orphen, cackling, and Majic followed her, sitting against a piece of lumber jutting out from the roof nearby.

“What were you looking at, Master?” he asked quietly.

Orphen looked at him, then looked back up at the night sky. The sand continued its dance. And so it would forever, no matter what anyone thought of it. Watching it for a few seconds, Orphen eventually answered, “The sky.”

“Well, obviously.” Claiomh was evidently dissatisfied by the answer.

With a glance at her face, Orphen chuckled and clarified, “Kimluck’s sky. Since I’ve come all the way here, I thought I should appreciate it a bit.”

“...By yourself?”

“No point getting all sentimental with somebody else around. And what do you two have to appreciate about coming to the headquarters of the Church anyway? This is just sightseeing for you guys,” he said, shooting a look at Claiomh, when he heard Majic mutter a response.

“That’s not true.”

“Huh?” That was Claiomh, but Orphen raised an eyebrow and looked Majic’s way as well.

The blond boy was hugging his knees and hiding his face, so Orphen couldn’t see his expression, but there was a strong will in his voice. “I’m here because I want to help you, Master.”

“Well, the same goes for me,” Claiomh added, pursing her lips, but Majic shook his head. He still wasn’t showing them his face, though.

“It’s not the same.” Before she could even argue, Majic asked her, “Why did you come, Claiomh?”

“I...” She seemed to be struggling to find an answer. She looked down as if to consult Leki, who had burrowed into her clothes, and settled on, “I just sort of felt like I had to come.”

“I felt the same way. But there was no ‘sort of’ about it for me,” Majic said quickly. He seemed more like he was trying to convince himself than either of the other two. He finally lifted his head, and though he wasn’t crying, his eyes glistened. “...There was no ‘sort of’ about it.”

Heavy clouds coiled high above him, far in the southern sky. Orphen noticed them and figured it was bound to rain tomorrow.

The rain started falling at dawn and showed no signs of stopping after noon came and went. It fell heavy all morning, laden with sand. The clouds, rain, and sand all mixed to make the sky above the town a deep blue, like the glum face of someone enduring some deep sorrow.

“Rain, huh? That’s rare,” Laniote remarked as he put away the dishes.

Claiomh, who seemed to have gotten attached to him for whatever reason, asked, “It’s rare?”

“It is. In this region, at least,” he answered with a smile. He was stacking plates in the corner of a room that was some sort of storage-slash-washing area-slash-kitchen.

Orphen watched them, stretching his shoulders, which were still sore from sleeping on the floor last night.

“Doesn’t seem like it’s gonna let up anytime soon either,” Claiomh said, looking out the window with Leki.

Majic was sitting near the window too, and he had been looking out it on his own for some time now. He didn’t even look up at Claiomh when she came up to him.

Glancing at them, Laniote explained, “Once it starts, it lasts a long time. I guess that’s just how the climate is around here.”

“Huh...” Claiomh made a vaguely interested sound.

“...So, do you have a way to get into the center of Kimluck?” Orphen cut in.

Silence fell over the room. Laniote and Claiomh—even Majic—turned to look at Orphen.

Laniote was the first to speak. “I do.”

“Well, I’d like to get inside as soon as possible.”

Laniote went quiet at that, but he didn’t look away. However, there was a note of confusion on his face. “I thought you might say that.”

“Why?” Claiomh asked, petting Leki as he lay on her head. The black baby dragon was yawning boredly.

The calm voice that answered her question belonged to neither Orphen nor Laniote, but Majic. “Because it’s dangerous to hide here for too long... right?”

“Right.” Orphen folded his arms. “Thanks to *somebody*, there was a huge commotion as soon as we entered town and all my plans went out the window.”

“That’s true. Everything got all messed up ’cause you started a fight, Laniote.” Claiomh nodded to herself, completely convinced.

Feeling something twitching around his temple, Orphen managed to restrain himself somehow. “Because of that, it seems like security in town has doubled, and if we just wait around, it’s a matter of time until the investigation reaches... uhh, what was it called, the Outer City? At this point, we should just do what we came here for and get out as soon as we can.”

“I suppose so. You shouldn’t blame Laniote, though. I feel bad. He didn’t know.”

Orphen held back the urge to put his head in his hands and turned to Laniote. “So, how do we get in?”

“I’ll take you there... If you went on your own, you’d get lost for certain.”

“Lost?” Orphen asked, not expecting that to be the word used.

Rubbing his thick fingers together (it seemed to be somewhat of a habit of his), Laniote smirked and said, “As I’m sure you know, Kimluck is divided into the Outer City here and the Center City around the cathedral, beyond the Walls.”

“Right.” Orphen nodded and Laniote pointed out the window to indicate the town.

“Only merchants bringing food and the like are allowed to pass from the

outer ring into the center. However, in that instance, the merchants are under cathedral supervision the whole time, and they're not allowed to stay past the time they're given... so dressing up as a merchant to get beyond the Gates of Learning wouldn't work."

"...So?"

"The problem is, the ban on people passing from the outer ring into the center extends to citizens of the town, too." Laniote turned to Orphen as he continued his explanation.

"Why?" Orphen asked. "I was wondering about that when we were attacked yesterday."

Laniote slowly nodded. "The reason is simple. What is it that Kimluck faithful hate above all else?"

"Sorcerers," Orphen responded quickly.

Laniote nodded again. "It's only natural then, isn't it? Sorcerous talent is hereditary..."

Hearing that, Orphen realized something. He recalled a phrase he'd heard the day before. "Mixing good blood"... Meaning bad blood couldn't be allowed.

"I see. To Kimluck faithful, even latent potential for sorcery can't be allowed to be passed on."

"Correct. And to prevent that, the cathedral hasn't allowed anyone into the city without proof of their pure blood for the last 200 years. Which means the only true members of the Kimluck Church on the continent are the residents of the central city."

"It's no wonder the Church's teachings don't get popularized in other cities. The cathedral folks don't even consider churches outside of the city legitimate, do they?"

"Correct again. However, the people who live here in the Outer City only do so because they want to enter the Center City, so there are a few secret routes past the Walls."

That wasn't the end of Laniote's explanation, but before he could go on,

Claiomh interjected, “I don’t really get it... They won’t let you in even if you believe in the Church?”

“Pure blood is very important to them.” Laniote smiled at Claiomh, who didn’t seem convinced. “Since sorcerers have both human and dragon blood in them.”

“Is it like not wanting to take in a stray cat no matter how cute it is?”

“...I think the nuance is a bit different, but yes, something like that.” Laniote smiled awkwardly, but he didn’t dismiss her analogy.

“So...” Majic spoke up. “What is this route inside you mentioned exactly? Since there’s a risk of getting lost, I imagine it’s pretty dangerous.”

Rain was still pouring down outside the window behind him. The droplets fell down in lines like an ashen grate over the world.

Laniote answered quiet enough that the rain almost drowned him out. “With this rain...” He chuckled, amused, and continued, “We’ll just have to hope it’s not completely underwater.”

Upon entering the bar, Orphen got a strange feeling about something. It wasn’t anything specific... The place was dimly lit, but that was only natural, given the rain outside, and there was nothing about the ten-odd men in the establishment around noon that stood out to him in particular.

The bar had tables with thick legs, lamps hanging from the ceiling, stairs, and a few casks sitting in a corner. It was just an average bar, on the smaller side with a low ceiling.

And because it was such an average bar, when Orphen, Claiomh, and Majic walked into it, they stood out a ton. Suspicious faces looked up at them from tables all over the room. Some of them may have even been hostile, though they weren’t being obvious about it.

“Master...” Majic muttered, losing his nerve from the atmosphere in the bar.

“Didn’t you live in an inn?” Orphen snapped at him.

“But we hardly got any customers, and I hate the smell of alcohol...”

Shortly after them, another person entered the bar.

“You’re late, Laniote,” Claiomh complained to him.

“Sorry. I had to take care of something.”

As Laniote put a hand to his shaved head, Orphen noticed that the hostility in the room had lessened somewhat as he’d entered. Only somewhat, though. He was still sensing something from some unknown source that made him nervous.

Paying attention to all the eyes focused on him while making it seem like he hadn’t noticed, Orphen asked Laniote, “Is it here?”

“...Is what?” He played dumb.

Orphen gave a short sigh. “You know, the route.”

“If you know the answer, then there’s hardly reason to ask, right?”

“...You piss me off.”

Laniote just raised a hand and laughed in response. “Haha. Well, just trust me,” he said, and strode into the bar.

Orphen followed him, trying not to watch his surroundings too conspicuously. He was making sure he didn’t make eye contact with anyone, but Claiomh was looking around without hesitation, so maybe it was pointless. Majic followed at the tail end, also wary.

If all these people suddenly attacked at once, what could he do... *I didn’t know I would feel so helpless just from not being able to use sorcery*, Orphen thought to himself, feeling pathetic. Even without sorcery, with the right moves, he should be able to at least get away from a mob like this. But for some reason, he just didn’t feel confident. He *thought* he’d been trying not to be completely reliant on his sorcery up until now, at least mentally. *I guess it really was just a thought. It’s no wonder Claiomh mocks me.*

As those thoughts went through Orphen’s head, Laniote found an old man behind the bar. It was hard to tell whether he was a waiter or what—he was just sitting in an old chair behind the counter, carving something out of a small piece of wood. He didn’t look much different than a customer.

The door on the side of the counter was open, and it seemed the custom here was for patrons to just walk behind the bar and make themselves their own

drinks.

“Hey, Jake,” Laniote called out jovially to the old man.

The old man looked up at him with just one eye. His hands were covered in countless scars from a chisel, holding a horse partially carved out of wood.

“Small talk? If so, I’m not interested.”

“I’m not here for small talk. I’d like to use the back, if that’s alright,” Laniote explained amiably.

Clatter. A chair was kicked aside, an answer coming not from the old man, but from behind them.

“Hey, Laniote.”

They turned around and found a large man glaring at them from the nearest table. It wasn’t the large man who had stood, incidentally, but his violent-looking friend. Upon looking around, they found all the men in the bar staring at them like they were planning on picking a fight.

“Yes?” Laniote turned to face them, his eyebrows knitting faintheartedly.

The man who’d stood downed all the beer in his mug and asked, “What’s this all about?”

“What do you mean?”

“I remember that brat. He’s the sorcerer who was with the Lady Instructor yesterday, isn’t he?”

A stir went through the bar at that. Several more chairs clattered as well, as more people stood up.

“What are you talking about?” Laniote played it off with a laugh. “True, he was with the Instructor... but he couldn’t be a sorcerer, right?”

“Wh-What?!” another man yelled.

Then came another: “There’s no way that explosion was—”

There’s no way it was caused by human sorcery! Orphen thought to himself, but regular people—especially people in this town—wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, he realized. The explosions had been caused by Leki, but apparently

everyone thought they were his doing.

The men were starting to yell louder when all of a sudden they all fell silent. With one phrase and a sigh from Laniote: "...I suppose I'll have to tell you..."

Orphen realized that it wasn't Laniote's words that had stopped the men, but his expression. He'd been nonchalant a second ago, but his face was dead serious now.

He started to speak quietly. "The Instructor refused us, but in her heart, she too doubts the ways of the cathedral, who do not wish to allow us inside the Inner City."

"What...?"

What? The men had voiced their confusion aloud, while Orphen had done so in his mind. He tried not to let it show on his face as he glanced at Laniote, attempting to discern his intentions.

Laniote went on, voice confident, "It's only natural. Miss Mädchen is one of the few Instructors who have left the city before. She thinks differently than those who have lived all their lives in the cathedral."

"And how do you know that?" The large man, the first who had addressed him, asked, still sitting.

Laniote nodded firmly at him and, of all things, indicated Orphen. "I captured this group during the commotion yesterday and heard from them about Miss Mädchen's thoughts." He put on a look of regret as he spoke. "And I realized how narrow-minded *our* way of thinking is."

"Narrow-minded?" The men were all listening intently to what he was saying now. Some of them had sat back down.

"Yes. Miss Mädchen's ideas are also dangerous, which is why she couldn't be honest with the likes of us." Laniote nodded once more and again indicated Orphen.

Orphen was slightly dumbfounded by this turn of events, but he tensed up when Laniote gestured to him... which ended up being the right idea.

Laniote easily continued, "Instructor Mädchen brought this group in to

secretly punish the evil and prejudiced people who run things in the cathedral. They're assassins."

Ack! Orphen almost burst out laughing, but clenched his abs and held it in. As he barely maintained a straight face, he timidly looked around the bar...

All the men looking at them only seemed like if they had a comment, it would be, "I see..." or something to that effect.

Why are they buying something so ridiculous...? Orphen was suspicious at first, but eventually realized... *They've all lived here their whole lives. Everybody's in the same environment, so they all have the same way of looking at things.* To fool them, all you needed to do was make their oppressors in the cathedral the bad guys. *He doesn't even have to personally know Mädchen. She's the only Instructor who's ever shown herself to them, and she's a young woman too, so she's perfect to make into a hero.*

Laniote kept going. "I don't know what caused those explosions either. It could have been a terror attack against the Instructor from a sorcerer spy who infiltrated the city."

With all the commotion, it was unlikely that many had noticed Orphen reciting a spell. He had to admit the man's lies were somewhat convincing. However...

"Wait a second, Laniote." The quiet, rasping voice belonged to the old man behind the bar.

"Yes?" Laniote turned to him.

Continuing his carving, the old man asked, "You heard all this from them?"

"That's right."

"And what proof do you have that they're not lying?"

With those words, silence fell over the bar like a spell had been broken. Or maybe like a spell had been cast.

"Th-That's a good question..." Two or three people stood again.

"You're not being played by them, are you, Laniote?" A stir was going through all the men.

Orphen watched them, quietly making a fist. That was when there suddenly came a voice.

“What is with you people?!”

He was actually a little anxious until now, thinking she was being *too* quiet. Orphen turned around to find, as he suspected, Claiomh standing imposingly on the bar, shouting with a loud voice that carried through the room.

“Are you sitting or standing?! Pick one! It’s annoying! And if you have something to say, get together and figure it out so you can say it! I’ll give you five minutes!”

“What was that, you bitch?!”

“Claiomh, maybe you should—” Orphen groaned, trying to pull her down, but Laniote came up next to him and stopped him.

He raised his hands, attempting to pacify the men, voice soothing. “I doubted them at first, too,” he directed at the old man behind the bar. “But I think if you see what he’s capable of with your own eyes, you’ll feel the same way I did.”

“What he’s capable of...?”

Laniote gave a confident smile in response to the man’s suspicious question. “If he wasn’t an assassin but was just some liar, it’d be easy to take him down, right?”

He’s using their argument against them, Orphen thought, eyeing Laniote. Mädchen’s lie, that the sorcerer was really a transporter, had been changed into a transporter who was really an assassin. It’s hard to prove that a lie is the truth, but it’s easy to expose one. Laniote’s strategy was to “expose” Mädchen’s lie with his own. *I guess that’s not a bad tack, but...*

Orphen sidled up to him and whispered, “Hey, Laniote...”

But Laniote ignored him and faced the men again. “Let’s see... Fay, Rand, Ord. I think you three would be a good match for him.”

“Three?!” Orphen whispered sharply at Laniote. “And unarmed?!” He didn’t mean without a weapon. He meant without sorcery.

But Laniote just smiled, full of confidence, and said quietly, so that only

Orphen could hear, “Don’t worry. It should be easy for you... shouldn’t it, Krylancelo?”

He’s testing me... Orphen clucked his tongue and turned to the men. The three, Fay, Rand, and Ord, had stepped forward, and were all solidly built. Before facing them, Orphen whispered one last parting shot at Laniote, “You swindler.”

Laniote didn’t change his expression, as if he hadn’t heard anything, but Orphen didn’t miss the twitching at the side of his mouth.

One of the men spoke. “An assassin, eh?” His nose wrinkled with suspicion, as if he hadn’t fully believed the story himself a minute ago. “This wimp?”

“Wimp?!” The aghast shout had come from Majic.

“I suppose it’s a matter of perspective,” Claiomh remarked from on top of the bar.

“Shut up,” Orphen spat, but he understood what she meant. To this guy—he didn’t know if he was Fay or Rand or who—even Laniote might look like a wimp. He was a full head taller than him and probably twice as wide. This was the first man who had spoken.

Studying the distance between them, Orphen took a fighting stance. The three of them would be no match for him if he was using sorcery, but without it, he was frankly not too confident. *So I’ll thin their numbers*, he decided, lowering himself and putting his right shoulder behind him. He glared up at Fay (he decided this one would be Fay) as the man approached him carelessly with a smirk.

“Honestly. Instead of relying on a kid like this, the Instructor should just take me—”

Whoosh! Orphen was already moving. In the second it took the man who was saying stupid things to open and close his mouth, Orphen had closed in on him.

“?!” the man yelled wordlessly.



In an instant, Orphen sent a vicious kick at the man's inner calf—Fay tumbled to the ground rather dramatically.

“Gyaaaaaaaaa!” he finally screamed, clutching his broken leg.

Pushing one of his steel-toed boots forward meaningfully, Orphen told them, “Just because I’m unarmed doesn’t mean I don’t have any weapons.”

“You bastard!” Rand (he’d decided which one this man was, too) raised his fist and leapt at Orphen. But Orphen had imagined that taking one down might provoke another to reflexively leap at him, so he watched the man carefully and only moved when he was already swinging.

Too late! His opponent must have been thinking, but the man’s fist was swinging more slowly. It was almost impossible for an amateur to launch an attack without making any excess movement. Orphen jumped on the side opposite the man’s dominant hand and launched an elbow into his enemy’s temple. He wouldn’t make an attack on the man’s skull with his fist. When his counterattack rattled the man’s brain, Rand sank to the floor, limp.

Now it was already one-on-one. Orphen naturally turned to face his last opponent. The last man (if he had to name him, this one would be Ord, he supposed) merely stared at him, dumbfounded. And he wasn’t the only one—the entire bar had fallen silent. To tell the truth, he’d only taken the two of them out with surprise attacks, but because of how flashy they’d been, it seemed no one had noticed that.

The sound of the rain echoed through the silent bar as if suddenly remembering to start back up again.

“Ugh...” Ord groaned, no doubt feeling cornered. But from how he was clenching his fists in a fighting pose, he clearly wasn’t planning on running. The tip of his clenched fist was trembling.

Orphen took a step forward. Ord jumped and took a step back.

Orphen stepped forward again. Ord stepped back.

Another step. ...Another step.

Orphen got bored then. He picked up a nearby chair.

“...Huh...?” Ord exclaimed, stupefied, and Orphen threw the chair as hard as he could. After the man was knocked out by a chair to the face, Orphen turned to the rest of the crowd.

“Well, kinda half-assed the last one, but... is that proof enough?”

No one answered his question.

“Right here.”

There was a small room in the back of the bar. It appeared to be something of a wine cellar. The walls of the narrow, dim room were shelves top to bottom, all stacked with bottles of various kinds of alcohol. They weren’t exactly packed, but there was a respectable assortment.

On the floor, there was one board that looked removable. The old man casually shifted it open with his foot. It was less like a floorboard, really, and more like an obvious cover atop a hole in the floor.

The hole was square in shape, each side about a meter long, and it looked pretty deep. It must have been dug deep into the ground.

“A hole...” Claiomh observed with some dismay. “I feel like I don’t have many good memories associated with holes...”

“Well, it’s easy enough to climb down it.” Laniote entered the room carrying a rope ladder.

“What’s with the hole?” Orphen asked, peering down into it with Majic.

It was the old man who answered him. “It’s a well.”

“Then there’s water down there?” Claiomh pushed Majic aside and looked down the hole.

The old man wordlessly shook his head. Instead, Laniote answered her while securing the rope to a hook hidden under one of the shelves: “The person living here before this was a bar dug it. There are no rivers in Kimluck, right?”

“...There aren’t?”

“No. Although there’s one about ten kilometers east coming from Legdeborne, it’s not very big. Anyway, it costs a lot to buy the water from there,

so they were looking for an underground source instead,” he explained as he dropped the ladder into the hole.

Orphen interjected, “If there’s a river nearby, why didn’t they build the town near it?”

“That’s a good question,” Laniote said with a wry smile. “Well, I’m sure they had their reasons. Anyway, to get to the point, they didn’t find any water.”

“So it’s a dry well.”

“But in exchange, this person dug up something even better,” Laniote said, tugging on the rope to check its strength.

“Hunh?” Orphen frowned, but Laniote didn’t elaborate, merely grinning. *Well, guess I’ll find out inside.* He sighed, giving up on getting an easy answer. If he could get into the center of Kimluck this way, he wouldn’t complain.

But just then... a clamor suddenly came from the bar.

“Hm?” Orphen looked over at the door, curious. It was closed, but it was fitted poorly, so he could hear the commotion through the gaps in it. He held his breath and listened in, and the next thing he heard was a scream.

“What?!” Orphen hissed, and the old man quickly pocketed his chisel and opened the door. Orphen followed him and looked out into the bar from the doorway.

The patrons they’d entertained earlier were standing, gathered around something. They were facing the entrance, away from Orphen. That’s when...

Bam! One of the men was suddenly shoved back—meaning towards them. At the same time, the men split into two groups with a stir. That made the entrance—and the several men standing in it—clear to see.

...*What the?* Orphen thought, puzzled. It clearly wasn’t a typical bar fight.

Eight men filed into the bar. They were all wearing white, maybe some sort of uniform. It looked like armor, fitted precisely from collar to hem. The hoods they wore were white too, but they also had black cloth covering their mouths. Each one held a two-meter-long staff.

“Orphen!” Laniote called from the small room. “Those are priest soldiers from

the cathedral office!”

“They’re what?!” Orphen paled and looked back at the soldiers.

The bar patrons all went into a frenzy. “What do cathedral soldiers want here?!”

The soldiers looked back at them coldly and brandished their staffs, knocking the men back.

The men all leapt at the soldiers together.

“Master! Hurry!” Majic yelled, grabbing Orphen’s arm.

Orphen turned around. “Hurry with what?”

“What?! We’re going in the hole, aren’t we? It’s an underground passage or something! Come on, hurry!”

“But...” Orphen hesitated, looking back at the bar. One of the soldiers had just knocked down Fay.

“That bastard—”

“Master!”

Orphen clenched his teeth, almost jumping back out into the bar, but he was stopped by Majic and...

“...Young one.” The old man was looking hard at him. “Take this and go,” he said, almost too quiet to hear, and plucked a small bottle from one of the shelves, pressing it into Orphen’s hand. It was empty save for a small piece of folded paper.

“What’s this?”

“Look at it later. This place isn’t going to last much longer. Plus, if you leave, the cathedral soldiers will chase after you and we won’t have to get our asses kicked by them.”

“...Right.” Orphen nodded, after giving the old man a look. He pocketed the bottle.

“Come on!” This time it wasn’t Majic, but Claiomh, who had popped her head up out of the hole.

“I know,” Orphen grumbled and gave Majic a little push.

“You first. I’ll bring up the rear.”

“O-Okay...”

Watching Majic approach the hole unsteadily, Orphen turned back to the bar one more time. The brawl had intensified and there were now men lying on the floor, bloodied and unmoving. However, none of the soldiers appeared injured. The eight of them had formed a tight circle and were easily handling their opponents’ much higher numbers.

Soldiers...? I thought the nobles dismantled the Kimluck military after the Sand War.

“Young one,” the old man addressed him once more. Orphen looked over and he indicated the pit, which appeared empty now. “You’re up.”

“Right...” Giving the old man a gesture of appreciation, Orphen passed by him and returned to the small room. He heard the old man whisper to him as he walked by.

“...I don’t trust Laniote.”

Orphen stopped and listened, but the old man didn’t spare him a glance, merely continuing to mutter as if talking to himself, though the words were clearly directed at Orphen.

“I don’t believe Instructor Mädchen would hire assassins, but I also saw you with her.” He looked up. “Don’t let your guard down around Laniote.”

“...I know.” Orphen replied, realizing what must be in the bottle. “Thanks, really. See you.” Orphen grabbed the rope ladder and leapt into the hole.



The tip of the gleaming blade was already pointed at her chest, but that was as far as it was able to assert itself. Still, he had to be aware of the ending it had planned.

The dagger stared straight at her. He was unable to be so direct, and asked with a bit of regret, “The sanctuary... does not have the strength?” He laughed. “The sanctuary, which burned our city, destroyed everything, and forced even

you to submit to them?”

“Have you ever seen them?” Pain flickered on Isterviva’s face. She squeezed her eyes shut to endure it. “Their age is a grave issue for them now. Far more than even mine.”

“Everyone grows old.”

“Those words stand as proof that you do not understand the problem we face!”

Chapter VI: Tears Punctuated her Shout

“Sneaking in underground... this is pretty cliché.”

“Were you expecting something less predictable?”

Orphen looked up at the now-closed ceiling as he listened to Laniote. Kimluck had no sewer system, but just a glance around was enough to tell him that the passage they were in was nothing of that sort. He didn't know what sort it was, though.

“What... is this place?” Majic shuddered, his voice echoing down the underground passage.

Claiomh followed after him, petting Leki. “It's pretty big.”

“Stop gawking and hurry up, you two.” Orphen turned around and gave a warning to the two who were starting to fall behind. They hurried to catch up.

The passage was spacious, as Claiomh had observed. Enough to call it something like an “underground hall” instead of a tunnel. There were also several branching paths throughout it. The stone walls and floor were very old, and some parts of the ceiling had collapsed, creating the occasional mound of rubble. It was less like it had been intentionally created to be maze-like and more that passages collapsing and being buried had eventually given it a labyrinthine complexity.

There was even more sand in this underground passage than there had been above ground. The air was so thick with it that it could have caused a dust explosion if it were combustible.

Spitting out the sand that had accumulated in his mouth, Orphen asked, “So these passages lead all the way into the cathedral district?”

“That's right,” Laniote responded, bemused. He was the only one of them with a portable gas lamp. “Oh, it's a little low here. We'll have to be careful.”

“Be careful of what?” Claiomh asked with a blank look on her face.

“The gaps between all the rubble fill up with rain water sometimes,” Laniote

explained. “And sometimes, due to the pressure, they can burst...”

“Flash floods,” Orphen provided.

Laniote nodded. “No one’s maintaining this place, as you can see. The cathedral is aware of it, but it’s so vast that they can’t fill it in.”

“But what is it, anyway?” Majic asked a very reasonable question. It wasn’t a sewer system. That much was clear from its size. It was more like some sort of vast facility had been swallowed by the earth.

“Lots of Celestial ruins are underground, but... this place is too wrecked to be one of those.” Nornir buildings were usually protected by magic, so a lot of their ruins tended to be untouched by the passage of time. This place was too derelict to imagine it being one of their constructions.

Laniote shrugged in answer. “Anyway, we should hurry,” he said, indicating above them. The rope ladder dangled down from the hole in the ceiling. A moment later, however, it dropped down.

“...Guess the old man dropped it down.”

“I guess so. That’ll give us a little more time.”

The ceiling was a fair distance away, and from there, there was a long vertical shaft to the surface. It was probably a full twenty meters to the floor of the bar—not something you could descend without a ladder. As long as those cathedral soldiers didn’t have any rope with them, they’d probably have time to get away.

“Of course, they know about this passageway. I can’t imagine they didn’t bring ropes. We should hurry.”

“Yeah.”

They began trekking through a stuffy, dark passageway, Laniote in the lead. Not only were the passages vast, they seemed to go on forever, too. And on top of being dark, there was so much sand in the air, they had almost no visual on their path forward. The light from the portable lamp Laniote carried faded into the darkness before it could illuminate the walls, so a chilly pressure seemed to surround them as they proceeded. Orphen could feel himself taking smaller

steps than usual because of it.

He cleared his throat and asked quietly, "So, how much farther is it?"

"Are you curious?"

"Of course I am."

"...It's not that far a distance, but we can't take a straight path there. It'll probably take another four or five hours." Laniote turned around and put a finger to his thick lips. "We probably shouldn't talk too much. It won't happen as easily as an avalanche on a mountain, but we could cause a flash flood."

"Maybe we shouldn't make footsteps either, then," Claiomh said loudly.

Sighing inwardly, Orphen gave her a pat on the head—or rather, a pat on Leki's back.

The two of them both turned to him with surprised looks on their faces.

"What is it?"

"Your voice scares me the most. All shrill and blaring."

Claiomh puffed her cheeks out and turned to look at Majic, who was silently plodding along. "You're being awfully quiet, aren't you?"

"I've been thinking," he muttered, looking slightly irritated at the sudden attention. He glanced behind them at the fallen rope ladder and asked, "Why'd those soldiers show up so suddenly?"

"The cathedral dispatched them after the commotion yesterday. I bet they've had their eye on that bar for a while."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Claiomh pushed her way past Laniote and walked over to Majic. "I mean you haven't really seemed yourself since you recovered from your dehydration."

"I don't think that's all that strange..." Majic glanced up at Laniote as he smiled wryly and then went silent again.

"Hey," Orphen said to no one in particular, folding his arms behind his head. "Aren't we talking an awful lot after just saying how we should be quiet?"

"I suppose so," Laniote agreed cheerfully.

Orphen narrowed his eyes and asked, “Do I have the best ears here?”

“Do you?” Claiomh cocked her head.

“I’m good at guessing how many bees are in a box.”

Thinking, *You have some strange hobbies*, Orphen looked at Laniote and grimaced. “So you’ve noticed, right?”

“It’s not good, is it?”

He didn’t even need to tell them at this point. There was a dull vibration echoing through the passageway.

“...Do we have a way out?”

“Don’t think so.”

And just then—water rushed in from a side path and flung the four of them through the tunnels.

Orphen took a protective position—holding his head and curling up—as the unexpectedly tumultuous water jostled him about. He didn’t think he’d impact the wall despite the volume of water, thanks to the size of the passageway.

Sure enough, the water quickly dispersed and Orphen was deposited easily enough onto the floor. The water, heavy with sand, spread out all around him.

Brushing his soaked hair away from his face, Orphen shakily got to his feet. He felt like he’d been moved a few dozen meters from where they’d been walking. He couldn’t see the light from Laniote’s lamp anywhere. He’d either dropped it or it had gone out.

Orphen looked around in the darkness. He didn’t see any of his companions nearby. Didn’t hear Claiomh either, even though she would normally be the first to start wailing about something like this. Since he couldn’t even hear any of them... he couldn’t imagine they’d been swept much farther away than him, so maybe they were unconscious.

...Either way, not much I can do without light. Clucking his tongue, Orphen muttered quietly, “I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits...” With a quiet *pomf*, some bluish-white orbs of light appeared nearby.

They didn't produce that much light, so he'd only lit up seven or eight meters around him, but compared to complete darkness, any illumination was welcome. However, within that welcome light, he saw no one.

The water, which, mixed with the sand, had become mud, spread out to cover the stone floor. Orphen was covered in mud, too. Though there was somewhat less sand in the air now at least.

He took a deep breath, filling his nose with the damp scent of the passageway. "Claiomh, Majic, where are you?" He expelled the breath as he called for his friends. "If you can hear me, answer me. Where are you?"

There was no response. Just his voice, echoing through the darkness. All Orphen could do was start walking. It was easy enough to figure out where the water had come from from looking at the patterns of the mud on the walls. If he walked that way, he'd at least be able to find his way back to where he'd been before.

He walked on, leaving footprints in the mud... then he stopped. He could see a figure in front of him. The figure stood stock-still, watching him. It was a man, not large, but solidly built. He knew at a glance that it was Laniote.

Orphen silently sent his spirit lights forward. Laniote's figure emerged in the light. His hood was removed and he was staring at Orphen, face devoid of his usual mirth. He was silent just long enough for Orphen to get suspicious, at which point he finally opened his mouth.

"Wonder if it's because those two are so light. Seems they were carried much farther than we were."

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm glad you haven't found them yet." Orphen clenched his fist. He lowered his hips—not into his usual, more natural stance, but one exclusively suited for combat. He was already well aware of the several other figures standing behind Laniote.

"So, is it standard practice for you guys to lie about who you are when you first meet someone?"

"I'd like to think I did a better job than Salua, at least."

"Well, it seems you're not a monolith, so I thought I'd get a little use out of

you at least. I figured if I said the name Krylancelo, you'd jump the gun."

Orphen narrowed his eyes, focusing on the darkness. "You guys are forcing me to change my naturally trusting ways."

"...When did you realize?" Laniote asked with a curious quirk of his brow.

Orphen answered with a smirk. "In order to use sorcery, we have to compose a spell and then release it. To do that, we require an incantation, but it's possible to form a spell in the air without releasing it with an incantation. This can only be detected by sorcerers, but, put another way, it's something sorcerers will always detect. Well, I'm sure this makes no sense to you, but just listen." He continued contemptuously, "I asked you if I looked weird in this outfit, right? I was composing some super offensive sorcery pointed straight at you at the same time. Impossible to miss it. All I had to do to hit you with it was use an incantation, but you didn't show any signs of noticing, so I knew you weren't a sorcerer, at least."

"Well, I figured it was something like that. I didn't think I'd really be able to fool you into thinking I was a sorcerer. There were plenty of ways to see through it. But you had to make use of me even if you knew I was lying, because you'd never be able to get into the Holy City on your own," Laniote said quietly, taking something from one of his allies behind him—one of the cathedral guards. It was a large, sheathed sword. "That flash flood was a miscalculation, though. I didn't think we'd really trigger one just by talking. Because of that, I lost track of your friends."

He drew his sword. The blade emerged. A glass blade. It was the symbol of the Kimluck assassin squad, the Death Instructors.

Orphen used only his eyes to determine how many figures were nearby. He sensed at least three hiding behind Laniote. Beyond that, it was too dark to tell. He knew eight of them had entered the bar above.

Laniote held his sword up in front of him, showing Orphen his usual cheery smile. "I should introduce myself. I'm Name Only. One of the defenders of Kimluck."

"That so..." Orphen grunted, and sent an order to the fairy lights floating above the cathedral guards. They flashed bright for a split second, then

vanished. What he'd done was simple. He'd raised the brightness of the lights, causing them to use up all their power and go out. It wasn't enough to blind them, but it did make Laniote—Name, rather—and his soldiers look up at them, distracted.

“I brandish thee—” Taking his chance, Orphen ran forward, whispering, “—Blade of Demons!” The weight of a sword appeared in his hand. Holding that weight at his side, Orphen dashed at Name.

Name noticed him and brought his attention back down, but his movements were a bit delayed. He brought up his glass sword to defend and Orphen smashed his formless blade against it. Name's peculiar glass sword shattered in an instant. At the same time, the weight disappeared from Orphen's hand.

Orphen kept his momentum going and crashed into Name even as the fragments of his sword were still in the air. He felt the Death Instructor's body hit the ground in the darkness. *If I press the attack, I can take him down, but...* It was too dangerous to try when he didn't know how many soldiers were around him in the dark.

Orphen ignored the Death Instructor at his feet and charged at the three soldiers waiting behind him. He launched his shoulder into the one in the middle. Leaping over the man as he went down, Orphen kept running without stopping. There were no soldiers behind those three, but...

“You won't get away, Krylancelo!” Name Only called after him. “The ladder we took and the rope the soldiers used to get down were both raised back to the surface! And you'll never find another exit out of here!”



When Majic opened his eyes, the world was upside down. He must have struck a pile of rubble headfirst when the torrent of water washed him away. All the blood had rushed to his head and the area behind his ears hurt like hell.

He sat up slowly and looked around. There was a light somewhere in the distance. In the white, round light, he could see several figures. They were a considerable distance away, but Majic instantly recognized one of them.

“Master...”

He climbed out of the rubble and stepped forward. He didn't know why, but he felt like he should hurry. He put a hand to his chest as if to ascertain what he was feeling. *There's something off about him. He's trying to run.*

Majic started to run as well, but—*squish*—he felt something strange under his foot. He'd stepped on something soft. He looked down, thinking it must have been a lump of mud, but discovered that Claiomh was lying at his feet... and he'd put his foot right on her face.

Waaaaaaaaah! He panicked and leapt back, but Claiomh seemed to be unconscious. She wasn't even twitching. He strained his eyes and found Leki next to Claiomh's face, staring up at him. Her companion was like a crow on a dark night, but his green eyes alone glittered, reflecting the far-off lights.

"What?" Majic whispered, quiet enough that Orphen wouldn't be able to hear him. He had a feeling Leki was trying to ask him something. He stared hard at the dragon, but Leki merely looked back up at him.

Majic glanced back in Orphen's direction. "If you don't need anything, I'm gonna go. I've got a bad feeling about this." He took a step, avoiding Claiomh. "...You take care of her, okay? You're way stronger than me anyway, right?"

However, the moment he raised his foot to leave, something appeared in front of him in a flash. "Wah!" He stumbled and stopped, glaring down at Leki. "What was that for?!" he whispered, getting down on his hands and knees to get his face closer to Leki. The baby dragon merely continued to stare up at him.

"I'm not Claiomh. I don't know what you're trying to say. What do you want from me? You can do anything, so why don't you just do it?" No matter what he said, there was no change in the dragon's eyes. He saw his own face reflected in the unblinking orbs. He almost felt like he was about to be sucked into them.

"Really..." Majic whispered again, and as he did, he noticed how powerless his voice was. That formless unease assaulted him once more, stronger this time. But... what was he so anxious about? Something suddenly flashed through his head.

...It's mental dominion. He was inside Leki's eyes. The Deep Dragons wielded the strongest mental magics on the continent, known as dark magic, with their eyes. *This anxiety I'm feeling is Leki's. Is that... what he wants to tell me?* Leki

still stared at him. He didn't nod or anything, but Majic felt like he heard an answer.

"But what are you worried about...?" Majic looked at Claiomh, puzzled. His heart lurched when he did, because of Leki's influence...? Or maybe it was his own emotions he was feeling.

Blood was dripping down Claiomh's forehead.

She hit her head during the flood! Majic hurriedly picked her up. Her arm fell, limp, to the side. She was completely unresponsive.

"Claiomh!" Majic shook her, but there was no change. She'd probably closed her eyes when she went into the water, then impacted something which had knocked her out. And since her whole body was soaked, she was chilled to the bone.

She might be... in real danger here. Majic had no knowledge of first aid, but the sense of anxiety Leki was sending him reinforced the confidence of his assessment. *The only thing I can do is resuscitate her with sorcery, but...*

Majic bit his lip, unsure. He had a good track record healing his own external injuries, but it was extremely difficult to heal someone else. He had all the information he needed about his own body's composition, after all, but it was basically impossible to gain such information on someone else.

"Can't you do it?!" He raised his voice at Leki. "What do you want?! If you can't do it, you really think I—" Majic raised his head then, remembering. "Master! Master could...!"



He glanced in the direction where the light had been, and just then—the faint lights far in the distance suddenly burst and went out.

“Wha...?” Majic panicked and tried to stand (though he couldn’t while he was still holding Claiomh).

In the now-retained darkness, he could hear the sounds of a struggle start up unexpectedly. He heard what he thought were Orphen’s footsteps and the clamor of multiple pursuers.

What happened...? Majic shook off the anxiety he was feeling and stretched out. He focused, lifting Claiomh up on his back. He listened to the footsteps, and before he knew it, Leki was leaping onto him. He hooked his claws into Majic’s clothes and scampered up to his shoulder.

Majic glanced at him and found him facing behind them. He must have wanted to be somewhere where he could see Claiomh’s face.

“Just wait, Master!” he shouted, taking a step forward. Claiomh’s feet dragged on the mud-covered ground. Her body was unexpectedly heavy—it occurred to him that no matter how light she was, she had to weigh at least 50 kilos—and he knew he wouldn’t be able to catch up to the running Orphen, but he quickly got an idea.

“Master!” he shouted, pushing through the darkness. He thought about creating some lights, but after a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. And considering how his master had purposely dropped his own lights earlier, it might be better for him to hold off. But if he did make some lights, he knew Orphen would notice them.

Dammit! Majic grimaced. *Why do I never know what to do? Master never hesitates.* One option was the correct one, but he couldn’t decide which to pick. He had a decision to make, but he couldn’t do it.

“Masteeer!” Majic finally raised his voice in a scream. “Claiomh and I are right here! Masteeer!”

Majic stopped. He sensed someone. Heard footsteps. Someone breathing. Some sort of presence...

He could feel it all around him. In the darkness his eyes had now adjusted to, darker, heavier shadows crowded around him. He realized he was surrounded. By eight cathedral soldiers wielding staves.



Orphen stopped, hearing a voice calling him. He turned around, careful not to snag his feet in the mud, but in this darkness, even with his honed sight, he only had a few meters of vision. He couldn't identify the boy beyond the deep black of the dark.

That was Majic's voice... Which way did it come from? It wasn't ahead of him, so Orphen made a quick about-face. "Dammit..."

"What uncanny timing..." The voice came from the dark.

In the next instant, a black shape appeared clearly before him.

"Agh!" Orphen hissed, jumping back. *He caught up to me?!* He groaned in shock and disbelief even as he took a fighting stance. He gained some distance from the shadow by jumping and the figure disappeared into the darkness once again. But that split second had been more than enough to identify him.

The Death Instructor... Name Only.

Orphen strained his eyes, but there was nothing in the spot his enemy had just occupied.

The man's voice alone carried to him. "If you'd kept running, I would have just cut through your back... You have some impressive luck."

I was running as fast as I could after pushing him back. Orphen looked left and right, asking himself, *He seriously caught up with me, just like that? What's going on?*

Plus, his enemy seemed to have better night vision than him. He'd chased right after him, after all. He was at a disadvantage with no light. Making a snap decision, Orphen intoned, "I call upon thee—"

"No light, please. You'll attract the other cathedral soldiers."

"What?" Orphen asked him, cutting off the formation of his spell. It was less that he agreed with the warning and more that he'd just reflexively gone along

with Name's relaxed suggestion, however.

He couldn't see the Death Instructor anywhere in the darkness that surrounded him. And he couldn't identify where his voice was coming from either, due to the echo.

He continued, without showing himself, "...After all, I'm going to be killing you. And I don't want any interruptions."

What is this? Orphen wondered. *I can't see, but he can. Is that possible?*

But Name wasn't giving him time to think. "Okay..."

With that one word, Orphen felt some pressure in his right hand. He used a technique to listen for his opponent's breathing. Turning around, he held up his left hand and shouted, "I release thee, Sword of Light!" shooting a shockwave and a bright white light in one direction. In the flash, he saw a glimpse of Name's shadow.

In that split second, the shadow moved to a position not illuminated by the light.

He dodged my sorcery?! He had only a second to groan in surprise before an impact sent him tumbling back. He fell into the mud, but leapt up quickly. He didn't even know where or how he'd been hit. It took a few seconds after he stood for his shoulder to start throbbing, so he surmised that that's where the blow had landed.

Enduring the pain, Orphen focused again. Name's presence seemed to have completely disappeared once more. He rubbed his shoulder, which ached stubbornly, and felt something cold on his hand. His clothes were still wet, but it wasn't that. It wasn't as cold as the water. He was bleeding. Pretty heavily.

"I repair thee, Scars of the Sunset..." he muttered, closing the wound.

Name quickly said, "Well, sorcery like that should be fine." There was a sneer in his voice. "...But that Sword of Whatever from before? I don't think you should do that anymore. We probably won't start any more flash floods from talking, but I can't guarantee anything with you firing off sorcery like that."

"Well then, if it gets to be that time, I suppose I should just tear the whole

place down and sink all of you with me. You should be ready.”

“Your last stand, eh? I’m surprised you’re already so pessimistic.”

“Oh, stuff it—” Orphen started, then realized how close his opponent’s voice was. He whipped his head up in surprise and found a person standing right in front of him. A black shadow, with darkness at its back, standing stock-still. He recognized its face, too. Could see its eyes. Amused eyes, staring straight at him.

“Laniote...” Orphen spoke his fake name without thinking about it.

“Yes, Orphen?” Name, perhaps also without thinking about it, used Orphen’s—well, not fake name, but other name.

They glared at each other, though Orphen wasn’t looking at Name’s face. His gaze was fixed on Name’s arm, which hung defenselessly at his side. The Death Instructor had something like a thread hanging from his right hand. It was a strip of leather thirty centimeters long, a dagger blade at its end. Looking closer, Orphen saw Name was wearing armor on only his right arm. It must have been so that he could swing that blade around without hurting himself. Other than that, he was dressed exactly the same as he had been before.

“You won’t run, will you? And leave your apprentice behind?” Even in the darkness, Name’s smirk was clear on his face. “Cathedral soldiers won’t hesitate to kill even children if they’re sorcerers. Even a girl who clearly has ties to nobility. After all, noble blood is the other half of your ancestry.” Invisible as he was in the darkness, it was as if the dark itself was sneering at him.

Orphen spat in his direction. “Luring me into this underground area, cutting off my avenue of escape, and even taking hostages... Sure is a lot of effort just to kill one guy.”

“I told you before that I prefer pragmatism, didn’t I?” Name’s sneer took on a self-deprecating air. Not that there was much difference. “It’s simple reality for human beings that no matter how much you train, if you’re alone, you’re no match for even three amateurs. They’ll gang up on you and take you down in no time. Or two of them will get away. I’m sure that doesn’t mean much to you, though. It’s you sorcerers who have transcended such a reality.”

The smiling darkness spread out around him. Orphen felt nauseous, assaulted by a sensation like a cold hand was rooting around inside his organs. He'd be defeated at this rate.

Orphen stared at the Death Instructor Name Only. He felt his pulse deep inside his ears. His vision was growing dark with red.

"Do you understand our fear, Krylancelo? To use your words, I've gone through a lot of effort just to kill you. I had to do so, to prevent you from using your sorcery." As Name spoke, he finally showed himself. He spread both arms and shouted loudly, "I will protect the Holy City even at the cost of my very life! I am not like Salua and Mädchen, the traitors!" He snapped his right wrist and the blade at the end of his leather whip danced through the darkness.

Orphen leapt back again. *Traitors...?* He watched the Death Instructor's charge as he thought to himself. *Mädchen I get, since she brought me here, but even Salua Solude?* He didn't know what made Salua a traitor, but he didn't have time to think on it now.

Orphen retreated, heels sliding through mud, and took a stance as he did. It was nothing too flashy—as long as he leaned forward slightly, he'd be able to attack. The problem was his opponent's dreadful speed. But at least for now, the Death Instructor was coming at him head-on. It didn't matter how far away he was. He just had to keep an eye on his opponent's weapon...

...It's gone?! The blade had disappeared from Name's hand.

Name lowered his speed in the next instant, then raised his right arm again. This should be the sign that he was *about* to attack, but the blade was already flying at Orphen's face from around Name's elbow.

"Tch!" Orphen clucked his tongue, protecting his face with his left arm. The blade dug into the meat of his arm, gouging him. The wound wasn't too deep, but as the blade pulled back, it bled heavily.

So that's what that weird weapon's for... He can wind up the cord and easily conceal it. Plus, he can attack without giving conventional tells. He was just swinging around a blade on a cord, so he wouldn't easily land a fatal blow, but if he could make his opponent bleed, they'd quickly lose stamina and find it harder and harder to focus.

While Orphen blocked, he aimed a heel kick at his opponent's leg to try and keep him in check. Name easily stepped back to avoid it. That was a move Orphen used a lot, too. As long as you weren't cornered, you wouldn't take a follow-up attack if you dodged backwards.

I don't have time to heal— Orphen determined, using another of his favored strategies: he dashed forward, chasing after his fleeing opponent, deciding to switch to offense.

...What...?! But Name had disappeared.

No... He knew where his enemy was. He should be farther forward. He'd just escaped past the range his night vision could make out. He was moving five meters for every two Orphen moved. Backwards.

He's too fast! Orphen was still composed enough to assess that his opponent's speed wasn't natural. He'd realized...

"What is with your physical abilities...?"

"I told you, didn't I?" Name said from the darkness. "At the cost of my very life..."

"You're a Hashashin—an assassin who uses drugs!" Orphen's realization echoed through the underground.

How do human lives come into this world? The love of the gods. The will of the gods. The promise of the gods. A miraculous meeting of chance. A great coincidence. Fate-like coincidence. Coincidence-like fate. There are any number of ways to describe it, but no one way that will satisfy everyone.

However, one thing can be stated with certainty: the human body works by chemical reaction. Thus, it can naturally be stopped by chemicals or bolstered by them.

"Are you crazy...?" Orphen's voice trembled with pity.

There weren't many drugs that could so drastically improve a person's physical abilities. The side effects—hell, the *expected* effects—would destroy the human body.

"I told you. I'm pragmatic."

He heard Name. Not from in front of him—he'd moved, soundlessly.

"We are always struggling to figure out how to fight you. The power of a human life is in the struggle. Have you heard that?"

"I'm not interested in outdated sayings. Hashashins are outdated, too—I thought those died out years ago."

Name didn't acknowledge the scorn in Orphen's voice. "Well, there's that much meaning in our power. We're not like you and your natural-born talent. You sorcerers all have the potential to be incredible warriors through just what you're born with." Each whispered sentence came from a different place.

Realistically speaking, he was probably just circling Orphen as he spoke, but his tone and the emotion in his voice made it difficult for Orphen to actually determine the precise direction it was coming from. He even seemed to be adjusting his distance from Orphen as well. It almost felt as if the whole world was shrinking and expanding around him.

"I'm seventeen. Can you believe it? All the drugs I used during my training have aged me this much. I've already dedicated half of my life to the gods..."

Orphen felt a chill run up his spine. "Have to say I prefer it our way."

"What should I devote the rest of it to..." Name went on without acknowledging him. "I think it will be taking your head."

Orphen was leaping before he even heard the words. A split second later—or maybe even less time than that—a sharp sound split the air behind him. Name had slashed at him.

I can't beat him unarmed... Orphen clucked his tongue, pressing down on his still-bleeding arm. He was starting to lose feeling in it. But it was too dangerous to use sorcery, too. *Then I'll...!*

Getting somewhat desperate, Orphen launched a kick at his opponent's face—his sturdy boot drew an arc through the air and connected with the faint outline he could see of Name's head. From the sensation he felt, the blow should have been akin to being struck by a bat. But Name's figure was still in his striking pose—he hadn't budged an inch.

A moment later, his shadow moved. It turned to face him. Orphen hurriedly pulled his foot back, but he was too late. Name was already swinging his arm up. Beyond his hand, his blade danced.

Shit! The blade had already pierced his skin by the time he could think that. It drew a jagged line down from his neck to his chest. Orphen gave an anguished groan and collapsed.

He stayed conscious as he tumbled to the floor, landing face-up. He looked up just as Name was swinging the blade down again to finish him off. He rolled to the left, dodging by a hair, and thrust off from the floor with his knees to get to his feet.

Just next to him, Name had broken his stance after his blade had missed.

Orphen quickly sent a kick with all the strength he could muster to the Death Instructor's ankle. Even if your muscles are strengthened and your sense of pain dulled with drugs, you shouldn't be able to do anything to strengthen your joints or harden your bones. Orphen lunged on Name when he fell to his knee, ankle shattered. He pinned Name's right arm, the one holding the blade, behind his back.

I'll use a small-scale spell to just break his right arm— "Fire, Lightbolt—" However...

Name was moving before the sorcery could activate.

What—?

He was pinned on the ground, his arm immobilized, but with that immobilized arm, he easily lifted Orphen up.

For a few seconds, Orphen was frozen, unable to see anything around him, including the floor. Then he felt Name moving. The Death Instructor was getting to his feet, with one broken ankle. He had to break free... *But I can't... Somehow, he's pinned me!*

—The darkness shifted— Name threw Orphen to the floor, their arms still entangled. Orphen tumbled upon impact, but at least he was able to gain some distance from the Death Instructor thanks to that. Distance—that meant that Name had sent Orphen flying with just one arm.

Nothing I've got works on him... Orphen could barely move, but he forced himself to raise his head. His knees were shaking and he couldn't stand. He had taken quite a bit of damage being slammed into the stone floor. His eyesight was clouded now, his night eyes failing him. All he could hear in the pitch blackness was Name's footsteps. One... then another.

The taste of blood filled his mouth. He could smell it too, choking him. It must have been filling his throat. That was when...

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!" Majic's scream—no, roar—resounded through the underground tunnel. He wasn't close. The sound was coming from far away. At the same time, a flash of light illuminated the area.

A boom and shake like that of distant thunder seemed to pierce Orphen's lungs from behind. The light flared up, creating a torrent of hot wind. He was sure of it—Majic had used some powerful spell.

Capable as he was of little else, Orphen looked in the boy's direction. He must have moved away from him while he was fighting. The boy was standing some hundreds of meters away. He was just a speck in the distance, but Orphen was sure it was Majic. Majic with something on his back...

Pillars of flame stood around the boy, giving off waves of heat. Shooting off a heat blast without focusing on a specific point could do that, but the amount of power the boy was generating was abnormal. Orphen had seen something like this before, but it was even stronger this time, giving off plenty of light. The mud around him had dried out from the heat and turned back into sand.

The explosion rocked the whole underground. *It's gonna come down...* Orphen thought to himself, too shocked to remember to feel fear. The whole underground might collapse. If that happened, it wasn't just them on the line—all the citizens of Kimluck above them would be in immense danger as well. Needless to say, the people in the tunnels had no chance of escaping.

"This is bad..." Orphen got to his feet. He could hardly move, but he forced himself upright.

The light provided plenty of illumination in the vast underground. Orphen looked around and found the man who was closest to him: Name Only. And when he saw the Death Instructor's face, he froze.

“Oh... this?” Name indicated his face with a lopsided smile. “It’s nothing to worry about...”

The Death Instructor was crying tears of blood. His eyes were red and swollen, bulging out of their sockets. Blood had seeped out of his thick eyelids and was starting to harden. He could see blood on his lips as well. His capillaries were starting to burst where they were weaker. Using psychotropic drugs or whatever they were to push your body past its limits meant doing that much damage to it.

The limits are there for a reason. Life is just chemical reactions, after all. And Name was pushing past those limits. But...

“It’s meaningless. Pain that the gods do not recognize is meaningless...” As if the dangerous tremors rocking the underground were just another meaningless thing, Name quickly lost interest in Majic and began approaching Orphen.

“I’ve attempted the Final Audience again and again... but the gods did not recognize me...” he muttered, as if to himself. No, he probably *was* talking to himself. “Mad sorcerer spies... foolish priests received Their words... but not I...” The Death Instructor didn’t wipe his tears or change his expression... just kept trudging forward in the reviving whirls of sand. As if his leg wasn’t even broken.



“That’s right. Even your master... received...”

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Orphen’s shout—no, scream—echoed through the space. He was screaming, his voice breaking, ignoring the pain even though it felt like his throat was about to tear. Orphen ran, squeezing the air from his lungs, spitting out blood and saliva. He leapt straight at Name Only as the Death Instructor slowly walked forward.

He took his fist, held down at his waist, and threw it forward with everything he had. Name didn’t even try to dodge. Orphen’s fist sunk deep into the Death Instructor’s solar plexus. Name’s abnormally solid body snapped and bent at that point, a dull pain settling in Orphen’s wrist at the same time.

The blow sent the Death Instructor flying backwards, where he finally collapsed and stopped moving. Tears of blood spilled from his eyes and bloody vomit spewed from his mouth as his chest expanded and he began to convulse.

Orphen slowly approached Name, cradling his right wrist. The Death Instructor wasn’t moving.

When he got closer, he realized his misunderstanding. It wasn’t that the man had intentionally held his ground against Orphen’s attack, he had just been too focused on what he’d been muttering to himself.

He was still doing it now, his voice hoarse. “What is it that the gods choose...? I’m right here... I know... what it is I must do...”

Orphen silently looked down at Name. His gut, where Orphen had struck him, had caved in, so much so that Orphen could hardly believe it himself. But he wasn’t sure if Name himself had even noticed.

“Sorcery must not be allowed to exist... In order for the world to survive... It’s the only... way...” Name’s eyes were unfocused, but Orphen could tell that he was looking vaguely in his direction. “Krylancelo.”

“...Yeah?” Orphen asked quietly.

Name smirked. “Am I going to die?”

“Looks to me like you offered up more than half of your life to the gods... whatever that means.”

“I see... That’s good, then.”

Orphen had no words to respond to him with.

The light Majic was emitting was still going, and the sand that glittered within it seemed to make everything terribly dull to Orphen.

“You said I was crazy, didn’t you?” Name was smiling like he found this whole situation incredibly amusing. His gaze was focused on Orphen’s right arm. The one he was hiding. “But your arm... To strike me with such force that you break your own arm... I assume you plan to then heal it with sorcery... That seems much more crazy to me.”

“I know. You’re... not crazy.”

Name’s smile widened again at Orphen’s response.

“That’s right. And it’s enough for me. I’m satisfied. I really am.” He laughed powerlessly—though it sounded more like a cough—showing his bloody teeth. “It doesn’t matter that I wasn’t able to kill you... There’s no way you’re finding your way out of this underground, after all.”

“...I don’t think that’s true.” Orphen wavered considerably over whether to say it or not, but in the end his desire not to leave it unsaid won out. He looked down at Name and took the small bottle out of his pocket. It was the one the old man had given him at the bar. He threw it against the floor and retrieved the scrap of paper that emerged from within. He spread it open and sighed. “Thought so. It’s a map of the underground.”

Name didn’t change his expression even after he heard that, but that might have just been because he didn’t have the strength to do so anymore.

Orphen pocketed the map and went on, “You were a lousy liar... The old man had caught on to you. A swindler’s logic can only take you so far.”

“Ahahahahahaha!” The resounding laughter indicated heretofore undisplayed strength. Orphen merely looked on as Name laughed loudly, eyes empty, but the Death Instructor eventually trembled, coughing out words like a curse. “A swindler, eh? That’s rude.” There were strained laughs in between his words. “Call it preaching. You learn it at Instructor School.” His laughter wasn’t vocal now, just a trembling of his head. “He didn’t believe my words. He’s on the path

to ruin. As are you, Krylancelo.”

He lifted his head, looking up at the empty ceiling, his eyes not reflecting anything. “If you weren’t, it wouldn’t be fair. After all, you —ed me.”

“You —ed me,” the Death Instructor repeated.

Orphen just listened, silent. He couldn’t feel the multiple lacerations, bruises, or his broken right wrist either. All he felt was fear over the approach of a different kind of pain swirling inside his head.

All Orphen could do was stare, trembling in fear. He’d been listening to his words, after all.

Name Only’s convulsions hastened. His tears and saliva had dried, his face was unmoving, looking almost like a blood-colored mask. His only movements were small twitches, which eventually stopped.

Time passed, and he remained still.

Majic’s light faded, darkness once again enveloping the area.

Orphen recalled the Death Instructor’s last words.

You —ed me.

You killed me.

He screamed.



He thought the tremors would never end. Of course, if they didn’t, they would eventually end all of their lives instead. But in the end, the underground settled after some time. They’d managed to avoid being buried alive.

Eight cathedral soldiers lay around him. They had all been knocked out by the blast of heat and light he’d sent out in all directions.

Majic let out a relieved breath. The soldiers had all rushed him at once. It had been a gamble taking them out with one big spell, but it had apparently worked. Though he was of course quite exhausted now, too.

“Hey, it worked... Right?” He spoke to Leki’s tail on his shoulder (the baby dragon would still only look toward Claiomh’s face). He shifted the weight of

the girl on his back and concentrated for a moment.

“I call upon thee... Tiny Spirits!” He thought it would work—he figured he couldn’t fail now—and his sorcery did indeed activate perfectly. Brilliant spirit lights shone above his head.

“That’s right. It does work.” Majic looked up at the lights and felt his cheeks flush. “I always wanted to know... I *can* do this. With enough determination. That’s what I was always missing before.”

He walked off, dragging Claiomh’s feet along the floor as he did (the height difference made this inevitable). Using the lights, he searched for his master. He could see him a considerable distance away, sitting down. Majic naturally headed in his direction, stepping gingerly around the fallen cathedral soldiers.

He kept speaking to himself, excited now. “Even if things don’t go exactly as planned, I can hold my own. I did just now, didn’t I? I mean, I was surrounded, in trouble. Maybe I can even heal Claiomh, too. Not that I wanna try, since it’d be scary if I screwed up.” Eventually his muttering ended up putting a damper on his enthusiasm, but he decided not to worry about that.

He’d defeated eight adversaries all on his own. Orphen had only beaten one—he could see someone lying collapsed beside his master in the distance. Thinking on that for a moment, he said, “That means I did better than him, doesn’t it?”

He probably should just let his master take care of healing Claiomh to save face, then. That was why he wasn’t doing it. He really did think that. Mhm. He did.

...He didn’t see Laniote anywhere, but he was sure the man was around somewhere.

“I’m doing really well, aren’t I...?” Majic nodded to himself. “It’s weird that Master doesn’t recognize that. That’s why—Hey, Leki, are you listening?”

Leki twitched his ear in response to hearing his name. He hadn’t seemed to have realized that he was the one being spoken to.

Majic clucked his tongue disappointedly and went on, “You really should listen, you know. Anyway, I’ve been thinking it’s weird. Master’s really

underestimating me, isn't he? I thought really hard after he got mad at me before. It's weird that he won't acknowledge me! That's why... I decided to get mad. Though I was a little sad that no one realized I was being quiet because I was mad."

Majic felt strength bubbling up in him as he spoke. He kept going without even sparing the time to breathe. He still had several hundred meters left to walk with Claiomh on his back, but that felt like a good amount to him right now.

"Yeah... I decided to get mad. 'Cause I'm doing really well. Why can't Master just see that? You understand, right? I bet everyone else sees it."

Leki wasn't listening, licking Claiomh's face instead. But Majic didn't mind. He just walked on, full of energy, even if it was just for show. Letting the bright lights lead the way.

Ahead, his master sat feebly on the floor, but it would take another dozen or so steps for Majic to realize that Orphen was unconscious, eyes staring emptily ahead. Until he did realize, he kept on talking.



Tears punctuated her shout.

When he noticed, he grimaced. "You do not understand the situation we are in either!" Brandishing his blade, he spoke hatefully, "'Several decades'?! We may not even have tomorrow!"

"You're wrong! You will not perish!"

Silence settled between them like a wall. Speechless, all he could do was grip his dagger with trembling hands. And she stood stock-still, rigid and tall.

"...You will not perish." Her tearful green eyes trapped light inside like frozen gems. "I will protect you. I swear I will."

He stared at those eyes, her words piercing his heart, though he didn't let them shake him. He groaned with a bitter smile. "Were you not the one who slew my brethren? As a pawn of the sanctuary?"

"Yet if I die, there will be nothing left to protect you."

Istersiva feebly shook her head, her gaze weakly settling on the blade he carried. This was the first time she'd acknowledged the dagger, he realized.

"...We don't understand." He came back to his senses, his tone devoid of its previous fervor. "What is happening? Why must we be hated? And why... must we lose you?" He covered his face and shouted, "Everything was perfect! The world was full of peace! If no one had done anything, no one would have to die! So why?! Why did this happen?! ...Why did this happen...?" He repeated, shoulders trembling.

"You know nothing. That is exactly what we feared. All that I have done to prepare, I did to prevent just such a thing from happening..." The hesitation was gone from her voice, though not the weariness. He knew well that there would be no end to her fatigue. What was giving her strength was her belief, her conviction.

Istersiva repeated herself. "You know nothing. Not of the shadow of the gods who still pursue us, nor of the destruction that occurred in the Serpent's Garden, nor of just what our descendants laid their hands upon. Perhaps I should have told you of all this." Her voice took on a pained sound. "But I couldn't... Maybe I was just being cowardly, but I couldn't. I can tell you with pride now, it was not impossible. But I just couldn't." Her voice trembled once. But just once. "The world... Our world, Ayrmankar..."

He looked up at the unnatural quality her voice had. And... he saw something he couldn't believe.

She was just before his eyes. Almost close enough to touch. But being careful not to.

He had never had an opportunity to see her this close before. Her cool eyes, quiet but eloquent, seemed to reflect his infinitely, like opposing mirrors.

She had just one answer for him.

"The key to the destruction of Kiesalhima is already inside the lock."

Epilogue

She stood alone in the dark of night. Rain fell ceaselessly outside. The scent of it filled even the room she was in, due to the gaps in the walls and roof.

The quiet darkness of the night surrounded her, seeping into the shadows of the room. There was no light, no wind or stars or cool breeze, just the scent of night around her.

A night gazing at the darkness, blade in hand... Azalie thought to herself, feeling the weapon in her hand. It was a longsword in a sheath of simple leather, a detailed relief of the moon and a beast on its grip, not currently visible in the darkness.

The Sword of Baldanders. Ironically, it was a weapon created by the Nornir in order to wipe out human sorcerers two hundred years ago.

It had been a long time since she'd put on her combat uniform, but it fit like she'd never stopped wearing it. Like an old friend unconcerned with the time they'd spend apart. The sword was too long to wear at her hip, so she carried it by a strap tied about the sheath. She had no other weapons. She'd found plenty of weapons that would probably be useful in Celestial ruins, but she'd decided in the end that it was her sorcery over all else that she should be relying on. She'd had plenty of bad experiences trying to rely on Celestial magic.

I've got five wasted years I have to make up for because of that. A smile came to her lips. *It's the same for you, right, Krylancelo?*

She glanced around the dark room. The dwarf brothers were lying in a corner, asleep. They likely wouldn't wake up anytime soon—not while the sleeping spell was still affecting them, at least.

Something else suddenly came to mind and she searched for it as well, sighing when she located it. She strode slowly to the simple bed and the book containing the world's secrets that lay carelessly atop it.

The World Book... *You read this too, Master... five years ago.* Azalie bent down, touching the book's black leather cover. *You infiltrated this city ten years*

ago... and then searched for this book? But why, Master...?

She narrowed her eyes, picturing her Master's face. Not only was he her teacher, she had thought of him as her closest friend as well... and she had killed him with her own hands.

Another face surfaced, replacing Childman's. A younger face, a child's, really. A boy with a hint of innocence still remaining in his features. Her brother.

Krylancelo... Tish, too... Everyone in our class...

Azalie picked up the book and stood.

Why was Master teaching us, anyway? It wasn't because the elders asked him to, I'm sure of that. So why... what was it for? With a prick of pain in her heart, she added, *Why did you train Krylancelo to kill me...?*

The apparitions in her mind gave her no answers, of course. She shifted her gaze as if searching for those answers. The sword told her nothing. All the book contained was war records and myths that she could only find meaning in around half of the time. The sleeping dwarves' only utterances were snores. And if the dark of the night were to answer her, the night would lose its value.

She was the only one who could see her own face. She was the only one who could hear her own voice. There was no one to give her her answers. She was well aware of that fact.

"I have to find out myself. And I have to put my own strength and life on the line to do it." She gave voice to the words, then glanced at the book in her hand.

The question was, where should she head, and in search of what? And what would she be able to find? She knew the book held no answers, at least.

Alone in the darkness, Azalie considered the doctrine of the Kimluck Church. *There's a legend... the myth of the three goddesses, the Weird Sisters: Urd, Verthandi, and Skuld, who rule over the past, present, and future. They're all goddesses, but they can never meet... the past knows not of the present and future, and the future is cut off from the other two. The present alone knows of the past and believes in the future, but is trapped in her cage, powerless...*

“No, she’s not trapped,” Azalie murmured, tossing the book to the floor.

She flicked her wrist and whispered sharply, “Verthandi is always walking forward in search of Skuld!”

Foom! With her whisper, the World Book went up in flames. Its pages flapped inside a white ball of fire... and it turned to ash without so much as a scream.

Rain fell ceaselessly outside. The grey and black of the book’s ash mixed with the sand in the air, creating an odd color of dust. The ash made no comment, but it never ceased its whirling, like an endless cycle of life and death.

She steeled herself inside that cycle, telling the darkness, “Tonight... Yggdrasil Cathedral. The center of the Kimluck Church. You didn’t make it in time, Krylancelo...”

Afterword

“...Huh? What am I doing here...?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh. The author’s here, too. That must mean...”

“Right you are. Book’s over.”

“Then, is this the terrifying Trader Junction, where if you show up here, you’ll never again show up in the main story?”

“You know, the readers are never gonna get an old reference like that, but yeah.”

“Th-Then what am I doing here? I’m practically guaranteed second place in the character popularity rankings, aren’t I?!”

“Calm down, Majic.”

“You want me to calm down?! Why?! What am I doing here?! This has got to be some sort of mistake, r... Huh?! Wait, is this actually the reader submission page of Dragon Magazine? Then it makes sense for me to appear at the end of the book... But wait! I don’t have my crossdressing set, I just sent it out to get it cleaned the other day!”

“What are you so upset for? And just so you know, this is the afterword of the new paperback.”

“Aaah (in tears)... then this really is the end for me. Just like this author, who bought a BEAR down jacket the other day and was told by all his friends that it really didn’t suit him... *sob sob*...”

“Oh, shut up. The author likes that jacket. And your full name sounds like some kind of dish soap.”

“That’s a registered trademark, so we can’t put it here (just kidding). *weep weep*”

“Seriously, calm down. Anyway, how old are you right now?”

“Huh? ...Umm, seventeen, I think. And I feel like I was traveling on my own,

too...”

“That’s right. This is entry #2 of the scrapped characters graveyard: the 17-year-old version of Majic from the Orphen 3YL setting.”

“3YL setting?”

“It stands for ‘three years later.’ I really like making these extra settings. I actually have a short piece I wrote way before it was serialized in Dragon Magazine, and this guy was the main character. And he was seventeen.”

“So this is after the series ends?”

“Yep. It’s not set on Kiesalhima. And Orphen’s already married, living out in the undeveloped boonies. You’re on a journey to visit him. That’s the rough outline, anyway.”

“I see.”

“Of course, this is all scrapped stuff, like Rats, the gator girl in the previous afterword. It’s not stuff that will definitely happen in the future as this series goes on. I haven’t done any thinking on Ratsbane’s mother yet, and it’s not set in stone that the main character will definitely have a daughter like her yet either.”

“But it’s a possibility.”

“Well, I won’t deny that. Anyway, there’s no need to worry too much about it, K from Sapporo (lol).”

“Vnya~”

“Anywho, let’s get back to the main story stuff, then. In the last book, I wrote that the current Kimluck arc would be three books, but... I think it’s gonna be one more.”

“So... there’s gonna be two more after this one?”

“Yep. I mean, the story’s not getting anywhere... ○○○ was actually supposed to have xxx’d already by this point... and ○○○ was supposed to have seen △▲△▲ and been all surprised, like, ‘whoa!’ ‘wah!’ too.”

“...I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, I’d hope not.”

“Guess that’s true.”

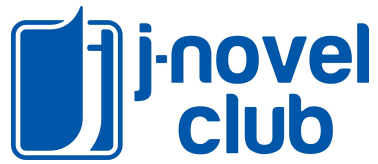
“Mhm. And since you’re so accepting, I’ll give you this Certificate of Character Scrapping. Here y’go.”

“Ugh... (Just you wait, author).”

“Well, that’s all for now!”

“Goodbye!”

Yoshinobu Akita, December 1996



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by Yoshinobu Akita

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The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. At the top, a large, dark, bat-like creature with wings and a single eye is shown. Below it, a young man with dark hair and a red collar looks down. In the center, a character in a yellow hooded cloak is being held by a young girl with orange hair and green eyes. In the bottom left, a large, close-up face of an older man with a white headband is visible. The overall style is anime-inspired with a dark, moody atmosphere.

Author
Yoshinobu Akita

SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

8. RAIN ON MY HOLY CITY, TEARS OF BLOOD!