



Author
Yoshinobu Akita

SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

1. HEED MY CALL, BEAST!



"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

As if responding to his voice, the room was suddenly illuminated by a pure white burst of light.



Claiomh snatched Volkan's sword and recklessly slashed at the mysterious assassin, Black Tiger!



Orphen couldn't move a single muscle in his body.
The sight before him had paralyzed all of his senses.



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Prologue

“Don’t look at me!” screamed the woman. But her words didn’t reach the boy standing in the doorway. The sight unfolding before him had frozen him to the spot — as much as he wanted to, he simply could not avert his gaze. His eyes were fixed on the woman crouched on the floor. The room itself was quite simple and practical. Only the bare necessities were present. There was an old bed, a simple desk, a bookshelf, a rack for clothing, and a window with a closed pair of thick curtains, blocking out all sunlight. The floor had but a single worn-out carpet, and upon that carpet was an anguished woman, squirming on the ground.

“Please, don’t look! **Don’t look at me!**” she screamed, with desperation in her voice. The boy heard the words, but his brain simply could not process them. He merely stood in the doorway, unable to move a muscle, as he watched the sight unfolding before him.

He was but a young boy of around 15 years of age, and of small build. His short black hair and black eyes reflected a tone of childlike innocence left within him, but it was immediately clear that he was already mature far beyond his age might imply. His general physique was very slim, but he was by no means frail. At first glance his physique was merely slim, but a closer look would show the toned muscles he had gained through rigorous combat practice over the years. His very body had been sharpened like a blade, and so even while rooted to the spot, his stance displayed perfect form.

Even with all of his honed instincts and training, however, the situation before him left the boy completely unable to form even a single coherent thought. He could neither run away nor approach. All he could grasp was that the woman before him was screaming desperately for him not to look at her, and that she was down on her knees, covering her face as tears fell through between her fingers leaving their marks on the carpet below.

“Azalie?” The boy called out, “Why are you... crying?” The boy reacted as

though he'd never seen this woman ever *cry* before.

The woman didn't respond. Perhaps she couldn't even hear his voice at this point — all she could do was cover her face with both hands and scream “Don't look at me!” over and over.

The woman in question wore a black robe covering most of her figure. This robe was a sort of uniform reserved for the top Black Sorcerers of this continent, and was a status symbol that indicated that she was highly ranked in the Sorcerers' institute known as The Tower of Fangs. It was nigh-unheard of for a woman of her age — barely 20 years old — to be wearing this robe, which was proof of her talent and skill as a Sorceress. Her black, wavy hair was cut to a fairly short length, most likely for practicality in combat training. Although she kept her face hidden with both hands, her light-brown eyes peeked out from the gaps between her fingers. She was about as tall as any boy of the same age, and her arms and legs were finely toned, making her figure all the more splendid even beneath the robe.

“Don't look at me! Please, please *go away!!*” she screamed. But the tone of her voice wasn't one of sorrow. Instead, it sounded like someone lashing out in anger. Someone unable to control themselves.

The boy noticed this, and very carefully took a couple of steps closer into the room.

“Azalie?” he asked nervously, “what happened? Just wait, I'll go and get Master Childma—”

“Don't!” she yelled, “It's already...” After regaining her composure slightly, her tone of voice changed from anger to something else. Although she still hid her face, the boy was able to make out some of her mumbled words.

“No... It's too late. Not Childman, not the Elders... Don't bring anyone else here.”

“But—”

“Get out! Get away from me! Just *go! Get away from me!*” Azalie commanded the boy to leave, raising one hand from her face pointing to the doorway for him to run away. The moment the boy saw her hand, he noticed immediately

that something was out of place. Through rigorous combat training it made sense that her fingers could not exactly be described as delicate, but what entered his vision was far beyond the realm of battle-hardened. For a brief moment, it almost seemed as though her very fingers had warped into *claws*.

Doubting his own eyes, the boy called out to her once more.

“Azalie? I just saw, your hand—”

“Please, just hurry up and *get away from me!*” she screamed again. At that very moment, her body began to distort. Suddenly her wavy black hair burst out into tentacle-like appendages accompanied by the gruesome sound of flesh being torn apart from the inside. As the nightmarish sounds of bursting blood vessels resounded through the room, inhuman, blood-splattered appendages suddenly began to sprout from within the woman’s body. Organs that were clearly not of human origin grew upon the outside of her body, and with a clanging noise, her belt fell to the floor — the leather and buckle both torn apart from the strain — as her entire body began to expand in a similar grotesque manner. The boy shrieked as he watched the horrific sight unfolding before him. And it was then that the realization finally hit him.

The woman before him was currently transforming into something *completely inhuman*.

As her lower body began to expand further and further, the weak fabric of her black robe was gradually torn to pieces. The back of her robe burst open to reveal a pair of blood-splattered wings like those of a bat. But that wasn’t all — far from it. As those leathery wings expanded, the woman vomited all sorts of bile and bodily fluid from her mouth. It spilled out on to the floor. From between the fingers covering her face, bits of shredded meat and blood leaked through and flowed down to the ground as her very bodily structure was ripped apart from within. Her lower jaw fell open so much that it looked as though it were about to fall off, and a lizard’s tongue peeked out from within her warped mouth.

“*Don’t look at me!*” only her voice remained unchanged, the desperation in it as apparent as ever. It wasn’t the voice of some monster — it was Azalie’s voice, and none other.

“Azalie, I—” The boy tried to call out one last time, but he simply couldn’t find the words. By this point his brain simply could not keep up fast enough to compose a coherent sentence.

All while the boy tried to figure things out, Azalie’s grotesque transformation continued. The remains of her robe on her upper body were torn to shreds as her shoulders expanded, growing green scales over them from beneath her skin. In the blink of an eye her two arms had increased to four, and she had already grown to over three meters in height.

The woman formerly known as Azalie had now become this indescribably huge inhuman beast. Noticing its own tail, the beast spun around and seemed to have fully grasped its own appearance. The beast’s last words were the same as before, “Don’t look at me...” but much weaker in spirit this time. From behind its now-scaly eyelids covering fiery eyes, the beast began to move. With swiftness unbefitting the colossal creature, it turned to face the window before crashing out of it and tearing a huge chunk of the brick wall along with it. With a thunderous roar following every flap of its wings, the beast broke out of the Tower of Fangs and headed for lands unknown.

With panic and anxiety assailing all his senses, the boy ran through the mess of blood and gore straight towards the window. By the time he made it there, though, neither Azalie nor her monstrous form were anywhere to be seen.

Moving now as if in a trance, almost like he were dreaming, the boy examined the interior of the room once more. Right then, his eyes caught something he had missed until now. In the very center of the pool of flesh and blood permeating the room, there lay a single foreign object. It was a moderately large, rusted, bloodstained sword of some antique design.

It would be a long, long time until the boy met with the woman he knew as Azalie once more. Years passed since this incident. Time marched on, uncaring.

Chapter I: Business As Usual

...And as the years passed, the boy kept walking, walking forward, not stopping even once, all for... *Thud! Thud! Thud!* “Wake up! I said wake the hell up, you son of a bitch! If you don’t get out here in the next five seconds I’ll beat you to a death with a really big stick! *Get your lousy ass out of bed, dammit!*” Orphen turned over in his bed as the loud thudding and cursing continued from the other side of the flimsy bedroom door. It was a cheap inn that he was staying in, so the sound echoed easily throughout the whole room. Orphen didn’t mind that it was a cheap inn, though. In fact, he felt more comfortable staying in a place like this.

“We’ve got business to do, you lousy freeloader! I’ve been putting this plan together for days, and you’re gonna ruin it by oversleeping!? If that’s your plan then I’ll put you to sleep so hard you’ll never wake up again, how’s *that* sound for a plan, asshole!?” The thunderous roaring gradually roused Orphen from his slumber. He rubbed his tired eyes and gazed up at the old, worn-down ceiling of his room. After being so unpleasantly awoken by all the racket, he turned his gaze to the room’s window. Judging by the angle the light was shining in from, he supposed it must be just before noon.

While Orphen was getting his bearings, the intensity of the yelling and thudding on his bedroom door increased.

It got to the point where it almost seemed like the person on the other side was trying to break it down.

“Oh, so you wanna stay holed up in there all day, do you? Fine! Then that room’ll be your coffin! I, Vulcano Volkan, will even do you the honor of lowering you into your damned grave if you just *get the hell out here!*” *If I go out there... He’s gonna kill me, he says?* thought Orphen to himself, still half-asleep.

Who, Vulcano Volkan? That little brat’s gonna kill me? He’s got some nerve, the little bastard— Orphen sat upright in bed and moved the sheets to one side, and in an annoyed voice, “*Shut up!*” he yelled in the door’s direction. The room

instantly returned to silence as Orphen finally got out of bed, scratching his bare chest. He spat in the direction of the door before deciding to get dressed. He grabbed his shirt that had been flung over the back of a nearby chair and slipped it on. Hanging from the same chair was a familiar silver pendant, which he picked up and examined for a moment. Hanging from a thin silver chain, the pendant's design was that of a downward-pointing sword with a one-legged dragon wrapped around it.

The pendant glittered slightly in the light as Orphen spoke to it as though it were an old friend.

"You hear that? Sounds like I'm about to get killed," he muttered. With a bitter smile, he hung the pendant around his neck.

The moment he did that, there was another loud *THUD* on the door.

"Who the hell are you telling to shut up!? Here I come to this stinky old shack to bring you a business proposal and this is how you treat me!?" Ignoring the noisy brat, Orphen walked over to the mirror in the corner of the room and took a quick look at his reflection. The face that greeted him was that of an irritated young man somewhere around his early 20s. The cynical look in his black eyes may partly have been because of his rude awakening, but his facial features suggested that this was just the way his face looked. His short black hair matched his eyes, bringing his whole look together.

Meanwhile, the person on the other side of the door sounded as though they were about to pop a vein.

"If I have to tell you to get out here one more time, I'll flatten you to death with a rolling pin and make a cake out of your corpse! Now hurry up and get your ass—" Finally having had enough of this nonsense, Orphen thrust his right hand out towards the door and with a practiced movement, rapidly chanted something.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" With that, the room was suddenly illuminated by a pure white burst of light. What shot out of Orphen's hand was a strip of burning light. It flew like a swift, raging torrent, blasting the room's large wooden door into tiny fragments with a thundrous *boom*! The remains of what was once a door now danced in the air as tiny fragments as they fell to the

ground, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

On the other side of the demolished doorway stood a small, stout teenage boy roughly 130 centimeters in height. His large, round eyes — somewhere between brown and black in color — were wide with shock as he stood there completely dazed by the unexpected explosion. The fur cloak he wore was clearly quite filthy, and not just from the cloud of dust. His messy black hair also looked as though it hadn't been washed in several days — if not weeks.

Orphen turned to the boy and, narrowing his eyes, he spoke.

“‘Get your ass out here,’ was it?”

“...If you could please find it in your heart to humble us with your presence, I feel it would be mutually beneficial to all parties present...” The boy corrected himself in a timid voice from within the dust cloud.

“Much better. See? Is it really that hard to ask politely?” remarked Orphen with a satisfied smirk on his face. As the dust settled, he got a better look at the boy before him. He was a short, stout, almost plump-looking dwarf, roughly 18 years of age. His short stature of a mere 130 centimeters was actually about average even for a fully-grown dwarf. His fur cloak was also the conventional outfit of most dwarfs, beneath which Orphen spied the bulky-looking scabbard of a longsword.

The boy — Volkan — took a look at the still-sizzling fragments of the demolished door and, gazing timidly upwards to face Orphen, he continued their conversation.

“Err, so umm, Sir Orphen, with that said it would be very pleasing if we could proceed to getting around to business...”

“I’m gonna go have breakfast first. You go wait outside.”

“Very well, sir,” Volkan replied almost inaudibly. His round eyes still open wide, he dashed down the corridor toward the stairs. He stumbled all the way down them, yelling curses at Orphen all the while.

Paying no mind to this, Orphen merely stretched his arms to help himself fully wake up.

“Business as usual, huh... But before that—” Orphen raised his right hand in the direction of the shattered door once more, and chanted something else. “I repair thee, Scars of the Sunset.” The words left his mouth and their inflection seemed to wrap itself around the wooden shards. At first glance they appeared to be floating in the air, but on closer inspection it looked more like time was flowing in reverse as the splinters and fragments began to reassemble themselves into their original form. Orphen strode over to the now-repaired door. He rapped against it with his knuckles.

“Good enough.” There was still a small burn mark in the middle of the door, but Orphen decided to ignore it, shrugging his shoulders as he closed the door behind him.

The cheap, run-down inn that Orphen was staying in was known as Bagup’s Inn. Orphen had never seen any customers besides himself even so much as step into the place. Not that this was particularly strange however, considering Bagup’s Inn was located down a back-alley right in the middle of this Commercial City with shops, stores, and inns filling every one of its streets. While the building itself was certainly quite old, it was always spotlessly clean and well-maintained. It wasn’t the cheap old shack that Volkan had made it out to be by any means.

Orphen came down the stairs into the bar area to find Bagup — the owner of the inn — cleaning the glasses and mugs behind the counter, while Bagup’s son, Majic, was mopping the floors. While supposedly directly related by blood, Bagup and Majic couldn’t possibly have looked any less alike. Bagup was a large man with a bushy mustache who might easily be mistaken for a pirate if he were spotted anywhere near a boat. Majic, on the other hand, was a rosy-cheeked, blonde-haired prince of a boy whose eyes still retained a touch of childlike innocence.

“Good morning, Mister Orphen,” said Majic politely. Orphen, having been staying at Bagup’s Inn for a full 2 years straight by now, returned Majic’s greeting with some playful banter.

“If you call being threatened out of bed by a dwarf a ‘good morning,’ I’d hate to see what you consider a bad one.”

“Would that happen to have anything to do with that loud explosion a moment ago?”

“Oh, that?” Orphen asked jokingly, “That was me telling Volkan to shut up by blowing his face up, and the door along with it. But don’t worry, I already fixed the door.”

While explaining himself to Majic, Orphen took a seat and asked Bagup to prepare him a quick and easy meal.

“Could’ve sworn I heard him yelling about some ‘business proposal’ or other,” Bagup said with a smile on his face. In stark contrast to his rough appearance, he spoke with the voice of a jolly old man. While Bagup went about lighting up his brand new miniature gas stove to cook up some oatmeal, Orphen leaned an elbow on the counter with his face resting in his hand and let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Business proposal? Not one of that brat’s scams has been legitimate business since the day I met him. Since he hasn’t told me a thing about this one, either, I’m not about to go getting my hopes up.”

Bagup looked over to Orphen with a grin on his face.

“What, you’re doubting him before even hearing out what he has to say?”

“I’ll tell you right now. Only an idiot would trust a single word that comes out of that good-for-nothing’s mouth.”

Bagup seemed to enjoy teasing Orphen on this subject. “Guess that makes you a pretty big idiot for always playing along anyway then, right?”

“You *do* know how much that brat owes me, right?” Orphen replied sarcastically. “I need to get back every last penny of that plus interest, and when you’re coasting along on the road to bankruptcy even stupid schemes start to sound appealing.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have tried your hand at being an illegal moneylender in the first place, then.”

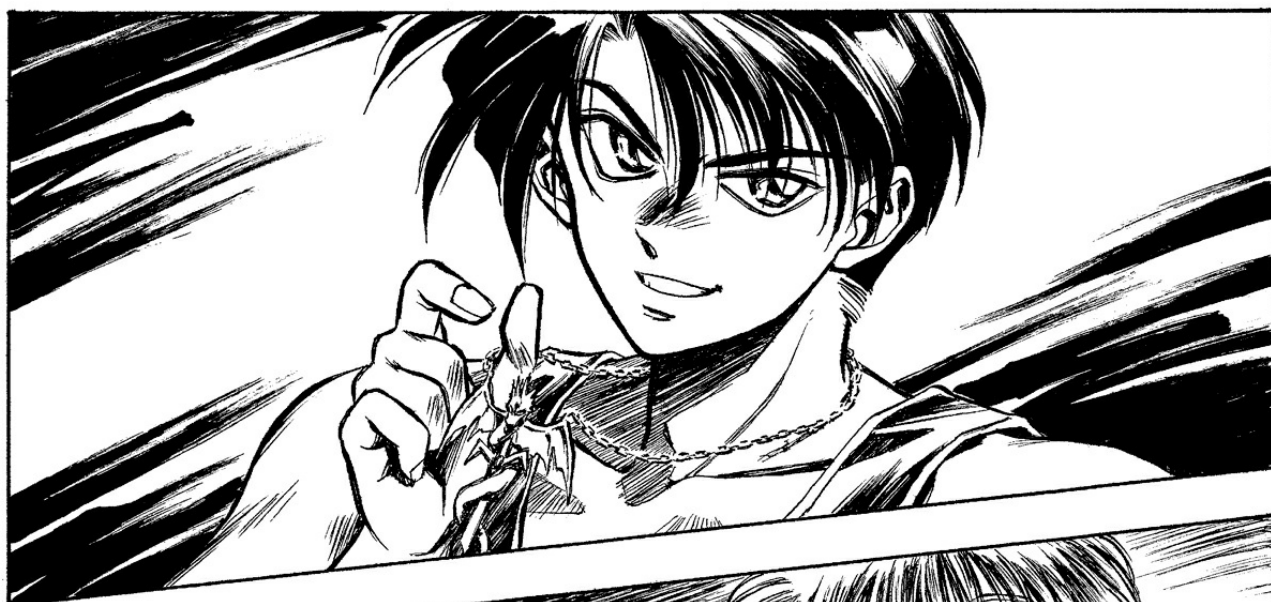
“Maybe you’re right... Hell, I’ve never heard of a debt collector who has to help out his own debtors with work just so they can pay him back.”

“Funny, that, because I happen to know at least *one* person who fits the bill,” said Bagup with a smile as he handed Orphen his oatmeal. Orphen laid the bowl on the counter to let his food cool down, then turned to Majic as if trying to change the subject.

“Hey, Majic, I can teach you some sorcery later if you want. For a fee, of course.”

“Really?!” Majic’s face lit up as he turned to face Orphen, bumping the mop in his hands against the leg of a chair.

“Hey now, don’t you go getting my son wrapped up in another one of your scams,” Bagup warned sternly. In response to this, Orphen held up his pendant for all to see. Out of all of Orphen’s belongings, it was basically the only thing he owned with any real value to it. “You *do* remember who I am, right? The great Black Sorcerer Orphen of the Tower of Fangs. Just leave Majic in my capable hands and I could turn him into an amazing Sorcerer. It’s the chance of a lifetime.”



“I can’t see my Majic being fit for sorcery no matter how you spin it,” said Bagup. Rubbing his moustache, he continued.

“Besides, the phrase ‘chance of a lifetime’ sounds a lot less convincing coming from the mouth of a guy with even less money than the kid he’s offering to teach.”

“For what it’s worth, I was even one of the candidates for Court Sorcerer back in the day.”

“Until they found out how you cheated your way there and you got disqualified, right? How many times do you think you can tell the same story and still expect anyone to believe you?”

“It’s fine, just trust me. Majic has a real talent for sorcery. He’s got that special *something* — a natural feel for it that a genius like me would recognize at a glance, y’know?”

“Do I really?”

“The floors aren’t gonna mop themselves, Majic,” said Bagup, who himself went back to cleaning glasses behind the counter as if to lead by example.

“There’s no way a genius Sorcerer like that — much less a candidate for the Thirteen Apostles — would be hanging around in a place like this working as a shady debt collector, no matter how much of a dropout he was. He’s just trying to butter you up by saying you have talent so he can scam you out of money, don’t fall for it.” After pointing his son to a corner of the room that hadn’t been mopped yet, Bagup turned to Orphen.

“Try not to tease him too much, alright? He looks up to you — for what reason, I don’t know — so he probably at least partly believes you when you go telling him lies like that.”

“Oh, c’mon, I haven’t told a single lie all day,” Orphen sulked. He picked up his spoon — so clean he could make out his own reflection in it — and began stirring his oatmeal.

“Majic really does have a talent for sorcery, and he’s still only what, fourteen? Instead of having him mopping floors, you should have him going to school,

where he can learn—”

“How to read, write, do math and learn history? I already have him going to school for that—”

“Not *that* kind of school, a Sorcery Academy I mean. There are plenty of good ones around.”

“And then what, have him aim for getting enrolled in the Tower of Fangs or something?”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far. The Tower of Fangs isn’t like other Sorcery Academies. It’s a little, well...” Orphen’s tone of voice changed awkwardly as he chewed on his oatmeal a little, finishing his sentence with “It’s a bit *unique*.” Leaving his spoon in his bowl, Orphen ran his fingers across his pendant once more. The sword-and-dragon pendant was given only to students deemed highly qualified in sorcery by the instructors at the Tower of Fangs. It was like a license of sorts.

Bagup was too busy watching Majic grumpily mopping the floor to notice the shift in Orphen’s facial expression. With a hint of curiosity in his voice, he casually spoke up again.

“So what makes you think Majic has any talent for sorcery, anyway?”

“Whaddya think is the one trait all talented Sorcerers have in common?” Orphen returned, equally as casually.

“Beats me, being the son of a virgin? If that’s the case, I’ll have you know that my wife was no—”

Orphen swiftly cut the jolly old man’s jest off by answering his own question.

“A pure and earnest passion for it. That’s the one, singular trait that all great Sorcerers share.”

Bagup burst into laughter the moment the words left Orphen’s mouth. He laughed so hard that he had to put down the glass he’d been drying off for fear of dropping it.

“If that’s true, then you must be one of the *least* talented Sorcerers in the world!” Orphen merely let out a little “Hmph” as if to say “think what you want,” then took out his frustration at being mocked on his oatmeal instead.



“Screw that damned human!” Vulcano Volkan paced up and down the alleyway in front of Bagup’s Inn, cursing Orphen with every breath he took.

“Who the hell does he think he is!? He’s just some slimy bastard with a few party tricks!” Next to Volkan was another, slightly shorter dwarf boy sitting on top of an empty barrel, swinging his legs back and forth. He was slightly younger than Volkan, and wore a pair of glasses with very thick lenses. Unlike Volkan, this boy didn’t carry a sword, but seeing as how the rucksack sitting next to the barrel was almost the same size as the boy himself, he clearly wasn’t travelling very lightly.

Volkan stopped in his tracks and turned to face the bespectacled boy.

“You think so too, right, Dortin?”

“...Huh?” The boy — named Dortin, apparently — clearly had not been listening to Volkan’s ranting.

“That Black Sorcerer human! Don’t you think he’s so full of shit!?” Volkan repeated what he’d just said, clearly in a very foul mood.

Dortin gazed up at the sky for a moment, as if at a loss for how to respond.

“...But you’re the one who borrowed all that money from him, right, Bro?”

It seemed that the two were siblings.

Volkan gaped his mouth wide open and spat out his words as though he were breathing flames. “Right, and that makes me a valuable customer of his!!”

I don’t think you’re a very valuable customer when you’ve failed to pay him back in time, Dortin thought to himself. He didn’t dare put these thoughts into words, however.

Apparently taking Dortin’s silence as agreement, Volkan continued his rant with the energy of a raging bull.

“Here I go through all this trouble constantly bringing him all these great jobs, and what does he do!? He acts like some huge bigshot, only to ruin every last job! I swear, I’ve met some good-for-nothing humans in my life, but that guy takes the cake and the whole birthday feast!”

I'm the one who finds most of the work, though... Dortin said to himself again; internally, of course.

The job this time was most certainly one that Volkan had found. This wasn't reassuring to Dortin in the least, however — he had tried many times to pry the details out of his older brother, but Volkan refused to say a single word about the alleged jackpot he'd stumbled across this time.

From all of Dortin's experience, this could only mean one possible thing: Trouble. Big trouble.

Volkan continued ranting to himself out loud, and very loud at that.

"And another thing! What's this crap about me having to talk to him '*politely*'?!" He spat. "He acts like he's in charge just because he's a few years older than me! What the hell's with that!? So what, you've got a couple more years under your belt! Fall off your high horse and break your damned neck while you're at it, damn it!" *If that's how you feel, then why do you always treat me the same way?* Dortin complained internally, as he was wont to do around his older brother. He gazed up to the blue sky peeking into the alleyway from above, feeling the late-Spring breeze on his face. Clouds dotted the sky, almost ominously, as if the sky itself were getting ready to come crashing down at any moment.



—*Tick, tock, tick, tock...*—

In the middle of the large fountain atop the fireplace stood the statue of a smiling Goddess holding up a clock, the twin pendulums of which were made to resemble a mother dog and a puppy as they swung back and forth between each other. The entire room was filled with huge, gorgeous furniture, which only served to sink Orphen's sense of dread all the way to the bottom of his stomach like a ship's anchor rooting itself firmly in the seabed.

The room was outright littered with such ornate furniture that Orphen didn't even know where the least expensive place to set his gaze was. The fireplace wasn't lit, nor did it need to be — Summer was just around the corner, after all. The pure white cloth on the table in front of him was less a tablecloth than it was an embroidered work of art. In one corner of the room stood a pair of

large, imposing, empty suits of silver plate armor crossing weapons with each other, and Orphen could have sworn they were glaring holes right through his back. The deep red carpet was so thick that he wouldn't have been surprised if he ended up tripping over it, and the huge wooden chair he sat in was carved with such an intricate, artistic design that it was probably worth at least as much as a gemstone of the same size. As the cherry on the cake, Orphen could've sworn that the chandelier dangling from the roof was bigger than the space of his entire boarding room from back when he used to stay at the Tower of Fangs. At first the room had just bewildered Orphen, but by now he was just trying to hold in his panic as he desperately tried to come up with a plan of escape from this terrible mess he'd gotten himself into.

The silver lining in all of this, if it could even be called that, was that Orphen himself was at least well dressed enough that he didn't look *entirely* out of place in this luxuriously massive room. He was outfitted in a suffocatingly smart tuxedo-like suit, his pendant currently in one of his pockets. Next to Orphen sat the two young dwarf boys in similarly designed, but obviously much smaller, tuxedo suits. Volkan was chatting away vigorously by himself, but Orphen could tell without even looking that Dortin was shaking nervously and his face was as white as a sheet.



“I hear tell that you are a successful entrepreneur. That is quite impressive given your young age.” The delicate lady sitting directly opposite Volkan must have been somewhere in her middle ages, but it was hard to judge by her appearance alone. She spoke with one hand daintily raised to her mouth. Orphen felt a chill run down his spine, completely unsure of how to respond to the lady. Before he could even come up with anything, however, Volkan carried on the conversation by himself.

“Indeed. Where we come from, everyone from housewives to factory workers is familiar with the Burplewarts Corporation.”

“And what sort of a corporation is Burplewarts? I’m afraid the name has not quite reached our town yet.”

“W-Well, that is... You see, it’s rather difficult to summarize it succinctly, however, uhh...” Volkan apparently hadn’t thought this through, because his hesitation was written all over his face.

“Well, ours is a corporation, and naturally as a corporation we have a large influence in the markets— You know how it is being a company in the market, it holds a very important place in the economy, indeed.” His words were practically incoherent. Orphen had to press his palm to his face just to stave off a headache he could feel oncoming at any minute.

“By the way, Master Burplewarts—” It took Orphen a moment or two before realizing that it was ‘his’ name that had just been called.

“Y-Yes, Madame?” he struggled to speak as politely as he could after being put on the spot.

The lady smiled brightly as she addressed him.

“You do not seem to be participating in the conversation very much. Not that I do not understand, of course. Arranged marriage meetings do often go this way, especially among younger persons. My daughter is usually not this timid herself—” As she spoke, she cast her line of sight towards her daughter who sat neatly by her side.

The daughter had been introduced as one Miss Mariabelle Everlasting. The mother had also introduced herself, as one Mrs. Tishtinie Everlasting.

Orphen directed his gaze to Mariabelle's face, and she smiled gently at him in return. She hadn't spoken a word since they had arrived, but her appearance gave the impression that she might be a prim and proper young daughter belonging to some high-class family. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what she was. Mariabelle looked to be slightly older than Orphen was, most likely somewhere in her early twenties. She was quite a beautiful blonde woman, but her timidity at that age struck Orphen as the trait of a rather idiotic young lady.

The real idiot here is me, though. No doubt about that, Orphen judged himself, far more harshly.

I shouldn't have gone along with this idiot's scheme. I should've just stayed at the inn and convinced Majic to let me teach him some sorcery and made a living off of that instead. And it's all thanks to this dumbass, this total dumbass, this complete and utter dumbass! Orphen glared at Volkan while trying the hardest he'd ever tried in his life not to let his irritation show on his face. Meanwhile, Volkan sat there altogether oblivious sipping away at his cup of tea, not a care in the world.

Here I was wondering just what kind of shady 'business proposal' he'd lobbed my way this time... How the hell was I to know it was a literal proposal!? This bricks-for-brains set me up in a marriage scam, of all things! Orphen felt like his vision was turning darker before his very eyes with every passing moment. In other words, Volkan had by some miracle managed to land an arranged marriage meeting with the not-quite-influential, but still-very-esteemed Everlasting family's eldest daughter. It was a complete mystery as to how this had come to pass, and Orphen wasn't sure he even wanted to know.

"By the way—" Tishtinie finally continued, seemingly having given up on trying to get her daughter to talk, almost like a dog owner giving up on trying to teach their pet a new trick.

"By the way, Master Burplewarts, exactly what manner of goods does your company specialize in?"

"Come again?" Orphen stumbled the words out in the tone of voice a child might use when asked to explain the mess they had made of their bedroom.

Volkan swiftly cut into the conversation once more with a bright little “Indeed, sleep medication!” which only served to make Orphen curse the boy’s very existence internally once more. At this point it was clear that Tishtinie was merely trying to keep the conversation alive as she asked more about the work.

“Sleep medication, you say? I am afraid I’m not particularly well versed on the topic, would you mind explaining the various sorts available on the market at the moment?”

“Whuh? Oh, uh, that is, well you see, it’s a rather specialized topic, so it’s quite difficult to put it in layman’s terms—” Orphen cut off Volkan before one more idiotic word slipped from his tongue.

“The majority of sleep medications traded on the market, particularly those grown in the tablelands, are sold only after being ground up into a fine powder to make them easier to mix with water and drink. As for the many varieties, the most common is technically not classified as a sleep medication, but rather a respiratory tranquilizer.”

“Respiratory tranquilizer?”

“Put simply, poisons.”

“Oh my,” Tishtinie raised her hand to her mouth and let out a shocked little gasp. Panicking, Volkan hastily added, “Naturally, our company takes no part in the dealings of this much more dangerous sort.” Beneath the table, Volkan pinched Orphen’s thigh as brutally as he could muster. Orphen returned the gesture and pinched Volkan’s hand without so much as flinching.

Why the hell would you go with sleep medication!? Orphen whispered out of the corner of his mouth, to which Volkan replied in a strained voice, *Just think about it, what’s the one thing every high-class lady can’t live without? The answer is sleep medication, without a doubt!* Orphen decided to drop the subject before he went insane, and instead shifted back to *Burplewarts* mode. With just a faint smile on his face, he turned to gauge Mariabelle’s impression so far.

Orphen knew better than anyone not to be fooled by a woman’s smile, but Mariabelle seemed to at least hold a somewhat favorable opinion of him so far. A favorable opinion of *Burplewarts*, the entrepreneur from the far away city of

Urbanrama, that is — not the dropout Black Sorcerer-cum-moneylender known as Orphen. Urbanrama was a self-governed city far to the Northernmost point of the continent, and one of very few at that. This background story that Volkan had come up with was quite smart on this one and only point, in that it would make it very difficult for Tishtinie to distinguish the truth no matter how suspicious she might potentially get during the arranged marriage meeting.

That said— *If you were gonna set up a marriage scam, wouldn't you normally target wealthy young women who lived on their own rather than with their family?* The Everlastings were not quite nobles, but from the commoner Orphen's point of view they might as well have been, which initially had Orphen worried that their lies would be exposed immediately with a simple background check. Instead, the Everlastings seemed to be a family of women living off the fortunes amassed by the previous family head who had been a big-name market trader. But if the Everlastings hadn't retreated from the market entirely then Orphen felt like that would have been the lucky alternative, since Volkan's scam would have been blown wide open from the outset and they could've all left this place by now.

Still thinking about how much he wanted to leave, Orphen gave Mariabelle one last bright smile while summing his conclusion of her in his head. She gave a cheery smile in return.

Behind his forced facade of politeness, Orphen thought to himself, *Hey lady, I don't suppose you'd rather marry Volkan instead and pay off his debt, would you? I'm just here for the money, I'm not looking to get hitched just yet.*

"You stupid Sorcerer! Do you have any idea how hard it was covering for your brainless ass!?" When Tishtinie and Mariabelle left the parlor room, Volkan suddenly exploded with rage. Dortin, on the other hand, was hanging his head like a prisoner who'd just been given the death sentence.

"You got something to say, brat?" Orphen spat.

"First you stuff me into this suffocatingly tight suit, then you drag me into this giant mansion with no explanation, and suddenly my name is *Burplewarts*? Seriously, *Master Burplewarts*, entrepreneur of a damned *sleeping medicine* corporation? What the hell are you even expecting to happen?"

“That’s obvious,” Volkan replied with a straight face, “I’m expecting you to pull off the role flawlessly and get hitched with this rich broad.”

“Okay, that makes sense... in your head, maybe!” Being as careful as possible not to damage the seams of his rental suit, Orphen grabbed Volkan by the collar. He glared daggers first at Volkan, and then at Dortin, and Dortin shot bolt upright like he’d just been given an electric shock. “I-I didn’t know, honest! It was all Volkan, my brother was the one who set everything up this time...!”

“I hope for your sake that’s the truth, brat,” Orphen put on the pressure, to which Volkan took as his chance to brag.

“Exactly, this brilliant and cunning plan was all mine! Dortin doesn’t have the smarts to come up with something as fantastic as this!”

“I don’t need a *cunning plan*, I need you to find *real work*!” Orphen literally tossed Volkan across the room like a rock, before standing up out of the chair himself and raising his arms in the air with the delirious frustration of a man who had just been framed for a heinous crime by his worst enemy in the world.

“Here I was wondering what kind of job you’d brought me this time, and of all the things in the world, it just *had* to be a damn *arranged marriage fraud*! I don’t even know how I’m supposed to react to this!” Volkan’s eyes opened wide with apparent shock.

“Marriage fraud? Who would even come up with something so heinous?”

“*You* did, you idiot!” Orphen snapped back.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Volkan calmly explained, “Marriage fraud is a horrible crime. Don’t compare the likes of that to my brilliant scheme.”

Orphen was just about at his wits’ end. “Alright then, *genius*, why don’t you try explaining the difference to me?” Dortin seemed curious to know the answer to this, too, as he approached his older brother dubiously. Volkan thumped his chest and explained.

“Very well, let me explain the brilliance of my plan to you peons. It’s quite simple, really. Basically, I act as your go-between for this meeting with the rich young lady and get you married into their family. You’ve seen how much money they’ve got to throw around, haven’t you? My debt is a trifling sum in

comparison, and you'd be getting *all* of this great fortune *all thanks to me—EEE!*" but before Volkan had even finished speaking, Orphen kicked over the chair, dwarfs and all.

"That's what you call *fraud!*" The door to the parlor opened right as Orphen began rolling up his sleeves.

Orphen snapped to attention; Volkan panicked and tried to climb to his feet; and Dortin's face was contorted with a voiceless scream. All three of their gazes locked onto the figure of a young girl around 17 or 18 years old, who now stood at the door.

"Wait—" Orphen tried to say something, but the girl cut him off abruptly. "Whoops, sorry." The next moment, the door clicked shut and the girl was out of sight.

Then a knock came from the door.

"C-Come in... Actually wait, just a minute!" Orphen tripped over his words before trying to come up with a course of action. He used his foot to flip the chair — along with the two dwarfs still collapsed on top of it — back into position, after which he sat down next to them before saying "Come in" once more. The door opened to reveal the very same girl, who gave a polite little bow this time while giggling.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to knock. Please don't think I'm ill-mannered, it wasn't on purpose." The young girl looked like a younger, more energetic Mariabelle. Orphen pieced together that this must be Mariabelle's younger sister. She wore a white dress, but it was much more casual than formal wear. It suited her really well. Her hair was slightly shorter than Mariabelle's, and she was slightly more petite in stature, but her voice definitely seemed like it had to be much louder than Mariabelle's must be.

For the time being, it seemed like she hadn't overheard their conversation, at least. Thinking to make a good impression, Orphen returned her bow and greeting.

"Speaking of manners, care to introduce yourself?"

"Oh, sorry about that. I'm Claiomh," she replied, sticking out her hand as if

she were introducing herself to a young child. Orphen shook her hand, to which her expression stiffened slightly.

“You have rather rough hands for a businessman.”

“Ah, yes, well, you see, that’s because the company president himself also helps out with the labor in the fields—” said Volkan attempting to wedge himself between Orphen and the girl. Orphen knew better than to let this play out, however, and gave Volkan a swift boot while he was still in her blind spot.

Then he made up an excuse of his own.

“In Urbanrama, both men and women must serve for a short time in the military. Even a mere two years of basic army training is enough to make anyone’s hands slightly rough to the touch.”

“Hmm. Come to think of it, I at least don’t think I’ve never heard of that law before,” Claiomh replied while butchering her grammar.

Okay, good. Doesn’t seem like she heard us, Orphen thought to himself as she released his hand. But his respite was brief, as Claiomh spoke up again.

“So, you’re conmen, right?” Orphen almost choked on the spot, but forced himself to look confused instead as though he had misheard the girl. Claiomh, however, showed no signs of retreat, smiling brightly as she continued with “You’re planning a marriage con with my sister, right? How much are you trying to con her out of? Hey, how much?”

“Err, whyever would you say such a thing...?” Orphen’s expression stiffened. He stole a glance at Volkan and Dortin, only to find them clinging to each other shaking in their boots with terror. Their reaction was perfectly natural. Stories involving conmen who got caught red-handed trying to steal from the rich pretty much never had happy endings.

Claiomh didn’t seem to understand Orphen’s question at first. She stood looking confused for a time before it apparently hit her, to which she slapped her fist down into her palm.

“Well, y’see, I overheard your conversation. I was standing just outside the door.”

“Err, how long have you been standing out there?”

“Hmm... Pretty much since you got here, I guess.” *Are you kidding me?*
Orphen prayed in his mind — to whatever God or devil would hear his prayers — while at the same time trying to formulate a plan based around taking this girl hostage in order to safely skip town without getting busted. He scrapped the idea instantly. While this was just his inspiration talking, Orphen was pretty sure this girl would respond to being held at knifepoint with a suggestion like “Wouldn’t it be a safer plan to just kill me now so I don’t get the chance to rat you out?”

While Orphen was busy trying to figure out a plan of escape, Claiomh grabbed his hand once more to try and catch his attention.

She asked once more, “Hey, so how much are you planning to con her out of? You’re gonna trick her and ruin her life, right?”

“No, that’s not what I...” Orphen racked his brain desperately for some kind of excuse that might be able to break him out of this predicament, “You’re mistaken, it’s not like that...” Alas, fortune (Volkan) was not to take Orphen’s side.

“It wasn’t me! I swear I had nothing to do with this!” Orphen ignored him and continued, “You see I — or rather, we of the Sorcerers’ Alliance have taken it upon ourselves to examine the general public’s cautiousness when it comes to such scams...”

“I’m innocent! This scumbag forced me into it, I’m as much a victim as you are! This guy threatened to torture me to death by running me over with a really big cart a bunch of times!”

“I-I never said any such thing! Why would you say that, bro?”

“In this world rampant with fraudsters, conmen, and criminals, we felt the need to devise a foolproof system for catching these people in the act. In order to accomplish this, we first need to gather information on the subject by practical application...”

“I didn’t ask for this! I told them to stop, I told them it was wrong, you’ve gotta believe me!”

“That’s a big fat lie! You’re the one who set this up in the first place, bro! You’re even the one who dragged us here without telling us beforehand!”

“Please understand that this is a necessary evil! We’re on your side, but to make this system work we need the cooperation of the general populace...”

“That’s right! It was all this heinous Black Sorcerer’s evil plot! He brainwashed me into doing it! Night after night he’d put me through the torturous experience of tickling me to near-death with feathers, always saying he’d finish the job if I didn’t side with him!”

“My big brother dragged us here without explaining anything!”

“SHUT. THE. HELL. *UUUP!*” Orphen yelled at the top of his lungs, firing a beam of light into the ground directly beneath the dwarf brothers’ feet. It burst into a thundrous explosion that seemed to shake the mansion’s very foundations. The blast left a huge smoldering hole in the luxurious carpet, and threw the brothers into a corner of the room leaving behind only a cloud of dust where they had been standing just a second ago. Still, dwarfs were known for their absurd durability, so it was unlikely that either of them were even really injured by the attack.

“You absolute *morons*! I managed to come up with such a great excuse to save our asses, but you couldn’t shut up for just five seconds! I was *this* close to getting us *all* out of hot water, but you just *had* to go and ruin it, didn’t you?!” Dartin seemed to doubt that Orphen’s excuse was good enough to have saved them, but he didn’t dare put it into words, instead just sullenly pulling himself back on his feet. Volkan, on the other hand, seemed to have passed out.

Orphen retained his fierce expression as he turned to walk towards the bozo brothers, but was stopped in his tracks by a curious sound from behind him. He turned around to find... Claiomh was laughing.

A world apart from her mother and sister, Claiomh was laughing with all the grace of a downtown commoner girl at a stand-up night in a local bar.

“Alright, I’ve got it now. You’re comedians, right? I’ve heard of this before — comedians who pull public stunts like this, and then someone jumps out with a sign that says ‘You got served!’ or something, right?” *If such a light-hearted business like that is actually profitable, I’d love to be a part of it*, Orphen

thought to himself, but before he could form a response, Volkan had seemingly teleported past him and grabbed Claiomh's hand.

"That is exactly what this is, ma'am. Why, you've caught us in the act. How shameful indeed."

"Just so you know, the sentence for fraud is 15 years in prison," Claiomh added cheerfully, causing the now-conscious Volkan to revert to his panicked cries of "I swear, they just forced me into it!"

"...Sorry, but something's bugging me, Miss." Orphen strode casually towards Claiomh, kicking Volkan in the armpit to knock him out of the way like an empty can.

"Just call me Claiomh, you don't need to be so formal."

"Alright. So, Claiomh, something tells me you're just playing around with us here. Am I right?"

"Yup, it's fun to watch," she nodded without hesitation.

"But seriously, what are you planning to do with us?"

"Me? Nothing, really. If my mother or sister find out on their own and decide to report you to the police, then I guess that's up to them."

"...You do realize that we... And by we I mean Volkan... just tried to con your family, right?"

"Well, yeah. But from the sounds of things, you weren't really planning anything *that* nasty. You were only trying to marry my sister, right?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Orphen frowned as he thought to himself, *why am I even explaining this?*

"Okay, Claiomh, listen to me. Your sister thinks I'm some rich entrepreneur, but that couldn't be further from the truth. This cover will get blown sooner or later, and when that happens..."

"Well yeah, people tend to find all sorts of faults in their partners only after getting married to them."

"I guess that's one way of looking at it."

“Mister Orphen, why are you agreeing with her?” Orphen grabbed Dortin by the nape of his neck and brought his face as close as possible, his voice was a whisper.

Shut up, I changed my mind. Listen, if we get this girl on our side, we might just be able to make it out of this in one piece, get it?

Dortin replied anxiously with just a weak little *are you really sure that’s such a good idea, though...?* In truth, Orphen understood exactly how the dwarf boy felt.

He turned around to face Claiomh again, and said “Okay, so...” before being interrupted by the unmistakable noise of a massive explosion within the mansion.

KABOOM! The massive explosion was accompanied by a cacaphony of similar noises. Windows could be heard shattering, walls being ripped and torn apart, as well as pretty much every other noise of things breaking that Orphen could imagine. The explosion this time wasn’t caused by Orphen, and this time it really *did* shake the entire mansion down to its foundations. The tremors were so violent that Orphen almost fell over before catching himself at the last minute. His mind immediately went through a checklist of priorities. Was he injured by the blast in any way? Nope, whatever had just happened sounded like it came from the other side of the building. Next, could he identify the source? Nope, he had no clue as to what could have caused that much destruction. If he had to take a guess, his intuition told him that rather than sorcery, it sounded more like a gigantic boulder or a small meteor had just fallen out of the sky. Finally, could he use this chance to escape? He could, and he would.

“Hey losers, let’s bail!” Orphen turned to Volkan and Dortin, taking charge of their planned escape. However, instead of the hearty “Yup!” that he had been expecting, he found the most bizarre sight unfolding. Dortin was screaming incoherently while running in circles, with Volkan chasing after him swinging his fists in huge circles beating his younger brother senseless.

“Will you just give it a rest, already?!” Orphen had finally run out of patience for this nonsense, and briefly considered abandoning these clowns to save his

own hide. However, he had no choice but to reject that idea. If Volkan and Dortin were caught, they'd rat Orphen out pretty much immediately. Even if by some miracle they didn't, there's no chance that he could count on them covering for him under police interrogation — they'd crack and spill everything within seconds, without a doubt.

"Hey, wait! Burplewarts!" The person who yelled and grabbed him by the arm was none other than Claiomh. Her playful expression had instantly shifted to one of shock at the sudden turn of events.

"I'm not Burplewarts! I'm Orphen!"

"You're an orphan?"

"That too, but... look, never mind." Orphen instantly regretted yelling out his real name on the spur of the moment like that, but he didn't have time to be thinking about that. He moved swiftly to grab Volkan and Dortin under one arm each, then made a mad dash across the red carpet-field, aiming to jump out of the nearest window, when... **THUD**, he fell to the ground face-first. Rubbing his nose, he turned around to try and figure out what he'd tripped over. What he found was Claiomh with both hands gripping his ankle, rooting him to the spot.

"The hell is your problem?!" Orphen scolded Claiomh like a parent would yell at their child.

"You were using a fake name, weren't you?! My teacher always told me that everyone who uses a fake name is a villain!"

"Look at all the fucks I give!" Orphen was on the verge of tears, trying desperately to shake Claiomh off of his leg. But just as he began to struggle, Claiomh's tone of voice suddenly switched from accusing him to pleading him for help.

"You're not just gonna run out on us like this, right? We don't have any men in this house. I think that noise just now was the storage shed collapsing! There's been a pretty strong wind since yesterday, so that has to be what happened!"

Sure, maybe if your shed literally just dropped out of the sky. Orphen didn't even bother putting his thoughts into words. *That sound definitely just came*

from inside the mansion itself. I can't tell her that, though, or she'll be even more reluctant to let me leave. Right now I need to focus on getting out of here ASAP. Fifteen years in prison for fraud? Like hell! I'm still only twenty — fifteen years ago I was still only five. I don't even have any memories of when I was five! There's no way I'm going to prison for so long that I end up forgetting about the joke of a crime that got me locked away in the first place!

"C'mon, please stay! Mother's always making me do all the heavy lifting in this house! It's not fair, she never makes my sister do anything like that. Hey, please!"

"I don't have the time for your stupid jokes!" Right as Orphen raised his fist in the air... "EEEK!" A woman's scream rang out.

"I think that was my sister's voice..." Claiomh clambered to her feet and turned her gaze in the direction the scream came from.

Oh, to hell with it all! I can't afford to get myself slapped with a fifteen year prison sentence, but I can't just abandon these girls, either, Orphen told himself. After an explosion like that, it wouldn't be surprising if Mariabelle had gotten buried under the rubble. This mansion was right in the middle of town so people were probably rushing to the place already to see what happened, but there was always the chance that help wouldn't make it and that Mariabelle might suffer some serious permanent injury. Worst case scenario, she might even be getting crushed to death already.

"Where's her room?!" Orphen yelled while tossing Volkan and Dortin aside. No sooner had Claiomh yelled back "Follow me!" than she was already up and running. Orphen dashed out into the hallway to follow after her.

The entire mansion was strangely deserted. The whole building was decorated with gorgeous furniture, but there didn't even seem to be any maids or helpers running around despite that massive explosion. The incident had apparently happened in a different wing of the building, but even as Orphen dashed through the main hall, the only traces that anything had even happened were a few shattered flower vases on the floor.

"Hey, Sorcerer, I thought we were making a break for it?!" Volkan had apparently returned to his senses, because Orphen could hear him yelling from

behind. And if Volkan was there, that meant Dortin was probably right behind him.

“Don’t mind me, just making terrible life choices *yet again!*” Orphen yelled without turning around. The only person who could have understood the meaning of those words was Orphen himself, but nobody bothered replying to him anyway given the severity of the situation. Orphen simply kept chasing after Claiomh down the endlessly long hallways, no longer sparing a second thought for the ridiculously restrictive rental suit.

“This is the room,” Claiomh said. She didn’t seem very nervous, but instead pointed to a large, ornate oak door with faint excitement lingering in her voice. The carvings on the door were seemingly carved out in the motif of a fairytale forest, which really added to the atmosphere of the place given all the white walls of the mansion.

Snow White, huh? That seems a lot less appealing when I’m picturing the princess asleep under a pile of rubble... Claiomh tried turning the knob, but it wouldn’t move. It was locked.

“What should we do?” she turned to Orphen and asked expectantly.

Orphen replied with a nod, then stood in front of the door and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and gathered his concentration.

Every Sorcerer on the continent of Kiesalhima — regardless of how skilled they might be — had to chant spells in order to use their sorcery. In other words, their voice was the medium through which they channeled their mana in order to produce all sorts of effects. However, since their medium was their own voice, this also meant that their spells were only effective for as far as their voice could carry. Places where their voice couldn’t reach would remain unaffected by their sorcery, no matter how powerful, and they could likewise only keep the effects of the spell alive for as long as their voice continued to carry through their surroundings. Spells were transient by their very nature, because any Sorcerer’s voice would be lost to the winds eventually.

It was said that there only existed two types of human Sorcerers: Black Sorcerers, and White Sorcerers. Black Sorcerers like Orphen specialized in spells dealing with heat or light, various types of energy, or even the body itself. They

were those with a degree of control over the physical realm. White Sorcerers, on the other hand, specialized in spells that could manipulate time, the mind, or the spirit. They were those with a degree of control over the mental or spiritual realms. White Sorcery was much more difficult by far, and those with an aptitude for it were extremely rare to the point where keeping count of them was of trivial difficulty...

After forming the image in his mind, Orphen touched the doorknob and softly chanted.

"I request thine invitation, Untrodden Gate." In truth, this incantation was pretty much meaningless. The only prerequisite for casting a spell was to let one's voice travel through the air, meaning that even just yelling out a single ordinary word or phrase was enough to cast a spell so long as the Sorcerer associated the word with a firm mental image of the desired effects. That said, it wasn't particularly easy to do this. Yelling out gibberish could easily break the caster's concentration, which is something only an idiot would do — this was why Orphen primarily stuck to the basics and chanted the textbook version of a spell whenever he could.

Anyhow, Orphen's spell took effect, and a small click could be heard from the door's lock. Orphen gently pushed the door open.

Behind him, he could hear Claiomh mumbling "What, that's it?" disappointedly. She had probably been expecting Orphen to shatter the door to pieces in a magnificent burst of light like the one he fired at Volkan and Dortin earlier.

Orphen merely ignored her and stepped into the room... Only to be left speechless at the sight before him.

Volkan pushed his way past to get a better look as well, but all he could react with was "What the hell is *that*?" Dortin, likewise, could only describe it as "Some kind of monster, right?"

"...Sh-Shut your mouths..." Orphen said in a shaky voice. He couldn't move a single muscle in his body. The sight before him had paralyzed all of his senses. The room lay mostly in ruins. There was a gigantic hole in the wall as if a meteor had come crashing through, and the city of Totokanta could be easily seen even

from the room's entrance. The giant hole had partially destroyed both window and wall, and a curtain that once hung over the window swung around being blown by the wind. Claiomh was right; the wind certainly *was* quite strong today. Most of the furniture lay in ruins, the small chairs near the door were all upturned and crushed, and the bed that sat near what had once been a window was split in half. That same bed seemed to be trembling in fear under the weight of its unfamiliar new master.

Mariabelle stood stock still against the wall near the entrance of the room. Orphen realized how hasty he had been to assume that she might be buried under rubble, but that hardly mattered anymore. The beauty that he had yet to hear a single word out of stood with a dress that looked more like a curtain covering her body, leaving her basically half-naked and shivering either from the cold, the fear, or both. Apparently the reason she had left in the middle of the marriage arrangement was so that she could redye her dress. In that case, her impression of Orphen might not have been so bad after all.

Tishtinie stood just slightly in front of her daughter, in a position as though she were ready to act as a human shield for Mariabelle in case the worst came to pass. Apart from that, though, she also stood frozen to the spot.

Tishtinie let out a scream — extremely similar to the one from earlier. She was probably the one who had been screaming all along, Orphen guessed. In other words, Mariabelle remained the silent beauty even now.

Orphen had just finished processing the state of the room when Claiomh poked her head through the door and, without so much as a pause, she said, very loudly, “Whoa, look at that *monster!*” Her reaction made Orphen flinch.

The ‘monster’ she mentioned was presently enshrined within the remains of Mariabelle’s bed.

“Theory number one,” Orphen could hear Dortin saying from behind him, “a grizzly bear mated with a half-rotten dragon’s corpse, the offspring of which was tossed off a cliff, ripped half to shreds by a swarm of giant crayfish, then thrown into a puddle of multi-colored sewage, resulting in the creature we now see before us.”

“I said shut the hell up!” Orphen kept his gaze fixed on the monster, but

kicked his leg backwards like a horse bucking its hind legs straight into Dortin's face. At least, he had been aiming for Dortin, but had ended up kicking Volkan instead.

"The hell's your problem?!" Volkan screeched, but Orphen paid him no mind, not daring to drag his eyes away from the beast. *It looks just like her...* he thought to himself. In truth, Dortin's graphic description of the creature was actually quite accurate. Its hairy, scale-like skin was coated in a thick, muddy mucus, and it easily stood at three meters in height. It had to weigh at least one ton. It was hard to tell where its torso ended and its neck began, giving it an overall sort of cylindrical, pear-shaped body. It had countless hand-and foot-like appendages sprouting from its body seemingly at random. Upon closer inspection, Orphen counted only six main arms and legs — the rest were all tentacles of various sizes that merely mimicked the shape of proper appendages. Its arms and legs could be distinguished by the blunt talon-like claws that they sported. None of the tentacles had any claws. The creature also had a massive pair of wings on its back, which only made it look even larger.

To the untrained eye, it certainly might look like some sort of dragon at a glance — the sort that you might very rarely run into outside of town every now and then. However, to someone like Orphen who had actually seen real dragons before, he could point out a number of differences that set this beast apart from them. If anything, this creature merely resembled a fleshy abomination of what a human might *think* a dragon would look like. For example, real dragons had brilliant green eyes. This creature had no such things — its very eyelids had seemingly melted to cover the eyes completely, and Orphen doubted if it could even see at all anymore. Its eyelids had melted so far, in fact, that they didn't just cover the eyes, but instead reached all the way down to its jaw, dripping wet with some blood-like substance.

Another difference that set it apart was that dragons were wise creatures — they wouldn't dare to approach a town full of people, for they knew the consequences. This beast seemed to lack any such logical thought processes. No, *she might still be in there somewhere*, Orphen told himself. If that were the case, then surely she would respond to her name? "Azalie!" Orphen cried out.

But the beast did not respond. It merely moved its head side to side slowly

like a desert lizard, apparently searching for something. Orphen was now convinced that she could no longer see out of those eyes. He called out to her once more.

“Azalie, it’s me, Orphen? I mean, Krylancelo! I’ve been searching for you ever since that day...!” Orphen spread his arms out wide and began walking towards the beast. Volkan panicked and tried to hold him back.

“Have you lost your damned mind, you nutty Sorcerer?!”

“Back off, brat!” Orphen yelled as he shook himself free of Volkan’s grip, taking another gentle step forwards. He could hear Volkan screaming at his back.

“Dammit! I dunno what’s going on in that cesspool you call a brain right now, but your shitty magic is the only thing that can kill that damned abomination! Hurry up and blow it up into a thousand meaty chunks, would ya?!”

“Don’t call her an abomination!”

“Then what the hell am I *supposed* to call it?! If you don’t start talking sense soon, I’m gonna dig around in that brain of yours with a cotton bud until it kills ya!”

“I’m telling you, she’s-” Orphen started to say something, but was interrupted when the beast raised its head and howled at the ceiling.

It was just an ordinary howl like that of a dog or a wolf, no more and no less. But by the time that howl had filled the room, everything just burst into flames.

“NGAAAHH?!” Orphen reacted on pure instinct. His scream caused a defensive spell in the form of a great halo of light, a large barrier to contain the fire within and prevent it from spreading. The beast’s figure was obscured behind the splendid sight of raging flames wrapped in a shimmering halo, yet Orphen called her name again.

“Azalie!!”

“The damned meatbag’s using magic now!” Volkan bitched. It didn’t take long for the smell of burning plaster to permeate the room.

“Azalie, wait! Please, don’t run away! It’s me!” Orphen reached his hands out

to the flames and chanted a spell. “Untangle these webs, Dancing Bronco!” **SKRACK!** The room was overcome with a sound like someone had just slapped the air itself with a large club. When the sound faded, both the flames and the halo had vanished... as well as the beast responsible for all the carnage. The room turned silent as the grave as if to mock Orphen’s failure to communicate with Azalie; only a cloud of black smoke lingered in the scorched remains of what was once a high-class bedroom.

Just as he had done once before, Orphen rushed over to the remains of the window. He looked up to the sky and tried to make out the shape of the enormous beast. For the second time, though, he had moved too late. He couldn’t make out so much as the outline of the creature in the vast, clear skies stretching out across the city.

Chapter II: A Vestige of the Past

...The girl was like an idol to the rest of the youngsters studying at the Tower of Fangs. Some of the boys even literally worshiped her. This boy, too, was one of the latter.

The girl had earned herself the nickname 'Chaos Witch' among the student body.

Even an unbiased third party would be hard-pressed to call her anything less than radiant. Even if she had lacked all of this, she would still have been a precious existence to the boy. Not only did they share the same instructor, but she had been like a sister five years his elder for as long as he could remember.

She often complained about having to keep her hair short for practicality, but the boy actually felt that it suited her better this way. He kept this thought to himself, however — instead just shrugging whenever she complained about the Tower's policy on hair length, as if to tell her *we can't exactly run around breaking the rules willy-nilly, you know*. Maybe it never actually mattered much to him either way.

As a matter of fact, this interpretation would have been the most apt. To him, her value lay far beyond superficial things like physical appearance.

She had a more youthful appearance than one might expect from someone her age, but her features were by no means childlike. The boy enjoyed seeing his own form reflected in those cheerful yet sharp eyes. Just gazing into her eyes like that boosted his confidence, and made him feel at least somewhat closer to her in terms of skill as a Sorcerer.

That said, the opportunities to share those times were few and far between — and almost exclusively restricted to combat training sessions. Even these rare occasions tended to end quite abruptly, with the girl closing in on him, deftly slipping under his arm and throwing him over her shoulder as though he were a weightless ragdoll.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you actually *enjoy* being thrown around by me” was a phrase she used so often that it had basically become a staple of their relationship.

The boy didn’t have the guts to tell her that her guess was, in fact, spot-on. Looking back on these exchanges made the boy feel as though they were events from a lifetime ago, when in fact this sort of daily routine had continued up until only a few years ago — but to him, those few years may as well have been an entire lifetime. The boy truly missed those precious days.

So much so that he found himself longing for them even within his own dreams... Considering all of the achievements and popularity garnered by Azalie the Chaos Witch in her lifetime, her funeral was underwhelming to a completely unnatural extent. Apparently the boy was one of the only people to feel this way, because amongst the crowd — particularly with regards to the elders — there were clearly a number of people who held a great amount of disgust for her even at her funeral. He could only make out bits and pieces of what they said, but even those fragmentary phrases belied the venomous spite behind them. The boy knew deep inside that he would never forget the way people talked of Azalie at her own funeral.

“...I’m still shocked that she actually stooped that low—”

“When you consider the number of witnesses—”

“She’s landed us in real hot water this time. If word of this ever—”

“People from the Royal Palace are already working to help cover this mess up —”

“Those are just emergency measures. The real problem is still—”

“This is the biggest disgrace in the history of the Tower—”

“A true disgrace to us all—”

Disgrace.

The word that rippled through the crowd seared itself permanently into his mind — but he had long passed the point where that mattered to him. It could have literally seared itself into his flesh and he wouldn’t have even winced at

the pain. The boy's gaze drifted over to the Tower's rear garden. The funeral procession that he was a part of had just left from that very area. As discreetly as possible.

A handful of people remained in the garden area, seeing the procession off. A number of people who had clearly been close friends with Azalie during her lifetime could be spotted, but even these people seemed to wear the same foul expressions as the elders who trampled all over her name. At least, this was how the scene appeared to play itself out from the boy's point of view.

The funeral procession gradually climbed the hill leading to the public cemetery. The boy hung his head despondently while walking directly behind the Witch's coffin, a position that nobody else had dared to take up.

"Krylancelo." The boy raised his head for the first time only after his name was called. The boy — Krylancelo — turned to face the owner of the voice, a red-headed boy the same age as him.

"Heartia?" Krylancelo's expression remained entirely hollow as he responded to the boy.

"I didn't think you'd be here."

"Of all Childman's students, we are the only two who actually showed up." Heartia responded in a lonely voice as he brushed his brilliantly bright red hair out of his eyes. His head might even have shone in the light, had the sun been out. Unfortunately the sun had been hidden behind a veil of clouds that almost appeared to have been carved from marble, eerily fitting for the atmosphere lingering in the air.

"What about Mr. Childman?"

"You must be even more out of sorts than I thought. He's right there, see?" Following Heartia's gaze, Krylancelo easily spotted their instructor. He was leading the procession.

"Well, whatever," he mumbled, as if it were unimportant either way. Whether the man had been there or not didn't matter to Krylancelo any more — nothing mattered to him any more. He didn't even see a point in living any more.

“Pull yourself together. I know Azalie was — look, I know she meant a lot to you. I know she must have meant more to you than I can ever begin to understand. But you’re acting like you’re at your *own* funeral right now.”

“Who knows, maybe I am.”

“No. You’re not.” Heartia left his friend with those words to try and encourage him before hastening his pace to catch up with their instructor. Krylancelo watched Heartia’s back growing gradually further from himself, and eventually his vision rested on the rear profile of the tall Black Sorcerer known as Childman.

Childman — he was indisputably one of the most talented Black Sorcerers on the entire continent. Even those who doubted the rumors of his prowess would be forced to change their minds if they ever laid eyes on him in person. Although only in his mid-twenties, his ferociously tempered body and intensely stern expression were every bit as impressive as the warrior the rumors made him out to be. His long black hair reached down to his back, held in place with a cord tied at the nape of his neck. Rather than styled this way on purpose however, it looked as though he simply hadn’t bothered to cut it.

The funeral procession seemed to stretch on for an eternity, the word “*Disgrace*” echoing into eternity along with it.

The cemetery at the top of the hill seemed tightly packed with gravestones at a glance, yet mysteriously there always seemed to be room for more. The funeral director led the procession to the empty grave waiting for its newest offering, and those carrying the coffin followed behind with a lightness to their step unnatural for a group of people carrying a deceased person to their resting place. Krylancelo, who hadn’t felt like attending the funeral service itself, had overheard those very people chatting in the waiting room about how it’d be fine for the coffin to be light, since it was only the corpse of a young woman.

No, that’s wrong, thought Krylancelo. *What’s in that coffin isn’t the corpse of a young woman.* The coffin was lowered into the hole that had been dug for it beforehand, and the people present took turns with the shovel refilling the grave hole. Krylancelo watched this happen expressionlessly. He watched Childman throw the dirt into the hole with his strong arms. He watched Heartia

deftly handling the shovel. He even watched the elders — who were not so boorish as to continue their scathing slander during this part — taking turns to fill in the hole, apparently satisfied enough that at least the dirt was covering up their much-loathed ‘disgrace’ for them.

Krylancelo’s thoughts took a grim turn. *Fine, drown in your satisfaction. Cover up your ‘disgrace’ all you want. If that’s enough of a performance for you, then perform your hearts out.*

Before long, his turn to lower the dirt had come.

Krylancelo gazed at the handle of the shovel as though it were some mysterious object from a foreign plane of reality. He stood there for quite some time before someone in the crowd cleared their throat as if telling him to hurry up and get it over with. Quite some time elapsed, but Krylancelo finally raised the shovel with his own hands.

Weapon in hand, he dropped into the grave and struck the coffin with the shovel head, putting all of his might into the attack. The shovel easily pierced the wooden frame right through the center, and broke out of the other side with just as little resistance.

A muffled commotion broke out amongst those attending the funeral, but as all of them were combat-trained Sorcerers not a one of them let their surprise rise to their face. Not the funeral director, not the elders, not even Childman or Heartia. The coffin-carriers took this as their cue to leave, their job over and done with.

It was a shallow grave in every sense. Krylancelo stood there with his expression upturned, and called out accusingly to all present.

“Tell me, who is this funeral meant for?”

“...This funeral is meant for my beloved student Azalie, Krylancelo.” As Childman was the only one to respond, Krylancelo directed his next words at the instructor.

“Then are you going to tell me that this coffin holds her corpse?”

“No. As you are well aware, that coffin is empty.” Childman’s voice remained as strict and dignified as it always was. It was like talking to a boulder — like

voicing meaningless complaints to a boulder that relentlessly blocked one's path.

But this didn't faze Krylancelo in the least.

"If her coffin is empty, then it's not her funeral!"

"Enough with your sophistry."

"Sophistry my ass! Azalie is still alive, and you know that as well as I do!"

"That would all depend on one's subjective definition of the word 'alive,' I would say."

Childman extended his hand towards Krylancelo and continued: "If you were to ask me, I would inform you once more that my beloved pupil Azalie is no longer in this world. I imagine most anyone else would be inclined to agree." Krylancelo smacked Childman's hand away.

"Most anyone else? Don't pull that shit with me! Anyone with a reputation to protect, you mean! All you're doing is creating a convenient lie to help cover up this, this — *disgrace*," he spat, "from becoming public knowledge! You don't even give a damn that she's still out there somewhere!"

"No matter how you may feel, the truth is that her actions could potentially be construed as a fatal disgrace that may have even resulted in the long-held prestigious history of the Tower of Fangs being brought to an abrupt end." A fatal disgrace — Krylancelo had heard enough.

"A disgrace? Really? You would call the most talented Sorceress in the history of the Tower a *disgrace*? She's not only a master of Black Sorcery, but a genius even in the field of White Sorcery as well—"

"Was, yes. She truly was the most talented Sorceress I had ever known."

"And she still is, because she's still alive!" Krylancelo glared at the calm instructor and felt that they would probably never see eye-to-eye ever again. He felt the extent of his powerlessness throughout his whole body. Ultimately, he even gave up on trying to win anyone over to his side.

Heartia took Childman's side.

"Krylancelo, you really need to let go of this—"

“Let go of what? Let go of the fact that she’s still alive out there?!”

“You’re on the path to success. You’ve still got your entire life ahead of you, and if you just hang in there and live it a little longer, you’ll eventually be living a life that most could only dream of. Even becoming a Court Sorcerer isn’t impossible with your level of talent. You had the highest score on the tests of everyone in our year—”

“I don’t give a damn about test scores, Heartia! If they ever need to fill a vacancy in the Thirteen Apostles, then I’ll gladly give that seat to *you*, mister Second Place!” Orphen’s words were sharper and more violent than any bladed weapon. Brushing Heartia aside, he locked gazes with Childman once more.

“If you wanna bury someone so bad, then I know just the name to put on this blank headstone!”

“You would think to bury me here in Azalie’s place?” Childman remained stoic, but his words were quite clearly not meant to mock Krylancelo in any way. This caught Krylancelo completely off-guard. After a brief moment of consideration, he stated bluntly:

“Not you. *Me.*”

Heartia was the one most taken aback by this.

“Have you lost your mind?” Krylancelo ignored his shock and continued.

“If you want to bury Azalie that badly, then you can bury the name and legacy of Krylancelo along with her! I swear I’m going to find her, no matter what. I don’t care how long it takes, I don’t care what obstacles I need to overcome — I’m going to meet her again someday. She’s the only family I have — without her, I’m just an orphan!” He quickly corrected himself. “Without Azalie, I’m not Krylancelo! *I am Orphen!*” Krylancelo — henceforth Orphen — ripped the shovel out of the coffin and threw it into the air like a javelin. A number of onlookers retreated for fear of it striking them, but Childman didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow. The mightiest Sorcerer on the Continent spoke in a gentle tone of voice.

“What do you intend to do once you find her — the abomination that she has become? Do you plan to restore her to her normal form with a single kiss as if

life were some romantic fairytale?”

“Come on, Childman. You know me better than that. The first thing I’m gonna do is find that stupid sword you sealed away somewhere. It was that *sword’s* power that turned her into a monster, so it must be able to turn her back—”

“That task is impossible for you,” said Childman with a sigh.

Orphen snarled, “Then you think it’d be possible if it were *you*?!”

“For me? If it were me, then—” Childman said this much before cutting his words short. Silently considering the gazes of the onlooking elders, he sighed once more and said self-deprecatingly,

“If it were me, then I would not so much as permit myself to consider an idea so foolish.”

“Who’s the foolish one here?!”

“Wake the hell up, you lunatic.”

“I’m perfectly sane!”

“I said wake up, you loopy Sorcerer! If you don’t wake the hell up within the next five seconds, then I’ll slap you to death with a leather glove!” *Childman is gonna... slap me to death...? With a leather glove?* What awaited Orphen when he opened his eyes was not the bed of a freshly-dug grave, but rather the iron bars of a prison cell. To be more specific, it was a dreary gray-blue stone prison cell in the basement of Totokanta’s finest penitentiary. One corner of the cell had a pitcher of water and a cup sitting next to it, but since Orphen couldn’t bring himself to drink from it he’d had a dry throat for almost a full day.

His head throbbed with pain. It seemed highly possible that Volkan had already taken the liberty of beating him while he slept. Volkan himself stood there with his arms crossed and a sour look on his face, while his little brother Dortin stood just behind him like a lamb being led to the slaughter. Orphen pulled himself upright and, with a hoarse voice that sounded like a groan even to his own ears, asked:

“So, what’s the big idea?” All it took was a brief glance at Dortin’s frightened posture for Orphen to tell what kind of terrifying face he must have been

making as he asked that. He made no effort to hide his irritation, after all.

“That’s what *I* wanna ask *you*,” said Volkan, oblivious as a rock.

“I’m going back to sleep—”

“Like hell you are!” the dwarf boy fumed. He grabbed Orphen by the collar, a feat only made possible by the fact that Orphen still sat on the ground. If Orphen chose to stand up, he would have pulled Volkan right off the ground with him. Since this didn’t happen, Volkan continued,

“I’m not letting you wriggle your way out of this one, you slimy Sorcerer! It’s been *three days* since we got our asses locked up in this joint, and you *still* haven’t even explained to us what came over you in that mansion for us to deserve this kind of treatment! Do you have any idea the number of things we’re under suspicion for? Marriage fraud, rioting, disturbing the peace *and* excessive damage of private property!” “Under suspicion,” of course, was Volkan’s way of saying “as guilty as they come.”

Government officials had swarmed the Everlasting family mansion following the hectic events of that day. Someone in the neighborhood had apparently reported the commotion. A perfectly understandable response. Even Orphen might have called for a military platoon or two if a gigantic monster like that suddenly burst through his neighbor’s wall with enough force to cause a small earthquake. Even Totokanta’s elite public police force found themselves at a loss as to how to deal with such an unprecedented situation, so for the time being they had simply taken the group of petty conmen into custody instead. It had all gone down so suddenly that Orphen found himself in a jail cell before he even had time to change back into his own clothes.

Orphen sarcastically spoke up: “Don’t worry, I’m sure *Master Burplewarts* will come bail you out just as soon as he gets home from working in the sleep medicine fields.”

“You trying to be funny, Sorcerer?! Who cares about that right now! What I’m talking about is how *everyone* in that building saw you talking to that monster —!” Orphen grabbed the hand that Volkan gripped his collar with and put pressure into bending it backwards. Ripping the dwarf boy off of him, he intimidated Volkan once more.

“Listen to me, damn it. I’ve told you a million times. Don’t dare... Don’t dare call her a monster.”

“Then tell me what I’m supposed to call it, already.” Volkan sulked while rubbing his painful hand.

Orphen rose to his feet and leaned against the back wall. He tilted his head back and considered for a moment where best to begin explaining.

“Most kids tend to hold the people close to them in high regard — especially when that person is like a caring older sister to them.”

“...I always knew you were a bit of a freak, but I never would’ve thought you were raised by zombie dragons.” Orphen glared sharply at Volkan, who instinctively hid his still-aching hand behind his back and snapped his mouth shut. Orphen spoke up again with a snarl.

“I grew up at the Tower of Fangs.” Volkan and Dortin couldn’t hide their surprise at this reveal. Even dwarfs like them knew about the Tower of Fangs — the biggest sorcery institution on the entire continent. Known for raising some of the strongest Sorcerers in the world, their organization had been known to change the tide of entire wars with large-scale sorcery in the past. Volkan sighed as if he had finally put the dots together.

“I see, so the Tower of Fangs is raising an army of those abominations now. I always knew there was something fishy about them.”

“Have you been listening to a word I said?!” yelled Orphen, finally losing his cool. He kicked Volkan in the head in a fit of rage, which naturally caught the guard’s attention.

“Hey! Keep it down in there.” Orphen panicked before smiling and waving to the guard.

“Sorry, force of habit.”

“...Break that habit immediately, you villain.” Orphen could hear his Volkan footrest complaining from beneath his fancy hard-sole rental shoe, but he ignored the furniture’s plight. He continued without any of the silent buildup from earlier.

“So like I was saying, I grew up at the Tower of Fangs. They raised me for as long as I can remember. I was an orphan before they took me in — almost everyone enrolled in the place was. No sane parents would ever enroll their kids in an academy with a ninety percent fatality rate, after all. Only the truly skilled lasted longer than a few years there, at best. You with me so far?”

“I think I’m keeping up,” said Dörtin.

“I think *I’m* being kept *down*,” grumped Volkan from beneath Orphen’s foot. Ignoring the latter, he continued with his story.

“Because of this, just about everyone studying there had to learn to bear with the solitude sooner or later. Competition was pretty fierce too, to the point where making friends was the last thing on anyone’s mind. The lucky ones had maybe one or two people close enough to them to be able to say they actually cared about them. That’s the kind of person Azalie was to me back then. While only five years older than me, she was said to be the most talented Witch in the entire long history of the Tower of Fangs.”

“What’s five human years in dragon zombie years— Ow ow ow!” Orphen drilled his heel into Volkan’s head to get him to shut up.

“She didn’t always look like that, you know. She used to be incredibly beautiful. I lost count of the amount of people who fell in love with her. Not really surprising when you consider the fact that everything she did set her worlds apart from everyone else around her. One day, though, she failed in some kind of sorcery ritual...” Orphen’s voice dropped in spirit as he reached the point of his story linking the past to the present.

“...And, well, you’ve seen for yourself how that turned out.”

“Remind me how that turned out, again?” asked Volkan in a cruel tone of voice. Orphen caught on to the dwarf’s plot, and he absolutely refused to refer to Azalie as a *monster*.

“She failed miserably. The spell went out of control and warped her appearance into what it is now. She had no choice but to leave the Tower. Following that incident, I left the Tower behind as well and went on a journey around the world in order to find her again. I’ve been searching for her ever since then — or at least I would have been, were I not plagued with a pair of

worthless debtors holding me back.”

“Or so you say, but it’s thanks to us *debtors* that you finally found her,” Volkan mumbled from beneath Orphen’s foot. Orphen didn’t seem all that amused.

“Don’t think for a minute that you can use that as an excuse for me to write off all that money you owe me,” jeered Orphen.

“Filthy penny-pincher!”

“You can start talking big the day you pay me back in full. Until then, you’re worth about as much to me as a footstool as you are a client — and that’s insulting to both my footstools *and* my clients.” Orphen finally removed his foot from Volkan as if to stress the point. Timidly, Dortin raised his hand.

“So, that mon— that Azalie person was originally a human?”

“That’s right,” Orphen nodded.

“I know for sure that it’s her... because I watched her body warp into that shape with my own two eyes. I was there when it happened.”

“Wh-what kind of magic turned her into that form?”

“No damn clue,” he said listlessly.

“You couldn’t have looked it up?”

“If it were that simple, I would’ve done it a long time ago. Besides, it was no ordinary sorcery that she failed at. It was some kind of experiment that she conducted in her own living quarters, without permission. If your next question is ‘Why would she do that?’ then your guess is as good as mine. That’s something only Azalie herself knows.”

“...” Dortin stood in silence for a while, then finally said, “Then the reason you left on this journey was to find a way to turn that thing— to help Azalie find a way to turn back to normal?”

Orphen sighed, and answered like he’d just been soundly defeated.

“...I’d love to do that if I could, but I still have no idea where to start. Without the spell that Azalie used as a base, I could spend a lifetime researching and it

wouldn't do me any good."

"Well, yeah," said Volkan while brushing the dirt off his suit after being under Orphen's foot for so long. "And since that's impossible, the least you could do is put that monster out of its misery yourself, right?"

"Not on your life, asshole." Orphen seemed ready to bite Volkan's head off at the mere suggestion.

"Then what the hell are you planning to do even if you find her?" Volkan seemed confused as to what Orphen's intentions were, but Orphen didn't bother explaining himself any further. Instead he sat himself back down on the floor and cracked his knuckles. Volkan mistook this as a threat, but Orphen ignored him and got lost in his own thoughts instead.

The Tower of Fangs considers Azalie's failed experiment to be a huge disgrace to the entire organization, one that they'll go to any lengths to try and cover up. Her staged funeral was just one of many examples of that — but they did a damned good job of turning everyone against her. He closed his eyes once more, hoping to sleep just enough to wake up a little more well-rested next time.

I'm the only person still on Azalie's side. I don't know how to help her, but I can't let myself just abandon her like everyone else has... He didn't have any dreams this time.

When he was shaken awake, Orphen noticed that the atmosphere in the cell was distinctly different from when he had gone back to sleep. For one thing Volkan had gone totally silent; it was Dortin who had woken him this time. Looking around, Orphen saw the reason for their surprise. The jailer and a group of soldiers all stood in a semi-circle in front of the cell door, in the center of which was a guest whose dainty appearance was completely at odds with everyone else present. She stood with her hands clasped behind her back and a cheerful little smile on her face.

"Claiomh?" Orphen couldn't hide his confusion. The blonde girl simply nodded like a student being asked if they'd done their homework.

"What brings you here, of all places?" Since the dwarfs were too stunned to talk, Orphen figured he should at least attempt to make first contact instead.

No matter how you spun it, Orphen just couldn't figure out what could possibly have brought her back to see them once more.

In place of an answer, Claiomh drove off her armed escorts. The jailer himself left her with a polite *very well, just call me over when you're done, then.*

"You wanna tell me what's going on, Claiomh?" Orphen inquired again, before she even had a chance to speak. While they were technically supposed to be aggressor and victim, Orphen found it hard to believe that the girl had come all this way just to rub salt on his wounds.

Claiomh approached the steel bars and spoke abruptly...

"I've come to get you guys out of here."

"Oh, come on," sighed Orphen, "if I wanted to break out then I'd have done that by now. Hell, I could open this lock in two seconds flat. The only reason I haven't done that is because I don't want my face plastered on wanted posters all over town."

"I'm not talking about a prison break, dummy. My mother said that as long as we don't press any charges, then they'll have no choice but to let you all go free."

"Maybe if the only things keeping us in here were the counts of fraud and property damages, but we'd still need someone to pay bail on the rest of our charges."

"Yup, she said that, too," nodded Claiomh. "That's why I'm here offering to pay that for you."

"Y-you'd really do that?" Volkan, of course, pounced at the chance. Orphen watched as he prostrated himself before Claiomh, gripping at the bars as though her face radiated the angelic light of his savior.

"Why? Sorry, but I just don't get what your motivation could be for helping us." Orphen muttered. "Don't tell me your mother still seriously buys that I'm some rich entrepreneur called Burplewarts." Orphen had meant it as a joke, but Claiomh's answer was completely serious.

"Of course not," she said. "I'm here to ask a favor from you."

“You want us to work for our freedom,” he guessed while pulling himself to his feet and crossing his arms.

Claiomh’s answer was straight to the point. “That’s right. You’re a wizard, aren’t you?”

“Indeed I am,” Orphen said with a smirk, “but if you want to hire your own personal Black Sorcerer, you’ll have to come up with a better offer than that.”

“Have you completely lost your mind, you scoundrel?!” Volkan’s panic was made readily apparent, but Orphen ignored him and kept his gaze fixed on Claiomh’s.

The girl shrugged and asked “Alright, what’s your going rate?”

“It depends on the job, I guess. Don’t worry, even I’m not so brazen as to try to rip you off from behind bars. Truth is, this suit’s a rental, and now thanks to you it’s built up a bit of a late fee on its return. Since I don’t have any money, you can see why this might be a bit of a problem.”

“Alright, I think I can cover that easily enough. Will this cover the costs for now?” she asked while removing a small ring from her right hand. Orphen looked at her in utter disbelief.

“Seriously...?”

“What? Did I do something wrong?” Since she didn’t seem to be feigning it, Orphen took the ring from her and held it in his hand.

“Do you even know how much this thing’s actually worth?”

“W-well, no, but... it has a really old design and all, so it’s gotta be worth *something*, right?” Apparently she couldn’t even get what he was hinting at. It was a simple silver ring with a clear gemstone, the kind that any girl might like for how pretty it looks, and it was obvious at a glance that there was some old writing carved into it.

Orphen, with a sigh, explained “Of course it’s old. At least *a thousand years* old, as a rough estimate. Hey Dartin, take a look at this. Tell me if you can understand what’s written here.” Dartin seemed to have taken an interest in the ring, so Orphen handed it over to the boy. Adjusting his thick glasses, the

young dwarf examined the ring intently. He quickly gave up on trying to decipher it, though.



“There’s no way I could read this. All I can say is that these characters don’t belong to any race currently inhabiting the continent, and that’s about it.”

“I’m impressed you managed to figure that out so quickly. That’s right, this ring’s so old that even I don’t know what the writing says. All I know is that I’ve seen a ring just like this, a long time ago—” it took a moment for Orphen to process his own words. He went over what he’d just said in his head once more, and that was when it hit him.

“I don’t believe it. Claiomh, do you know where I’ve seen this ring before? The Tower of Fangs! Why do *you* have something that the Tower considers an object of research?” Claiomh seemed to be struggling to keep up with the conversation, so Orphen’s question caught her off-guard. She spoke up again, sounding like she was trying to remember where she’d first found it,

“I don’t remember. It’s been in my jewelry box since I was a kid. I think I must’ve found it somewhere and held on to it because it looked pretty...”

“You trying to tell me you walked right out of the Tower of Fangs with something like *this* in your pocket? No way that’s how it played out. It’s impossible to steal so much as a hairpin from that place, they keep artifacts like this under a tighter lock and key than any bank in the world.”

“I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No, I know that — I just said that would’ve been impossible. But now that I think about it, there’s no way two perfectly identical rings like that could exist in the world. This thing’s filled to the brim with powerful magic — and not the sorcery of modern Sorcerers, but actual, genuine Magic from the age of legends.”

“So, what’s it say?”

Orphen shook his head and replied.

“Wish I could tell you. Nobody’s been able to decode this language as of yet. If we could do that, it would be a valuable hint for where to search to find a lot more such ancient artifacts.”

“That’s a little creepy — Not that I’m calling you creepy or anything!” Claiomh

corrected herself. “I meant the ring. It’s some powerful magical ring, but nobody knows how to control that power, right?”

“That’s a gross oversimplification, but I guess that’s one way of putting it.” Orphen was still staring at the ring, dumbfounded. Claiomh shivered just thinking about what she’d just learned.

“I’ll let you keep that, then. That’s more than enough compensation for any job, right?”

“Yeah, easily. Problem is, I can’t exactly pay for my rental suit’s late fees with a ring like this. Never mind change, I’d be able to buy an entire chain of rental stores out of business with this alone.”

“Yep. I’ll cover that part with actual money this time.” Claiomh still seemed to be creeped out by the ring she’d been unwittingly wearing all this time, and it seemed like now she just wanted to be as far away from it as possible. Orphen tried putting the ring on, but it was too small to even fit onto his pinky finger. Eventually he gave up and slipped it into his pocket instead.

“Alright, then we have ourselves a deal.”

“I’m really glad. My mother’s been worrying herself sick over this problem.”

“So, what kind of problem are we talking about here?” Claiomh’s response to this question was far shorter and more carefree than it had any right to be.

“I think someone’s threatening to kill my whole family.”

“A valuable source has informed us that you are in possession of one artifact known as the Sword of Baldanders, and we will be coming to retrieve it. Your intentions for the sword are irrelevant. If you fail to hand it over to us for whatever reason, then we will take it by alternative measures if we must. Failure to comply with these demands may have disastrous results for you and your family. We will be coming to collect the sword on the following day—” Today was the date written in the letter. The sender hadn’t specified a time or a location, so it was logical to assume that they would be coming directly to the mansion before the day was out.

“The Sword of Baldanders?” Orphen read aloud. Around him were Volkan and

Dortin, Claiomh, and Claiomh's mother Tishtinie. Mariabelle was apparently in her bedroom elsewhere in the mansion. Orphen and the dwarf brothers had already returned their rental suits and were now back in their usual old outfits; Orphen wearing the sort of dark clothes favored by Sorcerers, Volkan with his raggedy cloak and bulky longsword, and Dortin with his equally raggedy cloak and huge rucksack. Anyone who ran into their group in such a high-class part of town would definitely have seen them as a suspicious band of folks. Orphen had been especially worried about Volkan bringing his longsword with him into the mansion, but Tishtinie ended up letting him bring it inside without a word of complaint. They all sat around the table in the largest parlor in the mansion.

Not only had Tishtinie let them all back into her home after their failed marriage scam, it even seemed to Orphen like she had not even taken offense to the fact that they had tried to deceive her. Her attitude towards him had barely changed in the least from the time he had first introduced himself as Master Burplewarts. Whether she had already put the entire marriage scam behind her, or whether having a mysterious creature suddenly break through her wall had left her prepared to sell her soul in order to protect her family, Orphen couldn't be entirely sure.

Either way, Tishtinie explained the situation to Orphen as calmly as she could.

"This letter arrived at the manor two days ago." *So that'd be the day after we'd run into Azalie, huh?* Orphen thought to himself, before asking, "Have you told the police about this?"

"No. In the first place, I do not even know what this letter is referring to."

"You really have no idea?" For a moment Orphen thought that Tishtinie meant that she didn't know what a ransom letter was, in which case it made sense that she would never have heard of marriage scams before either. Apparently that wasn't what she had meant though, because her next words were, "Correct. This artifact — The sword of Bald Andrew?"

"The Sword of Baldanders, ma'am."

"I see, is that how you pronounce it? I apologize, as you can see I am afraid I have never heard of this sword before. I cannot very well prepare this sword when I have no clue as to where in the mansion it might be, much less what it

even looks like to begin with.”

“Well, I mean, it has to look like a sword, right?”

“That is just the thing. You see, when my husband was alive, he built up a collection over the years of all sorts of curious or rare weapons and artifacts. It would not surprise me if this Sword of Baldanders were a part of his collection... But I am afraid that I just don’t know which one it might be.”

“Could you tell me whereabouts in the mansion this collection is right now?”

“Of course. It is all in the cellar. I shall guide you there in a moment so that you may browse through it yourself.” Orphen noticed that Tishtinie had grown slightly pale and took another look at the ransom letter in his hands before letting out a sigh. The truth was that when Claiomh had first told Orphen that there was something she needed his — a Sorcerer’s — help with specifically, naturally he had assumed it might be related to Azalie in some way. But he found it hard to imagine that Azalie could or indeed would have written something like this.

While Orphen was busy organizing the facts in his head, Volkan had chosen to play sorcerous detective with the madame this time.

“And what of the hideous monster since then?” he asked, blissfully unaware that Orphen was glaring a barrage of spells’ worth of irritation into his back. Tishtinie did notice this, and recalling that the lad had tried to call out to the beast when he had first rushed to her aid she chose her next words very carefully.

“The bea—” she hastily corrected herself “that incident the other day has been the only one of its kind thus far. Do you believe that the two are connected in some way?”

“Without a doubt. It’s almost unthinkable to my professional mind that the two incidents could be completely isolated,” he puffed out triumphantly.

“When did you first notice this letter had arrived at your home?” Tishtinie gave her answer to Orphen, even though Volkan was the one doing the mock-interview.

“When I woke up in the morning two days ago, it was sitting on top of my

dresser.”

“That does sound like something only a Sorcerer would do,” Orphen concluded with a nod.

“What makes you so sure?” inquired Dortin, to which Orphen gave a small shrug.

“A Sorcerer is about the only kind of person eccentric enough to deliver a letter to the mansion’s interior instead of simply using the mailbox.”

“...So they’re basically just showing off?”

“Pretty much,” he replied, reminded of how Azalie herself often used to do such things purely to demonstrate her own capabilities.

“Alright, would you mind showing us to this store of antiques of yours, Madame?” he asked, to which Tishtinie nodded.

“Claiomh can guide you there. I am sorry, but I must go check on Mariabelle. This whole series of events has left her rather flustered as of late...”

“I’m not surprised. It must be a lot to take in.” He decided this was a reasonable call, and turned around only to find Claiomh giggling slightly. He had no idea what she found so funny about this situation, but Tishtinie seemed to understand perfectly as she showed a hint of a smile herself. Each held a finger to their lips as if to display that they had communicated telepathically.

What in the world is so amusing about this situation? Orphen wondered, but Claiomh took him by the hand before he could put his curiosity into words.

“C’mon, this way.” It might have just been his imagination, but Orphen felt like the girl’s tone of voice had been growing even more casual around him lately. It felt to him like he’d just gotten a new little sister. Still slightly puzzled by all of this, he figured it was best to just go with the flow for now.

Orphen drew a map of the mansion inside his head and surmised that this underground room was located pretty much in the dead center of the building. Claiomh confirmed this with a very simple “Yup.”

There was a cool draft in the passage leading down to the cellar. While it should have been pitch black due to the lack of windows, Claiomh had already

turned on a gas lantern before Orphen even brought it up.

“Where do you guys even *get* all this stuff?” asked Orphen, to which Claiomh proudly puffed out her chest.

“Father loved collecting new things too, not just old stuff all the time. Our kitchen even gets tap water.”

“I’ll be damned.” He raised his arms in surrender, which seemed to please Claiomh.

A bulky metal door sat at the base of the stairs. The bottom edge of it was slightly rusted, showing how old it must have been. Much less old was a plate hanging from it, which Orphen read aloud.

“Abandon all worldly desires, ye who enter here.” He made a face like he’d just been preached to by a door.

Claiomh puffed her chest out once more and added, “He also had an awful sense of humor,” far more proudly than she needed to. *Tap water’s pretty rare around these parts, so I guess I shouldn’t really be surprised,* Orphen thought to himself. He grabbed the doorknob and pulled on the door, which opened with creaking ease since it wasn’t locked.

What awaited Orphen on the other side was a veritable wall of miscellaneous items of all shapes and sizes. The closest of all of this was rows upon rows of shelves covered in books and paintings packed in to the point where he felt like he’d already reached the end of the room before setting a single foot inside. The floor was covered in a carpet of dust about as thick as the luxurious red carpets from the parlors, and the entire room was about as untidy as one might expect from all that dust. That said, the air wasn’t stale at all and actually smelled like the outside, which meant that it must have been well ventilated if nothing else.

“Oh yeah, remember that ring? This is where I found it,” Claiomh confessed to a years-old scheme. “My big sister had tons of rings, and I got jealous because I only had three at the time. So I snuck down here and found that one.”

“Yeah, that makes a lot of sense now...” said Orphen as he stepped inside to examine his surroundings.

The storage room itself didn't have a gas lantern like the corridor did, but the corridor's light was bright enough that just having it shining in made it bright enough to make out the details of the room already.

One of the first things to catch his eye was an ornate antique infantry spear hung up on the wall on front of him, coated with dust but still very clearly of an intricate design. It was obviously not meant for battle, but was rather some sort of ceremonial or commemorative weapon. A pretty old one, at that.

I'd probably be able to buy an entire street with that thing alone, he heaved an impressed sigh. A cursory glance around the room revealed several more objects clearly worth at least as much, if not more than that spear. One wall was almost totally covered by a large tapestry with some fraying at the ends which, if repaired even slightly, would probably have had no trouble selling even to the larger black-market pawn shops. The sight of such objects laying scattered around all over the place had to be a form of cruel and unusual torture.

"...So, any idea where this sword might be?" Claiomh answered Orphen's inquiry with an off-hand "Over there somewhere." Turning to look in the direction she had swung her arm, Orphen caught sight of what almost looked like the straw flooring of a stable flipped on its side, until he noticed that it wasn't straw, but rather countless swords. There were at least several hundred swords filling his vision. The storage room was quite sizable, but a large amount of that space was being taken up by the sheer volume of swords alone.

"Guess I can see now why you ruled out just handing over the Sword of Baldanders like the letter asked for. It's a herculean feat to pick out a single sword from among this mess."

"You think they'd mind if we just lead them here and told them to find it themselves?" Orphen playfully hit Claiomh on the head for her bad joke.

"Did you hire me to be a bodyguard for your family or a tour guide for your thieves?"

"The first one..." said Claiomh like a little puppy while turning her eyes up at Orphen's hand.

Besides, he thought to himself, *if the people who sent that letter really are*

connected to Azalie in some way, there's no way I can just let them slip away from here with the sword they're after. I'd lose my biggest clue I've had on this journey, and I probably won't be getting another chance like this. Orphen had already begun to formulate a plan of action, seemingly indifferent to Claiomh's struggle to break free from under his hand.



Why do I always end up getting wrapped up in these things? Dortin moaned internally as he followed his brother down the midnight garden path. *My big brother's the one in debt, that Sorcerer is the one he owes the money to, the one who wants to catch that monster is also the Sorcerer, and the people who want to catch these burglars are the family living here. What does any of this have to do with me?* He was dragging his same old rucksack around on his back. This bag was actually entirely full of books mostly written in dwarf tongue, with a few tomes of Archaic and human text mixed in. It was a massive collection of books by the average citizen's standards, but to Dortin it was a puny fraction of his overall collection he had left back home.

Back home, huh... He couldn't help but sigh whenever he remembered his home town. He hadn't been back there in a number of years now. Truth be told he would have loved nothing more than to go home this very instant — his brother being the only thing stopping him from doing that. When Volkan had been disowned by his family, the boy had retaliated by literally kidnapping Dortin and dragging him halfway across the continent. Since then, Dortin had not been able to break free of his brother's deathgrip. He fancied himself the most unfortunate dwarf in the world. He had long since gotten used to sleeping outdoors since a bed was a luxury on any adventure involving his brother, but he still hadn't gotten used to having to threaten children to steal bread for him from food stalls just so that he could avoid starving to death.

Dortin heaved another sigh. Technically, he and his brother were being made to patrol the garden, so he glimpsed at his surroundings lit only by the moonlight every now and then, but the paths were so thickly lined with oak trees that he felt like he was wandering around inside a maze instead. The garden didn't have a pond — such was how it was in the dry lands of the Totokanta region. Nobles were about the only ones wealthy enough to afford

such a large body of water as a pond or a private pool.

As Dortin ran his eyes around the place, Volkan suddenly turned around and asked, “Hey Dortin, you *are* doing your job, right?” *I could ask you the same*, he thought. “Yes,” he said. Volkan, clearly not convinced, said, “If you don’t start taking this more seriously, I’ll strangle you to death with a piece of rope!”

“I know...” said Dortin to his brother.

Internally he was sticking out his tongue, though. There was a comfortable breeze in the cool night air. Dortin could hear the tree branches and leaves rustling in the night air, and somewhere off in the distance — “*Mwuahahahahahahaha...*” accompanied by the sound of an animal’s hooves sprinting across the ground. The noise was echoing from quite far away, but gradually drawing closer and closer.

“Wh-what the hell is that noise?” Volkan panicked while trying to whip out his sword.

“Intruders! Intruders!” yelled Dortin at the top of his lungs to alert the mansion, recognizing full well that this must be their unwelcome guest. He trusted his brother not to use him as a living shield about as much as he trusted a bird not to steal his bread, and wisely concluded that it would be much safer to rely on the Black Sorcerer man no matter how despicable a person he was.

“Intruders—!” he tried to yell again before Volkan slapped him across the back with the blunt side of the sword.

“What’s the big idea?!” he quite rightly demanded to know. Volkan gripped his sword and stuck a daunting pose while laughing menacingly. “I’ve come up with a cunning plan, oh baby brother of mine.” *This isn’t going to end well*, he concluded before even hearing Volkan out.

Volkan drew his face closer and, in hushed tones, spoke up. “Whaddya think’ll happen if we call for that snake-tongued Black Sorcerer right now? He’ll capture the thief with his dark arts and steal all the credit, that’s what! But what if we captured the thief before that? The reward would be all mine!”

All ours, you mean, right? Alas, there was no plural when it came to rewards in Volkan’s mind.

“How much cash d’ya think they’d pay us for such a fantastic job well done? Enough to place a bounty on that fiendish Sorcerer’s head, that’s how much!”

“...If it’s that big of a reward then why couldn’t we just use that to pay back your debts?”

“What are you, an idiot?! Think of all the abuse we’ve taken from him until now! If we just obediently gave him the money he’s been trying to wring out of us, then all our struggles will have been for naught!”

“I dunno about that...”

“Well / do! We can’t let him get away with it, you hear me?! I, the great warrior Vulcano Volkan, cannot afford even a single blemish on my perfect record! We’re gonna knock that blasted Sorcerer down a few pegs and then kick him screaming into the pits of hell—” No sooner had the words left Volkan’s mouth than Volkan himself was kicked screaming across the garden path.

“The hell was that for, Dortin?!” he lashed out at his little brother as soon as he crawled to his feet.

“It wasn’t me!” screamed Dortin, which only made Volkan raise his voice even louder.

“I know that, dumbass! I just felt like yelling at you!”

“But I didn’t even do anything!” Dortin glanced around and, sure enough, Orphen stood right nearby. He always appeared out of nowhere without so much as a sound, which Dortin found creepy as hell. Not that he would dare say such a thing to the human’s face. For one thing, he was a Sorcerer. To Dortin, that made him almost as terrifying as that giant dragon creature from the other day.

Orphen picked Volkan up by the nape of the neck. The emotion on his face was clear as day even in the middle of night — pure, unfiltered rage.

“You say something, you little bastard?”

“N-no sir, nothing at all sir. I was just discussing with my esteemed little brother about how best to pay my loan back as swiftly as possible, sir.”

“You know I heard every word you said, right?”

“Aaahh!! My brilliant plot! This is all your fault, Dortin!”

“You just never change, do you...” Dortin braced himself to take Orphen’s rage, when suddenly loud laughter rang throughout the garden.

“Mwuah ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Where did that come from?” Orphen shot a confused look around the garden. Dortin also tried to scope out the enemy, but since dwarfs had notoriously poor night vision, he couldn’t make out the intruder’s silhouette anywhere.

“Where are you looking? I’m over here!”

“How the hell did you get up there?!” By now it was clear that the voice was coming from the roof of the mansion itself.

Casting his gaze upwards, even Dortin with his poor eyesight could make out a humanoid silhouette framed perfectly in the moonlight. The intruder stood over three meters tall easily, but was obviously not the dragon creature from the other day.

“Name yourself, bastard!” screamed Volkan in an attempt to make himself seem more important than he really was.

The figure on the roof burst out into laughter once more before beginning his introductory speech.

“I am the assassin that lives in the shadows! My contract is the night; my identity obscured by the day! The incarnation of dread and terror! The noble of the night, Nightmare Blood! My name is... Black Tiger!”

“You’re... No way!” Dortin took a step back in shock.

“You know this clown?” asked Orphen quietly. Dortin nodded and began to explain. “I think so. If I’m not mistaken, then Black Tiger is—” Before he could finish, the assassin leapt into the air with a hearty “Hup!” The stars spread out on the canvas of the night sky behind the assassin who danced graceful steps in the air as he dropped to the ground.

—KA-THWACK!— A heavy sound rang out across the garden as the large

figure dropped to the ground. It was not a monster, but a man — a man clad in a black outfit and a black mask. The mask clung to his face obscuring all of its features, except for two holes cut out precisely around his eyes which burned brightly with vigor. He held in his hands the sort of giant scythe that the Grim Reaper was seen holding in picture book illustrations. His mount was a large black bull, which was the culprit responsible for making him seem over three meters tall — without the bull he might have stood at around average height for a human, at best. The bull itself snorted flames from its nose and focused its eyes on Orphen and the dwarfs intently. The other thing that had made the man seem so large and imposing was revealed to be a blood red cape which fluttered in the wind like the wings of a phoenix.



It's a pervert, Dartin concluded. I'm going to get molested. Volkan had apparently come to the same conclusion, as he stood stock still in utter shock at the sight.

The freak calling himself Black Tiger continued where he left off.

"Hah ha ha! To think there existed a soul in this world who would recognize my name! You have my respect, boy!"

"Dartin, who the hell is this guy?!" Orphen asked and took a step closer to Dartin, who took a breath and tried to explain himself anew.

"If I remember right, then I'm pretty sure that Black Tiger is supposed to be... a shrimp." If one were to strain their ears at this very moment, they might have even been able to hear a pin drop.

Even Black Tiger himself was taken so completely off-guard by this that he had frozen in place like a statue in the very pose he had landed in. Orphen was completely at a loss for words. Volkan sighed and unceremoniously put his sword back in its scabbard.

The night breeze was pleasant. Dartin and the assassin Black Tiger stared into each others eyes for what felt like an eternity to them all.



Orphen had held a number of beliefs that he thought must be absolutely true in life.

For example, he had believed that the police were a corrupt force of violent individuals who would beat confessions out of suspects and demand bribes from prisoners. For example, he had assumed that assassins were solitary warriors with their burning animalistic spirits hidden beneath their cold yet fierce exteriors. Never in his life would he have thought he'd see the day where both of these preconceptions were shattered in the same day.

For one thing, the police hadn't so much as hinted at a bribe from him. And for another, this assassin had performed his own dramatic introduction where there was no need for one, and who even now stood still as a statue having a staring match with a young teenage dwarf. At this rate, Orphen despaired that

the day the rest of his preconceptions about the world would be shattered to pieces couldn't be that far off. He felt like even if he were told upon returning to the mansion that Mariabelle actually suffered from gonorrhea, it probably wouldn't even surprise him after this.

"So, erm..." Volkan paused for a moment to seriously consider what he wanted to say for possibly the first time in his life.

He settled on "Hey, Shrimp-Man!"

"Who are you calling Shrimp-Man?!" Black Tiger retorted at the top of his lungs.

"You, dumbass!" Volkan thrust his finger out at him. "You're the only one here named after a shrimp! Now listen here, I don't care if you're the most stupendous pervert in the history of the world or the biggest loony to ever escape the loony bin! My burning sense of justice won't allow me to let a wicked assassin get away with his life! I'm gonna boil you to death in a really big pot and make the world's worst dinner out of you!"

"Oho? You would dare defy the great Black Tiger? You, a puny dwarf?"

"Who are you calling puny, Shrimp-Man?!"

"Who are you calling Shrimp-Man, you brat?!" Their yelling match continued until the assassin ordered his bull to charge forward. —*KA-THWACK!*— The bull made the same noise as when it had leapt off the roof of the mansion and charged with the speed and force of a cannonball. Black Tiger's scythe glinted in the moonlight and he hooked it around Volkan's neck as he charged past.

Volkan didn't have enough time to raise so much as a death cry before his body was sent barreling all the way to the edges of the garden.

"Volkan!" screamed Dortin. Even Orphen almost made a dash in Volkan's direction, but stopped mid-stride when Volkan abruptly leapt back to his feet unscathed. He rubbed his neck like he'd just been bitten by an insect and started yelling at the assassin who had charged at him without warning.

"That hurt like a bitch, dammit!" Black Tiger spun his bull around and yelled at Volkan in turn.

“Never mind ‘hurt,’ that should’ve ripped your head clean off just now! What the hell are your bones even *made* of?!”

“They’re made out of bone, dumbass! I hope you’re ready to feel the hurt because I’m gonna make you pay for—” but before Volkan could unsheathe his sword, Black Tiger chanted something in a dignified voice.

“Come, Lightning!” and with a *CRACK* like the magnified sound of a rock hitting a wooden board, a bolt of lightning struck the ground at Volkan’s feet. The force of the following explosion sent Volkan flying again, this time dropping him down next to Orphen. He sat there dumbfounded until his little brother rushed over to help him to his feet.

“That freak just used magic...!” he uttered.

“And he looks pretty skilled with it, too.” Orphen seemed somewhat pleased that one of his preconceptions was gradually fulfilling itself after having been so brutally shattered not two minutes ago. He took up a battle stance and pulled his mind together so that he would be prepared to cast a spell as soon as he needed to. He wanted to try and settle the fight before his opponent caught on that he was a Black Sorcerer as well, but he also wanted to try and avoid injuring the man too seriously since the likelihood that he was connected to Azalie had just skyrocketed with this latest reveal.

“Hah ha ha! None are a match for the mighty Nightmare Blood, Black Tiger! Flee this place at once if you value your lives, peons!”

“The hell did you say, you—” Volkan made to threaten his opponent, but stopped mid-sentence when the man called Black Tiger turned to face him once more.

He hesitated for a second, but apparently his pride just barely beat out his terror, which let him force out the rest of his words while still in a position that would let him run away immediately afterwards if he had to.

“Erm, that is... If y-you keep acting so big, I’ll stare you to death from a mile away, dammit!”

“That doesn’t sound very threatening, bro,” quipped Dartin.

However, Black Tiger apparently no longer saw the dwarfs as any real threat,

turning to face down Orphen instead.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you, Black Sorcerer.”

How did he know that? thought Orphen dumbfounded. He had yet to cast a single spell, and nothing about his posture should have made it immediately obvious that he was a Sorcerer at all.

“I can tell by your reaction that you’re surprised. Yes, I’ve seen through you, Sorcerer! Before the great Black Tiger, assume that all of your secrets are plain as the moonlight!”

“So you looked into us beforehand, huh? In that case—” he grinned and held his right hand aloft.

“In that case?” inquired Black Tiger as though he didn’t know what Orphen was getting at.

“If all of my secrets are in plain sight,” he continued, “then that just means I don’t have to hide them anymore!”

“Eh?”

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

“Wait, h-hang on!” yelled Black Tiger, just barely able to deflect Orphen’s spell with the blade of his scythe. He had expected as much, but now he knew for sure that scythe was no ordinary weapon.

“Then eat this!” yelled Orphen, upon which a wave of heat spread through the air firing off an electrical discharge through the air in a straight line. Black Tiger blocked this attack too, however, with another spell which created a barrier of light around himself.

Volkan and Dortin could do nothing but stand back and watch as this sorcerous firefight continued. It was often said that the Continent was a big place, but even that didn’t account for there being two humans in the same place at the same time on opposite sides, each capable of firing off lethally powerful spells in rapid succession like this. Orphen focused his mana far more densely and fired off his initial spell once again.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!” This time the blast was so great that it ripped

several trees clean out of the ground, enveloping Black Tiger and everything around him. The trees were the only things to burst into flames, though, as Black Tiger had seemingly just barely managed to withstand the attack with another protective spell. From within the wall of flames, he made his next move.

“Come, Flames!”

“I release thee, Sword of Light!” Their spells collided in the air between them and raised a thunderous battle cry as they collided in a tremendous blast. The shockwave sent clouds of dirt flying into the air.

Something’s strange, Orphen thought.

Why hasn’t he tried to run away? It makes sense if he initially wanted to wipe out any guards before infiltrating the mansion, but only an idiot would engage in a competition of power like this after learning that there was an enemy among those guards almost as skilled as you are. It’s almost as if— and then it finally hit him. He turned towards the mansion and yelled to Dortin “I’ll leave this guy to you!”

“Huh? What do you mean you’ll leave it to me?!” He didn’t even wait for a response before dashing off in the direction of the mansion. He could hear Dortin screaming from behind him.

“Wait, don’t go! What do you expect me to do against a guy like that?!” Orphen ignored him and dashed into the building. *I should’ve noticed so much sooner,* he told himself. *That Black Tiger guy wasn’t just some crazy freak. He was a decoy!*

First things first, Orphen had to make sure the inhabitants of the house were alright. He ran to them in order, first swinging open the door to Claiomh’s room which was the closest. Despite all of the commotion going on outside, the girl was curled up in her bed sound asleep like a little puppy. Next he checked in on Tishtinie, who was awake and wearing a gown over her nightclothes. Apparently she had been waiting for someone to come and check in on her instead of aimlessly dashing out into the corridors to see what all the commotion was.

Orphen asked her for direction to Mariebelle’s room, which she had changed

ever since her old one was destroyed in the attack by Azalie a few days ago. Tishtinie led Orphen up to a room near the end of the hallway on the third floor. She tried to stop him, but he ignored her and kicked the door open.

The inside of the room was just barely lit by the moonlight pouring in from the wide-open window. The furniture in the room was all quite ordinary and laid out plainly, but the room was so vastly huge that it made the place feel strangely emptier than it should have felt.

Two human figures stood together in the center of the room. One of the was Mariabelle, and the other was a tall man dressed in the same outfit as Black Tiger (who was still going wild in the back garden).

The man's voice, sharp as the large dagger he held to Mariabelle's throat, leaked out coldly from beneath his mask. He paid no mind to Orphen who had just come crashing into the room, instead directing his question at Mariabelle for what was clearly the umpteenth time.

"Where is the Sword of Baldanders?" But Mariabelle didn't respond. She stood frozen in place, the color drained from her face.

Orphen turned to the man and yelled "Let her go!" He turned around slowly and mechanically, leaving the dagger pressed against Mariabelle's throat.

Shit, I let them take a hostage— Orphen cursed his carelessness before focusing his mind to prepare for what he had to do next.

Then the unexpected happened. The man let go of Mariabelle and instead took up a battle stance while facing Orphen down one-on-one.

Why would he deliberately let his hostage go? But Orphen didn't have time to wonder about this before the man made his move. In a single breath he crossed the length of the room and had closed in on Orphen completely. The movement was so swift that he was caught like a deer in headlights. He felt the chilling sensation of the man's open palm striking him on the chest, which for some reason was altogether more unnerving than if he had been stabbed by the knife.

The man suddenly let out a mutter.

"Fly," and fly Orphen did. He was sent barreling back out through the open

door and collapsed into a heap in the corridor.

That was sorcery, he confirmed to himself, still gazing at his assailant.

What are the odds of me running into two such highly skilled Sorcerers in the same night?

“Are you alright?” asked Tishtinie who had been standing in the corridor this whole time. She tried to help Orphen stand to his feet, but he brushed her aside and pulled himself up with his own strength.

“Don’t worry about me, go protect your daughter.” Tishtinie nodded at Orphen’s suggestion and turned to face the doorway, but seized up when she saw the attacker’s silent figure standing there.

Orphen knew it wouldn’t have made a difference even if the woman *could* have dashed straight to her daughter’s side.

This guy’s strong... Probably several times stronger than I am!

He took a deep breath and then cried out “I brandish thee, Blade of Demons!” An unseen weight materialized in the grasp of Orphen’s hand. He gripped his invisible sword and charged at the man’s large frame. The man took one step back and swiftly avoided Orphen’s swipe.

Orphen pursued that movement and chased him into the room. His invisible sword had already dissipated, so he pointed at the man with his right index finger and chanted another spell.

“Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!” The spell caused the air around the man to distort and convulse angrily. As a type of ultrasonic attack, the convulsions of the air tore the curtain behind the man to shreds. The target himself remained perfectly intact, having put up a defensive spell right in the nick of time.

Orphen could’ve sworn he saw his opponent smiling beneath that mask. The man gripped his dagger and closed in on Orphen once more. “Gather at my command, Shield of Amber!” Orphen’s spell caused the air to compress and harden around his would-be attacker. The man’s lunge slowed slightly, but it failed to stop him completely. He closed the gap in an instant, only slightly slower than before, but this time thrust out his dagger instead of his hand.

Though the effects only served to slow the attack, this was enough time for Orphen to flash a confident grin.

Gotcha! “I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!” This was the same spell that he had instinctively used to protect himself from Azalie’s flames. The web of light expanded and caught the man’s attack, sending him flying in the opposite direction with the distinctive smell of burnt flesh. He slammed into the wall with tremendous force and dropped his knife to the floor. The haloes faded away.

“That’s as far as you get,” Orphen declared his victory and walked over to the masked figure. The man groaned and tried to climb to his feet. Orphen carefully picked up the dagger he had dropped and moved to stab the man with it—before dropping his arm with a start.

“You’re... No way!” His mask burnt to shreds, Orphen could finally make out the face of his assailant. It was the familiar emotionless face of a thirty-year-old man with chiseled features and a stern expression.

“You’ve grown strong, Krylancelo.”

“Childman?!” yelled Orphen, a moment too late as he was thrown backwards. The dagger made a hollow clang as it dropped to the floor. Orphen clambered to his feet, but Childman was already gone. All that remained was a mere afterimage of his rear profile leaping out of the window.

“What the hell did you come here for, Childman?!” he yelled and made to make chase, but his arm was abruptly seized from behind.

Dammit, more of his friends?! He spun around prepared for yet another conflict only to discover that the person clinging to his arm was the girl Mariabelle in her nightgown. She clung desperately to his arm without so much as screaming, her eyes screwed tightly shut in sheer terror. Orphen found himself unable to do anything as boorish as shaking her off, which gave Childman enough time to regroup with Black Tiger in the garden and the two of them to make their escape.

I don’t believe it... Orphen gazed down into the garden to see two charcoal-colored dwarfs arguing amongst themselves about which one should take the attacks in place of the other, and let out a heavy sigh.

Tishtinie came into the room at which point Mariabelle finally let go of Orphen's arm and dived into her mother's grasp, but that was all too late to matter to Orphen now.

"Why would Childman, the strongest Black Sorcerer in all of Kiesalhima, come all the way out here personally? He's supposed to be back at the Tower of Fangs. What the hell's going on here?"

But there was nobody around who could possibly have answered the numerous questions flying around in Orphen's head. The only ones left were Tishtinie consoling her frightened daughter, Volkan savagely chasing his younger brother around down in the garden, and the pleasant sound of the night breeze, all moving at their own respective pace.

——*"That task is impossible for you. But for me? If it were me, then——"*——
Childman's calm yet infuriating voice replayed itself within Orphen's memories. The memory, a vestige of the past, called out to him like a message, spinning to life in his mind once more.

Chapter III: Revenge of the Shrimp

“Hey hey, are they really gonna let you in here?” Orphen met Claiomh’s relentless barrage of questioning with the same answer he’d been giving her all day.

“Like I’ve said over and over, I’ve got an acquaintance on the inside.”

“I smell a tall tale. You’re just some broke guy walking in off the streets, right? I’ve heard before that some of the biggest names in town have been turned away at the door before.”

“Well, yeah. I’d be kinda worried if they weren’t.”

“Then how come you think they’re gonna let *you* in so easily?”

“Because — for the last time — I’ve got an acquaintance on the inside.” It was the day after the mansion had been raided, the time just a little before noon. Orphen had consulted with Tishtinie and decided to depart into town. Staying holed up in the mansion wouldn’t accomplish anything and would be like painting a big sign saying *please attack us again*, and Orphen was doubtful he could take on Childman of all people a second time and still walk away with all of his limbs attached. In which case there was only one plan of action: To make his move before Childman did.

These were the circumstance that had brought Orphen here to this building, the Totokanta branch of The Continental Sorcerers’ Association, *Damsels’ Orisons*. Following Orphen were his unreliable dwarf lackeys Volkan and Dortin, and for some reason Claiomh had decided on her own that she was to be a part of this expedition and had currently wrapped herself around Orphen’s arm.

“Is this acquaintance of yours another Sorcerer?” asked Dortin, his large rucksack of books trailing behind him as usual. What was different from usual, however, was that Volkan had chosen to hitch a ride atop this bag instead of walking on his own two legs, a fact which poor Dortin had apparently failed to even notice.

Orphen confirmed Dorton's suspicions with a nod.

"Yup. Only Sorcerers are allowed in here, after all," he said while flicking his chin to direct everyone's vision towards the splendidly massive gateway. A beautifully designed metal lattice gate blocked all passage, and the steel plated relief above the gateway read the words *Continental Sorcerers' Association, Damsels' Orisons*. Next to the words the image of a praying woman's face was carved in profile. Beneath all of this were smaller words which showed that the designation of this building was in fact the *Continental Sorcerers' Association, Totokanta Branch Office*. The structure that could be seen through the latticed gate — in addition to the large gray walls surrounding the entire complex — might have looked even more like a small fortress were it not smack-bang in the middle of the city.

As Orphen was taking in the sight for the first time in a while, Claiomh finally seemed to have caught on to the meaning behind Orphen's earlier statement.

"Wait a sec. If only Sorcerers are allowed in, then what about us?"

"Are you a Sorcerer?"

"Do I look like one?"

"Then they won't let you in. Why would you ask a question you already know the answer to, Claiomh?"

"Awww, that's no fun," Claiomh raised her voice in protest. "Then why'd you bring us all the way here with you?"

"I didn't bring you with me, you tagged along. There's a subtle difference. Besides, I told you before we left the mansion, remember? Ordinary people won't ever be let into the Sorcerers' Association branches, that's how it's always been."

"Must've slipped my mind," she mumbled while freeing Orphen's arm from her grasp.

Orphen stretched his arm, free at long last, and turned to face the two dwarfs. Even a passing glance revealed that neither of them had any intentions of stepping into the intimidatingly massive fortress in the first place, so the fact that they weren't *allowed* inside was more like the best news they had heard all

day. He came to the logical conclusion and left Claiomh in their care.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible — assuming things go smoothly, at least.” And just like that, Orphen set off through the slightly-ajar outer gate and climbed the wide stone staircase all the way up to the main entrance. He steeled himself with deep breaths and braced himself for an unpleasant experience.

The Sorcerers’ Association allowed no passage to ordinary citizens — but this didn’t mean that just by the sole virtue of being a Sorcerer that they had any obligation to welcome you with open arms.

One hour left sitting in the waiting room was enough to make Orphen feel like he had become one with the chairs. He could feel his hunger mounting by the minute, and he had nothing to take his mind off of it as the waiting room had no form of entertainment to pass the time with whatsoever. Just when he’d grown sick and tired of being left waiting, a young man showed up and led him down a long, dark corridor with no windows into another room, at which point he said simply “Please wait here a moment,” to which Orphen complied without making any effort to hide his discontent.

The room he had been taken to was apparently the actual waiting room for guests this time. And, judging from how bare it was, it was probably among the absolute lowest class of such rooms. It made sense, he guessed. From their point of view, he was just some no-name, self-proclaimed Sorcerer who had shown up without so much as an appointment. He was lucky he had even been taken to an actual guest room instead of an interrogation chamber.

The thought guided Orphen’s hand to the silver pendant around his neck. As a form of identification, it seemed to have served its purpose well enough.

Letting out a sigh, he dropped down onto the uncomfortable couch in the corner of the room. The gas lamp on the roof was the room’s flickering source of light. Because the room was located deep in the building, there were no windows to let in any natural light, giving it an all-around dim appearance. The floor was covered in so much dust that it stuck to the soles of his boots. There was only one set of footprints in the sheet of dust, those being his own. In short, this room hadn’t been used at all in the past several days until Orphen had come along to liberate it from that sealed fate.

The room had two doors, located on opposite walls from each other: the one that Orphen had entered from, and the second leading to an equally dimly lit corridor almost completely identical to the one he had just walked down.

After thirty more minutes of waiting, the door finally opened again. It was the same one Orphen had entered from.

“Krylancelo!” the man’s voiced echoed with surprise throughout the room. Orphen raised his head to find a merry, red-haired young man standing in the doorway.

“Heartia.” Orphen’s voice was comparatively less excited.

The redhead didn’t seem to mind his guest’s lack of enthusiasm as he strode excitedly into the room.

“I saw the name ‘Orphen’ on the guest list, and I wondered to myself, ‘Could it really be him?’ Imagine my surprise when you showed up here out of the blue like that! You know if you’d just checked in with the name Krylancelo you wouldn’t have been left waiting for so long like that. The staff originally were a bit hesitant about letting me meet with you. It felt more like they were preparing to drive you away, can you believe that?”

“Yeah, I kinda noticed.” Orphen rose from the couch and gripped Heartia’s extended right hand with his own, giving a half-hearted handshake. Heartia returned his grip with a much more vigorous shake, and Orphen observed his face carefully all the while.

“You haven’t changed at all,” he said while examining Heartia’s facial features. Same old thin eyebrows, same old smooth face without the trace of a beard anywhere in sight, same old pointy chin as five years ago. Heartia’s smile faded slightly as he chatted with his old friend. “You, on the other hand, have changed quite a lot, I see,” he muttered.

That said, Heartia always seemed to have this air about him that suggested he couldn’t keep a serious-looking expression on his face for any longer than a few seconds at a time.

He pulled his hand back down by his side, shrugged his shoulders and asked “So, how have you been doing for yourself lately?”



“Poor as a beggar, really. If you wanna hear about that, I don’t mind sharing, but it’s not the best topic for conversation,” said Orphen sarcastically. Heartia made a wry face as if he were troubled by the news that his friend had not been doing well for himself.

“You know if you really wanted, you could land just about any official job you wanted as a Sorcerer. Lately people as strong as you have been steadily decreasing in number, so those with real skill are in high demand.”

“I’d say that’s partly the fruit of your efforts as a social welfare worker, don’t you think? These days it’s possible to earn a good living without having to put your life on the line for an organization like the Tower of Fangs like you used to have to.”

“I wouldn’t call that the fruit of my efforts — heck, I’m not even one of the key people involved. To tell the truth, my job right now is basically being the same old errand boy I’ve always been,” said Heartia with a self-deriding smile creasing his freckled cheeks.

“Ever since you left the Tower, I just haven’t really been able to put my heart into it anymore. I mean, we used to be like rivals, you know? I always did the best I could to keep up with you, and the sight of you constantly running full-speed ahead of me was what spurred me to do my best to keep up with you in turn. Without that huge wall in front of me to overcome anymore, I kind of lost a lot of passion for it. My grades just got worse and worse. Never mind becoming a Court Sorcerer, it was a bit iffy as to whether I could even get a job all the way out *here* at this little branch office.”

“You say that like you’re not enjoying the work you do here, but I can tell otherwise.”

“You’ve got me there. Yeah, I like the fact that I actually get to retire to my quarters at a set time every day. I’ve been taking it pretty easy out here ever since I was dispatched from the main Tower.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. I’m glad you’re keeping well. But I didn’t actually come here to trade stories about the good old days, Heartia.”

“...You didn’t?” Heartia seemed genuinely surprised to hear this, as if he

couldn't imagine why else Orphen would have come out to see him.

Keeping his eyes fixed on Heartia's face, Orphen continued. "I came here because I'm looking for someone."

"Who are you looking for that you would come to me about it?"

"Our good old acquaintance, Master Childman."

"Why are you looking for Master Childman?" he asked while furrowing his brow slightly. Orphen explained that he was currently employed as a bodyguard for the Everlasting family, and reported to Heartia about the events of the previous night, including that Childman had been involved in the raid on the family's mansion.

"Why would Master Childman do such a thing? Surely you must be mistaken. I just can't see him stooping to burgling citizens' homes like that—"

"Yeah, under normal circumstances he'd probably never resort to something as stupid as that. *Under normal circumstances*, that is. It suddenly seems a lot more plausible if you consider that he might have been hired for the job by the Sorcerers' Association. That's why I'm here today, because I believe that Childman is somewhere in this building at this very moment."

"That's preposterous. If Master Childman were here, surely I would have noticed by now. I know it's a pretty big building, but Childman is not someone who's easy to miss. Especially to someone like me who comes here to work every day."

"Right. Unless you're saying all this to cover for him."

"What are you trying to say, Krylancelo?!" snapped Heartia, his eyes flaring up in irritation.

"Look, you really need to pull yourself together already. Why are you doing this? Look, I'm really sorry about what happened with Azalie, okay? I can even put up with you not forgiving me as a person when I didn't take her side. But accusing me of being involved in some scheme like that is on a totally different level from just some verbal argument—"

"Heartia—" Orphen interrupted his old friend swiftly and silently, with a voice

that even to himself had begun to resemble Childman's in its cold, rational tones.

"Heartia. I haven't said a word about Azalie ever since I got here."

"...Are you trying to trip me up with twisted logic now? I thought we were friends, you and me."

"I still think of you as my friend, for what it's worth." Heartia merely scoffed at Orphen's words.

"You think of me as a friend, yet you can't bring yourself to trust me?"

"No, I trust you. More than I trust most people, in fact. Hell, I'd even trust you when most reasonable people might doubt you. But forcing myself to believe you when you're clearly lying to me wouldn't be trust, it would be lying to myself."

"I'm sorry Krylancelo, but can you please leave? I have work that I need to be getting back to," Heartia said as he turned his back to Orphen, making to leave the room. Before he could run away, though, Orphen grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"...What's the meaning of this, Krylancelo?" Heartia asked without turning to face him.

"My name is Orphen," he said as a matter of fact. "The part of me that was Krylancelo died that day all those years ago."

"It's this kind of self-serving behavior that creates more and more distance between you and your old friends, Krylancelo," he said while brushing Orphen's hand off so that he could leave the room.

Orphen stayed standing where he was for a short while. Feeling the passage of time in his body once more, he turned his head upwards and caught sight of a wall clock that he hadn't noticed before. The seconds hand ticking away in perfect rhythm with the flowing of time, and the clock informed him that it was now precisely one o'clock in the afternoon.



"C'mon, it's almost two o'clock now," Claiomh grumbled while stirring what

was left of the orange juice in her glass with her straw. It was actually still only a quarter to two, but Dortin made the smart choice of not bothering to correct her.

After parting from Orphen, Claiomh and crew had gone back into town to a fresh fruits parlor where they had since been holed up for a good two hours or so. Dortin, having nothing better to do, ordered a glass of fruit juice (with Claiomh's money) and sat down to read a nice, good, bulky old book. Volkan, meanwhile, was doing that thing he did where he kept ordering nothing but water repeatedly, unwittingly yet ferociously harassing the poor waiter as was just in his nature to do.

Claiomh gazed out of the store window at the Sorcerers' Association branch office that she could keep an eye on from inside the store.

"What's taking Orphen so long?" she mumbled.

"That damned Sorcerer has no sense of time. He's always leaving people waiting like this, he does it to me all the blasted time," Volkan quipped while chewing on icecubes with his big square jaw.

I don't know if you can really say that when we didn't arrange a time to regroup, Dortin fairly asserted to himself, flipping another page in his book.

Claiomh seemed to be genuinely worried about that Black Sorcerer right now. "You don't think the Sorcerers took him captive, do you?" Volkan nodded repeatedly upon entertaining this idea.

"That's pretty likely, if you ask me. That guy's gotten on the bad sides of a hell of a lot of Sorcerers all across the Continent, you know."

"Eh, really?" Claiomh perked up her ears at this. Volkan, finally having found someone to hear him out for a change, colored his speech patterns and exaggerated and twisted every possible fact he could in order to make his story sound all the more impressive.

"Mhm. Just the other day he got run through the wringer by a local greengrocer when he was caught shoplifting."

Wasn't that the time he tried to sneak the daikon radish that you'd stolen back into the store, bro? Dortin, who had already fully understood where his

brother's story was about to go from here, decided it was in his best interests not to correct the skewed facts. Volkan continued exactly as his kid brother had expected him to.

"I've even caught sight of him beheading chickens in the dead of night while chanting the name of all manner of evil spirits and creatures of the dark realms."

"No way, seriously?!" Claiomh's face lit up as she listened to Volkan's overblown tales of misadventures and demonic rituals. Volkan was too absorbed in slandering Orphen's name to even notice that Claiomh's impression of Orphen was improving the more the boy talked.

"I'm telling you, Miss. On the name of the great Bulldog of Masmaturia, renowned soldier of fortune, Vulcano Volkan, that man is nothing but a heinous magician." Dortin grew slightly nostalgic upon hearing the name of his hometown for the first time in so long, but Volkan wasn't sensitive enough to give a damn beyond the fact that it was a title he could use to bolster his own reputation. He continued after just the briefest of pauses.

"I'm saying this for your own good, young lady. You're better off firing that unreliable snake before he craps all over your family's reputation. Not to worry, I'll protect you instead! I'll take care of any villains far better and more humanely than that fiend would, just you watch," he said and slapped his fist against his chest. Claiomh blinked in surprised for a moment and said "Fire that unreliable snake... You want me to fire Orphen?"

"Of course!" he nodded.

"The proof is in the pudding, as it were. If you don't believe me, just check beneath the bed that foul man slept in last night! There should be a great many chicken feathers hidden beneath it in an attempt to conceal the evidence, I'm sure of it." *Come to think of it, I remember seeing Volkan crawling around under Orphen's bed last night... So that's what he was up to,* Dortin recalled. He was surprised to learn that his brother had even gone as far as to prepare small props like that to make his tall tales seem the slightest bit more credible.

Not that it really did much, since Claiomh didn't seem to care much either way about the chicken feathers bit.

“Hmm, is that so...” she mumbled, before announcing that she had to use the toilet. She left her seat and walked into the store, which Dortin took as his chance to talk to his brother about the stunt he’d pulled this time.

“Hey bro, where in the world did you manage to find chicken feathers to stuff under his bed?” Volkan puffed out his chest and with the utmost confidence said, “I ripped apart one of the pillows I found laying around in that mansion!”

“...I know those pillows are filled with feathers, but you do realize that not all feathers are chicken feathers, right?”

“W-wait, they’re not?” Volkan was actually surprised to learn this about the pillow feathers he’d been so proud of, when right then— —*KYA-SHIIINK*— A large glass window nearby shattered into hundreds of shards with a sharp noise, and a rock the size of a human head dropped right on top of Dortin and friends’ table. Volkan let out a piercing shriek and clung to his little brother out of shock. Dortin tried desperately to shake him off as he went to look out onto the main street.

“Hwaaah-ha-ha-ha-hahahahaha!” a booming laughter filled the streets outside in broad daylight.

“It-it’s the Shrimp-Man!” he yelled reflexively.

“I’M NOT A SHRIIMP!!” Following the Shrimp-Man’s war cry, Dortin’s table just up and exploded out of nowhere. Fragments of glass and that-which-was-once-table were sent soaring throughout the store, and Dortin’s unfinished glass of juice was quite rudely splashed all over his face. The orange fruit juice stung his eyes, so he tried desperately to wipe it away with his hands while retreating as far away from the table as dwarfishly possible.

The inner depths of the store was already a complete warzone. The city streets outside weren’t much better. Customers and pedestrians alike were caught in a tangled mess of panic as everyone tried to flee for their lives, and one waiter was so shocked by the exploding table that he’d frozen to the spot with his mouth agape.

Just then, Claiomh came flying out from the depths of the store like a bullet freed from its chamber at long last by the gunman with the itchiest trigger finger on the Continent.

“Oh hey, cool, what’s going on?” *You didn’t even wash your hands, did you?* thought Dortin accusingly, but he daren’t put it into words. Her golden blonde hair flapping behind her as though the wings of a bird of prey, she dashed over to Dortin’s side.

“It’s that assassin from last night,” he explained. The girl let out the most rapturous *Ooh!* that the little dwarf boy had ever heard as she held both hands over her heart to stop her heart from leaping right out of her chest.

“Where is he? Hey, where is he? I didn’t get to see him last night!” she echoed, snatching Volkan’s sword from him as she ran past.

“Wait, Miss, where are you going?!” Volkan tried to call out to stop her, but Claiomh straight-up ignored him and ran out into the street before whipping the blunt old longsword out of its scabbard.

“Come at me, boy!” she commanded while pushing Volkan out of her way. She noticed, in addition, the hapless waiter standing nearby with a silver tray still held aloft, and snatched it right out of his hands. She intended to use it as a makeshift shield, it would appear.

And so, in a deep yet clear voice, the Shrimp-Man announced, “Very well, but don’t blame the chef if you can’t stomach your order...” In a flash, the shadow-clad masked assailant was suddenly behind Claiomh’s back.

“Hyaaa!” she twisted her body at the unexpected attack, and pivoted on her heel to swing the sword in a brilliant horizontal arc. The blade connected with the man’s neck — and passed clean through it with no resistance whatsoever. The assassin’s shadowy figure faded away as abruptly as it had appeared.

“It was an illusion!” screamed Dortin. “Where’s the real one?!” He spun around to examine the inside of the store, and yelled out, whipping his finger out towards the entrance, “He’s over there! He snuck in by walking right through the front door!”

“It’s not sneaky if you announce it to everyone!” the man called Black Tiger yelled into the store. He wasn’t riding the bull he had last night, but he still bore his threateningly huge scythe, the handle of which he rested against his shoulder. Dortin took up a defensive position towards the would-be killer, trying to find a weapon only to realize he had none, and so he gripped his bulky

book with both hands and brandished it the way one would if they were getting ready to squish a cockroach.

Behind him, Dortin could make out the cries of Volkan trying to wrestle his own weapon back from Claiomh.

“Hey, lady! You listening to me, you wench?! Gimme my damned sword back! That’s mine!!” the cries of desperate anger continued, followed not long after by a loud *Cla-tang!* which Dortin rightly interpreted as the sound of Claiomh’s tray battering Volkan across the head.

Mumbling curses and words of frustrated resignation, he wandered, beaten, over to his brother Dortin’s side. Barely managing to pull himself back together, Volkan faced his self-proclaimed assassin foe and pointed straight at him.

“You’re one persistent son of a shellfish bitch, Shrimp-Man!”

“I’m not a bloody shrimp! I’m the Nightmare Blood Demon, Black Ti— wait a second, where’s that Black Sorcerer fellow?”

“He stood us up!”

“Wait, *what?* Where on the Continent is he?!”

“The hell should I know!” Volkan snapped defiantly.

“Nobody’s born a bad guy! A freak like you must’ve had a hard life, am I right?! *How-eeever!* That’s no excuse to walk the path of a murderer, making the world worse for everyone around you! I cannot allow such heinous acts to take place before my very eyes! My boiling blood won’t allow me to sit on the sidelines when such foul acts are committed right in front of me! In the name of the great Vulcano Volkan, I’ll punish you with the taste of cold steel! Brace yourself, foul evildoer!!”

Black Tiger inquired, quite confused, “How are you going to make me taste cold steel without your sword?”

“The little wench won’t give it back...” he sulked while turning to face Claiomh.

Black Tiger had apparently had it up to here with the shenanigans.

“Enough tomfoolery! Bring out the Black Sorcerer!”

“I’m not just gonna sit down and take being called a fool by a Shrimp-Man! And I’ve told you a dozen times! He! Is! Not! Here!”

“He *has* to be! That’s the whole damned reason I came all this way! Don’t tell me he went home without you already?!”

“Aaargh, I don’t know where his ass went, alright?! Now see here you filthy pervert, I don’t care if you sold your soul to the netherworld or what, but I swear on my name I’m gonna—” Right as Volkan struck an intimidating pose, Black Tiger uttered a certain phrase, and next to him materialized a huge column of dark flames. From within the flames emerged a beast with fur as pitch-black as the night sky, roaring as it stomped the ground to herald its arrival on the battlefield. Every time the bull shook its head, black smoke erupted from its nostrils and darkened the very air around it. The mere sight of the hulking bull temporarily made Volkan forget how to speak mid sentence, and his mouth flapped wordlessly even as the voice itself had already retired from this fight early and decided to call it a day nice and safe inside the boy’s chest instead.

Volkan leapt up and cowered behind Dortin’s back.

“Alright, Dortin, here’s your chance to shine! Tell that street slasher that you’re gonna tie a headband around his head so tight that it’ll suffocate him to death!”

“Volkan...” Dortin had all but completely given up on his chicken-brain of a brother.

Claiomh took this as her chance and emerged to the front lines of the battlefield. She brandished her stolen longsword with both hands and adopted an orthodox swordfighting stance, before calling the Shrimp-Man out.

“That’s enough with the ego talk, yeah? Come and get a piece of this if you think you’re so hot!”

“C-Claiomh, what are you thinking?!” Dortin tried to stop her by grabbing onto the hem of her skirt, but she brushed him off and continued her slow but steady advance towards her foe. *Oho*, Black Tiger let it be shown that he was impressed.

He patted the bull with one hand and stepped forwards himself instead. “You dare to challenge the magnificent Black Tiger to a duel? You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” said the assassin while walking towards her holding his scythe at the ready, still resting it against his shoulder. The bull did not budge from its position.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no...” Dortin thrust his fingers into his mouth and bit down on them lightly in a futile attempt to calm his nerves. Claiomh’s figure from behind betrayed no sense of giving in to fear whatsoever. Her posture was perfectly balanced, and she held the sword like a professional who had wielded one her entire life, stepping lightly with practiced movements while dipping the tip of the blade just slightly towards her opponent, ready to sink her blade into him as soon as she saw her chance to pounce. Watching her precise movements inspired a faint hope somewhere within Dortin’s heart that maybe, just maybe, this girl was actually some incredibly skilled swordfighter.

Fwooh...! the sound of air escaping lungs as the body pounced. Whether it was the killer or the girl who made the first move, it was hard to tell. It all happened in an instant. Black Tiger’s scythe carved an arc through the air. Claiomh saw the arc dropping down from the upper-right in front of her, and moved like a burst of air to intercept the blow with her sword. She saw it; the movement of the scythe, and knew that simply taking the blow wouldn’t be enough to kill its momentum, so she changed her strategy on the spur of the moment. She stepped in closer to the assassin and thrust her sword into his hand instead. There was a dull yet piercing *clang* of metal colliding with metal, and Black Tiger’s balance *seemed* to have been broken ever-so-slightly.

Claiomh caught this, too, and made to strike. She swung the sword towards her foe to put the pressure on him.

Alas, the assassin was the more skilled of the two. He shifted all of his body weight down and to the right, pivoting on his tiptoes to sweep Claiomh off her feet. As Claiomh was lacking in body weight to keep her grounded she was sent flying rather easily, but she, too, managed to shift her body weight and rolled into a retreat before Black Tiger’s follow-up attack had a chance to connect. Both duelists leapt back to their feet and took up their positions once more.

Dortin admitted his amazement to his older brother. “That girl is really good.”

“Hrm, she’s not half bad. Still a little rough ’round the edges, but she shows promise.”

She’s already better than you are, bro, he mumbled to himself. Even so, he thought, he didn’t think that she actually stood an honest chance at winning this duel against the assassin. The differences in both their stamina and experience were far too great. The fact was that barely a minute had elapsed and the color had already drained from Claiomh’s face. Facing off against an enemy with a real weapon like that was far more physically and mentally taxing than it may have looked.

She was panting heavily now, too. She held her ground, though, as she was not quite foolish enough to blindly rush an enemy with such a difference in skill between them. Black Tiger walked steadily and cautiously towards the girl, who now seemed far more petite than she usually did. And then— “I release thee, Sword of Light!” and with a fwoosh the brilliant white light connected with the ground at the spot directly between Claiomh and Black Tiger, causing a blast that resounded throughout the store interior.

What was barely visible within the dust cloud was the silhouette of Black Tiger leaping backwards at the last second, and Claiomh falling flat on her backside. Dortin didn’t even have to search for his brother amidst the blast, as the poor fellow had gone stark-raving mad and hysterically strangled his younger brother from behind.

“V-Volkan, bro, let go of me!”

“If I’m gonna die then you’re dying with me, Dортиiin!”

“I never agreed to that!”

Orphen appeared out of nowhere, better late than never. He must have climbed in through one of the broken windows at some point. He helped Claiomh up off the ground like he would lift an annoying younger relative to their feet after they had tripped and fallen down. He even peeled Volkan off of Dortin’s back while mumbling yet more complaints about the dwarf siblings, but Dortin couldn’t make out anything he was saying as the sudden unexpected explosion spell had left his ears ringing.

“The hell have you guys gone and gotten yourselves into during the couple

hours I was away?" was about all he could make out from the movement of his lips. Dortin had no idea how to explain what in the world had just happened, when Claiomh came over and dropped Volkan's sword back at its owner's feet and answered for them.

"I was dueling with that weirdo over there," she explained.

"I caught a little of that, yeah. You put up a good fight, Claiomh. I didn't know you could handle a sword that well."

"It's the club I'm in at school. I'm a team regular, even," she puffed her chest out with pride as she explained. "And what about you? Where've you been this whole time?"

"Whaddya mean, where have I been? I've been searching high and low for you guys. You didn't say a thing about dropping by a store like this before we parted, so I had no idea where you'd gone and wandered off to this time."

"Okay, but still..." Claiomh pouted like a girl whose boyfriend had been late for their date.

"We could've been killed. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. If he is who I think he is, then that self-proclaimed assassin wouldn't harm a fly," Orphen explained in a hushed voice. He bent down and picked something up off the ground, something that Black Tiger had dropped during his hasty retreat. Dortin caught a glimpse of the object, and he recognized it immediately. It was a pendant of silver, molded in the shape of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a downwards-pointing sword.

Chapter IV: Baldanders

“Now this,” muttered Orphen, “this is impressive.”

“You’re telling me. It actually helps though, this storage room was a nightmare to keep sorted.” Orphen and Claiomh were discussing the current state of the storage which was totally unlike how it had been previously.

Claiomh was the first to notice that the place had been ransacked, the reason being that apparently she frequented the room for strange or interesting articles whenever she got bored. Although ‘ransacked’ did little to sum up just what had happened to the room in the wake of its would-be thieves; it had been thoroughly *cleaned*. Not cleaned out, but cleaned up. Tidied meticulously.

“Given the state the place was in, I wouldn’t be surprised if that sword was worth less than most cleaners would’ve charged for the job.”

Claiomh simply shrugged. “In that case I just feel bad for them, because apparently they didn’t even get that much out of it,” she said.

“So they didn’t find it even after going through all these swords? How many hundreds are even here, for that matter?”

“I once got bored enough to count a long time ago, and there were easily more than eight hundred. And that was when father was still alive, so it’s probably a lot more than that by now.”

“Even if you knew exactly what you were looking for, that’s still easily enough to keep you busy searching for most of the day. I’m starting to see why Childman bothered with that letter in the first place instead of just looting it to begin with. But that brings me to my question: How do you know he didn’t make off with the sword? Even if Childman had time to check the entire inventory, it’s not like you went and did the same.”

“I didn’t have to. He left another note. I haven’t told anyone else about it yet, I thought you’d want to see it first,” said Claiomh as she produced another slip of paper. Illuminated by the light flooding in from the corridor, it was a note

that said simply ‘Have the sword ready to be collected by evening.’

“Good call, but you should still let your mother know about it. If those guys are coming back to retrieve the sword for sure this time, you can bet it’s gonna be at least as much of a commotion as last time,” advised Orphen.

“Hey,” said Claiomh, “Was this note written by the assassin from earlier?”

“I doubt it. That Black Tiger guy was probably sent after us to cause a diversion, while the other one — Childman — broke into the house to look for the sword. Otherwise there’s absolutely no reason for one of them to attack us in broad daylight.”

“Childman... He’s some crazy-strong Sorcerer, right?”

“Yeah. He was my instructor back in the day. Even in the Tower of Fangs, he was called the strongest Sorcerer on the Continent. His reputation isn’t just for show, either. He’s the kind of professional who could kill people without batting an eye if that’s what the job demanded of him.” Orphen’s words made Claiomh look down nervously and chew on her thumbnail. It looked like she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words. Orphen laid his hand on her head and tried to calm her down.

“Getting scared? It doesn’t suit you.”

“...Is there any way I could help you?”

“If you’re thinking about jumping in and waving a sword around like you did earlier, then don’t. Sorcerers from the Tower of Fangs aren’t just your garden variety thugs. They try to avoid needless bloodshed, but they won’t shy away from murdering one or even a dozen people if that’s what it takes to complete their mission.”

“...Were you the same, Orphen?” she asked while peeking out from under her ruffled bangs.

“Me? I’m... Well...” Orphen paused.

“I’m a dropout *because* I can’t make myself do that sort of thing,” replied Orphen as he recalled the incident with Azalie. Not wanting to upset Claiomh with the details, he lifted his hand from her head and turned to leave the cellar.

“Hey, Orphen?” asked Claiomh almost intuitively, “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Nope. There is someone I admire, though.” He almost added “You’ve even met her,” but quickly decided against it. If he mentioned that he gave up a promising future to chase what little was left of Azalie, he reasoned that anyone would think him out of his mind.

Claiomh closed the cellar door behind them and followed after Orphen.

“Who’s it that you admire?”

“Tishtinie, I guess,” Orphen gave an answer which sent Claiomh reeling with shock. Orphen laughed at her reaction. “I’m kidding. But the girl I’m talking about... she went missing a long time ago. I’m on a journey to try and find her.” His comment was technically not a lie.

Claiomh’s questions took a turn for the childishly naive. “When you do find her, are you gonna get married?”

“...Probably not,” replied Orphen after a moment of thought. “She’s not really the sort of person I can picture wanting to get married. That’s actually part of why I admire her so much. Still, admiration and love are two very different things, you know?”

“So that’s how it is,” said Claiomh while locking the cellar door. “Alright, so what type of girl *do* you like?”

“Couldn’t say. I’ve never really given it much thought,” he replied while trying not to think about it. “Time for me to ask some questions of my own. You said you picked up your sword-fighting skills from your club at school, right? But your stance didn’t look like fencing, and the way you moved made it look like you’ve studied actual combat styles instead of just sports. Do rich girls’ schools even allow that kind of club?”

“I’m not going to a rich girls’ school. The one I go to is a public school; only my sister could make it through that kind of strict education.”

“Makes sense. So then, what, does your school have a swordplay club or something?”

“Nope. I’m in the soldiers’ club.”

“...Quit that worthless club before it poisons your way of life,” muttered Orphen almost to himself. He stuck his hands into his pockets and followed after the dainty girl’s figure as she skipped up the stairs. When he did, his finger brushed against the ring that Claiomh had given him some days prior.

Orphen had seen this particular ring before. Not only that, but having remembered exactly where he’d seen it, he was now convinced that it was the exact same ring. The reason for that being... “...Can you read what this says, Krylancelo?” the girl asked while holding out a small, silver ring. Krylancelo squinted his eyes to try and make out the unfamiliar writing, but he quickly gave up and returned the ring to its owner.

“I can’t read it. Is it even actually writing?” was his only response. The girl — Azalie, known to those in the Tower of Fangs as The Chaos Witch — sat in a chair in the lounge room and giggled at how quickly Krylancelo had given up.

“Of course it is. Why else would it be written here? It’s writing from a lost age, developed by a breed of Sorcerers totally different from the kind we know today.”

“Then there’s no way we’d be able to read it. Those ancient Sorcerers died out a long time ago, didn’t they? There’s nobody left alive who still remembers their language.”

“Just because nobody speaks it doesn’t mean it’s impossible to decipher. Wyrldography — the study of these runes — is a subject of ongoing research even now. I’m one of the people helping out with deciphering this lost language, which means you’d better start doing your best to figure it out soon, too.”

“...What does your research have to do with me?”

“Why *wouldn’t* my research be an important thing for my future assistant to need to know?” said Azalie with a wink of her enchanting brown eyes.

“Future assistant...? Me?!” Krylancelo literally leapt out of his chair.

“You didn’t even bother checking the test results? Don’t try to act all modest after those results. I even overheard the examiner saying ‘It’s what we’ve come to expect from him,’ can you believe that?” she said, tossing the silver ring in

the air before catching it to emphasize her point. Even her grin was full of high expectations for the boy.

“Anyhow, I’m going to need you to figure this out on your own from now on. You won’t be much use as an assistant if you can’t even figure out something as simple as this on your own. I’ll give you the answer this time, but I won’t be able to do all of your work for you from now on, okay? This ring says simply: ‘Be disarmed, my foes.’ It’s a simple little spell meant to protect its owner from injury. It’s probably a one-time-use sort of thing, too.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because the effect is so broad. If it were designed for a specific purpose then the spell might hold out more than once, but the person who made this ring likely wasn’t a skilled enough Sorcerer to enchant items that powerful. But even if it were more useful than that...” Azalie held out her hand and the ring with it, to show that it was too small to fit over her knuckles. “I still wouldn’t be able to use it, because it won’t fit. Do you think your fingers are small enough?”

“If even you can’t get it to fit, there’s no way it’s going on my hand. It was probably designed with a young kid in mind. If it’s a simple protection spell then maybe it was meant to protect a child if they got thrown from a carriage or came close to injuring themselves, that’s my best guess.”

“That sounds plausible. In that case it might be a passive spell meant to take effect even if the wielder can’t read the spell itself, rather than a command-activated one. I should see if I can find a small monkey to stick it on sometime, that would be a good way to test it,” she said only half-joking before her face turned completely serious. “Enough about this little ring though. The reason I brought it up is because there’s an item with the same kind of runes that I want to perform a much bigger experiment with, and I don’t want the elders to find out. Can you come to my room later and help me out with that? I’m definitely going to need an assistant.”

“Sure, anything I can do to help,” the boy replied without giving it much thought. Azalie smiled at her new assistant’s reassuring answer.

Unknown to Krylancelo, this would be the last time he ever saw a smile on the face of the Chaos Witch.





“That godforsaken Black Sorcerer really gets on my nerves!” screamed Volkan in the middle of a library, completely ignoring the annoyed librarian who had been praying for him to leave since the moment he stepped foot into the building.

That’s all you’ve been saying lately, grumbled Dörtin internally. The book Dörtin was skimming through was a recreation of an extremely old dictionary of archaisms. The dwarf boys had been tasked with finding out the meaning of the word ‘Baldanders’ by Orphen, which had brought them to the library in pursuit of knowledge.

Volkan, however, cared very little for knowledge, and chose instead to slam Dörtin’s book shut right in his face. The act almost knocked Dörtin’s glasses right off his face, by which point he was utterly fed up with his brother’s unreasonable temper tantrums.

“What was that for?”

“Do you feel *nothing* at the injustice we’re made to suffer through on that bastard’s command?!” Volkan would have swung his broadsword around if he had been allowed to take it into the library, but there was no librarian on the Continent insane enough to let this unstable dwarf within ten feet of a bookshelf armed with anything more threatening than a bookmark.

“Think about it, my poor, dim-witted little brother. That Black Sorcerer took the one boring job he couldn’t be bothered with and thrust it on us like we’re his slaves! I don’t doubt he’s kicked back in a big comfy chair in that mansion sipping tea right about now.”

“Sorcery is supposed to be really taxing on the body and mind, and lately Orphen’s been casting nothing but really big, flashy spells. He’s probably really worn out after all that.”

“...You’re starting to sound just like that scoundrel,” said Volkan in the pettiest voice he could muster. “If you wanna be his dog, then so be it! I’ll judge you exactly as I would your worthless owner!”

“I’m only trying to explain—”

“Silence, boot-licker! I know that look in your eyes. You’ve always been the type to throw your pride into the dirt and let people trample all over it the minute the going got tough.”

“Says the guy who tramples all over me just to try and save his own backside at the first sign of trouble.”

“If you want me to rip your tongue out, then just say so!” Volkan erupted in rage and flipped the table between himself and Dortin backwards over his head, which sent it crashing into the bookcase behind himself. What happened next was a most convoluted domino mechanism which sent books flying across the room, even somehow collapsing the bookshelf directly behind Dortin and flooding the immediate vicinity in an avalanche of books. The library staff let out horrified shrieks at the sight of the disaster.

“Get out of this building right now, you devil children!” The librarian was positively livid. Dortin was relieved that the librarian’s rage had saved him from his brother’s antics, and lay waiting to be hauled out of the pile of books in what was his most peaceful break of the past few days. Right as he let all his muscles relax, a book fell down in front of his face and flipped open to complete his own quest for him.

“That’s it!” he yelled. “We’ve found it!”



“The Soon-Another?” Orphen repeated the words back to the still-excited Dortin. They had been given a room between the entrance and the garden so that they could be ready to leap to action at a moment’s notice.

“That’s right,” said Dortin passionately. “Baldanders is a really old word that means ‘The Soon-Another, different by the moment.’ It’s linked with the crest for the moon in ancient sorcery.”

“Hmm...” Orphen looked over the room for a moment, lost in thought. Dortin waited impatiently for him to react, while Volkan glared angrily out of the window. He snapped his fingers once and then told Dortin the conclusion that he had come to.

“Both the name’s meaning and the connection with the moon makes me

think it's tied to shapeshifting sorcery. What's more, the spell that turned Azalie into what she is now was the result of a sword, too."

"So you think it's the same sword?"

"The connection's definitely there. From what I heard, though, Childman personally sealed away the sword that Azalie used somewhere. How could a sealed, enchanted sword end up in a place like this...?" Orphen was pulled out of his thoughts when he heard three lively knocks on the door. There was only one person in the building who would knock like that.

"Come in, Claiomh." Claiomh opened the door and stood there wearing the kind of clothes a rich girl would wear when going horse riding instead of her usual light dress. She had her hair tied back in a ponytail, and her general appearance told Orphen everything he needed to know at a glance.

"Don't say anything. The answer is no. Change your clothes and go to bed."

"No fair!" she pouted. She pulled the large white gloves tighter on her hands to stop them slipping off and tried to appeal her case. "I can help just as well as anyone else! I even got mother's permission."

"...Tishtinie said you could help?" Orphen clearly doubted her words, but she continued unabated.

"She did. She said I could help as long as I don't get in your way. Even Mariabelle said to protect you as best I can."

"Gh..." Orphen wracked his brains trying to come up with a way he could talk some sense into the women of this household. "Listen, Claiomh. If this was anything like going duck hunting or game hunting, I might let you tag along. But this is a hell of a lot more dangerous than that. Do you have any idea what it's gonna be like?"

"Of course, I'm not an idiot."

"If you seriously think there's anything you can do, then you *are* an idiot. I could be dead before morning, or if things really go south, I might even end up becoming a murderer."

"You're too strong a Sorcerer to die, and you already told me you can't kill

anyone. So everyone's gonna make it out alive."

"Things don't always work out according to plan," sighed Orphen, by this point desperate to just hang Claiomh from a coat hanger by the nape of her shirt so that she wouldn't be able to give chase.

Claiomh noticed this, but didn't back off at all.

"You're a great Sorcerer, but there's still only one of you. You need someone to have your back if there are two burglars, and that's where I come in."

"If I needed someone to help me fight then I would've gone into town and hired the strongest-looking guy I could find."

"You didn't hire anyone, but you did go to the Sorcerers' Association to meet your old friend. Since you couldn't get his help, I'm just gonna help you out myself instead." Orphen put on his strictest face to try and dissuade her, but Claiomh simply folded her arms and glared back at him. It was clear that her duel against the Black Tiger had instilled some sort of stubborn confidence in her, because she didn't have the same sort of carefree air about her that she usually did. She was already long past the point where telling her to give up and go to bed would have any effect on her at all, a fact which made Orphen heave a sigh of frustration. Stuck with someone who wouldn't take no for an answer, he gave up and instead decided to at least make sure she was properly equipped to defend herself.

"Alright, where's your weapon?" The girl's face lit up with joy and she very nearly hugged him, but composed herself at the last second. She turned back out into the hallway then brought in her sword of choice. "This is the one I normally use," she said as she brandished a long, slender silver blade from its scabbard. Its plain, functional appearance suited her image, being bladed on one side with a gentle curve to its length.

"That's the one you're used to using at school, right?" he inquired, to which Claiomh nodded proudly.

"Yup. I usually fight with a safety cover over the blade, but I took that off because I thought it'd be more useful this way."

"A sharp blade's only useful if you plan on killing somebody. I don't wanna see

you turn into a murderer, so go get that safety cover before I get mad. Also, you might want to use an older sword, one that you won't miss when it breaks in the middle of the fight."

"I'm not gonna break my sword!" she sulked, returning her prized blade to its scabbard.

Orphen checked the clock. The time was just after one o'clock in the morning. Claiomh was fast asleep on the sofa, and the dwarfs had dozed off as well. He could have woken them up, but he knew there was no point even if he did. He was the only one who stood a real fighting chance against the two Sorcerers who would be raiding the place before much longer.

Childman... What brought you here to this city, Orphen wondered. First Azalie showed up out of nowhere, and then you appeared right on her tail. The common factor... It's the Sword of Baldanders. The ancient sorcery that warped Azalie into that state. Why do you want it though, Childman? He shook his head and corrected himself. It wasn't Childman who wanted the sword; it was Azalie. She had probably come to the same conclusion as Orphen, that the sword that reduced her to that state was also the only thing that would be able to turn her back.

In which case Azalie's goal was the sword, and Childman's goal was to use it to draw Azalie out. But why? The answer was obvious. *You're not doing this to turn her back to normal. You already told me that it'd be impossible to change her back. Meaning, you've come here to finish her off once and for all.* Azalie's blunder with the sword was seen by the Tower of Fangs as their ultimate disgrace. The elders had already succeeded in purging any trace of Azalie from their midst, erasing anything that might link the beast she'd become with the genius she had been in life. Now all that was left was for them to kill her for real.

I'm not gonna let you get away with that.

"I'm not gonna let anyone kill her," mumbled Orphen. He voiced his determination to help steel himself for what was to come.

"If there's any way to change her back, then I will. If not, then I'll protect her

for the rest of her life. Childman... I'll even kill you if that's what it takes." He stood up while being careful not to make a sound. He cast a glance around the room. Volkan was snoring loudly, while Dortin's sleep was much more restful. Claiomh was sleeping with horrible posture constricting the sofa like a snake. His eyes wandered and he started blankly into space.

He stood alone, still as a statue in the middle of the dimly lit room. His senses were pulled tight when his instincts suddenly kicked in.

Someone's coming, he thought. He couldn't tell who it was, but he could feel someone's presence drawing closer. Their presence filled the room and made the air heavy.

Orphen opened the door as quietly as possible and stepped out into the pitch black hallway. He looked up, trying to discern the cause of the darkness. One of the gas lights had gone out.

He closed the door behind him, and that was when it happened. The noise was like something gigantic colliding with the ground, and the shockwave could easily have been mistaken for a small earthquake.

It wasn't Childman's style to pull off such a conspicuous attack. This could only mean one thing — Azalie was back.

Orphen dashed out into the courtyard to confirm his suspicions. The area outside was bathed in red flames, making it brighter than it was indoors. The fire clapped as sparks danced through the air and the heat haze warped the scenery. A strangely grotesque figure stood in the middle of the courtyard, its face bent downwards as it lobbed flames into the ground at its feet.

"Azalie!" screamed Orphen. The sound of the flames must have drowned out his voice though, because Azalie didn't even react.

She lifted her hind quarters into the air and kept blasting fireball spells at the ground in a sort of handstand pose. Orphen tried to get closer, but the courtyard was so thoroughly flooded in a sea of flames that he couldn't find a way to approach.

While Orphen struggled in vain, Azalie became more and more enraged. She let out a tremendous roar and began gouging at the ground with her huge

claws.

What's under there...? The cellar?! Azalie somehow seemed to know the lay of the land. But Orphen didn't have the time for idle thoughts. He cast a spell to create a barrier around himself so that he could push on through the flames. Just as he began to draw close, Azalie spat out another fireball with enough force to blast chunks out of the ground in all directions.

"Shit!" screamed Orphen as he just barely dodged lumps of scorching earth thrown at him.

"Azalie! It's me! Can't you hear me?!" Orphen's voice was drowned out by another deafeningly loud crash, followed by the dull sound of ground giving way. The ground beneath Azalie could no longer support her weight, which caused it to cave in on the cellar storage room.

"Dammit," he cursed after losing his footing to the undulating ground beneath him. Virtually the entire courtyard had been swallowed by the ground, taking Azalie down with it. All that was left of her were her roars echoing up from under the ground, and her flames which burned the trees right down to their roots.

"What's going on?!" shrieked Claiomh at the wall of flames consuming the courtyard. The commotion had clearly woken her, as well as Volkan and Dartin, who had come out to see what all the fuss was.

Orphen clicked his tongue before dispelling the chaos. "Embrace my surroundings, Dancing Bronco!" The flames went out so quickly that the sudden drop in temperature caused a gust of wind. Darkness slowly returned to the estate grounds, except for the faint starlight which lent a slight silver sheen to the surroundings. The only sign that the commotion wasn't yet over was the sound of Azalie thrashing about wildly at the bottom of the pit in the middle of the courtyard. Orphen briefly considered dropping down the hole to chase after her, but caught himself before acting on impulse and ran over to check on Claiomh instead.

"You didn't burn yourself, did you?" he asked, which Claiomh answered with a shake of the head.

"I'm fine, I was just surprised. I got my mother and sister out through the back

door, that was the first thing I did. Did I do good?”

“Yeah, that was the best choice you could’ve made,” he reassured the brave young girl. Orphen wasn’t about to waste time checking on everybody’s well-being however, and quickly turned to face the crater once more. He caught sight of Azalie’s malformed tail thrashing about down there, writhing for all the world like a snake that had been battered across the head with a large rock.

“Is that... the same beast from before...?” mumbled Claiomh when she noticed the same thing.

“Yeah,” replied Orphen. Not wanting to let this chance slip through his fingers, Orphen prepared to dive down into the cellar. He was fully aware that it was a high-suicidal act to jump down into a confined space where Azalie was still thrashing around, but if she escaped again there was no telling when — or indeed if they’d ever meet again. He couldn’t let that happen.

Volkan drew his sword and hid behind his little brother. It was a comfort thing. Claiomh drew her sword as well, far more gracefully than Volkan could ever hope to manage, and stood her ground.

“Don’t even think about it,” warned Orphen. “You’ll be crushed flat in seconds.” Even Claiomh couldn’t argue with that analysis. Still, she had to try and wrap her head around the situation somehow.

“What’s going on? Wasn’t it supposed to be those assassins coming to steal the sword tonight?”

“Oh, they’re coming too. You can count on that.”

“But then how are we supposed to deal with—”

“Shh,” Orphen shushed Claiomh. The cellar below had gone completely quiet.

He ignored Claiomh’s protesting expression and began to circulate the mana around his body. He mentally pictured a large cage that could seal Azalie’s movements just in case, focusing all of his senses on the ground.

What came next caught him completely off-guard.

—*FHSHWAAAA!*— Azalie’s monstrous howl kicked up the night breeze and blasted the smoke lingering in the air in all directions. This was nothing

compared to the blast that followed.

Ghah! The buffet of air rapidly became a small tornado which grew rapidly in intensity. It threatened to flip the entire courtyard high into the night sky. Before Orphen even had time to react, Claiomh and the dwarf brothers were lifted several meters off the ground.

Dammit, it's Azalie's sorcery, cursed Orphen while trying to brace himself against the ground so as not to be flung around like a ragdoll.

I won't stand a chance if this becomes a battle of spells! However, he knew he had no other choice. First things first, though. He focused all of his mana once more, wringing out every last potent drop he could muster, and yelled with all of his might.

“Thou shalt feel my embrace, Lost Children!” The spell shot out myriad fishing hooks and lines from inside his own body, brimming with tremendous power in every thin thread of light. The lines were strong enough to fight their way through the tornado threatening to rip the air itself to ribbons, cleverly wrapping themselves around Claiomh, Volkan, and Dortin. Unless Orphen saved them, they were on a collision course for the ground from a terrible height, with more than enough momentum to massacre them all brutally. Relieved that his spell had been strong enough to prevent this, he gently brought everyone back to the safety of ground.

Not a moment too soon, as the tornado faded out at the same time their feet touched the ground.

The whole stunt left Orphen horribly drained. He was coated thick with sweat and had lost the sensation in his fingers and toes. His knees almost gave way and his heart was beating twice as fast as good health should ever permit. It was as exhausting as having run an entire marathon, all assailing him at once in the span of mere seconds.

He fell to one knee, physical strength completely escaping him. He had no time to wait for his breath to come back. He knew that he had to force his mana to flow normally again so he could prepare for his next move, but his body refused to comply.

I can't feel my legs, he thought numbly. *I need time to rest. How could a single*

spell take this much out of me...?

Claiomh rushed to his side to find out what was wrong. “Orphen, are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine in a minute,” he tried to force a smile to reassure her. “That last spell just took a lot out of me.”

“Are you sure you’re only exhausted?”

“I’m not hurt, I just used up all my strength. Can you help me up? My legs buckled.” Claiomh gave Orphen her hand and pulled him back to his feet. He looked around for any sign of the dwarfs — not to ask them for help, but to confirm that he had managed to save them. His wandering gaze froze facing directly ahead.

“...”

Volkan and Dortin entered his line of sight, but both of them stood stock still with their backs turned to him. He knew what had stolen their gaze, because he saw the same thing as well. Azalie hadn’t emerged from the crater at all, yet a large part of her body was now clearly visible to everyone present. “I don’t believe it... That giant freak’s gone and gotten even bigger,” grumbled Volkan, doubting his own eyes.

It was true, Azalie had grown far larger than she had ever been. Half of her body remained buried underground making it hard to judge, but she had to be at least five or six meters tall now.

“Dammit,” swore Orphen in disbelief. “I can’t believe she pulled that off.”

“What happened to her?” asked Claiomh.

“She forced the mana out of my body like wringing water from a damp towel,” he explained, “and then absorbed every last drop into her own stock. That’s why I’m weakened this much after a single spell.”

“She *absorbed* it?!” Claiomh had no idea how to react. She instinctively understood just how terrifying an act like that was.

“How... What are we going to do?”

“There’s not much we *can* do. I’m lucky to still be alive after bearing the brunt

of that.” Azalie tried to take flight with mighty flaps of her wings, but her body refused to take to the air. She had dug herself into a hole, and was now too big to fight her way out. She tried with more force behind each wing flap, and while she didn’t rise into the air, she seemed to slowly but surely pull herself closer to freedom. Volkan and Dortin ran terrified behind Orphen’s back, Volkan having lost his sword and Dortin without even his glasses.

“This is your fault, you crackpot Sorcerer! Get us out of this mess!” wailed Volkan on the brink of tears. “Your fuck-up turned the freakshow into a *giant* freakshow! Make things less worse, or I’ll measure your dead corpse with a protractor! You hear me, loser?!” The terror had turned Volkan’s already nonsensical threats into pure gibberish.

Orphen didn’t even have the strength to argue, so Claiomh stood up for him instead.

“Is that any way to talk to the guy who saved your life?! Just look at him! The poor guy can hardly stand after that spell he saved us with!”

“Who cares if we’re safe for now?! A real pro wouldn’t leave himself defenseless when it counts the most!”

“Like you’re one to talk, you dropped your sword in the confusion!”

“My sword? My *sword*?! Are we looking at the same monster here? My sword’s about as much good as a toothpick against that thing!”

“Oh sure, real *professional* attitude you’ve got there!”

“—*Shut up for a second!*” yelled Orphen, cutting off Claiomh and Volkan’s bickering. That act alone sent sweat pouring down his forehead. That was when he heard something nearby. “Hark, o Light!”

“Sorcery! Everyone get down!” he yelled with a start, pulling Claiomh to the ground under his weight. They safely made it out of the way before a burst of light collided with Azalie, causing her to shriek in pain. Orphen raised his head to see what was going on, keeping Claiomh pinned underneath him for her own safety. She yelled at him to get off, but it was far too dangerous to risk it. An arrow of light had struck one of Azalie’s wings as she tried to break into flight. The impact had lighted her wing in flames, which rained down heat and sparks

from the sky as she desperately flapped her wings to stay aloft.

Another spell flew true; it came from the rooftop.

“Hark, o Light!” Orphen found the source of the voice just in time to see another burst of light collide with Azalie. She howled in pain.

There were two humans figures on the roof. Both were familiar men, one large-built and the other shorter and thinner but still very clearly a male silhouette.

“Childman!” yelled Orphen, but the figure didn’t pay him a passing glance. Instead he pointed his left hand open-palmed at Azalie and chanted another spell.

“Hark, o Light!” Another powerful arrow of light struck Azalie, tearing off lumps of flesh and filling the air with the stench of burnt meat. Something landed with a wet *splat* at Orphen’s feet, and in a terrible instant of clarity he understood what was going on.

“*Stop hurting her!!*” he yelled emphatically, channeling a burning wave of light through his voice. The beam crashed into the roof with tremendous force at the feet of the two Sorcerers. This time it didn’t even stop there, the force of it tearing through the roof and extending out into the night sky. When the light gave way for its surroundings, both of the men had vanished from sight.

They’re gone. I didn’t kill them, did I...? thought Orphen with a chill running down his spine. He looked at his own hands. They were shaking terribly.

His fears of becoming a murderer would prove to be unfounded when both of the men landed behind him on the ground. Orphen turned around and confirmed that they had leaped down from the roof at the last second.

“Who is it, who’s there?!” Claiomh panicked and pulled herself upright. She had her hand on the hilt of her blade, but didn’t draw it from its scabbard.

Please don’t draw that sword, Orphen begged inside his heart. He knew that if she drew her sword here and now, she might very well be dead before it was all the way out.

When he finally found his bearings, he noticed that he had instinctively

positioned himself between Azalie and the Black Sorcerer duo.

One of the Black Sorcerers was indeed Childman — no longer wearing the mask from a few days prior, his face looked exactly as it did the last time Orphen had seen it clearly. He hadn't changed at all. To borrow a description from Volkan, his gaze was so sharp and relentless that his glare seemed like it could kill. His eyes were devoid of life, instead appearing as cold as a pair of glass marbles. That alone was intimidating enough, and that was to say nothing of his mouth that betrayed not a hint of emotion and his unwrinkled skin that made him seem more statue than man.

In stark contrast, Childman's companion was a younger man looking awkwardly at Orphen. His red hair danced lightly in the night breeze, and his normally gentle eyes had a shadow cast over them.

"Heartia," mumbled Orphen. The young man shuffled one foot backwards almost apologetically.

"Krylancelo. I'm really sorry, Krylancelo. We didn't have any other choice today. If only—" Heartia stole a glance at his master before continuing, "If only you'd come to see me just a few days sooner, then—"

"It's fine, I know what you want to say. I know why you forced yourself to act angry with me earlier... Black Tiger the Shrimp-Man."

"...So you really did notice," said Heartia with a hint of genuine surprise.

"When I think about it," continued Orphen with a little smile, "you're about the only guy on the entire Continent who'd come up with a ridiculous disguise like that."

Claiomh turned her face between Orphen and Heartia, trying to piece together their conversation. She found it hard to believe that the fairly handsome young Sorcerer was the same assailant she had crossed blades with.

Having sorted that mystery out, Orphen dropped his smile and turned to face Childman.

Childman was the first of the two to break the silence. "Stand aside, Krylancelo."

“...I refuse.”

“Krylancelo!” yelled Heartia. “You need to understand. This isn’t just a matter of the Tower of Fangs anymore. The Continental Sorcerers’ Association, Damsels’ Orisons, have made final their decision—”

“The decision to kill Azalie,” Orphen finished Heartia’s sentence for him with harsher words than his old friend would have used.

“...That’s right,” Childman confirmed.

“If you’re serious about this,” Orphen pushed Claiomh back with his arm before continuing, “then you’ll have to kill me first. But I’m not going down without a fight.”

“You are already at your body’s limits.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m totally powerless.” Orphen lowered his stance slightly. He moved so that his left arm was in Childman and Heartia’s blind spot and reached it out to Volkan who had been laying half-conscious on the ground nearby.

Volkan seemed to think someone was trying to help him to his feet. He gripped Orphen’s hand none the wiser.

Taking that as consent, Orphen moved with all the swiftness he could muster.

“Fly free!” he yelled in a voice laced with mana. —*FWOOM!*— Volkan’s round frame broke the sound barrier and he flew, the perfect dwarf cannonball.



Childman and Heartia reacted in the nick of time to avoid the attack, but each lost their footing in the process.

Orphen wasn't about to miss his chance.

"I release thee—" But before he could complete his incantation, he was knocked to the ground from behind. Dortin and Claiomh had wrapped themselves around his waist and pulled him down.

"The hell are you jokers—" He didn't have to finish his sentence. When he turned his head to face them, he understood why they had moved like that. Azalie, who had been sitting behind him the entire time had stopped struggling. She faced directly ahead. It took his mind a moment to catch up, the instinct registering before the thought.

Azalie had begun breathing deeply. She meant to cast a spell.

Claiomh and Dortin had noticed a few seconds sooner than he had. If they hadn't knocked him out of the way, then he would have been so preoccupied with trying to beat Childman and Heartia that he would have been caught completely off-guard by Azalie's attack.

"Shit," he swore. He grabbed Claiomh and Dortin by the shoulders and threw them behind him, pouring the last drops of his mana into a spell to protect them all. "I spin thee thus, Halo Armor—!" No sooner had the words left his mouth than Azalie howled a mighty attack. The surroundings were instantly dyed in hellfire.

By the time he came to his senses, the sun was already high in the sky.

It wasn't even morning, but afternoon already. The light filled the room, in which he saw a number of people around him. Tishtinie and Claiomh stood at one side, Claiomh back in her casual outfit, and Volkan and Dortin stood at the other. Of everyone there, Volkan was noticeably more scorched than the rest, his hair thick with soot. Orphen wondered what had happened to him when suddenly it hit him. He had thrown Volkan so far away that his protection spell hadn't reached the boy.

He already knew exactly what sort of obscenities were about to breach the floodgates of Volkan's foul mouth, so he tried to mentally tune the dwarf's

rants out until he was done venting his rage so livid that it would have made the hellfire blush. Various curses that would have easily gotten Volkan charged with a hate crime poured out one after another, but only the tail end of his outburst lodged itself permanently in Orphen's memory, because it overlapped with Tishtinie's voice.

"—You ☉&☆#☉% son of a %☆\$☉#!! I oughta rip out your teeth one by one and polish them into razors with a toothbrush before making you choke on them!"

"...I'm sure Orphen is still exhausted, we should really let him rest..."

"But madame—" The one to finally shut Volkan up was Claiomh, by method of yanking on his cloak so hard that he might as well have been dangling from a noose for all the breath he could gulp down. She dragged him all the way out of the room, and Dortin made the clever decision to follow them.

Orphen and Tishtinie were the only two people left in the room. Orphen took the chance to ask what had been bothering him since he woke up.

"So, what happened after that?"

"A large group of people from the Sorcerers' Association came to the mansion, and it appears as though they are still searching for something in the cellar storeroom."

"...What about Childman?"

"I believe one of the men who went down to the cellar was called Mister Childman."

"...I see." Orphen rested his right hand on his face and sighed.

Looks like I was all talk when it really mattered, he complained to himself. He wasn't crying, but Tishtinie seemed to think that he was. She simply remained silent as Orphen lost himself in thought.

Chapter V: The Night of The Hunt

“The Sword of Baldanders was no longer in that mansion by the time we arrived,” explained Childman in icy tones.

“I’ve been following that beast’s trail for five years now, and I’ve lost more good people to it than I would like. You understand what must be done, do you not?”

Orphen’s expression was colder than Childman’s voice. “You can’t justify her murder to me.”

“Azalie died five years ago. What I am hunting is little more than a monster.”

“She’s not a monster, and she’s still alive!” Orphen sprung from his chair as if going for Childman’s throat, but held himself back. He glared at Heartia and Childman in the dim room, a secluded little place in the corner of the Sorcerers’ Association building. It was sparsely furnished with only a single chair, and a table with a pitcher of water sitting on it. The dim lighting made it seem more like a storage room than anything else though it was far too empty for this to be the case.

“You can’t honestly believe that, Krylancelo,” said Heartia as he spread his arms with a darkened expression. “You’ve seen what she looks like, how she acts. She doesn’t even know who she is anymore. All that’s left of her is a tiny scrap of memory and her instinct to act on that information.”

“What does that mean?” The one to answer Orphen’s question was Childman.

“The beast has memories of the sword and a desire to return to its former self, no more than that. That is why it sought out the sword at the Everlasting family mansion.”

“...I thought you sealed that sword away. Why did it turn up at that mansion, of all places?”

“Because that is where I had it sealed away.” Orphen met Childman’s gaze, but couldn’t understand what he was saying. Childman’s dry lips parted as he

explained the situation for Orphen.

“I was once employed by the former master of that mansion, one Ekintra Everlasting... as an assassin.” His expression remained as solid as bedrock.

“In life, he was a good friend of mine. I frequently sent him objects that were deemed too dangerous to be left at the Tower of Fangs. Many such objects would be a danger to the world in the hands of a Sorcerer yet utterly harmless for the common man.” Orphen recalled the ring that Claiomh had given him.

“And so you sent all of Azalie’s belongings off there, sword and all.”

“The sword did not belong to Azalie. She took it from the Tower without permission. However, her failure when experimenting with the sword proved it to be an object of great danger, and so the elders decreed that it be sealed away where it may do no harm. While the name Baldanders was deciphered and known to all those who had researched the blade, the only one to figure out what sorcery it possessed was Azalie herself. And she failed to control it adequately. This is the natural result of that.”

“...How can you be that cold towards your own student?” Every one of Childman’s words made Orphen grind his teeth.

“I have sworn my loyalty to the organization, and Azalie died betraying them.”

“She’s not dead.”

“Not to you, perhaps. To those of us with sense, however...” Childman looked for all the world a lizard concealing himself in the dim chamber. His amber eyes reflected what little light there was, making him seem exactly like the Basiltrice, the ancient beast said to petrify any living being with a single glance. His gaze had exactly this sort of effect on Orphen himself.

Just how does he have this kind of presence? wondered Orphen.

Is it because he could stay calm describing the end of the world? Is it his saintly ability to ignore any sacrifices in the name of keeping the peace? I don’t know, and I don’t want to. No matter what it is, there’s no way I can reach that level myself. For as far back as Orphen could remember, Childman was the only person he had never been able to surpass. The very notion seemed foolish — how could he surpass the man when he could barely even keep up? If Azalie

were the most talented genius in the history of the Tower of Fangs, then Childman was the prodigy that defined the very organization itself. He was undeniably the most powerful Sorcerer on the continent. At only thirty years of age, he had become a legend in his own right. He was known and respected far and wide, and it wasn't hard to see why.

Childman turned to the side and began walking the circumference of the room as he spoke.

"I have been chasing that beast for a long time now, but it is a formidable opponent. Not only can it still utilize its spells, but its strength even appears to have been bolstered by the transformation. But sorcery is only a single one of its weapons — with that bulk and physical strength it would crush most adversaries before they could raise a weapon against it. It has slaughtered every ally I have taken against it. I must finish the job myself."

"If Azalie truly had an ounce of sanity left in her, then she would not have caused such casualties. From what I've heard, even the corpses were maimed beyond recognition," explained Heartia. Orphen didn't even acknowledge the youth's words.

"You were her teacher. Surely your sorcery is still a level above anything she's capable of even now, right?" Childman ceased his pacing and locked eyes with Orphen once more.

"In Black Sorcery, perhaps. But Azalie was capable of far more than that in life."

"...Her talent for White Sorcery," muttered Orphen. Heartia nodded, his face a mask of dread.

Childman continued almost as if he were giving a lecture to his old students.

"White Sorcery refers to the ability to manipulate the human mind and the flow of time. While this sounds unimpressive on paper, the reality is that it is one of the most potent forces known to man. There are even those who would claim White Sorcery to be true magic. Compared to a blade like that, our own sorcery is but mere parlor tricks," he said, spreading his arms to emphasize his point. "With the slightest whisper, a White Sorcerer can utterly dispel our will to fight. Should they raise their voice, we may be sent scurrying for safety, a

mere pack of rats before them. Should they yell, we may be driven to the extremes of insanity.” Childman brought his hand to his forehead and fiddled with his bangs.

“Or perhaps we would fall unconscious, or be put to sleep. Perhaps we may burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, or perhaps we would drop dead on the spot. Our personality might be irreparably changed, we may be rendered comatose, or we may lose all of our bodily senses entirely.”

“...It’s not like you to talk in circles like this, Childman. What are you trying to say?” Orphen scowled, but Childman merely shrugged as though his explanation was lost on him.

“What I am trying to say is that every man counts when fighting a White Sorcerer. We need as many skilled sorcerers as possible — especially those with actual combat experience.”

“...You’re telling me to help you kill her,” spat Orphen as he closed the distance between himself and his old teacher. But Childman refused to budge.

“You are not my subordinate, and thus I cannot order you. But your assistance would make a world of difference against the beast.”

“Forget it. I’ll have no part of this.”

“Krylancelo, don’t you get it?!” Heartia’s desperate pleas made Orphen turn to face his red-headed old friend. He chewed his lip for a moment while trying to find the right thing to say.

“This is your chance to atone, my friend. If you assist us with this, then it should more than make up for your desertion. If you simply explain that the reason you left was to hunt down Azalie, then—”

“I left the tower to *find* her, not to *hunt* her.”

“I’ll be participating this time too, Krylancelo. If I can track down Azalie... If I can put that beast down and retrieve the sword, then I might even be transferred back to the Tower as an assistant instructor.” Orphen was sickened to his stomach.

“Look, Heartia, I really don’t care to hear about your career plans right now.”

“You’re missing my point! I’m trying to explain to you just how dire this situation is for the Tower of Fangs. A once-brilliant Sorceress has lost her mind and absconded with a sword of tremendous power. If word of this gets out to the public, the Tower’s reputation would be tarnished beyond repair. Don’t you care at all about what happens to the students still studying there? You once said it yourself, the Tower of Fangs is not a place you can enter with half-hearted determination. Students enroll there knowing fully well that they may die before they earn their qualifications. If the Tower loses the authority they’ve built up over the years then all of those Sorcerer hopefuls will have fought so hard for nothing.”

“All I’m hearing is that you’ve sacrificed too much of your life to the Tower to see it go up in flames now.”

That comment was the last straw for Heartia. “That’s right, I’ve given too much to let it all go to waste like this! I’m not gonna stay some errand boy for the rest of my life. You can’t honestly say you’re happy with the way your life is right now either, can you?!”

“That’s my problem, not yours.” Orphen almost argued with Heartia over what was really more important between Azalie’s life and his own career, but he stopped himself when he felt Childman’s gaze from the side. His old teacher had not said a word, yet it was as if he had ended the argument merely by bringing attention to his presence. Orphen and Heartia both turned to face Childman, even though the man had not moved a muscle. Something about him merely commanded that the room be brought back to order.

Sensing his cue, he spoke up.

“This is not the time for petty squabbles, children. Krylancelo, listen to me and consider your position carefully. Tonight we set out with a force of sorcerers to slay the beast. Some of your old classmates will be a part of this operation.”

“...How can you slay her if you don’t even know where she is?”

“But I do. When you came to this place to meet Heartia the other day, I went and located the Sword of Baldanders in the Everlasting mansion. I placed a charm on the sword that I might know its location at all times, which is still

actively tracking the beast's location as we speak."

"...I should've known you'd be two steps ahead of me."

"Only when the situation calls for it. But this is beside the point. Tonight, the beast dies. Should you wish to meet with it one last time — to say your goodbyes, as it were — then you have no choice but to join us in our plans. In that case, however, you will follow my orders like all the others. Well, what say you?"

Orphen bit his lip and glared hatefully at his old instructor. The man's cold mask of rationality was seamlessly woven into his face.

No, thought Orphen. That's no mask. That's just the kind of person that Childman is.

"...When do we depart?" he asked. A lesser man than Childman may have grinned and nodded at seeing things unfold exactly according to plan, but the only change in his own expression was a glint of approval in his eyes.

"We leave before nightfall," he announced. "Have yourself ready to depart before then. We will supply you with weapons and field rations for the journey."

"Tonight? That's so soon! I've gotta get ready!" Claiomh shot to her feet and ran around making preparations to join Orphen on his journey. She ran around the room frantically muttering about her hair and how pulling two all-nighters in a row was bad for her skin.

"You're not coming," sighed Orphen. Claiomh's face was aghast with shock. This was the betrayal of the century. She simply could not believe that Orphen would abandon her to go on an adventure all on his own. Volkan tutted and waved his finger at her.

"This is best left to the professionals, young miss."

"You're staying behind too, deadbeat."

"Huh? Why?" Volkan froze at this announcement, but Orphen ignored him and made sure to cover all his bases. "You too, Dortin. I'm the only one going

along on tonight's hunt, got it?"

"You can't go alone! It's too dangerous!" yelled Claiomh, thrusting her finger into Orphen's chest. "Those sorcerers were looking at you like they wanted to tear your head off. If you go alone with a group like that, they might stab you in the back before the night's out!"

"They're sorcerers, not idiots. They wouldn't risk doing something that stupid, not when they need all the manpower they can get. The mission is more important to them than their own petty grudges. Still, I've been getting in their way an awful lot until now. This is just a joint operation to them, so while they won't stab me in the back, they're definitely not gonna go out of their way to save me from any tight spots. I can't take you along because I'm gonna have enough trouble looking out for myself," he shrugged, shooting down any further attempts at argument.

"I'm gonna tag along with Childman's group on my own. To be honest, considering the size of their force, I don't think Azalie stands a chance. She's gonna be slaughtered tonight if I don't do something." Orphen gazed out into the remains of the courtyard, little more than a blackened field in Azalie's wake. The afternoon sun made the carnage seem fresh and raw.

"I need to make my move before they suspect a thing. It's up to me to protect Azalie. Ideally I want to help her escape somewhere that even Childman wouldn't find her, but it's not gonna be easy. I won't be able to come back to this mansion anymore. I'm sorry for just running off like this, I really am. I wanted to at least fix the place up before I left, but I don't have the time for that anymore."

By the time Childman and co. had entered the valley, the sun had already set. Orphen brought up the dangers of traveling through the valley without sunlight to illuminate their path, but Childman brushed his concerns aside.

"We must move with haste lest the beast flee before we can slay it."

"You can't even wait for the road to be a little safer?" Orphen was trying to point out the folly of their march, but Childman was dead serious.

"We do not have that kind of time." Orphen gave up on holding any kind of

conversation and turned around to assess their group once more. The valley they were marching through was a few kilometers west from Totokanta, near the Aiden mountain range. The roads had a proper path carved out for merchant carriages, and the area was quite open overall. Many smaller settlements dotted the valley, but Childman's group didn't risk venturing too close to any of them as they were operating on an undercover mission.

Childman himself led the forces, with Orphen following right on his heels.

The reason Orphen was up front was not out of bias for his old student, but rather that he had simply assessed Orphen to be the most capable after himself. Behind Orphen followed Heartia and six other black sorcerers, all dressed in similar black garb. The group traveling in the middle of the night in black cloaks made them look like some kind of religious chapter. They all carried swords much like Orphen himself, but unlike Orphen they were also equipped with two meter long spears. Orphen spotted a few familiar faces in their ranks, but he didn't feel like catching up on the past with his old friends at the moment. He doubted they'd even talk to him at this point. Even his former best friend Heartia made a conscious effort to avoid looking him in the eyes.

Behind them all trailed a solitary old man of about sixty years. Old as he was, though, his muscular form was visible even through his robes, making it clear that he was no weaker than anyone else present. His hair was gray and streaked with white, and his face was clean shaven. His gentle features were stiff with purpose, belying the gravity of his task. This task was obvious from the pendant he wore around his neck — not the usual sword and dragon crest of all the other black sorcerers present, but the crest of giant dice on a ship given only to accomplished white sorcerers.

White sorcerers were so rare and powerful that they often directly served the royal family, with many of them practically locked away from the world. Normally a venture like this would require the King's consent and direct supervision, but no doubt Childman had resorted to less than legal measures in order to gather this many people so quickly. The very fact that he had been able to recruit a white sorcerer for this mission spoke volumes of his absolute authority — on par with even the elders of the Tower of Fangs, the Thirteen Apostles.

“Can that white sorcerer really seal Azalie’s powers?” Orphen inquired of Childman.

“Not likely,” his old teacher admitted. “I merely brought him along to bolster our own forces and instill confidence in the others. It is remarkably difficult to seal white sorcery with white sorcery. To draw a comparison, it is like trying to stop oneself from being stabbed by meeting the point of the opponent’s blade with the point of one’s own. Folly, yes, but the weapon itself offers a degree of comfort.”

“...You’re prepared to let any number of us die if it means you can kill Azalie. We’re all sacrificial pawns in this mission of yours.”

“Every man present knows as much.”

Orphen was doubtful, but continued. “So which of us do you plan to sacrifice first?”

“You will be leading the charge, if that is what you mean. You are the youngest and strongest of all present, and your prowess on the battlefield is known to us all. In terms of raw power you are perhaps the best I have ever raised, although your discipline has always been a cause for concern. Besides...” Childman paused for a moment before making a joke; a true rarity for him.

“I won’t have to cover your funeral costs, since you are no longer one of my men.”



“Why do I have to go through all this bullshit, dammit?! Curse you, I’ll scratch you to death with a rusty knife!” Volkan spat complaints at the Sawknee grass which continued to leave small nicks and cuts all over his leg as he hacked them down to make a path for the group. Overgrown tree roots also threatened to trip him up at every bend, which he vengefully tore to shreds with a hatchet.

“This was *your* idea, you know,” mumbled his younger brother from behind. Dörtin’s role in the group was to carry the portable gas lantern which served as their only source of light in the pitch-black woods.

Claíomh followed behind the dwarf siblings, wearing her horse riding suit and carrying a sword with her. “That’s right,” she said. “I only came along ‘cause you

said you'd be able to help Orphen. Are we even going the right way? I don't see those sorcerers anywhere."

"I'm a professional, don't doubt my sources," replied Volkan who didn't even stop to turn around. "I know everything there is to know about Totokanta's underground. A source of mine managed to figure out what those sorcerers are up to."

"Are you sure you haven't been duped? Besides, who even is this source of yours?" asked Claiomh, but Volkan refused to answer.

Losing her temper, she made to draw her sword. Dortin caught sight of this out of the corner of his eye and spun to stop her.

"W-we shouldn't resort to violence!" he yelled.

"It's not violence when a knight is punishing a criminal!" snapped Claiomh as she drew her sword completely. At the same time, Volkan stopped and turned around to face her. Perhaps because Dortin was standing between him and the crazed girl, he was acting far braver than usual. He threw the hatchet aside and drew his own blunt sword.

"A knight, you say? Since when were you of such noble birth? Keep flapping your lips like that and I'll rub you to death with a pencil eraser!"

"Go ahead and try, if you think you can!" Claiomh was at the end of her rope with Volkan.

Dortin was left helplessly trapped between the two of them. No matter whose side he took, it would definitely come back to bite him later, he realized. If he took his brother's side then Claiomh would beat both of them senseless on the spot, but if he took Claiomh's side then he would have to endure Volkan's ceaseless abuse for weeks to come. He was caught between a rock and a pointy object.

"Let's just calm down, okay?!" he yelled frantically, trying to come up with some sort of plan.

"Look, there's no need to draw swords on each other, right? Wait, bro, what's that under your clothes? Is that a book? No wonder you're so confident today, you've got armor! It's not one of my books, is it? Oh, I see, it must be the book

you stole from the Everlastings earlier today. That's fine then. And Claiomh, you've got something under your clothes as well, right? Huh? You don't? But your chest looks bigger than usual... Oh, I see. You've just padded it to make it look bigger." Dortin's futile attempts at placating both sides droned on, and both sides only seemed to be growing more and more agitated. "C'mon bro, just calm down, okay? We should all get along here, we're in this together. We've still got a long way to go, and I don't wanna be fighting and arguing for the rest of the trip, you know? I'm already at my wits' end just trying to put up with my brother's usual nonsense... Wait, no, I didn't mean it like that, what I'm trying to say is... Well, I'm generally just made miserable whenever he's around, and... Well, he's just a downright horrible person, and—" Alas, Dortin's ramblings did nothing to calm either side as they raised their weapons high above their heads. They came crashing down in the next instant... Right into Dortin's cranium. Blood spurted from his head where each of the swords had struck home.

"Why did you hit *me*?" he grumbled.

"Because you're a pain in the ass!" yelled his brother. Both sides having vented their anger on Dortin, the party headed onward once more. Volkan took the lead, chopping down the Sawknee grass again, and Claiomh sheathed her sword while picking up the rear.

Claiomh apparently hadn't vented enough however, as she resumed her grumbling just moments later.

"Where the heck even *are* we? My legs hurt, and I'm tired."

"If you look here on the map, see this bit here? Judging by the position of the stars, we're around this area, roughly halfway up the Aiden mountain pass. If Volkan's source is right then we should be almost there."

"How close is almost?" she grumbled, to which Dortin replied immediately.

"About two hours walk this way," he said plainly.

"Ugh."

"Don't 'Ugh' me, young lady. *You're* the one who tagged along without permission, you know!" snapped Volkan from the front of the pack, swinging

the hatchet out in front of his chest.

“Here’s how it’s gonna go,” he said. “We’re gonna be the first ones to find that monster, then we’ll drag it away somewhere and chain it down. Then we’ll sell it to the sorcerer bastards for a totally unreasonable price! No doubt this’ll piss off that worthless moneylender too, which is a great bonus! Do you get what I’m saying? This is business for us! We can’t let a chance like this fall through!”

“Your whole plan rests on the assumption that we can actually just walk up and chain that creature down...”

“You got a problem with my cunning plan, Dortin?”

“Not at all, sir,” he sighed, trying to cover up his exasperation.

“Two more hours, huh...” mumbled Claiomh, clearly exhausted from the long trek through the woods.

“My sister said she’d give me some money to spend in town if I went along to help Orphen, but it just doesn’t seem worth it now. I think I’m just gonna head home... Ugh, but the road home is a lot longer than just two hours...” She kicked at a pebble by her feet, which sent it soaring in an arc into the night sky.

Dortin was curious about what she had just said.

“Why would your sister give you spending money for helping that sorcerer?” he asked.

“Huh? Well, obviously because she—” Claiomh made a face like she’d been waiting for someone to ask about her sister’s feelings for Orphen for days, and her eyes sparkled as a strange sound began droning from just a short distance away.

—*Ffffwooooouuuuu, hwwuuuuuuu...*—

“Umm...” All three of them immediately recognized the sound — it was the sound of a large creature inhaling deeply. A chill ran down Claiomh’s spine as she made one last attempt to interrogate Volkan.

“...Alright, spill it. Where did you get the information about the monster?”

“Look, I can’t just go around blabbing my sources... But,” even Volkan turned

pale as the realization dawned on him.

“Well, alright. So there’s this inn in town run by a guy called Bagup, yeah? He was once a pretty famous thief a long time ago, but then he eloped with a girl everyone called the Queen of the Underworld, and settled down to make a family. Anyway, he still keeps tabs on his old underground contacts as a bit of a hobby, so I asked him if he knew anything, and, well...”

“You shouldn’t be basing your plan of action on the hobbies of some old guy!” She lost her temper and lifted Volkan off the ground by his head.

“Hey, guys...?” mumbled Dortin. “I don’t think now’s a good time for fighting amongst—” Before Dortin could finish being the voice of reason, the beast nearby let out a savage howl that echoed all throughout the woods.

—*Kshaaaaa!*—

It was frighteningly closer than expected — no more than five meters ahead of the group. It rose to its feet making all sorts of terrifying sounds, and charged blindly towards them. In his panic, Dortin dropped the gas lantern to the ground, which put the flame out. The area was reclaimed instantly by the darkness, leaving the twinkling stars in the night sky as the only source of light.



Two hours after Childman’s group had entered the valley, they stopped for a short break. Orphen took this opportunity to sneak away from the others and make his move.

He knew that he wouldn’t be able to buy much time before Childman noticed his absence, but every minute that he could earn was another minute he could keep Azalie alive.

I need to use every moment wisely from here on, he told himself. Childman was the only one who could follow his own tracking spell, and so he was the only one who knew Azalie’s exact location, but Orphen had noticed something that made his search far easier.

Since they had entered the valley, their group had been moving in a perfectly straight line regardless of how awkward the path became. When considering how much Childman had stressed that they had not a moment to lose, Orphen

deduced that if he continued in the same direction, he stood a chance of finding Azalie before Childman's group did.

He rushed through the woods skirting the upper half of the valley at a breakneck pace while keeping an eye on his surroundings. This became increasingly difficult the further he went, as the trees and plants grew more and more dense with every step. It only made sense. If Azalie was going to hide in the woods, it would be meaningless to stay on the outskirts. Logically she would be hiding in the thickest part of the woods she could find.

Can I really best Childman like this? wondered Orphen.

I've never even been able to keep up with him before, so what makes me think I can suddenly outrun him now? That single doubt threatened to swallow him like a tidal wave and wash away any scrap of reason left in his head, but he managed to pull himself together and calm down before it could cloud his judgment. He didn't hesitate for a moment, and hacked away at the chest-high undergrowth with his sword and burning determination. *If I don't pull myself together, Azalie's gonna be the one to suffer.* Each slash of his sword cut down a wall of Sawknee grass and low-hanging tree branches. Every clump of undergrowth he cut away was so thick that it sounded like the bodies of people falling to the ground one after the other, and sprays of moisture showered into the air where the plants had been severed. Orphen walked across the fallen plants as though crossing a sea of corpses to come, his sword strokes not relenting for even a moment.

An hour passed like this before he drew to a sudden halt, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. He was soaked in sweat and moisture from all the severed plants, and what by all means should have been a night breeze to chill him to the bone instead felt pleasantly cool on his skin. He wiped his sword clean with a cloth before returning it to its scabbard.

The reason Orphen had suddenly stopped was because of a strange yet familiar feeling rising in his gut. Someone was nearby and something was about to happen, though he didn't know who or what. He only knew to trust his instincts, because they had never let him down yet. He closed his eyes and felt sweat pouring down his face. He wiped the sweat off his face with the palm of his hand, and could hear it being flicked gently onto the grass nearby, so keenly

had he expanded his senses.

Not long passed before he raised his head with a sigh and opened his eyes once more. Had it just been his imagination?

No matter how hard he focused, the only thing he could make out nearby was woods and more woods. He had been forced to train his night vision as part of his combat training, so he was able to see quite far through the woods despite their thickness and the pitch blackness of the night sky.

Nothing in particular stood out in any way whatsoever. Maybe the undergrowth seemed a bit thicker than before, but that was only to be expected given that he had been running straight into it. There was no doubt that Childman was following the extremely obvious trail he had left behind, and he had no way of knowing how much distance his group had closed between them when they already had the beginnings of a path to work with. He knew it would be complete idiocy to suddenly start yelling in a place like this, but his instinct was telling him that Azalie was somewhere nearby even though all his other senses seemed to be denying this idea.

It might get me caught, but if Azalie really is nearby then I need to warn her before Childman gets the drop on her. “Azalie!” yelled Orphen at the top of his voice. Her name echoed throughout the valley. The echo faded away and the forest returned to tranquility, the only audible noise being the sound of the wind rustling the treetops.

He called her name once more, but this time it was drowned out by a far louder noise like a tiny localized hurricane.

It came out of nowhere with a deafening roar, and was quickly followed by a raging surge of gale force winds. The wind lifted leaves and fallen undergrowth, and even kicked up a cloud of dirt from beneath all of that. Orphen had to cover his face to avoid being blinded by the sudden storm of debris.

Something nearby let out a familiar howl, and Orphen understood immediately that his hunch had been right. Azalie was close. He dashed in her direction without a moment’s hesitation, his hopes renewed. Perhaps Azalie had finally recognized his voice, said the optimistic part of his brain.

No, he reasoned calmly.

That wasn't her responding to me, that was just her reacting to a loud noise. Even wild animals have that much sense. It's good that I've found her and all, but if I've startled her and she runs away then it'll all have been for nothing. Orphen knew that even if she made it away again, Childman would be able to trace her exact location for as long as she had the Sword of Baldanders.

"Azalie, wait for me!" he yelled, charging through the forest like a wild animal. No longer bothering to cut himself a path, Orphen simply pulled himself across overgrown tree roots and swung between low hanging branches in an inhuman display of skill and dexterity, zoning in on the location Azalie's voice had come from.

Another howl, this time filling the air with so much energy that it threatened to burst like a massive bubble. For a moment Orphen felt as though his body had been enveloped in flames — the all-too-familiar sensation of a spell being cast. The spell itself, however, was nothing so explosive. In fact it took a moment for any effects to display themselves at all. And then, just as the echoes of her screams began to fade, it happened. The ground pulsed and undulated, and like a giant mouth it began to devour its surroundings. Trees and plants and even the grass itself were all swallowed whole. Something caught Orphen's leg as it was dragged under and threatened to take him with it, but he barely managed to retreat to a safe enough distance to avoid being crushed into paste.

The results of this spell were astounding. What had once been the densest part of the forest was now a perfectly circular wasteland with a radius of a dozen meters or so. The culprit stood in the dead center, its towering bulk impossible to mistake.

Azalie... why? With a fresh hole opened in the leafy ceiling of the forest, the starlit sky now faintly illuminated the area. Azalie must have used up most of the energy she had absorbed from Orphen the night prior, as she had shrunk back down to 3 meters in height.

She stood there unmoving, and had her eyes not been covered behind sagging flesh Orphen could have sworn she was staring straight at him.

She inhaled deeply with each breath, but made no signs of launching a follow-

up attack. At her feet was a longsword, standing upright as though it had been thrust into the ground as an offering to the beast. That had to be the Sword of Baldanders, Orphen reasoned.

He took one step forward, and then another. The beast didn't budge, simply keeping its gaze locked on his gradually approaching figure.

Why would she destroy her own hiding place? he wondered.

It doesn't add up. If she knows that there are people pursuing her, and she doesn't plan on running or hiding, then that can only mean... Orphen realized just in the nick of time that he had been lured into an obvious trap — its lungs full of air, the beast moved to bellow out another spell.

Shit, she cleared the ground to make it easier to aim! The reptilian screech was followed by a torrent of cannonballs of solid light, tearing hideous claw marks into the ground where Orphen had stood a split-second before. He barely managed to avoid the attack by rolling to the side with all of his body weight.

"Azalie, it's me! You've gotta recognize me!" The words didn't seem to mean anything to Azalie beyond the sound of Orphen's yelling identifying an enemy for her to exterminate. Orphen barely managed to conjure up a halo of light to protect himself in time.

"Have you really lost your mind? I won't believe it!" The beast paid his words no heed, simply zeroing in on them to help track her target. Its attack this time was far more violent: a deafening downpour of swords of light, so sharp that they carved apart the very air itself.

"Gather at my command, Shield of Amber!" The atmosphere compressed into a wall protecting Orphen from the vicious onslaught. The sound of the spells clashing was almost deafening, and the attack had the force to match. Not all of the blades could be held back completely, and a handful that retained enough power after piercing the wall nicked Orphen's skin leaving shallow wounds.



This is impossible, he thought to himself. *My plan was doomed from the start. There's no way I can escape with her as well as protect her from Childman — I've got my hands full just staying alive out here!* Orphen's expression turned grim as the severity of the situation sank in. *I don't stand a chance against her in a battle of sorcery*, he realized far too late.

Azalie wasn't patient enough to let Orphen come up with a new plan, however. Seeing her attacks bounce off of her opponent, she opted to destroy him with a single spell of overwhelming might instead. As her screech echoed into the night, a sphere of light formed above her head and increased rapidly in size. It looked like she had taken several lightning bolts and crushed them together into a single clump of raw energy. The myriad sparks charged the air with static electricity. Even from this distance every hair on Orphen's body stood on end. He knew instinctively that this wasn't an attack he could hope to defend against. No spell in the world would be strong enough to keep him alive in the face of that super-weapon.

I'm dead meat! Orphen screwed his eyes shut, and waited for certain death to claim him. He could make out a bright flash from behind closed eyes, but the attack itself never followed. Confused, Orphen opened his eyes only to find that the flash of light hadn't been caused by Azalie's attack at all. It had been launched from behind him, and Azalie was the one who had been knocked back.

The beam of light faded out, having hit Azalie right in the face. Her spell broken, the ball of compressed lightning burst free in all directions, and searing hot air was unleashed in a violent wave. Orphen felt for a moment like he was being burned alive, but from the corner of his eye he could see that Azalie was the one who had burst into flames.

She's not dead, is she? Struggling to get his bearings, Orphen turned around to try and figure out where that attack had come from. What he saw confirmed his suspicions — Childman and Heartia, along with five other Black Sorcerers all in battle positions. The old White Sorcerer stood in the rear, being protected by the rest.

"How the hell did you catch up with me so fas—" Orphen yelled out, but his

voice was lost among the roaring of the towering flames consuming Azalie.

Childman simply grinned. Apparently he had understood what Orphen had said without needing to hear the words. His expression turned to stone once more though and he approached Orphen with a dignified stride. Heartia followed after his master with a far more sullen look on his own face. The rest of the sorcerers all reacted in their own ways, some looking pleased that their job had finally come to an end while others stood with their figures torn in grief at having played a part in the murder of an old friend. The White Sorcerer alone was utterly unfazed. Orphen thought the old man was staring straight at him, but he quickly realized that this was only because Orphen was standing directly between him and Azalie.

Orphen shot a bitter look in Childman's direction.

"I'm pretty sure you weren't there a minute ago," he doubted.

"Then you did not look hard enough," said Childman casually. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, "I am glad you went along with my plan. Having you lead the charge truly was a wise decision."

"You rotten son of a—" Before Orphen could even curse his old teacher, the surroundings changed without warning. The blazing pillar of light that had threatened to burn Azalie to ashes mere moments before disappeared like it had never been there.

Another roar, and the spell this time was immediate and precise. The elderly White Sorcerer behind Childman lit up in pale blue flames.

He was burned to cinders before he even had a chance to scream. Dead in an instant, he'd never know what took him.

"Flank her," commanded Childman with the composed swiftness of a battle-hardened veteran. His men acted upon his orders like a pack of trained hunting dogs. They each spread out to the most effective positions and prepared to launch an all-out offensive. Childman alone did not change position. Orphen blocked his path desperately, craning only his neck to analyze the battlefield. Azalie stood virtually unscathed from the pillar of flames, ready to fight back once more.

“Stubborn monster,” muttered Childman, and his subordinates let loose as though that was their cue.

“O Flames!” Amidst the cacophony of spells being chanted, Orphen could make out Heartia’s voice clearer and sharper than all the rest. Fire, Wind, Light — each sorcerer let loose with their preferred element in an attempt to overwhelm their foe with absolute force, but every last spell was blown away by Azalie’s roar before any of the attacks could reach her.

Then, a counterattack. Her target had no time to even bring up a shield before he was fried to charcoal by an exceptionally ruthless bolt of lightning.

The young man’s corpse was sent flying like a discarded dishrag, and Orphen could only ball up his fists in frustration as the tragedy unfolded before him. He knew he had to do something, and fast. Azalie could only hold her own against these numbers for so long. No matter how strong one person was, they could barely hope to stand a chance against a squad led by the most fearsome Black Sorcerer on the Continent. Orphen stole a glance at Childman and noticed that the commander himself was preoccupied with the battle now.

I know what I need to do, but can I pull it off...? Orphen knew he had to act fast, since Childman was probably preparing to leap into the fray himself any moment now.

Childman’s subordinates didn’t even have a moment to spare keeping the rogue in their midst in check, each one pouring every fiber of their being into their spells to keep themselves alive long enough to wear down their monstrous foe.

Knowing that this would be his last chance, Orphen made a mad dash straight for Azalie.

I need to grab that sword and leg it as far as possible, he concluded. *Azalie’s probably only holding her ground this time because she has what she’s been looking for, and Childman can only track her because of that spell he put on the sword. If I can get it away from her, maybe she’ll run away like she always has done until now.* The sword in question lay at Azalie’s feet where it had been for the whole battle. Orphen muttered a spell under his breath, boosting his own physical attributes beyond human limits. His movements were a blur to any

onlookers, but his target was obvious. The sword was uprooted from the ground and vanished along with its thief into the depths of the forest.

He ran. The last thing Orphen heard before leaving the battlefield behind was Childman barking a new order. “Heartia! Retrieve that sword from Orphen!”

—*Kaboom! Blam!*— The sounds of explosions echoed through the woods even at this distance. Orphen took comfort in this noise, because at least it meant that Azalie was still alive and fighting. All he could do for now was put as much distance between himself and the battle as possible, and hope that Azalie would flee when she noticed that the sword was gone. He found it extremely awkward to run through the woods with one sword at his side and another in his arms. He could only hope that he’d put enough distance between himself and Heartia that he could find a place to hide before his old friend caught up with him.

After all that trouble Childman went through to get this thing, I’m surprised he only sent Heartia after me, thought Orphen. *Still, pulling Heartia away from the battlefield should make all the difference. Hell, maybe it’s even lucky that Childman sent one of his best after me instead of two or three weak grunts.*

Orphen dashed through the undergrowth as fast as he could, trying desperately not to be tripped up by all the weeds and vines that he didn’t have the time to chop down. He knew that if he slowed his pace even slightly he would have to fight Heartia one-on-one — and unlike the spat at the mansion where he had acted as bait, this time it would be a serious duel testing both of their abilities. The thought sent chills down his spine. Just when Orphen was sure that he had outrun his old friend, the loud chant of “O Flames!” cut off his path in a blaze.

He knew better than to keep running with his back to Heartia. That would be tantamount to suicide. He resigned himself to his fate and turned around to face the source of the voice.

It didn’t take long before Heartia emerged from the woods sword-in-hand, having thrown aside his spear in favor of speed the moment he’d had to make chase.

“You saw what happened back there,” he said out of nowhere. “Comicon

was murdered by that *beast* you still call Azalie. You remember Comicron, right? From our class? Or have you been chasing your own delusions so long that you've forgotten the names of your old friends?!" Orphen realized that Heartia must have been talking about the young man whom Azalie had killed mercilessly with a lightning spell the moment the battle broke out in earnest, but in truth he hadn't recognized the boy as Comicron at the time.

"So even Comicron was in on your little plot, huh..." he muttered. Orphen's apparent lack of grief at learning one of his old friends had been murdered before his very eyes told Heartia everything he needed to know.

"He was fully prepared to give his life for our cause — just like the rest of us. What about you, Krylancelo? After seeing one of your friends murdered so heartlessly, are you still going to take that thing's side?"

"I'm pretty sure I've made myself clear on that point."

"Why do you have to betray us like this?" spat Heartia as he pointed the tip of his sword in Orphen's direction.

"We all know your secret — you could fight Azalie on equal footing and maybe even win, if you really felt like it. If someone as strong as you were on our side from the start then we would have been able to put her to rest as swiftly and painlessly as possible."

"And what makes you think I'd ever agree to help *anyone* kill Azalie?" said Orphen, tossing the Sword of Baldanders to one side and drawing his own from its scabbard.

Heartia was disgusted with his former rival's behavior. "You're the only one who still calls that beast by *her* name. That thing is not Azalie, if anything it's the monster that killed her. She's dead, Krylancelo. That heartless beast is not your family, and never will be ever again."

"You can't say that for sure until we return her to normal."

"You don't get it. She *can't* be turned back to normal. Azalie is the only one who ever figured out how to use that sword, and look where that got us!"

"Then I'll figure out how the sword works and turn her back to normal myself."

“*You*? Don’t make me laugh. Wyrdography was one of your weakest subjects, it would take you decades to decipher all the runes on that blade.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe every point you’ve made is completely valid. But every last one of you keeps glossing over one very important detail. The only reason Azalie is fighting back — the only reason she killed Comicon — is because *you* attacked *her* first. She’s only defending herself!”

“You’re the one twisting things to your own logic, Krylancelo. Surely you haven’t forgotten that she’s attacked you, too — and unprovoked, at that. That thing is a mindless beast that only knows how to kill.”

“Maybe to you, perhaps,” said Orphen in his best imitation of Childman’s tone of voice. “To those of us with sense, however...”

Heartia’s gaze sharpened in an instant. “If you would mock our instructor even now, then you’re clearly beyond reasoning with. You leave me no choice but to beat you into submission.”

“Go ahead if you think you can, genius assassin, sir *Black Tiger*.” Orphen provoked Heartia before quickly shifting his sword to his right hand and outstretching his left.

He chanted “I release thee, Sword of Light!” and tore a gash in the ground between himself and Heartia, kicking up a cloud of dirt as a smokescreen so that he could put a few more paces between them.

“O Shadows!” came Heartia’s spell from within the smokescreen.

The immediate area turned darker than the darkest black. Even Orphen’s exceptional night vision was useless within this field. He clicked his tongue and tried to take a step back, assuming that a spell of this magnitude had to have very limited range, but he backed up into yet more darkness.

He understood instantly that it would be futile trying to escape this shadow barrier and chose to go on the offensive instead.

“I release thee —” he began to chant, but was cut short when something suddenly grabbed his arm and tossed him through the air.

Shit! he swore internally, his back crashing into the ground with enough force

to knock the wind out of him. Even after pulling himself to his feet it was all he could do to recklessly swing his sword and hope to hit something while trying not to get grabbed again, but a few well-placed slashes in each direction told him that Heartia had already put some distance between them.

I'm dancing like an idiot to Heartia's tune, he realized and forced himself to calm down.

He dropped his sword, placed both hands to his chest and chanted "I erase thee, Footprints of Evil!"

Orphen's spell sent a burst of power radiating outwards in all directions, and the strain caused the shadow barrier to crack and shatter like a large rock being thrown against a window. The collapse of the barrier revealed Heartia standing just a few feet away.

He was focusing all of his power for an all-out attack, and Orphen sharpened his mind to intercept it.

Both sides were ready to clash head-on when out of nowhere a bizarre sight took all of Orphen's concentration and trampled it into the dirt. Confused, Heartia turned to see where he was looking, and he too froze in place speechless.

"Claiomh?!"

"ORPHEEENN!!" the girl shrieked as she charged out of nowhere with the force of a raging bull, trampling poor Heartia face-first into the dirt. It was Claiomh alright, no doubt about it — the silly girl was waving around a shortsword in a panic as she ran, eventually cowering behind Orphen's back from some unknown terror.

And, not far behind her...

"HEEELP!" screamed Volkan and Dartin in unison. They sprung up right out of the undergrowth and marched with coordinated precision right over the collapsed Heartia grinding his face further into the dirt.

"Monster!" yelled Volkan. "Your job! Sorcerer! Kill it! Kill it *now*!"

"This is all your fault!" Dartin chimed in. "This is what we get for trying to

capture that thing!”

“The hell are you guys up to *this* time?” asked Orphen in an attempt to figure out what had just happened. He struggled to peel Claiomh off of himself, but she clung to him for dear life.

Dortin tried to explain what had led to this. “W-we were wandering through the forest looking for that monster, then Claiomh kicked a pebble and it just so happened that it hit the beast on the head...”

“That rotten bear-lizard’s been chasing us all over the place! It wants to bite my head off! Slay it, you slimy Sorcerer!”

“Azalie’s chasing after you? That can’t be right. She’s got her hands full dealing with Childman right now...!” Confused, Orphen turned to look in the direction that Volkan’s panicked group had charged in from, and it had indeed been where Azalie was. Then he noticed an enraged Heartia in that very same direction trying to pull himself back on his feet.

“I’ll kill you little bastards!!” he screamed.

Then, a guttural “GHAAAAAH!” as a huge angry cannonball with legs came charging out from behind a tree only to trample him with the force of an avalanche. Orphen moved purely on instinct. “I release thee, Sword of Light!” he chanted while dodging the beast.

The area was illuminated for a brief instant, and then the strange new beast was sent flying — with Heartia caught in the blast. Both crashed helplessly to the ground with a pair of tremendous thuds. With the threat taken care of, Orphen tried desperately to calm the terrified Claiomh. After bringing her back to her senses, he calmly analyzed the situation one more time. First, he made his way over to Heartia and the strange beast that he had sent flying. Half of the creature’s body had been incinerated in the blast, but its heart was still beating even in that state. It was far smaller than Azalie, but more importantly it looked absolutely nothing like her. It looked like some kind of large ox crossed with a brown bear, and it had a large pouch around its neck area, likely for carrying its young.

“It’s just a Hairy Howler.”

“A hairy *what?*” asked Claiomh, still wrapped around Orphen’s waist as though letting go would mean the end of her adventuring days forever. Orphen patted her on the head and explained: “Hairy Howlers are big, rough animals that hunt their prey by first intimidating them with the loud howls that give them their namesake, then proceed to chase their prey in circles with their crazy stamina. All they do is howl and then charge around crashing into everything. I had no idea there were any around these parts.”

Meanwhile, Volkan had taken advantage of the passed-out redhead Sorcerer and was currently stomping proudly on the young man’s head. He gripped Dortin’s arm like a vice to force him onto the scene of his own mock victory, and stomped repeatedly on the man’s head while singing his own praises. “Waa, hahahahaha!” he roared out. “This is what happens when you cross me, you smelly Sorcerers! I’m the Bulldog of Masmaturia, and all the evils of this world will one day be rust on my sword! You odious oafs are nothing before my magnificent might! Sweat your glands dry in fear at my name! Challenge me if you dare, I’ll flip the pages of a calendar at you until you die dead!”

“...You wouldn’t be able to kill a bug with a move like that.”

“Then I’ll rip out all the hair on your head one strand at a time until you bald to death!”

“...” The sight of Volkan and Dortin trampling all over a powerless Heartia was enough to kill all the animosity that had bubbled up within Orphen.

“...I can’t even pretend to be happy after winning like *this*.”

“It’s fiiine. And technically, we *did* kinda just save you right now, sooo...” Claiomh chimed in. Orphen simply nodded and said “Yeah,” before turning to face the conscious-but-still-stupefied Heartia.

“Look, maybe you guys are right. Maybe Azalie does need to be killed for the greater good, I really can’t say for sure. I don’t care about what’s right or wrong, though. I just want to protect her. If your reason for wanting to kill her were based on how much of a threat she is to the world and the people in it, then maybe I’d even help you protect the people — I wouldn’t kill her, but I’d cooperate to some degree. But you bastards had to go and make this all about the Tower’s reputation, and killing someone for a reason like that makes me

sick to my stomach.”

Heartia didn't respond. His clothes and skin were singed black from the explosion, and all he could do was twitch and squirm beneath Volkan's foot.

“What's that all about?” asked Claiomh, to which Orphen simply replied: “Don't worry about it.” He picked the Sword of Baldanders up and handed it to the inquisitive young girl.

“I want you to look after this for me. Don't let it out of your sight. Keep an eye on Heartia too, though I doubt he can do much in that state.” Just as he was about to set off towards the rumbling explosions of Azalie and Childman's battle in the distance, Claiomh forced her way back into the conversation.

“Wait just a minute here!” she yelled. She threw the sword over in Volkan's direction, but since he wasn't paying attention it knocked both him and Dartin off their feet. She paid no mind to this and continued, “Why should I have to look after some dumb sword after I just saved you?! It's not fair! Those useless brats can look after a hunk of metal just fine, can't they? Why do you keep trying to brush me off with dumb little errands like that?”

“Look, I'm just thinking of what's best for...” but he didn't bother completing this sentence. He had learned just what sort of a person Claiomh was over the past few days. He knew fully well that no matter how much he warned her or told her off, she would sneak out after him anyway and probably cause even more trouble than necessary.

“You know what, fine. Just try to keep up.” Having made his reluctant decision to let the girl tag along, Orphen started to sprint back towards the rumbling battleground. Claiomh squealed with joy behind him, but this lasted only a few seconds before she started whining.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

“What's your problem?! I already said you can tag along!” yelled an irritated Orphen. He turned around only to find Claiomh slumped on the ground.

“My feet hurt from all this running around and the skin's all torn up and I'm bleeding and it huuurts! Can you carry me there?” He had only just agreed to let her tag along and already regretted it. He ignored her and ran off on his own

anyway. It didn't take long for Claiomh's joyous cheers to morph into moaning jeers.

By the time Orphen made it back to the battleground the fight already appeared to be coming to a close — and not in the way that Orphen would have expected.

The ground was littered with corpses. Everywhere Orphen looked revealed another dead body. The group's White Sorcerer and what Orphen now recognized as Comicron's corpse were one thing, but the others had been killed equally as brutally. One body lay on the ground torn into fleshy ribbons, one sat there without a head, another with no head anywhere to be seen, and yet another still burned away filling the air with the stench of scorched flesh. Every last one of them, without exception, had clearly been murdered by way of Black Sorcery.

...Why hasn't she used her White Sorcery at all? wondered Orphen. *This carnage doesn't suit her...* Thinking back, Orphen realized that Azalie had not once used White Sorcery since she first appeared at the Everlasting mansion that day. Could it be that she couldn't use it anymore? Or was there simply no need, with this overwhelming power at her disposal?

Azalie had always been strong — strong enough to earn herself the nickname *The Chaos Witch*. But as talented as she had once been, this situation was still utterly abnormal. It defied reason for her to take on six of the most powerful Sorcerers on the Continent and kill five of them without leaving a single trace of White Sorcery upon any of the corpses. Childman was the only member of the group not dead yet.

Childman turned his head only briefly to confirm whether it were Heartia or Orphen who had returned, and then turned his attention back to Azalie as if to say that it mattered little either way.

"O Light!" he commanded, and a violent torrent erupted from his fingertips. The blast lit Azalie up in flames and scorched the earth around them both, but she took very little actual damage from the attack. Apparently she had been successful in shielding herself for the entirety of the fight.

This is just... ridiculous. With that much power at her disposal I doubt even

Childman stands a chance on his own. Orphen understood that if the battle continued any further Childman would be reduced to cinders like the rest of his squad.

He dashed to his old teacher's side just as Azalie conjured another burst of flames. He arrived at Childman's side just in time to put up a defensive position, and both called out their own protective spells.

"I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!" cried Orphen, and his own shield overlapped with Childman's, strengthening it just enough to hold off the bulk of the attack. Even both of their shields together was barely enough to suppress it however, and thin tongues of flame snaked their way through the guard threatening to incinerate them should their concentration waver in the slightest. Were it not for Orphen's help, perhaps even Childman would have been unable to withstand that one.

Orphen sighed with relief, but didn't dare drop his guard for a moment. He stood ready to intercept her next attack with all of the strength he could muster.

"You would join my side at this late hour?" asked Childman, seemingly amused by the unexpected turn of events.

Orphen recalled what Heartia had told him. *Comicron is dead.*

"Just because I want to help Azalie doesn't mean I want to walk over your corpse to see it happen." He scowled for a moment, and then continued. "I don't get it. When did she become *this* powerful? She never used to be able to overpower you this one-sidedly before. Hell, this situation's the reverse of what I was expecting."

"Perhaps so," the man said bluntly. "O Light!"

"Cut it out, already!" yelled Orphen, and his voice created another halo shield between the combatants. Childman's spell collided with it like the sound of a sword clashing with a steel plate and faded out without ever reaching its target. The stone-faced man laughed through his nose and smiled bitterly.

"Do you intend to defend both of us until we all collapse from exhaustion?"

"I won't have to if you just try to see things my way for a change!" Orphen

shot a cautious glance at Azalie to make sure she wouldn't attack while he was trying to reason with his old mentor.

"There *has* to be a way to save her. There's no way it's completely impossible. If the Sword of Baldanders did this to her, then it must be the key to turning her back. We just need to figure out how the spell works and we should be able to reverse it."

Childman's gaze appeared to cloud over for a moment like he was lost in thought about something. It felt to Orphen like the man lost himself in thought for a great while, but this was just the result of seeing a man standing stock still in the middle of a burning battlefield which made time appear to move slower than it actually did. Childman actually laughed cheerfully, and his voice was uncharacteristically laden with emotion.

"You've really grown up into a great guy, haven't you? If I ever have to name my successor, I'd have to name you first and foremost."

"What are you talking about? Now's really not the time for—"

The words caught in Orphen's throat. They tasted like blood to him. It took a moment for him to process what had just happened. He gazed down and saw it: a dagger lodged in his stomach, and Childman still gripping the hilt. Instead of pain, all he could feel was the strength being sapped from his body.



“Child... man... Why—?” he barely managed to force out the words.

“Fret not. I’ll heal you up good as new, just as soon as I’m done with my job,” promised Childman.

“You... bas... tard...” Orphen tried to take a swipe at Childman with the last of his energy, but his hand grasped thin air. There was nothing he could do to stop his old mentor now. Childman turned to face Azalie once more. The beast raised its head to let out another roar, but Childman moved swiftly enough to prevent it. The spell he chanted was on a completely different scale from everything he had tried thus far. The words were laden with a ferocious power.

“O Chaos!” A resounding thud like a giant demon had just stomped its foot down on the air itself caused the very ground to reverberate and sink by a few centimeters. Tree roots deep underground could be heard snapping from the sudden strain of increased gravity, and the very environment seemed to force Azalie’s gigantic form to the ground.

She moaned in agony, but the spell that she had been trying to cast just moments earlier dissipated without a trace. The more the weight increased, the more the atmosphere warped and collapsed in that area. The air seemed to melt into a dusky haze which glimmered faintly in the starlit night, crushing Azalie’s form utterly and completely beyond recognition... The spell was one with a very specific and cruel purpose: the perfect obliteration of any and all matter in the vicinity.

The sheer force of it caused a tremendous explosion the likes of which other spells could never live up to, and Azalie was torn apart so thoroughly that it almost seemed like her insides had been ripped straight out of her skin, leaving the remains of her corpse to fall limply to the ground. Childman healed Orphen moments later just as he had promised, but Orphen wasn’t grateful for this mercy in the slightest. He stumbled weakly over to where Azalie lay limply in death’s final embrace and cradled her still-simmering head in his arms, ignoring the minor burns searing his arms like hot iron.

“Azalie!” he pleaded, but there was no response. He could see that she was still breathing only faintly, but it was clear that she was not much longer for this world. She forced her warped eyelids open, to gaze at the man who lay by her

side in her final moments — at least, this was what Orphen chose to tell himself.

“Azalie, it’s me! Orph— Krylancelo! Azalie, can you see me? Do you recognize me?”

“KRY... LAN... CE... LO...!” A desperate blaze burned to life in her eyes. Her eyeballs were the size of human fists and burned a brilliant fiery red even in the darkness of the night. She took heavy laborious breaths and forced herself to speak... but the voice that came out was not Azalie’s.

It was a man’s voice.

“Krylancelo! I have searched... far and wide for you...! That girl... has lost sight of herself...! I wanted... so badly... to help her...”

“...What?” Left dumbstruck with no idea how to respond, Orphen simply gazed into the face of the stranger cradled in his arms.

“These eyes... can no longer see...! I could hear sounds... and a queer sense... of perception... was granted to me...! But I just...! I was so blind... all this time...!”

“...What are you trying to tell me?” asked Orphen, but the beast had not the strength left to answer his questions. Feeling that its time was short, it did as people on their deathbed often do and continued talking to anyone who would lend a final ear to them.

“I wanted... so desperately... to save her...”

“Wh...”

“That is why... I have searched for you...! I knew that... *you, of all people...* may be able... to save her... from her torment...” Having conveyed its final desperate message, the beast lost all its remaining strength. The muscles in its body gradually slackened, and like the receding tide its life faded out into a place where the living could no longer follow.

Orphen slowly raised his head to find Childman staring down at the beast nearby. His face was as expressionless as ever, but his eyes burned ferociously giving an unusual impression of triumph.

The forest lay still and silent, until suddenly a rambunctious voice came bellowing from nearby. “Let go of me, you scoundrel! Heinous villain! Don’t you dare carry me like a blasted flour bag, you hear me?! Put me down or I’ll push you to death on a park swing!”

“Watch where you’re touching, you pervert!”

“...Can I please fix my glasses? They’re slipping off and I’m starting to get really motion sick...” Orphen looked up to see Heartia walking towards him carrying both dwarf brothers and Claiomh over one shoulder, and the Sword of Baldanders in his belt. He seemed to have already recovered completely from their skirmish earlier, and to be carrying all of that weight at once without breaking a sweat meant that he had recovered enough strength to cast a physical enhancement spell on himself, too.

“*Orphen*, I’ll be taking this sword back to the Tower of Fangs. That’s where it belongs,” he said. And then:

“I wasn’t sure if you would fall for my weakened little act like that, but I’m glad I was able to make it convincing enough to fool you.”

He rubbed the area that he had been trampled over on his back with his free hand, but his words were lost on Orphen.

Even if he had heard them, he wouldn’t have cared in the slightest — something far more important weighed on his mind. Even the Sword of Baldanders meant nothing in comparison to what he had finally realized.

After all this time he had finally managed to fit together all of the pieces of this ridiculous puzzle and see the whole truth for what it was at long last.

Chapter VI: The Chaos Witch

Just a little ways north from the city of Totokanta, Orphen sat waiting by the side of the Stairway Highway.

The Stairway Highway was the subject of much praise among merchants and travelers making their way to and from the commercial city, because in midsummer it was surrounded by lush fields of emerald green, making it quite the scenic route. In early summer as it was now, though, the grass and the plants were still preparing to bloom, waiting for that perfect time of year where they could burst to life all at once and enchant all that passed by. The cold spring winds had yet to catch up with the recent change in the season, and it blew quite strongly even now. Orphen didn't mind the cold winds much. He had been standing out in the open in the midday sun for a while, so if anything he was glad for it because it made the wait slightly more bearable.

He cast his gaze over to Totokanta City not far away, waiting for a certain person to make their way down the road. He had been waiting for quite some time now, but he wasn't impatient or irritated about this like he might normally be. When he thought about who he was waiting for out here, somewhere in his heart he wished that his guest would never come.

The weathered scabbard that held his sword was pressed against his shoulder, and he tapped his fingers against it rhythmically, ruminating over the inevitability of what was to come. Then, in the distance, he could make out a cloud of dust being kicked up by a small wagon heading in his direction. As it drew closer he could begin to make out the clip-clopping noises of the horses pulling the carriage and the creaking of the vehicle's wooden wheels. It was a two-horse carriage of modest size.

It wasn't long before he could make out the carriage in its entirety, with its black box-like form and rider in the driver's seat. He knew this was who he had been waiting for without a doubt. Orphen rose to his feet and strode into the middle of the road, stopped, spread his arms wide, and yelled "Stop the cart!"

at the driver. The driver cursed as he pulled on the reins and brought the carriage to a halt just a few meters away.

At this distance, Orphen could even make out the golden lettering on the side of the vehicle. It read: Continental Sorcerers' Association, *Damsels' Orisons*. Exactly the people he had been waiting for.

The angry driver of forty years dropped down from his driver's seat and strode intimidatingly over to Orphen, prepared to deal with him the same way he would any other old highway bandit. He squared his shoulders fully prepared for a brawl and scowled in an attempt to scare the would-be thief away, but Orphen was unfazed. He slipped his pendant out from under his shirt and held it up in front of the man — the crest of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword. The driver understood the significance of this pendant and corrected his attitude immediately.

"Wh-whatever can I help you with, sir? Might you, er, need a ride somewhere?" Orphen didn't feel like dealing with this low-ranking cart driver, so he decided to bluff an air of authority to deal with the man as swiftly as possible.

"No thanks, I've got other business to attend to. But you might be able to help me out with something related to that. Tell me, how far is it from here to Totokanta City?"

"Eh? Oh, umm, I believe it's about three kilometers down the road I've just come from," answered the man.

"Three kilometers, huh? Alright, that's not so bad. Now, here's what I want you to do for me. I want you to leave your carriage here and run back to Totokanta, touch the city's outer wall, and then come straight back. It shouldn't take you longer than an hour."

"...Sir? Whatever is the meaning of this?"

"That's not something you need to know, got it? All *you* have to worry about is doing as I say. Just run to the city and back. That's it, job done."

"But that's ridiculous..."

"Stop flapping your gums and start moving those legs!" yelled Orphen. The

cart driver was scared out of his wits by this, because working for Damsel's Orisons, he knew full well what could happen to a person who angered a Sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs. Terrified, he made a full speed dash straight towards the city without a second thought for the carriage and its passenger that he had been forced to leave behind in the middle of the highway. Orphen stood watching the man as he receded further and further into the distance, and didn't move at all until the poor fellow was no longer in sight. With that innocent man out of the way, he turned to face the carriage and its passenger sitting within.

He gripped his sheathed sword in one hand by his side and spoke to the person within.

"Get out here," he said, but the tone of his voice was more forlorn than angry despite his harsh choice of words. "I know you saw this coming, now get out here and face me."



Orphen had been preparing himself for this moment, so he didn't have any regrets about what was to happen next. Neither was he particularly upset about what it had all come to. That said, he did have his doubts. He held some faint hope that maybe, just maybe, his deduction had been wrong, and that this had all just been one big misunderstanding.

Such thoughts ran through Orphen's head even as the carriage's door opened and a tall, well-built man stepped out into Orphen's view.

"What is the meaning of this, Krylancelo?" asked Childman as he stepped out of the carriage. In his hand he held the Sword of Baldanders. This should have been the first time that Orphen had ever had a chance to examine the sword this closely, yet its very shape and every rune carved into it invoked powerful memories within him as if it were something he'd seen and held every day for the past five years. Ever since Azalie first fled the Tower of Fangs after her horrible transformation, Orphen had been intimately acquainted with the sword. Even though his first and only real memory of it was a glance of it from the corner of his eye, lying in a pool of Azalie's blood. The sword that had changed his and Azalie's lives forever. The sword that 'she' had stolen from the

Everlasting family's mansion just days before. The very same sword that Childman now gripped in his hand.

"You already know what I'm here for, *Childman*."

"A Sorcerer though I may be, I am no psychic, Krylancelo. If you are here because you think my report to the Tower of Fangs included information of your betrayal, then worry not. I have already told the elders that your actions were invaluable in tracking down the beast that I might slay it before it ruined any more lives. You have no reason to worry, I have vouched for your innocence and you are a free man now."

"...The Childman I knew was never as talkative as you are, you know that?" Childman's facial features had always looked like they'd been carved out of stone until this moment. But with those words, Orphen could see the facade dropping for the first time before his very eyes.

Childman fell silent, his face now painted with just a tiny bit more emotion than it ever had been in his life until now. When he finally opened his mouth once more, even his tone of voice had changed.

"...When did you figure it out?"

"You had me fooled until you killed *that beast*, as you called it. *He* told me something while he was dying in my arms. That was when I finally figured it all out," said Orphen to the person in Childman's form.

"Why did you do it, Azalie? What drove you this far? I've been calling out to you all this time, all these five years since you took off from the Tower. I know it's way too late to just talk our way through our problems, but it'd be nice if you heeded my call, just this once." Childman had never been the kind of man you could call boyishly handsome. He had always seemed strict, composed, and charismatic like the worshiped founder of some religious sect. Here and now, though, that image crumbled to pieces to be replaced by a different kind of charm.

The kind of dangerously mysterious allure that Azalie had captivated people with for all the years she'd been alive.

"...What difference would it make? What's done is done, and there's no going

back now,” *she* said, Azalie’s tone of voice issuing forth from Childman’s mouth. The smile she wore betrayed a hint of sadistic cruelty, and she toyed with the Sword of Baldanders that she gripped in Childman’s hand.

She held the sword as though it was her most precious belonging. Orphen saw the moon crest on the sword and his mind went back to what Dortin had told him about the sword’s history. The beast-like figure engraved by the crest looked just like the hideous form that the accursed blade had forced upon Azalie all those years ago.

The sight of it renewed Orphen’s resolve, and his gaze shifted from the sword to Azalie/Childman once more.

“...I’ll be the one to decide what difference it makes.”

“...” she paused, evaluating Orphen’s newfound resolve. “You’ve grown beyond my expectations, Krylancelo. I’m proud of you.”

“I don’t feel like I’ve changed much. I just got desperate over the years. I might never be as smart as you were, but the one thing I’ve learned is that sometimes I have to steel my resolve even if it breaks my heart to do so.”

“You might think that’s a new thing for you, but I’ve seen it in you for as long as we’ve known each other. You’ve always been stronger than you give yourself credit for. You and Heartia were fantastic students, but you’ve always had something that he lacked — hell, I doubt if even Childman could have emulated that burning determination of yours, you know that? You have the kind of talent that any Sorcerer would be jealous of. I always knew you would become an exceptional master of the art someday. I would’ve been overjoyed to have you as a partner had things not turned out this way.” Azalie’s shoulders fell with regret at the unfortunate situation.

“I’m proud of you even now, you know. You even knew I was waiting for this confrontation. And you were right to assume that I had anticipated this moment. Actually, if you *hadn’t* been right here waiting for me, then I would have been extremely disappointed in you. I knew deep down that if anyone could figure it out, then it would be you — not Heartia or those stuck-up guys at the Sorcerers’ Alliance, but you. The only person who’s ever truly understood me.”

“...We don’t have all that much time before your escort comes back from that errand I sent him on, and I’d rather not make him run all that distance a second time just so we could reminisce about the good old days. So let’s skip the banter and get to the main point already. Why did you do it, Azalie?”

“You’re right. You deserve to know the full story,” she said, a brutal look befitting of Childman’s statuesque features warping her face. “You already know that I tried to experiment with this sword in secret from everyone, and that I failed miserably. That disaster warped me into that hideous form and I was forced to go on the run when the Tower of Fangs came to the decision to slaughter me just to protect their own *reputation*,” she spat. “I had to fend off more pursuers than I can even remember anymore, and Childman was right there with them every step of the way. They tried everything they could to murder me and erase every trace of not only me but every contribution I had made to their research. Those ingrates treated me like a monster — they selfishly assumed that I’d lost all sense of reason just because my body had changed in a way that they didn’t understand,” her own words tore open an old emotional wound as she snorted in disgust at all those who had turned against her over the years.

“I mean, I’m talking perfectly fine right now, aren’t I? Do I *look* like some crazed murderous beast to you? Do I *sound* like one? If my words and actions seem spiteful or unreasonably cruel, then think for a moment *why* I was forced into this role. *Five years* I spent on the run, Childman and his cronies relentlessly hunting me down every step of the way. Five whole years — long enough for you, my adorable little brother, to mature into a man I’d have been proud to have by my side for the rest of my life.” Her expression softened for a moment when she spoke of the man she considered her only family, but quickly stiffened again before she continued. “After five whole years of being chased in circles by a murderous group I once called colleagues, it finally dawned on me. I thought that I’d truly go insane at the rate things were going. Even if I didn’t lose my mind, I knew that Childman would eventually find a way to best me and put me down for good. I wasn’t about to let myself go down without a fight, so I came up with one last desperate plan.”

“...A plan that involved finding the Sword of Baldanders and using it to

transform yourself back to normal,” guessed Orphen, which made Azalie nod.

“That’s right. The only problem was, Childman sealed the sword away somewhere five years ago, and I had no leads on where to start looking for it.”

“And so you thought that if you couldn’t find the sword yourself, you’d just force Childman to lead you to it. At any cost.”

“That, and his persistent chasing of me was going to get me killed sooner or later. So I made use of my trump card — I used my White Sorcery to swap bodies with him. To trap *him* as the beast while also giving myself the freedom to move around unrestrained. It was a real gamble trying to pull off a stunt like that, you know? Even with my talent for White Sorcery, there was no guarantee it’d work. But I gambled on that slight chance, and I pulled it off.”

“...And you massacred all of Childman’s subordinates in the process so nobody would ever find out,” concluded Orphen gloomily.

Azalie shrugged and explained, “They’d been chasing me for five whole years, and they’d been trying to kill me the whole time. If I didn’t kill them, then sooner or later they’d have killed me.” Orphen still had some doubts, but he chose not to ask. Instead he simply stared wordlessly at her, which she chose to interpret as acceptance, and so she went on.

“Isn’t it just so funny? Childman went on and on about how it was impossible to turn me back using the sword, but the minute he found himself in the same situation, he made a beeline for the thing! All I had to do was follow him, and he led me straight here to Totokanta. Then he crashed right into that mansion, and I knew for sure. That was where he’d sealed the sword away. Knowing that, I went to Heartia and sought his cooperation — under the guise of *Childman*, of course. And you already know the rest of the story from here, because you ended up getting yourself wrapped up in it. I had to get that sword back at any costs, but Childman ran off with it before I could get the chance. So I had to exterminate him.”

“That’s not the real reason, and we both know it,” scowled Orphen. “You didn’t just kill Childman for such a petty reason. There was something else that drove you to it. If Childman were the only one you were after, then there was no need to massacre as many other innocents as you did. You had your chance

to snatch the sword the minute you placed a tracking spell on it — but you didn't, and you dragged more innocents from the Tower of Fangs into your little revenge plot. The minute you had the thing you could've just run off anywhere you wanted and resumed the experiment you'd failed at five years ago. I mean, it can change you into any shape you want, right?"

"...You don't know the truth about this sword, Krylancelo. You don't understand what a cruel thing it is," she said, a bitter smile rising to her face.

"Why do you think I failed five years ago? Hell, try and think for yourself for a minute here. You're a smart guy, so consider this: if it was just an enchanted item that let a person change the form of anything they cut with it into any form they desired, then why make it in the shape of a sword? The answer is simple. The Sword of Baldanders is exactly what it looks like — it's a *weapon*, not a tool. It's not designed to let anyone become whatever *they* want, it's meant for the wielder to turn their *enemies* into any form they want. Statues, animals, rodents — anyone they cut with the sword, they could render harmless or torture to their heart's content. I simply figured that if it was capable of *that*, then surely if I cut myself with it, I could turn *myself* into any form I wanted. So I stabbed myself with the thing... and lost my concentration from the pain. I lost the mental image of my desired form, and that's how I ended up turning into that hideous *beast*."

"...And you still plan on trying it again anyway, don't you?"

"Of course I do, because I know I can do it right this time. Now you know the full story, I've told you everything there is to tell. What are you gonna do about it?" she said provocatively. She was much taller now with Childman's body than she had been all those years ago back when she used to tease Orphen all the time, but Orphen was no longer looking at 'Childman.' He had already recognized this person as the real Azalie, and her form overlapped with Childman's body to the point where he could almost see her with his own two eyes.



He looked her straight in the eyes, and they looked to him like the very same eyes he used to find himself lost in so many times all those years ago. Her body may have been Childman's now, but her eyes and her voice were very much those of the Azalie he'd known all his life. His mind made up, he reached out his right hand to the sheathed sword he held in his left, gripped the hilt, and drew the blade.

"And what're you planning to do with a dangerous thing like that?" she asked.

Orphen shook his head and explained his own reasoning to the witch before him.

"If we'd been lovers since back then, I might've even agreed with your logic. Hell, maybe I'd even have helped you in your plans, no matter how cruel they were. But we're not lovers and never have been — and you murdered Childman in cold blood."

"I already told you, it was kill or be killed for me."

"Don't feed me that bullshit. I know better than anyone how smart you are. I know you could've come up with any number of ways of getting that sword back without having to kill a single person. You can cry self-defense all you want... but we both know that's not the case," choked Orphen, on the verge of tears.

"I'm just a cold-blooded murderer, is that it?" she asked, demanding to know why the man she had thought of as family once upon a time was throwing such horrible accusations at her.

"I respected you once, but you lost all my respect the moment you killed Childman. *That's* what this is all about, and it's why I'm here in front of you right now."

"Then tell me, what was I *supposed* to do? Just run away for the rest of my life? Just accept that I'd become a monster and live out my days as a fugitive? Is *that* the kind of life you'd rather I had right now?"

"That's not what I'm saying, Azalie. I'm saying that there's a line you shouldn't have crossed, and you went and crossed it without a shred of remorse. You murdered Childman, and that's the one thing I can never forgive you for."

“What was I supposed to do? If I didn’t kill him, then he’d have killed me eventua—”

“Just stop and think about it for one damn second!” yelled Orphen, swinging the sword in a horizontal arc several paces away.

“Why do you think he sealed the sword away *himself*, without handing it over to the elders? Because he didn’t want it falling into their hands! Why did he chase you *himself* for all those years, instead of leaving it to someone else? Because he didn’t want to actually let anyone kill you! And why do you *really* think he went straight for that sword the minute he switched bodies with you? Think about it, Azalie. Think back as far as you can and ask yourself, did Childman ever once say that it was *completely* impossible to change you back? All he said was that it would be impossible for anyone *else* to change you back. He knew all along that there was a chance for you, but he also knew that *he was the only one capable of saving you with it*. He wanted to save you *himself*, with his own two hands.”

“...That’s all just wild speculation on your part.”

“Is it? On the day of your funeral, Childman said something to me. He told me that the task would be impossible *for me*. But then when I asked if he could pull it off, a look crossed his face and he started to say something really important — but he cut himself off so that the elders wouldn’t find out that he was planning to go against their orders. He was convinced all along that he could save you himself, even way back then.” Azalie hesitated at Orphen’s explanation. Her face — the face that she had stolen from Childman — grew pale as the realization of it all dawned on her at last. Orphen found it a terribly strange sight. He had never seen Childman flustered before, but now that Azalie was in possession of the man’s body, his old instructor’s face had been displaying more emotions than Childman himself had ever shown in all his time alive. Orphen didn’t relent for even a minute.

“Even I didn’t get it at first, but it all makes sense now that I think back on it. Childman has always been two steps ahead of me, and he’s always chosen the most pragmatic course of action for solving any problem thrown his way. He lied to the elders about wanting to hunt you down himself, then made use of the Sorcerers’ Alliance and their connections across the Continent to track you

wherever you went — so that he could get there before anyone else and keep you alive until he was confident he could change you back to normal. Compare that to me and my stupid fucking short-sighted plan of wandering around the Continent without any leads whatsoever, just blindly hoping I might coincidentally run into you one day. I was an immature dumbass, and Childman had the right idea this whole time.” Having blurted out everything on his mind all at once, and practically in a single breath, Orphen slumped his shoulders while panting heavily. He felt exhausted even just thinking about the scale of what he’d just said. He turned to gauge Azalie’s reaction, and saw her standing there completely dumbfounded staring in his direction — or rather, staring off into space in his direction.

“What a sick joke this whole thing is,” she sighed. “Why do you think I used this sword in the first place all those years ago?” she asked, holding the Sword of Baldanders up for Orphen to see.

“It’s because I wanted that stubborn old mule to look at me. The *real* me. Not as a student, but as a *woman*. I was only trying to be the best woman I could be... just so that I could be good enough for him.” She drew the sword of Baldanders from its leather scabbard and held it in one hand with the tip of the blade resting against the ground. Orphen watched as she tossed the scabbard aside and his eyes followed it as it fell to the roadside, understanding what this meant.

Orphen, too, took up his blade and faced Azalie once more.

“If you felt that strongly for him, then why? Why did you kill him?”

“You know, I’m not even sure anymore... I guess, if I had to put a reason to it, then I’d say it’s because I’d already gotten what I wanted from him.”

“You *what*?”

“Think about it. If everything you’ve said is right, then he had acknowledged me all along, right?” she said in a voice thick with self-derision. She held the Sword of Baldanders up and took a battle stance.

“Azalie...” growled Orphen, but Azalie shook her head right after saying that.

“I’m just kidding, Krylancelo. But since things have come to this, there’s

something I really want you to understand. I never asked for this. Things didn't turn out this way because I wanted them to. This is just the end result of a messy situation. I did the best I could, made what I thought were the best possible choices at the time, and ultimately this is how it all turned out. That's all there is to it."

Orphen remained silent and took one step closer to Azalie, but stopped himself before asking one last thing.

"If that's the case, then the fact we're about to cross blades is just another result of you trying to make the best decisions you can under the circumstances, right? You've got no choice but to kill me like you killed Childman, and then nobody'll ever know that you're still alive and the Tower of Fangs will lose every reason to chase after you. Am I gonna die for a stupid reason like that?"

"...If I wanted to kill you, Krylancelo, then I would have done so on the very same night I killed Childman. I had every chance to, but I didn't. It all comes down to trust at this point — I know you're the kind of person I can trust not only with my secrets, but with my life itself. Once I have my own body back, I wouldn't even mind being your woman for the rest of my life. I'll give myself over to you completely — and I'll let you do *whatever you want* with me."

"Azalie... please, just stop. I used to look up to you — you were the kind of person I only wished I could be. Please don't trample over my feelings more than you already have." Azalie said not another word and hung her head, apparently wounded, for Orphen to see.

Orphen was surprised to see her react this way, but the moment didn't last long. She raised her head with a cruel look distorting her face — Childman's face — and held her sword to the ready once more. With Childman's hands. The sunlight heralding the beginning of summer shone high in the sky and reflected off the bare blade of the Sword of Baldanders. The glint caught Orphen's eyes and he had to close them for a moment before opening them again.

In the brief moment he closed his eyes, he went over the events of the past few days once more. He had been forced to face his old friends and people he thought of as family one after another, each confrontation more heartbreaking

than the last — first Heartia, then Childman, and now Azalie. How much more could he take before he broke completely?

Azalie... he called out in his mind, the name now calling up a whole torrent of mixed emotions in him. He gripped the hilt of his sword tight enough that he almost lost all feeling in his fingers. He reminded himself of what had to be done, and he knew he couldn't let himself get killed here. Not after he'd come all this way.

Azalie made the first move. She raised her sword high into the air, and with Childman's towering stature, it looked to Orphen like she had just stabbed the sky itself. This was something that Childman himself would never have done — not Childman, the former genius assassin. That man would never even be caught swinging a sword at all if he could help it. He had always preferred more subtle tools befitting his trade, such as daggers or steel wire. He would never duel someone head on if he could help it, especially if he meant to actually kill his opponent. Azalie, on the other hand, preferred to take a much flashier approach to these situations. She was the kind of person who, for example, took great joy in one-on-one duels with swords and spells, treating them like the most fun game in the world.

That's definitely Azalie, Orphen told himself. It's not Childman. But depending on how you look at it... you could say that they're now two halves of the same whole. Talk about being someone's better half... what a sick joke.

Azalie took a step forward to test the waters — with Childman's foot. Orphen recalled that this was an old habit of hers. She always did this right before charging recklessly at her opponent, determined to finish them off in a single attack. Orphen saw it coming, and shifted his sword ever so slightly to provoke her into it.

Her resolve steeled, Azalie charged forwards at blinding speed. In a single breath she closed the distance between them and was within striking range of Orphen before he could even react. —*Swoosh!*— In the blink of an eye, the sword came slashing down through the air. The sound of it as it arced towards Orphen was so quiet that he would've had to strain his ears just to make it out. Orphen didn't move. He didn't even try to dodge, counter, or protect himself. And so Azalie's ferocious attack hit him right on his shoulder.

But the blade was not to cut the skin. The moment it made contact, an irrepressible force welled up from within Orphen's body. It was as though the sword were trying to cut through a human-shaped mass of gale force winds. This strange power pinpointed itself at the point of impact, seized the Sword of Baldanders in mid-swipe, and tossed it away with enough force to knock it out of Azalie's hands.

The sword twirled through the air and stabbed itself into the ground some distance behind Orphen's back. Neither Orphen nor Azalie moved a muscle as all this played out. Azalie stared blankly at her — Childman's — hands, utterly confused as to what had just happened.

"You didn't go for my vitals," noted Orphen. He gripped his sword in hand and stood before the disarmed Azalie.

"Well, even if you had, it wouldn't have made any difference. You remember that ring you showed me a long time ago? The one that we figured out would protect its wielder from harm, but only the once?"

"...I remember. But I don't see you wearing it, and you shouldn't have been able to fit it on any of your fingers, or even your toes for that matter," she muttered while taking a step back.

"I figured I didn't really need to wear it," said Orphen, shrugging his shoulders. "The only condition for its activation was to have it recognize me as its owner — me, and nobody else. So I made sure it had no way of denying that I was its one and only owner... by keeping it tucked away safely inside my stomach. It was easy enough to swallow a tiny little ring like that," he said and patted his stomach with his left hand. Azalie had trouble believing what she had just heard. The look on her face was like she had just been cheated out of her life's fortune over a legal technicality. Orphen took another step closer, and this time Azalie didn't even try to back away. Instead, she burst out into laughter.

"That's just... I don't believe it! That's so *stupid*! How did you even come *up* with that trick?!" Orphen stepped even closer until their bodies were practically touching, and said straight to the Azalie with Childman's face,

"Let's settle things here and now." Refusing to give up, Azalie hunched down with the elegance and swiftness of a cat and sprung up pouncing herself on

Orphen. Her tackle didn't land. Orphen had acted at the same time, and swung his sword right into her stomach. The sensation of metal ripping flesh ran right up his arm.

The sensation lasted for only the briefest of moments. The Chaos Witch let out a gut-wrenching scream, then collapsed to the ground, completely and utterly beaten.

Epilogue

The sounds of horses neighing in the distance mingled with the gentle breeze to really give the impression that summer had come at last. The sky was free of clouds and the scorching sun bore down on the city. Totokanta suffered from extremely dry heat starting around June, which made the smell of the grass and the greenery ever more fragrant. A cool breeze blew in from the east, sweeping across the Great Skymirror Lake and passing through the garden of the Everlasting family's estate. What had once been reduced to a burnt and barren field was now restored almost perfectly to its original state. Orphen had spent three days working to fix it up, but there were still a couple of small patches here and there that he simply hadn't been able to do anything about, even *with* his sorcery.

The pair of horses nearby whinnied impatiently. They were a pair of chestnut-coated mares linked up to a wooden carriage. They had belonged to the Everlastings, but Tishtinie had given them to Orphen when she heard that he was going on another journey.

"Are you sure you are prepared for the trip?"

Orphen had been spacing out when Tishtinie's voice brought him back to his senses. "Huh? Ah, yeah. I'll be fine," he replied. Tishtinie and Mariabelle stood at the mansion's entrance to see Orphen off. Claiomh, however, was conspicuously absent from the scene.

Orphen cast his gaze to the carriage and said "I didn't really have any preparations to make. All I'm doing is chasing after a pair of half-pint little thieves."

"Those two little dwarf boys, yes? They ran off with that sword everyone made such a fuss about, did they? What bothersome little fellows they are," said Tishtinie with a little frown crossing her beautiful face, almost as if she were talking about a pair of children who had pulled a harmless little prank.

"They really are. I have a feeling they've taken that sword away to try and

pawn it off somewhere. I should never have mentioned even off-hand that enchanted items like that are virtually priceless. That was my mistake. I should've known that this would happen," he sighed.

"By the way, Madame, I don't see Claiomh around anywhere. After how much she clung to me and followed me around all over the place these past several days, I was expecting her to at least see me off."

"Ah yes, about that..." Tishtinie started to say, but stopped herself and stole a sneaky little glance at Mariabelle standing next to her. Neither said a word, and Tishtinie simply shrugged with a little smile on her face.

Orphen understood the meaning behind that little exchange immediately.

"You're a wonderful woman, Tishtinie," he said with a wry smile, "but I can't honestly call you a very clever mother."

"Pardon me, young man?" she replied, placing both hands on her hips with her elbows sticking out like a mother telling off a small child.

"...Sorry, you're right. Thinking back these past few days, you've been nothing but a model parent to your daughters."

"Do look after that girl for me, won't you now?"

"Only for as long as she behaves herself. If she ever gets to be too much for me to handle, you'd better believe I'll be taking her back here even if I have to drag her halfway across the Continent," he promised. After his chat with Tishtinie, Orphen turned to face Mariabelle. The girl resembling a slightly older, more mature Claiomh stood with her hands clasped in front of her chest as she gazed forlornly at Orphen. He hadn't heard her voice even once, and had even begun to think that she might actually be mute, when suddenly her pretty little lips parted and broke this illusion in the most shocking turn of events he had experienced thus far.

"The truth is, I really did want to marry you, you know," she said in a voice like an angel whispering in his ear. Orphen was caught so completely off-guard by this confession that he froze in place, an opportunity which Mariabelle did not let slip by. She wrapped one slender arm around his neck, drew her face close to his, and planted a little kiss on his cheek.

The sensation of her lips on his skin brought back a flood of memories of the girls of this household acting suspicious whenever Mariabelle's name came up in conversation, but most vivid in his mind was the single line: *"This whole series of events has left her rather... flustered as of late..."* for its sheer absurdity given the context.

These women had been *gossiping about romance* while their house was being targeted by an assassin. *Still, if I'd just paid a bit more attention to their behavior, I could've pieced all this together myself ages ago,* thought Orphen as Mariabelle slipped away from him just as swiftly as she had embraced him. He shot her one last pleasant smile before bidding her goodbye.

Orphen rode the horse-drawn carriage at walking speed as he left town and set out onto the highway. He already knew exactly where Volkan would try to take the Sword of Baldanders: The Tower of Fangs. Volkan and Dortin were virtually clueless about sorcery, and being the simpletons that they were, they would undoubtedly take a sorcerous item straight to the one place most directly linked with sorcery in their tiny little heads — hence, the Tower of Fangs.

This meant that Orphen's next journey would take him north across the Continent. He took his carriage down the very same road that he had had his duel with Azalie on just a few days prior. He held the horses' reins lightly in his hands as he passed the sign saying Stairway Highway, and let himself get lost in thought.

As his carriage passed the very spot that he had last seen Azalie...

"Don't worry, this is that idiot Volkan's sword," said Orphen to Azalie while holding up the sword for her to see. She lay squirming on the ground clutching her stomach in pain, winded and trying to catch her breath.

"That little dumbass doesn't know the first thing about how to look after a sword. Hell, he uses it virtually every day to beat his little brother across the head. Do you know much about dwarfs, Azalie? Their skulls are actually literally harder than iron. After all that abuse, this sword's lost its edge completely. It's just a big metal club now with a little bit of sharpness to it. Still, a big metal club

can do a fair bit of damage in the right hands. You've probably got at least a few broken ribs, so I wouldn't try forcing yourself to move too much or you'll mess up your organs pretty damn bad."

"Are you going to... kill me?" she asked as cold sweat ran down the brow she had stolen from Childman. In response, Orphen tossed Volkan's sword aside and picked up the Sword of Baldanders instead.

"Kill you, huh... If I had it in me to kill you, then I wouldn't have left the Tower of Fangs all those years ago."

"But it's been five years since then. You're not the same boy you were back then."

"I haven't changed at all since then... No, maybe I *have* grown a little, but I'm still the same person at heart."

"Then what are you planning on doing with me?"

"..." Orphen shifted the Sword of Baldanders around in his grip and thought to himself for a moment — or rather, he acted like he was thinking to himself. In truth, he had already made up his mind the moment he chose to confront Azalie like this.

"Nothing. I'm gonna leave that decision up to you," he said, then thrust the sword into the ground right in front of her.

"If I cut you with this sword, I can turn you into any form I want, right? Well, I'm gonna let *you* decide which form you want me to give you. I've been watching you all my life, so I can remember every detail about how you looked all the way up until five years ago. I could probably give you that body back if I focused on that mental image hard enough. Or, if you'd rather stay as Childman, then that's fine with me, too. Hell, if you wanted to turn into another kind of monster then I could do that for you, too; though I'm betting you're sick and tired of that already. At the end of the day, it's your life, and the choice is yours to make. Just tell me what you want, and I'll grant that wish for you. *But* —" he paused and lowered his voice before continuing,

"—if you feel even the slightest trace of guilt for murdering Childman, then never show your face in front of me ever again, for any reason — no matter

which face you choose to live with.” Azalie lay clutching her ribs in silence, her ragged breathing the only sign that she was still conscious. Just when Orphen was worried that she might pass out from the pain, she relayed her choice to him...

“You can come out already, I know you’re hiding back there. I’m starting to get bored of driving this thing on my own,” said Orphen, calling into the back of the carriage without taking his eyes from the road. The carriage was a large half-cylinder with curtains covering the front and back ends. It was a small thing, just barely big enough for two or three people to ride comfortably in.

The curtain at Orphen’s back slid to one side, and Claiomh poked her head out with a surprised little look on her face and asked, “When’d you figure it out?”

“Tishtinie pretty much outright gave it away,” he said. “She told me to look after you for her.”

“So you decided to let me come along anyway?”

“Not like I had much of a choice. Even if I’d dragged you out kicking and screaming, you’d just have found some way to come chasing after me anyway, right?”

“Of course,” she nodded without a hint of hesitation.

Orphen turned around to face Claiomh and stared her straight in the eyes. She felt to Orphen like she’d slipped into his life right out of a completely different genre altogether. Her face beamed with joy, and Orphen knew that this could only mean one thing.

“Alright,” he grumbled, “fess up. What else are you hiding?”

“*I’m* not hiding a thing,” she replied, acting like she’d completely pulled the wool over Orphen’s eyes. Then she turned around and called back into the carriage, “It’s alright to come out now, we’ve been busted.”

“W-wait, hang on, you’re telling me there’s someone *else* back there, too?” Orphen couldn’t help raising his voice in surprise. A second face popped out from behind the curtain right next to Claiomh’s, and Orphen recognized those

handsome, youthful features immediately.

“Majic?! What are *you* doing here?”

“You promised you’d teach me sorcery, but then you just up and left town without even dropping by the inn to say goodbye! So I’m coming with you until you make good on your promise!”

“A-alright, I get the logic behind it, but how did you know I’d be using this exact carriage?”

“Eh? Did I forget to mention it?” Claiomh responded in his place. “You know how I go to a public school, right? Well, our grades are different, but me and Majic are in the same class. When I brought your name up in conversation one day, he said you’d been staying at his inn for ages now. I was pretty surprised.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” grumbled Orphen, finding himself completely at a loss.

“I already talked it over with my dad,” said Majic, resembling a kid explaining that she had gone and gotten her father’s permission like a good girl. “I brought it up with him every day since you stopped coming back. I told him I really wanted to learn sorcery, and he finally agreed on the condition that I find a trustworthy Sorcerer to study under. And since you’re the most trustworthy Sorcerer that came to mind—”

“Alright, fine, I get it already. Dammit, Bagup, what the hell’s going on in that head of yours?” Recognizing that he’d been beaten, Orphen decided to take out his frustration by wringing the reins in his hands like he was strangling a person with an abnormally thin neck. He turned his gaze to the sky, more crystal clear than blue and endlessly vast. The pleasant wind blew gently across his skin, and the highway and all its surrounding greenery stretched onwards into the horizon. Orphen briefly wondered to himself whether he should at least take some solace in the fact that he’d have some company to keep things from growing too boring on his journey, but he decided to postpone his judgment on that for the time being.

The few clouds floating along in the sky drifted over in Orphen’s direction, and he began to feel like they might drop straight out of the sky on top of him any moment now.

Afterword

“Hellooo there! It’s meee, Mariabelle! I’m here with the author to bring all of you lovely readers what you’ve been waiting for... That’s right, it’s the afterword!”

“...You’re a lot more energetic than you were during the actual story, huh.”

“What fun would the afterword be if I didn’t say anything, huh?! C’mon, you introduce yourself too, you silly little fellow.”

“Alright, alright. To everyone who read this book to the end, it’s nice to meet you all. This is likely the first time anyone will have ever heard of me, but my name’s Akita.”

“...Surely not the first time, you already released another book before this one. Right?”

“My point still stands.”

“Well, I mean... Sure, as you’re writing this it’s been two whole years since you released your first book and nobody’s heard a peep out of you since then, but still...”

“Two whole years of silence in this industry’s long enough for most people to forget my name, I’d say.”

“Never mind *forget* your name, most of them probably never even knew how to read it in the first place.”

“...I kinda doubt that.”

“No, I’m serious. Your name’s gotta be against the rules, it’s definitely not fair for your poor readers who have to try and figure it out.”

“I wasn’t aware that there were rules for having a name.”

“Can we talk about it for a minute? I mean c’mon, it’s written as 禎信 for goodness sake! You think anyone reading this book right now can figure out what that says?!”

“For those of you who are capable of trying, and just tried, well... ‘Sadanobu’ is the wrong answer.”

“The correct answer is... Right there on the front cover of this book, for anyone who’s forgotten already!”

“To tell the truth, there was a time where I tried coming up with a bunch of other pen-names to choose from instead.”

“...Really? I’m almost afraid to ask, but... alright, what sort of pen-names did you come up with?”

“One of them was written with the kanji for Opportunist, but read as Hinata Kazumi. Another one I came up with was Firehorse Bellygorou. On the other end of the spectrum I tried making it sound more like a ring name, like Fighting Mud Turtle, The Eternal Red Backpack Chief, High-Heel Hairylegs... I even thought about going with A Cat of Flanders for a while there.”

“...This is getting ridiculous. Can I go home now, please?”

“Your home doesn’t exist in this world.”

“...Moving on. How come so much time passed since your first book was released? It’s not like you spent two whole years on this single volume, right?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what’ve you been up to this whole time?”

“Coming up with potential pen-names. Clog-gratulations, for example. Or something like Rummenigge Weigh-Scales, maybe.”

“Don’t you regret wasting two whole years of your life on that nonsense?”

“I did write some stories every now and then, too.”

“...Oh really?”

“*My Nose Hairs Won’t Stop Growing!* was one, and I had another called *What the Strait of Gibraltar Looks Like During Winter.*”

“You’re incorrigible...”

“Right, and the fact that this incorrigible man was able to finish this book is entirely thanks to everyone who lent me their strength and assistance to make

it a reality.”

“So you *do* have some modesty in you, after all.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m by and far the single most modest person you’ll ever meet.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Hrmph. Well, anyway, to everyone who helped me make this book a reality: Thank you all so much! Thank you to Kitamura-kun, who’s working part-time in a book store in Nishiogikubo. Thank you to Yanagido-kun in Meguro, who’s probably still sitting around licking light bulbs and grinning to himself as usual. Thank you to Zumipon-kun who once got so drunk that he completely and utterly destroyed a public lavatory without a trace—”

“...You have some pretty awful-sounding friends, you know that?”

“Oh shut up, you. As I was saying... Thank you to S, O, and K who had my back during that one seminar. And to Yamamoto, Renno Ryou-sensei, and Hida-san, I love you all! (lol). To the people who graciously let me work part-time in that furniture store, thank you very much! Let’s see, who else... Oh right, to that weird old door-to-door salesman guy, thank you for your support in helping this novel get published! And thank you to that mysterious green-faced person who’s always watching me through my bedroom window every night!”

“This is suddenly all starting to sound pretty insincere...”

“(not listening) And of course, I can’t forget to mention my editor, M-san, or Kusaka-san who was kind enough to agree to do the illustrations for this novel! I know I’m probably forgetting a lot of other people who worked hard to help make this release a reality, but I’m really grateful to all of you! And of course, last but certainly not least, thank *you*, dear reader, for reading this book to the end!”

“Thank you very muchly, every-buddy!”

Akita Yoshinobu



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 1

by Yoshinobu Akita

Translated by Andrew Hodgson Edited by Christopher Foxx

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