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SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

15. ENGULF MY DESPAIR, VERDURE!



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The man who had appeared before him just stood there, completely unscathed. Majic didn't recognize him, but he felt instinctively that the man was dangerous, as if the surrounding air itself was telling him that this was the worst possible foe he could face.



There was only
one way to flee.
Holding his sword
up, he shouted,
“I release thee,
Sword of Light!”

**A figure slowly
emerged from
the ridiculously
huge tree.**

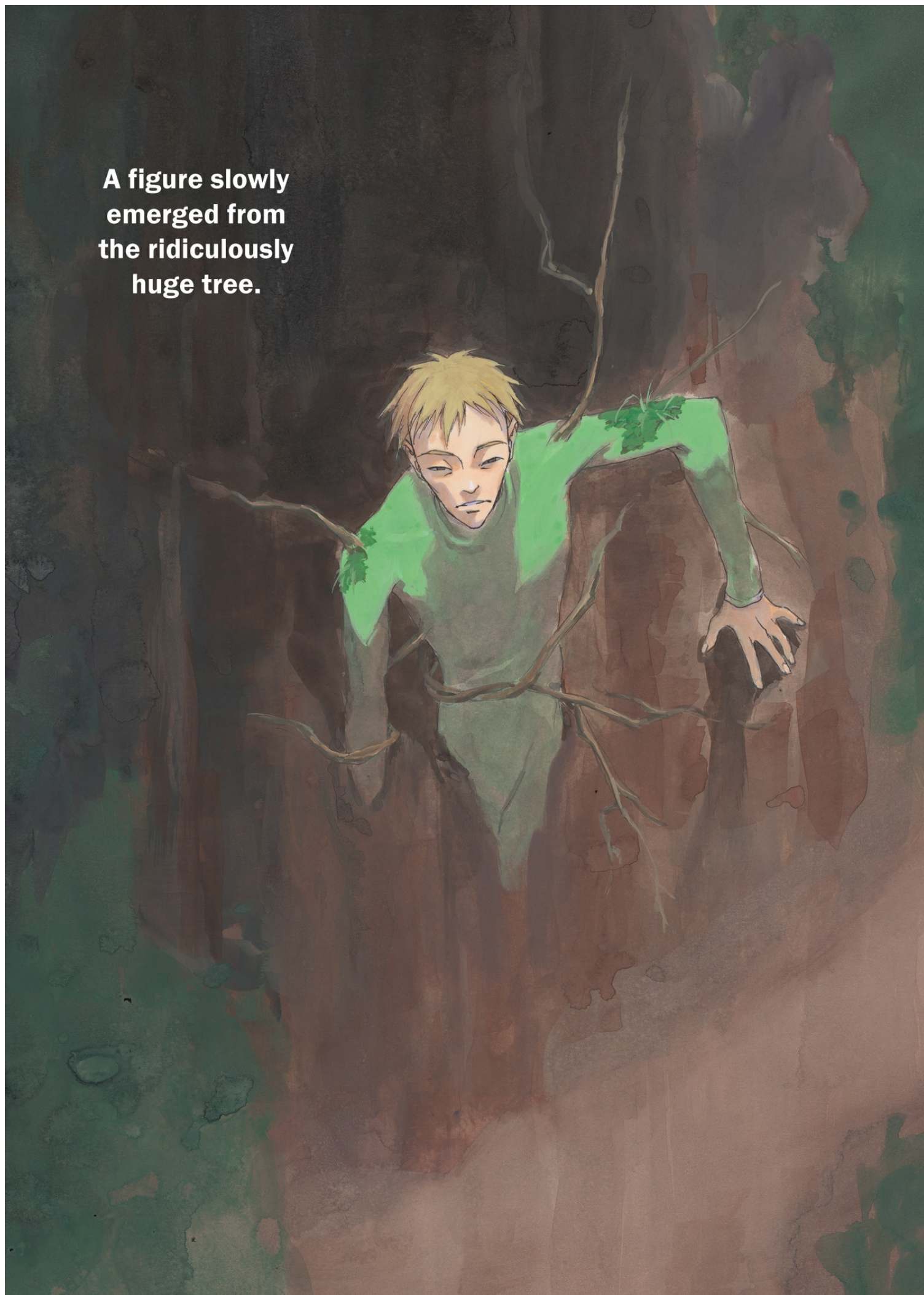


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Prologue

The darkness Damian Rue stared into was endless; it was nothing more than black.

It was a hollow, lukewarm darkness that matched his own body temperature, with no sort of intrinsic dread or loneliness. Of course, had he found warmth unpleasant, then it would surely have been uncomfortable.

It was the real world—meaning he knew the space didn't extend in every direction. It was a frighteningly unilateral, bounded, and yet infinite space, with no sort of fixed direction to it.

No, Damian Rue thought to himself with a bit of cynicism. The real world is the one that's bounded now... Isn't it, my lord?

There was no answer.

Even a lord with some power could not reach into this place with power and wisdom. He knew that. There were several absolute powers on this continent. Territories that could not be opposed, against which opposition would be meaningless. Of course, that didn't mean they couldn't be avoided or used for some purpose. There were a variety of ways those powers could be dealt with.

Damian Rue observed everything he could. He observed carefully.

No matter what method they used to deal with their foe, it would have to begin with understanding exactly what sort of being it was.

Its power is massive... Far too massive to exist in human territory right now.

This was an irresistible power they were dealing with, that could easily dictate the course of history.

Such things simply couldn't exist. Any power that was absolutely unalterable by anyone had to be sealed away where it should rightfully stay. It had to be eliminated by any means, locked away in that cursed sanctuary.

Damian Rue began to quietly mutter to himself. "Doppel X... Why must they

plague us so?”

He had no more time to think. His time was extremely limited. How much time remained in the real world? In this space, where time lapped like waves, a slight miscalculation could result in rather massive consequences. Seconds could become hours, years could become minutes. Though it should even out with the real world.

In any case, his time being as limited as it was, a slight miscalculation could become a very big problem. There was no harm in hurrying.

Damian Rue advanced quickly.

He was aware that he was in territory humans had no business entering. There was no point in caution—if the being here wanted to destroy him, it could accomplish that in an instant. He would be banished for eternity, with nothing he could do to stop it. Needless to say, the prospect was frightening to him.

The one aspect he had to defend himself with was luck. He didn’t even have a god to pray to. All he could do was laugh glumly at this thought.

At his relationship with the gods.

The world received a past—a history—from the gods, though they also took away its future.

What does the history of the continent even amount to? If the end came so soon, it would be nothing more than a diary without any meaning. Nothing more than a pointless span of time reduced to a single word etched upon a gravestone.

That’s probably all that it is anyway.

History brought culture to humanity. It brought wisdom. Society. Entertainment. Literature. It brought great wounds. It brought a will to maintain peace.

It brought sorcery.

If they were the pinnacle of that sorcery, then human history created them.

In the end, I suppose we’re only a portion of what it created. I’m not so

arrogant as to claim I have more worth than a single average citizen.

The Kiesalhiman continent was left standing only at the whim of the gods.

He stopped walking. Damian Rue made a discovery.

Of course, it wasn't as if he'd found anything in particular. His discovery was more the place itself.

There was nothing there, but it was the center of the darkness.

He could proceed no further. Since this was the center, if he moved in any direction, he would only get further away.

In the center of the mightiest power on the continent, Damian Rue sighed.

So this space itself is the sum of their power.

The whole span of darkness was the Deep Dragon's limitless power.

"My lord," he muttered quietly. "It's impossible. I can't do it either... I can't kill it." He shook his head and added, "Deep Dragons are invincible creatures. They have no weaknesses and are incredibly aggressive. They are the ultimate warriors, who have never been defeated, neither in the old world nor in the new."

The most accomplished caster on the continent—an unofficial position, of course—stopped there, waiting for a response. He stared into a single spot and waited.

"Please be ready, then. If we are going to fight this thing, it will take all the forces we can muster, and I cannot guarantee our victory even then." He clucked his tongue. "Or will you have that assassin take over as soon as you lose us? For our showdown with the sanctuary..."

Several seconds of silence passed once more.

During that time, soundless words arrived directly at his consciousness.

He made to open his mouth in response to them—

WHO ARE YOU...?

He opened his eyes at the question.

“What was that?” he groaned. It was impossible.

Looking straight ahead, he clenched his fist. In this state, he should have none of his senses, but every so often, he could feel the sensation of sweat on his skin. Of course, that was the only reason he could hang on.

This can't be, he thought. There was no way his lord could have foreseen this. It wasn't possible. Was it good fortune? He knew that luck was their only chance at victory...

“My lord, this is impossible, but...” Damian Rue reported. As he reported, he considered the meaning of his discovery. “This Deep Dragon...has a weakness.”

Chapter I: Eleven Hours Until—

It was joy.

An impulse welling up in him that he couldn't force down even if he knew it was wrong—joy.

He looked down at his hands and shouted in his mind, *I controlled it...!*

He wasn't burned. He never even felt any heat. He'd released all the power he was capable of utilizing and he hadn't let any of it out of his control. He had comprehended all of it, and controlled it perfectly.

He'd manipulated the world, changed things to suit his needs. He'd always felt a certain rapture when he completed a spell. Unable to quell the feeling rising up from his gut once again, Majic repeated, *I controlled it!*

It had been perfect. The wave of heat and light he'd emitted had lit up the night sky in white, stabbing into his target and exploding. He'd wielded the full might of the spell, and the earth had trembled, quaking with his sorcery.

However...

Majic opened his eyes wide in shock. After the sorcerous explosion, the same inn stood there, unchanged from several seconds before. The wooden building remained in place, completely unscathed, still tethering Claiomh to it, though he had no idea what mechanism was at work to do so.

Several meters in front of him, a fireball spun, its might dispersing without bringing about any sort of effect on the building.

A shudder ran through him. His composition had been perfect. His spell had been perfect. Any sorcerer would have been proud of it.

And it had been meaningless.

What's...going on? he asked some imaginary person. No. He quickly assigned a name to the person he was asking. But that person wasn't here now.

I have to do something... He clenched his fists.

Claiomh was staring at him, dumbfounded. She couldn't do anything. Majic had to be the one to act.

He didn't know what was going on—the situation surpassed his understanding. The inn had expanded. It had attacked Claiomh when she had gotten close to it. He'd fallen at the same time, but he didn't know why. He'd been sent to the ground like something had pushed him. He'd finally gotten back up and executed a flawless spell, but his sorcery had had no effect whatsoever.

He listed off all the things that had just transpired. He didn't understand a single one of those occurrences.

Would Master understand...? he found himself wondering. But of course he wouldn't. Incomprehensible things were incomprehensible to anyone.

But did he have the courage to execute the best plan—or as close to the best plan as he could—even if he didn't understand the situation? That was what it came down to.

Just that...

But what is the best plan? He was annoyed with himself for being so panicked. One second from now, Claiomh could die. Or *he* could. He had no idea how many enemies there were or what they had at their disposal, so anything could happen. The most likely thing would be both of them being killed at the same time. Of course, it didn't make a difference which one of them died in a few seconds.

The best plan...is... Majic bit his lip and shouted, "I'll come back—"

He spun around and ran off in the direction they'd come from.

"I'll find Master and come back right away!"

A second later, he went flying into the air.

Dammit! he cursed, shoved down by that inexplicable force once again. He didn't fall, but he pitched forward and his speed dropped.

Still, he maintained his balance and kept running.

"Just try killing Claiomh before I get back."

Majic's eyes wandered through the deserted night streets as his footsteps echoed. He groaned. He didn't know if he was running or floundering, just trying not to fall, but he kept moving his feet nonetheless.

"I'll destroy you, 'til there's nothing left—'til there's nothing left! It won't matter where you hide. I'll destroy every last bit of you!" He couldn't imagine the person was actually listening, but he went on. "You think I'll let you get away with this...this incomprehensible mess?!"

"You think the world runs on ideals or what?"

Majic suddenly stopped at the sound of the voice. Unease assailed him. He didn't know why he'd stopped. He hadn't stopped when he was shoved, when he was rolling around on the ground, so why had he stopped just because of a voice?

It didn't make any sense. He had to keep running. After all, the best plan was to find his master—find Orphen. No matter what happened, he must not stop.

Yet he did, his knees shaking so much he likely wouldn't be able to start again.

"...Who's there?" His voice was shaking too, and he couldn't hide it.

In any case, his adversary showed no signs that they were listening and spoke to him seemingly unprompted. "Say you're betrayed by something you believe in, so you cry out. Your grief would be meaningless. All your betrayal means is that what you believed in wasn't worth your trust. There's nothing in this world that can be believed in."

"No, there is." Majic looked around, holding his chest to catch his breath. His clothes rubbed against his sweat-soaked skin. "I'm a sorcerer. And if you show yourself to me, I'll lay into you with everything I've got."

"You say you believe in the idea that you could beat me? Hmph. Very well... I like that answer."

How much had he run by now...? Urbanrama's night streets didn't seem nearly as dangerous as people said they were, maybe because he hadn't seen a soul for some time now. It was unnaturally deserted. But there was no point in thinking about that now.

Where would his opponent come from next? He had no way of predicting that, so he just waited, ignorant. He strode to the center of the street, thinking he'd gain some distance from them there no matter where they were hiding.

He tried not to think about anything, instead readying his mind to fire the strongest sorcery he could muster as soon as his enemy showed themselves.

He counted breaths. *One, two...*

"There's no need for you to keep your guard up like that."

The voice came from the direction he was paying the least attention to.

"Of course, there's also no reason for me to hide."

In other words, right in front of him.

Majic hurriedly threw both arms up, going through a practiced sequence of movements.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

When the sequence was completed, light converged on the new target in front of him, exploded, and disappeared. There were no issues with his spell's composition.

He felt a soundless explosion—though there should have been sound. It was more accurate to say that only the view remained in his memory, the sound forgotten.

The light faded...

"It doesn't work... Why...?" That was all Majic could say.

His composition should have been flawless. He was sure there had been no mistakes. However...

The man who had appeared before him just stood there, completely unscathed.

Majic didn't recognize him, but he felt instinctively that the man was dangerous, as if the surrounding air itself was telling him that this was the worst possible foe he could face.

The man wore a worn-out suit and carried a sword—and he recognized the

sword. That was strange, though. He remembered it clearly. It was Lottecia's sword. He himself had identified the Celestial engravings on it. But according to Claiomh, Ryan had stolen this sword in Nashwater. He had no idea why this man was now in possession of it.

He was likely working with Ryan or something like that, but...the sword was drawn. That shouldn't have been possible. A dull white, the blade stood out against the darkness. The sheath was nowhere to be seen.

The man was just looking straight at him.

"If it were me, I'd try one more time—before I made a move."

Majic could only interpret his words as a warning.

He could feel his cooled temperature climbing once more. "Don't take me lightly!" Majic shouted, firing another beam of light, calculating a line that drew the shortest distance from him to his opponent.

The pure-white light reached the vicinity of the man without issue, but...

"Again...?"

It exploded *before* reaching him, the might of the blast not reaching him through some sort of invisible spherical barrier protecting the man.

The man tightened his grip around the sword in his hand. The sword had sorcery within it, and that sorcery was active—Majic was sure of that. He could see the spell composition formed by the glyphs on the sword, but he wasn't capable of parsing Celestial sorcery.

"Freak Diamond...that's what Beedo Crewbstar called it. Its true name is the Sword of Korkt," the man explained blithely, like he was making smalltalk. "As was typical for its kind, the sanctuary cast it amidst human society long ago...so that humankind could erase the stain from its species with their own hands. In other words, it's a tool for those who have no sorcery to oppose those who do," he said with some cynicism.

My spell was perfect...but it didn't work... Majic was shocked. He'd cast more perfect sorcery than he'd ever been able to cast before, and yet it had had no effect. And it wasn't just against this man. It hadn't worked on that strange inn

building either.

Then...what use is sorcery...? He cursed, though he didn't even know what he should be cursing.

Still...

"Dammit!" Majic spun around and ran off, just like that. He pointed a hand at the man and tried to run. But just then...

"Wah!" He flew into the air and slammed into the ground. After rolling once or twice, he found he was facing the man again. And he hadn't moved a single step.

"I see..." The man swung the sword and grunted contemplatively. "Just as I thought, it's much more accurate the closer the target is."

"Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!" Majic shouted, still on the ground.

The air rippled, and a destructive sound blast should have slammed into the man, but...as he expected, there was no effect. There was only the sound of the blast bouncing off of something.

I knew it. There's a wall or something there. That meant that something similar was at work to explain why he was being sent flying into the air and falling to the ground—some invisible force was picking him up and throwing him. If it was sorcery, then that was all there was to it. There was no point in thinking any more about it.

"If it's a wall, I just have to smash through it!" Majic yelled to encourage himself, raising his upper body from the ground. The road he was on was paved, but there was all sorts of trash and detritus lying here and there around him. Grabbing a rock that was light enough for him to lift, Majic held it out in front of him and tried out a spell he'd only attempted once before.

"I leap over thee—?!" His words stopped.

The strength went out of his arm. The rock in his hand fell to the ground.

Everything happened in an instant. His elbow was broken.

He couldn't understand what had happened. He didn't feel any pain. But everything past his right elbow was bent at an impossible angle. The spell he'd

formed easily slipped from his consciousness at the same time.

He looked down and found something thin wrapped around his arm. His vision grew hazy, his consciousness started to slip, and then he realized that he was about to give up. He shuddered. Amid all this, he realized that the thin thing around his arm extended to the hands of the man in front of him. He thought it might be a whip, but it wasn't. A whip couldn't break someone's arm anyway.

Of course, it was even more unrealistic that one of the man's fingers on the hand holding the sword had stretched out several meters, wrapped around his arm, and broken it at the elbow joint.

However, since that was exactly what had happened, it was clearly more realistic than the whip.

In his hazy consciousness, Majic lifted his other arm. But he couldn't, because another finger had embedded itself in his shoulder.

It might have broken his collarbone too—he couldn't move at all. "Ugh... Aaaaaaaaaaagh!" Majic finally screamed.

"Now, unlike us...you don't actually need your arms for your sorcery," the man muttered. It was practically a miracle that Majic heard him, not that he was particularly thankful for it. The man's eyes were shining green. "But you can't compose spells without concentrating. You humans have a sense of pain, after all."

"Aaaaaaaaaaagh!" Majic writhed, screaming in agony. He didn't know where he'd gone wrong, but he couldn't even run away now. He could smell blood. His shoulder felt hot.

The man took a step forward. Majic's hazy field of view was further obscured by the tears in his eyes, but he could see the man moving, at least. He wanted to run his hands through his hair, but he couldn't. The pain tormented him, but he couldn't even squirm in his agony.

"Please don't think I'm just a sadist. We too have our pride." The man's voice came from far, far away. "It's just that the only way for me to make sure I finish you off while staying inside the barrier of this sword is to fix you in place and

then deal the killing blow...”

“Aaaaah...ah—” His scream stopped there. It wasn’t that the pain had faded or that he’d run out of strength. He’d just expended all the air in his lungs and could no longer make a sound. He was spasming, unable to breathe in.

Suddenly, the pain went away.

His consciousness rapidly faded, and he realized idly that he would never wake again.

Mom...

Then he heard a voice completely different from the man’s voice.

“From all places, come. To your home, where the wind carves your presence.”

There was a strange, instantaneous mix of sounds, like air had gathered in one place and burst.

Majic’s vision, which was starting to go white, opened up again with the impact. His consciousness returned to him along with his senses, and in return, he was once again assaulted by intense pain. But now, he was grateful for the pain. He clung to it, in fact. He’d only lost consciousness for a second. It had been incredibly blissful, but he’d been faintly aware that it was not a sensation he should have indulged in.

With his remaining strength, he opened one eye. He was lying on the ground. He found that strange. If that man’s fingers were still stuck in him, then he shouldn’t have been able to fall over.

The man wasn’t in the same place he had been earlier. And his fingers were gone. Where he’d been standing, there was only a mark like a section of the ground itself had been carved out.

He didn’t understand, but...he shifted his gaze a bit and found the man lying on the ground. He hadn’t been knocked out or anything; he was just lying there like something had taken him by surprise. He was several meters back from the destroyed area of ground.

“Mas...ter...?”

At the same time he had that thought, he got the feeling he was wrong.

He heard a voice start up as if it were a wind that had just started blowing.

“Return home. Scarred beast’s cage. A large ripple, a small cry.”

There was a sharp, loud sound once more. The man leapt with each sound like a bent nail hit with a hammer. The same wall from earlier seemed to be blocking the impacts, but it was jumping with the man.

“Worms in the innards. Snakes in the guts. Gravel burying everything, offered up to the south wind.”

The man disappeared just like that. He must have fled.

Majic just lay there feverishly, listening to the pounding sound of his heartbeat. Maybe it was the sound of the blood leaving him. He was starting to become unable to think at all. There was one thing he knew, though.

Those poem-like phrases he’d heard must have been spells. He’d seen compositions too. That was probably why he’d thought it was Orphen for a second—the spells had been so detailed they were a match for his master’s. That wasn’t something you saw too often.

But...who is it...? He closed his eyes, unable to voice his thoughts.



Claiomh Everlasting’s life began seventeen years ago.

Her birth was nothing special, though those involved might be angered to hear that. In other words, she was born from an average amount of love, pain, and miracle. Her mother was Tishtinie Everlasting. Most considered her father, Ekintra, to be a good match for her when he married into the family, but Tishtinie, who had already lost her parents at the time, apparently went against the wishes of her uncle, who was her legal guardian. The uncle died prematurely as well, and as if it were some terrible tradition for the Everlastings to be short-lived, Ekintra passed away due to illness when Claiomh was fifteen.

Claiomh had an older sister as well, but her mother gave her sister her name. Claiomh’s name was given to her by her father. Claiomh had been very attached to her father as a result.

Ryan Killmarked watched her from the shadows. The scared girl, unable to move.

She didn't show it—she had a brave face on—but he could sense her heightened pulse, breathing, and body temperature. Of course, if he was imagining the link between them, then he was imagining this too.

Did she understand what it meant to touch someone?

Some died with family members holding their hands. Some had their death confirmed when a doctor opened their eyes. But she would die while touching her murderer.

Touching me...

Right now, he was just a pair of eyes in the darkness. Eyes that she couldn't see. Even he thought he was being cowardly, but considering the protector perched on her head, there was really no being too cautious.

If he were one who could end her life, then it was something that could make her life never-ending.

A Deep Dragon.

The mightiest of the dragons.

If he was her death, then this stood before him as his own death.

She was often unwell as a child, but her affliction may have been more mental in nature than physical. In any case, that caused her parents to be rather overprotective of her, and because of that, there was some discord between her and her sister.

Of course, after a while, that problem sorted itself out on its own. The issue wasn't worth mentioning, really.

She behaved in ways that were altogether unsuited for her family name—at least according to her great uncle. She sought out a meager schooling in the outlying part of town and ran around in her youth as if to vent her frustrations. She wasn't blessed with any particular talents, but the people around her saw her as a lively person, and she never acted in a way to contradict those

opinions.

Her rambunctious personality surely led to many clashes with those around her, but her blithe nature thankfully prevented her from earning true ire from many of them. In the end, she tended to do what other people wanted her to, so they didn't think too badly of her.

The Green Gem Armor, Snake Green—this was his only weapon. His sole, supreme weapon was a sorcerous one crafted by another race of dragons.

The underclothes that covered his whole body aside from his head acted in accordance with his will, responding with an overzealous vigor.

This is the one trump card I have against it... It's my despair too.

It's a fitting weapon. Perfect for this stage... isn't it?

The armor could shape-shift as much as it needed to. It could manifest tree-like tentacles, transform into whatever was necessary, and even draw certain sorcerous glyphs.

It could camouflage itself as well, though crudely—as an old wooden building, for example.

First, he covered the entire building with his tentacles. Then he just mimicked the building's appearance from memory. After eliminating all of the people inside the inn, he just sat at its center and waited.

To be honest, he had trembled when the girl had touched the inn—his tentacles. His partner was supposed to take care of the boy. That meant all he had to do was finish things with the girl.

In the hall in the center of the inn, he sat, surrounded by his tentacles, eyes glinting in the darkness. He already had her wrist. Now he just needed to pull.

Whether it be the heart, the eyes, the brain, or the spirit, if you got close enough, you could steal them or trample them underfoot. That was what it meant to touch someone.

Shrugging off the boy's meaningless sorcery without paying it too much mind, he thought vaguely on what he was about to do. What he *had* to do.

It's strange... He smiled wryly. This was supposed to be nothing more than a mission. Like the magic sword Freak Diamond, Asraliel's pup had to be retrieved by the sanctuary as well. He hadn't received orders to that effect from the sanctuary, but it went without saying. The sanctuary would need the strength of the chief warrior of the Deep Dragons. And to procure it, they would likely have to kill the girl—the boy too, while they were at it. That was all there was to it. It was nothing he needed to go out of his way to report to anyone. He'd tried to do it in Nashwater. He hadn't been expecting the larval Deep Dragon to attack him spontaneously, but irregularities were always to be expected.

Such as... Right. Orphen, or Krylancelo, or whatever his name was. Like that black sorcerer. No, all human sorcerers are irregular by nature... And if you go back far enough, the world itself and dragons are too. At that thought, he let out an exhausted, listless breath.

That's right. Claiomh. You're an irregular too. To me, at least.

She had become not a job he had to take care of, but a target he felt he had to challenge.

But why? He had to know the reason, but he couldn't put it into words.

It could be that it would end up being a frighteningly simple answer, and he didn't want to acknowledge that. If that was the case, he was better off not understanding it.

Just then, he heard... “Leki... If you think you can't win, you can run away too, okay?”

The words didn't cause him any particular shock, but his eyes underwent a change in the darkness. They felt damp to him. Though he couldn't see them himself, so he had no way to know.

He could hear her voice through his tentacles. It was probably a function for eavesdropping. This armor was specialized for intelligence-gathering, after all. He couldn't speak directly to the outside of the inn with his own voice, but the tentacles could produce an artificial version of his voice. Not that he used that function all that often.

He used it now to answer her. “You should probably be worrying about that

boy right now,” he told her.

The blond boy—a fledgling sorcerer, it appeared—was not long for this world.

“My partner already went after him. Sorry, but I don’t think there’s a single person who could survive him chasing them down.” He felt something at his mouth, his lips pulling up as he added, “That’s right... *This* is despair.”

“I’m sick of hearing that from you,” she retorted swiftly. “What’s the big idea, anyway? That sword wasn’t enough for you? What do you want this time?”

What *did* he want?

He had to sneer at himself for even thinking about it for a second.

He had something he wanted to tell her.

That was why this inconsequential, ordinary girl had become an irregular.

He wanted to talk to her.

He wanted to admonish her.

He wanted to convince her of something.

It might have been something inconsequential, but...it was important to him.

Maybe even more important than a Deep Dragon.

“Well, let’s see.” That was why he told her. “Let’s see... I want your conviction. Problem is, I think the only thing I can accomplish is letting you die.”

The armor responded overzealously to his emotions.

To his bloodlust. To his fear. To his lust. If they all corresponded to the same impulse, then there was no need to hesitate. Thin, vine-like tentacles snaked out toward her body—

She spent her school life in a sort of monotonous frenzy, where she never ran out of time no matter how she wasted it. She had not a large nor a small number of friends, split between a few she was particularly close to and the rest, as is normal.

Her grades were very good, and from her decisive personality, she tended to

take the initiative when in groups. That was probably one of the reasons that she had a lot of friends who were younger than her.

Suddenly, there was an impact. Ryan felt deep, sharp damage registering, on a completely different level than the boy's sorcery before.

The perception granted to him by the tentacles abruptly cut off. Everything was knocked down, twisted, destroyed. Ryan came to with a thunderous boom shaking his eardrums. He'd been careless. It wasn't that he'd let down his guard, but that he'd been too preoccupied. It should have been obvious that if he attacked, he'd receive a counterattack.

Clucking his tongue, he put his guard up. There was a groaning sound from the inn's support pillars and walls. An overwhelming power was trying to crush the building from the outside. It was only still standing thanks to the support of the armor's tentacles. That wouldn't last forever, though.

At this point, escape was his only option. There was no benefit to staying inside the inn. He commanded his armor to protect him at all costs.

And he commanded himself to fight with all his strength.

Her diary was filled with surprisingly trivial things.

Many entries were just the date and weather, with the temperature likely measured by a gut feeling.

Any sort of emotional musings were so few and far between you could say there weren't any at all. One day had one to three lines devoted to it. Maybe she just wasn't good at writing long passages. And among the three-line days, there were entries like, "I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Zzz."

She wrote nothing on the day she met me. And—this interested me the most—the day she was betrayed by me, she wrote:

"I thought Leki might leave. But he came back. Thank goodness."

The moment I saw this might have been the point that I became unable to turn back.

When the majority of the tentacles sprung out of the roof of the inn, the building collapsed, losing structural integrity. The whole thing became twisted, like a wrung-out rag. Ryan poked his head out of the lump of tentacles surrounding him and looked around. He peered down at the spot where the girl should have been from his bundle of plants. She'd already left the side of the inn and was looking back up at him, holding the small green-eyed dragon to her chest.

There was no time for a conversation.

Ryan shuddered and twisted around. At the same time, the bundle of plants around him expanded, forming a wall of forest between him and the girl. This time, it wasn't merely a force but an explosion and a great shaking that assaulted the inn. Forced back by the pressure of the blast, he fell from the roof to the street behind the building.

The tentacles protected him from the impact as he knew they would. He discarded everything that was burned by the Deep Dragon's sorcery before he fell and, now lighter, ran to the side, stretching several tentacles around his right arm. After a few steps, he could see the blonde girl and the little black dragon from the shadow of the inn.

The girl still hadn't noticed him. But the dragon's gaze was fixed on him. A gaze that could instantly take someone's life.

Looking back at it, Ryan smiled. "I'm not frightened of you, you know." He thrust the arm wrapped in multiple tentacles out at her. "I'm ruled by only one thing, after all..."

The tentacles thrust out sharply at her like a spear, but before she could even cry out, they were destroyed in an instant. They seemed to have just crumbled from the inside out. The Deep Dragon's eyes were shining.

This time, he stretched out the tentacles from his left arm and thrust them into the ground. Tunneling deep underground, Ryan increased the number of tentacles around his body as fast as he possibly could. If a forest could explode, then it would look like this—tentacles shaped like tree branches burst out all around him, radiating outward. Before the tentacles completely obscured his

view, he thought he could hear the shrill voice of the girl.

“Why are you doing this?!”

He thought he had already answered that question. But if she was asking, that meant that she hadn’t understood him.

Ryan’s answer rumbled in his throat as he extended the tentacles around him. “Because you didn’t understand me.”

“Understand what?!”

The writhing tentacles had expanded from tree branches to trunks. Soon, he would be completely buried inside them, and wouldn’t be able to speak with his real voice anymore. Before that happened, he shouted out, “I want to teach you despair!”

“But...that’s...!”

An explosion—

The forest of tentacles, which had been growing to an enormous size, was vaporized in an instant. The blast likely would have had the power to send the man inside of it flying as well, but he had taken action a second faster. The tentacles he’d stuck underground had already expanded to a size two meters or so in diameter. He’d moved himself down into those roots—he could move freely inside the armor. If he dove down a dozen meters into the earth, even a Deep Dragon’s sorcery wouldn’t find him so easily. Their sorcery used their vision as a medium.

He, on the other hand, could more or less sense his adversaries with his tentacles and launch attacks from safety. Though there were limits to the tentacles’ senses, so his opponents might be able to get away.

He remembered the spot his target had been standing on before he dove down into the earth. If he used that spot as a reference to detect them, they shouldn’t be able to get away too easily.

He stretched out his tentacles once more.

The girl didn’t seem to have moved at all. She might have thought he was dead.

“Killing is my job, Claiomh,” Ryan muttered, though it wasn’t as if he was actually speaking to her. “I do exactly as I am ordered. Someone other than me decides what I do with my life and when I die. What free will I am afforded is only to decide whether to let a target live or kill them... If I do my work well, I may be able to fulfill my missions without killing too many related individuals. For example, if you’d handed over Freak Diamond like a good girl back then, I would have been able to flee with it without any further trouble. I might have been able to collect that Deep Dragon too. But you took irregular action, and I was forced to choose to kill you.”

His tentacles wrapped around his target with no resistance. If he just squeezed a bit, he could easily snap the slender girl into several pieces—even a Deep Dragon’s power wouldn’t be able to save her. She would die.

It would be easy... Dying was easy.

But I won’t simply let her die.

Ryan groaned once more. He knew she wouldn’t be able to hear his actual voice, but the tentacles should have been transmitting it for him. “I don’t like killing...but I won’t claim any sort of moral superiority. I have my own reasons to find humiliation in the act of killing—but dying is easy. I must continue to live, embracing my despair. Compared to that, dying is effortless!”

He could feel her soft flesh through his tentacles. It wasn’t the same as the sensation of touch. The information merely came to him as data. And the data was that of human skin.

“You will know despair before you die. You must take with you at least one one-thousandth of the pain I feel. It would irk me to no end if you didn’t.”

He suddenly stopped, sensing something strange.

Through the tentacles, he sensed the softness of the girl’s body—its suppleness, its fragility. He was sure of that. But...

What’s going on here? It’s too soft, isn’t it? This is...

There was no resistance. None at all. Not only was there no resistance from the Deep Dragon, it didn’t even feel like she was pointlessly struggling in the tentacles’ grasp. But he was sure he had captured the girl.

I'm absolutely certain of it... He increased the number of tentacles wrapped around the girl and made sure. He felt a human shape. Her height, weight, the length of her hair, even her appearance—as far as he could tell through the vague sight the tentacles gave him—matched the girl he expected to sense. She wasn't dead already. He could clearly sense the sound of her heart beating and her breathing. However...her body was completely slack. If the tentacles released her, she would fall to the ground.

Is it a trap...? No, how could it be? She wouldn't even know that I can sense this. And even if she did, it's still more likely that I'd just strangle her anyway. He couldn't understand what was happening. And if he wanted to be sure, he'd have to emerge from the earth.

"How could this be...?" He would almost certainly run straight into that Deep Dragon, but... "I can't just kill her without making sure... She doesn't understand yet."

It was important to him.

It might have even been more important than the Deep Dragon.

He muttered something to himself once more and smiled wryly.

And he ordered the armor to slowly, carefully, bring him up out of the ground.

Claiomh Everlasting—seventeen years old, born in Totokanta, unemployed. See the above for a simple history and notes on her personality.

That was all I found on her even after bowing my head to my partner to investigate her. There was only so much the Network could do—it couldn't read people's feelings or memories. Not only that, it could only find out things that people knew.

In the end, if I truly wanted to know something, finding out on my own was the only way. My mother in the sanctuary wouldn't tell me anything, but that was how I learned for myself. And there was something that I'd realized just now: it's only obvious for traps to be set in places that don't appear to be dangerous.

Especially the pitfalls of fate.

The first thing he found when he breached the surface was the girl.

He'd released her from his tentacles and, just as he'd expected, she lay on the ground with her limbs splayed out around her, completely limp. Her eyes were open and unblinking. Her chest was slowly rising and falling, but that was the only part of her that was moving. Her face was completely slack as well, creating perhaps the best example of "expressionlessness" he'd ever seen.

"...What's going on?" he repeated the same words he'd thought to himself underground. He couldn't understand it. "Did she die of shock at the fear of death? No, she's not dead... Brain death? That's ridiculous..."

He looked around. There was no sign of anyone around. And if someone had approached in all the chaos, harmed her in some way, and left, that wouldn't make any sense either.

He approached her cautiously. The fallen girl didn't so much as twitch. It couldn't possibly be a trap. He had been observing her for more than five minutes already. She wouldn't be able to lie there for that long without blinking.

He crouched down next to her and mused aloud, "Well... I can collect this now, I suppose..." Then he finally realized...the very thing he was supposed to collect wasn't anywhere in sight.

He turned around. It wasn't because he'd noticed something. He just expected to find something there if he looked. If it was a trap, it would be natural for something to be behind him.

And there it was.

Ryan looked up, feeling his whole body tensing. And there it was.

An enormous head was staring down at him. A black shadow stood out among the darkness. It wasn't illuminated by the moonlight, but was just a dark silhouette cut out from the surrounding shadows. The ruler of the black forest. He recalled an old name for it. It had appeared without a sound to give its enemy an abrupt, unannounced death.

“A Deep Dragon...!”

But it wasn't the baby dragon that had just been here a moment ago. Its head stood at a full four meters high. Its body was that of an enormous jet-black wolf. The beast was quietly looking down at him with sharp green eyes.

It couldn't be here. All Deep Dragons were in Fenrir's Forest. They were there to protect the sanctuary. To expel any who intruded into the forest. It was unthinkable to see one in a human town like this.

With the exception of one individual.

“Only one Abyssal Wolf... Doppel X, the sanctuary's outside fighting force... Asraliel's larval form...” He screamed. “But Asraliel is still alive! Are you saying you've succeeded his name?! For what purpose?! Why?!”

His screams ended there. He knew it was mere foolishness to ask questions of a Deep Dragon.

He was standing before a warrior. This beast would do nothing but eliminate its enemies.

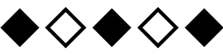
Ryan opened his mouth wide, but not voluntarily. His whole body twisted and he found himself unable to move. He could hear bones breaking from everywhere within his body. A squishy sensation and taste spread through his mouth. His body was so hot it felt like he was boiling. His core alone felt ice-cold. He'd lost sensation in his limbs and had no idea what form his body was in right now. His vision quickly went dark. Only those vibrant green eyes in front of him remained in his memory.

Aaaah...

The letters went on infinitely. He'd already lost consciousness. He couldn't form words. The letters alone were all that came to mind.

A violent amplitude.

In that amplitude of life and death... Ryan Killmarked met his demise as he had done countless times before.



From the darkness of another street, a man watched the giant beast slowly

disappear.

“Well, that was unexpected...”

“Was it?” If that was what the man said, then this was the only way he could reply.

He stood still, waiting for the man’s next words.

How could the man be described? His form was slim, but solid. He wore nothing more than ordinary, everyday clothes, though he wore them like a military uniform. Maybe he gave off that impression due to the quiet maturity he possessed as a thirty-something-year-old. He had close-cropped hair, meticulously trimmed facial hair, and wore no watch or accessories due to a self-professed distaste for metal. He likely didn’t carry a weapon either, but the man would have no use for such a thing anyway.

The man took his time thinking the matter over and then corrected himself. “Our lord couldn’t have predicted this either. I am sure of that.”

“You’re probably right.” He seemed to feel the scar on his lip aching and pulled his hand out from beneath his cloak to scratch at it as he nodded. Clasps from various places all over his body made quiet sounds as he moved.

The man glanced at him in irritation. “Yuis.” He indicated the street. Ryan, who had been practically torn to shreds after a single glance from the beast, was dragging his injured body, trying to flee the scene. “Follow him. He’s trying to escape even with those injuries... He probably has a base of operations to return to.” If he could even make it there. But the man didn’t add that thought. It was obvious to anyone watching.

If anything, it was more of a mystery how Ryan hadn’t died instantaneously—he might have been trying to flee, but really he was just dragging his ruined body forward. He must have been fatally injured in at least ten places. He appeared to be leaving the fallen girl there in the street, but he was likely not even conscious anymore. His body was moving on pure instinct, trying to get him away from the Deep Dragon. Though the dragon was gone at this point, having lost interest in its already destroyed adversary.

All of that was obvious as well. So he merely asked the man with his eyes

instead of his words.

The man, however, hadn't changed his opinion. "The Red Dragon I ran into earlier fled without putting up much of a fight either. After encountering an unknown force, they should attempt to meet and exchange information. It seems their Network is not capable of that, after all."

"He said no Network in the same world could be superior to another, though."

"I understand. And I agree. Our Network is not capable of any more than theirs." The man sighed. "But my orders do not change. Follow him to their base. And after confirming whether or not they have any combat capabilities we are unaware of, if possible, destroy it all."

The man did not call his words opinions, but orders. Maybe there was no point in such a distinction, but...in any case, he asked, "Just me?"

The man smiled wryly. "Be plain with your words. You are already marked by them. I have made use of that fact to place a suggestion on the sanctuary man who was observing you—he will stay standing in that same spot for at least half a day more. As long as the man doesn't doubt that fact, the Network won't pick up on the truth. So, they still think you are under surveillance. Additionally..." Hardening his expression, he looked down at the blond boy collapsed at his feet and added, "I will be delivering this boy to somewhere he can be looked after and then following the Deep Dragon. You have no objections to that, do you?"

"What about the girl?" He indicated the girl who had been left alone on the street. She hadn't moved a muscle.

The man just smiled wryly once more. "I don't particularly want to touch anything a Deep Dragon has interfered with. Do you? She could be compelled to explode the moment she's touched—not that I imagine that's truly the case... I'm sure Winona will do something about her, though. That's her jurisdiction."

"Understood." He nodded.

There was nothing they could do about this. He kept that thought to himself and looked for Ryan. The dying—though notably not dead yet—man had still only dragged himself a few steps forward.

He checked the weapons tucked away in his cloak. He had come equipped to take on Doppel X, though if he had to go up against a Red Dragon, he might not be fully prepared.

He determined that there was no need to take particular care in his tailing of the man as he stepped forward.

“Have you ever changed your mind about helping our lord?” The man suddenly stopped him with a question.

He turned around and asked back, “Why?”

The man looked him in the eye probingly, seeming to leave just one chink in his stony expression.

“...Never mind. Winona said something strange to me.” Stroking his angular jaw, he added, “She said you’d failed to finish off a target.”

He just walked off without answering.

Chapter II: Five Hours

There was nothing different about the morning sun that day.

If there were a ban on eating runny fried eggs on toast with plenty of butter, then maybe some would have been surprised, but there was no such thing. There were no limits in Urbanrama on eating such a breakfast that could create a fatal stain on a dress shirt, or complaining at a razor for a bad shave, or opening the window and watering a potted plant.

Regardless, on such a normal day, the people of the city had to accept the appearance of a certain thing.

No one knows who first discovered it, though it is a fact that it was a surprise to everyone. The only reason there wasn't a full-blown panic was because its discoverer had no idea what the thing happened to mean. There might have been a frenzy if they had even the faintest idea of its significance.

It appeared in Urbanrama's largest park, in the north of the city, perfectly still in the light of the morning sun. Nothing about it moved. Not its perfectly leveled gaze, nor its weighty build, nor its smooth jet-black fur that flowed back across its body. It merely existed there in stillness. Those who passed by it jogging, delivering milk, commuting to work, couldn't understand it, but they all felt one thing about it.

It was a ruler. No one would be able to move it, and they all had to simply accept its existence now. An absolute ruler.

Some discerning observer might have identified it. Either that or maybe it named itself.

But now, it sat unmoving, merely bathing in the morning sun. The enormous ruler, perhaps a few meters tall at its full height, was waiting for a certain moment.

Asraliel, the ultimate warrior of the Deep Dragons. The ruler with the jet-black fur who bore that name existed there soundlessly, in accordance with its

species' laws.



“Hup...hup...hup...!”

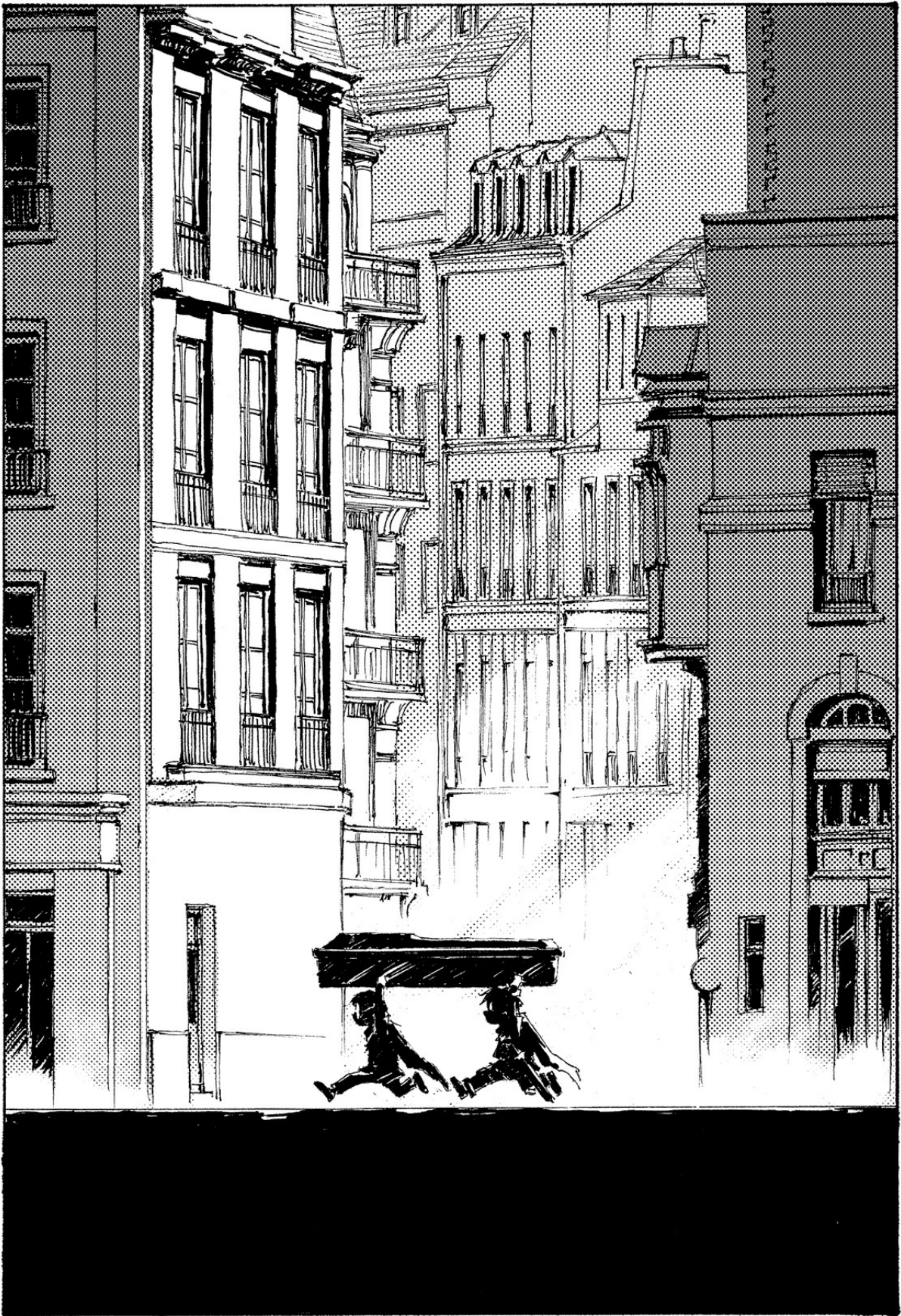
Those regular grunts were the only thing to disturb the morning's stillness. No, they weren't loud enough to disturb anything. Dortin revised his narration. The grunts were little more than a quiet addition to the morning's stillness.

“Say, Brother...” Dortin groaned underneath the head portion of a long chest that was almost like a coffin—he had in fact assumed that it was a coffin at first, but had forgotten about that at this point.

“Hmm? What is it, Dortin? Would ‘heave-ho’ be a better thing to shout, like I previously suggested?”

“No, that's not it.” Dortin shook his head. “I think this really is burglary, though.”

“Hmm?” His brother reacted from the tail end of the box as if he'd heard something he sincerely didn't expect to. “You think so? I recall differently. These Positive Vibration Sonars, in other words, the ears belonging to the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, clearly remember that cabbage man telling me to make free use of anything inside the building during the time he was gone.”



“Well... I don’t think we should really be using things that were *hidden* inside the building, though...”

“Hmm. Playing it by ear, are you? Well, fear not. I’ve decided there are no exceptions to his statement, so it’s probably fine.”

“I don’t think you’re the one who gets to decide that...”

“Haaa ha ha! You understand nothing, little brother. Money and power decide everything in this world! ‘You got a problem? Win ’em over.’ Think I’ll make that a key phrase next year or so.”

“That’s optimistic...”

“Ooh, ooh! ♪ Everything’s comin’ up gold todaaaay! Make your bribes of justice come truuue!”

“You’ve got a song too?” Dortin groaned dejectedly.

Fortunately, there wasn’t anyone passing them by on the street this early in the morning, and he didn’t see any police coming to stop them despite them being obviously very suspicious right now. Not that police weren’t around at all times of the day, but you could generally avoid them if you avoided police stations.

To make matters worse, dwarves already stood out in human society; since the majority of them were isolated in their southern territory, it was very rare to see one in a human town. They had their characteristic fur cloaks on, and even if they didn’t, their builds were simply too different from humans to blend in. Plus, his brother wore that secondhand sword at his waist, so really, it was only a matter of time before they were stopped for questioning wherever they went.

If someone stopped them now, it’d be all over for them, Dortin realized with a shudder.

“If it doesn’t work out, then throw ’em awayyy! ♪ Oh? You’re throwing that away? I’ll pick it up, theeen!”

His brother’s off-key tune seemed to have entered its chorus.



“That’s why I’m saying it’s ridiculous to think you can win a fight without any physical strength. Do you disagree? I mean, what are you gonna do with those flimsy little arms of yours?”

“Well...”

“Brains and courage ain’t worth shit. It’s foolish to think you could win with those alone. Listen. Rather than some underhanded scheme that could fall apart on you at any moment, your odds are way better if you train your fists so you can crush this guy’s jaw the second he turns toward you. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Hmm.”

“Plus this guy, Ed? He’s really just a pushover. I remember having that guy on his hands and knees way more than once back at the dojo.”

“Huh?”

As he dozed, he heard what sounded like a dangerous conversation between two battle junkies. He opened his eyes to find the morning sun streaming in through the window.

It was a quiet morning. Like nothing at all had happened the day before... Orphen smiled wryly.

How carefree. I don’t even know where I am right now.

He raised both arms, feeling irritated. Bringing his hands out of the clean-smelling sheets on the bed, he covered his face with them. The comfortable sensation almost made him want to cry. Not that he had any tears to shed at this point.

Well, what now? he asked himself. *The only ones left are me, the gloomy revenge seeker, and a chatty busybody. That’s all we got. So what do we do?*

“That’s not all you got, if you ask me.”

Orphen leaped when a voice refuted something he hadn’t even said aloud. He looked to the side to find a contrasting pair a ways away from his bed: a large woman and a small woman, both looking blankly back at him. They seemed to be surprised by his sudden awakening.

The refutation had come from the large woman—he thought he remembered her saying her name was Winona. She wore the same shirt with the college logo she'd been wearing yesterday, and well-washed jeans. He would bet that she didn't have a second set of matching clothes. She blinked once at Orphen, then turned back to the smaller girl, Lottecia.

“Like I was saying... That's not all you got. First, you punch him, but after that's the important part, right? Until you give him some words he'll never forget for the rest of his life, your revenge ain't over.”

“No, I, err...” Lottecia looked tiredly up at the other woman, who towered over her even on the clinic stools they were sitting on.

Orphen gave a quiet sigh. They'd been having a different conversation, apparently.

Clinic.

When the word came to mind, he reevaluated his situation. The word felt right—it seemed that was exactly the sort of place they found themselves in now. Actually, it seemed more like a nurse's office in a school. Normally, clinics didn't have beds for patients to sleep in. There were two beds in the room, and he was sitting in one of them. They took up half of the space in the room. The rest was occupied by a treatment table, various instruments, and the chairs that the doctor and patient were likely supposed to sit in, which were currently occupied by Winona and Lottecia. Since there were so many things in the room, it seemed cramped, and there wasn't any sort of yard outside the window, just the wall of another building. The walls weren't very high, and the sunlight was still coming at them at a low angle. There was no clock in the room, but it was probably still early in the morning.

“Did I tell you about the guy I beat the crap out of when I was fourteen? Huh? I did? Well, I was beating up different guys every week back then, so this is probably another story—”

Turning his back to Winona's voice, which showed no signs of slowing let alone stopping, Orphen headed out of the room's only door into the hall. He wandered his way to the bathroom. When he didn't want to think about anything, he found it helped to go wash his face.

He found the room easily and went inside it. Whoever's building this happened to be, he couldn't sense anyone inside of it other than him, Winona, and Lottecia. For now, he lifted the faucet lever and let water flow into the sink.

Scooping up the transparent liquid, he felt his hands going numb from the unexpectedly cold autumn water. Orphen washed his face a few times and then looked at himself in the mirror.

Lifeless eyes started back at him.

He was the sort of man in black that you could really find anywhere. Realizing there was nothing hanging around his neck, he reached into his pocket, finding a pendant on a thin silver chain. Someone must have taken it off of him and put it in there after he lost consciousness the night before. Hanging the pendant from his neck, he looked at himself once more. At his chest hung a crest of a one-legged dragon curled around a sword. It was the symbol of the Tower of Fangs, the highest authority on black sorcery on the continent, and the mark of a caster of the highest order.

But the man in the mirror was just smiling powerlessly at him.

"Geez..." He clucked his tongue and turned around. Then he seemed to change his mind and looked back at the mirror.

"What? So I couldn't do anything. Well, what was I supposed to do? I know. I wasn't even thinking anyone lurking around me would target Claiomh or Majic. I wasn't thinking about that at all. It had never even occurred to me."

He was annoyed at himself for thinking something might have changed. Putting his hands on the sink, he pressed close enough to the mirror that his nose almost touched it and went on, "What is happening? What's possible?" He had to figure that out first.

He had to think about the night before—about everything up until the night before.

In Nashwater, he had run into a dragon—a Red Dragon, who had the ability to disguise himself as a human. One of a species particularly suited to battle even among dragons. Of course, no dragon was *bad* in a fight...

"The dragon—did he say his name was Helpart? He was working with Ryan to

obtain the magic sword forged by the Celestials that Lottecia had.”

He had no idea why a dragon would want such a thing, though. Sure, most of the Celestial relics were powerful, but it was just a sword. For an individual, it might provide a rather dramatic boon—an assassin by trade for instance might go through a fair amount of trouble to obtain one. But it was nothing that required the amount of sacrifices that had been made for it. Especially considering the abilities dragons were naturally born with. They had no reason to invade human territory, for one. Celestial relics had significant collector’s value as well, and there was a black market dedicated to the retrieval and sale of such items, but again, a dragon would have no reason to trade something for human money or property.

In other words, Orphen had no idea what was going on.

His eyes grew sharper in the mirror.

“Plus, it seems like he ran into me by sheer coincidence, but he also said something about observing me because of Azalie...”

There was nothing that surprising about that. If his sister really had left Kiesalhima for the old world through the Aymankar Barrier, then the dragons, who monitored that barrier, would naturally take interest in her. Actually, this was convenient for him. If dragons approached him about the matter, they might come with some information about her location, and he had no leads about that right now.

“But why Claiomh? Why Majic...?” He bit his lip. His actions had caused him to lose both of them. “Why is this happening?!”

He couldn’t take it back. He couldn’t do it over again.

“Dammit!” He smacked the mirror and then pulled away from it.

This time, he turned around and ran back down the hall, returning to the clinic and opening the door.

“Tell me where we are. I’m gonna go find Majic—”

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

As if the words had some suggestive power over him, Orphen stopped. He

stood still in the doorway.

Why was this happening...? He felt his heart twist at the unexpectedness of the situation.

“It’s just like our lord said. You really are careless.”

Winona coldly said that to him, pressing a gun to Lottecia’s temple.



Slowly...slowly...a red dot surfaced in his vision. The dot was almost black, and he could hardly pick it out from the darkness around him. But if he paid attention, he could differentiate it. Why did he have to do such a thing? Well, it was instinct.

The dot grew larger and larger. It swayed monotonously and warped complexly.

Suddenly, he felt something connecting. His little finger and hand, his wrist and arm, his hips and spine, his neck and head... When they finished connecting, the first thing that came back to him—was the cold. It would take some time for his chilled body to return to a normal temperature. For the short time right after his body returned to functionality, he writhed around in a numbing chill. His muscles contracted, generating a bit of heat. His sluggish mind finally strung together his first thought.

Ryan... My name. This, he could always remember. There was never any doubt in his mind about it. His second thought.

The sanctuary... My homeland. These words brought him peace. He could picture the place in his mind.

A deep forest. A glittering lake, its surface a mirror to the clear sky above. A giant moss-covered tree, its roots at the bottom of the lake, around which small fish swam. The sanctuary. His soul was always at peace there.

He felt agony. It always came at the same time, he now remembered. Now that his body had resumed functioning, he needed to breathe. He squeezed his lungs slowly, which almost seemed to have hardened like clay. The pain permeating his entire body grew smaller and sharper. He couldn’t see that red

dot anymore...

Ryan opened his eyes. What he saw was the ceiling of the aged church.

He looked around. The building was on the verge of collapse, damaged as if there had been some powerful explosion there. After noting the circular blast marks on the floor and the complete lack of wall on one side of the structure, he sat up. His head was throbbing. He held it in his hands. His tongue felt like it had shriveled up, he was so parched.

“Ryan Killmarked... No changes?”

He heard a voice. He turned around and saw a man.

Or half of a man, anyway.

The man’s right arm all the way up to the shoulder and even the right side of his chest had been removed from the rest of his body. It looked like what could only be a fatal wound, but the seemingly carbonized black surface of the wound didn’t appear to even bother the man.

He sat in a battered suit with equally battered posture. Ryan guessed he’d been sitting there just like that for the whole time he’d been reviving. The man was looking at him like he was used to this.

Ryan returned his gaze and waited for his memories to connect. Information floated up in his mind. Himself. The sanctuary. The Green Gem Armor. His mission. And his partner.

“No... No.” He shook his head. “I’m fine... I remember. I...” He stopped for a second. “I haven’t changed...right?”

He’d basically asked his partner’s question back to him, but the man didn’t seem bothered by that.

He shrugged—with one shoulder, at least—and replied, “There don’t appear to be any problems for now. We’ll figure out what memories you’re missing later. There’s a rather pressing matter.”

“R-Right.”

His headache...or rather the sensation that there was still something piercing

his cranium—someone must have destroyed it rather thoroughly—had faded somewhat, but in exchange, he was now being assaulted by a severe nausea pushing up from the bottom of his stomach. He tried to bear it by clenching and opening his hands, but he could feel sweat welling up on his dry skin.

Regardless, the man—his partner—went on. This was the greatest assassin of the Red Dragons, Helpart.

“Asraliel’s name has been inherited. This is no particular problem.”

“...Right.”

They hadn’t planned for it, but it was an inevitability, so its early occurrence was nothing to make a fuss about. It was just a bit ahead of schedule.

“However...” Helpart continued indifferently. “The new warrior chief of the Deep Dragons has deemed us his enemies.”

“That’s unusual.” Ryan shook his head. “Deep Dragons should have no individual will...”

“Exactly. Though, complaining that it makes no sense does us no good.”

Helpart was as unflappable as always, but this matter didn’t strike Ryan as something that could be taken so lightly. There was no power on this continent that could stand against a Deep Dragon. They never fought among themselves, so they were basically invincible creatures. And one of those unparalleled fighters had deemed them his enemy.

Ryan looked his partner in the eye, almost wanting to laugh. The human disguise showed no emotion. He had lost his whole right side, but maintained the human form for some reason. There was probably no particular meaning to it. He recalled hearing once that burns took longer to recover from than anything else. That was the difference between him and a Deep Dragon. They might have both been dragons, but Red Dragons had weaknesses, as did most other beings.

He probably wouldn’t admit it, but...he can’t win, Ryan thought to himself. *In which case...*

“Helpart,” he said. “If you don’t mind getting this whole town caught up in it,

there's a way we can stand against him. Or a way I can, at least."

"We always planned on getting the town involved. The humans... Well, they've been warned. I made an announcement, though I take no responsibility if he didn't take it seriously."

"What did you plan on doing?"

"Calling all my kind here that I can contact. And attacking with everything we have."

...And getting them all killed in the process, I'm sure.

Instead of voicing that thought, he made a different suggestion. "You don't need to do all that. I alone will suffice. I don't want anyone interfering, though... I'd like you to eliminate any potential obstacles. It'll take me four or five hours to fully prepare."

"Understood," Helpart said simply. He was probably all for it if Ryan's plan would work. After a moment, however, he looked at his partner with a strange expression on his face, especially for someone who should have been unemotional. "Are you still fixated on settling things with them?"

"Them?" Ryan cocked his head at the incomprehensible question. "Who do you mean?"

He commanded the Green Gem Armor that protected him to attack at its full power.



Why is this happening...? Orphen repeated the thought, eyes narrowed. He watched Lottecia blink in confusion, her face slightly strained. Rather, he watched the thick arm holding her around the neck and the gun pressed to her temple.

Both belonged to the large woman behind Lottecia: Winona.

Winona didn't appear to be particularly amused nor angered. She merely stayed frozen in that same position. In her left hand was a standard—rare though the weapon may be—pistol. A darkly glinting steel weapon with revolving chambers.

Orphen made to raise his arm, but Winona cut him off with her voice. “I wouldn’t move if I were you. I can pull this trigger faster than you can chant a spell.” Lottecia frowned at the familiar words, and whether she noticed or not, Winona went on, “You know what this is, right? There’s no holding back with this weapon. Do you know how much blood is in a person’s brain? I’d personally rather not see that today.”

Orphen listened silently and then put his right hand inside his jacket.

He could see Winona’s brow furrowing, a confused look on her face. “I believe I told you not to move,” she snapped.

“I heard. And you’re right. The bullet in that toy of yours can fly out faster than I can compose and activate a spell’s effect. It’d be faster for you to pull the trigger than for me to jump out, surprise you, grab the hammer of your gun, and bite you or something to free Lottecia, then punch you in the liver too.” He sighed. “But I’ve been talking for thirty seconds or so now, and you haven’t pulled that trigger once.”

“What are you...?”

“You don’t get it? Basically, people can’t do anything unless they’re prompted to. I’ve already put my hand in my jacket. The time it’d take me to pull it out and you to squeeze the trigger... Well, those are probably equal. So? What do you think I have in my hand?”

“Hmph.” Winona huffed dismissively. She was clearly holding Lottecia tighter with her arm now—Orphen didn’t have to see Lottecia grimace with her nose and mouth covered to tell.

“Probably a throwing knife or something, right? It’ll take time for you to draw it from its sheath anyway. You’re just bluffing.”

“Wanna try me? It’s not my life on the line. It’s Lottecia’s and yours. That’s a bet I’m fine with taking.”

“...”

“Cut it out. I can’t imagine you’re serious.”

“Fine.” Winona held her hands up just like that and released Lottecia.

Lottecia scrambled away from her and Orphen slowly removed his hand from his jacket. In it was a silver short sword.

Winona shrugged when she saw it. “Doesn’t look like a throwing weapon to me.”

“So we were both bluffing. Who are you?”

“Sorry. I just wanted a quick way to figure out what you were like.” She took the holster in her bag, which was lying nearby, and made to put her pistol away, then seemed to think better of it and held it up to Orphen instead. “This should be enough to tell you who I am.”

“A knight?”

Only those authorized by the Union of Lords to do so could carry around firearms—meaning she had to be one of a limited number of knights.

Winona stroked the weapon lovingly. “I call her Deedee. I’m a dispatch officer with the police, albeit an unofficial one.”

“An unofficial officer... A Dragoon?” Orphen groaned. He’d heard of them before—everyone had. But there were few who believed they existed, and he didn’t even know how many people actually knew of their existence.

Lottecia was still in such shock from the situation that she didn’t appear to be taking any of this information in and was just focused on getting away from Winona.

Orphen took a step forward to shield her and asked, “So you work for a specific nobleman?”

“Dragoon” was a nickname for a person in that position. A soldier free from the shackles of law and reputation, who answered to one individual alone. Needless to say, they weren’t actual soldiers, but they resembled Imperial troops, they were fiercely brutal, and they excelled at blending in, which was why they were treated as unofficial police.

“Yep. That’s exactly what I do...and I’m here on my lord’s orders.” She crouched down and put her gun in her holster for real this time. As she shoved it into the huge bag she carried with her...

Lottecia suddenly lunged forward to take her by surprise.

She must have picked up her sword the moment she escaped from Winona's arm. She had the sheath of it sticking out now to thrust into the crouching woman, when—

“—Ngh?!”

Lottecia's trajectory suddenly changed with a sound like the air was leaving her lungs. With unsteady footsteps, she crashed into the corner of the room. After hitting the wall, she finally came to a stop. She looked like she'd hit her head rather hard.

Orphen glanced at Winona, who was still crouched on the ground, her arm out like she'd simply swung it once.

“What did I say?” she said without lifting her head. “I said it was foolish, didn't I?”

Orphen silently threw the short sword in his hand. It glinted through the air, grazing Winona's raised hand and stabbing into the far wall.

Winona glared silently back at him after glancing at her hand. There was a bead of blood on the tip of her middle finger.

“It's fine to have pride in your work,” Orphen told her. “But you haven't finished answering my question.”

Winona stood with a whistle. She turned to him and said, “I see... They do say Krylancelo is an unparalleled fighter. You surprised me.”

“Whatever. Either way, you're being a jerk. Answer me already—everything I want to know. I shouldn't even have to ask every little question.”

“I don't think we have time for that.”

“...What are you worried about?”

“I can only assume you've been avoiding looking at her, but...” She was...smiling.

Gritting his teeth, Orphen looked in the direction she was indicating. At the bed next to the one he'd been sleeping in.

Claiomh was asleep there.

Her eyes were closed—she wasn't in the same state she'd been in the last time he'd seen her, not moving a muscle, with her eyes open. Still, in all the commotion that had just occurred, she'd shown no signs of stirring. Her only movement was the regular and unnaturally slow rising and falling of her chest.

Orphen groaned, somehow managing to unclench his teeth. "We have to get a doctor to see her."

"We did... Well, not a licensed one, I suppose."

"The one who owns this building?" Orphen asked, looking around the room.

Lottecia was finally rising slowly from the floor, using her sword as a cane. She was glaring at Winona rather furiously, but probably wouldn't be able to move for some time.

Winona didn't seem particularly bothered by this. She merely shrugged, her guard completely down. "We're just borrowing the beds here. I wanted somewhere to rest in the northern part of town too."

"Hmm...?"

"My partner—no, supervisor? Commanding officer? Well, whatever. He put a suggestion on the owner here to let us stay for a few days. That's who examined your friend too."

Orphen glanced at Lottecia to confirm Winona's words. She still looked like she hadn't recovered at all, but she returned his gaze with one eye closed, nodding shakily.

"Yes... There was...someone else here...before..."

"Damian Rue. You can trust him and me for now. Our lord seems to need you, after all."

"And who's this lord of yours?" He recalled something then. "There shouldn't even *be* any lords since the Noble Revolution. The Union of Lords gave equal rights to all citizens, erased the borders between territories, and decided to govern the continent as a whole. Like how it used to be with the Celestials. They'll send out administrators, but nothing more than that..."

“There’s one left on the whole continent. One border that still stands. But no matter. I’ll take you there someday,” Winona said casually. She looked around, gaze eventually settling on the short sword Orphen had just thrown. She approached the sword where it was still stuck in the wall, pulled it out, and smirked. Then she said quietly, “It’s called...the Imminent Domain.”

Not wanting to ask for clarification, Orphen just stared silently back at her.

She flipped the short sword over a few times in her hand, playing with it, then blew a breath on its silver blade. “My lord needs you,” she repeated. “At the very least, he thinks you’ll be useful.”

Orphen sighed, irritated. Her aim was plainly obvious. It was nothing significant. She just wanted to make him ask again.

“Who is this lord of yours?”

“I want to make a deal. Do you get it?” She approached him, narrowing her eyes. She held the sword by its blade and proffered the grip to Orphen.

Orphen was somewhat curious about Lottecia’s gaze, but he took the blade and put it back in its sheath inside his jacket. “A deal?” he asked.

“I’ll answer all your questions. In exchange, I want you to meet my lord after all this is taken care of.”

Orphen thought over her words. He didn’t need half a second to consider it, but he’d come up with three new things to ask her. “All my questions?”

“Weeell, most of them, I’d say.”

Orphen frowned at her jovial correction and asked, “What does this lord of yours want with me?”

“Dunno.”

“What do you mean by ‘all this’?”

“Well, for instance...” She indicated the figure sleeping on the bed. “We have to fix this girl...don’t we?”

Orphen leaped forward. Before his opponent could react, he slid a foot around her and hooked her calf with his heel. When her knee gave out and she

sank downward, he pressed his finger to her neck, almost hard enough to dig in—and she was surely aware that it was her carotid he was aiming at. He glared sharply and told her, “Give me details.”

“Sheesh.” Winona was looking up at him with an expression like she was half taken by surprise and half still smiling fearlessly. She still had one knee on the floor, and since Orphen was stepping on her leg, it would be hard for her to move.

Or at least, it should have been...

“Hah!” With one breath, her body sprang up. It was an incredible display of muscular strength, such that even if he were on her back, he’d probably be thrown off. His leg removed from hers, it was all he could do not to fall down himself. He backed up to put some distance between them as she stood and raised his fists.

Winona seemed satisfied. There was joy in her eyes that hadn’t been present up until now as she took a very militaristic stance. With her muscles tensed, the already large woman looked even bigger.

“I think I get now why my lord picked me to scout you out!”

“Well, I don’t. Why don’t you help me understand?!”

“Great! I love doing stuff this way. It’s simple and quick!”

After she shouted, she brought her fists in as if to shrink her otherwise huge frame. It was probably some martial arts stance.

Watching her, Orphen took his full battle stance. There was no need for clever tricks anymore. He’d already seen the card he needed to see. Even if his opponent had something else up her sleeves, that didn’t matter.

Even if I have to half-kill her... He stopped breathing, waiting for the moment she’d leap out at him. But just then...

“Stop!” A voice called out.

He looked over and found Lottecia holding her sword to her chest after shouting.

“This isn’t the time for that, is it?!”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Orphen and Winona both looked at her like they'd been totally thrown off. She was trembling, tears in her eyes.

“You just lunged at her earlier, didn't you?” Orphen asked her, eyes narrowed.

“You sure did.” Winona seconded.

“Aaah! Shut up!” Lottecia held her head and shook it back and forth. She looked up as if to get back on track and spread her arms in the direction of the still-sleeping Claiomh. “Anyway... If you know how to fix Claiomh, that's more important! What's going on with her?” She directed the last question at Winona.

As if the bandanna she wore on her head itched, Winona scratched her face somewhat awkwardly and told her, “Well, it's all conjecture, but Damian's the authority on stuff like this...probably, at least. I don't know anything about it, personally.”

“The way I see it, you're all out of options. Tell us everything you can. If all I have to do is see your lord or whatever after that, then I'll do it.” Orphen folded his arms and pressed her.

Winona turned to him. “Well, I should probably start at the beginning, then. I'll just get this out of the way first, though. Don't want you rushing me through a long story.”

As if to cool her head a bit, she took a deep breath, then told them, “It was that young Deep Dragon who killed this girl.”



There was nothing different about the morning sun that day.

If there were a ban on opening curtains heavy with mold to let the yellowish sunlight into a dark bedroom, then maybe some would have been surprised, but there was no such thing. There were no limits in Urbanrama on perfunctorily sweeping the trash and ashes of a long night of fun to the side of

the room, or driving away the vagrants gathered directly underneath one's window, or lighting up a cigarette at the prospect of having to endure another day.

Regardless, on such a normal day, the people of the city had to accept the appearance of a certain thing.

It was a very clear abnormality. Dozens of city blocks had disappeared, after all. No, to be more precise, a forest had appeared there. Buildings and streets had all been swallowed up by a forest and could no longer be seen. Through the dense trees, maybe a broken sign or a cracked roof could be seen here and there. The forest had definitely appeared in the early morning. Blocks that had been there the night before were gone by the time morning came.

There was no chaos—there was no way for there to be any. Not a single person had emerged from the forest. It was slowly expanding. Trees grew one after the other from the ground, splitting the pavement and consuming everything in their path.

Some discerning observer might have been able to identify the forest. But the people of the town hadn't yet connected the appearance of the oddity in the north of the town with the appearance of the oddity here in the south.

However, it didn't take them long to realize.

The giant wolf that had appeared in the north of town, and the forest that had appeared in the south.

They almost seemed to stand in opposition to each other, and the forest was slowly encroaching on the town in the direction of the unmoving wolf.

Chapter III: Three and a Half Hours

“Evacuation of the townspeople is largely without issue. At the very least, everyone within a two-hundred-meter radius has, for the most part, been evacuated.”

“That’s not enough. Expand the danger zone to one kilometer.”

“Are you insane? Not all the townspeople have military experience.”

“And most of them will want to bring their valuables with them.”

“Set fire to their houses if you have to to get them out of there. They’ll thank you for it tomorrow.”

Leticia sat with her arms folded in the hastily organized response center, listening to the barely coherent conversations flying around her. She couldn’t help bemoaning her luck at the poor timing of it all.

Luck. That’s all it is. It was that luck that had held her up here in Urbanrama with an unprecedented, historical disaster just three days after she’d arrived in the town’s port.

Cursing it all, Leticia sighed, eyes narrowed. As officers of the Continental Sorcerers’ Association scurried about in a panic, no one paid her any mind.

She observed them languidly in their red and black uniforms. Whether it was by chance or because all of the members above a certain standing had evacuated, a particularly young officer caught her eye. In this office, where normally only rather mundane matters were discussed, a whole room full of powerful sorcerers were completely panicked, shouting at each other with bloodshot eyes in search of a solution to the situation. No, rather than searching, perhaps it was more accurate to say they were merely hoping for a solution. The problem was, they were in possession of nothing that could rectify the situation. There was no way they *could* be. The problems plaguing their city were fundamentally insurmountable.



Leticia opened one eye and glanced up at the whiteboard at the opposite side of the room. The text on it was large enough that she could easily read it even from where she was sitting.

Deep Dragon Appearance and Accompanying Phenomena Solution.

Evacuation of the citizenry was being carried out by the city's defense force, so they were handling the planning and command of that endeavor. But since the disaster occurring included the appearance of a Deep Dragon, naturally, the Sorcerers' Association had to get involved too. If they were going to attempt to deal with the Deep Dragon, there wasn't a way to do that without sorcery.

The Continental Sorcerers' Association couldn't afford to make fools of themselves. A bad mark on their reputation could endanger the rights and lives of all sorcerers on the continent.

Regardless of whether the situation was dire or not, everyone here shared that anxiety.

That's only natural, Leticia thought with resignation once again. Even she had to admit she was being rather cold. *I can't die a meaningless death in this hopeless strategy.*

But all human deaths were meaningless. If she didn't want her life to be a waste, she had to stay alive. Leticia MacCready shook her head.

The whiteboard had a vague account of the situation on it. The evacuation status of the citizenry, the damage already done to the city, expected losses, etc...

The enormous Deep Dragon that had suddenly appeared that morning was sitting silently in a park in the residential district in the north of the city. This was unprecedented—a Deep Dragon appearing in a human settlement. The Abyssal Wolves resided in Fenrir's Forest and thoroughly eliminated all human intruders into their territory. Through their eyes, they held command over all matter using their dark sorcery, and they were widely thought of as invincible beings. When they marked a target for death, they appeared behind them in complete silence and eliminated their prey without even giving them a chance to turn around. There was no way to defend against their sorcery, and a single

look from them could eliminate any sorcery their opponents threw at them.

But for the time being, the dragon had not become an issue. Ever since it had appeared, it had maintained total silence. It merely sat completely still in the middle of the park as if waiting for something. Of course, they had no idea how long that would last, but they had a more pressing matter to deal with first.

That was the appearance of a forest.

From the phrase alone, it was hard to make sense of what had happened, but there was really no other way to describe the situation. As if in opposition to the dragon that had appeared, a huge forest had also appeared in the south of Urbanrama. It had spread quickly and had already swallowed up a vast area of the town. On top of that, it was still expanding. Since the area that had been “eaten” by the forest so far was mainly the slums, it was difficult to get an exact sense of the damage level thus far, but it was safe to say that the town had lost a large amount of its manpower. Even after the situation was taken care of, it would require a vast amount of time and money to repair what had been destroyed. And since Urbanrama couldn’t expect any financial aid from the capital, being an independent city, this was already a fatal blow for them.

The forest was continuing to devour its way forward, heading for the dragon. Based on its speed, the Continental Sorcerers’ Association had calculated a certain time.

It was a simple guess. If the forest maintained its current speed heading north, it would make contact with the Deep Dragon around noon.

Three and a half hours to go... Leticia thought, looking down at the watch on her wrist.



“Hunh?”

Dortin felt rather perplexed when his brother suddenly stopped walking as if he’d noticed something—of course, since they were both carrying the long chest, if his brother stopped, he had to stop too. They’d been wandering the deserted streets for a long time now, and he hadn’t noticed any particular change in the scenery. Unable to pinpoint what had caught his brother’s

attention, Dortin turned back to face him.

Volkan was looking around them with a dubious expression. “Isn’t there something weird about this, Dortin?”

“You think so?” Dortin looked around too.

He didn’t notice anything in particular being out of the ordinary. There was nothing strange about the town, and he could recall passing through both a crowded alleyway and a rundown shopping district. Right now, they were just outside the back gate of an elementary school.

“Now that I think about it...” Dortin muttered. “Where are we going, anyway?”

There was no need to ask, he tacked on on the inside. They hadn’t been thinking about it at all.

The walls of the school building, which were covered with graffiti here and there, were almost quiet enough to be creepy, and there were no signs of life in the town other than the faint cries of some birds. The trees in the yard were withered and the flower bed was covered in footprints. Even the rabbit hut was empty, its wire door hanging carelessly open. It would probably swing with a rusty sound if the wind blew, but there was no breeze at all under the clear sky. The windows of the building and the gate right in front of them were both left open, giving the building a very vulnerable impression.

Now that I think about it... he repeated in his head. After all that stuff happened, we just kind of ran away... We’ve been fleeing blindly since then. We don’t have any idea where to go, so it hardly makes a difference whether we were thinking or not, I guess.

A strange man had barged into the church they’d been staying in and had murdered an acquaintance of theirs. Then another strange man had dropped in—literally, from the ceiling—and they’d been able to escape because of him.

So many crazy things had happened one after another, they hadn’t been able to make any rational decisions about what to do next.

Dortin turned to look at his brother, completely lost. “Maybe we really should have gone to the police.”

“Ha ha! What are you talking about, Dortin?” Volkan returned sunnily. “The police? They’re, like, you know. All batons, and handcuffs, and stakes, and scissors.”

“No, I don’t think they have those last two things...”

“Well, my scientific findings state that those who don’t want to be tortured or incarcerated shouldn’t get anywhere near those guys.”

“I think it’d be better if you just didn’t live your life in a way that’d get you immediately arrested if you ran into a cop.” Dortin groaned. “This is a good example...” he added quietly. “If we hand this over to the police quickly enough, we might not get in trouble for it...” He tapped the chest they were carrying.

Volkan opened his eyes wide in surprise. “What?! Dortin, you’re already tired of being rich?!”

“No, that’s not...” He tried to deny it, but Volkan didn’t appear to be listening to him at all. He had his arms folded, the chest resting on his head, and his brows were knit as if he were thinking hard about something.

“Hmmm. I never thought you were so fickle. But you know, I’ll just warn you. You should limit it to swapping clothes with a hobo who looks just like you.”

“Don’t move.”

“That’s right, Dortin. Don’t move. Wait, why? I don’t even get why I’m asking you, since I’m the one who should be telling you.”

“Don’t speak.”

“It’s only you and me here, which means that anything said to you would naturally be said by me—”

His brother finally stopped talking then.

Dortin had not only stopped talking but stopped breathing too, merely looking up at the man that had suddenly appeared before them.

He stood, blocking their way without any sort of trick. Dortin didn’t even need to think about whether or not he recognized him. He’d seen this face just a short while ago. With his thick black cloak, long black hair, and that scar on his lip...

He was slightly singed in places, but didn't look particularly different other than that, and was staring down at them with an utterly disinterested expression.

Looking up at him from the shadow of the long chest, Dortin flinched, feeling like there was some foreign object in his stomach again. An object like the one the man in front of him had used to blow the head off of a human being. The pit in his stomach felt all at once warm, sharp, cold, and heavy.

"It's you!" his brother screamed—from behind him. "Uhh...the one who's in black but isn't the debt collector!"

"Err... Don't you think you're forgetting about something a lot more important, Brother...?"

"Ah. Right, then... Uhh...the kinda lanky one."

"No, I don't mean his appearance."

"What, you want me to point out how he murders people everywhere he goes? Well, yeah, I don't think that's great. You should really cut it out."

"Brotherrr!"

The man merely stood there in silence. He had both hands hidden under his cloak—Dortin tried his best to take solace in the fact that he was at least not in a battle stance quite yet—and was looking down at them with a faint light glinting in his narrowed eyes.

He heard Volkan start chuckling fearlessly.

"Don't you worry, Dortin. Your brother has already seen through this man's weak point!"

"...Really?" Dortin asked, even though he knew there was no point in expecting anything.

But Volkan just looked full of confidence. He gave a big nod and said, "Mhm. Judging by his build, I'd guess he's weak to being cut with a sword. I'm sure he's also weak to being hit with a blunt instrument, and being struck by a carriage, and, uhh...being mauled by a vicious beast. You've got too many weak points, you!"

“I’m sorry.”

“Now he’s apologizing?!”

Dortin couldn’t help shouting at the man’s quiet muttering after his brother stuck his finger out at him. He stepped back after raising his voice, but the man showed no particular change, still just standing there in silence.

If he didn’t have anything to say, then Dortin certainly didn’t either. He looked around timidly in the uncomfortable silence that stretched between them. Was there anything that could get them out of this situation...?

“There’s no one left in this area,” the man muttered as if seeing through Dortin’s thoughts. He wasn’t paying them any attention anymore, looking off in a random direction instead.

“Hmm?” Volkan grunted.

The man ignored him for a few moments, but eventually continued, “If you have no connection to them, then I don’t particularly care.” He pointed in a different direction than the one he was looking in and told them, “This is part of the danger zone already. The residents were forcefully evacuated a short while ago. The forest will be here soon. If you’re going to escape, you should go this way.”

“Forest?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Kinda hard to do that now...”

He could hardly ignore the important-sounding words coming from the man’s mouth. But the man refused to elaborate, merely hardening his expression slightly as a sudden breeze blew by, fluttering his long black hair and heavy black cloak.

Right after that, the ground began to rumble.

“Hunh?”

The rumbling quickly grew too intense to ignore. Dortin stumbled, trying to keep his balance with the long chest held overhead. He could hear the man muttering to himself.

“Faster than I thought...”

A moment later...

The ground swelled up, the elementary school was flattened in an instant, and a forest pushed through the area, swallowing everything around them up into it.



“Does ‘the sanctuary’ mean anything to you? That’s what they call the place where they live, and my lord calls it that too. It’s the final bastion of dragonkind.”

“Feel like I’ve heard the name a few times.” Orphen nodded, looking up at the sky.

Thin clouds that looked like scratch marks on the blue sky passed by slowly. The town was quiet. Looking around from the roof, he couldn’t see anyone outside. In the distance, however...

In an open lot a few hundred meters away—no, was it a park? A huge jet-black beast sat there.

He’d run into one of these beasts before. Even from this distance, it was unmistakable. The beast was a Fenrir, a Deep Dragon.

Orphen sucked air in and realized that he’d been holding his breath for some time. He smiled wryly and turned back to look at Winona.

“The dragons’ sanctuary... It’s in the center of the continent, right? That’s what everyone says, at least.”

They were up on the roof of the clinic where he’d woken up. It was relatively spacious, and the view wasn’t bad, though it wasn’t too clean, since it didn’t seem to be used often. The hinges of the door that led to the roof were rusted too.

“In the end...” Winona’s voice echoed, loud in the morning quiet of the deserted town. “It’s just a shelter for them. The dragons lost most of their power in their battle with the goddess. And they say the Weird Dragons...the Celestials, who ruled over our ancestors, were completely wiped out then.” She

recited the words like she'd practiced them many times before. "What about you? What'd you learn about dragons?"

"Don't run into one."

"Huh?"

"That's what my master taught me. Don't run into one, and if you do, don't pick a fight, 'cause you won't win." Orphen shrugged.

Winona's expression hardened. She scrunched up her face, clucked her tongue, and spat out, "That's not true. We've won fights with them."

"So..." Orphen asked cautiously, "You guys are fighting against dragons—against the sanctuary?!"

"What if we are?" Winona went straight past caution and folded her arms, puffing her chest out showily. The muscles of her upper arms bulged.

Orphen was sure of it... *I have no idea who her lord is, but she's gotta be one of his strongest fighters*, he was forced to admit. *No way she's just some grunt.*

When he acknowledged that fact and looked back at her, it was almost like there was no evidence to the contrary whatsoever. There was no wastefulness in her training, nor was there anything missing. Her body was practically a testament to a warrior's pride. Even among knights—or dispatch officers, as she'd called herself—there were likely few so specialized for battle as she was. There was a famous department of the police force specialized in fighting armed bandit gangs, but their training differed from hers.

He returned her gaze and it was easy to read her intent from her eyes.

The anti-bandit force was merely specialized in subjugating armed humans. But her...

I can only assume she's meant to be fighting those who surpass humans...

Orphen was silent for a long time before speaking. And what he finally came out with was a fair statement even he had to grin wryly at.

"You can't fight with dragons."

"Sure you can. I mean, we are." Her response was blithe. "I won't say it's easy

or anything. Plenty of my comrades have died, but...”

She suddenly stopped.

“Hm?”

“Shh,” she cautioned, racing swiftly and silently to the door to the roof. She grabbed the knob without pausing and threw open the door.

“Aaah?!” Lottecia tumbled onto the roof with a yelp. As soon as she hit the floor, she leapt back up and bit her lip, glaring at Winona.

But even with a girl holding a sword staring her down, Winona just spread her arms breezily and said, “Seems like you want to ask me, ‘what was that for?!’ but people who eavesdrop really don’t say stuff like that, you know.”

“I have a right to hear this!” Lottecia shouted, back on her feet.

“A right?” Winona asked, face blank.

“We told you about Ed, didn’t we? So I—”

“And what are you going to do after hearing this?” Orphen interjected for the first time.

Lottecia opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to say something back to Winona, before turning to Orphen instead. She was holding up Claiomh’s sword in almost a ceremonial manner.

“What are you going to do?” Orphen prompted.

She shook her head in small, jerky movements and said, “I’m going to go see him...one more time.”

“And get killed again?” Orphen shot back. “We don’t have Leki here to revive you this time.” As he spoke, he looked at the park in the distance over his shoulder. The huge jet-black beast hadn’t moved a muscle; it was still there. The wind stung his eyes as he watched it.

Feeling unpleasantly cold, Orphen continued, “You saw him once. You were killed once. The same thing’s just going to happen again.”

Lottecia said nothing in return. He didn’t feel like looking at her face, but he could guess what it looked like.

“You’re right,” Winona murmured. Orphen hadn’t been expecting her to interrupt. He turned to find her speaking casually, slowly, and detached from the situation. “The same thing...might just happen again.” There was something odd about her tone, though...

Orphen nodded to Lottecia. “Still, there’s no reason to exclude you. If you want to listen, go ahead and listen.” The black-haired girl looked up at him, expression noticeably brighter, and he almost felt like a bit of his spirit had been sucked out of him.

What is this sense of futility, really? He asked himself a question he already knew the answer to and sighed. *Cripes. I don’t know whose fault this is, but don’t I have too many problems right now? This is ridiculous...* He complained to no one in particular.

He thought Winona might object to Lottecia’s presence, but the matter didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. She began to speak again in the same tone she’d been using earlier.

“They call themselves Doppel X.”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t know what it means. I just know these guys leave the sanctuary and sneak around outside.”

“It means ‘traitor.’ Doppel X...”

“That’s what I thought. You’d have to ask them for details, though. The only thing I know is that the dragons in the sanctuary have these agents they dispatch outside for stuff.” She indicated herself with her thumb. “And we find them and assassinate them. No exceptions.”

“Why do you have to do that?”

“Ask my lord. I’m not confident I could explain.”

“Are you sure it’s not just that you don’t understand it?” Orphen asked, and she blinked at him, scratching her head. She took a few seconds to perform the action, lost in thought or something like that. Orphen judged that to be the case. He could also have been right on the mark. He at least thought he wasn’t

completely off-base.

Winona smirked. “I’ll put it this way instead: I think my lord will want to tell you that himself, so I won’t do it. Either way, it’s not something I can say to somebody who might not even cooperate with us.”

“You’re really concerned about how this lord of yours feels, huh?”

“Guess so. But you—”

“So what is it?!” Lottecia’s clear voice cut into the conversation.

Winona shot her a look like she’d interrupted whatever clever comment she was about to make, but Lottecia didn’t even notice. She was just irritated that the conversation didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

“What do these Doppel whatevers have to do with us?”

“Plenty. You just don’t know about it,” Orphen answered with a sigh. Not that he was completely confident he understood what was going on either. “Ryan, who stole your sword, was working with a Red Dragon named Helpart.”

“That’s right. There’s a lot you don’t know, little lady.” Winona reached out to pat Lottecia on the shoulder, but Lottecia just moved out of the way of her hand.

“But why do the dragons even want the sword?” She was a bit shrill in her state of frustration, but it was a good question. Orphen didn’t have an answer, so he shot a look at Winona to try to get one out of her.

She took a deep breath before quietly answering, “How would I know what they’re after? I can tell you this though, little lady: that guy you call Ed didn’t go back to Nashwater because he wanted your sword or anything like that. The one who wanted the sword was Helpart, Doppel X’s best assassin. If ‘assassin’ is a bad way to put it, then ‘combat specialist.’ He’s a Red Dragon, after all.”

Orphen watched Lottecia swallow silently. He murmured, “Red Dragons are natural-born slaughterers. I understand all too well why Master told me not to get involved with them.”

Winona nodded and continued, “Helpart’s killed several comrades of mine. That Ryan guy’s been involved too. Yuis—oh, that’s Ed—went back to

Nashwater on our lord's orders to kill Helpart. But he screwed it up, got the sword stolen, and didn't even kill one of them. And now we're in this mess. But, well, he's gotta clean up his mess at some point. I bet he's working on taking care of the two of them right now."

"Well, I don't particularly give a crap about all that." Orphen touched the pendant at his chest.

Winona laughed. "Pretty heartless."

"If he's set out to kill someone, then I'm sure he'll finish the job and come back fine. I hate to say it, but I couldn't stop him anyway."

"Sure you're not overestimating him a little?"

"You think? Far as I know, he's the sorcerer who's gotten the closest to Master—" Noticing Lottecia's gaze, he explained to her, "I know him real well. I've known him for years... He's like family to me. And just so you know, the name I know him by isn't Ed or Yuis. Dammit... I know he's always had wanderlust, but is it really possible to live so long, under so many different names?"

"You're no different, are you, Krylancelo?"

Orphen clucked his tongue and brought his fist down on the iron fence next to him. "Enough about him... Anyway, I get that you guys are fighting with dragons under the orders of your lord or whatever, but that's not a lot of information to go on. It all comes down to this—I don't get why you have to do such a thing."

"Oh, shut up. I told you already." Winona seemed truly exasperated. Her face was screwed up in a weary frown. But after Orphen stared her down for a moment, she added, "Well, how about this, then? As long as we can't put up a fight against the sanctuary, we'll never really be out from under the dragons' rule. We need to find a way to stand on equal ground with them if we want to achieve true independence and self-reliance. Good enough for you?"

"The fact that you have to ask makes me doubt your sincerity."

"That's just how it is with sound arguments, isn't it?" She stretched her arm like giving a decent excuse had left her shoulders sore and walked over to the fence, leaning against it. Waiting for the sturdy fence to settle with a creak

behind her, she gazed into the distance—and it was obvious what she was looking at.

Orphen followed her gaze to the gigantic black ruler, the Deep Dragon.

“Look at the panic one of the four major cities on the west side of the continent is in just ‘cause that thing showed up. If it felt like it, it could destroy this whole town. Then there’s the forest that’s popped up in the south of town, heading straight toward that overgrown dog.” She slid her finger out toward the town like she was moving it over a map. “I don’t intend to let them do as they please forever, personally.”

“This town has its own military. The Sorcerers’ Association isn’t just going to do nothing about this either.”

“Oh yeah. The Sorcerers’ Association, right. There’s a friend of yours visiting there. Just go visit if you get a chance.”

“Huh?”

“Err...” Lottecia interrupted. Her voice was calmer than it had been earlier, and she paused for a moment before continuing, perhaps waiting for Winona to turn to look at her. Winona ignored her, however, so she just held her sword to her chest and asked, “Can you tell me where Ed is...?”

“Well, I can think of three reasons not to.” Winona shifted and the fence made an unpleasant sound under her. “One: it’d be a problem for me if you killed Yuis right now. Two: I don’t want to make the guy with the nasty eyes over there any more stressed than he already is. Three: Yuis wouldn’t forgive me... Oh, can I add one? Even if I wanted to tell you, I don’t know. I know he’s somewhere in town. He’s looking for his target on his own volition to kill them. He’s a hunting dog without a leash. You get it?”

“Seems to me like you’re trying to make me into one of those hunting dogs too.” Orphen watched to see what reaction she’d have to his comment. He’d been expecting her to laugh, but she just shook her head solemnly instead.

“Somebody else’s dog is of no use to us. Isn’t that right?”

“Then what do you want with me?”

“Well, there are things only you can do. And if he can’t make them his, my lord will at least offer people fair trades if he wants something from them.” The light in her eyes seemed to sharpen. “You want to save that Claiomh girl, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but my lord’s a realistic person. He doesn’t want to make the greatest assassin of the day into an enemy. What he wants is a fair trade. So what he offers will definitely benefit you in some way.”

“Don’t know that until you tell me what it is.”

“It’s not like we expected things to go this way, so Claiomh’s recovery is only being added in as a matter of course. The reward he planned for you is something else.”

“Well, what is it?”

There was something uncomfortable about her gaze. Orphen felt the back of his neck prickling as they spoke. He had a bad feeling about this. Ill omens always came with no warning, no matter when or where.

And Winona’s calm voice only served to exacerbate the chill he felt.

“I’m guessing my lord is the only person on this continent capable of locating your sister... And he’s already succeeded in contacting her.”

Orphen’s breath caught.

Winona went on, “It was only for a few seconds, and he wasn’t able to get her to realize his presence. But he confirmed her survival. He needs you in order to negotiate with her... That’s all I can tell you. I think it should be enough, though.”

Orphen finally took a breath. He ran a hand over the back of his neck, wiping away the sweat that had formed there. His palm was incredibly cold. He was looking at Winona’s face, but not registering the expression on it.

He slowly looked for the words to say. “Claiomh comes first... Azalie can look after herself.”

“Okay. I’m relieved to hear it.” Winona smiled. It looked different than her usual smile—relaxed, even, though that might have been an illusion. She lifted

herself from the fence and waved her hands at him. “Let me give you some relieving news too. Your pupil’s okay. Damian took him somewhere safe. He might take a while to wake up still, but you shouldn’t need to worry about him.”

“If I’d put up more of a fight, would Majic have factored into the trade?”

“Hey, we’re finally getting somewhere. Don’t quibble.” She smiled boldly, but quickly wiped the grin off her face and said, “Your Sleeping Beauty—ah, the girl named Claiomh, I mean—by Damian’s reckoning, her mind or soul or whatever’s left her body. So her body’s not dead, but who knows how long it’ll last like that. Could be that she just passes on, or becomes a different person entirely. That’s what he said.”

“Is he just guessing?”

“Damian’s a powerful white sorcerer. If that’s what he says, nine times out of ten, he’s gonna be right.”

“A white sorcerer...?” Orphen asked, taken aback.

Winona nodded simply. “Let me tell you what happened to your Sleeping Beauty. She was attacked on her way back to the inn by a Doppel X named Ryan.”

“Ryan...?” Lottecia’s voice cracked. Her eyes were wide, a hand covering her mouth.

Winona raised an eyebrow in a shrug-like gesture. “It’s not just dragons working as agents of the sanctuary. Makes the most sense for humans to infiltrate human spaces, after all.”

“But...Ryan spent half a year at my dojo—”

“Cause Yuis was there, probably. Not only is there no way to tell when they’ll take action, they’re more careful than you’d think.”

“So Ryan did that to Claiomh?” Orphen got them back on topic.

Winona shook her head. “No. He just got a step away from killing her. I wasn’t there, so I can’t say exactly what happened...” She frowned. “The problem is she had that Deep Dragon acting as her protector.”

“You said before that Leki killed Claiomh,” Orphen recalled. “I can’t imagine

that's true, though. What reason would Leki have to hurt her?"

At the very least, the baby Deep Dragon had never done anything but protect Claiomh up until this point.

Winona smiled wryly. "Well, of course not. He wouldn't harm her."

She suddenly went silent. Lottecia was pursing her lips in irritation, but Winona held a hand up to her. Her nose twitched like she was sniffing something, though that likely wasn't the case.

She then swiftly took a stance and stared in the direction of the door to the roof.

Orphen could feel viscerally the reason she'd suddenly gone on alert. His nerves were giving him the same signals, that there was some threat close by that he could sense.

He put his hand in his jacket and gripped the silver shortsword. He had no idea whether it would be of any use or not, though...

After a short silence, Winona murmured, "It'd probably be quickest to ask this guy if you want the details."

"I suppose so." The voice came from behind them—under the railing.

Orphen turned around. At the same moment, a blond man leaped up from beneath the fence. His eyes were glowing green and his mouth was wide open, baring his canines.

As he flew over the railing onto the roof, Orphen drew the shortsword from his jacket and plunged it right into the man's face.

With a sensation like he was cutting through a paper balloon, the man burst apart and disappeared.

A moment later, there was a loud noise and something went flying. The sound came from behind him again. The door, which they had initially been cautious of, had been blown to pieces. And standing there was a man who looked identical to the one Orphen had just sliced apart.

He must have stretched out when he destroyed the door. His arm stretched out two meters or so, limp, until he shook it and returned it to its original

length.

He looked entirely dull. He wore a completely uninteresting worn-out suit. His features were plain. His face and hair looked weary and battered. The only thing that stood out about him was his unnaturally brilliant green eyes.

He looked like the sort of man you'd be able to find anywhere.

That man stepped forward and artlessly brandished his right arm.

Then his fingers stretched out like whips and crashed into Winona from the side.

Unable to dodge the blow, she hit the floor and bounced several times

Orphen held up his shortsword and deployed a spell. "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

The beam of pure white light engulfed the Red Dragon—and then spun off in a random direction, as if deflected by an invisible wall, and exploded fruitlessly in the distance.

"What?" Orphen groaned, though he didn't have time to think about it.

The Red Dragon, the Berserker, Helpart...was headed toward him.

Lottecia finally screamed.

Helpart revealed the hand he'd been hiding behind his back until now. In it, he held a drawn blade. It was a thin, straight sword with a strange shape, like it was only meant for display. The blade shone white as if to explain its name.

"Freak Diamond!"

Orphen ignored Lottecia's voice and jumped to the side. He dodged the fingers flying at him, their target having shifted to him from Winona.

He blocked my sorcery... Orphen clucked his tongue and began to form his next move.

The sword. His defense against sorcery. He put two and two together.

In the war between Celestials and sorcerers long ago—there were those who called it that, but it was really no more than a game of tag—the Celestials gave the humans under their command countless weapons they could use to fight

against sorcerers. Endowed with their powerful sorcerous glyphs, these weapons displayed fearsome powers and slaughtered more sorcerers than the actual Celestials, who seldom emerged to fight themselves. Due to their nature, most of these weapons had the power to defend against sorcery.

Human sorcery might have advanced by leaps and bounds since those ancient times, but it was still difficult to penetrate these weapons' defenses. And...

This *guy's gonna use one of those?!* Wielding the weapon was a Red Dragon assassin.

Seeing the monster wielding this glowing sword, Orphen groaned with hopelessness. Red Dragons already had no sense of pain or weak points, so blades and bludgeoning weapons wouldn't work against them. If they could block sorcery too, they became invincible.

If he can block a heat ray, then I can't even get close to him. Orphen was about to stand, but put his hand to the ground instead. *I'll have to find a way to take him by surprise and steal the sword.*

He took a breath and began to weave a powerful composition. Shouting, he released his spell.

"I intone thee—" His breath caught.

His vision suddenly darkened. Shuddering, he gasped for breath. Orphen writhed, consciousness fading from lack of oxygen. But there was something strangling him powerfully from behind, and he could barely move.

Still, he forced himself to turn around, and...

"What...?"

There, Orphen saw Helpart, but he looked slightly different. The right side of his chest had been gouged out, and he was missing his right arm completely. The wound had carbonized, but other than that, there was nothing particularly different about him. The man's elongated left arm was strangling Orphen. It was wrapped around him so tight, he was worried it would snap his neck if he let it.

Orphen moved just his eyes to look at the Helpart in the doorway—the one

holding the sword, with all its limbs—only to find that one in the process of crumbling away. The sword fell to the ground with a clang.

“The first was a fake. Is it so surprising that the second might be the same?” the remaining Helpart murmured quietly.

“Gh...!” Orphen groaned, sticking the shortsword into the arm wrapped around his neck even though he knew it wouldn’t work. Even as he stabbed him, the arm squeezed tighter, slowly lifting Orphen from the ground.

The tip of his nose felt hot. His throat burned. His jaw bent. Worst of all, he couldn’t make a sound—couldn’t release a spell. He was panicking.

“Orphen!”

He heard Lottecia’s yell and a heavy sound like something being thrown. She’d probably done something that Helpart had deflected, but his vision was so dark now, he had no way to see what it was.

He was going numb. Trembling. His whole body was boiling. He could hear a grinding in his head and he wanted so badly to just give in.

The temptation was impossible to resist.

At least it was a blissful end.

Something that had gone on for so long would be brought to its completion in an instant. The temptation could bring everything to an end.

This whisper of invitation was omnipresent, always in someone’s ear.

In terms of ease, it was the most supreme choice in the world. Especially in this era, where it had been proven that souls and heaven didn’t exist.

The gods were gone from this land, and life and death were now equal...

...

Bullshit! Orphen shouted internally, bringing his arm down and then up, throwing the shortsword in his hand at Helpart, where he stood several meters away. He didn’t know if the blade had hit his opponent, but he pressed all his fingers against the dragon’s arm around his neck, trying with all his might to rip his enemy’s arm off. A second later, the arm loosened a bit. The sword must

have hit him, though Orphen couldn't see anything, his vision hazy with tears. A moment later...

"Raaaaah!" He heard a roar in his fading consciousness. There was an impact and the arm was suddenly gone, his body freed. He looked up and saw Winona holding a sword—the sword Lottecia had been holding—after cutting through the dragon's arm.

"Hey, this is a nice sword." By the time she was finished saying that and getting back into a striking stance, Helpart had reformed his arm expressionlessly.

He pulled the shortsword from his throat artlessly, tossed it aside, and muttered, "I won't let you interfere..."

He couldn't hear the end of the dragon's words, but Helpart went on nonetheless. He likely hadn't intended Orphen to hear anyway.

"My partner...wishes to bet life, death, and everything..."

Right after he finished—no, it was slightly earlier—Helpart howled and the building was blasted apart in an instant.

Chapter IV: Two Hours, Ten Minutes

“Ryan. You must go outside this world.”

The voice was beautiful, like a bell rung by a freezing wind.

What...? Why am I remembering this...?

After you open your eyes, you eventually forget the dream you were having.

It's hard to say when it will happen, but at some point, you'll be unable to recall it anymore.

All you remember is that you had a dream. Maybe that someone was in that dream.

But you don't remember the dream.

You don't remember anything, but...

What... What am I doing...?

The Green Gem Armor was one of the most powerful weapons created by the Celestials. The ultimate arms, crafted by the unparalleled caster Isterviva. It was literally the ideal weapon. While perfectly protecting its wielder, it also displayed inexhaustible offensive power.

As long as you made use of it within the means of its abilities, it was the best possible weapon, one that nothing could possibly surpass.

Or rather, it was one step before that. On the verge of death, Isterviva hadn't been able to completely perfect the weapon.

As a result, the weapon had several flaws.

Still, the sanctuary made use of it despite its flaws, in light of its usefulness.

“Did that surprise you? Yes, I said outside. You must go where our power does not reach... So take this with you.”

Outside.

The fear he felt when he heard that word as a boy—a child, really—was an incredibly vague thing. He was already used to the tedious words of the Second World-Seeing Tower’s keeper, who foretold the world’s ongoing destruction over and over again, so he shouldn’t have felt any fear, but the things represented by that word were so big and so vague that it refreshed the feeling he thought had already been squeezed out of him. Outside.

Outside. Outside here. Outside of here.

When he actually went “outside,” there was hardly any danger there. The first place he landed in was Urbanrama, right there.

That was also where he experienced death for the first time, ten years ago.

“This armor... Oh, is that funny? Calling this ‘armor’? This is tougher than anything else in the world, though, and it’s a weapon too. It will respond to your emotions and will to tremendous effect. It will labor eternally so that you’re not hurt, so that you don’t die.”

The ultimate armor.

The thing she’d described in that way was something terribly strange. It was a pair of green tights that covered almost the entire body. The green color made it seem all the more like a Celestial invention. The Celestials were weak to sunlight and were said to yearn for the verdure that existed on the surface. They found the color to be more beautiful than anything.

That was fine, but something bothered him about this. Maybe it was something that anyone would have noticed. If the armor was so powerful, he asked, why hadn’t it been given to him earlier? It wouldn’t have been strange for him to be dressed in it right after he was born.

His mother’s gentle voice answered his question.

“There’s nothing Celestial sorcery can’t create. But...nothing they create is ever perfect.”



“He should be somewhere around here...”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“What to do about this...”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a sigh, Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon looked down at the two dwarves running in circles around him and screaming. The one wearing glasses was simply panicking, while the one carrying the sword was running around dragging the long chest behind him. They were of no significance to him, but they were also in his way.

Farther out around him, buildings crumbled as giant trees erupted from the ground, swallowing up the town. Keeping his balance amid the rumbling, Colgon stuck out one foot for the time being.

“Dwhooooa?!” Tripping over the tip of his boot, one of the dwarves tumbled to the ground, still holding the chest. Following after him, the other one fell on top of him.

“What was that for?!” One of the dwarves rose faster than he thought they would. He stood, shoving off his friend on top of him, and started wailing something like, “The crime of obstructing the path of the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the flawless hero, the Great Vulcano Volkan, who might I add just this morning obtained the seat of the Ultimate King of Wealth, is no light one, I shout with all my might! In fact, I believe the punishment is to be killed by being sentenced to the death penalty, so listen up!”

However, a moment later... “Nwhooooa?!” A tree several dozen centimeters wide sprang up right in front of him with no warning.

Since the dwarf finally went quiet, Colgon took a look at his surroundings.

It had taken no more than a few seconds for every bit of the town within sight to be destroyed. After literally swallowing the town up, the forest was increasing in density at a rapid pace. Between the large trees that had sprung up at intervals of a few meters, smaller trees emerged along with noisy,

tangling vines to form a strange moss-covered forest that went beyond even a primeval wood.

It's like packing before a move...

The forest's mass was abnormal. A sea of trees that could mow down a town was growing at an unbelievable speed.

Dodging a branch growing out next to him, he narrowed his eyes.

Ryan must be somewhere inside this sea of trees...but I'll never be able to find him.

There was no longer anything he could do with the weapons he had on hand.

Colgon sensed another branch growing out toward his neck and made to dodge again, but stopped. Or rather, he was forced to stop. He looked down with his eyes only and found himself buried in something like moss up to his ankles.

"Like moss" because if it were actually moss, it wouldn't be a problem, but he couldn't move his feet, like they were glued to the ground. And while he was standing there like a statue, more vines wrapped around his shoulders, his neck, his arms, and his body, over his black cloak.

"Gwhoa?! Do you have something to say about this, Dörtin?! Did you go off and do something to earn a bottomless grudge from a plant like this while your brother wasn't watching?! If you can think of another way to explain this phenomenon, then answer me and fix it right this instant!"

"I don't know!"

Colgon closed his eyes, listening to the wailing of the dwarves. Countless lines connected in his mind, forming a picture like embroidery. He finished the composition in an instant. After weaving it, he released it and shouted, "I intone thee, Holy Song of Destruction!"

A moment later, all the vines touching him crumbled away like dirt. The destruction fanned out from there in a chain effect, faster than the trees could spawn. A circle of trees around him crumbled to dust.

"Whoa!" The dwarves exclaimed in surprise at the sudden destruction of the

trees plaguing them.

Colgon ignored them and drew his sword from within his cloak. His sorcery spread rapidly and faded just as fast. He'd succeeded in erasing the forest from a circle twenty meters wide or so, but new trees were already pushing up from the ground around him.

After slicing through the vines creeping up with his sword, Colgon leaped back. Of course, at this point, there was a sea of trees with no gaps between them extending as far as he could see, so there was nowhere for him to run.

Well...what do I do now? he asked himself quietly. There was no need for him to panic. *I jumped in to see what I could do, but I can't win against this.*

In which case, fleeing was his only option. And since there was no route for him to flee through, he had to make one himself. Naturally, there was only one way to do this.

Picking a random direction—one where he could vaguely sense that the wall of trees might be a bit thinner—he took a breath. Holding his sword up, he shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A pure-white beam of light crashed into the wall of trees and sprayed flames in a wide area. The impact of the explosion carved out a large swath of trees, but...

That was all it did. He was able to destroy some of the trees, but new ones quickly sprouted from the ground to take their place. There was no longer any trace of the asphalt that had crumbled from the trees' appearance. New trunks and vines sprang up, shoving aside the rubble and signage of the houses that had formerly stood in their place.

“So they grow faster...” Colgon muttered to himself.

“Heeey!”

He turned around to find one of the dwarves yelling with a fist raised in the air.

“Where do you get off showing up out of nowhere and doing what you like only to give up a second later?! The least you could do is figure out a way to

save me!”

“Giving up wasn’t exactly my intention,” he said, lowering the hand holding his sword.

“O-Oh.” The dwarf’s expression softened a bit, turning somewhat blank.

“Well, that’s fine, then.”

“It’s just that I’m out of moves to make.”

“That’s not fine, then!”

Colgon frowned, slightly irritated by the wailing dwarf. He sighed as he continued to dodge the trees and vines sprouting endlessly from the earth.

Suddenly, he noticed something when his eyes happened to be pointed in the direction of the dwarves.

The younger brother (he guessed) was lying on top of that long chest they’d been carrying. The chest had been knocked over and its lid had opened. And through the cracked lid, he could see the glint of metal.

Colgon silently hurried past the dwarf to the chest. When he kicked open the aged wooden lid, several lengthy items clattered out.

The dwarf hurried after him. “Hey! Who gave you permission to kick the personal belongings of the Bulldog of Masmaturia?! Hmm... I see. Poor people are drawn to the scent of money. Alright. Stand right there if you want to make some coin, dog.”

Ignoring the dwarf’s nonsense, Colgon stared down at the objects on the ground. The chest had been stuffed full of weapons. Most of them were swords, and there was also some junk that couldn’t really be called weaponry. The one thing they all had in common was that they were all engraved with sorcerous glyphs.

“These are Celestial weapons,” Colgon muttered and looked at the dwarf.

The dwarf twitched and took a step back.

“Why...? Where did you take these from?”

“W-Weeell... No, you see, er... I excavated it from under the floor of your

murder site this morning. And I had a feeling that the law might consider it my property, so, you see...”

“No matter. There might be something useful here.”

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

Colgon set his sword down at his feet and started picking up the weapons in the chest one by one. He glanced at his surroundings—it was clear that he didn’t have much time—and began to toss them aside as soon as he picked one up.

“Aaah! Don’t just throw them all over the place like that! Just in case you didn’t catch it the first time, let me remind you that those are the precious resources this folk hero, the Great Vulcano Volkan, is going to use to lead a rich-tastic life—are you listening?!”

He was not listening.

A sword, a simple stick, something like a clock, a sword, an accessory, a box, a sword, a sword, a book... He tossed item after item beside him, glancing at each one’s glyphs as he went. Normally, to use tools like this, one needed to understand the meaning and function of the glyphs engraved in them. But there was no way he could actually analyze these glyphs. It took even specialists months to decipher the meaning of Celestial glyphs. It then took even more time and effort to identify the action required to activate the tools’ functions, and such research could be dangerous too. It was like codebreaking—easy to understand if you knew the key, but incredibly difficult to solve if you didn’t.

However, rarely, there were tools that responded to their wielder’s will and activated even if they couldn’t understand the glyphs on the weapon. Most of the weapons developed by the Celestials were made to give humans with no sorcery the ability to stand against those with sorcery, so many of them functioned to protect their wielder from danger.

So his odds weren’t bad.

Not this one... Not this one either... Nothing’s happening...

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa...”

He could hear the dwarf running around catching each of the things he threw aside.

Colgon continued, unbothered. But the chest was running out of items and he hadn't found something useful yet.

He felt sweat forming on his forehead and gulped.

The area was getting noticeably darker. The trees were starting to blot out the sky. He might need to destroy some to buy some more time.

He raised his head. The wall of trees had advanced close enough that he could reach out and touch it now. And the moment he grabbed the last object in the chest—a fist-sized egg-shaped jet-black stone...

Nothing happened.

However...

"Where did you get that...?"

The voice seemed to come from all around them—from each and every tree surrounding them.

It didn't sound unlike Ryan's voice, but it was hard to pick up. Colgon looked up, feeling like the muffled voice had him by the throat. He'd been so focused that he hadn't noticed, but the movement of the forest had stopped. It almost seemed to be watching them now.

"You say something?" It was the dwarf who'd spoken up. He was tangled up in the trees, holding more Celestial relics than he could fit in his arms.

Colgon shook his head. "No." He squeezed the black egg in his hand and stood.

It was more difficult than he thought to talk to someone he couldn't see. Still, he looked vaguely upward and said, "It came from your church, apparently..."

"Hey, he's the one who said we should steal it." The dwarf immediately pointed to his unconscious brother, but that didn't really matter.

The voice of the trees—it must have been Ryan's voice—trembled. "We collected those... Jack was keeping them safe for us... So why do you have

them...?”

Colgon grimaced, sensing something off about the voice. He answered honestly, “These dwarves carried it out from where it was hiding. That’s all.”

“Who are you?!”

“Hm...?”

“No, it doesn’t matter... It took us ten years to gather those... Give them back.”

“I have no particular interest in these,” Colgon said, slowly raising the stone in his hand. “But I believe they’re meant to be used when they’re needed.”

The stone had turned transparent like glass, and inside it, countless glyphs had begun to shine.

Did I win my bet?

The forest began to move once more, but the glyphs in the stone shone bright faster. He closed his eyes so he didn’t blind himself. At this point, there was nothing more he could do. He had no idea what the tool in his hand did. But whatever it was, it had activated. All he could do now was believe that it would protect him.

Of course... A few seconds later, he opened his eyes. It’s not as if I’ve ever lost before. I know that...

It was dead silent there. He didn’t hear the sounds of the writhing vines crashing into things or the roars of the trees breaking through the earth.

What he saw was a wall. A wall inside an aged building. The ceiling was a little low for that, he felt, before realizing he was standing on top of some sort of platform. His foothold was terribly unstable, and he wobbled with the smallest shift in his center of gravity. Based on how it felt through his boots, whatever he was standing on was incredibly soft. Judging from its height, it could have been a chair.

He looked down to find a familiar group staring up at him with their mouths wide open. To be more specific, it wasn’t their faces that were familiar to him—it was what they wore. Black clothes with red accents. The uniform of the

Continental Sorcerers' Association. He'd never personally had any dealings with the organization, but he'd seen them many times before. They appeared to be in the middle of a meeting. From the contents of the whiteboard behind them, they seemed to be endlessly discussing fruitless things in relation to the abnormalities currently plaguing the city of Urbanrama...

After looking around that much, he finally became aware of just what it was that he was standing on. It was a chair slightly removed from the meeting table, or to be more precise, the lap of the woman sitting there with her legs crossed, Leticia MacCready.

He was standing there, still holding up the jet-black egg-like object.



“Waaaaah!” Orphen went flying through the air.

He opened his eyes in order to maintain his balance. He'd have no way to land safely if he couldn't keep track of which way was up.

He looked around and gleaned two pieces of information.

The first was that the ground was within sight—this was good news. If he'd been falling head-first at the ground, he'd have to just give up. If he could at least see the ground, there were measures he could take.

The second was that Helpart was also within sight. Though it could be another fake, of course.

From an unstable position in midair, Orphen wove a complex composition, thrust his arm out at his opponent, and yelled, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A beam of light cut through the atmosphere and headed for the one-armed Red Dragon. However, Helpart's body shifted a moment before the white light could reach him. He extended his left arm like a rope and likely hooked it on something on the ground. His trajectory suddenly shifted as he fell.

Orphen reached the ground as the heatwave from the fruitless explosion blew into him. Thankfully, the pressure from the blast had slowed his fall. Thanks to that, he was able to establish his footing with only a slight stagger.

He swiftly turned around. He'd fallen in the middle of a large street next to

the building. There were no people around, perhaps because they were right next to the area where the Deep Dragon had appeared. He'd thought the entire clinic had blown to bits, but when he got a proper look at it, it was only the roof area that had been destroyed.

Relieved, he muttered, "Claiomh's alright, then..."

"As long as you don't die."

He reflexively leaped to the side.

He thought the voice had been like a weapon, and he might have been right. He could see something like a sharp whip pierce right into the area he'd just been standing in. A moment later, it drew back, returning to its owner's hand.



Well, not to his hand... Orphen smiled wryly as he got back into a battle stance.

Helpart was watching him, left arm held out but returned to a normal length. Watching with his green eyes.

The dragon stood there casually, like he was just loitering. He didn't hide. He opposed Orphen from the same place the sorcerer was standing—in the middle of the street.

"I think I'll kill you first," Helpart said. "I do have a reason. It *would* be easier to kill your companions first, but I think you would put up more of a fight after your companions were killed. Judging from previous experience."

Orphen didn't answer, just waiting to see what his opponent would do. Really, it was more just that there was nothing he could do right now.

He can dodge point-blank heatwave attacks. I can't even think of anything that would work against him. He felt sweat dripping down his temple. *At least I don't have to worry about anything getting in my way here. I don't know about Lottecia, but Winona's not an idiot. She's probably already fled. I'd appreciate it if she took Claiomh with her too...*

Orphen clenched his fists. "It's too late."

"Hmm?"

"Maybe it's pointless to ask now, but you've already attacked Claiomh and Majic. Why?" Orphen asked Helpart.

"You seem to be mistaken." Helpart's heel clacked on the street. Orphen focused on him to see where he was going, but the Red Dragon had barely moved. After observing him for a moment, he realized that the combat specialist had simply lost his balance due to the absence of his right arm.

In any case, Helpart continued, "Our first priority is securing that Deep Dragon. Its power will be necessary to the sanctuary. You can understand that, can't you?"

Orphen didn't answer, just shifting back a few centimeters. Even while they were just talking, he wanted to maintain a decent distance between him and his

foe.

His opponent...didn't pursue him. He just went on, "For that purpose, Ryan Killmarked has launched an attack on the Deep Dragon using perhaps the only weapon that might be effective against it. Although this town might be taken down as collateral damage..." He indicated the area around him. "I would like you to understand."

"Not much chance of that," Orphen spat. "Is that really Leki...? Do Deep Dragons really grow that much in one night?"

Down on the ground, he couldn't see it anymore, but Leki was sitting in a park somewhere far in the distance behind Helpart.

Helpart indicated the direction without turning around. "You know nothing about the Fenrir. And..." he paused. "There isn't much more that we know. Deep Dragons have been freed from almost all biological aspects. They have no need for food or oxygen and they do not reproduce, so they do not increase in number. But neither do they decrease. Ever since that fateful meeting with the destructive gods, when they became a race of dragons...all that remained to them was their overwhelming might. A might that I believe is rightfully theirs. If it had been the Weird Dragons that had obtained that power, they would have destroyed themselves in days."

"What about you guys?"

"We would have done the same," Helpart readily admitted. "You do not understand the weight of the power we obtained... You, who consider sorcery nothing more than an extension of your arms and legs, are little more than dangerous children."

Orphen thought he could see a shadow fall over the Red Dragon's face—which had never once displayed any emotion—for just a second. No, he *had* seen emotion once before on it.

His eyes back then... The expression he'd been wearing the first time Orphen saw him.

That gaze of despair he'd worn, looking up at the sky.

It was the same look on his face now. Orphen was sure of it.

This time, however, he wasn't looking at the sky. He was looking at Orphen. And with not the brown eyes of his disguise, but shining green eyes, he said, "Ryan Killmarked is a human who understands that. That is why I consider him my comrade."

"Yeah, just commiserate, then!" Orphen leaped to the side. He thrust out his hand and shouted, "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

Helpart responded instantly to his incantation and transformed half of his body, springing to the side.

Watching him, Orphen dispersed the composition that he'd almost completed. No explosion occurred, and he immediately wove a different composition.

"I dash across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!"

Gravity instantly vanished. He took a great leap backward. As he did, he saw a part of Helpart's body cutting through the space where he'd just been standing, though he had no idea where in his blind spot it had been creeping up on him.

I have to put some distance between us...as much as I can. Landing on the roof of a nearby house, Orphen thought to himself, *If I don't have to worry about anything in my surroundings, there's no need for me to come at him from head-on.* He would blow the dragon away with his most powerful attack from as far away as possible.

It was possibly the only way to deal with such an all-powerful assassin as a Red Dragon. Large-scale destruction would render his assassination techniques meaningless.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" An impact struck him, so intense that he almost lost consciousness.

It wasn't a physical impact—if there were a recoil, he would have been dead in a second—but a torrent of the mental energy he'd used to weave his spell. Releasing power without controlling it was akin to a taboo for sorcerers. But Orphen had ignored that and let everything he had out. White light blotted out everything in his field of view, and amid the sound of the rumbling explosion, he could hear small destructive sounds like the chittering of insects. The heat

generated by the blast melted everything, and the shock waves mowed down whatever remained. Something burst with a snap. The leather gloves on his hands boiled and melted to bits. The pain and heat spread from his arms to his shoulders and then through his entire body.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

When the light faded, he finally realized that he was screaming. He stripped off the foul-smelling, smoldering jacket he was wearing and threw it to the ground.

All that remained in front of him was an enormous hole.

Several blocks had evaporated, leaving only the remnants of sorcerous destruction and some still-burning whirls of flame. Orphen buckled from the pain of the burns likely covering his body, falling to his knees. Still, he clenched his teeth and waited, though even he wasn't sure what exactly he was waiting for.

One minute. Two.

Vaguely measuring time with his breathing, Orphen shuddered. In the flaming aftermath of the hellfire he'd unleashed on the city, nothing moved.

Helpart had died. Surely. He'd perished, bathed in flames.

“Did I...get him...?”

“You likely would have if I hadn't taken a similar surprise attack this morning.”

Orphen gasped and twisted around, clucking his tongue.

Something went past him, grazing his cheek. A second later, the smell of blood filled his nose.

Keeping his balance somehow, Orphen went on the defensive and found Helpart waiting behind him.

Pulling his extended finger back, he said, “That man...Ed? It's strange. The two of you seem very similar to me for some reason. Based on your histories and types, I can't imagine you've met...”

“Of course we're similar. We learned from the same master,” Orphen

murmured, putting a hand to his slashed-open cheek.

Helpart shook his head. “If you had a connection like that, I would have been able to find it via the Network.”

“Screw your Network. The same combat techniques. The same training. The same education. He and I learned the same things. So what if the Network says otherwise. It can’t bend reality.”

“Hmm. I will admit the Network has deficiencies.”

Orphen ignored Helpart’s words and continued his murmuring. Words were about all he could produce through the pain and discomfort of his burned skin. “The only difference is that he learned Master’s techniques in secret and I learned them in the open. As a result, I gained Master’s techniques. And he... Colgon...” He removed his bloody hand from his face and groaned. “He obtained Master’s strength. According to Azalie, anyway.”

“I just can’t understand what you—”

“What is Master’s strength? If it was Colgon who took your arm from you, then I couldn’t even scratch you doing the same thing. Is that what it means?!”

“...”

“But Master died, and his students are all who-knows-where now. So what’s —”

“The pain must be driving you mad. You have no strength left, do you?”

“What’s the point of that now?”

“I’m going to finish you off now. I suggest that you don’t resist.”

“This is my power now! The things I want to protect, I can only protect with my own power!” As he shouted, he felt his body grow lighter.

Am I dead...? His body moved so freely that he seriously thought that for a moment.

Helpart was moving too. He spread out the fingers of his left hand and they all stretched out explosively.

One of those fingers pierced Orphen’s left thigh. Another one dug deep into

his right side.

He'd been watching as Helpart had launched his attack, but he'd had no way to dodge. That clued him in that he wasn't actually moving that quickly.

But Orphen took off running anyway. Straight toward Helpart.

The third finger—his ring finger? Not that it mattered—pierced his left palm and then, as if sewing through cloth, went straight into his elbow and then his shoulder.

Still, he didn't stop. He didn't feel any pain, so it didn't even occur to him to stop.

The fourth finger. It was coming at him from behind, trying to pierce his back and gouge out his organs, but it couldn't keep up with his forward movement and only lightly grazed his skin. Even he didn't know how he was seeing what was happening behind him.

The final, fifth finger.

It was headed straight for him, right between his eyes. If it hit him, it would pierce his skull and scramble his brains.

It was moving at a speed no human could surpass. And yet...

Orphen batted it out of the way with his right hand. Its trajectory changed, it stretched out behind him, only grazing his face on the way past—it might have taken his ear with it, though. He could feel liquid filling his ear. It was probably blood.

Still, he didn't stop. He suddenly realized that he was within reach of Helpart.

He saw the Red Dragon—the natural-born slaughterer who felt neither pain nor fear—open his mouth wide in a scream. He was acutely aware that he couldn't hear what the dragon was shouting, but he still understood the words coming from his mouth.

“Why won't you stop?!”

Orphen thrust his hand out like a spear and stuck it in Helpart's mouth. He grabbed the dragon's tongue and gripped it hard. That was when his hearing suddenly returned to him.

Maybe it was so that he could hear what he himself was shouting.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

It was a small explosion. He’d used up most of his power in that all-out attack earlier. What he had left was by no means significant.

Still, the flames swelled. The Red Dragon’s body burned from the inside—along with Orphen’s own fist, stuck inside his mouth—and burst apart into pieces.

Orphen collapsed to the ground, almost swallowed up by those same flames. Feeling returned to his body. The shock delivered to his nerves was so intense, he might have died from that alone. The Red Dragon’s body had lost several more parts and was burning like a torch. Orphen fell to the ground with it, burning from the contact, but there was nothing he could do about that. Not only was he out of strength, the damage he’d taken was worse than anything he’d ever suffered before.

This isn’t funny... He cursed, writhing from the acrid smell of burning flesh. *I can’t die taking out this assassin. There’s a ton of stuff I still need to do...*

Suddenly, he felt a pleasant, cool breeze.

“Then stand up.”

No, maybe it was the voice he thought was cool. He looked up. There was a figure above him, standing with arms crossed and looking down at him.

The man had a dignity that came with age... No, that probably wasn’t right. He was still in the prime of his life—young, even. His unimpressed, analytical gaze forced Orphen to recall another person who was very familiar to him. The name of the strongest sorcerer on the continent, his master, flitted through his mind.

But the person standing there was someone completely different, of course.

Orphen stood as he’d been told. He glanced down at his feet and found the corpse of the Red Dragon, fully carbonized and cooled now. He, on the other hand, was unscathed. He inspected his body, unable to believe it. Not only were his wounds gone, but the burns he’d suffered from the backfire of his own

sorcery were no more too. There wasn't even a trace of his bangs having been singed.

Confused, he looked at the man, who just breezily explained, "I healed you."

Orphen could hardly believe it. Even with sorcery, healing such heavy wounds—fatal ones, really—without any sort of side effect was close to impossible. At least for human sorcery, it should have been.

But, unconcerned with his questions, the man continued, "I am Damian Rue. That's all you'll get from me, since we're short on time."

"You're...a white sorcerer?" Orphen recalled the name from what Winona had told him.

The man—Damian—nodded. A simple, short nod, as he looked down at the Red Dragon's body. "Frankly, I'm rather shocked. I thought Yuis was the only one who could take down this monster. Although... I suppose your solution was a bit lacking in elegance."

"I'm not gonna thank you if you healed me just to talk smack. What do you want? According to Winona, you've got a better handle on the situation here than anyone else." Though his wounds were healed, Orphen was still exhausted. He wobbled as he asked the question.

Damian walked forward, pace relaxed—Orphen reflexively went on his guard, but the man just seemed to be inspecting the corpse in front of him. Peering closely at it, he said, "Well, he's definitely dead. I'd heard that you were an assassin who couldn't kill. Krylancelo?"

"That hasn't changed. I just...didn't have any other options."

"Hmm. I suppose your resolve is commendable. Though it would have been meaningless if you'd died as well. Now, do you have a desire to use your power for something bigger than an individual?"

"I don't." Orphen spat. He felt something hard in the back of his throat, like a lump of phlegm, but he was aware that he was imagining the sensation. He took a step back from Damian and told him, "But I just told Winona I'd take it if you had a deal to make. She put Claiomh's recovery on the bargaining table."

“I’m not personally fond of such deals.” He stopped advancing and waved an arm in the direction of the stationary Deep Dragon that could be seen in the distance from the roofs. “I will just tell you that the girl’s recovery comes with its fair share of risks. This is merely my personal opinion, but I cannot imagine your *or* your sister’s power is worth enough to us to take on those risks.”

“Then get lost.”

“My lord is of a different opinion, however.” Damian gave a little shrug.

Orphen had just started to turn his back to the man. Irritated, he glared back at the man over his shoulder. “Make up your mind already. You’re getting on my nerves.”

But the other man just continued to avoid the subject. “You seem to have guessed that we don’t have much time. Very well.” He bent down and picked something up. It wasn’t Helpart’s corpse, though it looked similar. It was a leather jacket, practically singed beyond recognition. “I wasn’t lying about the risks, though. I would like to hear your opinion. What level of risk are you willing to take on? What does that girl mean to you?”

“Claiomh...” Orphen tried to answer, but the words stuck in his throat. He smiled wryly. It was a foolish question, but answering it would be even more foolish.

In life, you can naturally avoid such foolish things. This was cleverness, but people’s hearts rotted inside such narrow cleverness that it didn’t allow any foolishness at all. They didn’t give off a foul smell or change in appearance, but they did rot.

He knew all that, but he still couldn’t do something so uncool.

Orphen gave a low groan. “I just decided.”

“You decided?”

“Just now. I’ll protect what I want to protect. All of it. That girl should be acting stupid, causing chaos, sewing destruction all around her but emerging from it unscathed herself. That’s what she’s meant to do. So I’ll make sure she can do that again.” He took a shaky breath and went on, “I was stupid. I should have paid more attention. She’s been weird lately... like she knew something

like this would happen.”

“You might be right about that.”

“What?” Orphen asked. It wasn’t as if he’d been making it up, but he still hadn’t expected the man to agree with him.

Damian reached inside the melted leather jacket and pulled something out. It was the shortsword’s sheath that had been sewn onto the inside. He dropped the jacket and said, “To be more accurate, the Deep Dragon should have sensed some amount of danger. Once it made contact with another Doppel X, it should have known that the sanctuary would take some action regarding it. Though Deep Dragons should have no individuality...so this is more like an attempt to translate its thoughts in a way that we can understand...”

“I don’t care. What is it you’re getting at?”

“I’m saying that the Deep Dragon should have been getting ready. Though it had no reason to worry about its own safety. Deep Dragons are invincible creatures. And the Achilles tendon this invincible beast took on without planning to...”

“Is Claiomh!” Orphen leaped to his feet.

Damian shook his head, smiling. “And you. Your pupil too. Lottecia Crewbstar...likely her too. Any who would likely leave a scar on the girl’s heart were they lost. And there was an unexpected name among them as well.” Damian spoke as if he’d seen a list of names, toying with the sheath in his hands. He paused and chanted something that sounded almost like a song. “Ryan, I believe? Him too.”

As he said the name, the silver shortsword appeared inside the sheath. Orphen had lost it in the earlier scuffle, but Damian had retrieved it with barely an incantation. It was obviously sorcery, but Orphen hadn’t even been able to perceive the composition of the spell.

He’d heard that high-level white sorcerers could cast spells without an incantation, but it was the first time he’d actually witnessed it. *No... Have I seen it before? Kimluck’s pope...*

Pope Ramonirok. He’d called himself the first human sorcerer. If that was the

truth, then it would make him the most powerful human sorcerer as well. It was true that he'd wordlessly cast mental dominion sorcery, but even that seemed crude now compared to Damian Rue's display.

"Ryan?" Orphen asked, inadvertently hiding his surprise. Thinking of the man in the cabbage-colored clothes with the flippant smile, he asked, "Isn't he an enemy?"

"That's merely a matter of perspective. That girl is clever. No, that's not the right way to put it. She's sharp." As he spoke, he held the shortsword out to Orphen, sheath and all.

Orphen grimaced. "I know you're not talking about me, but that analytical tone you're taking kinda pisses me off." He took the shortsword and drew it. Making sure it was the same shortsword he was used to, he sheathed it again and went on, "I do think Claiomh has incredible instincts. But what about them?"

"I'm saying she's not dull enough to eliminate a man who's shown affection to her just because he's an enemy."

Orphen started taking his bandana off as he listened, but paused in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought you didn't want to have an analytical conversation."

"Are you only capable of sarcasm?" Orphen spat, finishing taking off his bandana. He used it to tie the shortsword to his left arm. Making sure the sheath was fastened tight, he looked back up at Damian.

"She wants to see you," the man told him with a serious look on his face. "Go to her. You can get the rest of the story from her."

"What are you—"

But after indicating the area where Orphen should go, Damian vanished like a flame swallowed up by wind. Orphen glanced around, but the man had disappeared without so much as a trace. After a moment, he suddenly realized that he'd never even been there in the first place.

A spirit! It was the ultimate form of white sorcery, or so he'd heard. Damian

had severed his connection with the physical realm, abandoning his body to become, essentially, a ghost.

Freeing yourself from physical restraints also freed you from any physical benefits. And becoming a being of pure spirit while maintaining your sanity was incredibly difficult. Normally, such spirit beings faded to nothing after only a short time. But if you were able to maintain your sense of self, you could become a being of almost unlimited power. Though most likely, there were some restrictions these beings had, their own laws they had to follow.

“Go to her...?” Orphen repeated, turning in the direction Damian had last pointed. Of course, there was no need for him to consider what the man had meant.

He was looking at the park where the Deep Dragon sat.

Chapter V: Thirty-Six Minutes

Walking through the deserted town really forced Orphen to realize just how exhausted he was.

He dragged his feet down the long, long road in front of him. He was already starting to lose track of how much he'd walked. Exhaustion had compromised his ability to sense time and distance.

Slowly regulating his breathing, Orphen set to work putting one foot in front of the other without resting. If he rested, he knew he would be stuck in one place for longer than he'd like.

He wasn't certain about anything, but there was a sense of urgency pushing him forward, like he had a limited amount of time that was steadily decreasing. He couldn't rest. He told himself that once again.

Limited time... But what's limiting it? He walked on, his questions urging him forward. *Now that I think about it, there's been something off ever since I saw Colgon in Nashwater. And it's just getting more and more complicated.* He cursed to himself, picturing the man's cool and collected face.

Ryan... Helpart... Lottecia... Now Winona and Damian? Then there's this lord of theirs. The lord of the Imminent Domain... When he listed the names out, they arranged themselves rather easily in his mind. Winona and Damian worked under this lord—along with Colgon. They said they were opposing the sanctuary. On the other hand, Ryan and Helpart were working under the orders of the dragons' sanctuary. And Orphen had gotten wrapped up in their conflict.

Of course, when he thought about Leki, he realized they weren't exactly uninvolved. That meant that sooner or later, they would have run into Helpart anyway, and if Damian had the dragon and his associate marked, then they probably would have met his group too. So it was less like they'd gotten wrapped up in something and more like they'd run right into a disaster they were bound to encounter at some point anyway.

No, he suddenly thought with a frown. Orphen scratched at his forehead, rethinking the situation. *What about Lottecia...?*

She alone stuck out in this scenario. But she was the owner of the magic sword that Ryan and Helpart had for some reason gone after.

And she'd been married to Colgon.

For sticking out, she seemed far too involved. Something was strange about the disconnect there.

Orphen thought to himself, *If she were just the owner of the sword, that'd be fine, but... What's going on here?*

Unlike the southern part of town, which he'd been in until yesterday, up here in the north of Urbanrama, the buildings were evenly spaced and the roads were wide. With not a soul in sight, they seemed even wider. There was one garbage can knocked over, perhaps by someone evacuating, but it must not have had much in it, because there were only a few scraps of paper lying nearby.

Glancing at that out of the corner of his eye, Orphen suddenly realized, *Right. It's not her; it's Colgon who sticks out.* His actions had been contradictory.

In Nashwater, he'd tried to steal Lottecia's magic sword. But if he'd wanted it, he could have just taken it two years ago when he'd split with her. It was unlikely that he wouldn't have been able to do so. And in fact, two years later, he'd gone so far as to murder her to obtain it.

If, on the other hand, his stealing the sword had just been a ploy to foil Ryan and Helpart's attempt to obtain it like Winona had said, then there wouldn't have been a reason for him to try to kill Lottecia.

Though... Orphen added with some suspicion. *I can't really trust anything Winona says. She's obviously lying about something, but...I have no idea where it begins and ends with her. It's not that she's a great liar, I just have too little information to go on.*

He needed to see Colgon.

"It's about time..." He put it into words and groaned. "That bastard... I don't

know where he is, running around... He's obviously avoiding me. Wouldn't everything become clear if I just asked him about it?"

The question was how to find him. Considering Lottecia's involvement, he had to be careful. At the very least, he wanted to find Colgon before she did.

I probably have to slug him at the very least. His mood was heavy at the thought. *If I keep this up, there'll be no one to stop Lottecia.* He wasn't looking forward to the encounter.

Just stop. This is no time to think about that, he told himself with a sigh.

"First... Claiomh. Dammit... That spirit could have at least teleported me to Leki. I can't imagine he wasn't capable of that."

He still had a ways to go. Stopping for a moment, he stretched out his back, when...

"Gwah!" With a short yelp, he fell forward. He'd felt something heavy hit him from behind.

The blow to the back of his head made his consciousness fade briefly. He dropped to the ground face-first and focused his ears, trying to get a handle on the situation.

What? Were there more of them?!

Frankly speaking, he didn't have the strength to take on another enemy like Helpart. It was difficult to find an escape route in an unfamiliar town, but he fumbled for one as best as he could. For the time being, he had to drag his heavy body up again, but he just couldn't...

Of course it was heavy. Something was on top of him—on his back.

"I see..." a voice muttered above him. "So this is an emergency evacuation device that transports you to the closest person you know when you're in danger... I thought it might be a training device that hurls you into further danger when you use it."

It was a familiar voice. Orphen's exhaustion weighed down even heavier on him.

He raised his face and yelled, "Colgon!"

“Hey. Long time no see,” the man said casually.

Orphen scratched at the ground with his nails when he saw the cold face looking down at him—no, he supposed it was just incapable of showing emotion. He felt his strength leaving him more than his irritation was rising.

The look on Colgon’s face was one of simply meeting an acquaintance for the first time in a while. That was all. In other words, nothing more than what was occurring on the surface level. It made all sorts of things that had definitely happened seem like fiction.



From five years ago to today. Everything that had happened in that span of time was suddenly nullified. Several names. Murders. Dragons. The sanctuary. Winona. The white sorcerer. A gun. A knight. A lord...of the Imminent Domain.

Lottecia.

As if they were all lies, Colgon stood there completely unchanged from the last time Orphen had seen him.

Everything spun around inside his head, and he yelled, "You're light!"

And just as he thought, Colgon replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "I'm rather heavily equipped, actually."

"No shit! You're heavy! Get off of me!" Orphen shouted, knocking the man off of his back. The burden finally removed from him, he stood.

Colgon was just waiting for him, looking unperturbed. Unable to hold down a mounting sense of irritation, Orphen found himself saying, "I can't believe you'd just show up here out of the blue."

"It's not out of the blue, Krylancelo." Colgon bared his right hand from his cloak, face still grave. He was holding some sort of black egg-shaped stone. "There's a reason."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"You may have heard me earlier. This device appears to transport someone to their closest companion when they're in danger. Though I'm not sure exactly what it would consider a 'companion.'"

The "device" he was referring to must have been the stone. It wasn't showing any sort of response now, but after he'd heard the description, it did seem to be a Celestial tool to him. It had not a scratch on it and was giving off an unnatural luster.

"I was trying to eliminate Ryan Spoon," Colgon continued, "but the situation progressed beyond my capabilities. I was able to make a narrow escape with this device."

"...And?" Orphen urged him, eyes narrowed.

Colgon sighed. Now that Orphen looked more closely at him, he noticed an unfamiliar scar on the man's lip. He must have gotten it in the last five years. But everything else was the same as it had been the last time they'd spoken, five years ago. His long black hair, his melancholy eyes, the flat tone he spoke with, they were all so unchanged they pissed Orphen off. This was the exact same man that had been living at the Tower of Fangs five years ago.

He slowly shook his head, lowering his eyes a bit. "Well, there was a bit of a problem with the place I was sent to. I was about to be killed when this device activated once again."

"I don't get it."

"I think it was the footprints that really did it. I left very clear marks."

"I get it even less now."

"Where are we?" Colgon suddenly asked. He looked around and said as if making small talk, "This town really has no distinguishing features. When I'm spat out somewhere else, I have no idea where I am anymore."

"Aren't you from here?"

"The south part."

"Uh huh."

"That's why I never got along with Forte and his north-side merchant family. You don't remember?"

"I remember. But right now, it just sounds like you're reading a profile on someone."

Orphen was aware that his tone was biting, and Colgon was just looking at him blankly. He was standing there like a big black sculpture, one hand stuck into his cloak. From the shape of his cloak, it was clear to Orphen that he was hiding all manner of weaponry inside it.

Since his old friend had gone silent, Orphen went on, "I'm saying it sounds like you're reciting a fictional past you made up for yourself. Isn't that right, Ed? Or is it Yuis?"

"I don't think you have room to criticize someone over having multiple

names.” Colgon’s expression hadn’t changed at all, at least as far as Orphen could tell. “I’m not sure what to tell you if you want to know which is my real name. To you, I am a black sorcerer by the name of Colgon. Damian Rue would probably say that since Yuis is my oldest name, it’s my real name.”

“You disagree?”

“I’ve never been called Yuis by you. So between the two of us, that isn’t my name.”

That’s splitting hairs, Orphen was about to say, but he caught himself. The words didn’t ring entirely false to him. He could see where Colgon was coming from. So when the words came out of his mouth, they’d become something else.

“What does this lord of yours call you?”

“‘Old friend.’ I’m not joking... He really has. At the very least, I don’t think he’s ever called me by name in my presence.” Colgon smiled. It was somewhat lonely, like he was thinking on a nostalgic memory. “He’s probably got it right. I have no name. I only call him lord as well.”

“So you work for this guy who’s ‘got it right’ as an assassin?” Orphen asked, tone sharp.

Colgon turned to the side as if to dodge the words. The wind in the deserted town blew gently, as if guided by his eyes. A wind not even strong enough to move a scrap of paper on the ground.

“No matter what you may think...” Colgon said slowly, “I can only do what I’m capable of.” He turned back to face Orphen and spoke quicker this time.

“Anyway, I won’t let you die. I got you involved at the behest of my lord, but I never wanted to cause you any trouble. You’re my family,” he added quietly.

Those were words Orphen knew he shouldn’t have a retort for, but he bit his lip, recalling a pair of faint eyes with a translucent shine in them—eyes that had been emotionless at times and had burned with anger at him at other times.

“Then why...?” When he recalled her gaze, the words came to his lips unbidden. “Why did you kill Lottecia? Weren’t you married?”

“For my goal,” Colgon replied simply.

“Your goal?” Orphen asked, not understanding. “Killing her was? Or marrying her?”

“Both.”

He was irritated all over again at the calm tone the man used to answer him. He knew he’d never understand from looking at the man’s face—he’d never once been able to read Colgon’s intent from his expression.

Long black hair. A black cloak covering his body. Black eyes that veiled his emotions.

In all that, he couldn’t picture the frightened eyes of the man’s wife that had come to mind earlier.

Orphen shook his head, trying to dispel the image. He opened his hand and asked, “Why are you lying?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Nothing that you’ve done in relation to Lottecia has made sense. In Nashwater, Helpart told me that he couldn’t go for the sword for six months because you were keeping an eye out for him—but I think he had the wrong idea. You don’t fear anything. And what did you do there? Go around assaulting trainees you barely knew? You almost got Claiomh too. And just so you know, I’m not forgiving you for that.” He clenched his fist again and pressed it to his old friend’s chest.

Colgon didn’t so much as twitch, but Orphen didn’t let that bother him and went on, “Plus, when you finally did take action, it didn’t even take minutes for Claiomh to find Lottecia after you cut her down. It’s not like you to leave a target like that even if you’d already fatally wounded her. Why didn’t you finish her off?”

Colgon was silent. As the silence went on, time alone slipped through Orphen’s fingers.

In the empty silence of the town, Orphen groaned. And as he groaned, he finally realized what it was he’d been thinking about and unable to comprehend

all this time.

“Did you hesitate? But why...?”

The silence lengthened. But in all that time, Colgon’s expression never changed.

Slightly opening his scarred lips, Colgon murmured, “I wonder. I don’t have all the answers. I’m not Childman.”

That was all he said. There was nothing more.

No more words came from him, but inside his eyes, there seemed to be a light that rejected any further questioning.

Orphen sighed. “Alright. Then I don’t have anything else to ask you.” He brought his fist back.

“I’m sorry,” Colgon said quietly but casually. Like he was offering nothing more than simple gratitude.

Orphen crossed his arms, cradling his fists, and looked up at Colgon again. “What are you gonna do now?”

Colgon shrugged under his cloak. “There’s nothing more I can do. I’ll leave town. If you come to the Imminent Domain, we’ll likely see each other again... Our lord’s not a bad person. I’d like it if you worked with him.”

“We’ll see. Can I see that device of yours one more time?”

“Hmm?” Colgon obligingly took the black egg-like object out from under his cloak once more.

He held it out so that Orphen could get a good look at it and Orphen held out his hand. “I release thee, Sword of Light.”

Light swelled up and exploded at Colgon’s feet. But a second earlier, the device glowed with a translucent light and transported him away, leaving behind only the glitter of the activated glyphs.

Left alone again on the street, Orphen said to himself, “If you’re not going to tell me anything, then you don’t get to force your problems onto me. Settle your shit yourself.”

He looked back the way he'd been traveling and reminded himself of his objective, settling down his slightly rattled mind.

First... Claiomh.



“Well, we should be safe now. Long as he doesn’t shoot off any more absurd beam attacks.”

She wasn’t listening. All she was doing was struggling to lift her aching body up. She knew she had lost consciousness for a moment, but it might have been seconds and it might have been minutes. She shook her head to clear the dull pain in it and took a breath. Her lungs refused to expand, but she got enough air into them to maintain her grip on consciousness.

She had no idea when she had taken hold of her sword but she found it held in her arms. It was probably when the green-eyed monster had dropped it—after all, she wouldn’t have had any other chance to pick it up—but she couldn’t even remember why she’d gone for it.

The feel of the grip should have been familiar to her, but it seemed to have changed at some point. She’d held it countless times since that day her father had died, but in the few weeks she had been apart from it, it was like it was no longer hers anymore. It didn’t feel right in her hands. A crimson metal sword that was neither cold nor warm. When that monster had taken it out, the sword had been drawn. That was the first time she’d ever seen it drawn from its sheath. And when she’d picked it up, it had definitely been drawn then too. But...

When she opened her eyes, the sword was sheathed for some reason.

Lottecia sighed, whether out of disappointment or relief she didn’t know. All she knew was that it was likely one of the two.

Freak Diamond. The magic sword of the legendary warrior Beedo Crewbstar. A memento of her father’s.

It felt somehow unrealistic that it had made its way back to her.

The place she’d lost consciousness in was now far away. Well, probably no

more than a hundred meters or so, but... After she'd fallen from the roof and was groaning in the rubble, all of a sudden, Winona had been standing in front of her. She must have grabbed Claiomh from the clinic because the girl was over her shoulder, and in one hand she held a sword. What was its name... Slake Thirst? She was holding the small but heavy sword in one hand like it was nothing more than a kitchen knife.

That's right. She'd been holding Freak Diamond then, she realized. Winona had yelled something at her, and she'd run off. After that, she had the feeling an incredibly large explosion had occurred. She'd probably only been able to run thanks to her intense fear. Fleeing here had left her so exhausted, she'd completely passed out.

She heard Winona set Claiomh down with a heavy sound on a bench in a carriage waiting area. When the girl's arm hung, limp, down to the ground, she picked it up and set it on her stomach before sheathing the blade she was carrying and sitting down on the same bench.

Then she suddenly asked, "Which do you think'll win?"

"Huh?" Lottecia asked, confused.

Winona gave her a wry smile. She raised a thick finger and pointed it in the direction they'd run from. The flames from the huge explosion earlier were still raging. Pure white heat waves radiated from the area. Even from this distance, there was heat carried by the wind.

Staring back that way, Lottecia suddenly realized she must be making an incredibly stupid face and shut her mouth. She almost didn't care considering how tired she was, though.

In any case, Winona went on. Even she was a little out of breath from how much they'd run. "That dragon... Helpart's his name. He's killed forty-nine sorcerers in the last ten years. And that's just that we know of. Each one of them was a powerful Sorcerous Stabber on a secret mission to destroy that monster. His record is eight in one day. So." She shrugged her shoulders after listing all that out. "Think that kid in black can take him?"

"I don't know..." Lottecia said ambiguously, picturing the man's face. If she'd asked if he seemed reliable, she'd have to say no. To be frank, she didn't have

that good an impression of him. At first, he seemed to be avoiding her, but every time they *did* speak, he seemed to meddle and say too much. He struck her as arrogant, and she wasn't entirely sure what he was trying to do.

When she'd thought that far, Winona spoke up again. She bent over her large body, already having caught her breath. "Well, if he loses, it's over for us too. Red Dragons never let their prey get away. Now that we've run into him, he'll chase us to the ends of the earth."

Again, she didn't understand why, but an antagonistic feeling seemed to gnaw at her. "It'll be fine."

"Hmm? You think the two of us can beat him? Are you crazy?"

"No. I think...he can win."

There was a deep rumble as the wind, the flames, and the white beams of heat still flying roared.

Looking up at them, Lottecia went on, "I don't think he'd lose to anyone."

"You got a reason for that?"

"He has...the same smell." Lottecia searched for the words...unsure if she would ever find them. After all, she wasn't aware of what she was trying to say. At the end of her search, those were the words that came out.

What her mind had vaguely settled on was their brief exchange the night before. She'd thought that she'd cornered him, but in the end, he had been the victor.

It was the same as something else that she remembered well. Something hopelessly familiar to her.

Gripping the sword that had belonged to her father, she glared at Winona. "He has the same smell as Ed. No matter what happens...in the end, he wins. Ed always..."

She was aware that Winona probably wouldn't understand her reasoning.

And all the woman did was give her a wry smile in response. Huffing a breath out through her nose, Winona told her, "You've got a lot of praise for the guy who left you, huh?"

“That’s not it!” she shouted reflexively. “I...”

“You hate Yuis so much you want to kill him, don’t you?”

“I...” Lottecia’s words faded away under Winona’s calm gaze. She felt like even her thoughts had been cut off—a dizzying sensation of loss muddled her view of her surroundings. She couldn’t pass out. Becoming aware of that, she managed to hold on. She realized that she had actually been on the brink of unconsciousness. She’d been about to topple over but caught herself at the last second.

Freak Diamond had fallen at her feet. Since she hadn’t heard it hit the ground, she must have lost consciousness for another few seconds. She’d hit her head a few times since the start of the day and her body was at its limit.

“The same thing might just happen again.”

She heard a line she’d heard once before. Lottecia raised her voice. “I won’t lose next time! I—”

But Winona just coldly refuted her. “No.”

“No...?” Lottecia frowned, sensing something about the other woman’s tone. Something cold spread through her stomach.

Winona was seated on the same bench, but her eyes were much higher than Lottecia’s. “No, but...the same thing might happen again. That’s all.”

“...?”

“He might just be mistaken, but...” Winona took a glance at the white flames still burning in the distance. “You weren’t killed... You’re still alive. If the same thing happens again, then just maybe...”

“What are you...?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it,” Winona said casually with a wave, then yawned. She’d appeared to have recovered quickly, but she must have been exhausted too. Or maybe she was just bored.

Lottecia was feeling fatigued just looking at her.

“Maybe I *should* take you to see Yuis,” Winona suddenly said as if to take her

by surprise.

Lottecia looked up with a start. “But you just said—”

“Mm... I guess I changed my mind.”

“You can’t just...”

“It’s not my skin on the line. Simple as that.”

“But...” Lottecia didn’t know what to say. She’d been on the verge of passing out, but her heart was racing now. She even felt a chill. Winona’s casual attitude annoyed her immensely, but she had no idea what to say to the woman. Should she jump on this new proposal or reject it? Should she cry? Should she scream? She had no idea.

“So?” Winona frowned at her, still sitting. “Do you want to see him? Or don’t you?”

“I...” Lottecia looked around as if searching for an answer. Of course, there was no way she’d find one in her surroundings. After the explosion earlier, the town was dead silent. The only thing she found after looking to the right and left was a gloomy-looking man in a black cloak.

“Huh?” She froze.

She looked over to see Ed right there. He was just standing still, holding something like a black egg in his hand.

Lottecia’s head whipped back around to Winona, but Winona just waved as if to say it wasn’t her problem. With no idea what was going on, she heard Ed begin to mutter something.

“I see. So that’s what he meant. Krylancelo...” Ed murmured irritably, hurling the egg at the ground. It didn’t break, however, merely rolling away.

Lottecia’s mind went blank. She balled her hands into fists, staring in his direction.

But as she reached down toward Freak Diamond at her feet—*bang!* There was an explosive sound that threatened to rupture her eardrums. At the same time, the sword jumped and fell back to the ground a few centimeters away.

She held her hand where it was and looked up, finding Ed holding something out in his right hand. A strange angular object that shined with a black luster. It had a hole in it that was pointed straight at Freak Diamond.

She couldn't move. Frozen in an unnatural position, she began to see her fingers tremble when Winona spoke up from beside her.

"Your Tempest bullets are expensive, aren't they? Don't waste 'em like that."

Ed slowly put the weapon away under his cloak. Apparently it was called Tempest. "It was the Tower that came up with the technology."

"And you were the one who leaked it, huh? Does that mean you can use it whenever you want? Last I heard, all the equipment allotted to you is our lord's property."

Ed had no rebuttal to that.

Lottecia reached her limit, collapsing to her knees. Now that she was lower to the ground, her hand was touching the sword.

She grabbed Freak Diamond, useless as it was in its sheath, and raised her head.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Ed said coldly. "We don't have much time. That forest will be here soon. We'll all die if we don't flee."

"Forest?" Lottecia asked, but no one answered her. The other two both seemed to be aware of what he meant.

"That bullet you just wasted," Winona piped up. She was shouldering Claiomh's body as she spoke. "If you put it in her head, that wouldn't have taken any time, would it? If you don't want it to be a waste, you could take another shot. Wouldn't even take you seconds. And this situation is pretty ideal too. How many people do you think are gonna die in this commotion?"

What is she saying...? Lottecia listened as she gripped the hilt of the sword.

"I'll decide..." Ed started dispassionately.

"You'll decide what you do. Right. Well, whatever."

Winona shrugged and stood. She walked off in one direction as if she knew

exactly which way to flee.

Ed began to walk too, but toward Lottecia. He passed right by her and kept going...

“Ah...” The small sound that leaked out from the back of her throat quickly grew explosively loud. “AaaaaAAAAAH!”

As she screamed, Lottecia swung the magic sword and stood—Ed had his back to her. Either because of the cloak he was wearing or because of the armor he had on underneath it, he looked a size larger than he actually was. Lottecia slammed the sheathed sword at the center of his back, as hard as she could. However...

This also happened quickly. The cloak fluttered behind him, and just when it seemed to obscure Lottecia’s vision entirely, it wrapped around the sword and tossed it away. Pulled with it, Lottecia fell to the ground.

Even she could hardly believe that she was still holding on to the sword. Sensing that this was her last chance, she struggled to stand one more time. She was certain that she would be killed before she could. But even though she knew that, she didn’t care.

I should have just done this from the beginning... Though she wasn’t certain exactly when “the beginning” was, she shouted to herself, *I should have just done this without thinking!*

If she had...then at least she wouldn’t have had to feel like this.

By the time she got to her feet, Ed was facing her with the cloak wrapped around him. He wasn’t holding a weapon. He wasn’t in any kind of stance.

Is he mocking me?!

Lottecia raised the sword up, infuriated.

A moment later...

There was a terrible buzzing like the flight of a swarm of insects. And it was coming from the sword in her hands. She looked down and found that it had been drawn from its sheath. The blade shone with a white glow.

“I drew it...?”

“Looks like it. The sword is activated. It happens automatically when picked up by its wielder,” Ed said quietly. “But no one knew the form the sword would take when activated, so no one could control it. That’s all it was.”

“With this...!” Lottecia held the drawn sword up, pointing its blade at Ed. But Ed didn’t so much as flinch.

“Of course, you don’t know how the sword functions either. Give it up.”

Lottecia glared at him, unable to say anything in response, just panting with exertion. The man she was facing off against simply turned on his heel to follow after Winona, who was walking off with no intention to get involved in their conflict.

He turned only his head back to her and stated indifferently, “Everyone’s death is fated, apparently...but I wonder what that really means. For instance, if running into me leads to your death, maybe that’s your fate. Either way, I always have the ability to pencil your death into my schedule.”

Lottecia grit her teeth together and shouted, “I’m not dead yet!”

“Don’t ever appear in front of me again.” Ed fully turned his back to her. “I’ll only warn you once... Next time, I’ll kill you again.” Then he walked off.

Lottecia was left there, staring at the tip of her sword. At its smooth, gentle, white outline, like that of a flower. Its blade trembled slightly, but it took her a few moments to realize that that was because she herself was shaking and not because it was a function of the sword.

She looked up once more and found that Ed and Winona had taken several steps away from her. She shouted after them, “You talk big, but you’re just a man. I know that better than anyone. You’ll be the one to die next. I’ll make you pay for what you did to me. I will find a way to kill you.”

Ed didn’t turn back around. He just walked off, cloak billowing behind him.

Lottecia touched her face. She realized for the first time then that she was crying.

“Do you have no reason to even fear me?!” Her voice no longer reached him.

She took a breath and the sword returned to its sheath with the same sound

it had made earlier.

She slowly pointed it down. She couldn't do it now. She shook her head, realizing that.

I can't now... It won't work...

She headed after them...until she noticed something strange.

Winona had turned back toward her. That in itself wasn't strange, but her expression...

She was watching her with an expression Lottecia had never seen before—in part interested, in part cold, both amused and full of hate. After giving her that look for several seconds, Winona turned away.

Chapter VI: The Time of Judgment

The Green Gem Armor extended its tentacles, increasing its mass as if it had an inexhaustible capacity. It was, essentially, a simple strategy—just smack its target with more mass than it was capable of destroying in one instant. It took time to generate the mass he would need, but Helpart should independently assassinate anyone who would interfere with the process. That sorcerer in the black cloak had interfered once, but it hadn't been much of a problem. The sorcery of one individual wasn't much of a threat.

All he needed to think about was killing a Deep Dragon.

The Deep Dragon. That was supposed to be his mission. There was nothing he should have prioritized more than that.

There...shouldn't have been. Ryan said to himself, deep, deep inside his armor. *I don't understand... I'm missing memories? Again... What did I lose this time?*

He curled into a little ball and shivered inside his armor, inside the darkness. He shouldn't be thinking about it now. He could just ask his partner about it later.

About what he forgot this time.



Deep Dragons were beautiful beasts. So Orphen thought as he stared up at the creature from right before it. In the silent, deserted town, with the autumn sky at his back, he naturally found himself looking upward.

Meeting this beast meant certain death. It would take your life without hesitation. That was nothing more than a simple, plain truth. There was no point in thinking of the reason why when you were killed by this beast.

But right now, the Fenrir was merely sitting there, still. It occupied the plaza in the middle of the park with its enormous body, waiting motionlessly for something.

Orphen slowly stepped through the fence at the entrance to the park. “You know...” he found himself muttering. “It’s kinda scary when it’s this quiet.”

You should take your death as a given when you encounter a Deep Dragon. And Orphen was just looking up at such a beast. It was a strange feeling.

“Damian!” Orphen called, looking around. He didn’t see the white sorcerer anywhere nearby. “I’m here! You said you’d explain everything when I got here, right?!”

“I did not.”

There was still no sight of him, but Orphen heard his voice respond. He didn’t find this particularly surprising.

What was unmistakably Damian’s voice continued quietly, “I told you to ask her.”

Orphen had no idea who he meant by “her.” But right around then, he noticed a change in the Deep Dragon. Up until now, it had been staring at a point in the distance, unmoving, but now it was beginning to stir. It moved to look directly at him.

“What...?” Orphen backed up under the glow of the green eyes turned his way. Since the dragon was sitting on the ground, its head wasn’t that high up. Maybe halfway from where it would be standing. Still, it was far above his own height.

Some worshipped Deep Dragons as gods. Or dragons in general. When members of the Dragon Faith described the object of their worship, the race they most often brought up was the Celestials, the Weird Dragons who had led humanity in the past. According to them, Celestials were goddesses, the example humanity should follow; perfect, blameless beings. That wasn’t particularly strange. They were the ones who taught humanity everything. Ethics, morals, the meaning of life; their lessons were the basis of all of these for humanity.

When those of the Dragon Faith spoke of Deep Dragons, the beasts were considered reapers that always brought death with them. There was no way to oppose their judgment or even appeal against it. They dealt a merciless death

that did not allow even a complaint from the faithful (or its victims). It could also be called the easiest path to liberation from one's earthly desires.

Their logic was ridiculous, but when faced with such a dragon, even if he didn't agree with them, he understood where they were coming from. That was what Orphen thought, having come into contact with several dragons in the past.

So when the Fenrir suddenly stood without a sound, closed its eyes, and charged at him, shaking its head, Orphen was completely speechless.

That giant body running at full speed should have generated a ton of power, but since Deep Dragons didn't have footsteps, it just looked like a surreal image. Still, Orphen's reflexes were thankfully still functioning. He managed to leap out of the way before the enormous black wolf squashed him under its feet.

"Orphen!" The voice resounded directly inside his head. He realized right away that he wasn't hearing it with his ears, but he didn't have any time to reply.

The dragon went right past him, still without making any sound, crushing the fence and leaving the park. It leapt over the street outside and into a river beyond it, disappearing for a moment.

"Wha...?" He couldn't even form a full word at this point. His mind went completely blank as he stared after the dragon.

The wolf's black head peeked out from the river. It trudged out of the water and shook its body, flinging water everywhere.



The black wolf, ruler of Fenrir's Forest, plopped down in the street where a large, shallow puddle had formed, and moved its ears about this way and that as if searching for something. When its ears perked straight up and it beat the ground with its front paws (of course, there was no sound), Orphen finally realized what it was doing. The godlike beast was trying to express that it was angry.

"Why'd you dodge?!"

"Oww!" Orphen grimaced, the voice piercing his brain once again. His wincing wasn't just because of the volume of the voice, however. He'd begun to catch on to exactly what was happening here.

"Are you...Claiomh?!" he yelped.

"There you have it." A cool voice confirmed his suspicions. This one did not belong to Claiomh. Orphen looked to his side and found Damian Rue's composed face looking back at him. "The Deep Dragon child gave this girl its body and sorcery. I did think it was strange. There was no reason it wouldn't have attacked me when I dove into this Deep Dragon's mind. But it couldn't, of course. This girl has none of the knowledge required to weave such a complex spell as one to attack an invading force in her own consciousness. It was a bit of a letdown when I figured it out, really."

"But... This...!"

"It's nothing too surprising, is it? When I asked the girl, she told me that the Deep Dragon child occasionally used its sorcery in response to her requests. This is only a small step away from that. For a Deep Dragon, at least." Damian folded his arms and said all this matter-of-factly.

Orphen was surprised to find that he was on the verge of simply accepting this at face value. He was completely lost in the situation that had presented itself to him. He waved his arms as if to give himself some momentum as he shouted, "A small step?! Are you kidding?!"

He pointed his arms at the Deep Dragon after waving them. The black wolf just cocked its head, face blank.

"I mean, this is stupid! Why did he have to do such a thing?!"

“Well, how should I know that?”

“Listen, you...!”

“I asked him to.”

Orphen looked up at the dragon when he heard her voice. All he saw was the huge beast though, not the girl he knew so well.

It seemed to make him almost sad, strangely.

For now, he pushed such emotions aside and asked, “You asked...? Asked who?”

“Leki.”

He felt a sense of déjà vu having this conversation. He’d had such a telepathic exchange before, when they’d met a Deep Dragon in Fenrir’s Forest. And it had been with another enormous black wolf that had looked exactly like this.

Of course, the conversation he was having with the dragon in front of him was nothing like the one he’d had before. He was unmistakably talking to Claiomh now. He even pictured her face every time her voice echoed inside his head. It was a strange sensation, hearing her speak to him without being able to see her gesticulating wildly in front of him.

Geez... Orphen scratched his head, groaning. “What exactly did you ask him?”

“Well...let’s see. Where should I start?” The dragon seemed to give Damian a glance.

The white sorcerer just shrugged his shoulders listlessly.

“Start from the beginning,” Orphen suggested. “I’m completely lost here.”

“I guess this is something I have to do, isn’t it?”

Ignoring Orphen’s request (though not betraying his expectations), her story started in a rather clumsy manner.

“We don’t have much time... You should probably make it quick,” Damian Rue muttered.

Orphen didn’t have anything to say to that. He couldn’t think of anything,

anyway. There wasn't a clock anywhere in the vicinity, but he didn't know what limits on their time the white sorcerer was talking about in the first place.

The one thing he did know was that it was getting closer to midday. He looked up at the faded sunlight of the fall sky and groaned. "Well, tell her that."

He looked back at the giant beast. The dragon—or Claiomh, rather—had returned to its original spot in the park and settled back down. It shook its tail every so often, though Orphen had no idea if it was trying to signify something by doing that. It sure made the creature look less dignified, though.

"I can't really think of a way to make it quick..."

"Kinda matches the feel of the voice, though..."

"What does?"

"Don't worry about it." Orphen frowned. "But aren't you a little too calm?"

"I wouldn't say that. I've gone through a lot, you know. I couldn't even talk before. Damian had to show me how."

"If you think you can, you can probably do anything. A Deep Dragon's power is basically limitless, after all," Damian added.

Orphen grinned wryly. "That so? I guess Claiomh's obtained new heights of power for humanity, then. What do we do about that? Helpart was pretty sure that if anyone other than a Deep Dragon had their power, they'd self-destruct."

Damian raised an eyebrow. Orphen wasn't sure why, but he seemed to have gotten the man's attention. The white sorcerer crossed his arms and said, "I have to say I'm surprised she hasn't experienced any changes in her mental landscape."

Orphen hadn't even been thinking that far. "What kind of side effects were you thinking she'd experience? I mean, there can't be any precedent for this kind of thing."

"For one thing, it surprises me that she's able to converse with us normally—she should be peering directly inside our minds right now."

"Eh...?" That took Orphen by surprise. His words failed him.

Damian explained, regardless. He put a hand to his chin and spoke matter-of-factly. “She should have full access to my thoughts and yours, with or without our say. Normally, touching another’s mind is enough to cause some confusion —”

“Really? If you understand what other people are thinking, I’d think it’d make things easier.”

“...Well, that’s what she says.” Damian waved the hand he’d been covering his mouth with. Orphen could imagine the two of them had had exchanges like that a few times already. Damian had a look to him like nothing would surprise him anymore.

Orphen wasn’t quite ready to accept all this yet, though. “Well, still... You know everything I’m thinking, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Seriously?”

“I guess you’re not really thinking anything surprising or weird, are you, Orphen?”

“Sorry to disappoint. Feels pretty weird to say that, though...” He crossed his arms like Damian. Now that he thought about it, Leki was always reading Claiomh’s thoughts and taking action based on them—it was probably akin to breathing for them.

He reflexively thought of barricading his thoughts against mental dominion, but it was probably pointless to even try to resist against a Deep Dragon. Realizing that powerlessly, he told himself, *Just give up. If Claiomh’s not making a big deal of it, it’s probably nothing to worry about.*

“I was a little surprised when I peeked inside of Ryan’s mind, though...” Claiomh piped up.

Orphen looked up at her. “Just explain from the beginning, then. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Well, yesterday, when we went back to the inn without you, Ryan was waiting for us there. And Majic just ran off. Come to think of it, did you find

Lotte?”

She must have meant Lottecia. Orphen gave a low groan. “You can read my thoughts, can’t you?”

“I can, but all the information comes to me at once, so it’s hard to make sense of it... Hey, Orphen, you didn’t do, like, something really silly with Lotte yesterday that you can’t tell me about, right?”

“Ask her about it later. For now, she’s okay...I think. Can you get on with it, though? Apparently, we’re short on time.”

“That’s right. We are.” The Deep Dragon nodded its great head. It scratched its nose with its front paw before it went on, as if it found it difficult to continue without gesturing in some way. *“How should I say this...? I could tell that Leki was suffering.”*

“Huh?” What she was saying got even harder for him to understand. It couldn’t be that even she didn’t know what she meant. It seemed more like when she tried to explain it, she struggled to put it into words.

She thought for a moment after Orphen’s confused response and corrected herself. *“It was...ever since we met Ryan in Nashwater. Leki seemed to be suffering. It was like Ryan and Leki were on the same side, and he didn’t want to be fighting with him.”*

“Well, they’re both outside agents fighting for the sanctuary. They call themselves Doppel X. Basically, everyone who fights outside the sanctuary for them is one of these Doppel X. The Deep Dragon found himself caught between a sanctuary ally and that girl.”

For once, Orphen was happy to hear Damian’s interjection. It didn’t quite sit right with him though, so he asked, “I understand that...but does this mean that Leki is in opposition to the sanctuary now? He likes Claiomh that much? Enough to cut ties with his own kind?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. It was because he couldn’t cut ties with either side that he became stuck between them.”

“Leki...fought with Ryan for a little while, but he seemed so sad about it... I told him it was okay, that I’d handle the rest...and then I’m not really sure what

happened...” She went quiet, and Damian picked up again.

“This is just a hypothesis of mine, but I’m reasonably certain I’m correct. Deep Dragons have no individuality. That’s why individuals around them get separated into only two categories—friend or foe.”

Orphen listened quietly as the man spoke like he was lecturing about something he’d studied well.

He gestured to the Deep Dragon in front of them as if to show an example. “So what I’m guessing is that anyone they consider a friend, they consider one of their own kind. And fellow Deep Dragons would have no qualms about sharing a consciousness. After all, they have no individual wills. While fighting Ryan, she said she would handle the rest. However, objectively speaking, it would be suicidal of her to try. It made no sense to leave things to her. So he gave her his body and power and he entered her powerless body instead. Meaning, what’s inside her body right now is the spiritual form of the dragon.”

He went on academically like that until he reached the important point.

“So can they go back?” Orphen asked.

Damian nodded. “It’s likely. I can’t imagine they wouldn’t be able to.”

“Weren’t you talking about how there were terrible risks involved earlier?”

“A means to an end. I wanted to know if you were ready for what you would find out. Like I said, she’s reading your mind right now. If you weren’t prepared for what you now see, I figured it would be best for you not to meet.”

“I’m so happy you care...” The Deep Dragon covered its face with its front paw like it was pretending to cry.

Looking to the man next to him, who was nodding with his arms crossed, Orphen narrowed his eyes and muttered, “This better not be an elaborate prank you two are pulling on me.”

“Like I could do this as a joke.”

“Doesn’t strike me as all that more extreme than some of your other jokes.”

“Anyway, when this happened and I saw Ryan’s face...everything he was thinking came into me. Like how those weird clothes he wears work...”

Everything. Then I knew that I had to do this." The dragon switched from fake-crying to emphasizing its point.

Orphen was struck by the knowledge that he was having a very strange experience right now, but a rumble from far off in the distance cut off his thoughts. He turned around.

The sound was coming from the direction the Deep Dragon had watched the whole time it had been waiting.

"What's...?"

"We're out of time," Damian said quietly. It was almost drowned out by the sound of the rumbling.

"Why? What's going on?" All Orphen could do was ask.

The answer came from Claiomh. *"Well, obviously, I have to handle this. But don't worry, I won't lose to that jerk."* Her voice was full of confidence.

"What?" Orphen asked, a vague sense of unease eating at him. "You're gonna fight with Ryan?"

"No!" she stated definitively. *"I'm gonna save him!"*

"Huh?" But the rumbling was so loud now that Orphen couldn't even hear his own voice.

No, it wasn't merely rumbling anymore.

In an instant, the ground of the park split in a giant fissure, and from that rift, countless giant trees emerged. Orphen looked around and the whole area had already been transformed into a primeval forest. He didn't even have time to shout as it happened.

And that wasn't all.

For some reason, the unconscious forms of Volkan and Dortin were hooked on one of the trees' branches. The sight was so unexpected, it took him a moment to process what he was seeing.

It's true... His brain stopped, he heard himself thinking in an oddly detached manner. *Claiomh's probably the only one who can handle something like this!*

In the next instant, the dwarves fell down on top of him as if they'd been aiming for him.



Finally finding his target, Ryan Spoon felt all the blood in his body boiling—it wasn't a sensation he was particularly used to, but he didn't find it all that strange. He was up against one of the strongest creatures on the continent, an invincible Fenrir, a Deep Dragon. A reaper he likely wouldn't be able to beat even if he threw everything he had at it.

Facing it head-on was out of the question. He had no chance of victory if he didn't fully make use of all the advantages the Green Gem Armor gave him. Under no circumstances could he let the enemy see his actual body at any point. He had to sink into a place where his enemy wouldn't find him, and he'd attack using merely the senses afforded to him by the tentacles.

Right now, he was only a pair of eyes in the darkness. And she shouldn't have been able to spot them. Even he thought this was cowardly, but when he considered the small protector sitting atop her head, he knew he could never be too careful.

Wait...what? He doubted the image that his own brain had just supplied to him. He was supposed to be facing off against the mightiest of beings, a Deep Dragon. Not some insignificant girl.

Or...did it happen again? The thing that always happens... It might have. Or it might not have.

His blood had cooled. But that didn't mean there was anything else he could do.

"My despair is nothing new!" he shouted in the darkness.



Ryan Spoon's life began twenty years ago.

At least, in terms of the actual passage of time, it had been twenty years—his perception might have said otherwise.

He grew up in a very beautiful place. Everything was orderly, silent, clear, with

no darkness to fear and no tumult, just white walls and ceilings, soft sheets, fluffy pillows, vases without water in them, square mirrors, and toothpaste that you could swallow... A life like that went on vaguely for a long while. A tranquil period that almost made him forget when he was born and how much time had passed since then.

He had kept frogs as pets for some time. Two creatures the size of the nail on his thumb, in a small tank. He remembered asking his mother something as he watched them.

“Why don’t these frogs get any bigger? Will they be small forever? Do frogs never change?”

His mother answered him with a faint, strained smile. She told him that the frogs had already changed. That they’d become adults, so they wouldn’t change anymore. That in the spring, they would lay eggs again, and he would understand what she meant.

It probably wasn’t an answer that she’d given much thought to. And before winter was over, Ryan had forgotten about the frogs and the small tank had disappeared from the room.

He didn’t know who had taken it. It might have been his mother, and it might have been someone else.

“The frogs...” He suddenly remembered about them years later and found himself muttering, “They probably didn’t even care about the time that they were larvae.”

When his mother heard him, the only thing she did was correct him about frogs not being insects.

Claiomh stood and was horrified at the sharpness of her senses—she didn’t even need to strain her eyes to take in all the information around her that she needed. Countless tentacles of wood pressed up toward her. But she knew which way each of them were moving, where they had appeared, and even where they would be several seconds from now. These were likely just the natural senses of a Deep Dragon, but all too quickly, they threatened to overwhelm her. She knew instinctively that the information was too much for

her to process.

I won't last that long...like I thought.

Right in front of her, Orphen was screaming, having been tackled by the two dwarves who had appeared for whatever reason with the tentacles. The tsunami-like forest bore down on them, threatening to crush them, when...

Scatter! she commanded.

She glared and the forest evaporated. There was no heat—the countless trees merely dispersed as if turning to dust. And it wasn't just the forest that she'd glanced at that had disappeared. Her gaze had pierced back and was encroaching on the rest of the trees little by little. The sea of trees was being ripped away by its roots.

I can do this... I can, she told herself. However...

"You put a suggestion on me... You didn't allow me to tell him."

She heard the voice directly in her mind and trembled. Even with the powerful body of an enormous beast, she still had her human senses.

She looked to the side and found Damian floating in the air, giving her a cold look. Beyond him, the second wave of forest tentacles was already starting to appear, but he went on, unbothered by that.

"You didn't let me explain the risks to him."

There was no need for them to converse out loud. They could just think and the other would understand.

If you told him, Orphen would stop me.

"I brought him in order to have him stop you. He's as skilled or maybe more skilled than my subordinates. I was sure that he'd be able to find Ryan inside this mess and kill him. There's no need for you to put yourself in this danger."

I can read your mind! You just want to get your hands on Leki too, don't you?!

"If you could achieve complete control over this Deep Dragon's powers... I could think of plenty of uses for them. I don't hide that."

I'll blow you away! she shouted before returning to her senses with a

shudder. What was it that she had just shouted?

“You’re already starting to lose yourself in that power. You won’t be able to maintain your sense of self for much longer. If you become completely absorbed in the group consciousness of the Deep Dragons, no one will be able to help you anymore. You’ll become a Deep Dragon completely.”

Leki’s body would never absorb me!

“A true Deep Dragon cannot be allowed to manifest in Urbanrama! This whole city will be wiped from the map!”

Just as she’d told him, she could read his mind. And even if she couldn’t, she’d be an idiot if she couldn’t understand what the expression on his face meant. Claiomh understood with a deep sense of irritation. She felt Damian’s urge to kill her with complete clarity.

In the dark chaos, something came at the edge of her consciousness like a sharp blade thrown at her. That was his animosity. Animosity alone should cause her no real harm, but Damian was something called a white sorcerer (not that she knew what that was), and he had a similar power to hers right now. She heard a dry, whip-like sound, and a sharp pain ran across her face.

She hadn’t been able to predict or foresee this, but she knew what had happened. There was a large gash on her forehead. It was an attack that the normal Leki would have been able to easily defend against, but...

I can’t control all this power!

Blood clouded her vision. She jumped back, though it wasn’t like she could avoid the red trailing down her face. She at least managed to maintain some of her vision, though she didn’t know what would happen if she kept bleeding.

She looked forward. Damian was no longer there. And the forest had grown in the time that they were talking, its tentacles pushing toward her once again.

“Ryan. You must go outside this world.”

The voice was beautiful, like a bell rung by a freezing wind.

The pronouncement came with no warning. There must have been a reason it

had to happen at that time, but his mother never told him what it was.

All she said was this: “A phantom of the past has appeared. Isterviva’s ‘child.’ It’s something that was foreseen. She knew the lifespan of the barrier better than anyone, after all.”

He knew that asking questions would be fruitless.

“This is proof that the world doesn’t have much time left too. I’ll have to tell you everything soon. You will become one of our warriors. And you will head outside the sanctuary.”

No, something was preventing him from asking questions—a defense mechanism, perhaps. Or maybe not. He could tell looking at his mother’s eyes how much would fall apart if he knew the answers to his questions.

“Did that surprise you? Yes, I said outside. You must go where our power does not reach... So take this with you.”

She had given him the Green Gem Armor. He found out later that it was all she could do for him. She had selected the greatest weapon that existed in their world, the sanctuary, for him. The ultimate weapon, that in the original sanctuary had been nothing more than a toy.

She couldn’t see Damian, but she knew he was nearby. She took a moment to spin around and wipe out the encroaching forest—it only took an instant, but in that time, she lost all feeling in her body. No, her body had moved, but it was rapidly becoming less clear to her what she was moving for, where she wanted to go, and what she wanted to do.

Is this what he meant...by absorbed?

She wasn’t without her senses for all that long, but she felt like if she stopped concentrating, she’d fall asleep for a longer period.

I have to hurry...

She looked up. The wound on her forehead ached. She’d done a fair bit of damage to the forest with that blow, but not much had changed. It was still proliferating just like before.

I have to hurry!

Even now, her Deep Dragon power was passively receiving Ryan's thoughts and memories. The information chipped away at her concentration, which was not only annoying, but also potentially fatal. What as a whole was nothing more than a vague impression was gradually separating out into individual words. Sanctuary. Mother. Green Gem Armor. Frogs. Outside. Outside. Outside!

She freed her vision once again. Before the forest could reach her, she blew away the tentacles that had been coming for her, crushing the town beneath them, all this time. Everything she could see was wiped away, but it still wasn't enough to eradicate the verdure completely.

"Ryan. You must go outside this world"...

She heard a voice. The voice of Ryan's mother from his memories.

Ryan hadn't been able to say anything back to her. He hadn't asked her anything.

That's why you...! Anger bubbled up in her for no discernible reason until blood seeped under her eyelid, closing off the left side of her vision.

That cooled her head. She wanted to wipe her eye clean, but she could barely move her body.

I can't move...? Wait—

She shuddered. It was simple gut instinct, not any sort of deep understanding of her enemy. She had realized why she wasn't able to see Damian anymore.

He'd done the same thing he had this morning—gone inside her mind, trying to destroy her from the inside.

What am I supposed to do about that?!

She tried to scream, though no sound came from the Deep Dragon's throat.

Her front legs suddenly weren't able to support her anymore and she tumbled to the ground. Even then, the body she was in made no sound.

What do I do...?

She groaned, still unable to move.

If she just knew what to do, she wouldn't hesitate to do it. Of course, she wasn't really one to hesitate even if she didn't know what to do. But right now, there was nothing she *could* do. Not in her current situation.

Can I...really not do anything?

Even with anger or panic, she wasn't able to stand.

The bleeding cut off her vision entirely.



"Hrmmm... Dartin. Listen. Rich people, you know...they've gotta be, like, calm and collected in any situation, right? They can only panic when...uhh. You know, inflation. And stocks. Those things can't go down, so keep that in mind..."

"Err, hmm... Brother... I think most rich people would prefer inflation to being grabbed by weird tree branches and dragged who knows how many kilometers away..."

Shoving aside the two babbling dwarves, Orphen somehow managed to drag himself out from the rubble—he didn't know whether it was a miracle or what, but he was uninjured.

"Uh huh. Let's see here..." he spat. "How many times have I died today? You actually go on living for a while after you start wishing you were dead, huh..."

He looked around and found that he was standing in what was now empty land. Since the forest had destroyed all the buildings nearby and had then disappeared, there was nothing left to fill the space around them.

There was a piece of a roof or something that had almost crushed him. He lifted it up and made his escape. Finally getting to his feet, he sighed. He was still so exhausted. He was dizzy; his body demanded rest, but he couldn't submit to the temptation.

He looked around again. The forest had fallen back far in the distance, though with the town cleared of obstacles, he could see it swelling forth like a swarm of locusts. He had no idea what kind of speed it was growing at, but he figured it would be a while before it reached him still. And if he had no method to combat it, he had to flee.

“Claiomh!” Orphen suddenly yelled as if it had just occurred to him. A ways away, he could see the Deep Dragon’s massive body on the ground. It was sticking half out of the now completely destroyed park and convulsing at intervals, but there was no response from her. He got closer and discovered that she was injured—rather, the Deep Dragon was.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” He remembered the time he’d gone up against a Deep Dragon this size. “I couldn’t even scratch the thing no matter what I did... Is that avalanche of a forest really that powerful?”

He ran over to her and took the massive head into his arms. The wound wasn’t actually that deep.

“Claiomh!”

“Orphen...”

He took a relieved breath when he got a response. The Deep Dragon slowly raised its heavy head, though it couldn’t even get it one meter up.

“I can’t move... I can’t really see...”

“The wound’s not bad. I can heal it, easy. Why can’t you move?”

“That guy... Damian...”

Orphen reached out to heal her, but he stopped when he heard what she was telling him. He realized that he couldn’t see the white sorcerer anywhere nearby.

“A mental attack...?”

No matter how skilled as a white sorcerer Damian Rue was, his powers shouldn’t have affected a Deep Dragon in the slightest. But with Claiomh at the helm, that was another story.

“Wait, but why’s he attacking you? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Because I...” That was all the dragon said. Its head fell powerlessly to the ground.

“Hey... Hey, Claiomh?!” He lifted up the snout, but there was no response.

Deep Dragons didn’t need to breathe in the first place, so Orphen had no idea

how dangerous a state Claiomh was in, but he assumed it was bad. Lifting up the unmoving dragon's head, Orphen shouted, feeling his heart pounding in his chest.

“Claiomh, listen! White sorcery affects the mind! So it throws the process out the window and goes straight to the results—no, umm—basically, none of it makes any sense, so you can do whatever you want to do! Like go inside someone else's mind or make yourself a spirit that can exist separate from your body!”

He shook the head in his arms, willing her to realize what he meant. Even if Claiomh couldn't control it, the Deep Dragon's power dwarfed Damian's completely.

So...if she can wield even a fraction of that power, she should be able to stand up against Damian. All Orphen could do was believe that. He continued to shout.

“Since it doesn't make any sense, you can use that against it! Since there's no process, the results aren't guaranteed! If you're hit with a fireball, anybody would just burn up without being able to do anything about it, but you can fight against the completion of a mental attack the whole time you're taking it! Do you get it? Don't give up!”

“...”

He almost felt like he could hear something. It might have just been his imagination. Orphen hugged the head in his arms before slowly lowering it and letting it lie on the ground.

All he could do now was believe that she would win.

He drew the shortsword he'd tied to his arm. Then he stood and turned around.

It wasn't too close yet, but the forest was continuing its march forward. He didn't really understand, but from what Claiomh had said, this forest was Ryan's work somehow.

A crazy effect like this... Is it a Celestial relic? I'd heard he could grow trees from his clothes to attack, but...if he can create this much, I don't think there's

anything I can do about him. Even Colgon ran from this guy.

He glanced back at the dragon. She was still on the ground. There were also those two dwarves a bit of a ways away...

For now... Orphen held up the hand that wasn't holding his sword and shouted with all his strength, "I raise thee, Exorcist's Blade!"

A black bullet shot from his fingertips into the wall of trees and a huge explosion followed.

He wasn't able to blow away the whole forest, but he was able to stem its momentum for a time. He concentrated, formulating his next spell as he muttered to himself, "I swear..." Glaring at the writhing forest that was already starting to regrow where he'd destroyed it, he shouted, "Can't I go anywhere without people destroying everything around me?!"

A white light slammed into the reforming wall of trees.



The sorcerer stood in front of his target, apparently trying to buy time.

It was pointless, Ryan thought mirthlessly. Capturing the man in the limited vision the tentacles supplied him with, Ryan observed this new player on the field. He was unfamiliar with the sorcerer.

The armor's tentacles had expanded enough to crush most of the town, and the Deep Dragon's attacks had reduced their mass somewhat, but they were still going strong. He'd been prepared for the entire mass to be destroyed in an instant, but the dragon had ceased functioning for whatever reason. There must have been something wrong with it. Now, all that was left between him and his target was a lone black sorcerer. He didn't stand a chance.

He did not value his life over the good of the sanctuary. Though protected as he was by the Green Gem Armor, he hardly needed to worry about his own life. Some side effects came with the armor, but they were nothing to worry about.

Despair. He feared nothing else. He needn't fear anything else. He desired nothing else.

Ryan smiled. It was only obvious. He had his despair. He knew despair.

There was nothing else he needed.



“First, I don’t think it’s necessary. I’ve been observing you since last night. You could consider the dragon switching with you as an emergency measure after you fell into his hands. But that shouldn’t mean you have to risk yourself in battle with him.”

“I don’t need a reason.” She replied to the voice she heard somewhere in her mind. She didn’t have the power to open her eyes or to stand, but she was able to muster up the strength to speak, though she didn’t know from where. “I can’t let Leki do something that would hurt him. And because I read Ryan’s mind...”

“I’m not going to say something hackneyed, like ‘you’re only doing this for your own self-satisfaction.’ Being the way I am, I also peek inside people’s minds here and there. Sometimes it doesn’t even take sorcery, only a little wisdom.”

“I feel bad for Ryan.”

“Do you? He’s been acting as a secret agent for years now, though we only recently became aware of him. He’s a highly skilled individual. Just so you know, these Doppel X... I wouldn’t call them ethical.”

“I don’t know anything about Doppel X or the sanctuary, but...” Claiomh finally found who she was talking to and pursed her lips.

Damian Rue was standing quietly in the middle of a dark space.

She wasn’t quite sure yet where *she* was, but she continued, “I told you about the clothes he’s wearing, right?”

“You mean the Green Gem Armor?” Damian scoffed. “If that’s the reason for your pity, then *you’re* the one being hackneyed. It’s a powerful weapon. In fact, he’s demonstrating at this very instant its ability to wipe out a good portion of this entire city. Due to this great power, it also has flaws. That’s all there is to it.”

“It’s completely denying who he is.”

“It just causes him to lose some memories. You found that out when you looked inside his mind, didn’t you?”

“But aren’t we made up of our memories?”

“He still seems to be functioning fine.”

“I want to save him.”

“I’ve judged that your plan to do so is reckless, to put it mildly.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to discuss your odds of success or failure. It’s meaningless if one or the other isn’t one hundred percent. But what happens if you succeed? If you fail, you will become a Deep Dragon in mind *and* body, and you will act as such—meaning you will kill every human in the vicinity you can perceive. This city will likely be wiped off the map. That does not strike me as a sound wager.”

“...”

“Well? Didn’t you want to tell me it would be fine because you wouldn’t fail?”

“...”

“But you can’t say that, can you? Not after feeling a Deep Dragon’s power.”

“...”

“So, I will eliminate you. Surrender. As for Ryan Spoon...with my assistance, I’m sure that friend of yours can win.”

“I...” Claiomh said with complete confidence, “...have never met a more unpleasant person.”



Orphen didn’t have to worry about his stamina—he’d been firing off big spells this whole time even though he already wasn’t at his best. Thinking about it would only wear him out faster. The wall of trees had been pushed back several times now, but it was still closing in on him.

He shouted at it, “I intone thee, Holy Song of Destruction!”

There was a chain of devastation. Trees that had been moving vigorously

instantly stopped, crumbled, collapsed, scattered. The destruction spread in an instant and the sea of trees transformed into a great heap of wood chips.

Even if the compositions he was weaving changed, the results were largely the same. He was able to eliminate some of the forest pushing toward him, but he simply didn't have the strength to eradicate it completely.

However...that didn't really matter. Even if he ran, he had no way of moving the body of the Deep Dragon collapsed behind him, and whether she revived or didn't, he'd know soon enough.

Whether Claiomh wins or loses... All I have to do is buy time until then. That's all I can do, really.

He fired off his sorcery over and over again at the forest.

Then, all of a sudden, with no warning whatsoever...the forest stopped.

Orphen was suspicious, but he couldn't miss the opportunity. He wove a composition with all the strength he could muster in an instant.

"I destroy thee, Primordial—"

But before he could finish, there was a change in the wall of trees before him. Several branches stretched out and traced a complex figure in the air faster than his eyes could follow them. Once the branches themselves were in a complicated configuration, they burned away to nothing. And the flames formed symbols he recognized.

Wyrd glyphs?! Going pale, he tried to put on the brakes, but it was too late.

"Primordial Stillness!"

Released, the composition manifested into a huge explosion. There was a violent rumbling that almost warped space around him. But the glyphs expanded as if to envelop the blast and forced it down. His sorcery cut out after only giving the rubble-filled town a slight shake.

He blocked my spell?!

He'd let his guard down a little since the forest had been moving forward without resisting any of his attacks until now. But he was up against a Celestial relic—it made sense that it would be able to block his sorcery.

This was a fatal development. Until now, each blow of his had been able to buy some time, but this attack had just been shrugged off completely. And considering how fast the forest was advancing, he didn't have time to ready another spell. Orphen bit his lip and gripped the shortsword in his hand. He knew it was desperate, but this was the only weapon he had left against the enormous forest pressing toward him again.

Claiomh! He looked over his shoulder at her. There was no change in the Deep Dragon.

The forest began to move. He turned back to face the trees as they surged forward with a low rumble. Orphen took one last deep breath and held it.

The debris at his feet burst apart and from the wreckage sprung one vine, then another. Orphen's blade flashed and he deflected one of the vines that had been aiming at him. Even now, the forest was still drawing nearer.

If only I knew where Ryan himself was! If he just knew that, there might have been something he could do, but if all of this mass was coming from his clothes, there was no way he'd leave himself somewhere where his enemy could find him.

Suddenly, there was a thick branch snaking around his left arm, though he had no idea where it had come from. Before he could recover, another branch and a vine wrapped around his body too.

"You shouldn't have said that..." A voice came from right next to his ear and his blood went cold.

There were only trees and vines around him now. He was surrounded by a fully grown forest. He wasn't able to move a single muscle anymore, and could only listen to the quiet voice continue...

"No, what you said was definitely true. If that was the way you came up with to counter white sorcery, it's certainly an interesting idea. But that sort of mental control requires practice... Simply telling an amateur like her about it will only end up hastening the inevitable."

"Damn you..." Orphen groaned. But the voice didn't so much as pause, apparently not intending to listen to him.

“Do you understand? She’s fallen into the snare of a process by which she resists me, loses, and I take control of her. Of course, this is an unavoidable flaw in your strategy, as creating the process gives you a method through which to resist me. Oh, are you unable to breathe? It would be a bit of a problem if you died...”

At the same time as that phrase was uttered, Orphen felt his body freed without warning. The countless branches binding his arms and legs disappeared as if they were never there in the first place. He fell onto his back and got the wind knocked out of him, but he had no time to moan about it. He sprung to his feet and surveyed his surroundings.

What he found himself in was something like a dome of forest. He was inside a large space blocked off in every single direction by trees. Of course, that was only natural, since the forest had consumed him completely and then a little section of it around him had disappeared. Unperturbed, Damian stood behind him with his arms crossed again.

Since the forest had also blocked off the sky, it was so dark that he could barely see a thing. He didn’t know why he could see Damian’s form alone clearly. Maybe that was just how spirit forms were. In any case, the forest had completely stopped by now, and it felt different than its temporary halt earlier. He had a feeling that it wouldn’t start to move again. And with that feeling, he also felt a chill racing up his spine.

His mind was frighteningly empty.

The rumbling and roaring had turned to a silence so complete it was as if all the noise before had been nothing but a lie. All he could hear was his pounding heartbeat. His hands on the ground in front of him, Orphen tried to remember just what it was he’d been doing.

I...got swallowed up by the forest. It wasn’t as if he’d lost his memory. He knew that, but there was something his brain wasn’t letting him remember.

Why was I trying to hold this forest back? And... If I failed...that means...

Before he could even register the answer, he was already shouting. “I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits!”

Several small pure-white lights appeared, driving away the darkness.

It was no wonder the forest had stopped, and it would likely not start to move again. There was no need for it to move more. After all, Ryan had fulfilled his objective.

After swallowing him up, the forest had surged past him and absorbed the collapsed Deep Dragon behind him as well. Several of the trees had pierced the huge black beast's body. A dark red liquid gave the creature's black fur a strange luster. Otherwise, the Deep Dragon was completely unchanged from before. It lay there unmoving.

Orphen screamed. Before he knew it, he had picked up a piece of rubble lying nearby. He squeezed and the piece of wall crumbled in his fist. He could hear Damian's voice...

"Now then. Let's find Ryan... I'd like for you to finish him off, if you could. I'm not particularly proficient at killing living things, after all."

"You bastard!" Orphen leapt at him. He didn't even feel his fatigue. All he wanted to do was plunge the shortsword in his hand into the body of the target before him.

Damian didn't even try to dodge. The silver blade plunged into the white sorcerer's left lung.

Strangely, he did feel like he had stabbed something, but there was no blood, and not so much as a groan came from the white sorcerer's lips. Damian was unfazed. He uncrossed his arms and put one hand on Orphen's where it gripped the shortsword stabbed into him.

"That's not going to work." Damian tugged and the shortsword pulled out of him. There was no blood on the blade. Orphen slowly backed away and the white sorcerer said matter-of-factly, "It's nothing more than a difference in position. Now, Ryan will need to be killed either way, so..."

"Claiomh said she was gonna save him."

"That too is nothing more than a difference in position."

Suddenly, the forest that Orphen had thought wouldn't move again began to

do just that. But it wasn't the same rapid movement. This time it was slow...and it was retreating. The trees that had pierced the dragon too began to recede noisily, liquid still clinging to them. The sky was quickly uncovered, and the too-bright midday sun with it. And finally...

The forest, which had multiplied and consumed the whole city like a giant snake, began to return to what might be called its normal state—one single enormous pillar of a tree. Looking up at it from the ground, it was impossible to tell just how wide or tall it was. The process sped up partway through the forest's transformation.

Orphen ignored Damian, who was looking wordlessly up at the shifting tree, and walked over to the Deep Dragon. Before he reached it, he stepped on something that made a wet sound—the liquid that had come from the beast and spread out as a stain on the ground. He could hear his clenched molars grinding against themselves.

The dragon was dead. It might have been the first time in the history of Kiesalhima that one of these supreme warriors had been killed. It was clear just looking at it that the gaping wounds in its chest were fatal. All the organs that had spilled from it were black. And...

"Hmm?" He wasn't sure what he'd found.

But before he could try to figure it out, he heard a voice and turned around. Damian was speaking, just as unemotional as always.

"There's no fight in you. Are you surrendering?"

The white sorcerer was addressing a figure that was slowly walking out from the ridiculously huge tree. A lanky young man. From the green tights he was wearing, branches and vines extended out, connected to the huge tree.

"Ryan Spoon, are you listening to me?" Damian asked him.

Ryan just staggered forward, not looking particularly interested in what the white sorcerer had to say. He did look rather defenseless...

"I just came out because I have nothing to fear anymore... Aren't you the ones who are surrendering? Not that I particularly recommend it." Ryan shrugged. "You have no way to kill me. My Green Gem Armor will guard me

completely. Mere human sorcery cannot hope to penetrate my defenses.”

Several thin branches coiled around him protectively. Those branches could draw Wyrð glyphs in an instant.

He looked up at the huge tree behind him—really, it was so large that it seemed laughable to even refer to it as a tree—and smiled wryly. “I expanded my tentacles to their very limits in order to oppose a Deep Dragon. It didn’t put up as much of a fight as I was expecting, though.”

“This is Claiomh.” Orphen also pointed behind him—at the corpse of the Deep Dragon.

Damian shook his head. “He likely has no memory of her.”

“What?”

Orphen looked over and Ryan’s face was just as blank as his.

“It’s an effect of the armor,” Damian continued. “The Green Gem Armor... It fiercely defends its wearer, and if they’re hurt or killed, it will even use Wyrð glyphs to revive them. It’s basically all-powerful, possessing no vulnerabilities.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Orphen spat reflexively. “No way could there be a weapon that powerful. If there were, the Celestials wouldn’t have died.”

“It has side effects.” This time it was Ryan who spoke up. His mouth twitched a bit as he thought something over. Seeming to come to a conclusion, he continued, “I see. I must have met you before I revived this morning. Sorry, but I don’t remember. Each time I revive, I lose some memories. Especially if my brain was destroyed.”

Damian quickly cut in, perhaps annoyed that his explanation had been interrupted. “But it’s not just your memory, is it? I heard a fair bit from the girl who peeked into your mind. It was a little difficult to interpret her explanation, but I’d say it was fairly precise.”

“I suppose so. It’s not just my memories. I’m not really sure of the extent of it myself... My personality might change too. I seem to break down ever so slightly each time. My body too. At least I think so. I wouldn’t be surprised if I was made up mostly of cancer cells by now...”

“How could you be alive?” Orphen muttered reflexively again.

That must have amused Ryan. He had a silly grin on his face. “Well, the one thing I can’t do is die. This armor keeps me alive, after all... But...yes, it’s probably my organs that are at fault. It was a bit of an adjustment when I started to throw up any food that I ate, but...I did adjust.”

“Are you trying to gain our sympathy?” Damian asked coldly.

“No. What would I do with it? It wouldn’t change my fate...” Ryan said, spreading his thin arms. His faint lips stretched out into what could be interpreted as a smile. Maybe that was what he intended. “This is judgment.”

“What?”

“Hmm... I can’t remember. But someone called it that. Judgment. To decide our fate...” There was a stale joy in his eyes—a worn-out happiness. Either way, he was clearly satisfied. “I didn’t think I could beat a Deep Dragon...but now that I have, I suppose I must go on living for a while longer...”

Wait... Orphen thought to himself with a realization. *Was this his last chance to die...?*

He’d fought one of the strongest beings on the continent, a Deep Dragon, and he’d survived.

He couldn’t have heard what Orphen was thinking, but Ryan shook his head. Maybe he’d been thinking the same thing. “Oh, please don’t think I want to die. I have a mission...for the sanctuary. That is why I must live... And for you, who will die, I would at least like to teach you despair...”

That was the signal. The tree tentacles behind Ryan all began to stir at once. Some of them were drawing glyphs, so Orphen knew his sorcery wouldn’t work against them.

How many tens of thousands of them are there? Maybe it’s hundreds of thousands...

It pained him to admit it after the things Ryan had said, but he did despair at his chances.

The forest had become one single giant tree. It was ridiculous to think that he

could contend against a mass that had flattened an entire city underneath it. If he had any hope of winning, it would be against Ryan himself. But that was *if* he could lay a hand on the man.

For the time being, he turned to Damian. There was no change in the white sorcerer's attitude. He could likely flee from here in an instant, so it was only natural that he wasn't particularly worried.

Meaning I'm going to have to handle this myself. But what could he do against someone defended even from death by Celestial armor?

"Just do this." The sound of Claiomh's voice was another signal.

A signal for Damian to turn to him with a shocked expression—for Ryan to shudder—and for the giant tree tentacle formed by the Green Gem Armor to disappear in an instant.

The armor's tentacles were destroyed dramatically by a mental dominion attack that affected all matter, whether living or non-living: a Deep Dragon's dark sorcery. A hole opened up in the center of the huge tree and exploded outward through it. The destruction was absolute. The forest dispersed without leaving so much as dust in its wake. Finally, even the tentacles protecting Ryan vanished before the green tights covering his body crumbled away too. Skin bared, Ryan fell to the ground wordlessly.

Orphen had to admit he got a kick out of seeing Damian Rue's face frozen in shock, but he knew he couldn't stare at it forever. He slowly turned around. It wasn't as if this was completely unexpected for him. Still, he felt himself going weak at the relief flooding through him.

The Deep Dragon's corpse remained there. But from one of its great wounds, a tiny head was sticking up.

It shook its head in frustration, trying to twist itself out of the gash it found itself in. It was covered in dark fluids, but it was Leki at his original size—in other words, a baby Deep Dragon. His green eyes flashing, he took several seconds to finally extricate himself from his own corpse.

"What...?" Damian murmured, voice trembling.

Orphen smirked. "Just means Claiomh was one step ahead of you." He

pointed his finger at the man who still seemed to be having trouble understanding the situation. “You failed in your mental dominion. Claiomh came out on top—if she hadn’t, her sense of self would be long gone. It’s just that by the time she finally drove you out of her mind, her body had been destroyed. So she put a suggestion on one of her organs that was still clinging to life and had it produce a copy of her. Then she moved her spirit into that.”

“...How’d you figure it out?” Claiomh asked.

Orphen scratched his head. “When I saw the body earlier, there was a tail sticking out of the wound.”

“I ended up head down, so it was kinda hard to get out.”

Paying the dumbfounded Damian no mind, the baby dragon jumped soundlessly to the ground. It shook its body, but the liquid still clung to it. Just like that, it ran over to Ryan.

“I had to get rid of the whole thing at once so that that weird suit couldn’t make any more trees or anything. I’m glad it worked, though... Ryan!” The baby dragon raised its voice—if it could be called that—as it planted its front paws on the unmoving Ryan’s head. *“So much for your despair! I won! And it wasn’t even hard. Now, you’ve caused a ton of trouble for everyone, so you’re gonna have to apologize for quite a while after this! Come on, stop sulking and say someth—”*

But Ryan didn’t respond. He didn’t even move.

Curious, Orphen made his way over to them. Ryan was collapsed on the ground, not moving a muscle.

The baby dragon took a step back.

A fitting autumn breeze blew through the destroyed town. The chill hadn’t bothered him until now, but it was suddenly biting at his skin. Orphen laid a hand on Ryan’s shoulder and rolled the man over to see his face.

“Oh...” was all Claiomh could say when she saw Ryan on his back.

The man was all skin and bones, dark discoloration on his chest and stomach as if his blood had already settled there in death—but that wasn’t as shocking a sight as his face. His eyes had rolled back in his head and his lips were dry and

slightly open. Several of his teeth were missing as if they'd fallen out when he'd hit the ground. His throat was unnaturally swollen as if air was stuck in it. He was barely breathing.

Orphen didn't even bother checking his pulse. It was clear to anyone looking at him that Ryan was rapidly dying.

"Why...?" Claiomh murmured shakily. *"I thought if I got rid of the armor—"*

"When you remove the Green Gem Armor, all that's left is a man half a corpse whose health has been fatally compromised," Damian said, regaining his calm. As the baby dragon glared up at him, he added, "There's nothing that can be done for him now."

"But..."

The white sorcerer appeared to be right. If he was this close to death, even a Deep Dragon couldn't heal him. In fact...

"It's more like he should have been dead a long time ago but he's been kept alive in a strange state instead..." Orphen muttered.

He heard an odd whistling sound and strained his ears... The noise was coming from Ryan's throat. He was trying to speak. He could barely form the words, but...

"I wanted to...teach you. I wanted you to understand my feelings..." He could be understood with some effort. "The despair I feel!"

"Ryan!" Claiomh shouted his name. *"Did your memories come back?"*

But Ryan—the dying man—weakly shook his head. "No. It's not that...any memories remain. You mustn't hope for...a miracle like that..."

He raised a frail hand. Orphen didn't know what he was reaching for, but the hand trailed through the air for a moment before settling on his chest.



His voice continued, barely above a breath. "It's happened before. Something like this...many times. So I just...figured this time was the same."

The rest was practically delirious muttering. There was no light in his eyes, nothing reflected in them anymore.

"Despair... It's not bad. Do you know what despair is?"

Claiomh had her eyes closed and was shaking her head vigorously. She must have been listening, though it was clear that she didn't want to.

"What do you think death is?" Before anyone could answer, Ryan went on, "The heart stopping, the body in a state where it can no longer be resuscitated? Maybe a doctor would say that...but that is nothing more than the cause of death... Death comes after that... It is the result that follows."

As if he was reciting a poem, he said, "Death is the eternal loss of all. It's everything slipping through your fingers, not merely fragments. An eternity, where there is no chance that you could one day pick them up and make them whole again. A decisive wedge. An inevitability that does not even deign to sneer at the naivete of those fools who do not believe in it, but instead merely rejects them. A handful of something in the darkness, far deeper than mere black. You should stare into it. Though you won't find anything. If you have the imagination required to know such a thing, however, you should see it."

His faint breathing picked up, but it wasn't a sign of recovery. It was more like the final dance of a candle's flame.

If he had a bit more strength left, Ryan might have lifted a hand one more time even though there was no longer anything he could grasp with it.

"There are no miracles in this godless land, but a lack of miracles is not despair. Everyone knows there will be no miracles and that they must live on regardless. *That* is despair."

"Ryan! I—"

"Since he's not coming to help me, I suppose my partner must be dead too... So be it. Ahh, I really don't care anymore... I don't..."

It wasn't because he'd died. Still, Orphen found himself looking up at the sky

without knowing why.

The sun was at its zenith.

Epilogue

It didn't even take three days for its people to return to the town. No matter where they had evacuated to, all they could do was return, after all.

Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon walked alone down a street in the north of Urbanrama to the harbor.

It wasn't as if there was a particular place he meant to go. For the time being, he intended to return to the east. After this little incident, he wouldn't be called on by his lord for any more favors for a while. His lord's greatest enemy for the time being, Doppel X, had had their numbers reduced somewhat. He knew that if his lord wanted to call on him, he'd find Damian Rue standing behind him once again.

"Well, it wasn't destroyed." He recalled what Damian had said to him when they'd parted—they'd met up once everything was finished.

Colgon hadn't said anything in return, but the white sorcerer had gone on as if speaking to himself, *"The Red Dragon seemed certain that their no-holds-barred battle with the Deep Dragon would wipe this city off the map. But though the area they destroyed was vast, I have no doubt that the city will be able to recover from this."*

Colgon had little interest in what the man was saying, but he was probably right.

At the end, he added, *"Maybe the dragons do not control humanity as much as they themselves think anymore... Not since they withdrew into the sanctuary two hundred years ago."*

He hadn't even realized that? he'd thought, but he hadn't said it out loud.

His body was light after removing all his equipment—though his clothes and cloak stayed the same, of course. He'd given all his weapons, the Tempest included, to Damian. He had an agreement with his lord that he would only go out fully equipped when he was on a formal errand for him.

It had been that way for some time now... He'd forgotten when they'd made that agreement, in fact. It felt like he'd been living this way for a long time, but maybe it hadn't been as long as it seemed. At the very least, he'd never been bored doing this. He didn't mind if it went on for a while longer.

He stopped suddenly, feeling like he'd heard Damian's voice. But it wasn't an actual voice calling out to him—of course, since there was no person named Damian who existed in the strictest sense, he never *really* had an “actual voice” in the first place...

“...Never mind. Winona said something strange to me.” Maybe he was just hearing things. *“She said you'd failed to finish off a target.”*

Colgon ignored the voice and kept on walking.



“I still feel kind of weird every so often, you know? Like I'll just...float off, into a million little pieces. It really is best to be in your own body. Mhm.”

Orphen nodded wordlessly at the words of the girl walking along beside him. He wasn't listening all that closely to what she was saying, of course. He still felt a little strange as well. It wasn't like the things he'd been through had left any lasting damage to his body, but...maybe when you faced death so directly, something about your senses changed.

“What a big old commotion, though. I mean, half the town's completely trashed. What do you think they'll do? Do you think we'll get in trouble if people figure out it was our fault?”

“...I'm sure we'll be fine,” Orphen responded vaguely. Those who hadn't been involved wouldn't have understood a thing about the entire incident right up until the end of it, and there was nothing that could link Orphen and his companions to it.

If there was... Orphen glanced to the side at the small black dog perched on top of the girl's head. *If there was, it'd be him. We shouldn't stay in this town too long.*

He sighed. Not that he'd been planning on taking it easy here for all that long in the first place...

Urbanrama was already well into reconstruction efforts. They'd passed near destroyed sections and there was debris being removed and surveying being done. It was hard to say how many lives had been lost in the southern part of town, but the north had been evacuated in time, so there wasn't too significant a loss of life. That led to new differences between the north and the south of town, and after the dead were laid to rest where they'd fallen, plans for the future were drawn directly on top of the wreckage. That was just how it was in this town.

Maybe that wasn't limited to just this town.

On the surface, at least, the town seemed to be at peace once again, though who knew if that was a good thing or not.

I would never have been able to deal with this situation with my power alone. Orphen's own thoughts pricked into his chest. He had only managed to survive this time thanks to the assistance of others.

The lord of the Imminent Domain, eh? Wonder what he's like... Someone who commanded a white sorcerer like Damian, a knight like Winona, and an assassin like Colgon. Orphen couldn't even imagine the man.

He lifted his hand to scratch his head when a weight suddenly settled on him from his side. Claiomh had come over and was clinging to his arm.

"What, are you still having trouble walking?"

"Yeah." She nodded, so Orphen had no choice but to accept the weight with a sigh. As she hung from his arm, she seemed far heavier than she'd been when she was unconscious—not that her actual weight could have changed at all.

Still, it didn't feel all that bad.

"Hey," she said. "That was pretty scary, wasn't it?"

"Hmm?"

"You know, me becoming Leki, and..."

"Guess so. I'm surprised you didn't cause a bigger ruckus, really." He was a little exasperated as he said it.

But Claiomh shook her head. He hadn't looked, but he'd felt her head move

as she clung to his arm.

“That’s not what I meant. I mean, I was pretty surprised when I suddenly switched bodies and Ryan was right in front of me...but then, I just tried to fight back a little bit, and...he got turned to goop just like that...” She groaned.

After taking a breath, she continued, “So then, I ran away too, but... How do I say this? It was pretty scary knowing I could do something like that any time I wanted.”

“...Yeah. They call that the Sorcerer’s Misery back at the Tower.” Orphen sighed and shrugged with his free shoulder only. “Most sorcerers get it at least once. Sorcery really is too much for a flesh-and-blood human to handle, after all. You lose confidence in your ability to keep control, and you suddenly can’t use your sorcery anymore even when you need to. Especially sorcerers who’ve caused a big accident—”

“What about you, Orphen?”

“Well, I started using sorcery when I was pretty young. I was super scared back then.”

“Huh...” Claiomh looked up at him. “What’s the cure?”

Orphen looked up, trying to find the best way to respond. Still somewhat puzzled by the question himself, he answered, “Well, whether I was confident or not, I was constantly in situations where if I didn’t use it, I’d die. So I just got used to it.”

“Your training must have been really harsh.”

“No... I kinda feel like...it was more just my daily life...”

“Hm?” Her face was blank, like she wasn’t sure what he meant, but she quickly smiled and said, “I felt kind of like I understood.”

“Understood what?”

“Like, huh, Orphen really is different from me, isn’t he? I always *knew* that, but I don’t think I really *understood*. If before, I half understood and half didn’t understand, then now it’s like half of that not understanding half has been added to the part that I understood, or like...”

“‘Not understanding’ is where I’m at...” Orphen cut off her tongue twister-like rambling with a groan. She didn’t seem particularly bothered.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I just thought I really should study some more too.”

“Hm? Okay...”

As they spoke, they approached their destination.

“Ah, here it is.” Orphen stopped and Claiomh came to a stop a beat later.

They were looking up at a public hospital on the larger side. It was a fair distance away from where all the commotion had been.

Claiomh looked up at Orphen and asked, “Majic’s here?”

“Should be. At least according to Winona.”

“Think I can bring him inside?” Claiomh indicated Leki on top of her head and Orphen smiled wryly.

“Probably not. Just rest on that bench there. I’ll go get him.”

“Okay. Hey, Orphen...?”

“Hmm?”

Orphen turned around when Claiomh called to him after letting go of his arm. She had her hands clasped behind her back and was giving him an oddly sincere look. Her lips quivered once as if she was hesitating to say what she wanted to say.

Finally, she said, “Ryan died because of the stuff I selfishly did, didn’t he?”

Orphen stared silently back at her and she smiled, though she was trembling slightly as she did so.

“What should I do?”

If he imagined that her smile was the same as it always was...then he could believe that it really was. So, he said, “Just act like you always have. Or try to...that’s all you can really do.”

Orphen waved and headed into the hospital. He knew that there was no such thing as something that never changed, and he knew that there was nothing he

could do about that.

Ryan... I didn't really know him, but... He had likely fulfilled his goal. He'd managed to teach Claiomh despair.

But still.

It's up to her how that affects her.

He stole a glance back at Claiomh.

She was holding Leki and looking up at the sky.



Colgon realized that he'd sped up subconsciously and slowed his pace. He took a deep breath to steady himself. There was a chill breeze, but his body didn't cool quickly, so he was a little startled by the cold temperature of his sweat.

What am I so scared of? Closer to the harbor, the street was getting more crowded. He smiled wryly to himself among the passersby. *It's like I'm running away...*

What was he running from? When he didn't have anything, not even a name?

He wiped away the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand. Listening to his still-pounding heartbeats, he suddenly realized that there was a dark shadow standing before him.

The figure was squat, with round shoulders. He had no idea where it had come from, but it definitely hadn't been there a moment before. The figure wore formless black clothes and a round black hat and its fists were clenched.

Fists...?!

The moment he had the thought, the man before him thrust his fist into Colgon's gut from point-blank range. He felt the strength leaving his body before he could even cry out. The impact from that heavy, heavy fist almost felt like it had shattered him at his waist. He fell toward the ground, powerless, but the man caught him before he hit.

"Ugh...!" All he could manage was a grunt. Out of the corner of his eye, he

saw the man taking out something long and thin—a syringe.

Passersby moved around them seemingly without noticing, their chatter not changing in the slightest. They were like a black wall moving by.

The needle touched his neck. There was a pricking pain and a cold sensation as something invaded him.

His vision blurred. As his consciousness crumbled into pieces and faded away, he did what he could to commit the last sight his eyes captured to memory.

It was futile effort, but he did clearly hear the voice whispering into his ear.

“Maybe there’s no point in keeping a promise to a dead person... Still, I can’t simply let you get away. As Ryan’s...successor.”

He didn’t recognize the voice, but he could imagine who it belonged to.

“Why don’t you come with me...?”

The man in...the holy robes...

Jack Frisbee. He’d left the man alone after shaking off his surveillance.

That was the last thing Colgon remembered before losing consciousness.

Afterword

“I see! I see how it is, Kawai-kun! You had quite a profound reason for putting poison in the dam and murdering Okazaki-sensei! And parading around the station swinging an axe during commuting times and taking over the broadcasting station and airing evil radio waves to reformat some eight hundred people’s minds! That nuclear missile must have been you too... Though, now that I think about it, having a reason probably doesn’t excuse any of that.”

“No, you don’t understand; just listen to me. These behind-the-scenes issues like having reasons or not, all they serve to do is hurt us. Do you not love me, Dad?!”

“I’m not your dad. Also, is having a reason a behind-the-scenes issue? You always say such complicated stuff, Kawai-kun. Two hundred times!”

“Two hundred times what?”

“Who knows. Also, Kawai-kun, aren’t you fifty-eight by now?”

“I told you that’s a secret! You’re so mean, Rodriguez!”

“Who the heck’s that?”

“It’s you.”

“Okay, I’m Rodriguez. I was born to the eighth father and the fourteenth mother.”

“Yikes. I dunno what that means, but it sounds like it’s super important information.”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“Gyaaa! I don’t care what you do to me, just don’t do the bug punch!”

“I suppose you’re right. I don’t particularly like the thought of holding a praying mantis and smacking you either.”

“Come on, man, how long do we have to do this?”

“...This was brought to you by the Kouraku Shimamachi Liberal Hall. *I See, I See How It Is, Kawai-kun (Iijima-san)* was written and produced by a devilish old man who roughly resembles a French person. Appearing in acting roles were not particularly anyone. Hmm? You saw people on the stage? Well, that’s strange... Please don’t let it bother you.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Hyoah!”

“Cut that out before people start questioning your sanity. If people doubt the author, then we all go down with him!”

“Oh? That move just now... Was that the Great Mountain Mystic Fist: Snakebite Zone?!”

“No.”

“The Second Son Fist, then.”

“That sounds weak... No, come on. Can you just finish things normally? This is an afterword, you know.”

“Hmm... You might be right about that. Well, as always, this is the afterword of volume 15. Actually, I kind of feel like I’m writing ‘afterword of volume 15’ for the first time, but please just let it go.”

“I’m telling you this is incomprehensible.”

“But now that I think about it, fifteen volumes is kind of a lot, isn’t it? The sum of the text data is about 4 MB at this point. That’s a lot of data, considering the hard drive on this computer is 7.85 GB.”

“You’re saying too much again.”

“Because of my work, I’m running out of hard drive space lately.”

“Well, first you could get rid of that connection to the Britannian continent.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. You were just crying ‘cause you got PK’d.”

“Whaaat? Well, lots of hard and painful things happened. I overcame a lot and tried my best, but I couldn’t buy a PS2. But the Doppel X arc that’s dragged on for so long has finally been brought to a close. Reckless, which is one axis of this series, finished serializing, but I think this one will go on for some time still. I hope you’ll stick with it until the end. (Bow)”

“Mhm.”

“I think that about does it. Let’s meet again at the end of the next one. See you!”

“See youuu! ♪ ...And who was I, anyway?”

Yoshinobu Akita, March 2000



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 15

by Yoshinobu Akita

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