


Author
Yoshinobu Akita

SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

14. LAY CLAIM TO MY HEART, DEVIL!



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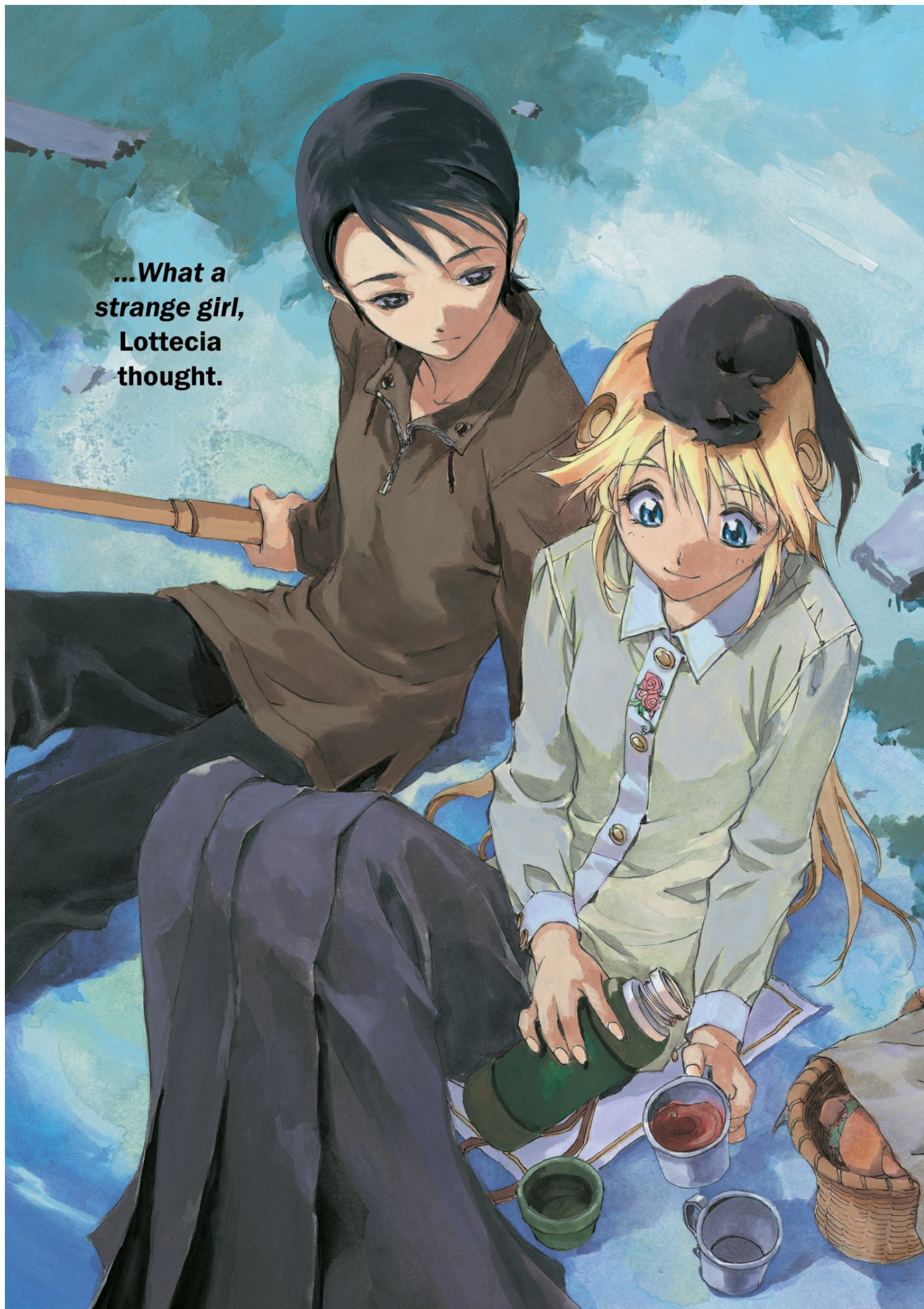
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**...What a
strange girl,
Lottecia
thought.**





"I can thrust my sword forward a few centimeters faster than you can chant a spell."
The threat was almost like a joke. But she wasn't smiling.

**The girl was
Claiomh. On
her lap was
Majic. But it
took some
time for him
to understand
this.**

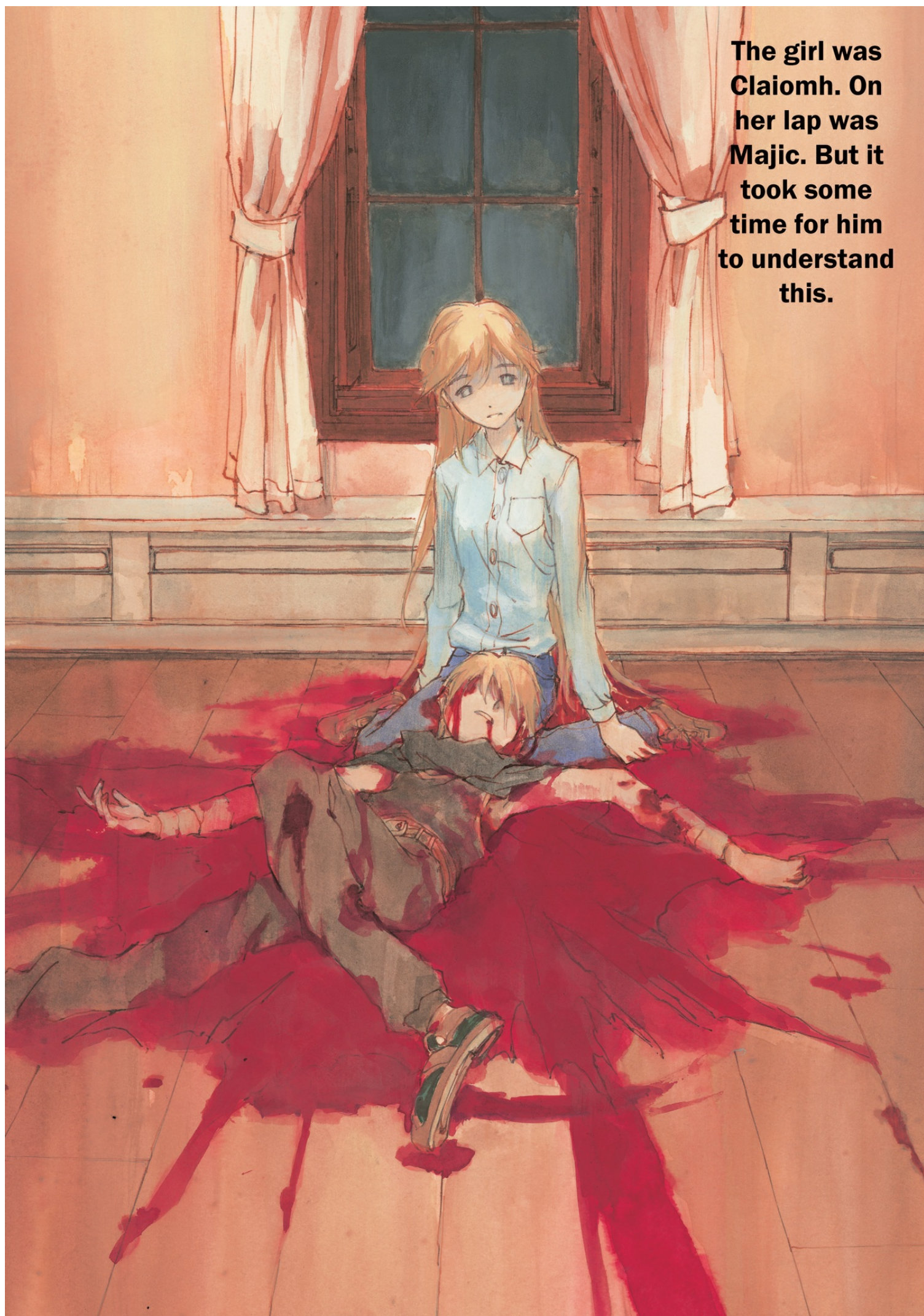


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Prologue

Populating that night was the usual dark sky, the natural light of the stars, the moon, clouds...and the completely inconsequential surface world. That was everything.

There was nothing standing between the earth and the sky. Even a dividing line between them was impossible. There was no sound of music, no whispering, and no watching eyes. It may have seemed like insects, or possibly humans, were making sounds, but in actuality, there was only silence. When humans gathered in these numbers, it made it impossible for wildlife to exist, but those humans didn't so much as whisper, since the people of this town seemed to believe that even gossip was a sin. The only words exchanged were empty greetings. Meaningless gestures, hollow smiles, weak physiques, compromised flesh, both necessary and unnecessary wisdom. Then there were things like love and emotion. The town was full of such things, and anyone could obtain them without trouble.

Jack Frisbee looked up at the night sky and confirmed to himself something he already knew full well. This place was full of freedom and, naturally, the acute danger that accompanied that freedom.

"That's right. This must be what it means to be free...just like you." There was no need to put it into such concrete words. In fact, that was actually rather dangerous, as mere gossip was a sin here.

"I'm free?" What answered him was neither the darkness, nor the night, nor the void. Though it might have been hiding in the shadows. It was nothing more than a man with a lanky aspect to him. He had a physical form, and as such, there was nothing to fear from him. Or so Jack believed.

The moonlight made the shadow of the buildings stand out in the night sky. Compared to those shadows, the night sky was entirely too blue. The well-defined shadows, which would never blur with the submerged blue sky of the night, almost seemed like sharpened blades. Unlike real blades, however, the

tips of these shadows had unnecessary embellishments—the holy sign.

The symbol atop the roof, of a cross with arms pointing at both heaven and earth, would normally be maligned as a false idol. But the church worshipped this symbol, and he, rotting away in this cursed land, was no exception. This church belonged to no large-scale religion like the Kimluck Church whose headquarters lay in the northernmost reaches of the continent, but it had still saved many people—and had likely led even more people to their doom. There were probably an almost infinite number of minor faiths such as these on the continent.

“More free than I am,” Jack murmured with a wry smile on his face. As he did so, he tapped his arm against the black wool holy robes he wore in a gesture like a salute.

He could predict the man’s response. And when the man veiled in shadow spoke, he said exactly what Jack expected him to, other than the second half of his remark.

“You’re very free, Jack. You can always say no.”

The words themselves weren’t surprising. What was surprising was that he would go out of his way to lie. No, it wasn’t out of ill will, he was sure.

Heaving a dry sigh, Jack thought to himself, *I can’t say no. Not when I know about them.* The price for such a privilege was extremely simple. *We’ll get nowhere simply rehashing all this...* He kept his face neutral as he thought these things.

How much of the man was intentional, Jack wondered. Was he really a fool, as his first impression implied? Or was he something else, as was made amply clear after that? Was he foolish, was he bright, was he actually brilliant...or was he just cruel? Could all of those things apply to him, or was he simply foolish and cruel?

Such things were like puzzle pieces, and though they might have only had one correct way they fit together, if you weren’t actually interested in the completed picture, then the pieces themselves may have been meaningless. They were nothing more than amusement built off of fruitless effort.

He felt like he'd been thinking on this for a long time, but in reality, only the amount of time it took for a breeze to blow by had passed.

Swallowing the bitter feeling he was experiencing, Jack finally asked, "So, who do I have to kill?"

"Likely the greatest killer of the day."

"...Are you sure you're not overestimating me?"

"Rest assured, we have an even more difficult task." The man seemed to shake his head as he lounged in the shadows. After a moment of silence, he went on, "We'll be killing two women and a child. Would you like to trade?"

Jack didn't answer. He wanted to give the man time to explain himself.

But the next response came not from the man...

"Do we need to make him our ally? Ryan... Ryan Killmarked."

The newcomer had made no sound and possessed no presence, but that was nothing surprising. In fact, if Jack could actually sense the figure's approach, he would have been rather bewildered with himself.

He turned around at the voice and, behind him—neither too close nor too far—another man had appeared. He as well was framed by the night, but not enough to hide himself. He had faded blond hair and wore a wrinkled suit. He stood with his hands in his pockets, pointing a hollow look Jack's way. Of course, there was no guarantee his kind actually used their eyes for sight.

"I'd prefer for you to call me Ryan Spoon... Helpart." The man in the shadows, Ryan, called out to this new man—no, his actual gender was just another mystery. Rather than an objection, Ryan's words seemed to be nothing more than a reminder. "We simply don't have enough pieces on the board on our side. And you're the one who suggested that a showdown might be necessary."

"Was their sudden appearance really so important? I believe you were the one who most clearly answered that question, Ryan."

"And I have no intention of changing my personal theories in that area," Ryan said, his tone cloying. "We have a choice we must make, but I believe this is not the sort of choice where one agonizes over one thing or another."

“Would you even call it a choice, then?” Helpart retorted, tone utterly serious.

Jack couldn’t help but think—couldn’t help but laugh... The snicker that spilled from his nose burst like some sort of half-formed sneeze.

Still, Ryan was utterly calm. He probably would have reacted the same way even if it was Helpart who had snickered.

“It’s really extremely simple.” His voice came from the shadows, almost as if he was sinking into them.

Jack was sure that he was going to explain his reasoning, but Ryan suddenly stood without doing so. His disheveled light blond hair seemed to have even less color than usual in the cold light of the moon. He wore a brown jacket with no buttons on it, black pants, and leather boots. Under all this, he wore some strange green tights that covered everything but his hands and head.

And in those hands, he carried a single sword. Though maybe the object couldn’t really be called a sword.

In the dim nighttime light, it almost looked like a brass instrument. A crimson metal sword decorated with ornamentation. Its scabbard almost seemed fused with its grip such that drawing it appeared to be impossible.

Ryan wandered over to the silent, unmoving Helpart and held the sword out to him. “You should use this.”

“The Sword of Korkt?”

“Indeed. I already have one, after all...”

Ryan was no doubt referring to the Green Gem armor he wore. It almost made you wonder if it was the Celestials’ taste to make killer weapons with comical appearances. Jack narrowed his eyes and pondered. No, they likely had very little of interest to say about weapons.

“As for how to use it, well, you can just ask your master, can’t you? I don’t know myself, of course. Though I’m confident that with enough time, I could figure it out.”

“If it will be faster to use the Network, I’ll do that,” Helpart said simply, taking

the sword. He almost seemed to hesitate for a moment before saying, “What we’re short on is time. It’s not pride.”

“I admire your self-restraint.” Ryan gave Helpart some perfunctory applause and looked up exaggeratedly at the sky. After waving his hand theatrically so that anyone could tell he was about to leave, he said, “Well, this isn’t something so grand as a plan—just the same as before. We’re just waiting so that we don’t miss an opportunity. That’s all it is. I hope for the best effort we can make and the bare minimum of an outcome. Now, my friends, I’ll see you—”

However...

“You haven’t answered my question yet, Ryan Killmarked.” Helpart’s whisper was sharper than any weapon within the night’s domain. “What is the choice that we must make?”

There was a moment of silence as Ryan, who was about to leave, turned around and raised his head.

“It’s simple. Extremely simple.” His answer seemed more fragile than anyone who existed in the night. “Who is right, and who is wrong? We must choose whether we are right or we are wrong, by our fates.”

“No.” Jack interrupted their conversation for the first time. It wasn’t conscious. He’d just found his mouth opening. “You must know what that’s called, Ryan... At the very least, it isn’t a choice.”

The two Doppel X—though there were hardly any left on the continent who knew the significance of that symbol—turned their gazes to him.

Jack rubbed his lips together, his heavy throat trembling. “It is by no means a choice,” he repeated. “It is judgment.”

Chapter I: Four Days Until—

The water was lukewarm, but it still stung her wounds. She knew she was fortunate enough just to get a basin of water at all—very cheap too—at one of the many inexpensive inns on the highway, so she couldn't ask for more. Still, Lottecia grimaced, feeling something smoldering inside her. Something like a thin film slowly separated from the washcloth in the basin. It was blood.

She was surely injured somewhere. Such a thought was ridiculous, of course. When she looked down at her arms, they were completely covered in bruises. She was injured *everywhere*. It was probably her condition that made the owner of the inn bring the water to her.

In her inn room, she was mustering what little strength she had remaining to wipe her body down, but it wasn't just bruises she had. There were lacerations in places too, which meant that she had to keep the cleanliness of the water in mind. She decided to avoid her cuts as she wiped.

She raised her left arm and looked down at her side, finding a wound in no time. It was just behind her hip. She had no recollection of being hit there, but then...she could hardly remember what she'd done today either.

"I'm so pathetic..." She'd thought she wasn't the sort of person to talk to herself, but she was doing it before she knew it.

She stared down hazily at her wound and...lowered her arm, exhausted. The arm naturally wrapped itself around her shoulder, over her chest. There was no scar there, but she felt a stinging pain like an invisible line had been carved into her body. She slid her fingers over her skin, savoring the irony.

Who would even believe her? If she complained, who would believe her with that completely unharmed body of hers? That she'd been split with a sword from the shoulder to the chest, enough for her shoulder to separate from her body.

She'd rolled around on the ground, and her dirt-stained jacket was hooked on

a nearby chair. She was so tired she didn't want to wash it, but she couldn't put it off forever.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Fatigue washed over her.

As she felt all this, she muttered to herself, *So this is...*

Warm water. An injured body. Dirty clothes. A cheap inn on the highway. Her unscarred body. Blood. Exhaustion. Irony. Her arm, wrapped around her own body. Fatigue. The world she saw looking up with her eyes closed. All of it together was...

An urge to kill someone.

She'd finished washing up, so she should change her clothes before she caught a chill. Her reverie was immediately replaced by such practical thoughts.

She was tired. She didn't have the energy to sustain her anger.



"Uhh..."

"...Ugh..."

"Err..."

"Hmm..."

"..."

He wasn't actually lying on the sandy ground with patches of grass here and there groaning meaninglessly for all that long—it wasn't as if he wanted to be doing it all that long, anyway. The same probably went for Majic, who was doing the same thing a slight distance away.

Unable to muster the will to get up and frankly too lazy to even move his head in that direction, Orphen nevertheless turned to look in the direction of his apprentice, seeking him out through instinct.

The weather was neither good nor bad. It made him miss the blue skies in Nashwater. They'd gone down the mountain and were looking up at the whitened, cloudy sky from the side of the highway now. That said, there were no signs of rain. The wind pulled up dry sand from the ground, blowing it

through the short grass. Orphen breathed slowly, feeling almost like that wind was taking his consciousness away with it too.

His hair was damp with sweat, but the wind was drying it. He ran a hand through his dark hair, fatigued. There was sand in it as it clung to his fingers.

His clothes were soaked with sweat too. He'd taken off his usual leather jacket, which was laying on the ground nearby. A crest of a one-legged dragon curled around a sword lay buried in the creases of the damp black shirt wrapped around his chest as it rose and fell in time with his breathing. A silver pendant. The proof of one who'd studied at the pinnacle of black sorcery on the continent, the Tower of Fangs.

Orphen suddenly realized that he was listening closely to the sound of his breathing and the beating of his heart, and he smiled wryly. He'd had no intention of falling asleep here, but even if his brain rejected the thought, that might have been exactly what his body was trying to do. The back of his neck hurt, since he was lying on the ground.

"Umm..."

Orphen opened just his right eye when the voice got his attention. An upside-down blond boy was reflected in his narrowed vision.

He didn't know when the boy had come over to him, but from that position, head hanging over him, Majic said, "I just thought of something. A way to win, maybe."

Orphen didn't answer him, instead just twisting his heavy body and standing up. He looked over and found Majic already in a fighting stance, both fists clenched. Orphen just stood there, not in a stance, and urged Majic on with his eyes.

There was a familiar silence. He moved his center of gravity slightly back and waited to see what Majic would do.

But Majic opened his mouth instead, as if putting it off for a moment. "See, I was thinking."

"Thinking?" Orphen asked for whatever reason. He was aware that the boy was stalling.

In his self-taught stance—though it resembled Orphen’s own, of course—Majic continued, “Charging in head-first is pointless...but if I go around from the sides, you see through that right away too. So I’ve been thinking about what I should do.”

“Uh huh.”

That was apparently the sum of his explanation. A severe look entered the meek boy’s eyes.

Orphen leaped back when Majic rushed at him. It wasn’t quite a jump, more like a quick step backward.

When the world started moving, he saw a strange afterimage, like his consciousness alone had been left behind. This happened sometimes when he moved—he almost felt like a bystander watching the action from above. Of course, it wasn’t as if he could actually see outside of his field of view, and there shouldn’t have been a way for him to sense people by their presence alone. But somewhere in his perception, he could sense the direction from which people were going to attack him.

He knew the mechanism behind this. It was something extremely simple—merely a culmination of experience.

That was enough boasting. He wasn’t too on guard as his apprentice rushed toward him. The last month or so of their training had been enough for Orphen to grasp the boy’s speed, his strength, the way his eyes moved when he went into action, and his imagination. Even the unknowns—for there was always an element of the unknown—he already knew. That was just another thing that his experience allowed him to predict.

Come to think of it, it is a little strange, though...

Several things had happened in the few moments that shouldn’t have even made up one second. Majic had raised a yell, lifting his arm up and throwing his fist forward like he was throwing a tantrum. Orphen was already far enough away from him that he didn’t even have to dodge, but Majic stepped forward again after swinging his fist. This time he swung his other fist up from below. By this point, Orphen had stopped moving his feet. He dodged the fist by shifting his upper body.

The advantage of using your entire body to dodge was that you could continue the movement to get into your opponent's blind spot—as long as you had the courage, that is. There wasn't really a need to do so in this case, but Orphen slid over to Majic's right side without letting his feet leave the ground anyway. Majic went straight past him, revealing his unprotected side as he did so. If this was all he was scheming, it wasn't any different from anything up until now. From what they'd done hundreds of times, maybe even thousands of times before.

The change was small.

As he slid his feet, Orphen noticed from his detached point of view that there was an obstacle in his way. His gaze moved toward it. There was a shoe in the direction his left foot was sliding.

To be more accurate, there was a foot there. Majic lunged forward with his legs spread wide to block Orphen's path.

That was probably his plan; he was used to Orphen circling around him, so he was blocking his master's movement. And Orphen *did* have to stop there. Majic spun around toward him, his expression all too clearly showing an elated “got you!” and—

Orphen immediately spread his feet apart and kicked the boy between his legs. Majic's expression changed immediately.

Naturally, Orphen's attack had a significant effect. Majic crumpled on the spot without even a scream, just a strained sound squeezing out from his throat.

Looking down at him, Orphen muttered in disgust, “What kind of idiot exposes a weak spot right in front of his opponent?”



Majic didn't seem like he would be getting up anytime soon.

Orphen patted him on the back and sighed. "Well, it's not bad that you're thinking for yourself a little, but...maybe I should start teaching you some forms and stuff."

"Uuugh..." Finally recovering enough to raise his face, Majic looked up at Orphen with a pathetic expression. Tears in his eyes, he whined, "That was a little harsh, wasn't it, Master...?"

"I dunno what to tell you. If you don't protect your vital spots, they'll get attacked; that's just how it is. 'Course, depending on how you look at it, the human body is really nothing *but* vital spots."

"...Is it?"

"Well, we've got joints, muscles, and organs everywhere. And no matter where your skin's split open, you'll bleed. In the end, all we can do is take attacks in places that aren't as fatal as we guard the truly fatal spots." He shrugged.

Lending Majic a hand as the boy tried to stand, Orphen continued, "Really, sorcerers are supposed to be able to defend themselves completely, but..."

"What do you mean?"

Orphen nodded. "Because they have sorcery. That should allow them to defend themselves perfectly without relying on their bodies. However..." Orphen shook his head as his pupil listened intently to his words. "However, no matter what, weaving a composition for a spell, deploying it, and activating it takes a period of several seconds. It's easy enough to defend against sorcery with sorcery—when your opponent deploys his composition, you have time to read it and form your own defensive composition. But that means that when two sorcerers fight, it's hard for the battle to reach a conclusion. So, what do you think sorcerers do?"

With a wry smile, Orphen brought a fist up to face height. "They hit each other primitively. Or they use slightly more civilized weapons. Those who are a little smarter and more ambitious about the advancements of civilization might not even use sorcery at all. They'll use sophisticated weapons like the hiring of a

third party with money, or words that wound the heart. Any of those methods are difficult to defend against with sorcery... And needless to say, the best method is the final one.”

“Is that the reason why most sorcerers have combat training?” Majic asked.

Orphen nodded again. “That’s one of the reasons, yeah. The biggest reason is because in the period of persecution in the past, the best way sorcerers had to defend themselves was by heightening their combat abilities.”

“Huh?”

“There weren’t a lot of them, and they didn’t have much to their names. Plus, they were hated and feared. The only thing sorcerers could do to raise their worth was show society just how fearsome they could be as adversaries. Especially at the start of the new era, when there were no organized theories on sorcery like there are today and people back then barely knew of any methods to defend themselves, they’d use whatever they could. Hence, the first thing they mastered was hand-to-hand combat.”

“Err...” Majic hadn’t responded to Orphen’s explanation with anything but nods up until now, but he finally interrupted here.

“Hm?”

“Do all sorcerers learn the same kind of fighting style?”

“What do you mean?” Orphen asked, uncomprehending.

“Do all sorcerers fight in the same way?” Majic reworded himself.

“I guess you could say that, but you also couldn’t,” Orphen muttered, looking up into the air. “To tell the truth, there are a lot of sorcerers who’ve received no manner of combat training at all. Especially these days, training that’s too brutal doesn’t really have a meaning. The only reason combat training is part of the regular curriculum at the Tower of Fangs is because it’s an old tradition. There are plenty of people at the Tower who suck just as much as you do.”

“Really?” Majic looked surprised, like he hadn’t been expecting to hear that.

Observing his reaction, Orphen shrugged and continued, “Well, there’s all kinds, basically. On the other hand, there’s also plenty of people I’d have

trouble up against too. I can easily think of more than I can count on my hands right now. Anyway, getting back on topic, the combat theories and techniques taught by those at the Tower do vary from person to person. Though they'll share a lot of the basics."

Orphen cocked his head after saying all that. Up until here, his explanation was just like something out of a textbook, but from here on, it would be different.

He took a few seconds to carefully choose his words. Looking into the eyes of the boy peering so intently at him, he said, "Incidentally—not that I know what meaning there is in telling you this—my fighting style is incredibly old."

"Huh...?"

"I think...it was probably passed directly from Celestials to humans."

Majic was speechless at that.

It was no wonder; even Orphen had trouble convincing himself of what he was saying. It was almost entirely guesswork, and the evidence to support that guesswork was flimsy at best.

"'Fighting style' has a lot of meanings, really. The way I move my body is part of it, but there's more to it. The theory behind those movements, the discernment needed to discard that theory at times, decisiveness, resolve; all these things together is what makes up a single 'fighting style'... But that's not really important."

After a beat, he continued, "Two people taught me my fighting style. One was Master Uoar Curlaine. Probably the most powerful assassin of the day. He beat the basics into me. Those basics undoubtedly follow the Tower's most recent theories on combat... After that, I was taught the old way of fighting by Master Childman Powderfield. He was my official master when it came to combat training."

"I've heard that before," Majic said, voice bright. He quickly shut his mouth when he looked at Orphen, however. For his part, Orphen hadn't intended on giving him that harsh a look, but that's exactly what he'd done if Majic's expression was any indication.

“Umm... I think it was...Miss Leticia, maybe?” he murmured, voice slightly muffled. “Maybe not... Anyway, I think I heard that...before.”

“I mean, that’s fine...” Orphen said, exasperated. Not at his pupil, but at himself. Now that he thought about it, it was kind of stupid that he’d never talked about this before. He gave himself a wry smile.

“Master Childman... If you heard something about him, I can pretty much guess what it was. He was the strongest black sorcerer on the continent. The one who really controlled things at the Tower. It’s not like he really acted against what the higher-ups wanted, though.”

The one exception being what happened a few months ago—or really, began five years ago—but there was no need to tell Majic all of that.

“I learned from him...how to fight. That’s the only thing I know, and in the end, that’s the only fighting style I can teach you. But I think that style is from long ago...”

“...?”

“From long ago...”

Orphen suddenly stopped there. While he was searching for his next words, he just so happened to see something out of the corner of his eye.

The two of them had been doing their training in an empty area a little ways off from the highway—of course, since the highway cut through barren wasteland, there wasn’t really anywhere near it that *wasn’t* an “empty area.” Basically, they were in an area that wasn’t too far from the highway, meaning the inn where Claiomh was resting, a sandy spot at a low elevation that would make it difficult for people to spot them, and they’d been doing a sort of preparation for Majic’s combat training here for the last few days. No, it wasn’t just Majic...

Recognizing a black-haired girl leaving the inn, Orphen muttered her name. “Lottecia...?”

Majic blinked with surprise and tried to find her.

She’d left the inn like she’d forgotten something and was headed straight for

them. She held a wooden sword in one hand.

“Didn’t she just leave, saying she was going to rest...?” Majic murmured, sounding dumbfounded.

“Yeah.” Orphen nodded and just waited for her to reach them.

Earlier, he’d gone up against her pretty seriously, and she’d left looking like he’d seriously hurt her pride. He’d thought she wouldn’t be back for a little while—meaning a few days, at least—but it hadn’t even been an hour since she’d returned to the inn.

Eventually, she came right up to them and stopped. “Err...” she started, as if taking a moment to line up the words she’d prepared beforehand in her mouth. She held her sword to her in both hands, almost like she was leaning on it...

“I thought I’d get a little more exercise. I know I’m still recovering, but it’s fine...”

She was obviously overworking herself, but...Orphen nodded wordlessly.

“Master?” Majic asked incredulously, almost reproachful.

Lottecia turned swiftly toward the boy at his outcry. Her expression was cold—or rather, her eyes barely betrayed any emotion at all. Orphen had noticed watching the two of them in these last few days that Majic seemed to have trouble handling Lottecia. Still, he left the boy alone, not extending him any sort of helping hand. He looked in a random direction, feigning ignorance as he massaged his shoulders.

He couldn’t see Majic’s face, naturally, but he had a good idea of the expression on it.

Still, in a quiet, fearful voice, the boy told the girl, “Umm, Lottecia... I think you’re really pushing yourself too hard. You didn’t practice like this in Nashwater, did you?”

“That’s why—” She started instantly, but her words faded quickly. And the pause after them was too long for her to just be taking a breath.

By the time she opened her mouth again, Lottecia’s voice was even. “That’s why I lost.”

“Still, punishing yourself like this won’t help...”

“What are you two doing, then?”

“I’m taking lessons from Master. I’m not pushing myself too hard or anything.”

“Then—” Lottecia’s voice grew louder. It wasn’t that she’d raised her voice. She’d probably just turned her head in Orphen’s direction. He looked over his shoulder at them and just like he thought, Lottecia’s faint eyes met his gaze.

“Then please teach me too,” she said clearly. “I’ve been asking you for some time now, but you keep dodging the question. Why is that?”

“Because there’s nothing for me to teach you.”

As Orphen answered, he was thinking about something else. *Lottecia... Were her eyes...always this fragile?*

A grim light burned in her fragile eyes as her lips pulled down. She looked like she was either grinding her teeth or holding herself back from saying something scathing.

Instead, a single rational phrase came out of her mouth. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I meant what I said. There’s nothing I could teach you. Your sword skills are clearly superior to mine, no matter how you look at it.”

“Superior?” Her voice finally changed for the first time. “Earlier, I couldn’t score a single point off of you.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Orphen threw his hands up, the cloudy sky catching his eye for a moment before he continued, “You told me to treat it like a real battle, so that’s what I did. I’m the one who would’ve been powerless in an actual competitive match.”

“I want to get stronger in real battles!” Lottecia stepped forward, gripping the hilt of her wooden sword tightly. Her bearing alone was making Majic back away from her, but she didn’t notice that. “I told you that again and again, didn’t I?! I want you to teach me how to *really* fight with a sword, not just competitively!”

“Why?”

“Well—” She stopped herself once more, squaring her narrow shoulders. This time, she didn’t finish her thought. She just stood there, gripping her sword.

“I’ll say it one more time,” Orphen said quietly. “There’s nothing I can teach someone with technique as refined as yours.”

Before she could say something in response, he shook his head to cut her off. “The rest, you’ll have to think of yourself. The most I can do is give you hints as to what you should be thinking about. If you couldn’t come up with anything when I was kicking you around earlier, then no matter how much I explained with words, you wouldn’t absorb any of it. That’s what it comes down to.” He signaled to her that that was all she’d get from him.

He couldn’t tell from Lottecia’s expression whether or not she accepted his explanation. However, from his outsider’s perspective, she seemed to struggle to erase the anger from her expression before she slowly raised her wooden sword...and began doing practice swings.

When she turned her back to him, he looked away from her and told Majic, “Let’s call it a day.”



It wasn’t as if Winona had forgotten that she should do what she always did, as she always did it. It was the best method of self defense, and if you were always defending yourself, that also meant that you were always under attack. Just as it was impossible for her to forget to maintain her weapon—her trusty Deedee was in perfect shape again today—she must also never forget to maintain her mental readiness. Everyone knew that. “It’s all over if I lose today” is a mentality that you could only cling to until school was through. After that, it wouldn’t cut it.

She couldn’t ignore the surprise in strangers’ eyes upon seeing her, like they’d witnessed some bizarre animal. But she did get used to it. A huge woman carrying a leather bag that weighed thirty kilograms would stand out no matter what she did. She admitted that to herself even as she grew increasingly irritated. It was a fact that annoyed her to no end, but facing facts you didn’t want to admit was the only way to overcome them.

The air had gotten a little cooler, but the climate wasn't all that different from summer yet. Because it was easy to move in, and because of the slight pride she felt at her own age, she'd gone on this little excursion in the simple outfit of a T-shirt and jeans. The shirt with the symbol of her college on it was a little frayed, but that only made her look more the part, she figured. She was going for the look of a poor college student on a trip.

If you ask if I'm on a training journey, I'm gonna clobber you, she wordlessly warned the small man running the inn she'd just entered.

His first words, however, were rather inoffensive. "Welcome. Room for one?"

Not only were they inoffensive, there was a very sincere consideration for her in his voice. At least, that was her impression.

She apologized to him, once again wordlessly, and nodded. "That's right."

She looked around and found a few guests in the dining hall on the first floor. Even out on the highway in the middle of nowhere, it seemed there were quite a few travelers. Giving a chilly glare to a group of four men who were clearly staring at her (these were probably on an actual college trip), she turned back to the innkeeper.

"Got a room?"

"We always do," he returned with a jovial smile, scratching the back of his neck. He must have been bitten by a bug or something. He suddenly realized what he was doing and shrugged sheepishly. "Don't worry, there's no bedbugs. We have some bug spray if you're worried, though."

"Thanks. I've got my own," she said, raising her empty hand slightly. "So? Where's the room? You want me to find it on my own?"

"Ah, it's right this way."

The inn couldn't be called high-class even as empty flattery (not that she had any need to flatter anyone in the first place), and it wasn't as if she wasn't used to places like these, so she had somewhat prepared herself, but...there were stains on the ceiling, dirty dishes, holes in the walls, sand all over the floor... None of this was particularly rare for this sort of establishment.

She looked around once again. Without some special circumstances, no one would spend more than two nights in this sort of highway inn. Anyone still here in the afternoon like this either had those “special circumstances” or was simply lazy. When she thought of it that way, the people she saw seemed to fit the bill. She pretended not to notice the staring and smirking of the college men still directed her way, but didn’t forget to observe them. She couldn’t forget these habits.

She concluded that they must be students simply because the only people with the time to spend lazing about in such a place were students. Their shabby appearances were another factor. They were all unshaven and clenching their fists as if to show off the upper arm muscles they’d likely trained at a gym. One of them wore glasses. They had no other distinctive traits—none she could identify as she followed the innkeeper to her room, at least. They were speaking too quietly for her to overhear them, but she could tell they were laughing.

With a *clack*, a door opened and two sweaty young men emerged and headed for the dining hall. She observed them too.

A crest of a one-legged dragon coiled around a sword—here in the east, it wasn’t too well known, but this was a symbol of the highest authority on black sorcery on the continent, the Tower of Fangs. One of the men wore a pendant of that crest. He must have been exercising hard, because his black hair was tousled with sweat and sand and he was limp with exhaustion, but there was still a sharpness to his gaze. He was still young, probably around twenty. He wore all black and walked with a haphazard gait, but notably, never once stumbled. The other person with him was a boy with contrasting blond hair who appeared to be nothing short of totally exhausted.

“Masteeer,” the blond boy whimpered. He looked like he was in pain and not just tired from the awkward way he was walking. “Can we just leave her like that?”

“What else do you want me to say?” the black-haired man answered irritably. “Plus...I don’t know how to say this, but I don’t really want to get involved with her.”

“What...?” the boy responded, confused.

That was where Winona wordlessly walked past the two of them. She went up some stairs and arrived at her room. After getting the innkeeper to leave, she waited until she heard his footsteps finish climbing back down the stairs before she took a breather.

Now then... Entering her room, she took a crumpled-up sketch out of her back pocket. She examined the picture of the scowling black-haired man and nodded, quietly saying to herself, “Target acquired.”

She ripped up the sketch and deposited the shreds in the ashtray on the desk.



Ultimately, relying on him had been out of the question. She was only confirming something she was already aware of, but that was the conclusion she came to. When all was said and done, she was just putting the cart before the horse. Because he was a man.

The sun had set, and she was under the night sky now. It wasn't a brilliant sky full of stars, but there were a decent amount of them letting off countless tendrils of light.

I have to get where I'm going through my own power... Lottecia let her voice echo through her empty chest. *Either way, there will be no meaning if I don't...*

She knew that already. She didn't need that sly black sorcerer reminding her. The fact that she already knew that and yet still tried to rely on him like an idiot was keenly frustrating to her.

She wasn't counting anymore, but her wooden sword continued to cut through the air at the same consistent speed. She couldn't remember anymore how long she had been doing this. She kept going until she couldn't even lift her arms, took a break, and then started again.

She sensed something then. She wasn't sure if she'd heard footsteps or seen something out of the corner of her eye, but she stopped moving. The exhaustion she'd almost managed to forget suddenly weighed down heavy on her shoulders, but she endured it and turned around.

“I’m sorry. Did I interrupt you?” asked the basket-carrying figure.

At first, she didn’t know who it was—maybe she was too tired to even think for a moment. The girl had long blonde hair, and on her head sat a strange black dog. The dog was curled up, its nose pressed to its stomach, like it was sleeping, but Lottecia almost felt like she could see the green shine of its eyes peeking out from its closed eyelids. Really, it was probably just sleeping lightly in the way that animals do, with its eyes half-open. Underneath the dog, the girl had her eyes cast down apologetically. Even in the dark of night, Lottecia could see her green eyes through her long eyelashes. Almost like there were little torches inside her eyes...

She hadn’t recalled the girl’s name. Lottecia felt somehow certain of that. Nonetheless, it spilled from her lips like it was only natural. “Claiomh.”

“I brought you dinner... You haven’t been doing that this whole time, have you?” The shock was clear in her voice during her second sentence. Her eyes were wide open, pointing at the sword whose tip was now resting lightly on the ground.

Lottecia had no idea how to answer. She just watched herself like a bystander as she responded automatically. “I have. I’ve been taking breaks, of course.”

“Huh...” Claiomh sounded impressed.

Looking at her, Lottecia finally felt her severed senses rejoining her. She took a breath. The cover on the basket Claiomh was carrying had flipped back a bit to reveal bread rolls and hastily made sandwiches with things like eggs and vegetables in them. Now that she looked closer, she saw that Claiomh had a thermos over her shoulder as well. It looked like far too much food for one person, however.

Noticing her gaze, Claiomh smiled and told her, “I thought we could eat together.”

“...Okay.” She wasn’t sure what to say, but once she’d spoken, she smiled wryly, thinking it was a rather stupid reply. There were plenty of other things she could have said instead. Thanking her, or expressing happiness, something like that.

It wasn't to make up for that or anything, but Lottecia asked, "What about the others?"

"Others?" Claiomh asked blankly.

She laughed. "You know... Err, why can't I remember their names?" Lottecia dug around in her memories and found a name. "Was it Orphen? I feel like that should be an easy name to remember, since it's so strange..."

"Oh, they're eating at the inn," Claiomh said, looking around. Finding a spot she liked, she spread out a handkerchief on the ground, a sunny smile on her face.

Taking a seat on it, she set the basket and the thermos down next to her. She didn't move the dog off her head, though. It was still curled up like always.

Heading over to her, Lottecia asked her, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Orphen even got me my own room, so I've been able to rest well." She *sounded* well when she answered too.

However, her expression soon clouded, just like mountain weather. "I'm sorry. Umm...you know. That I collapsed from heatstroke, or exhaustion or whatever. I thought you might be mad that we've had to stop in a place like this for a few days now."

Lottecia just sat down next to Claiomh silently. She was in her workout clothes, so she didn't need to worry about getting them dirty.

Claiomh wasn't, however. Though she'd worn pants the whole time they'd been traveling, now, she wore a skirt—the one she'd been wearing when they'd first met in Nashwater, as a matter of fact—and a blouse that looked soft. Lottecia didn't know what had brought this change on. Maybe there wasn't any sort of real meaning. But she couldn't help feeling as if she was on a date or something, and she sheepishly looked up at the sky.

What in the world am I thinking? She remembered then that she was in the middle of a conversation and hurriedly smiled at the other girl.

"...Don't worry about it," she said to the anxious Claiomh, and closed her eyes. "As long as I'm chasing after him, I'll catch up to him one day. It's not as if

he's on the move around the clock either anyway." In the darkness of her closed eyes, the words easily came to her lips.

When she opened her eyes again, Claiomh's expression had changed in the exact way she'd thought it would. She was relieved—she believed what Lottecia had said completely.

Of course, she hadn't exactly intended to *lie*, so perhaps that was only natural.

"And," Lottecia went on, "I think this was a good opportunity for me to rethink some things."

"Rethink things?" Claiomh asked.

Lottecia nodded. "Because I stopped moving and thought about some things, I think I know now what I want to do—what I *really* want to do."

"Huh..." Claiomh's voice was bright as she poured tea from the thermos into a tin mug.

Enjoying the fragrance of the tea in the night air, Lottecia found herself watching Claiomh's hands as she prepared the tea, watching her face from the side. Her innocent lips always displayed exactly what she was feeling without hiding a thing.

"Here." Claiomh suddenly faced her, holding out a mug. It took her a moment too long to avert her gaze, however, "...What's up?" was all the girl asked her.

Lottecia faced her properly. "Thanks," she managed to return, taking the mug in both hands.

Claiomh quickly shifted her focus to the contents of the basket without saying anything more. She didn't seem to think it strange that Lottecia had been staring so hard at her.

What a strange girl, Lottecia thought as she looked down at the contents of her mug.

What she said out loud was something else. "That's right..." she murmured, as if saying the words to herself as much as to Claiomh. "As long as I'm chasing after him, I'll catch up to him one day..."

The colored liquid swirled within the battered tin mug. As she felt the steam caress her face, she took a long breath.

“Yeah...” a voice piped up from beside her. “We’ll catch up to that creep for sure! If I don’t give him a piece of my mind, I won’t be satisfied!” Claiomh shouted, making a fist.

Lottecia felt like she was watching her from afar. Something seemed odd to her.

Noticing her gaze, Claiomh gave her a congenial smile.

For a few seconds, Lottecia couldn’t be sure what she was feeling, but she finally realized. She must have smiled at what Claiomh was saying without realizing it, and the girl had smiled back. But something was off.

What is she saying? It seemed so strange to her. It was strange that she couldn’t understand. It was like a strange dye spreading through previously clear water. She didn’t understand it.

Payback? She wasn’t thinking about that.

Maybe people were largely the same, but there was one thing that was clearly different between them. Other than that one thing, they were just like this steam...vague and without shape, warm and without meaning.

She was going to kill him—Ed. As the warm steam embraced her face, Lottecia felt comforted by her consciousness sharpening like a shard of ice.

Chapter II: Twenty-Four Hours

“Hrm!”

To the right, cheap apartments separated haphazardly by soot-covered walls...

“Ooh!”

To the left, a gentle slope, a beautiful park, tree-lined roads with not a speck of garbage in sight.

It might have made sense if there were some sort of barrier between the two, wrapped with barbed wire, if there were guards or soldiers with whips standing by.

But in reality there was nothing of the sort there, except for an even clearer barrier—the atmosphere.

Not even able to conjure up a sigh with meaning, Dortin sighed meaninglessly. It wasn't as if he had never seen sights like this before. In fact, he should have been used to things like this with all the traveling he did between human communities. Humans were always creating disparities between them and other people in their living spaces.

In other words, this place, Urbanrama, wasn't all that unique a town.

“Hmmm.” His brother Volkan had been looking this way and that and groaning philosophically for some time now.

Dortin turned to look at him curiously. His brother was dressed much like he was. Anyone would probably think they were together from the way they looked. Of course, everyone wore these fur cloaks back in their homeland, so there wasn't much he could do about that.

If there was one thing that was notably different about them, it was that his brother wore a sword at his hip. Not that the sword in question had much meaning. Well, it would be a different problem if it did, he mused.

“What’s up, Brother?” Dortin called out from behind him.

The two of them were standing on the roof of an aged building. It was steep, with a strange, lopsided symbol on it, that of a cross with its arms bent—one up and one down. It was quiet around them, since they were quite far from the more bustling part of the town.

They’d climbed up here using a ladder they’d found in the back of the building (this was his brother’s idea, of course). It was a bit odd, but perhaps not all that bad an idea. Even if the view wasn’t spectacular, looking at a town from a high elevation did usually leave an impression. The breeze up there was cool and comfortable, enough to make him think maybe this was the most pleasant place to be within some ten kilometers—that is, if the footing were a little more stable, of course.

Volkan turned around on the sword-like roof. “Mm!” he grunted with a hardened look on his face. Clenching a round fist, he went on, “I just realized something big, Dortin.”

“Uh huh?” Dortin asked curiously.

“Just climbing up here and looking at a bunch of roofs is really boring,” he stated like it was some grand conviction of his.

“Hmm,” was all Dortin could manage as a response.

Apparently, the view hadn’t meant much at all to his brother, and he’d just been practicing his pensive grunts as he looked over the scenery. Dortin decided to leave him alone.

He sighed and hunched his back.

Hm? He noticed the door of the building—the owner had called it a church—had just opened.

Twisting around and looking down, he spotted a man in black and a greenish young man leaving the building. The two of them were walking casually, and there was nothing particularly odd about that, but...

What is it...? Dortin felt some sort of vague feeling looking at them.

The young man was, well, an acquaintance of his. He always wore a pair of

green tights that made him look rather buffoonish. He had bleached blond hair, walked in an unsteady manner, and really probably *deserved* to be thought of as buffoonish, or so Dortin thought. He called himself Ryan. Back in Nashwater—and this was the truly incomprehensible thing—he'd become a swordfighting apprentice of Dortin's brother. Of course, because of that, they were able to travel rather comfortably, so he couldn't complain about it...

Then there was the man in black. He'd always felt like "man in black" had a bad connotation, but this man left a very different impression than what Dortin considered typical for someone described like that. The man wore an official-looking coat made out of black wool and described it as "holy robes." He lived in what he called a church and wore what he called holy robes. If he were wearing an instructor's robes, then he would probably be part of the Kimluck Church, but the Kimluck Church forbade the worshipping of symbols—so he pondered as he observed the symbol he'd never before seen sticking out of the building next to his brother.

There were a practically infinite number of minor religions on the continent, especially in human territories. Even the ultimate religious authority, the Kimluck Church, had churches all over the place that all had vastly different doctrines, such that they could almost be called different religions in themselves.

Still... Dortin cocked his head, thinking it strange. *I haven't seen any people who look like worshippers... This place must not be very popular...*

Ryan had introduced the man as his uncle. *"This is Jack Frisbee...my uncle. He takes care of me when I'm in trouble. That's the sort of guy he is,"* he'd said with a smile.

The two of them appeared to be discussing something as they walked, but they were too far away for Dortin to hear what it was, naturally. They looked sort of like they were chatting good-naturedly, and sort of like they were having an argument. From directly above them, he couldn't even see their expressions, so he had no way to know.

The only things he could hear were the occasional fragmented phrases.

"Are you certain?..."

“...Most likely. What about you?”

“As for him...”

“Don’t worry, eh?...”

“Unconfirmed...”

“Irregular...”

“...Irregular...”

Irregular. That word caught his attention. It wasn’t the sort of thing that came up in normal conversation.

He had no idea what they were talking about, but he caught one thing for sure. They talked for about five minutes, and at the end, they both nodded, so it seemed they’d come to some agreement, or confirmed something between them.

After their conversation, they parted, Ryan entering the building and Jack Frisbee walking off down the road that led into town.



There’s nothing I can do about this. Orphen smiled wryly when he realized what he’d started thinking. There truly was nothing he could do about this.

Of course, there was also no reason for him to be so pessimistic. The weather was perfect. There wasn’t too much sun to walk endlessly down the highway under. The dry wind left him a little parched, but that wasn’t really too bad.

“It’s a lovely day for travel.”

After his remark, he heard a reproachful voice from behind him.

“Maaasterrr.”

Orphen looked over his shoulder to find Majic lolling his head back with fatigue, a gigantic pack on his back.

“Who do you think it’s thanks to that it’s so lovely, huuuh?”

“Hmm...” Orphen looked up without slowing his pace. He snapped his fingers. “That looks heavy, Majic.”

“Is that all you have to saaay?”

As Majic walked, his luggage swayed left and right. The backpack was filled to bursting, with a rolled-up blanket and the grip of Claiomh’s sword sticking up out of it. Orphen wasn’t sure just how much it weighed, but the size of it sure seemed excessive for the boy’s physique.

“You made me carry all of our stuuuff. And you said you’d take over soon toooooo. But we’ve been walking for two hours nooow.”

“Well, sure, I wanted to take over, but...” Orphen shook his head and sped up a bit, making sure to leave enough space in between them that Majic wouldn’t be able to reach out and grab him. “I figured if I offered before you asked me, I’d be hurting your pride—”

“Please take over.”

“Hey, Claiomh! Majic wants you to take over carrying the luggage!”

“What?!” came her shout. A few moments later, she appeared with Lottecia in tow, a dangerous expression on her face. Majic probably couldn’t even turn around to see her, though.

Claiomh raised her little fists, a black puppy-like creature—Leki, the baby deep dragon—on her head. “What?! You think I can carry something so stupidly huge?!”

“Th-This has your stuff in it, you know, Claiomh...” Majic groaned unsteadily, evidently in an argumentative mood.

Orphen just turned back to the front, feigning innocence. The last thing he saw before looking away was Lottecia’s expression. *I guess she really doesn’t like me now...* She had been pointedly *not* looking in his direction.

Well, that’s to be expected, I guess... There was nothing he could do about it. He repeated the thought to himself and sighed.

Meanwhile, Majic’s argument with Claiomh was still going.

“You could just carry it for a *little* while...” Majic whimpered.

“Weren’t *you* the one who told me to leave it to you and take it easy ‘cause I’m still recovering?!”

“I-I mean yeah, I did say that, but I’m definitely gonna be the next one to collapse at this rate... And couldn’t Master just take over for me in the first place?!”

Orphen spun around when the topic rolled around to him. He opened his mouth, intending to get out of this somehow, when...

“Huh?”

Suddenly, from beside Majic, someone reached over and picked his bag up like it was the lightest thing in the world.

Majic wobbled, blinking with confusion at the burden that had been pressing down on him suddenly lifting.

“Pretty pathetic,” the woman who’d lifted up his bag said with a mischievous smile, “making a fuss over a bag like this.”

Majic just looked up at her, his mouth opening and closing like he was a fish on land. And he did have to look *up*. She was likely over 180 centimeters tall, easily a full head taller than Majic.

Orphen was used to this, having two tall sisters, but he still felt a little timid in this woman’s presence. He hadn’t even noticed when she’d shown up—it must have been in the few seconds he was facing forward. He’d noticed a lone woman in casual clothing walking the same way they were, but she was far behind them the last time he’d seen her.

“E-Err...” Majic finally succeeded in saying something, though he still seemed to be opening and closing his mouth far too many times for the actual sounds he was making. “Err, I’m sorry, uhh...”

“Winona. It’s Winona. I’d write it for you, but my hands are full,” she introduced herself, though it probably wasn’t her name that Majic was asking. Still easily holding up his bag, she asked, “And you are?”



“Er, Majic,” the boy introduced himself, looking rather dumbstruck.

What he was surprised about was that the woman—Winona—was carrying another bag, a leather knapsack that looked like it weighed dozens of kilos, over her other shoulder. She wore a faded dark-green T-shirt and jeans. It was similar to what Claiomh was wearing, but the outfit gave a completely different impression on Winona. She strode swiftly like an athlete and her shoulders didn’t so much as twitch under the weight of the two bags. It was obvious at a glance that she was well trained even beyond her impressive physique.

She had a long headband wrapped around her forehead so that her hair didn’t get in her way. It was hard to tell how old she was. In her twenties, probably.

“Wow...” Claiomh sighed as she jogged to catch up with them. She seemed to want to check whether Winona was actually lifting Majic’s bag up or not. “You’re strong!” she said admiringly, circling around to the woman’s front.

“Umm, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Claiomh. And this is Leki.” Since she was walking, she introduced herself with only a simple nod before continuing, “That’s Lottecia.” Lastly, she indicated Orphen. “The one in black with the beady eyes is Orphen. He may be in black and have beady eyes, but he’s not all that bad a scoundrel or anything, so don’t worry about him.”

“Hey!” he yelled in response, but nobody paid him any mind before Winona continued the conversation.

“You guys headed to Urbanrama?”

“Mhm,” Claiomh said. Winona seemed to have judged her the representative of the group.

“Seems we were staying at the same inn,” she said to the girl hopping along walking backward in front of her. “You’ve got an unusual group, so I was kind of curious about you.”

“Unusual?” Claiomh asked, sounding mildly surprised.

Winona smiled and looked over their group one by one before she said, “Well, you don’t look like family, and you seem too young to be some sort of

interest group. That being said, you couldn't be a group of runaways... What are you kids doing about school?"

"I took a leave of absence. I was just about to graduate anyway."

"I'm...umm...well, I'm Master's apprentice, so..."

After Claiomh and Majic answered, Winona sent a subtle look at Lottecia.

She'd been walking slowly, hanging back so as to avoid getting involved in the conversation, but she reluctantly murmured, "My father said...I wouldn't need it...since he could teach me anything I needed to know..."

"She's the assistant instructor at a dojo. A sword school," Claiomh added helpfully.

"Hmm," Winona nodded interestedly. Finally, she looked Orphen's way. "And? What about you?"

"I..." Orphen hesitated, unsure how to explain himself. He decided to pick the easiest way. Lifting up the pendant at his chest, he showed the symbol to her. "I may not look it, but I'm a sufficiently qualified sorcerer to take an apprentice. I'm on the low end of the higher ranked sorcerers at the Tower of Fangs." Really, he'd been expelled and excommunicated, but it wasn't too big a lie. And it was true that he had achieved the rank.

"A sorcerer..." Easterners didn't encounter his sort much. Winona gave an impressed whistle and said, "First time I've seen one. Hey, can you make a monster show up or something?"

"Sorry, but no. And just so you know, I can't conjure a flag into my hand or make my eyes glow or fly either. Just to be clear."

"Sorry, didn't mean to tease." Winona smiled innocently.

"What about you?" Claiomh asked her. The woman really seemed to have caught her interest. She was leaning forward, her eyes sparkling.

Winona shrugged (still shouldering all the luggage). "Me? Well, it's just a hobby, really. Best way to get around without using money is with your feet." She grinned and got back to the original topic. "And you guys?"

"We're looking for someone." Orphen put his hands behind his head.

“Is that what we’re doing?” Claiomh asked, and Orphen’s shoulders fell.

“I can’t believe you...” he told her, eyes narrowed.

“Oh, I get it. I guess it’s true that you can’t get revenge until you *find* the person first.”

That’s not what I meant, Orphen thought, still glaring at her as she clapped her hands in comprehension. Now that he thought about it though, their escape from Kimluck had been a bit complicated, and he hadn’t ever really explained everything about his sister to the two of them since then. He didn’t really see a point in doing so now anyway. It wouldn’t mean anything to them.

“Revenge?” Winona asked, sounding rightfully accusatory.

“That’s right!” Claiomh responded cheerfully. Leki was still curled up on her head, but when she spread her arms wide, he stuck his tail straight up as if in agreement. “We’re going after this super jerk to teach him a lesson! He’s probably headed to Urbanrama.”

“Huh,” was Winona’s rather appropriate response to Claiomh’s vague explanation. “Well, I don’t know your circumstances, but...” She smiled exasperatedly. “There won’t be any end to it if everyone gets revenge against each other. Don’t you think that’s kind of stupid? I think it’s smarter to let bygones be bygones.”

“Do you?” The quiet words came from Lottecia. Her wooden sword was in Majic’s luggage too, but she squeezed her own arms almost as if she was holding it. She sounded almost dazed as she continued, “I don’t think so.”

Winona just looked at her and blinked.

“Yeah!” Claiomh added. “Some things just can’t be forgiven!”

“Well...I guess so,” Winona said with some consternation. She must not have expected to be argued with.

However...

“No,” Lottecia interjected quietly. “I don’t think it will go on forever...”

Everyone turned to Lottecia, but she was just staring straight forward, none of them reflected in her eyes.

No, she *was* looking at something.

“Ah... You saw it,” Orphen murmured, realizing what it was. “Guess we’ll get there tomorrow.”

It was still faint, but they could see it now, far in the distance.

The autonomous city of Urbanrama.



“Say... I’ve known you’ve had a secret for a long time, you realize.”

He already knew that the voice was just a hallucination. And he knew exactly when the words he was hearing were from. It wasn’t that he remembered, but that he knew...

“You’re always like this. You always think no one will find out. That’s why you hear things like the voice of God.”

The voice was sickly sweet, full of scorn and a little bit of self pity, growing louder and softer. It was never the same, ebbing like waves. Sometimes he enjoyed it, and sometimes he could barely stand it.

“Do you understand? You weren’t satisfied being deceived by other people anymore, so now you’re deceived by yourself as well. That’s your ‘voice of God,’ isn’t it?”

It probably was, he admitted to himself, as if watching sand spill from between clenched fingers.

He pulled the rim of his black hat down over his eyes.

His faith was childish. Everyone said that. Even if they didn’t say it, he knew they were thinking it, mocking him secretly.

There was no way he could be hearing the voice of God. Of course he wasn’t. His mind seemed to rattle like the ringing of a bell. It was a sensation he was long used to. There wasn’t even a need for him to stop and wait for it to pass. He could walk the streets of Urbanrama perfectly accurately no matter how dizzy he was.

Urbanrama. Repeating the name to himself, Jack smiled.

He shouldn't smile on his own. That was something devils did. They laughed, saying there were many gods. But no matter how many times he told himself this, he just couldn't seem to rid himself of the bad habit. For the time being, he pulled up the collar of his holy robe to hide his mouth so that no one would see.

Not that I know who would look, he added to himself, watching the streets.

It wasn't accurate to say the town had gone to ruin. In fact, it was actually full of life.

The soot and smoke covering the sky was thinner than usual right now—probably because it was the middle of the day. Jack walked the bricks dirtied by soot and oil without making a sound. To both his sides, cramped apartment buildings that seemed to have far too many windows towered, laundry hanging limply just inside those windows. You couldn't hang it outside. In the matter of an hour, they'd be dirtier than they were before you washed them. Maybe that didn't matter, though. After all, the people who owned those clothes would just put them on again tomorrow and go back to work.

A crumpled piece of newspaper rolled down the street, propelled by the wind. Pedestrians walked swiftly and without rest, though some stumbled on the warped pavement, still slick with the rain from several days before. Posters clung to the walls, but most of them had half, a quarter, or everything but the four corners torn off of them, likely burned by those living on the streets. Now, there were only some singed steel drums here and there, but at night, this place would be crowded with people.

My home of Urbanrama, Jack repeated to himself. This time, however, he didn't smile.

The first independent city established on the continent. At one time, people spoke of it all over as a place full of dreams.

A city that deceived people. People who deceive people. Those remaining on the streets of this city were those people who could no longer dream. Those who couldn't even remember anymore that if they continued to dream, they might reach paradise...they might be able to cross to the northern part of town.

To paradise...to the town's north.

Jack stopped.

He hadn't come to a halt for no reason. He looked up at the building towering beside him, hiding his eyes under the rim of his hat. The apartment buildings seemed to stretch on without ever tiring of it, and there were hardly any differences between them. Maybe they'd been office buildings once, but the deeds had been lost and individuals had stepped up to claim and manage them. Then they rented them to people and collected rent from them, whether or not they could pay.

He observed a window on the third floor of the building. The curtains were shut tight, maybe because the glass was broken.

He didn't seem to glean any information from the broken window. Still, he walked off swiftly after stopping there for a moment.

No, he pretended to leave, walking a block forward before circling around and coming back. This time, he looked up at the window from a different alley, sighing after he confirmed that there was no change. He would have to wait here for some time now. There was no harder labor than waiting.

Twenty-four hours passed. In all that time, he did not move. His gaze did not shift even once.

Slowly confirming something, he walked forward—straight forward toward the building he'd been observing for twenty-four hours, without concealing himself.

None of these buildings had locks on their front doors. Some didn't have doors, in fact. He strode forward, entered the building, and climbed the stairs which he quickly spotted. His footsteps resounded through the cheap structure as he walked at a speed just under running. The structure of the building was simple, and he was quickly able to find the room he'd been observing. There was nothing so stylish as a number plate attached to the apartment, but the door was closed tightly. He grabbed the doorknob next to the empty mailbox and twisted it. It was locked.

Glancing to the side, he shifted to the next door over and twisted its knob instead. This one opened easily. The moment he opened the door, he could

smell the odors of life from inside the apartment. The smell of food, of human grease, of the corpses of insects. At the same time, there was a shout.

“Wh-What do you want?!”

The apartment was small, with a layout such that you could see everything as soon as you opened the door.

Ignoring the shouting of the young man with the thin face wearing a dirty shirt, he entered the room.

“H-Hey, what gives?! You a burglar?! Heh, there’s nothin’ here for you—”

The young man’s voice cut out there. Jack had grabbed him by his collar to shut him up.

“Has there been anyone in the next room over?”

“What?!”

“You hear noises, don’t you? Heard any recently?”

“Th...” The young man’s voice caught for a moment. He closed his fearful eyes, unable to maintain his brave face, and told Jack, “There’s no one in there... I don’t think so, anyway.”

Jack tossed the man aside just like that and returned to the other door. He stared at the closed door for a time...and then rammed his fist into the hinge! There was a dull sound and the cheap door flew back into the apartment. Stepping over the broken door, Jack entered the room and looked around.

It was empty inside.

He clucked his tongue and spun around to leave the building. From the cracked-open door beside this one, the young man peeked out frightfully, so Jack sent a look his way before passing by him.

It was so stupid.

There were two things he could say with certainty. First, his enemy had already caught on to him. And second...

He’d provided that enemy twenty-four hours of time.



“We’re staying here?” Claiomh’s expectant voice resounded from the deserted street corner. They’d been walking for a long time, so she must have been tired—and considering she’d actually collapsed a little while ago, she’d held out pretty well, really.

Looking at her pale face, Orphen nodded. “Sure. I think this’ll work out fine.”

He looked up at the snug little inn again. It seemed like a comfortable place to him. It had a red roof, a fake chimney, thick white window frames, and a sort of unreal atmosphere to it, but the sight of it was very welcome to him after his long walk down the dry highway.

“This is the place I recommend,” said the tall woman carrying the large leather bag, Winona. She seemed to have some familiarity with Urbanrama, and when they’d asked where they should stay, she’d brought them straight here.

Standing next to her was Majic, with the huge backpack once again on his back. “But it says this area’s unsafe, Master,” he said, paging through a guidebook. “Wouldn’t it be better to stay in this northern part of town?”

“Well, I don’t mind taking you there if that’s what you want.” Winona just shrugged, unruffled. “Safety’s expensive in this town...especially if you rely on other people for it.”

“This is fine, isn’t it?”

The last to speak was Lottecia. She had lagged behind on the highway, following the rest of the group at a slight distance. The journey was likely quite hard for her as well, but she hadn’t complained once.

“It doesn’t look *that* dangerous...” she added as she looked around.

Orphen scanned his surroundings after she did. It didn’t look dangerous because there were no signs of any people nearby. Such a location might make people feel calm, or it might fill them with unease. However...

It’s not completely deserted...

Decayed buildings stood on both sides of the inn. Less than a block away was a grocery store, and it seemed to be open, but they could see no clerks or

customers inside. The abandoned buildings had no doors and almost seemed to be begging people to lurk inside of them, but in the end, they couldn't expect anything perfect in an unfamiliar town.

Winona smiled, seeing right through him. "Well, you probably shouldn't walk around at night." The reason for her wry smile was obvious—she didn't need to explain it.

"Lots of homeless folks hang out around here, after all. Most of 'em are harmless, but there's some nastier types, students and fugitives and the like, who show up from time to time too. You'll probably be safe in the inn, though. The innkeeper here's got an understanding with the street gangs, and pays his safety fees without complaint."

"Safety fees?" Claiomh asked, mouth gaping open.

Winona winked, though it was a clumsy one. "I told you safety comes at a price in this town, didn't I?" She turned to face Orphen again. "The fees you gotta pay up north are on a different level, though. So? What do you want to do? If you've got cash to spare, you could line the pockets of the bourgeoisie up there."

"I wouldn't say we can spare much," Orphen admitted.

They'd left Nashwater with a decent reserve of traveling money, but it had decreased a fair amount since then, especially with the extra time they'd spent on the highway.

"Yeah, here's fine," Claiomh said, arms crossed and Leki still on her head. Leki slid off her head to hang in front of her face, so she shifted him back and stated flatly, "There won't be any problems."

"We've got a problem!" someone burst into his room and shouted. Orphen raised his head and found Claiomh there.

He exchanged a look with Majic, his roommate. They'd just gotten back from dinner and were planning on relaxing after the meal. Instead, he sat up on the beat-up bed with its dead springs and asked, "What is it?"

If there was any problem with the room, it was that the window didn't open.

Stagnant air whirled around under the low ceiling, giving the room an oppressive feeling. There was no furniture in the room other than the beds, but it didn't look too small with all their luggage crammed into one corner.

A floor and a ceiling. Some beds. A window that didn't open and a low ceiling. They all brought to mind a prison cell. In other words, it wasn't as comfortable an inn as its outer appearance had suggested.

But that wasn't the end of the world.

"Like I said, there's a problem!"

Claiomh must have left her room in quite a hurry. She had a jacket hanging from her shoulders over her pajamas. She'd even forgotten to pick up Leki, so he was curled around her feet. She hadn't even come to dinner, saying she wasn't hungry. She must have been sleeping since they'd arrived, since her long blonde hair had a bit of a strange shape to it.

She seemed to suddenly come to her senses, looking around the room restlessly. "What time is it?"

"Probably like nine," Orphen answered on instinct, since there was no clock in the room.

"It was past eight in the dining hall earlier, so that's probably right," Majic added. The blond boy was sitting on his bed and had been perusing his guidebook since they got back. He must have wanted to sightsee.

"Ughhh." Claiomh groaned in a vague sort of half angry, half stumped way.

"What is it?" Orphen asked her as she stood there with her face scrunched up. Claiomh's "problems" were seldom anything to actually worry about, but there was a severity to her expression that was rare for her.

Still maintaining that severity, Claiomh groaned in a low voice, "My sword is gone."

"Huh?" Orphen wasn't sure what she was saying. "The one that was in the bag?"

"Yeah."

Majic was the one who'd carried the bag in, but he'd taken Claiomh's stuff out

of it and left it all in her room—including her sword.

Orphen got up and looked for his shoes under his bed. “‘Gone’ meaning stolen? You’ve been in your room this whole time though, right?”

“Yeah. But I was sleeping.” She nodded, her face dark.

“What, did you forget to lock your door?” Orphen asked incredulously. “Come on, even you—”

“I locked the door! But...” Claiomh stomped her foot, irritated, and Leki tumbled from her leg. “But, I... I don’t think it was stolen.” She hung her head, hiding her face behind her bangs, and spoke haltingly.

Orphen sighed impatiently. “Well, what do you think, then?” he urged her on.

“Listen...” Claiomh looked up, steeling herself. She was frowning, hunching her shoulders, and making a timid expression like what she was about to say chilled her. Her voice shook as she spoke. Maybe she’d even had a suspicion that something like this might happen. Orphen sensed that for one simple reason: he had an idea of what she was about to say.

That was why he wasn’t surprised by her words.

“Listen, Lottecia’s gone. And...my sword is gone too.”

“Huh?” That was Majic.

Claiomh just shook her head, not responding to him. “Her stuff is gone too. Orphen—”

“I got it.”

What did he “get” exactly? Orphen asked himself that question even as he nodded and stood from the bed. He’d just finished donning his boots.

Really, what do I know? he asked himself again. There *were* things that he knew, but they didn’t matter now.

Claiomh still stood there, staring up at him.

“Let’s go look for her,” Orphen said. “If she took a weapon with her, this is no joke.”

The light returned to Claiomh’s eyes. She turned around swiftly and left the

room—Orphen could hear her running down the hall and opening and closing another door. She'd probably gone back to her own room to change.

"Master..." Majic murmured. Orphen turned to him and found the boy giving him a rather serious look, guidebook tucked away under his arm.

Guess I'll try it... There was no particular meaning to that thought. But after swallowing the bad-tasting spit in his mouth, Orphen asked Majic, "Did you notice anything?"

"About Lottecia? You'd have to be an idiot not to, right?" He pursed his lips accusingly. "You and Claiomh both noticed too, didn't you? I don't think there's really any doubt about it. She came with us to kill Ed, because he's most likely in this city."

Orphen just stayed quiet, waiting for him to continue. Putting the words Majic was muttering into his head robotically, like he was crunching numbers.

"That Ed guy... He cut Lottecia down in no time at all...he *killed* her. It's basically a miracle she's still alive after that. And now she wants revenge. But..."

For the next few moments, Majic just opened and closed his mouth wordlessly, before a clear emotion showed itself on his face. He opened his eyes wide with fear. "She'll *never*..." He savored the word. His hair seemed to stand on end. There was no way Orphen could have seen such a thing, but the back of the boy's head seemed to puff up and bristle.

"She'll never beat him. I saw it. I saw her get cut down. Master, she can't beat him. Practicing for a real fight won't help at all. Master!"

"I'm listening," Orphen told him quietly. "And you're right. She can't win. It's impossible. No matter what sort of lucky break she might get, there's no way. Her beating him is an impossibility."

After that, he turned around and headed for the corner of the room where their luggage was. He dug something out from his bag. Since it was all the way in the back of it, it took time to remove it.

"Master..." Majic's voice was careful. "Master, you never met Ed Crewbstar, did you?"

“Nope,” Orphen replied immediately. He stood, the sword he’d finally dug out from his bag in his hand. “But I know him well. And I know Lottecia can’t beat him.”

He waited quietly and the door eventually opened. Claiomh, having finished changing, walked in. She’d been in a hurry, but had still found time to fix her hair. She was in her usual jeans and a sky-blue shirt, with Leki stationed in his usual position on top of her head.

Orphen looked at her and pocketed his shortsword, muttering, “Not as long as he doesn’t want it, at least.”

Chapter III: Fifteen Hours

“Geez... In a real hurry, aren’t you? Did you take a minute to think before rushing to your death like this?” She quietly spoke to herself and swiftly opened up her luggage.

All the while cursing her bad luck, that this was about to be a very long night right after she arrived.



He couldn’t imagine she actually had a destination in mind. Of course, everyone had their secrets. She’d told them she grew up in Nashwater, but it wouldn’t be surprising to hear she knew some people in Urbanrama.

Still, his instincts were telling him she didn’t have a destination in mind.

So as soon as she gets into town, she finds a weapon and sneaks off... Well, I guess she’s decisive if nothing else, Orphen cursed to himself, looking out at the nighttime streets of Urbanrama.

“Stubborn and reckless... Well then...”

“Huh?” Majic asked, overhearing Orphen talking to himself.

Orphen just smiled wryly. “I said don’t stray too far from me.”

“I think you should say that to Claiomh, not me.” Majic groaned, indicating the girl several steps ahead of them.

Claiomh was rather conspicuous. This wasn’t any different from usual, of course—she was wearing her usual clothes, acting in her usual restless way, had Leki in the usual spot, wore her blonde hair in her usual style. But she was out of place in Urbanrama.

Here, there were cracked streetlights and sandy asphalt dotted with broken glass. People in dirty clothes gathered around steel drums with brightly burning fires in them. The temperature wasn’t low enough to be considered cold. It was probably more for the light than the heat that people stayed close to the fires.

Orphen took a peek at one of the people, cautious, but not enough so to be openly wary. He wore a ragged coat that was the wrong size; he'd likely just found it somewhere. Torn work gloves peeked out from his pockets. In a bag at his feet, there were scarves and blankets, or maybe just random scraps of cloth, in preparation for winter.

The moon was visible tonight, but almost all of the light from the stars was blotted out by the thin fog that hung in the air even at night. There was an ashen scent to the air due to the fires burning along the street. Each window in every building had a light behind it, but there were no silhouettes you'd expect to see if people were living there, since the light was only peeking through gaps in thick curtains. As for the doorways of the buildings, they were either empty frames or bolted shut with three different locks, nothing in between.

Orphen sighed briefly. The girl stood out like her being here was some sort of definite mistake.

Well, that's only natural. This time he only thought the words without saying them out loud. *Whether she looks the part or not, she's the daughter of a rather distinguished Totokanta family. Instead of collapsing from exhaustion after a hike down the highway, she should probably be peacefully drinking tea in a little parlor room like her sister...uhh, what was her name again?*

Naturally, Claiomh had no way of knowing what Orphen was thinking. She glanced about here and there, a severe look in her eyes. She was probably looking for Lottecia, or some sort of clue as to her whereabouts, but the streets were filled with homeless people, and there were any number of abandoned buildings she could be hiding out in all around them. The three of them had a very low chance of actually finding her even if they searched all night. And there was no way Claiomh hadn't noticed that herself.

Orphen could just imagine what she'd say if he pointed it out: *"That's right. It'll be super hard, so we have to try super hard to look for her! Isn't that obvious?"*

Even if she's got the word "difficult" in there, I doubt "impossible" is in her dictionary, Orphen thought, deciding to focus back on the search.

"Master..." Majic whispered next to him.

“What is it?”

“Well...do you think we’ll find her?”

They’d gone right back out to walk more before they could take a proper break at the inn, and Majic’s face was visibly paler. It was like all the vitality had gone out of him.

Orphen looked forward at Claiomh’s back and told him, “I’d pretty much assumed a search was pointless if we couldn’t find her within an hour.”

“How long have we been out here again?”

“We’re coming up on two hours, I’d say. She’s either not in this area anymore, or if she is, she’s hiding somewhere we’ll never spot her outside like this. I never talked with her—Lottecia—much, but from what I could tell, she seemed pretty quick for her age.”

“Quick?” Majic asked with a blank face.

Orphen shrugged. “Quick-witted, I mean. She was also quick to lose her temper these last few days, but she managed to slip away from us right after we got here without any of us noticing. I don’t think she’d screw up and get caught when she doesn’t want to be.”

“Then...there’s nothing we can do?”

“What are you two doing?!”

When they heard the yell, the two of them looked up and found Claiomh standing still, looking back at them. She had her hands on her hips and her brow furrowed. Rather than being angry, it seemed like her aggravation had boiled over. Even Leki on her head had his ears and tail pointing straight up.

She waited for them to get a bit closer before she went on, “Are you really looking?! We have to find her, you know!”

“Why do we have to find her?” Orphen asked without changing his expression.

“Huh?” Claiomh hadn’t been expecting that response. She lowered her tone of voice and frowned, flustered. “W-Well, I don’t know *why* exactly, but...” she muttered, looking down at the ground. Most of her face was hidden behind her

bangs as she looked down, but Orphen could still see her lips, pursed with displeasure.

“You might think she’s not a very friendly person, Orphen, but that’s just because of what happened...she can’t help it.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Orphen finally caught up to her and stood in front of her. With a sigh, he asked, “Why are *you* so worried about her?”

“Well...” Claiomh raised her head, but after pausing there for a moment, she suddenly cocked her head and asked, “Why *am* I...?”

“Go back to the inn, you two,” Orphen instructed them. Then he realized something and added, “Can you make it back on your own?”

“We’ll be fine.” Claiomh puffed her chest out. “What are you gonna do, Orphen?”

“I’m gonna look for some more.” Orphen nodded. “I sort of feel like I had a hand in driving her to this, after all.”

Claiomh stared at him in silence for a few moments, but she eventually opened her mouth as if she couldn’t hide it anymore. Her voice was trembling as she said, “I have, like...a really bad feeling about this.”

Orphen felt the same way, but he had no intention of telling her that. He pretended to ignore what she’d said and beckoned Majic over.

“Yes?” The boy’s voice sounded calm, grounded. Or maybe he was just so tired that his tone had lowered.

In any case, Orphen told Majic, “I plan on coming back by morning, but circumstances being what they are...the unexpected could occur. It’s not like there’s no chance Lottecia won’t change her mind and go back to the inn, but if she doesn’t, we should move tomorrow.”

“Move? Why?”

“Cause if we actually want to find her, we’ll need help from someone who knows this town, right? A woman trained in fighting has disappeared with a weapon. We could get help for that, don’t you think? And we know someone who probably has connections with the police, right?”

“Okay. I think I get what you mean.” Majic nodded, though he didn’t look too pleased about it. “Do you know where they live?”

“Nope. But he’s rich, and pretty famous too. If I don’t come back, you guys look for him. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Alright.”

Orphen ignored Claiomh, who was looking at the two of them with a question mark over her head, and looked away from the both of them. In the direction he was now facing was a shadowy street with flames burning here and there, human figures around them. He suddenly found himself remembering what the woman who’d shown them to the inn—Winona, he thought she’d called herself—had said. “Safety’s expensive in this town.” The innkeeper paid tribute to the gangs and charged his guests fees that took those payments into account. It was a simple thing; there wasn’t even any reason to think about it, really. A system that wasn’t worth going against.

But... Orphen hid a wry smile. What sort of payment would this town demand of a woman carrying a sword who’s sworn revenge? She might have to pay more than a high price...

“Orphen...”

Majic and Claiomh were already heading back for the inn, but Orphen heard Claiomh call his name. He turned around and found her looking at him over her shoulder.

“Hm?”

Claiomh raised her arm slowly. It wasn’t a specific gesture, or one that seemed to have any meaning. “It’s gonna be okay, right?” she asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“Up until now, whenever there was trouble, you’d always do something about it, but...”

Hm...? Something about her seemed strange. Orphen took another look at her face.

Her eyes, her mouth, the way she was tilting her head... It wasn’t as if they’d

spent a ton of time together, but he figured he'd known her for long enough to figure *some* stuff out. There wasn't anything different about her outer appearance... As he stared so hard at her he could even see the individual breaths she was taking, Claiomh piped up again.

"I have...a really bad feeling about this," she repeated.

Orphen gave her a little nod and quietly told her, "Don't dwell on it too much." He smiled at her. "When things seem hopeless, as long as you don't give up, you can usually get through 'em somehow... If that weren't true, then we'd have been dead a long time ago. Right?"

"...Yeah." It looked like Claiomh smiled, but it was an incredibly weak smile.

Maybe she hadn't fully recovered yet. Leki was expressionless, merely raising his head groggily.

Orphen waved goodbye to the two of them and turned his back on them. He returned his attention to the task at hand and walked off.

There was no change to the evening streets. No change to the difficult task of finding a single person on them.

He heard a song. There must have been a drunk out somewhere on the streets. In the darkness, even if he saw a familiar-looking shadow, there was no guarantee he'd even recognize her. But at the moment, this was the only method available to him.

"We have to find her, you know!" Claiomh's voice echoed in his mind. Well, it *was* like her. If she had a goal in mind, the methods hardly mattered to her. Even if only the worst method was left to her, she'd choose it for her noble goal.

Orphen stopped.

Like her...? Is it really?

It seemed like her, but it wasn't...

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he felt like he was making a big mistake.

Listening to the *crunch* of his boots scraping against the ground, he turned

around and looked for Claiomh. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but he could make out her blonde hair in the distance. It looked like she was just walking back to the inn with Majic, not chatting with him or anything.

Orphen furrowed his brow, suspicious. "She..." he muttered to himself searchingly. "She doesn't think Lottecia's already done for, does she...?"

It wasn't a question he could answer, but...

Regardless, he stood there for some time, watching Claiomh's blonde hair sway until it disappeared into the darkness.



"Cheer up, Claiomh."

"Why?" she asked viciously.

Majic opened his eyes wide, bewildered. "Why not? What's being depressed going to accomplish?"

"I'd just be stupid if I were full of cheer at a time like this." Claiomh groaned, sighing. She was well aware that Majic was right, of course.

It would still take them a while to get back to the inn, and spending all that time in silence would be awkward. So, to be honest, Claiomh only spoke up because she didn't want to suffer through that silence.

"...Sorry."

"It's fine," Majic said, folding his arms behind his head. He must have wanted to change the subject. He put a sunny smile on his face and changed his tone of voice. "Come to think of it, it's been a while since we've been able to chat like this, hasn't it?"

"You think so?" she asked.

Majic nodded. "Yeah. You know, I finally convinced Master to teach me fighting techniques recently and all. We've been busy... And I don't think we've been alone together all that much since leaving Totokanta anyway."

"Yeah, you might be right..." Claiomh started to nod, but asked a question instead. "Wait, you're learning fighting techniques?"

“Huh? Yeah. You didn’t know?”

“Since when?”

“Uhh... Well, recently...”

“What are you learning something like that for? Who are you gonna fight?”

When she asked the question, she realized she should ask Lottecia the same thing. Why did she want to know how to wield a sword? Maybe it was only obvious to want that, since her father ran a dojo. Majic doing the same thing was incredibly strange to her, though.

Majic looked up in the air, trying to decide how to answer. “Well...it’s not like I have anyone in particular in mind, but...don’t you think ‘combat training’ makes it sound like I’m really doing sorcerer things?”

“I guess so, but you don’t seem like a sorcerer at all,” Claiomh said, picking Leki up from her head and holding him to her chest. The black baby dragon looked around blankly, perhaps surprised by the sudden change in elevation.

Claiomh pressed her chin to Leki’s swiveling head and looked at Majic. “Right... I guess you’re supposed to be a sorcerer, huh?”

“Y-Yeah. I am. Where’s this coming from anyway?” Majic asked, flustered.

Claiomh shrugged. “I guess I’ve just never actually thought of you as a sorcerer before. Now that I think about it.”

“Hmm...is it that weird that I’m a sorcerer?” Majic grumbled, looking down at himself. His outfit was strangely black, maybe because he was emphasizing the “black” part of black sorcerer a bit too much. It wasn’t just that it didn’t suit him, it actually actively made him look worse.

Claiomh furrowed her brow and said, more like she was talking to herself than Majic, “I guess it’s just like, before you’re a sorcerer, you’re just Majic. Or like, no matter how much sorcery you learn to use or how much you train, Majic will always be Majic.”

“Hmm.”

Claiomh went on as if she hadn’t even heard Majic’s response. “I mean, Orphen’s also just Orphen, but I think, ‘right, he’s a sorcerer too, isn’t he?’

sometimes about him. I guess that's what's different about you."

"Isn't that just because you already knew Master was a sorcerer when you first met him, Claiomh? So you've got, like, a preconception that sorcerers are people like Master."

"That's not true. I'd met plenty of sorcerers before Orphen."

"...Really?"

"If you're running a decent-sized business in Totokanta, you're bound to come into contact with the Sorcerers' Association whether you want to or not. My father definitely knew a few of them."

"Huh," Majic muttered, sounding impressed. He folded his arms. "There must be something Master shares with those people that makes them seem sorcerer-like, then..."

"No, I don't think that's it."

"Huh?"

"Well, those people didn't seem like sorcerers."

"What do you mean?" Majic asked, let down.

Claiomh screwed her face up. "I don't know what to tell you. They just didn't."

"Hmm..."

Claiomh just walked on silently as Majic groaned in confusion. This was the first time she'd come here, and it was nighttime too, but she didn't get lost, strangely. Maybe it was actually because she wasn't thinking too hard about where she was going. As she thought about that sort of thing...

"Oh, come to think of it." Majic suddenly changed the subject. "I wonder how everyone's doing."

"Everyone?"

"You know, everyone at school. And my dad... It's been about half a year since we left Totokanta, after all."

"Stop that," Claiomh quickly cut him off, waving her hand to silence him.

“Huh?” Majic blinked his eyes.

She went on irritatedly, “I’ve been kinda homesick lately.”

“I see...”

The conversation sputtered out there, and they ended up walking in silence after that. There wasn’t any particular need to rush, but they naturally walked a bit faster when there was no conversation. A short time later, the inn came into view.

I’d like to think of a more tactful way to say it, but... Claiomh thought to herself seriously. *Can this inn stay in business in a place like this?*

Outside town, on the highway, something like this made sense—no matter how rundown the inn was, if there was only one, it was better than nothing. Urbanrama was an important location, connecting the west and the east of the continent by sea, so it wouldn’t be too strange if there were inns all over the city. But the port was in the north of town, which was the side that woman named Winona had said was “more expensive.” The sort of people who were able to travel by sea wouldn’t be found in this slum anyway.

What sort of people normally stay here? she thought to herself.

The windows were dark and silent. They could barely even sense anyone inside the building. In fact, they had no idea if anyone other than them and Winona were even staying there. That meant the only people in the inn right now were the innkeeper (and his family maybe) and Winona.

A yawn escaped Claiomh’s mouth. She rubbed her eyes, finally aware of how tired she was—she’d completely forgotten, but she’d hardly eaten anything and had walked for hours today, so it was only natural that she was fatigued.

I’m sorry, Lotte, but If you were going to disappear, you could’ve waited until tomorrow... she thought to herself, even though she knew it was cruel. *What are you planning to do anyway? How could you find one person in a big town like this?*

The same could have been said for them—meaning, maybe Lottecia was thinking the same thing they were, that the only thing to do was try.

Claiomh suddenly stopped, because she'd noticed Majic had done the same. She clucked her tongue (but quietly, so that he wouldn't hear). "Come on, Majic, don't be mad about something like this. I'm tired too—"

But she stopped talking when she noticed that he wasn't looking at her. He wasn't just averting his eyes from her, though. He was looking up vaguely at the inn, as if he'd sensed something.

"...?" Claiomh followed his line of sight questioningly. There wasn't anything particularly strange about the building. It was as quiet as ever, almost enough to make the deserted night streets seem lively in comparison. It was still poorly constructed too, like it might fall down if a stiff breeze blew into it, but the age of the walls and roof proved that it had at least had the strength to stand for many years until now.

But, in any case, nothing about it looked different to her.

"What is it?" she asked him.

Majic just looked at her mysteriously, as if he didn't know himself. "Well, er..." he started hesitantly. "This might just be my imagination, but..."

He lifted his finger, his voice trembling. Pointing at the inn, he continued, "Don't you feel like the inn has gotten bigger?"

"Huh?" She had no idea what he meant, but his incredibly simple observation caused Claiomh to look back up at the building one more time. The completely normal old wooden building. If he'd asked her whether the building had gotten *older* since they'd left it, she might have agreed, but it was just crazy to think it could get *bigger*.

She frowned and asked Majic, "What are you talking about?"

"No, I just...thought that..."

"You thought that, huh...?"

Claiomh ran over to the inn. It was late at night, and the vagrants burning fires weren't near the inn, so even up close, it was too dark to make many detailed observations about it. In fact, the building was so indistinct, she almost thought it would be easier to discern details about it if it were nothing more than a black

silhouette.

“...There’s nothing different about it,” she said to Majic as she put her hand on the door. When they’d left, the innkeeper had promised to keep it unlocked until midnight, so the knob turned easily. She peered inside, and nothing had changed in there either. It was deserted and dark, though perhaps it was strange that the bar on the first floor was closed at this hour.

It happened in that instant.

While the words “nothing different” were still echoing inside her mouth, the very opposite sensation exploded into her mind. A danger signal.

Always, without exception, what came to her mind at times like these was her sister’s face. Mariabelle loved to come hang out in her room, and she was always knocking on the door even when Claiomh didn’t want anyone seeing her. When she was writing letters, or when she’d snuck leftovers from dessert into her room, or when she had laid out all the money she’d earned at a job she’d taken without telling her parents and was counting it—of course, she couldn’t say whether or not this was at the same level as something like that.

With a start, Claiomh concentrated on the hinge of the door. And it had deformed slightly—not the door, though the door seemed to have caved in a bit. To be more specific, everything except the door, including the whole outer wall of the building, seemed to be a few centimeters thicker.

At the same time, Leki started thrashing around at her chest where she was holding him. He shook his head and wriggled out of her grasp, kicking off of her shoulder to jump onto her head.

“Claiomh, run!” Majic suddenly shouted.

There’s no time! she snapped at him mentally, all while she did her best to leap backward. Still, faster than she could leap, she saw a part of the expanded wall shifting even more.

Shrieking, she looked down as a vine coiled around her wrist faster than the eye could see. The thin tree vine had separated from the transformed wall and was squeezing her so tightly now that she couldn’t pull or push her right arm at all.

“Aww...it’s nighttime, so I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” she heard a voice say.

“Ryan?!” Claiomh shouted, identifying the voice. She looked around for him, but couldn’t see him anyway. Then she heard...

“Waaah!”

“Majic!” She shouted another name when she heard the scream. She twisted her neck around, since her arm was still stuck in place, and found Majic.

He was flying through the air.

There was about a second where she was too bewildered to have any sort of thoughts. In that time, she watched Majic sail through the air and fall down, smacking against the surface of the road. She watched him bounce and roll and finally realized then that something had *sent* him flying. But she didn’t know what it took to toss a person so lightly like that...

“Ugh!” Majic didn’t seem to have taken too much damage from his tumble. Claiomh didn’t see how that could be possible, but at the very least, he wasn’t hurt badly enough to be immobilized. He hopped right back up from the ground and assumed a combat stance.

But at the same time, he was sent flying once again.

It didn’t look like anything had hit him. He’d just suddenly fallen. There had clearly been some impact to his body. But she couldn’t see who or what was causing it.

Claiomh whipped her head around, looking everywhere. Even as she did so, Majic took another invisible blow and fell to the ground once more. He didn’t seem to have any idea what was happening either. The enemy must have been hiding in the darkness of the night, but their method of attack was completely concealed as well.

He went flying for the umpteenth time, but Majic continued to get up off of the ground regardless. His breathing was heavy at this point, his face screwed up like he was about to cry. He looked over at Claiomh for a split second—then shifted his eyes to the place he figured the next attack was going to come from.

In that split second that he'd looked her way, she knew exactly what he was thinking about doing, and that he'd decided not to.

Maybe that was why Claiomh found herself yelling, "Majic! Just run already!" She raised her voice as loud as she could and declared, "I'll hold out somehow! So—"

"But!"

"What do you think you're gonna do, save me?!"

She saw it clear in his eyes that she'd hurt him. Of course, in this darkness, that was either a miracle or her imagination.

But there was no time for a debate. She told him decisively, "Make as much commotion as you can running! That way, Orphen'll notice us!"

"Ugh!"

She heard Majic groaning, though she wasn't sure why. She thought maybe he'd attempt to argue with her, but instead, he twisted his body around—and lifted both hands.

Then, in a louder voice than she'd ever heard from him, Majic shouted, "I release thee—"

There was desperation in the boy's voice. His body shifted back as if he'd been shoved by something, and at the same time, a sphere of pure white light expanded before his thrust-out hands.

"Sword of Light!"

She didn't hear any sound. It was as if her eardrums were vibrating but her brain was rejecting the information. The white light completely overwhelmed everything in her field of view, blotting everything out. The rumbling pierced through the tips of her toes all the way up to her torso and made it hard to breathe. She could feel the earth shaking beneath her. That was how intense the impact was. It was enough to make her wonder whether his spell had been aimed at *her*.



But a moment later, it became clear to her that the light had been aimed not at her, but at the inn building. The heat waves warped the air around her as the building went up in flames.

As the impact faded, Majic stood there in that same pose. His aim must have been to free Claiomh by destroying the building. However...

“What...?” he muttered, unbelieving.

There wasn’t even a scratch on the inn.

No, that wasn’t accurate. All of the windows were broken (thanks to that, she had almost received a barrage of glass shards), and the door was gone too. The interior of the building was completely wrecked, but there was no damage whatsoever to the walls, and the fireballs still in the air were starting to sputter out. The heatwave from the blast had caused sweat to burst out from her entire body, but there wasn’t even a smell of singed wood from the walls.

The dumbfounded Majic went flying once again.

When he stood up, Claiomh tried to shout at him again, but he was faster.

“I’ll come back—” he shouted, spinning around and dashing off. “I’ll find Master and come back, right away!”

He fell, knocked around by his mysterious attacker, several more times as he made his escape through the dark night streets. It took some time for him to disappear completely into the distance.

After she watched him go, Claiomh looked down at her right wrist, which was still fixed in place. The tree vines and thin branches, and that voice. She was almost certain she knew who was to blame for this.

“Leki...” she murmured. “If you think you can’t win, you can run away too, okay?”

“You should probably be worrying about that boy right now.” There was that voice again.

She raised her head and glared in the direction she thought it was coming from. The speaker was clearly watching her, and waiting a few seconds to see what she’d say. But before she could come up with something, he went on.

“My partner already went after him. Sorry, but I don’t think there’s a single person who could survive him chasing them down. That’s right...*this* is despair.”

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

“Well, let’s see.”

Claiomh spun around, feeling like she heard Ryan’s voice just next to her ear, but of course no one was there. His voice was so clear to her there was no way to miss what he was saying, but she couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Let’s see... I want your conviction. Problem is, I think the only thing I can accomplish is letting you die.”

There was a shifting sound...and all of a sudden, the wall of the inn had transformed again. Several vines were now stretching out toward her. They all moved slowly, one of them reaching up to her neck.

Claiomh watched it all unfold as if it was happening to someone else.

Chapter IV: Twelve Hours

He heard an explosion.

Orphen turned around and saw a vortex of flames so bright it almost turned the sky white—he calculated the direction and distance and intuited that it had come from near the inn. Those white flames, clearly unnatural, could only have originated from one thing: sorcery. And of the casters in Urbanrama, he could only think of two people and one animal capable of creating a blast that big.

No matter which of those actually set off the explosion, he couldn't claim he was uninvolved.

"Tch!"

Orphen gave up on gaining a good understanding of the situation and simply turned around. No matter how much he hurried, it would take him twenty or thirty minutes to get back to the inn. He had no idea what had happened—it could have been a literal worst-case scenario or a simple whim of Claiomh's.

He raced through the night streets as fast as he could, throwing a sidelong glance to the vagrants on the street around the fires who were all looking up in confusion after the burst of light in the sky.

Suddenly...

"Huh...?!"

He stopped, doubting his eyes.

His knees buckled at his sudden stop. As he stood back up, he watched a thin figure dart across the street in front of him. Confusion stalled his comprehension, but he managed to keep the figure in his sight without letting it get away from him.

The shadow who had fled across the street and stolen into a deserted building was undoubtedly Lottecia. She disappeared into the darkness of the building, sword and simple bag in hand. She hadn't paid Orphen the least bit of

attention, but the timing was just too convenient to be called a coincidence. No...

This is actually the worst timing... Orphen cursed. He wanted to get back to the inn as fast as he possibly could, but if he let Lottecia out of his sight now, he probably wouldn't get a second chance to find her.

Orphen stood there for several seconds debating. If he had to choose one or the other...there was probably no reason to hesitate. He should get back to Claiomh and Majic to see if they'd gotten themselves mixed up in some unforeseen circumstances. Weighed against that possibility, getting involved with Lottecia wasn't worth his time.

However...

Dammit. He clucked his tongue.

He couldn't help feeling like the expression on Claiomh's face he was seeing in his mind was telling him he had his priorities wrong.

He ground his teeth and turned once more. Eyeing the entrance to the abandoned building Lottecia had gone into, Orphen muttered, "Just leave it all to me, eh?"

He shook his head. "When exactly does she think that's gone well in the past...?"

And he headed for the dark entrance of the building. The white light that had lit up the sky had completely faded by now.

This went without saying, but it was pitch-black inside the building. There was some light coming in through the windows, of course, but it was something like splotches of color inside black paint; it hardly made a difference at all. He was sure that Lottecia had entered this building, but in this darkness, she could be standing right in front of him and he wouldn't know it.

On the other hand, Lottecia can't exactly move around how she pleases in here either. She's got to still be by the entrance... Orphen told himself, clenching his fists.

If possible, he'd like to get this taken care of quickly. He simulated several methods to do exactly that, and the easiest, surest, and fastest one quickly came to mind.

He sucked in a deep breath and said, "Lottecia...you in here?"

As he spoke, he reached out his hand in the darkness. "I'm turning on the lights. I want to talk. Don't run, alright?"

Even as he spoke, he was smiling wryly at his own lie. It went without saying. The quickest method to solve this was to let her run away so thoroughly that she left no trace of herself—that he had no way to chase after her anymore. If he did that, then he'd be able to give up and go back to the inn.

He continued, half hopeful and half prepared. Even he wasn't sure what he was hoping for and what fate he was prepared for, but his next words were not to call out to Lottecia, but to cast a spell.

"I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits..."

Fwoom. With a small sound, a white ball of light appeared above his held-out hand. The sphere of light pushed his field of view out over the darkness. The building was so empty it could probably be called a ruin. The only things on the floor were some insignificant pieces of garbage and the pillars melancholically supporting the ceiling.

He was in what had probably been an entrance hall when the building was still in use. It was fairly spacious. There were several doorways in the back of the hall, but no doors remained on any of them.

As far as he could see, he was the only person in the room.

However... *She just has to do stuff that pisses me off, doesn't she?* Orphen thought, feeling his face twitch.

One of the doorways in the back led to some sort of former office space. Nothing distinguished it at all from the other doorways, except...what was likely Lottecia's bag was sitting in it. Obviously, so that he'd be able to spot it.

The woman herself, however, was nowhere in sight.

And neither is the sword...

There was only one thing he could think. The obvious placement of the bag was bait. Meaning, she planned on luring him there and hitting him with a surprise attack.

The question is how serious she is, I guess. He recalled the piercing gaze Lottecia had sent in his direction. *She might just be planning on surprising me, but she might also try to kill me.*

As for where she actually was and when she planned on taking action, those, he could only predict. Considering how much time had passed since she'd entered the building, she couldn't have set any sort of large-scale trap. And it had just been coincidence that they'd passed by each other on the street, so she couldn't have chosen this building for any particular reason.

Her surprise attack would be more or less a frontal assault. Making that assessment, Orphen stepped into the building. Now that he had made his call and taken action, he couldn't have any misgivings. Taking a slow, deep breath, he dispelled them from his mind and continued taking one step after another forward.

"I just took three steps in from the entrance. I'm walking slowly. My attention is focused forward—on the bag you left in the doorway."

He'd started speaking both to keep her in check and as a warning to her. As long as her surprise attack didn't betray his expectations, he could deal with it somehow—and if she panicked and did betray his expectations, he could deal with that too. As a competitive swordsman who'd dabbled in tactics as well, she should understand that.

As long as she understood him, there would be no meaningless danger. Not for him, and not for her.

"I'm guessing you're somewhere within two meters of that bag. From your reach plus the reach of your sword, you couldn't be any farther away. When I reach out to the bag, you'll lunge at me with the sword. Am I on the right track?"

There was no response. He didn't even sense anyone moving. So he went on.

"Listen, I don't think I was very kind to you... If I offended you, I apologize.

Claiomh's worried about you. It'd take a long time to explain, but I—" Orphen felt his mouth tensing. "I think you're better off not seeing him—err, Ed—again."

He waited, thinking surely *that* must get some sort of reaction out of her, but the silence went unbroken.

Orphen stopped. "I could turn around and go outside right now, and blow this whole building away with a single shout. Do you understand that? Or I could just leave. The only reason I haven't yet is because I feel like I owe you that."

He strained his ears to see if he could hear anything, even just a sigh, and went on, "How about we make a deal, then? I want you to reveal yourself to me. In exchange, you can ask me for something. No matter what form it takes, I think we should have a discussion."

The building, lit by sorcery, was filled with cold white air. Part of that was because sorcerous light had no warmth, part of it was because of the season, and part of it was because of the derelict state of the building.

A sarcastic thought suddenly came to mind. Maybe Lottecia had revealed herself to him a long time ago, but she was camouflaged in this white light. He smirked, recalling her deathly pale face.

Guess the only thing I can do is charge in. He sighed with a sort of lax determination.

Biting his lip, Orphen strode forward once again, making obvious noise with his shoes on the floor.

Walking forward artlessly, Orphen purposely stopped when he reached Lottecia's bag. A second later, he leaped over the bag and took a look around.

It didn't take him half a second to find Lottecia.

"...?!" Orphen stopped, turning white as a sheet.

She was standing right there.

Completely naked.

Her limbs were even paler than her face, and her body brought to mind some sort of sapling. At her feet were her clothes, hastily stripped. Her thin left arm

vaguely hid her front as she stood there staring at him. There was a brilliance to her fierce gaze. Those eyes were what drew Orphen's attention more than anything—too late, a warning signal ran through his entire body.

Orphen watched as the blade in her right hand whipped efficiently through the air. The sorcerous light source was blocked by the walls, so it was dim in the room. But the sword Lottecia held shone like it was reflecting all of the light that existed there.

"Tch!" Still, Orphen tried to jump back, but Lottecia was quicker.

It was only a flash. In that one flash of movement—she stopped the blade just in front of his chest, and Orphen could do nothing to avoid it.

Several seconds of silence passed.

Looking down at the blade only a few centimeters away from his pounding heart, Orphen searched for the words he should say. To Lottecia, staring at him with nothing on her but that sword.

At this, too, she was quicker. Her pale lips parted and she quietly said, "I can thrust my sword forward a few centimeters faster than you can chant a spell. Want to try it?"

The threat was almost like a joke. But she wasn't smiling. And Orphen had no desire to smile either.

Lottecia went on, "Before...just once, I tried to beat Ed by doing the same thing. I sort of figured it might work on you too."

"I wish you wouldn't drag me into things you do during your marital spats." Orphen managed a comeback, to which Lottecia smiled.

"You were the one who told me to think of something myself. I'm grateful for your instruction, really." The air between them still felt tense as she continued, "Seems you were really looking hard for me."

Orphen groaned, trying to stall for time. "No wonder we couldn't find you... We looked all over the place, but we didn't realize the person we were looking for was tailing *us*."

"I was waiting for a chance to be alone with you. I thought you'd come after

me if I showed myself to you. Though it seems like there's some commotion happening back at the inn now..." She indicated the direction the inn was in. "Sounds like an emergency. You want to go back there right away, don't you? But I can keep this up for the whole night."

"...You'll catch a cold," Orphen muttered, voice low, and waited for her response. What she said next was pretty much what he had been expecting.

"You were talking about making a deal, weren't you? Well, I revealed myself to you. And now your life is in my hands, isn't it?"

"So, what are your demands?"

"Well, I was planning on asking you to help me find Ed. And to teach me properly how to fight, but..."

Orphen saw her swallow. At the same time, he felt like the blade had inched a tiny bit closer, but he couldn't tell if it had been on purpose or not.

"But you said something that bothered me earlier. That I was better off not seeing Ed. What did you mean by that?"

"Isn't it just regular common sense that two people with swords who plan on killing each other shouldn't meet?"

"Don't try to play it off. You were about to say something else." This time, she had definitely intentionally moved the blade closer.

There was no need to hesitate...something in the back of his mind whispered to him. She had a right to know. However...

Orphen slowly opened his mouth. "Do you know the name of that sword?"

"Huh?" was Lottecia's dazed response.

Dodging the question in a situation like this was dangerous, but a proper swordsman would likely have at least *some* curiosity about a subject like this. Especially when there was nothing she needed to fear thanks to her overwhelming advantage. Before Lottecia could get angry, Orphen continued talking.

"It's called Slake Thirst. According to the legend, an artisan swordsmith gave it to a swordsman who was wanted by the police, a real homicidal maniac type.

And he told him, 'slake your thirst with this.' So the swordsman happily went to do just that."

"..."

"Well, long story short, the guy never actually cut anyone else again once he laid hands on that sword. Why do you think that is?"

"...He had a change of heart?" Lottecia asked quietly.

Orphen shook his head. "The sword was just crafted exactly for that swordsman in particular. Its weight, balance, even the thickness of its grip was made specifically to match the length of his fingers. It was made to perfectly bring out the techniques the man enjoyed using most, with just the right curve and thickness of the blade. The smith carefully examined each one of the corpses the swordsman had carved up to make him the perfect weapon."

He smiled. "Finding someone who understood his art so completely, the swordsman found that his thirst had been slaked."

"So...what are you saying?" Lottecia muttered, uncomprehending.

Orphen nodded and answered. "Well, the man was quite robust. The sword looks light, but it's actually pretty heavy," he told her quietly as he lowered his center of gravity so that he could move at any moment. "You've gotta be getting tired of holding it up with just one hand, right?"

"—?!" Caution spread across her face.

Orphen leaped to the right without hesitating, watching the sword thrust forward and graze his left side.

As he moved past her, Orphen watched Lottecia's face to see what her reaction would be. Anger? Just surprise? If it were possible for one emotion alone to completely rule over someone, what she showed on her face was probably plain old panic. He wanted to believe that she hadn't thrust the blade forward prepared to kill him.

Once he'd avoided her first attack, it was over. Lottecia turned around. There was hesitation in her eyes, but it wasn't enough to keep her still.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" she screamed like a beast and raised her sword once more.

But by that time, Orphen had already gotten into a stance, fists clenched.

When she slashed at him, he responded from head-on. He kicked off the floor, the impact turning into a wave that brought strength from his feet to his waist, from his waist to his back, and from his back into his shoulder. He thrust his fist out as fast as he could.

WHAM!

The sound of the impact mixed with the wordless scream coming from her mouth. Orphen buried his fist in her naked stomach, feeling the resistance of her abs against his hand.

She went flying backward from the blow. Slake Thirst fell from her hand to the floor with a *clang*. A moment later, she was curled up on her side, unable to move.

Orphen exhaled and groaned. "If you can't breathe, hit the floor for me. I can perform CPR, at least. Sorry... I don't hold back against adversaries with weapons."

"...Kh...!"

It looked like it was painful for her to even look up at him, but she still fixed him with an icy glare, sweat glistening on her forehead. Orphen pretended not to notice and picked up the sword.

He looked around for the sheath and found it stood up against the wall. On his way over to grab it, he picked up Lottecia's clothes and underwear too.

Sheathing the sword, he held it under his arm and walked over to Lottecia with her clothing. The blow he'd dealt her wasn't something she should have been able to recover from in just these twenty seconds or so, but she had caught her breath somehow and was staying still on the floor. Now she was covering her body with both arms.

Orphen handed her clothes to her. "Come get me when you're done changing...and don't run away again, would you? If I had to keep watch over you the whole time you were changing, it'd...be exhausting."

He headed back for the entrance, still carrying the sword. *Though if you*

want... Orphen thought to himself. *I wouldn't mind if you ran away somewhere and never showed up again.*

Honestly, *he* almost wanted to run away. *I don't get it. It's just...* He put a hand to his forehead and looked up at the fairy light floating near the ceiling. The inoffensive sorcerous light didn't so much as twinkle.

Lottecia Crewbstar, huh? What is she?

Even his internal narration went silent. Orphen finally really thought about her—that pale, determined face of hers. How she swung her wooden sword without once looking his way. The face she made when she triumphantly thrust her sword forward. Her bestial cry...

It wasn't like anything about her was particularly strange...he didn't think so, at least. Of course, there wasn't really any such thing as a strange person in the first place. Every human being was just that: human. Even if other people saw them as odd. Even if no one else understood them.

He heard footsteps behind him. Turning around, he found Lottecia standing there with her bag over her shoulder, finished changing.

What should he say to her?

Orphen looked about, not finding any words. For the time being, he asked her, "Are you coming?"

Lottecia nodded wordlessly. She was completely expressionless. Her exhaustion probably had something to do with that.

"It's not like I don't understand why you're so desperate," he said. "And I can't just tell you to get over it, of course. But you're basically just taking your anger out on us."

Standing there with her shoulders drooping, she looked even smaller than she already was. She just stood there silently, eyes downcast.

With a sigh, Orphen shrugged. "To be honest, I don't actually know why I feel like I have to help you or how to actually do that. But if you're willing to come with me, that's enough for me."

He wasn't sure if she nodded or not to that. It might have just been that her

body swayed a bit. Deciding that he probably shouldn't pursue the matter further, Orphen just went on, "You should at least apologize to Claiomh, alright?"

"Right." She finally squeezed a sound out.

Then she raised her face and changed her expression. She looked sad and detached as she murmured, "You're just like Ed. You're not kind to me."



Well, that was probably fine.

It was incredibly clumsy, but if it was finished, then it was fine.

If her mission was to watch this farce, then she figured she at least had the patience to do so. Patience. That's right. That was what was needed of her. It was something everyone had, but no one had enough of.

Smiling wryly, she watched over the two of them. When the man had entered the building, she'd been prepared in a worst case scenario to make use of Deedee, but it seemed her intervention hadn't been necessary. True to her information, the man was careless, but he was skilled enough to make up for his carelessness. That was commendable, she supposed. Just as patience was demanded of her, what was demanded of him was exactly that—she smiled cynically—carelessness.

"Hmm... So you think he is unsuited."

She cocked her head to listen to the voice that suddenly welled up in her mind. She had always cocked her head when she heard this voice, and she continued to do so now.

"Let me ask you, then. Can you be so careless?"

There's a limit to what humans can do. They can't even change fate. If so...maybe it was actually flaws that were demanded of humans...

"Either way..." Confirming the sight of the two leaving the building, she hid herself once again. "If he's gonna die, I hope he dies in a way that doesn't end up getting me in trouble."

Muttering to herself, she sank into the darkness behind her.

Chapter V: Ten Hours

“...What is this?”

When he heard the words that had naturally spilled from Lottecia’s mouth, Orphen finally realized he was asking the same question.

The situation was as abnormal as it could possibly be.

The inn was *twisted*.

It went without saying that some incredibly powerful force had been at work here. The way the inn was curved to the side was as if a giant had pinched and twisted it. The walls and supports were crushed, leaving only a suggestion of the inn’s original form. Orphen couldn’t tell if the change had occurred instantaneously or extremely slowly. Either way, it was obvious that the situation was very abnormal.

Lottecia was speechless, mouth open wide.

Orphen looked around the area for now, getting a better grip on the sword in his hand—he would be ready to draw it at any time.

He recalled the sorcerous blast that had almost definitely occurred here a short while ago. That explosion was likely not directly connected to this phenomenon, but it was probably related. If that was the case, then it meant that a battle involving sorcery of that magnitude had occurred here.

He didn’t even need to enter the inn to know it was empty. And even if there were people inside, based on the damage to the building, he was sure they had died instantly.

Something suddenly came to mind and Orphen clucked his tongue. *That explosion... From the timing, it most likely occurred around when Claiomh and Majic got back to the inn.* There was a possibility the two of them had been inside the building when it was destroyed.

“Err...” Lottecia suddenly spoke up. She pointed at the inn and asked,

“What...is this?”

“Did you not hear me ask the same thing a minute ago?” Orphen groaned and looked away from the inn. “Should I tell it like it is? This is exactly the ‘emergency’ you were referring to before. And if I’d ignored you and rushed back, I just might have made it in time to stop whatever happened. Not that I know what the heck it was.”

He told her all that and Lottecia went pale. It was still dark, but the change was so pronounced that he could tell even in the low light.

“But...” Her shoulders slumped and she staggered a little. “But...I never thought something like *this* would happen...”

Orphen silently listened to her before sighing and admitting to himself... This had nothing to do with her. By the time the explosion had occurred, he was too far away from here. Even if he’d rushed back, nothing would have changed. He understood that, but he couldn’t bring himself to share that with her.

“Well, whatever...” he muttered and looked around the night streets. There was no sign of anyone nearby even though something this big happening should have drawn some onlookers.

“Guess we’ll have to look inside for now.”

“Is that safe?”

“No idea.”

Orphen looked up at the sky and took a breath, then turned to her and held out the grip of the sword. When he looked down at her, Lottecia was glancing between his face and the sword as if this was unexpected.

He shrugged. “Sorry, but I want you to protect yourself as much as you’re able to. Frankly, I’m not confident I can go up against someone capable of all this and protect someone else at the same time.” He indicated the inn building.

Lottecia silently took the sword. She stood still, keeping it sheathed, and looked to him for instructions.

Orphen shifted his gaze, unable to keep it on her. The door was gone from the front of the inn. It had been torn from its hinges and was embedded in the

interior of the building. As far as he could tell peeking in from outside, the interior of the inn was completely messed up too—like the whole building had just been shaken around.

“Umm...” Lottecia called out hesitantly. “Are Claiomh and...Majic...in there?”

“Well, I hope they’re not,” Orphen answered swiftly.

Even being optimistic, the only reason they’d have to be in a building destroyed so thoroughly was because they couldn’t get out or because they were already corpses.

Sensing that, Lottecia didn’t ask any more questions.

“Well, we did have a place we were going to meet up if we got separated,” Orphen told her without looking at her. “So I just want to make sure they’re not here.”

“Right.”

“Can’t say I’m not interested in how the inn ended up like this, but it’s not that important. That’s something we’ll figure out if we find them too.”

“Right.”

“Needless to say, my biggest priority right now is my own safety. Yours should be the same thing. So don’t try to help me if it means getting yourself in trouble.”

“Right.”

She nodded rhythmically to each of his points. Satisfied with that, Orphen nodded back.

Pointing at the inn entrance, he said, “Okay, let’s go.”

He carefully stepped forward. The sound of that first step rang out in the darkness.

The crumbling floor sank unsteadily. It was completely trashed inside—tables, chairs, and cupboards flipped over. If it could break, it was broken, fragments scattered about everywhere. As if there were chunks of glass stuck between the broken floorboards, there was a grating crunching sound with each step he

took. The darkness and stillness were more eloquent the more quiet it was.

Rubbing the sweat on his palms with his fingertips, Orphen quieted his breathing. Maybe there was no point in trying to hide his presence like this. But there was something in the darkness that told him that it was the right thing to do.

He knew this feeling. Sensing a bad taste in the back of his throat, Orphen looked over to Lottecia. She at least appeared to be calm, following silently behind him with the sword, still sheathed. Her silent steps were probably from her lighter weight. She seemed to have the advantage when it came to sneaking around.

“Err... Orphen...” Lottecia hesitantly called out to him.

The thought suddenly occurred to Orphen that this was the first time she’d called him by his name and he couldn’t help smiling wryly. He listened to what she had to say.

“Can we not just call for them from outside? It’s a small building...”

“Sure, you can do that. Just keep in mind that they might not be able to call back. If you get an answer, that means we have to go inside, but even if you don’t, we still have to, so it really doesn’t make a difference.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Still, there’s no reason not to... In fact, we probably should. But, dammit...what is this?” Something in the air was instinctively keeping him from calling out.

Orphen sighed and muttered, “Hey, Lottecia.”

“Yes?”

“Let me tell you a good way to find Ed.”

“Huh?” She blinked in surprise, almost letting the sword drop from her hands.

“Remember how the air feels here,” he told her. “It’ll feel like this anywhere he’s done something.”

Having no idea what he was talking about, Lottecia naturally couldn’t respond to him.

Orphen left her behind and hurried into the building. This was probably the

kitchen or something—in its current state, it was too wrecked to be properly identified. Orphen pushed open a crooked door and peered behind it.

And he said, “It’ll be just like this.”

He felt Lottecia stretching forward behind him to see what he was looking at. She gave a little yelp when she caught sight of it.

What was lying there had once been a human being. It was probably the remains of the innkeeper.

The reason they couldn’t be sure was because rather than an individual, it was nothing more than a body, and rather than a human being, it was nothing more than a corpse the size of a human being. It had been so thoroughly destroyed that those were the only ways it could be described.

It had probably been something different than the impact that had deformed the inn—the flesh was flayed like it had been torn up directly, with a dull blade. The wounds most closely resembled those caused by a beast’s claws.

Orphen nudged the frozen Lottecia backward. She had a hand to her mouth and her shoulders were trembling. Tears glistened in her wide-open eyes.

“What do you...mean?” Her voice was a sob. “You think Ed did this?”

“No. He wouldn’t make such a mess of things. He’s not the type to murder indiscriminately like—” he started to say, then cut himself off. He shook his head, unable to finish the sentence in front of someone who had almost been killed by the man. “I just think someone like him probably did this.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

“I could say I do, but I could also say I don’t.”

“...?”

“Well, anyone who’d make a huge scene like this wouldn’t just do it for no reason. Which means I do have *some* idea at the very least.”

After he said that much, Orphen clucked his tongue. “Dammit!” He kicked the leg of a chair lying on the floor and turned to the interior of the building. “What is with this timing?!”

“Timing...?” Lottecia asked.

Orphen looked her way. “We just happened to arrive at this town today.”

“Right.”

“Claiomh just happened to collapse on the road outside town, so it took longer than it would have otherwise, and it wouldn’t have been strange for us to arrive yesterday or tomorrow instead.”

Lottecia went quiet, perhaps realizing what he was about to say.

Orphen went on without paying her any mind. “You just happened to sneak out and we went out looking for you. I just happened to send the two of them back to the inn on their own. At that point, this inn just happened to end up in this state. Why? All I can think is that someone was watching us.”

“But who would—”

“I don’t know! And why’d they go after those two and not me—what reason did they have to attack Claiomh and Majic in such an extreme way?!”

“We don’t know that yet!” Lottecia raised her voice, maybe because Orphen had. She said, half-shouting, “We don’t know that they got caught up in it yet!”

“...!”

He had no idea what to call it other than an impulse. It was a meaningless impulse too. If he were to call it anything else, he would have to acknowledge the existence of some sort of higher power.

Maybe that would be better.

Orphen felt something snap in his mind. He kicked off from the ground and took off running, headed for the stairs to the second floor. He ran up the crumbling flipped-upside-down stairs as fast as he could. His boots tread over broken planks as he did, but he continued running without worrying about it. The damage on the second floor was awful as well, but Orphen ran over it all, headed for a certain door—

That door alone was untouched, though that was probably just a coincidence.

Orphen silently kicked open the door to the room Claiomh had been staying

in.

The hinge split and a fragment of wood grazed his cheek. Orphen closed his eyes reflexively from the pain, then snapped them open again so that he could see the figure sitting still in the center of the room.

She was like a maiden sitting by the waterside. Or perhaps more like a painting of one.

She sat with her legs folded beneath her and her back straight. Her arms were limp at her sides and she was staring straight forward, though her eyes captured nothing. She was merely looking forward, not even blinking. Her glossy blonde hair fell straight down her back and dipped into the puddle of blood underneath her.

On the lap of the girl on the floor was a boy with his eyes closed. The blond boy was torn to shreds, completely limp, just letting the blood pour out of his body. It looked almost like he was bathing.



Stay calm.

He almost felt like he could hear those words coming from somewhere. You mustn't flee based on impulse. You mustn't believe what you see. Only after you flip over what you see, analyze it carefully, and confirm what you've found does it become the truth.

Orphen slowly exhaled. Even after expelling all the air from his lungs, what surfaced in his mind wasn't the impulse he'd warned himself about or anger. It was something even he didn't expect.

The girl was Claiomh. He spent some time convincing himself of that.

On her lap was Majic. It took him time to understand this as well.

Just then, he heard a scream from behind him.

He didn't even need to turn around. It was Lottecia. She'd chased after him and finally caught up. In a halting voice, she repeated twice, "Why... Why?!"

It was nothing more than noise resounding outside of his focus. The voice, the words, held no meaning. Orphen was just silently observing. Even at the sound of the scream, Claiomh's gaze never moved. Her body was still, other than the faint up and down movements of her chest as she breathed.

Her lips were parted slightly. Some drool was spilling from her mouth.

"Why...is he not here?" Orphen said to himself quietly.

"They're both here!" Lottecia yelled at him. She was probably half out of her mind. She grabbed Orphen by the shoulders and shook him. "You can't tell? They're both right here!"

"It's weird that he's not here," Orphen went on, slapping her hands away. He looked around the room. Everything in here was as trashed as the rest of the inn, but no matter where he looked, he couldn't find what he was looking for.

"Orphen—"

"Leki's not here. Why is he not here?!" Finally, he shouted. He balled his hands up into fists and said, "He's a deep dragon... He's always protected Claiomh. So why..."

“Everyone wants to know why. Well, I’ll ask ‘why’ right back. Why can no one be quiet even when they’re dying?”

The voice sounded familiar. Orphen turned.

Majic was lifting his head up. No, it very clearly was not the boy he knew.

Lying on the floor with countless wounds opened up in him, he stared straight at Orphen, neck bent at an angle that completely ignored the human skeletal structure. His eyes shined a vibrant primary green, not like their usual color.

The change occurred in a mere instant. The boy’s body smoothly morphed, coiling around Claiomh’s body like a snake. It moved fluidly but fought against gravity as it climbed until it reformed into a humanoid shape next to Claiomh, who hadn’t budged during all this. The man wore a beat-up suit and stood at a lazy angle as he stared dryly at Orphen.

His right arm alone remained in a form resembling some sea creature’s tentacle, wrapped around Claiomh’s neck.

“Helpart...” Orphen squeezed the name of the red dragon assassin out from his throat. He raised his right hand reflexively, but—

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. The girl is the real deal. Though her mind seems to be somewhere else at the moment.”

Orphen froze at the cold voice that came from Helpart. Piercing him with his gaze, Orphen growled, “What are you here for? Where’s Majic?”

“An announcement.”

“What?”

“What I’m here for. You heard me. I’m here to make an announcement.”

“And what’s that?” Orphen asked slowly.

Lottecia was frozen in incomprehension. Orphen was relieved to find that she hadn’t even drawn the sword—it would likely have been worse than pointless and only would have caused problems. He hoped the reason she hadn’t drawn was because she understood that.

If she didn’t, the second she calmed down, she might rush at him with it.

Mindful of that, Orphen continued. “Let me hear it. What’s your announcement?”

Helpart only smirked—widening his mouth and making a low sound in his throat—and answered with the words: “Destruction comes.”

“To me?”

“No, to this town.”

“Are you stupid?” Orphen said immediately. He felt his face twitching with annoyance. “Urbanrama’s one of the four major cities in the west of the continent. How many people do you think live here? There’s a branch of the Sorcerers’ Association in the northern part of town and there’s plenty of weapons here too. Most of the people who live here have served in the military. That’s what they say, at least.”

He scoffed and said, “Why don’t you tell me just how you plan on destroying this town?”

“I never said I was planning on destroying it. It is nothing more than simple fact that it will be destroyed. If we war, that is.”

“Why would that be?”

“According to Ryan, it will become necessary.”

“Ryan?” Lottecia repeated. She was probably surprised to hear a familiar name.

She took a step forward and words spilled from her like a dam had burst. “I heard...from Claiomh, that he was the one who stole the sword. Ryan has something to do with this? Where is he?”

“I’ve made my announcement...” That was all Helpart said, completely ignoring her.

Then, once again, his eyes glowed green, and he morphed and sank through the gaps in the floor, disappearing in a mere instant.

“Ugh!” Orphen reflexively moved to chase him, but there was nothing he could do. No matter how he tried to go after him, the dragon had probably already fled the building. He had no way of chasing down a being that could slip

between the tiny gaps in the floor to escape anyway.

Instead, Orphen ran to Claiomh. She was still staring at nothing with a trance-like expression on her face. The floor had shaken slightly, causing her limp body to topple over. She fell faceup, silently, like a moth drifting to the ground.

“Claiomh!” Orphen called to her as he lifted her up. Her body was so light it almost made him recoil when he touched her.

There was no response from the girl, but she didn’t appear to have any wounds.

“Claiomh! Wake up! Dammit, her mind’s somewhere else? What’s that supposed to mean?! Wake up already! What happened?! Where’s Majic?!”

“Orphen!” Lottecia’s panicked voice suddenly cut through the air.

At the same time, the whole building gave a great *creak*.

“It’s coming down?!”

It was obvious enough that he didn’t have to voice it like that. The walls and floors had lost most of their supports, so there was no way for them to maintain their original shapes anymore. When Helpart made his exit through the floor, he might have done something...but there was no point in thinking about that now.

Orphen picked up Claiomh and shouted, “I release thee—” Composing and deploying the spell in an instant, he raised his right arm as if to slice through the power in the air. “Sword of Light!”

Light collected in a spot before him, then expanded out from that point.

The light exploded inside the room, burying everything before him in white, and then sped in a torrent in one direction. The heatwave roared up at the ceiling and blasted everything there and above away. That impact was the last push the building needed to crumble completely.

The next thing he felt was falling. It *felt* like two meters—though when he thought about it, with the amount of rubble beneath him, he couldn’t have fallen that far. He’d definitely felt the terror of a long-distance drop, though.

He didn’t scream, just tried to maintain his balance atop the crumbling floor.

Orphen's eyes snapped open as he held Claiomh's limp body in his arms.

When everything was over...he stood atop the scattered remains of the inn. He got a better grip on Claiomh and looked around. Lottecia looked relatively unharmed as well. She had her hands on the floor and was looking up at him.

"Wh-What did you...just do?"

"I blew the roof away so we didn't get buried under it." Orphen looked up at the hazy night sky. Even with the wind blowing, the sky in this town never cleared.

"Destruction...eh?" he muttered to himself. "Why...? For what purpose...and how?" He had no answers to any of his questions.

Orphen took a long breath and tried to leave the area, dragging his legs. There was still no one nearby. If there still wasn't a single spectator in the area after such an extreme commotion, Orphen could only think someone had made sure everyone nearby would keep their distance.

Which would be easy for a dragon like Helpart...

He was nowhere to be seen nearby either. It rubbed Orphen the wrong way, but he had to admit it was probably better that way for the time being.

If I'm going to settle things with him, it has to be by myself. There's no way I can fight him while protecting someone else, Orphen admitted quietly.

"Err..."

He turned around upon hearing Lottecia's voice.

She walked over and peered down at Claiomh, furrowing her brow worriedly. "What's...wrong with Claiomh?"

Orphen looked down at the girl leaning against him too. There had been no change in her condition. He wouldn't be surprised if she hadn't even moved her eyelids once in all this time.

Orphen felt his heart chilling. He shook his head. "I dunno. But this isn't normal. It's obvious enough that she's not just in shock or unconscious. We'll need to take her to a doctor. Shit, I have to find our stuff underneath this rubble... No, that wouldn't do any good. We don't have any money anyway."

“Er, I’ve got a little...” Lottecia held up the small bag she was carrying.

Orphen turned to her. His mouth opened to argue reflexively, but he stopped himself at the last second and lowered his eyes. “Thanks,” he murmured. “I’ll probably need to borrow some. There’s no way to know if this is even something a doctor can fix, though.”

He walked slowly out of the rubble, making his way to the darkened, though ultimately safer, street.

“That...man?” Lottecia seemed to be struggling to stay quiet in all her confusion. Her eyes moved restlessly this way and that as she quickly asked, “I thought he was Majic, but he suddenly...transformed. What was that?”

“A dragon—basically, humans don’t know about them, but monsters like that are out there. I can give you a more detailed explanation, but I don’t have the energy right now. And Majic’s still missing. I still don’t even know what happened.”

“We should look for him!”

“Like I said before, there’s a place we were gonna meet up. I said this too: you should prioritize your own safety.”

“So we should just leave him be?!”

“If you want the same strength I have so you can fight Ed, then yes!” Orphen finally raised his voice, glaring at her and shouting. “If you still think you need to do that, then believe in my methods for a start. And if you can’t, then do whatever you want.”

She must not have thought he’d bring that up. Lottecia went quiet, her face the same as it had been when he’d hit her.

Orphen averted his eyes from her and turned away. He didn’t want her to see the look in his eyes. He clucked his tongue and cursed to himself, *Sure, we might find him if we look... Maybe he’s just hiding in one of those alleys. He might be buried under the rubble I just stepped over too.*

He could come up with all sorts of fantasies, but reality was something else. It was the unmoving girl in his arms and the limits of his own exhaustion. Recalling

Helpart's tasteless transformation into a bloodied, dying Majic, Orphen filed that away as reality as well. He couldn't go around looking for his apprentice, who might very well be dead, and waste the time he'd been given by his foe—he didn't know what the dragon's words had meant, but it was clear to him that it had been a warning. He had to get Claiomh somewhere safe, and he had to rest too. If they could, they should hide themselves as well.

Plus... Orphen bit his lip. *I already started teaching him how to fight. He should at least know how to flee by now.* It had only been a few hours of lessons, but if he hadn't managed to absorb any of the things Orphen had taught him by now, he wouldn't be able to make use of any of the things Orphen planned to teach him in the future either.

"Undergoing training...means..." he said quietly. He had no idea whether Lottecia could hear him or not, but he didn't really care, he thought with a wry smile. He was well aware that it was nothing more than an excuse. "...being responsible for mastering the things you've learned. It's a declaration that you're prepared to look after yourself. That's how sorcerers have always lived..."

Lottecia didn't answer him, but he got the sense that she'd heard him. Or maybe he just thought that because she wasn't saying anything to him.

In any case, Orphen looked up. He'd been staring at his feet as a result of having to carry someone. He went to confirm the direction he was headed in and...spotted someone in his field of view.

His nerves were immediately on edge—he wasn't capable of doing anything drastic right now, but he at least wanted to get a good look at the person and make sure he could drop to the ground at any moment. It was his best alternative, since his movements were heavily limited with Claiomh in his arms. Of course, this meant that he wasn't capable of holding back if he had to make a counterattack. He made sure he was ready to use his most powerful sorcery if he had to.

However, a few seconds later...

"...It's you," Orphen muttered, taken aback.

The woman—Winona—gave him an untamed smile, that big bag of hers over

her right shoulder. Fixing the cord of the bag that was digging into her shoulder, she indicated the destroyed inn and whistled. “So, uhh...what happened there?”

“You’re alright.”

“Guess so,” she said blithely. Striding over to Orphen, she held out her hand to take Claiomh from him so casually that it seemed like the obvious thing to do. “Give her here. You look like you’re about to collapse.”

Orphen hesitated, but he didn’t think he had a choice. He could barely move his legs. “Thanks.”

Entrusting Claiomh to her, Orphen collapsed to the ground on the spot, all the strength going out of him. He looked up and found Winona holding Claiomh easily with just her left arm.

“This weird guy chased me out of my inn room, so I was wandering around a bit, but...” she shrugged her shoulders. “I guess it was a benevolent warning. How do you even flatten a building like that?”

“You say that like it’s okay just because he was benevolent... Dammit, what even happened...?” He groaned.

“Say...” She chuckled and asked him, “Should I explain it all for you?”

“Huh?” Orphen looked up, confused, but Winona wasn’t looking at him.

Gazing down at the unmoving Claiomh’s face, she went on, “Traveling’s a hobby of mine, you see. I’ve seen all sorts of things. Probably more than you have. When I look at a person, I can generally tell at a glance exactly what sort of trouble they’re wrapped up in. Simple as that.”

“Hah...” Orphen scoffed, not intending to go along with her joke. Still sitting on the ground, he balled up his hands into fists.

That was the last thing he remembered. As his consciousness faded, he heard a voice...

“Traveling’s my hobby... Probably will be for my whole life...”

Letting blackness take over, Orphen leaped into a pleasant darkness.

Chapter VI: Six Hours

When morning came and no one had returned, he felt simultaneously like it had nothing to do with them and also like maybe it did. There was nothing unusual about that—thoughts should always conflict somewhat for someone of reasonable intelligence. There was no such thing as intelligence that never conflicted with itself. Of course, the matter he was considering was nothing so significant.

Watching his brother stick his whole upper body into a drawer and root around for something, Dortin murmured, “Umm, Brother.”

“What is it?” his brother Volkan asked, tossing random junk—a lot of it was broken toys—out of the drawer. He was engrossed in his work, his tone distracted.

But an answer was an answer. Dortin accepted it, and went on, “I think this might actually be pretty bad...”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, wouldn’t this be, you know, burglary? Or something worse? Umm, right. It’s being ungrateful, don’t you think?”

“Hmm?”

Dortin looked up at him when his brother made a sound like he was listening, but he just sighed when he saw him. Volkan had pulled a toy jewelry box out of the back of the drawer and the sound he’d made was actually one of interest in his discovery.

The lid of the jewelry box was warped, so it wasn’t completely closed, but the latch was locked. As his brother tried to pry it open with his teeth, Dortin groaned, “Those guys might come back at any moment, you know.”

“So you say, Dortin. However...” Volkan gave up on opening the box for the time being and raised a finger with a frown on his face. He opened his mouth solemnly, though Dortin felt like he’d never said a solemn thing in his life, and

said, “That cabbage I specially allowed to become my pupil—”

He must have meant that man named Ryan. He *had* been wearing cabbage-colored tights. Dortin’s brother simply wasn’t the type to remember humans’ names.

“He left his very, very, very, very important master behind and went out at night. And since he didn’t even leave me any breakfast, it simply follows that if he happens to die growing mold in a sink strainer, well, so be it. I mean, really, I should be able to eat whatever I want. Thus, it is no longer his age, but the age of the great hero Vulcano Volkan.”

Dortin wasn’t sure what his point was, but his brother said all that with great confidence and then went back to trying to pry open the lid of the toy jewelry box. Either way, he really didn’t imagine any money or food was going to come out of the box even if his brother did manage to open it.

Not telling his brother that—he didn’t want to become an accomplice to his crimes—Dortin sighed. He looked around the messy room and started to feel rather glum. Whose job would it be to clean it up, he wondered.

The church was deserted. Neither its caretaker nor Ryan were there. The man in the black clothes hadn’t come back since Dortin had seen him leave, and Ryan had left as well, before night fell. Dortin had no idea where either of them had gone. Ryan had brought them here and had just left them alone. Dortin felt a little like he’d been caught in an endless cycle of this since joining human society.

Sensing that staying here would only escalate his melancholy, Dortin turned around to leave the room. He left his rummaging brother behind and stepped daintily out of the room, avoiding all of the clutter.

The gloom still hadn’t left the air in the hallway. It probably should have, banished by the light of the morning sun, but only hazy sunlight filtered through the dirty windows. It was the same everywhere in this building. Parts of it were dirty and showed their age, but it was neat enough on the whole to live in at least. That man had called it a church, but the only thing church-like about it was the idol up on the roof.

No. Heading down the hallway, Dortin rethought that. There was one more

thing.

Dortin opened the door at the end of the hallway, not in any particular hurry. The thin door clattered as it opened the path for him. Beyond it was a hall. On the other end of the hall, there was a set of double doors—the building's largest entrance and exit. Though right now, only one of those double doors actually opened.

The hall had probably once been used as a chapel. The side Dortin had entered from, meaning the side that led deeper into the building, was raised slightly like a stage. Still, that was the only hint regarding what it was, alongside countless traces where there might have been pews or pulpits, maybe even an organ and various idols.

The windows all around the room were dirty, like everything else. The room brought to mind a long-unused storeroom or an abandoned building awaiting demolition. Infinite specks of dust sparkled in the morning light. The sparkles weren't beautiful or significant in any way, but they were still sparkles.

They're probably in debt, Dortin imagined. Drawing his arms into his cloak, he shook his head pityingly. *It has to cost money to maintain a building like this. They probably put up anything valuable like the pews and artwork as collateral and it was taken away. I think it's pretty hard for minor faiths that don't have the protection of the Union of Lords to get by anyway...*

He was suddenly sympathizing with the black-clothed man he hadn't seen since the previous day. *I bet he had a church with no congregation left forced on him and he's been wandering around trying to raise funds for it. He seemed kind of miserable. Maybe he's going around to old churchgoers' houses. I wonder if he's getting rocks thrown at him or something.*

Thunk. Dortin stretched his neck out at the sudden noise and saw the door shake as if someone was hitting it. Not the door that he'd come in from, but one of the double doors. Through the window in the door—they weren't frosted glass, but the dirt covering them had a similar effect—he could vaguely see a person's head.

The first thought he had was, *This is bad.*

Someone came back?! He shuddered and turned around. He wanted to warn

his brother down the hall, but there was no time. No matter how fast he hurried, it would take at least a few minutes to clean that room up.

Dortin prayed as he turned back to the door, which shook once more—it was locked. It was just a flimsy piece of wood serving as a bar, but a lock was a lock. That might buy them the minutes they needed to tidy up the room.

But just as he was feeling so optimistic...

“Huh...?” he couldn’t help exclaiming out loud. He adjusted his glasses and observed what he had seen once more. The bar on the door had suddenly jumped up like it was flung—and the door was no longer locked.

He thought he’d seen something like a thin piece of wood for a moment too, but as far away as he was, he couldn’t be sure. Someone had probably stuck a thin branch through a gap in the doors to remove the bar. Peering down at the piece of wood on the floor that was no longer serving its purpose, Dortin then looked up at the ceiling. There were no longer any idols in the chapel, but he could still pray for his own good luck, couldn’t he?

Assuming I have any left... he added internally. For the time being, he decided to return to the room his brother was in. If he warned him quickly enough, they would probably at least have enough time to flee. This building had plenty of exits. God’s doors were open to everyone. It was probably something like that. Not that he knew what God was worshipped here.

He was just a bit too late in fleeing. Still, he turned and sped off as the door opened. Even as he fled, however, he looked back over his shoulder to see who was at the door.

Pushing the door open with his shoulder and rolling through was Ryan, several lines of blood running down his head. His usually flippant face was pale and he was unsteady on his feet, collapsing to his knees as soon as he got inside.

“Huh?” Dortin said rather dully as he paused his flight.

Ryan banged again, though not with his arm on the door but with his face on the ground this time. Then he went still.

A moment later...

“Dwaaaaaaah?!” A scream resounded, yet again rather suddenly.

It hadn't been Dortin or Ryan.

Dortin peered suspiciously into the hallway. He was sure that the sound, which had come from deeper into the building, had come from his brother. Soon after, he heard rushed footsteps heading his way.

Volkan kicked open the door and flew into the room. Eyes wide, he waved his arms and wailed, “Dortin! This is bad! At least I think it's bad! See, I broke things off with that stingy dresser and steeled myself to pull up the floorboards—”

“You went that far?” Dortin groaned, eyes half-lidded, but his brother took that positively for some reason.

Clenching his fist, Volkan struck an emotional pose and went on, “I went that far! But you don't need to be so impressed with your perfectionist brother! The Bulldog of Masmaturia is compassionate enough to share the spoils with—”

At that point, Volkan noticed the open door and the cabbage-colored man collapsed in front of it. No, it was only his tights that were cabbage-colored, and they weren't even that anymore, since there were blood stains here and there on them now.

“Hm? Isn't that my pupil I see over there?” he asked, not sounding all that interested, and looked at Dortin.

Dortin nodded awkwardly, feeling like his momentum had gotten thrown off. “Yeah. I think so.

“So he's dead...” Volkan shrugged, at least looking a little bit disappointed. “Well, it's hardly surprising. The wide-range annihilation killer move for capturing cities I taught him yesterday, ‘Love at First Sight,’ is such a huge technique that it can take some seventy years off of your life if you use it. I did try to warn him that it'd kill him to even practice it so he should just thank me for teaching him its name... Also, I charged him seven thousand old gold coins for the lesson. We put it on his tab.”

“I guess I'll just ask—what kind of move is that exactly?”

“Well, it's a rather abstract technique where you basically just work really

hard and kill about a hundred thousand people. I don't like specifics, you know."

Dortin decided to leave his brother be and ran over to Ryan. The man didn't raise his head at the sound of Dortin's footsteps. He might have already been dead.

Thieving, and then a corpse.

Dortin almost wanted to cry, then only felt sadder when he realized he wouldn't be able to. He was already completely used to things like this.

He crouched down next to Ryan, looking at the man's hair, half-crusts with blood. While he had a vague idea of how to tell the difference between a corpse and someone merely corpse-adjacent, he still couldn't totally be sure. And when he realized he'd probably have to touch what might be a dead person with his hands, he began to regret thoughtlessly rushing over here.

He'd thought the man was suspicious, but did he really need to harass him like this? Why did Dortin have to be the one to do this? Nevertheless, he timidly reached out his hand.

He was reaching for the man's neck, but he wasn't really sure where the carotid artery or what have you actually was. Needless to say, blood vessels weren't really made so that you could see where they were from the outside—and if they were too obvious, it was likely a situation where they were of no use anymore anyway. Muttering to himself that doctors probably had a more unfortunate profession than he'd thought, Dortin touched the prone Ryan's neck.

He couldn't feel a pulse, but the skin seemed warm to him. In other words, he had no idea.

For the time being, he was really bleeding a lot. There was so much blood spread out all around him that he had no idea where the wound even was. Pulling his hands back, Dortin muttered with some consternation, "So...what do I do?"

"You may...simply...leave me...be." The answer came from Ryan himself.

Dortin jumped and took a step back, but Ryan went on as if he hadn't noticed.

“If I just...stay still...I won’t...die...”

He had no idea what the man was saying, but it wasn’t as if there was much Dortin could do anyway. If Ryan didn’t want him to do anything, he had no intention of going against the man’s wishes.

Still, Dortin exclaimed, “But, umm...” He felt very strange, like he was having a conversation with a corpse. “It’d probably be better if you rested inside instead of lying around out here...”

“Y-You might be...right about that.” Ryan’s arms trembled with the effort, but he tried to pull himself up.

Volkan slid in from the side, looking down at him with his usual rotten oranges kind of gaze. “Hmm... You look even more half dead than usual, my pupil.”

“Ha...ha ha...yes. I suppose I do.” Ryan laughed and pulled himself up.

Watching him from the side, Dortin couldn’t help taking one step back. He had no idea what sort of power was at work here, but half of Ryan’s face was *peeling off*. The skin wasn’t cut, but the inside and outside of his face were just *off* by a few millimeters, like an egg that had been emptied without cracking it. His eyes were bloody, and he likely could barely see. Dortin could hardly believe the man was still conscious.

He looked down at the man’s body. It was hard to tell through his clothes, but there were parts where his bones didn’t seem to be positioned quite right. His right arm appeared to be completely unmoving. He began to crawl along the ground using only his lower body and left arm.

“Ah, aaaah, umm...” Dortin reached out, finding it difficult to keep his cool. “M-Maybe you shouldn’t move, actually...”

“Oh...you...think so?” Ryan muttered. This time, he went limp on the spot.

The man was clearly not in his right mind. Dortin had no idea what had happened, but Ryan was obviously confused. That was only to be expected, of course.

“A doctor!” Dortin shouted to no one in particular—certainly not his brother.

He had no idea where to find a doctor in this town, but that was what the man needed, he surmised. Actually, he might need a funeral home. There was a graveyard nearby at least, fortunately. This was a church, after all...

Now even I'm confused. Dortin shook his head and peered down at Ryan, who seemed to be out of strength. He exchanged a look with his blank-faced brother and rapidly went through all the things he could and couldn't do in his head.

The best option, though it was completely illogical, would be for a doctor to suddenly appear and give Ryan whatever treatment he required. If that was impossible, then the next thing that came to mind was the *worst* option: just pray that he die without suffering any more.

For the time being, Dortin looked to the door that still lay open. He could see outside. As the church was in a residential area, there was no chance there was a hospital nearby, and all he could see was a gently sloping path extending out into the distance—however...

Crunch... Something black entered his field of view. At first, Dortin thought it was a shadow of some kind—a sort of impossible shadow that had manifested in physical space—until the black boot *crunched* on the gravel on the floor of the hall.

He quickly realized that it was just a human dressed in black. And a certain human's face suddenly came to mind when he saw the figure.

"U-Umm, this person's going to die!" Dortin shouted, not knowing what else to do. But when he looked up, he quickly realized that the person standing there wasn't the debt collector he'd been thinking of.

There was no expression on the man's pallid face. His scarred lip was a hard line as he bared his right hand from beneath his black cloak. He was holding a small lump of metal that was also black. It was a strange object, but it wasn't as if Dortin had never seen one before. The object was one of smooth, simple lines. The one he'd seen in a different human's hands had had a much more complex shape. But the one in this man's hand looked like nothing more than a metal stick with a handle attached. On the end of the metal stick was a round hole. A deep hole that brought to mind a skull's empty eye sockets—though only one. The man pointed it straight at Ryan.

He was probably three or four meters away. When Dortin realized that fact, he was surprised by the distance Ryan had pulled himself forward.

The lump of metal in the man's hand burst with a loud *bang!* It jumped along with the hand holding it. Something seemed to hit Ryan's back at the same time. His shredded body shivered at the dull impact.

"Huh...?" While he was watching, uncomprehending, the weapon in the man's hand jumped another two times. Each time it did, some sort of silver cylinders fell from the side of the weapon and hit the floor with the scent of gunpowder. To tell the truth, the only reason he could tell how many times the weapon had fired was because he was closely watching those cylinders fall.

A few seconds later, the weapon stopped moving. There were eight small cylinders on the ground in total. After counting them, Dortin looked back at Ryan and screamed.

The contents of his crushed head were sprayed out in a fan shape on the ground. Dortin collapsed to the floor, feeling something welling up from his stomach or maybe from all the organs within him. It wasn't as if he had no idea what the man had done. And he wasn't completely ignorant about that weapon either. It was a gun. Weapons only the knights in the capital were allowed to possess. That was all he could think it was. The leader of that whatever religion in Fenrir's Forest had possessed one of these weapons too. But the one this man had just used was clearly superior in power and precision to that one, even to an amateur's eyes.



Feeling even more nauseated thanks to the taste of bile in his mouth, Dortin raised his head. He'd remembered who the man was now. It was the same man who'd attacked the dojo in Nashwater, though he couldn't remember his name. For some reason, that man was here.

And he'd killed Ryan.

Dortin turned to his brother, who was clearly on a several-second delay, a look of dull surprise on his face.

The man slid the gun in his hand over a bit. It looked like he was pointing it at the two of them now. On the man's face was a cool expression that said he was capable of forcing an unreasonable death upon them.

Dortin just trembled, unable to even come up with the idea to flee. He could think of nothing to say either. A moment later...the man's expression changed. He narrowed his eyes as if in surprise and leapt back. At the same time, light cut through the spot where he'd just been standing.

It wasn't just a flash of light. If anything, it had almost looked like a whip. The floor and walls split like sliced butter and then merged back together soundlessly. It wasn't slow enough for him to follow with his eyes, but he still did his best to follow the whip's afterimage to find out where the attack had come from.

With a *plop*, something fell from the ceiling right in front of his eyes. It was a figure. A plain-looking man wearing a worn-out suit. His blond hair waving with the movement, he looked back over his shoulder at the two dwarves.

His eyes shined green.

"Indigenous people? Please flee," the man said in a strange tone. No, it wasn't his tone that was strange. It was his words. Dortin hardly ever heard those words. He almost didn't understand them when he did, in fact.

It was a language much older than New Kiesalhiman, the language spoken by most of the people living on the continent now. It was even older than Old Kiesalhiman. The man was speaking Dwarf.

"Please flee," the man repeated slowly.

Volkan probably hadn't understood him. He was standing there blinking.

"Brother!" Dörtin shouted, standing up. "We're running! Inside!"

He sped deeper into the building as fast as he could.



At the sudden appearance of the dragon assassin, the man merely quietly raised his firearm. There was gunpowder smoke all around him due to his rapid firing a moment earlier, and the scent of it tickled his nose. The feel of the automatic pistol in his hand was comfortable, but he was also aware of how dangerous that feeling was—this was, after all, merely a weapon. It was not all-powerful. He had three bullets left.

Watching the two dwarves flee with unnecessary panic out of the corner of his eye, the man stared coldly at the face the dragon was showing him.

He couldn't glean an expression from the assassin's face. The dragon had the appearance of a blond man with gaunt cheeks and sunken eyes that shone green. He was a Red Dragon. An extremely troublesome opponent, though the same could be said of any of the six dragon species.

For the time being, all he could do was pull the trigger. But the moment he started to squeeze, the dragon opened his mouth as if he'd been waiting for that moment.

"You can't do it unless you think of it as work, can you?"

The man merely looked back at the dragon, uncomprehending. Deciding to hold off on pulling the trigger for at least a few more seconds, he frowned and muttered, "What are you talking about?"

"You can't kill unless you think of it as work, can you? You immediately grow aware of your surroundings once you've finished..."

The dragon didn't smile. He spoke indifferently. For a being who could transform his body in any way he wanted, he was only capable of expressing himself rather blandly. Perhaps his kind weren't capable of expressing emotions and the like.

Or maybe they didn't even feel any.

The man waited a moment, then glanced down at Ryan, whose brain was splattered on the ground, and asked, “Were you trying to take me by surprise once I’d let down my guard after killing him?”

The dragon’s answer was apathetic once again. “Well, something like that,” he said without nodding or moving at all.

The man took half a step back to gain a bit of distance from his foe. They were about three meters apart now, which was advantageous for neither of them. Both of them could attack from this distance. Of course, there was no guarantee that a bullet could kill a Red Dragon.

But even if the lead rounds couldn’t destroy his opponent’s body... “Not much camaraderie between you Doppel X, is there?” ...his words could get through to him.

Just as he expected, the dragon’s gaze shifted. If he’d spoken a second later, he might have been attacked.

“I see. I couldn’t quite believe it when Ryan told me, but you are aware of our existence... How can that be?”

“You’ve only been active for the last ten years or so, haven’t you? In that sense, no matter how big you try to act, you’re not that different from me. We’re equals.”

“Equals... I don’t think that’s true. We don’t understand you...”

“I’m just more careful than you are.”

“I’d say it’s merely the difference between the hunters and the hunted.” The dragon seemed to sneer. “Seemed” because outside of his voice, there was no indication on his face or in his gestures that he was showing any emotion.

Raising his hand, the dragon continued, “You seem to believe your superiority is only natural. In reality, we have some doubts about you, but that is all it is. We do not fear you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How did you know about this place?”

The first thing the man thought about when he heard the question was what

would result from answering it. If he gave his opponent information, how much would the dragon be able to infer from it?

No. The man merely watched his adversary in silence. And his opponent likely expected this. The dragon spoke again without showing any indication that he was bothered by the man's silence.

"Hmm. Well, it's no wonder you were able to follow my partner. It seems he went through rather a lot last night. I even had to step in to make the announcement he was going to make. I suppose I should just be surprised that he had the willpower to make it back here."

After saying all that, he paused for a moment, then asked, "We were supposed to be monitoring you. How are you able to move freely?"

Yet again, the man answered with silence. And yet again, the Red Dragon quietly responded to himself.

"Jack Frisbee... That's his name. You must have lost him. That's impressive. So? Did he die? Or is he still looking up at that window, believing you're in that room? That's really all I mean about our doubts," he added, shrugging. It was the first hint of humanity he'd shown.

Next, the dragon spread his arms out like a magician and said, "I'll figure it out if I ask. Even if you don't answer, I can guess. Doubts are only doubts. Only fools feel fear from them. Now then..." He changed the subject like they were just having a casual chat. "What do you think it means to be a true adult?"

While the man stood there unanswering, the dragon went on without waiting very long.

"It's questions. Answering questions. If you're an adult, then no matter what you're asked, no matter when, you must answer." He smiled. "Ah, I'm not trying to be snide. I'm just explaining why I decided to answer your questions. Now, you had a question about our sense of camaraderie too, didn't you? I'll answer that next."

There was a strange glow in his green eyes that almost seemed to be sucking the man inside...

"To be honest, I'd like to tell you that I don't give a damn about him, but I

would have stopped you if I actually thought my partner would die.”

For a moment, the man couldn't understand what that meant, but his eyes soon snapped to Ryan on the floor. The young man was still lying face down in the same spot, blood and other fluids still spilled around him on the filthy floor. However...

Those green tights Ryan was wearing...there were silver letters blazing on their surface in places. The man looked down at him and found the tree branches extending from the tights forming complex letters and burning. Then the lights from the flames enveloped Ryan and regenerated his head, which had been completely destroyed.

It can automatically revive him?! If he could be resuscitated from this state, then that meant that he was practically unkillable if you didn't take his tights off.

Clucking his tongue, the man turned back to the Red Dragon, but he was a second too late. By then, the dragon was already gone—only an afterimage of him remaining. He must have jumped back up to the ceiling.

A few seconds later, his attack came.

The man was ready for it. He needed to avoid it. But which way should he go? He reached a conclusion quickly.

He ran forward, leaping to the spot where Ryan was lying on the floor. At the same time, he gripped his pistol with both hands. He didn't look for the Red Dragon after losing him. He knew he didn't have the time. Behind him, he heard a loud noise—the dragon's attack. It must have carved right through the floor. He ignored that and just focused on Ryan in front of him.

Passing by the regenerating Ryan, he emptied the rest of his bullets into the young man's head again.

The young man's dirty blond head shattered once more, but it was only the same thing that had happened earlier. In a few moments, he would begin to revive once more. But the man could buy a certain amount of time—at least the same amount of time that they'd spent conversing up until now.

Ejecting his now empty magazine, he loaded the gun with a new one.

By that time, he'd already turned around. They had switched places now: the Red Dragon stood near the entrance, while the man stood right next to Ryan.

He pointed his gun straight ahead and pulled the trigger right away. Two gunshots echoed, and two bullets buried themselves in the dragon's face. The rifled bullets left larger holes in the creature's face than he expected. With a wet splashing sound, the forehead and cheek of his target warped like putty.

He realized quickly that the bullets had little effect on his adversary. The Red Dragon could soften—or rather *liquidize*—himself faster than he could shoot. He could make the bullet and the impact simply pass through himself to stave off the fatal damage. With his face still transformed, he pointed one hand toward his foe. A moment later, everything past his wrist stretched out.

Rippling as it flowed forward, the dragon's hand charged toward him, moving like water shooting out of a hose. It hit the floor and then bounced up again, so he leaped back, shooting twice at it. One shot hit it, and the hand slowed down from the impact. In the half second he bought from leaping back and slowing the hand down, he pulled the trigger once more. He opened up another hole in the dragon's hand next to the first and the thin flesh tore apart, pulled to the floor by gravity. But he had no time to watch all this happen as another warning was going off in his head.

This time, the dragon's other hand came shooting toward his other side. But it didn't attack him straight-on; instead, it stopped moving a few meters away from him, in his blind spot. He was likely planning on stretching his fingers from there to attack. The five fingers all tensed in a knife shape and pointed his way.

There was no way for him to intercept the attack—he pointed his gun at the Red Dragon's body. His opponent showed no indication of dodging, and he knew that his weapon wouldn't be able to kill him. However...

The gun jumped three times. Almost simultaneously, he struck the dragon in the shoulders and stomach. The same as before, all that happened was the creature's body warped. But the well-placed shots caused the dragon to lean heavily. He lost his balance and collapsed backward, causing his five fingers to change trajectory and speed past the man, only grazing him.

Again, he had three bullets left.

All the ammo he'd fired had hardly even had an effect. As the Red Dragon sluggishly, casually rose from the ground, the man fired the rest of his bullets into him. But the dragon suddenly shifted to the side, dodging all three shots—his movements completely ignoring the skeletal structure a human's body would have.

The man let yet another empty magazine fall to the floor and loaded a new one once more. He listened to the sound of it clicking into the well but didn't raise it to aim again, instead sliding it into the shoulder holster beneath his cloak.

Then he let his arms hang free at his sides.

"You giving up?" the dragon assassin asked him. Reforming his bullet-riddled body to its original shape, he went on, "My partner will revive soon... There's nothing you can do, is there?"

"Guess not," the man muttered quietly. Watching the dragon crease his face with a smile, the man bared only his right arm from his cloak. He sent a look at Ryan and found that the young man was engulfed in light once more, the hole in his head already sealed up.

"It automatically revives its wearer when it detects they've died, eh? I didn't think there was a Celestial weapon so powerful."

"Are they not all something like this?" the dragon asked, pulling out Freak Diamond. The sword had a complex shape and could never be drawn from its sheath. He had no idea where the dragon had been storing it, but wouldn't have been surprised if it had been within the creature's body.

In any case, the dragon casually held up the sword and said, "Maybe things would be a bit easier for me if I used this too, hmm?" He looked up into the air as if to test the theory, but then shrugged and tucked it back into his suit.

Seeing that, the man muttered, "That sword..." Making sure his opponent was listening, he continued, "I'll answer your question. In exchange...hand over that sword."

"...?" There was no look of confusion on the dragon's face, but the man was sure that the creature was thinking over the meaning of his words. After a few

seconds of silence, he responded, “What are you planning?”

“Well, just a bit of wishful thinking.”

“I don’t make deals with irregulars. And I especially can’t make an irregular deal,” the dragon responded smoothly. But after contemplating for a few more seconds, he corrected himself. “Of course, I just did so recently. I will grant you a question, at least... Depending on your answer, I may think about it. Who are you?”

“I’m here at the behest of my lord,” the man answered instantly. That should have been enough for him to understand.

This time, the dragon assassin was silent for several times the length of his previous pauses. He groaned. “Lord? Lord...” As he muttered, he seemed to hit upon the man’s meaning. It must have been stored somewhere deep within his memories.

“The lord of the Imminent Domain...? The only one who opposes the sanctuary...” The dragon looked him in the eye and took a deep breath. In a dazed tone, he continued, “So he’s started to move...”

“He’s always been moving. You just never paid attention to him.” The man held up his hand. “Return the sword.”

“Sorry, but...” the Red Dragon responded coldly, standing up straight. He lifted his arms just a bit in what was likely his battle stance. “That was the worst possible answer. I can’t let you leave here alive now.”

“I see.” The man sighed without pulling back his stretched-out hand.

He observed the being before him. The dragon was a natural-born assassin—all Red Dragons were. All of his abilities were specialized for that task, as if someone had specifically crafted the creatures for it.

And all those abilities were about to be put to use against him.

The unstoppable killing machine, the Red Dragon, spoke to him... “Farewell, then.”

“I suppose so.” Flipping over his held-out hand, the man raised it with a flourish like a conductor and began composing a spell. Then he muttered, “I

release thee, Sword of Light.”

Light swelled up and blotted out everything before him.



In the darkness, Orphen remembered a certain man.

He was aware that he was dreaming, and that he would forget all this when he awoke. That didn’t matter to him. It was all nothing but phantom memories anyway.

The man was a member of his family, in a sense.

He’d met many people over the years, but there were only a few he considered family. And this man should have been one of them.

He was a fellow pupil of the strongest sorcerer, whom he’d studied together with at the Tower of Fangs, the highest authority on black sorcery on the continent.

However...

He’d never thought of the man as a sorcerer.

There were several reasons why. Gazing at the man in his memories, he thought to himself, *He never uses sorcery*. It wasn’t that he *couldn’t* use it. Orphen had seen him use it before, in fact, just once. It wasn’t any sort of special occasion. They were just having a mock battle.

He completely overpowered Tish back then... He commanded sufficient sorcerous power and control to even overwhelm one of Orphen’s sisters, Leticia MacCready, who was feared as one of the strongest sorcerers at the Tower, yet he didn’t use it.

If you’re a sorcerer, you use sorcery. That was only obvious. By nature, those who possessed special powers tended to rely on them. It only made sense. Thinking of walking on your feet as “relying too much on your feet” was simple monomania. Sorcerers existed with their sorcery from birth, and would be sorcerers until the day they died. However...

Not doing that...means he’s not a sorcerer... It was strange. There should have been no question about it. He was a sorcerer. Still, he also seemed to only be

masquerading as one.

What was it that he relied on as he lived? When he had that thought, he also found himself adding to it, *What is it that I rely on as I live?*

Yuis Els Ito Egum Colgon. To the long name of the man also sometimes called Night Kocker, Orphen added one more name: Ed.

The sorcerer of calamity called the Chaos Witch.

Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon.

She'd laughed at him once, many years ago. Just to Orphen and two more of them, when he'd told them that long name. She'd said it sounded more like a spell than a name, and they'd all laughed at that.

Colgon alone had merely given them a dry smile. "Maybe it is a spell. But if it is, then it's an incomplete one."

No matter how he tried, he couldn't think of the man's smile at the time as something pleasant.

"Once everything is truly over... If I chant it, I wonder what will happen?"

Epilogue

Aboard a ship, Leticia MacCready looked into the distance and sighed.

There was nothing she was particularly stressed about—the ship wasn't swaying much today and she'd gotten used to the smell of the seawater by now. She'd left Tiffes and Pat with Forte along with the whole mansion. She was a little worried about that, perhaps. Forte Puckingham was one of the strongest sorcerers at the Tower. He'd never had any pupils before and had no idea how to hold back, and she was disappointed she wouldn't be able to see how the two of them would throw him for a loop.

There weren't a ton of them in service, but steamboats like this were a fairly typical way to get around the continent. They sailed around the north coast to connect the eastern and western sides of the landmass.

Leticia leaned against a handrail on the deck of the ship, letting the wind whip through her hair. The continent was nothing more than a foggy, dark shape in the distance now. She understood logically that the currents of the sea were calmer out here farther from the shore, but she still felt a little surprised by the distance out from land the ship was in spite of herself.

She wore a black shirt and light, beige slacks with a thin gold watch on her wrist. The casual outfit was an indication that she was out on personal business. If she'd reserved a second-class cabin with the Tower's budget, she would feel the need to dress in an official capacity, in the black robe uniform of the school. Of course, she wasn't exactly paying the expenses of this trip out of her pocket money.

She smiled and looked down at the surface of the water. The sea was blue, but endlessly dark the deeper down into it she peered. Now that she thought about it, his eyes were much the same—this trip had been his suggestion.

I suppose I should thank Forte, she thought to herself. *Or will I realize by the time I'm coming back that there was nothing to be thankful about?* Even if he'd suggested it with good intentions, he wasn't a man possessed of an

overabundance of thoughtfulness, she added with a wry smile.

“Nice view, isn’t it?” a voice suddenly called to her. “Of course, I’m pretty used to it by now, you know.”

Leticia hurriedly wiped the smile from her face and schooled her expression as much as she could as she turned around.

A well-dressed man had approached her at some point.

“Oh?” she responded diplomatically.

The man she’d never seen before bowed his head, an overzealous smile on his face. He put a hand to his chest and introduced himself.

The name was just as unfamiliar to her as his face, and Leticia promptly forgot it as soon as she heard it. He was most likely just another bored passenger taking a walk through the ship.

So he went looking for another bored person to talk to. She had plenty of time to think of what to say to him. “I heard the view out on the ocean was different.”

“You must be joking. Unless you mean way out there. There are still plenty of ships that stray too far from the continent and meet a terrible fate.” Again, the look of surprise on the man’s face was exaggerated like he was an actor.

Deciding that must be his profession, Leticia continued, “Didn’t our ancestors come from beyond the sea, though?”

“Ha ha. That’s what the sorcerers say, isn’t it? I prefer to believe the newer published theories that humanity is an indigenous race of the continent, and that the Celestials fabricated a history more convenient for them. I find it much more realistic than fairy tales about the beasts of the gods and all that.”

“Oh... Do you know much about history?” Leticia raised her eyebrows, surprised.

The man laughed, showing his white teeth. “Well, I am a bit of a scholar. Did you know they have historical archives that aren’t yet released to the public in Tefurem? I just went and asked them to disclose the information, but they turned me down rather bluntly, unfortunately.”

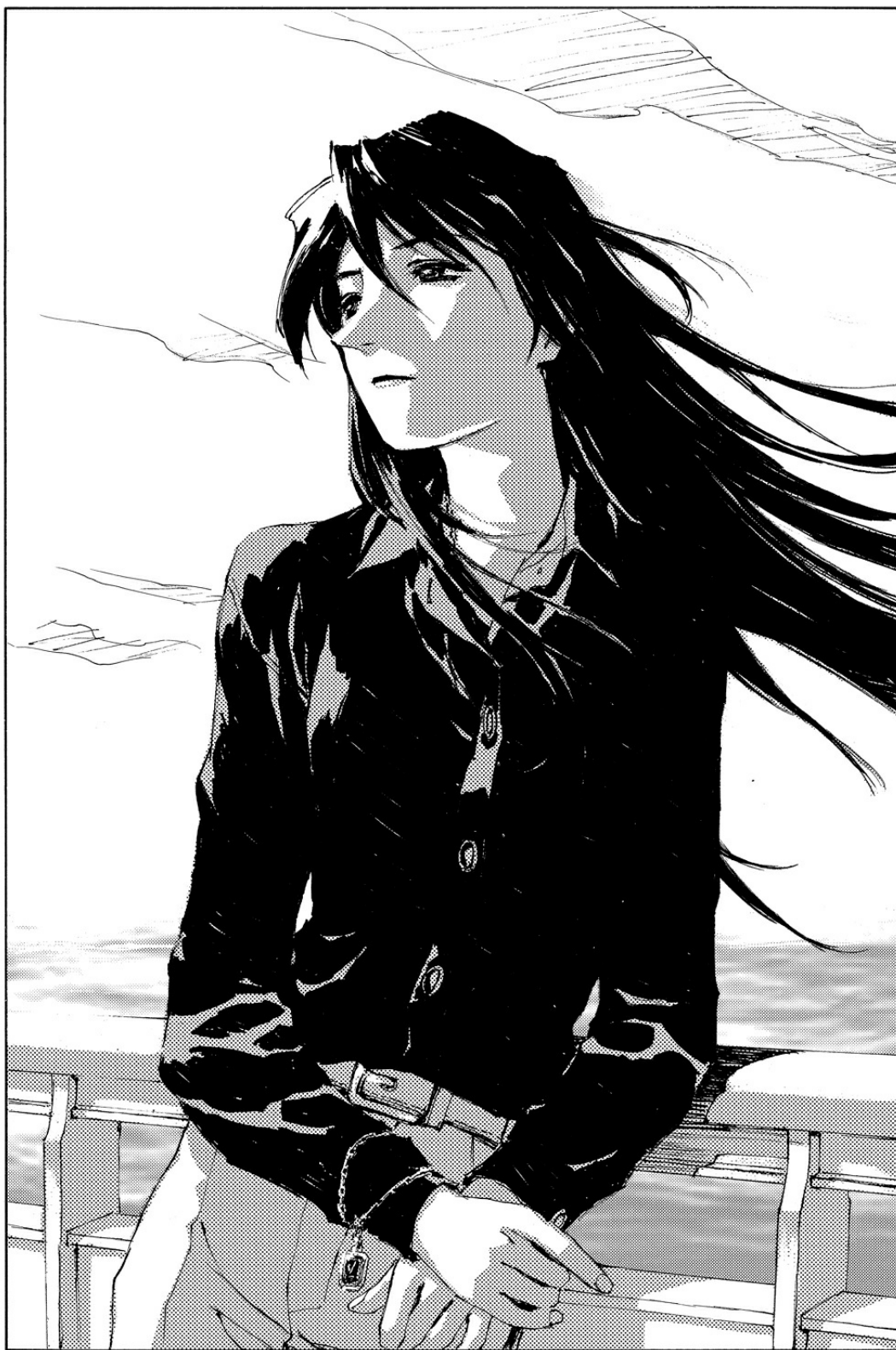
“I see.”

“I wanted to fight them more, really. My father—father-in-law, really—well, the man who will be my father-in-law would be most accurate, I suppose... In any case, the man got into some sort of accident, so I had to return rather quickly. He’s a scholar himself, and the last time I saw him, he was spouting some nonsense about finding a copy of the Browning Family’s World Book or some such... He probably just hurt himself doing fieldwork.”

Leticia came to a swift understanding of the information the man was feeding her as he spoke. Basically, he was a braggart who was proud of the work he was doing, he was engaged, and apparently, he was not an actor.

His being a scholar or not wasn’t an issue. There was no such thing as a real or fake student of learning. Anyone could be the real thing if they professed themselves such and anyone could be called a fake if someone pointed the finger at them.

Leticia shrugged and smiled. She poked her fingers into her shirt collar and told him, “Maybe I should come clean before it seems like I’m trying to trick you.” She pulled out the pendant hanging beneath her shirt—it was a crest of a one-legged dragon coiled around a sword. Taking it out, she showed it to him. Any scholar who would come all the way to Tefurem must have seen one of these before.



“That’s...” The man’s eyes went wide as saucers in an obvious display of shock. “Well, I’ll be. I didn’t know you were a sorcerer.”

“Leticia MacCready, of the Tower of Fangs. But I’m on personal business right now, so I won’t go telling the Tower’s leadership.”

“I appreciate that...” The man scratched his head, looking sincerely nervous.

Leticia couldn’t help giggling softly. Putting the pendant back into its place, she told him, “Don’t worry. I’m far removed from the leadership of the Tower, really.”

“Hmm... I can’t imagine that’s true, but all I can do is hope, I suppose.” He recovered quickly and asked her, “You say you’re on personal business... If you don’t mind my asking, what sort of business is it?”

“It’s nothing important.” She looked away from him, toward the sea where the ship was headed. “I’m just going to see my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. To talk about our sister.”

“I see...”

“I’m sorry.” Leticia cleared her throat and turned back to the man. Looking straight into his light-colored eyes, she asked him, “Could you tell me your name again?”



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 may 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.

Afterword

A certain day, a certain month.

Akita succeeds in attaching the crest of the Tower of Fangs to what he considers his main weapon, the MP5. It's nothing more than an insignificant bit of modding, but still, he's happy about it. He obtains mag pouches and other various things at the same time. These, too, are not such significant purchases, but they make him happy. He's been worrying about a gun that keeps jamming, so he decides to take the whole thing apart and do some maintenance. All goes well after that. He's quite pleased with himself. Getting overconfident, he adds some custom parts to a Colt Python. It breaks completely. He learns that happiness can be complicated.

I'm currently struggling every day to find a good method of lettering on ABS. I want to put the name RAZOR EDGE on my MP5, but I don't know how to do it. It's hard to be a newbie.

Well, anyway, with that greeting out of the way, let's head on into the afterword of volume 14. There haven't been any one-shot characters for a good while now, so I can't do the conversational style I used to anymore. How wise of me to notice that (in fact, some say I should have noticed that around volume 7).

So this is what you get!

Now, I've been pretty busy lately, wandering around Akihabara to buy Slayers Fight cards, making frequent appearances at the Pokémon Center, setting my soul on fire, recommending a particularly bad steak place to a friend, getting XXXX recommended to me as revenge, making authors purchase guns, buying the limited edition box set of *DT Eightron* and pushing it to my friends, saying "this is it! This is my top pick of '98!" and annoying the crap out of them, but I've been working some too.

...Okay, but if I write that, some people are going to take it seriously. Like my

editor (shiver).

To be honest, I've been having a hard time even finding time to goof off lately. My days are so hectic I barely have memories from last month. I've lost eight kilos too. Who knows what's going on.

Of course, it wouldn't do to spring a leak from lack of fun, so I make sure I get breaks every so often.

What I'm really into lately, which isn't at all a secret among my friends anymore, is toy guns. Airsoft guns, to be more specific. I got interested in them and brought them up with the editing department and they just came out of the woodwork. Then when I got invited to an airsoft game, I got totally into it. My current goal is to get a team of authors together and take down the editing department with them. The team name would be Team Torture Train, and our emblem would be a hand holding an overhead train strap.

The following is a private message: Please contact me if you are an author for Fujimi interested in joining my team. Beginners are very welcome (I mean, it's only beginners right now anyway).

Let's do some more gun stuff for good measure.

There are a few movies that made me think, "man, gun action's so cool"...but there's one film I can never remember the title of. I think it's, like, *Gloria*, or something like that... I don't really remember the plot either, to be honest, but there's a scene near the end where the main character's girl gang(?) shoots a bunch while walking, and it's just super cool. I think that one was pretty mainstream...

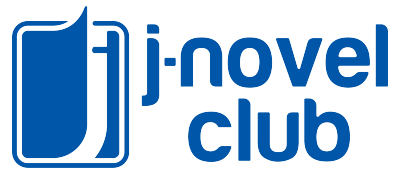
Okay. Just in case, I want to say, I really like toy weapons, but I don't like real weapons. Blades and things like that scare me—not that I'm trying to be sanctimonious or anything. But I don't like real knives despite owning several rubber ones for airsoft games.

...Yeah, when I go on this long, it's like, "what kind of afterword is this, anyway?"

Well, in any case, we're through fourteen books now. Book 15 should have some pretty big events in it, or at least, I'm preparing myself for that around now. Who knows what'll actually happen... I'll be happy if you're looking forward to it at all.

Okay, let's meet again at the end of the next one!

Yoshinobu Akita, September 1999



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 14

by Yoshinobu Akita

Translated by Amy Osteraas Edited by Christopher Foxx

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