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SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

16. DANCE ACROSS MY BATTLEFIELD, VISITORS!



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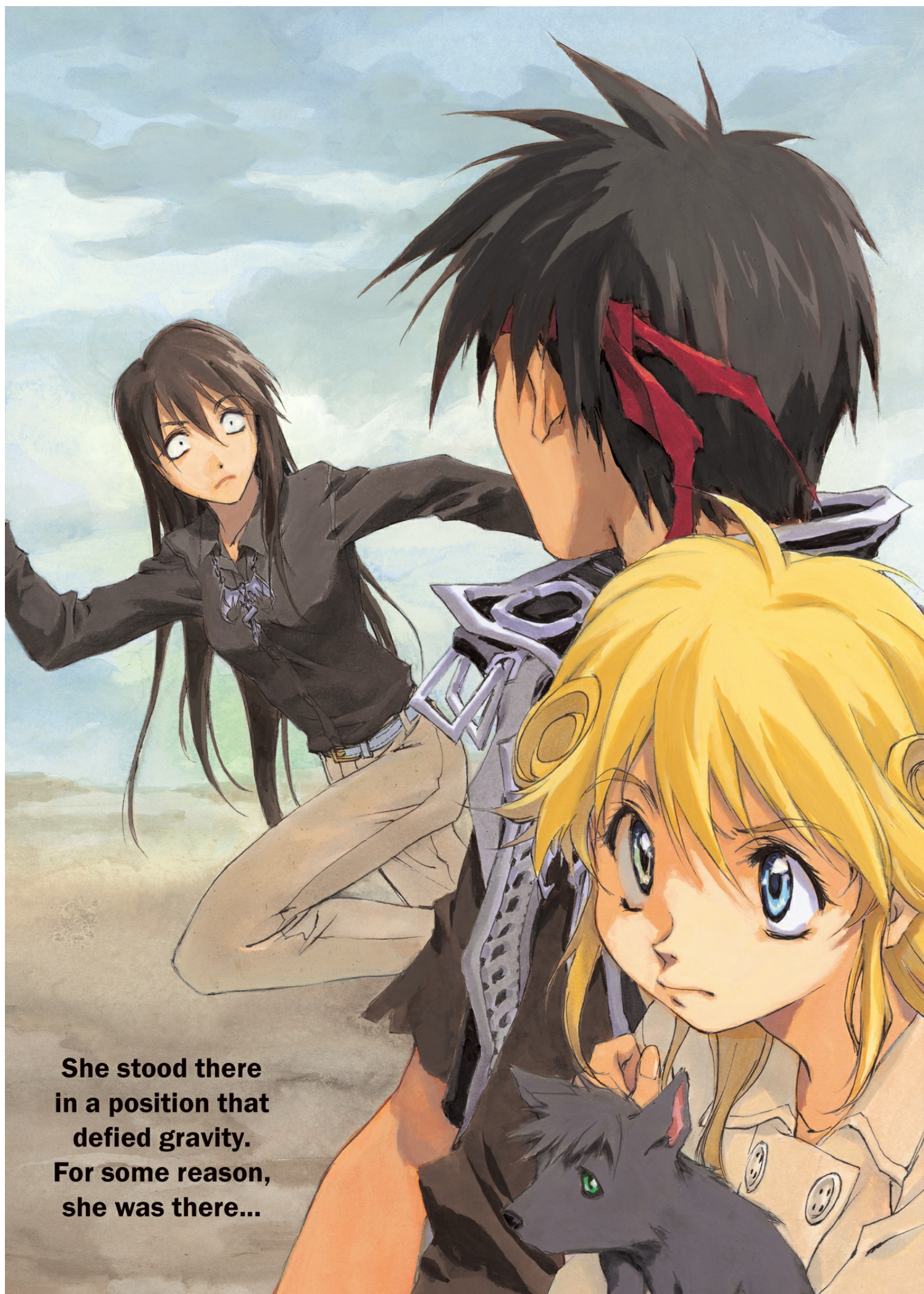
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**She stood there
in a position that
defied gravity.
For some reason,
she was there...**



**"Torture the prisoner
for information
on our enemies."
"What?!"
Majic couldn't help
shouting.**

***“My sorcery defeated
more of them.”***

**Irgitte raised her
chin haughtily, taking
a dig at Leticia. That
was the start of the
mass destruction.**

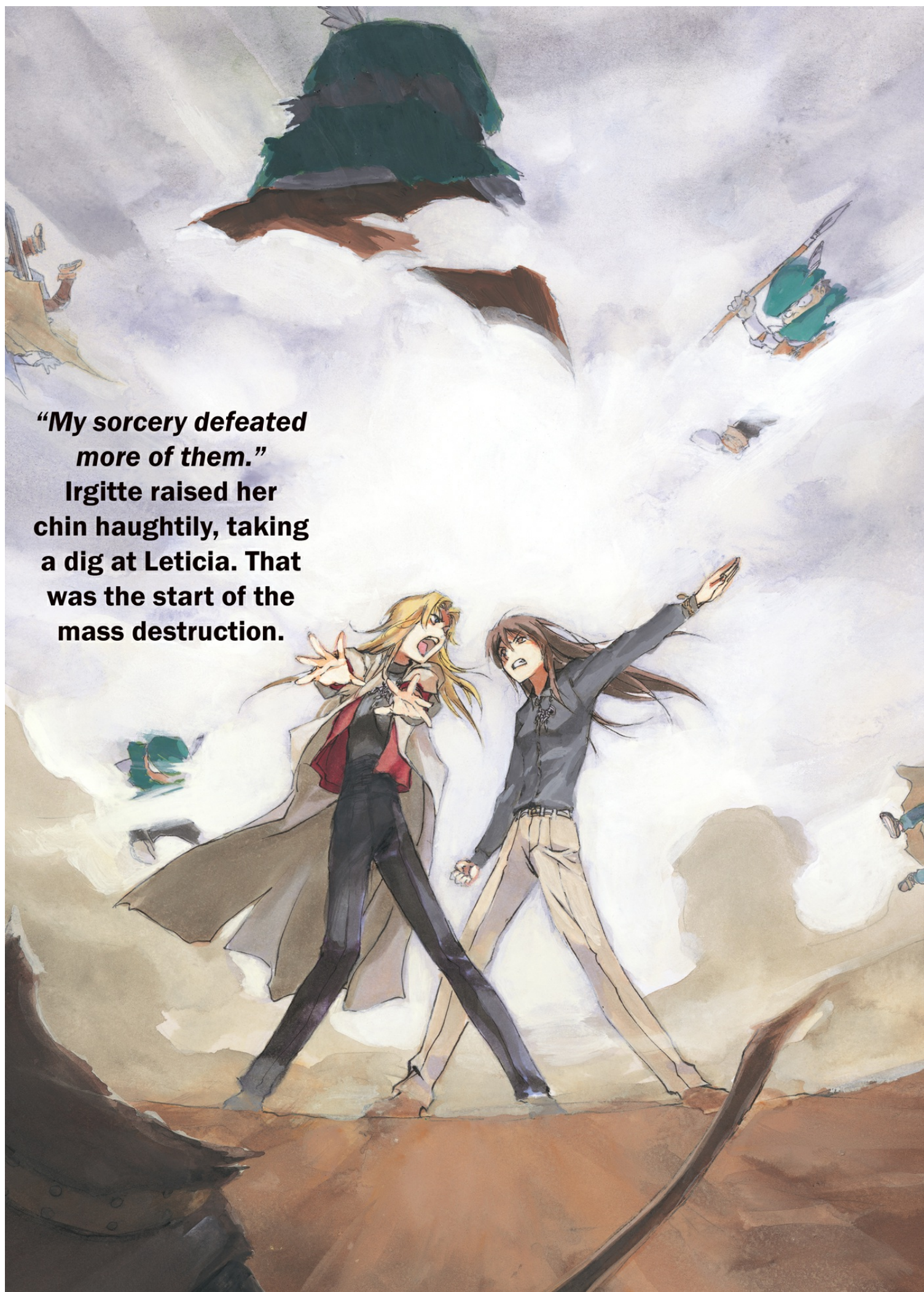


Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter I: All That's There Is a Question](#)

[Chapter II: Conflict Is Here](#)

[Chapter III: Where Did It All Begin?](#)

[Chapter IV: The Resolution Might Be That Way](#)

[Chapter V: If You're Looking for a Hopeless Bunch, You'll Find Them This Way](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

“Princess! A report on the state of the battle!”

Looking down at her subordinate standing at attention before her, the princess was instantly able to tell what state her invincible army was in without needing to hear the report. It was bad. The state of the battle was exceedingly bad. Abominable, one might even say.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so hasty... She felt a bead of sweat drip down her chin. It might have been cool outside, but it was sweltering inside the command tent. No, the unbearable heat was likely the fault of her armor, she considered, listening to the heavy plates of her equipment scrape against each other. Still, she couldn't take it off. This was a battlefield, and there was no place for anyone not wearing armor on it. That was war. It was etiquette that had long been followed on this continent, and a tradition that would continue long into the future.

Before her was a foldable table with a map spread out on top of it, and on top of that, her helmet. Her helmet was fashioned with a mane like that of a powerful warhorse. It was a striking design, but one that easily identified her even from afar to enemy soldiers. Perhaps her enemies would delight at the sight and charge forward to separate her head—helmet included—from her body, eager to take down a living legend, the undefeated general herself. If that were the case, then she welcomed it. It only meant the enemy army would automatically lose from its ranks however many hasty soldiers it had. She clenched a gauntleted fist and imagined the scenario. It wasn't as if something like that had actually happened before, but the outcome she foresaw was probably accurate. After all, what else could happen?

“Make your report,” she said quickly, quietly. All of her subordinates were much shorter than her, so she naturally had to look down at them when they spoke. Even if she was slightly anxious about the fact that the man's long spear threatened to catch on the top of the tent, she kept her eyes pointed down at

him. It was her duty to determine whether the man was in a sound state of mind and if his report could be trusted to be accurate. Even if that meant the tent might be rendered unusable by inclement weather after a hole was opened up in its ceiling unbeknownst to her. That wasn't her top priority. It was closer to third or fourth on her list.

In any case, after adjusting the position of his helmet, her subordinate rattled off, "The left flank has been almost completely annihilated!" He sounded almost tearful. Of course, a tough soldier would never show such emotion outwardly. "They should still be unaware of our ancillary troops. However, it's only a matter of time! We should deploy them immediately—"

"How arrogant." Her voice was chilly. "It is the princess who commands this army."

"Yes, ma'am! I'm terribly sorry!" The man stood at attention once more, bowed, and continued his report. "It is clear that the enemy aims to wipe us out—to eradicate our nation entirely! Their attacks are entirely without mercy! We are doing everything in our power to counter their attacks, but the firepower they wield is of heretofore unseen might—"

"Leave conjecture out of your report. State only the facts."

"Ma'am! I-In that case...well...the left flank has been annihilated."

"Very well." She nodded and moved one of the pieces atop the map in front of her to the side, righting a knocked-down piece in its place. "Deploy the ancillary troops. Quickly. No second-guessing. We'll use them to take down the enemy army's flank."

"Y...Yes, ma'am! I'll give the order!"

Her subordinate answered loudly and sped out of the room. She watched him go, and once she was certain that she was alone in the command center, she sighed. As she shook her head, her blonde hair fluttered around her, glittering like glass.

"There's been no report from the special platoon, but...they won't be moving yet." She groaned and ground her teeth for lack of anything to actually chew on. "Is all lost already? Has the battle slipped from the princess's grasp, its

fragments already taking aim for her heart?!”

“Repooort!” Another one of her subordinates leaped into the tent. “Princess, th-the enemy army had troops lying in wait...!”

“What?!” The report was such a shock to her that she couldn’t help crying out in surprise—though even as she did, she was aware that she was making a mistake. A commander’s panic would only lead to the panic of her men. It had no positives, and countless negatives.

She forced herself to calm down and studied her subordinate’s face. Was his report truthful? A mistake? But though she could see grim determination on the man’s wounded face, she saw no trace of frivolous confusion.

“It happened all too quickly... And we never expected it from their formation. But they have additional troops! A-And a fearsome number of them!”

“How...” How could this be?

She became aware of her shoulders drooping only when she heard the resulting sound from her armor. Her subordinate must have heard it too—that was more what she was worried about. The armor was old-fashioned heavy plate, but it was too large for her build. Because of that, it was practically hollow on the inside. Of course, no one in her army would be so insolent as to call attention to this fact, but she couldn’t deny the shadow of guilt that pricked at her heart.

No. She shook her head. That wasn’t right. The size of her muscles had nothing to do with it. After all, she was an accomplished warrior, even if she couldn’t rely on brute strength. There was always a chance that even if her entire force were wiped out, she alone would still be able to rout their enemies. She was the supreme soldier, so it was possible. It should have been, anyway.

She told herself that and raised her head. She stood up straight, as if to indicate the sky with her jaw.

And she declared, “The final battle begins now!”

She took her helmet into her hands and prayed to God. They would never lose to this vile enemy, who had lost sight of God.

Chapter I: All That's There Is a Question

Not knowing what the word “kalavinka” meant was nothing special, though the fact that he didn’t even care to find out would surprise those who knew him. After all, the shame in ignorance is not in not knowing something, but in being content not to know. No one called him ignorant, but there was also no one who blamed him for being imperfect. In any case, the reason Forte Puckingham didn’t care to look up the meaning of the word was because he was content to simply know whether or not it was being used to describe the real thing. In short, once he knew that the word was in reference to a public theater in the shopping district of Tefurem, he had no interest in who might have named it that and what purpose they might have had in doing so.

No, maybe he was actually wondering whether the existence of the theater itself changed in some way due to the meaning of the word. At twenty-five, he was already used to acting the part of the experienced veteran, but his actual age placed him squarely in the range of “youngster.” The thought brought a cynical smile to his lips. He restrained himself from making such a display openly, of course.

It had been a long time since he’d come to a theater on his own. Usually, he invited someone to come with him. He wasn’t fond of going out alone in the first place. He felt a menacing sense of underhandedness, like he was doing something frighteningly pointless, and if he couldn’t escape that feeling, then he might as well compromise. It didn’t matter who he went with. Leticia MacCready would have been fine. He didn’t know the reason for her extreme loathing of opera, but she still came with him when she was in a good mood. Particularly when it wasn’t a lengthy sort of musical—he had no idea where certain troupes got off advertising a four-and-a-half-hour run time of a show on a pamphlet like that was a selling point. The shorter the show, the more likely she was to attend. She must have preferred short sketches or skits at small theaters. He’d taken her to a few of those and she’d enjoyed most of them.

As for her students, they were more trouble. He was looking after the little

devils while she was absent from Tefurem, and though it was painfully obvious to him that the siblings were lacking in entertainment, he just could not work up the desire to take them out somewhere. It wasn't that he disliked children. And he wasn't particularly bad with them either. Nor were the two of them extraordinarily difficult problem children or anything of that nature, Forte admitted to himself with a bit of self-derision. It was merely that he wished to avoid them. He didn't want to get any closer to them than was necessary. The two were a pair of siblings that got on well—though the older brother seemed to have a little more ambition than the younger sister. She likely only desired to stay in the same place they currently were. He wondered, would the sister always wish that her brother would remain family? Or would they have a falling out sometime around puberty, and reconcile a decade later? Both options seemed ordinary to him, and equally likely. Either would be fine. The two would always be siblings regardless.

They're not some temporary family like we were. This time, he sighed in an open display. He was in a dark theater and his seat was relatively close to the exit. He had no intention of forbidding himself from even this minor reprieve. He was not his teacher.

No, the continent's most powerful sorcerer, Master Childman Powderfield, may have only been the product of a mass of people's imaginations. He had seized power at the Tower at the same age that Forte was right now. That legendary man was already a veteran at that point... Though maybe the fact that he was thinking that now was the root of the illusion. The rational sorcerer part of him was able to think that way, at least.

Any reputation like that is bound to be exaggerated. If I'd heard about him from someone else, I definitely wouldn't have believed a prodigy like him could exist.

Forte, of course, had been directly instructed by the man for several years.

Forte had been held up as one with extreme talent, and the place that talent had led him was that classroom. Childman's class.

On stage, a large woman was belting out a soprano that—according to the pamphlet—she'd obtained after at last achieving perfect pitch, directed out

toward the vast space between the audience seats and the ceiling above them. Naturally, it wasn't something that could be seen, but Forte couldn't help imagining a net as sharp as knives for a few moments as he listened. A small bird trying to avoid that net... The net being too small... And then...

His imaginings came to an end. He wasn't very good at keeping up mental images for a long time. Still, he sort of wanted to know the fate of the bird. If someone hadn't wanted him to see that and had taken it away from his eyes, who would it have been? Himself? The bird? A hex of the performer after spotting an inattentive audience member? It was stupid. It was stupid, but...

He had apparently fallen asleep. He awoke to the sound of the curtain rising. The light from the setting sun poured in amid the dark audience seats. The program had concluded, it seemed. Patient spectators were still clapping and impatient ones had already risen from their seats and were gathered near the exits. It had probably not been a bad play. He decided to at least make a note of that. He would come again five years from now. If they were still performing it, that was. Next time, maybe he would understand.

He made to rise from his seat, then frowned and sat back down from his half-risen position. He glanced at the man seated next to him, who was comfortably watching the stage, clapping languidly with flexible fingers.

Before he could say something, the man stopped clapping and turned to face him, just a single beat faster than him.

"That's not a good attitude to have, Forte Puckingham." He rubbed his chin as if amused—though not only did the man lack a beard, he was so devoid of any sort of hair that his skin almost looked inorganic—before removing his hand from his face and continuing. "It's not good to sleep. It was a nice play. Especially... Well, forgive me. When I try to voice my emotions, it always ends up sounding hackneyed. But it was good. Basically, generally good. The king strangling the queen in despair, but the cursed princess coming to her rescue even while she knew it meant her own death. Now, I know why you're suspicious. This seat is one you reserved, isn't it?"

"Not that I had anyone to attend with."

"Oh, don't be so cold. You can tell I bear you no ill will, can't you?"

“How could I tell that just by looking?” Forte asked dryly and stood.

Since he was out on personal business, he wasn’t wearing the usual robes he wore at the Tower—and naturally, this meant that he wasn’t armed either.

Though that likely went for the other man too. He wore a subdued beige suit with a blue tie. Forte had reflexively rebuffed the man, but to tell the truth, he *could* tell that the man held him no ill will just by looking. There was nothing tangible he could base that feeling on, however.

He didn’t recognize the man’s face, but the other man was familiar with him. He was still sitting calmly in his seat as the audience began to leave in earnest and a quiet buzz filled the venue. As he folded his hands together and scratched at his nose with his thumb, Forte observed the man once more. He felt no hostility from him, but that didn’t mean the man wasn’t an enemy.

Maybe it was because of the man’s frank but lopsided smile. Maybe it was because of the neatly trimmed mustache under his nose. Maybe it was that he’d been able to watch this tedious play without falling asleep.

After observing the man, Forte asked quietly, “You have some business with me?”

“Maybe I don’t. Though that couldn’t be possible. Of course I do.” The man punctuated his three-stage answer with gestures, smiling to himself. “Let me introduce myself. The name’s Kurabe Rashille.”

“An alias, I assume.”

“Everyone says that. If you want to waste some time, go ahead and look me up. Of course, I imagine you’ve probably heard the name before—”

“I have. That’s why I asked if it was an alias,” Forte said, irritated. “But if you’re going to say all that, I’m guessing it’s not a fake name. As far as I know, that name belongs to one of the top five sorcerers in the royal court.”

“That’s me, Kurabe Rashille, of the Thirteen Apostles. An upperclassman of yours, you might say. It’s been a while since I’ve visited Tefurem, though.”

The noise was beginning to leave the chamber. Aware of the decent number of audience members getting up from their seats and giving the pair of them—

who were glaring at each other with some hostility—curious looks as they filed out of the room, Forte cleared his throat.

“What do you want?” he asked the man, trying not to be too hostile.

He wasn’t sure whether he’d succeeded or not, but it seemed his intention had gotten across, at least. The man he was speaking to wasn’t that foolish. In any case, this Kurabe looked up vacantly at the air in front of him before moving his gaze back to Forte. Was he around thirty? Forte was sure that he was older than him, but not by how much.

The court sorcerer adjusted his position in the worn theater seat and said, from a completely relaxed position, “I need to see Childman Powderfield. As soon as possible.”

Contrary to the man’s appearance, the voice that uttered those words seemed to be driven by some urgent emotion.



“I release thee, Sword of Light!” The shaky, nervous voice was drowned out by the sound of the explosion that soon followed.

A triangular rock jutting up from the ground some twenty meters ahead of them exploded, engulfed in light. The light whirled about in the space for a moment after destroying its target, then burned up and vanished. Orphen observed it and then slowly moved his gaze sideways.

It wasn’t him who had let loose the spell. Staring at his student, who was frozen a slight distance away with his hands in the air and sweat dripping from his brow, he called out, “You pass. If you’re aiming to improve, you’ve got a ways to go still, but your composition was flawless. You had the spell more than under control.”



“...”

“Majic?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I see...” The blond boy lowered his arms in surprise. His green eyes shimmered as he stared vacantly between his own hands and the rock he’d destroyed, as if the action had been carried out by some unrelated third party.

Orphen scratched the back of his head and added, “It’s easy once you’ve got the hang of it, right? The trick is to keep yourself just one step before the limit that you can’t handle. Then you repeat the process, practicing so you don’t forget how much to hold back. Eventually, you’ll be able to tell the exact amount of power needed for any given situation.”

“I see...” Majic replied somewhat vacantly.

Outside of town, off the highway, there was no risk of running into anyone. The majority of traffic on the continent traveled by boat, and though the inter-city highways were relatively well maintained, there was still danger out on the roads. Especially just off the roads, you could easily end up somewhere that was no man’s land. Though the continent’s population was steadily growing, and there was always a need to develop more farmland, they hadn’t yet run out of areas close to civilization to cultivate.

Orphen’s party had left Urbanrama a week ago.

Under the skies of the wasteland, in the wind, Orphen went on, “Paradoxically, sorcery is something that’s easy to lose control of but also always easy to control. If its danger as a whole is a ten, then a caster always has to be aware of whether he’s in a situation that calls for a one or a nine on that power scale. Of course, there might be times when the situation calls for more than you’re able to control, but... I don’t recommend exceeding those limits. Frankly, even I’m not sure which is better: to use sorcery beyond your control or to go into a situation that requires that much power and try to handle it without sorcery.”

“Right.”

“The reason sorcerers have always undergone combat training is because of

the old sorcerer-hunting days, but it's not really all that practical these days..."

The continent was at peace now and sorcerers had rights and organizations to defend those rights.

People's minds had changed—their lives had improved such that they could maintain mental equilibrium without creating an "other" that had to be persecuted. Of course, you could also say that if that equilibrium was upset, they would go right back into victimizing sorcerers.

"Well, nobody really believes sorcerers were nothing but victims like it says in the history textbooks anymore." Orphen shrugged, rolling his shoulders and loosening his joints before he moved to stand away from his student, facing him. "Let's try this out," he said as Majic's mouth hung open before him.

Orphen raised his arm, pointing his fingers at Majic before turning his body ninety degrees to face a different direction.

He only needed a second to form his spell. The process to materialize his oft-used mental image was something that no longer required conscious thought.

"I release thee, Sword of Light." He muttered the spell and emitted a white whirl of light, identical to the one his student had just manifested. There was an explosion in the direction his arm was pointed that carved out a chunk of the ground.

Before the sound of the explosion faded, Orphen turned back to Majic. "You got the knack of it? I'm gonna shoot the same thing at you next. Block it."

Majic was just staring wide-eyed at the place where the explosion had occurred, showing no sign that he was listening.

"Majic?" Orphen called to his student.

"Huh? Oh, yes..." The boy turned to look at him with almost exaggerated surprise.

"Were you listening?"

"Yes, I...umm, err, no, what did you say?"

"Come on..." Orphen groaned, eyes narrowed. "I'm going to hit you with my sorcery, so block it," he repeated.

“What?!” Majic yelled somewhat hysterically. He waved his arms in the air and took a step back. “H-How could I possibly block your sorcery, Master?!”

“I never said I was gonna go all out or anything,” Orphen said exasperatedly. He lowered the arm he’d kept raised all this time. “And I’m not going to take you by surprise either. I’ll give you a proper signal—”

“Still, if I mess up my defense, won’t I die?”

“I told you before, your compositions are fine.”

“But—”

Orphen sighed as Majic went on incoherently. He kept spouting excuses for some time without realizing that his teacher had given up on arguing with him.

If he didn’t stop him, the boy would probably have kept rambling forever.

Orphen thought to himself in silence. Out here away from the highway, there was no one who could possibly hear him, and he didn’t particularly feel the need to hide what he was thinking, but he remained silent nonetheless.

The Sorcerer’s Misery, huh... Come to think of it, I was probably afflicted with the same thing back in Kimluck, wasn’t I? It’s not as extreme as that, but Majic’s got a pretty bad case right now...

After telling his pupil to do some more practice on his own, Orphen fell into thought once more as he began his trek back.

It was a famous affliction that all sorcerers—inexperienced casters in particular—were said to suffer from at least once. All of a sudden, they would find themselves fearful of their own sorcery and would hesitate to use it. In actuality, it was healthy to have a certain amount of fear for a power that was too mighty to be wielded by a flesh-and-blood person like sorcery, but if the person wasn’t aware of their affliction, situations where they needed to use their sorcery—like when a flowerpot suddenly fell from above, or they tripped on some stairs, or an ancient demon king was revived with a virgin sacrifice—could become even more deadly. And if they *were* aware, things could get even more troublesome. Sorcerers couldn’t just quit being sorcerers. Sorcery was a cross they were burdened with at the genetic level, one they’d have to fearfully bear for the rest of their lives.

There was no miracle cure. The only solution was for them to get used to the fear. They simply had to pray that time would solve their problem.

Actually, it's more dangerous for casters to not experience the Misery, since that means they don't understand how scary sorcery is. In which case... I guess I just have to leave him be.

Of course...

"That's only if we were in a normal situation."

"Is this not normal, then?"

A large woman appeared before him as if out of nowhere, casually asking a question like they'd been in the middle of a conversation.

Her build, muscles, and well-balanced physique matched the easy smirk she comfortably wore.

The woman—Winona—stood there in a worn-out sweatshirt, her arms folded at her chest as she waited for Orphen to answer her question.

Orphen felt his lips tugging into a sardonic smile outside of his control. "Well, we're in the middle of being led to the territory of some loony guys who are picking a fight with dragons by one of their unlawful goons. Is that normal?"

"It'll be normal enough in time. And not just for us, but for the whole continent."

"I'll summarize what I just said, then. Is 'loony, unlawful goon' enough for you?"

"I'm not unlawful. I told you I was a proper dispatch officer, didn't I? Maybe not officially, but..."

Orphen waved his hand, not wanting to debate that particular subject. The gesture could have been taken as an affirmation or a denial. Winona seemed to interpret it as a surrender.

"My lord needs you, but he's not expecting you to serve him or anything. Still, I consider getting you to come quietly to be one of my duties."

"Well, good luck with that." Orphen tried to walk past the woman, but

Winona put her foot out to stop him.

“What are you so scared of dragons for? You’re a powerful sorcerer. Maybe the best on the continent.”

“You’re thinking of the Thirteen Apostles. They’ve got plenty of guys more powerful than me.”

“Ha. Those amateurs quaking in their boots back at the capital?”

“I was a candidate to be one, you know. And I failed the test.”

“Tell me this, then. What sorcerers are there on the continent who could wipe out the Red Dragons’ worst killer? Other than you.”

“If we did it again, I’d be dead. Actually, I’d be dead if Damian hadn’t saved me.” Orphen pushed past Winona with an irritated sigh. If she’d resisted, he likely wouldn’t have been able to budge her, but she just moved back to let him pass. She watched him with eyes that were somehow cold and heated at the same time.

“Damian Rue only saves people he deems worthy. People who would be of use to our lord.”

“What do you think you’ll get by flattering me at this point?” Orphen scowled. “I told you I’d go see your lord, didn’t I? That’s why I’m coming with you without complaining.”

“To ask him about your sister’s whereabouts, right?”

“Yeah. ’Cause that’s the deal.”

“Well, I’d like for you to meet him because you want to.” Winona cut the conversation off there and walked away.

Orphen waited for her to walk away without turning back to look at her. She continued straight on without looking back at him either. She could have been heading in the direction where Majic was still practicing, or she could have just been walking in a random direction away from him.

Orphen stayed still there for several minutes. *What is this?* The question came to his mind. *The lord of the Imminent Domain...* Winona seemed to be serving the man completely selflessly.

It couldn't be that she was so foolish, she didn't understand how absurd fighting dragons was.

Even Colgon was doing something for him. If they were talking about the strongest casters on the continent, this man who was like an older brother to Orphen was the first that came to mind for him. The Thirteen Apostles couldn't compare.

Then there's Damian, the white sorcerer... These three people he'd come to know in the last two weeks or so. *Is there really someone who can make all these guys serve him from the bottom of their hearts?* He couldn't help feeling like this was all some elaborate joke.

While none of it sat right with him, he figured meeting the person was the only thing that was going to give him any answers.

Well, there's plenty of relationships between people that make no damn sense.

"Killer Move: Swallow Counter Six Striiiiikes!"

As the girl shouted flashily and swung her wooden sword around unpredictably, her opponent received the blows with a similar wooden sword but a much calmer demeanor. She deflected the girl's horizontal swing lightly and then sped her sword onward into her opponent's body.

Though she was wearing a protector, the girl still didn't have the fortitude to endure a blow like that from a wooden sword. But for the blonde girl to only stumble back a few steps before falling onto her backside from the attack meant that her opponent had likely been holding back. Looking down at her fallen adversary, the other, black-haired girl lowered her sword.

"You okay?"

"Y...Yeah. I'm getting...used to this," the blonde girl—Claiomh—muttered, her feelings on the matter sounding complicated.

The two of them hadn't noticed Orphen's presence yet. He was observing them from a few meters away, a small black dog rolling around in the sand at his feet.

The two girls both wore the same protectors and held the same wooden swords. The worn-out equipment came from the dojo the black-haired girl, Lottecia, belonged to. They trained like this for an hour every day without tiring of it, though the gap in their skill levels remained as stark as ever. Still, she must have appreciated the exercise at least, because Lottecia never complained about being forced to play along with Claiomh's selfishness.

Speaking of relationships that make no sense, Orphen thought to himself, that describes these two to a T.

Lottecia was the first to notice him. "Oh..." She gave him a vacant sort of look and then, after a pause, asked, "You were watching?" with her lips pursed as if that were some violation of the rules.

While Orphen struggled to come up with a tactful response, Claiomh leaped up from the ground. Her long blonde hair bristled with rage as she strode over to him with her wooden sword in hand.

"Orphen!" She stood right in front of him and stretched up tall to meet his gaze. "Those things from yesterday didn't work at all!"

"The things?" Orphen turned his head to the side and Claiomh swung around him to stay in his line of sight.

"The killer moves you taught me! What happened to your guarantee that I'd be totally fine if I had them, huh?!"

"Oh, those. Which ones did you try?" Orphen asked with a yawn.

Claiomh shrunk back down to her normal height, counting on her fingers. "Well, the one I just tried was the Swallow Counter, Six Strikes. Then earlier I did the Winding Mountain Simenon Slash and that didn't work, and the Lap Pillow Hexagon Smash failed before I could even try it, but I haven't tried the Galaxy Meteor Handsome Killer yet..."

"Well, try that."

"Oh, really? Will that work?"

"Probably." Orphen nodded, giving Claiomh, who had gone right from angry back to gleeful, a pat on the head.

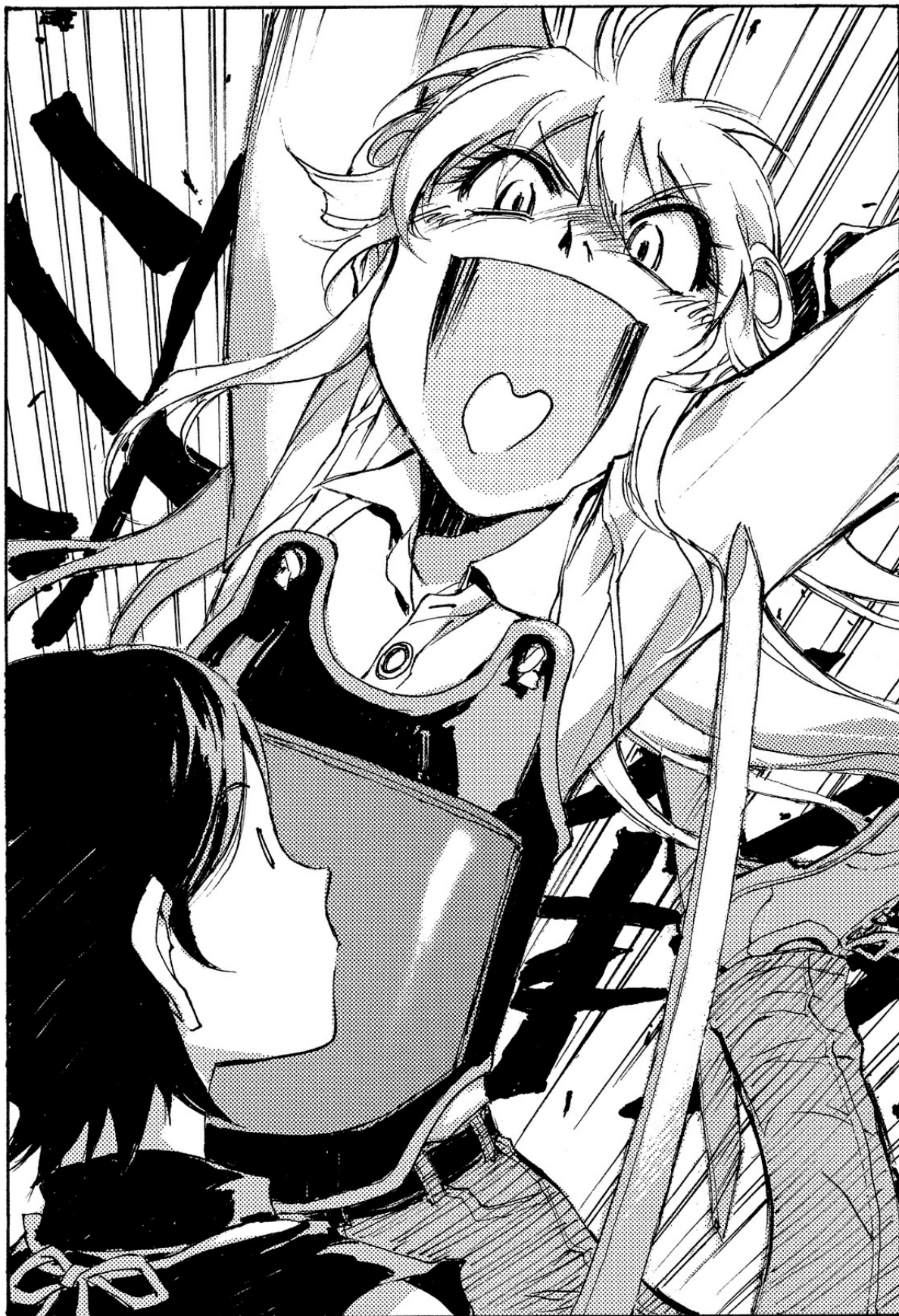
Lottecia gave them a dubious look as she listened to their conversation.
“Umm... What are these moves you’re talking about?”

“Well, Claiomh hasn’t been able to beat you, so she wanted some help with her strategy.”

“That’s right!” Claiomh puffed her chest out with the utmost confidence.
“Don’t let your guard down this time, Lotte. Come on, get ready.”

“Alright...” Lottecia raised her sword once more, dubiously.

“Galaxy Meteor!” Claiomh raised her voice, lifting her sword high in the air above her shoulder. “Drone Beetle Killeer!” She charged...



...But before she could even swing her sword, Lottecia crouched down low and stepped forward, tackling Claiomh to the ground and knocking the wind out of her.

While Lottecia was giving the other girl a confused look, Claiomh quickly got up off the ground. Looking around for her wooden sword, which she'd dropped when she fell, Claiomh grumbled, "So weird... Why do none of them work?"

"Hmm," Orphen mused in the same confused tone, hand still holding the sword that had come flying his way. "Must be your timing."

"You think so?"

"Err..." Lottecia timidly held her hand out and asked, "What exactly is the strategy here?"

"Well." Orphen nodded. "I was hoping if she shouted out an attack name and charged, you might be surprised and fall for it, but I guess it's not working."

"And that last one was a super high-class technique where I got the name wrong a little bit too."

"Why?!"

Orphen shrugged his shoulders. "Well, what else is she supposed to do? I think a surprise attack's an obvious strategy against somebody she's got no hope of beating."

"...There's not a significant difference in our skill levels." The words weren't convincing at all coming from the former master of a sword training school.

Orphen put a hand to his mouth to cover up the wry smile on his face. "If you can eke out a victory a hundred percent of the time, I don't think there's any need for you to be humble about it. As far as I'm aware, you're a top-class competitive swordsman."

"..."

"Hm?" Orphen prompted when Lottecia suddenly fell silent. Even if he couldn't tell what words she was trying to form, he could understand what she wanted to say well enough.

Lottecia flipped her wooden sword around as if sheathing it and turned to Claiomh. As the blonde patted her workout clothes and protector to knock some of the sand out of them, Lottecia said expressionlessly, “Let’s leave it at that today, Claiomh. Your surprise attacks might need some work, but I think you’ve got the basics down. If you can grasp the fact that sword-fighting is just a struggle for position between two people, I think you’ll start figuring out where the weak spots in my stance are.”

“Mhm,” Claiomh responded blithely, as if she may or may not have understood what Lottecia meant. “I always seem to lose in speed, though.”

Lottecia scratched her cheek awkwardly at that. “The speed of our swords isn’t really different. It’s not like I’m that much stronger than you.”

“You think so?”

“If it seems that way, then it’s because I’m moving first. To move after your opponent and still take the initiative—well, you don’t really have to think about that yet.”

“Hmm, hmm.”

Claiomh was listening intently, but Lottecia suddenly narrowed her eyes nervously, watching her. Her throat moved once before she shifted uncomfortably and quietly asked, “Why are you doing this, Claiomh?”

“Huh?” Claiomh blinked.

Orphen stayed quiet, letting the conversation play out. He looked between them with his arms crossed before Lottecia gave him a glance either because she’d noticed his gaze or for some other reason.

The look only lasted an instant, however, before Lottecia gave the two of them a rare affable smile and bowed as dojo etiquette entailed. “Never mind. I’m going to take a little walk before I come back and change.” She waved and walked off.

Watching her go, Orphen thought, *Relationships that make no sense. Why did Colgon marry that girl...?*

Contemplating the reason might have been meaningless. If there *were* a

reason, he didn't imagine he'd be able to understand it. That was the feeling he had.

By the time he focused his attention back on Claiomh, she'd taken her protector off and was scooping up the puppy—or rather, baby dragon, Leki—from at his feet. From the neatly folded protector on the ground, he surmised that he'd been thinking for longer than he was aware of and slowly shook his head.

He was aware that he was doing a lot of thinking lately. And most of it was on the same questions, ones he fruitlessly repeated without getting any closer to their answers. It didn't mean anything and didn't do any good. However...

I have this feeling, like the answer's right around the corner, and I'm about to stumble onto it. So Orphen thought as he dazedly watched Leki settle into his regular spot atop Claiomh's head.



He had a bad feeling about this. He sort of felt like nothing bad ever happened without him getting a feeling about it—but that might just have been because he had a bad feeling pretty much around the clock, nonstop. Anxiety was like a good friend to him, a close companion, a blood brother. That last one, quite literally.

Lately, however, there was something else he'd started getting with his bad feelings.

"So..." As the woman spoke quietly, in a chilly tone one would be hard-pressed to call amiable, he couldn't help thinking about these recent feelings he was getting. "You two are certain you'll be able to help me find Krylancelo."

"Ha ha ha! Of course! Your path forward will be smooth sailing if you stick with the Bulldog of Masmaturia! After all..." His brother Volkan crossed his arms confidently, his fur cloak fluttering behind him, and laughed loudly. The woman's expression did not get any warmer, but Volkan showed no signs of letting something like that bother him. Striking a pose, he declared, "That rotten sorcerer's ultimate foe, who he pursues with bloodshot eyes, is none other than myself! We could stay here, and he'd come to us!"

“Don’t you get the feeling he’s kind of forgotten about us lately, though?”

“That’s not true. You speak nonsense, Dortin.” Volkan nodded confidently, turning back to the woman in an overly grandiose manner. “That being the case! When we succeed in our mission, I’m expecting a fitting reward, of the overflowing, massive, and also big variety!”

“Yeah, yeah...” The autumn wind at her back, the woman’s hair fanned out around her. Despite the fact that she’d come out into the wasteland in a great hurry from Urbanrama, there wasn’t a hair out of place on her head, a fact which caused Dortin some consternation.

As he contemplated that, he also hit upon another thing he couldn’t quite understand. “What are you doing here, though?” he found himself asking her. “You seemed to be in such a hurry, we kind of just followed you...”

They’d met this woman before. Not here in the east, but back in the west, in the black sorcerers’ town.

She seemed surprised by the question. Dortin himself admitted that there wasn’t much point in asking it now.

Leticia MacCready—sister of the black sorcerer they often found their fates intertwined with—answered with a frown on her face. “It’s no bother to you, me being here, is it? I was able to dig you two out of the rubble because I was here, you know.”

“That’s true...” It wasn’t an actual answer to his question, but Dortin didn’t bother pressing the issue.

Instead, his brother laughed loudly. “Oh, don’t worry about it, Dortin!”

“What do you know about it, Brother?”

“Anyway, I heard he was headed in this direction... I dunno, though. My source for that information can be pretty clumsy sometimes...”

“Your source?”

“Yeah... Don’t worry about it.” She waved her hand wearily.

The woman carried a travel bag in one hand, and though they’d been walking for several hours now, she showed no signs of tiring. She didn’t have hulking

muscles or anything, but she must have kept herself in good shape. She wore very plain clothes, though Dortin wasn't sure he'd call the black shirt and slacks suitable for travel. She had a small gold watch on her wrist and wore bigger shoes than her thin frame would lead one to expect. The thick leather boots appeared to be much tougher than normal walking shoes.

"Anyway, I know his destination, so I'm sure to meet up with him sometime, but I'd like to find him as soon as possible. Honestly, things get more complicated by the day..." The second sentence was muttered darkly to herself as if in complaint, but she had still spoken loud enough for Dortin to hear.

"Well, we're going as fast as we can out here..." Dortin took a look around. They were out in the wasteland off from the highway. There were no forests or rivers to obstruct their path forward, just a dry, barren flatland through which an autumn breeze blew. Here and there, misshapen hills jutted out from the earth along with lines of rocks that made the land impossible to settle. It hadn't been ruined by someone, but had always, by nature, been wasteland.

Nature was not all living things. Death was just as much a part of nature as life was. No, death probably existed in far greater quantities than life. The flickering flame of a faintly sputtering candle in a vast room certainly seemed a great conflagration to a single moth. However...

"I suppose so."

Dortin was surprised when Leticia agreed with him, but a moment later, he realized that she was just referring to what he'd said out loud a moment ago and hadn't read his mind or anything.

"It's all so dull, it hardly seems like we've gotten anywhere, but we should have made pretty good progress. I wouldn't say no to a little action right about now, though—"

There did, on occasion, appear to be a god who abruptly granted these sorts of wishes.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

Dortin watched with his mouth hanging open as a wave of light, in time with the sound of a familiar voice, barreled into Leticia MacCready from the side.



A change had come over the battlefield.

The sight before him was grisly enough to quell the ecstasy he felt upon witnessing the destruction he'd caused. Nightmares were easily realized—that was why they rattled everyone who had them.

Lowering the fingers he'd woven the destruction with, he shook his head. "The battlefield..." he murmured, as torrents of hot air blew past him from the explosion. "War consumes the environment, society, resources, hearts, instantly. It's like fireworks. We look up at it and even as we shed tears, somewhere in our hearts, we wonder when the next festival will be. Isn't that right, sweetheart? We're demons. Everyone is. They all crave stimulation." Without wiping the tear from his face, he turned in the direction he'd spoken, unable to open his eyes.

He was facing a woman with her arms crossed, who sighed with an exasperated look on her face. "Are you a grade schooler writing an apology note or something?" She patted the dust from her clothes, her hands stopping at a pendant she wore at her chest, a crest of a dragon coiled around a sword. "Would you not set off explosions so close to us next time? Why are you 'School' people so careless?"

"I know. I know, sweetheart. You've closed your heart due to the senseless cruelty of war. You've forgotten that there's still love in this world. But I know that even while you throw insults around, you're silently offering up prayers."

"Ugh!" The woman—who grimaced each time she was called "sweetheart"—groaned in frustration, grinding her teeth all throughout the man's speech until she finally threw her hands into the air and brought her face up to the crying man's, baring her canines at him. "Oh, give it a rest, Kakrako—Kakreko—agh, dammit, Kakikikekukekaka...ka!" She stretched her cheeks out to fix her tangled tongue and pronounced the man's name properly: "Kakorkist Isthani!"

"Aren't you sweet, to want to have my name on your lips for longer..."

"It's hard to say! Change it!"

"I couldn't change a name I got from my mama, who loves me."

“Ugh, gah!” The woman stamped her feet on the ground and turned in a different direction. To that side, another man sat on a rare flat rock, calmly observing the spot where the explosion had been.

His shaved head made him look younger than he was. Or maybe it was just his boyish face. As he sat wrapped in layers of cloaks on the rock, he almost looked like some kind of ornament. The look on his face wasn't severe, nor was it particularly cold or warm. He merely let his gaze fall where it was needed, when it was needed, and waited for his moment.

The woman turned to him and barked, “Will you say something, Seek?! You're his teacher, aren't you?!”

Seek remained silent, expression unchanged, for several moments before turning to Kakorkist and remarking, “This is not war.” He returned his gaze to the point of the explosion. “The last war on the continent occurred forty years ago.”

“That's not what I...” the woman started to say, but she was apparently too exhausted to even finish the sentence.

“But Master!” Kakorkist interjected with excessive zeal. “Can any conflict between two people not be called war?!”

“It can't. As long as you see your enemy as another person, you're not waging war.”

“You two,” the woman muttered, her eyes half-lidded. “I can't believe you can act like you're having a serious conversation in a situation like this.”

The blast from the explosion was finally starting to disperse. The sand and smoke were falling away, exposing the mark in the ground like something had torn through the ruined earth.

All that was there was the mark from the explosion. Nothing else remained.



“Think the corpses were completely burned away?” the woman asked either or both of the men.

It was Kakorkist who shook his head in response. “No, that heat shouldn’t have been enough to destroy the bones.”

“So the explosion sent them flying off without a trace?”

“If the blast had been that powerful, we wouldn’t be standing here unscathed.” This came from the man with the shaved head, who leaped off the rock and took a cautious look around the area. “Our sorcery had no effect on the opponent... That’s the more likely explanation. Especially if they’ve been fighting this long without leaving a single corpse behind.”

“You mean we’re fighting ghosts?”

“War is—”

“Shut up.” The woman quieted Kakorkist with her fist and turned completely to face the bald man, having judged him to be her only reasonable conversation partner. “If our sorcery doesn’t work, does that mean we’ll have to subdue them with our bare hands?”

“A vast army carrying weapons? I’ve always thought you Tower of Fangs types had a tendency to be overly confident.”

“It’s because we have a history to back that confidence up. Unlike you guys.”

“Hmm. Well, that debate won’t get us anywhere...” The man clenched his fists at his chest, then performed some complicated gestures with his fingers as if making a ward against evil. “This lord is a very strange entity. If he were capable of summoning spirits to defend his territory, it wouldn’t particularly surprise me.”

“It’d surprise *me*.”

“Then you don’t have enough awareness of the enemy that you are attempting to fight,” the man said flatly before taking a sword out from his cloak—a slender saber.

When she saw that, the woman swallowed her retort and instead asked, “So, what do we do now?”

“There’s a sense of order to their movements. Someone is commanding them. We’ll take out whoever it is.”

“Indeed, it is always cruel strategies that are needed to end war—”

The woman smacked Kakorkist to shut him up. “Well, just watch and tell me whether or not you think my confidence is unearned.”

“Your posturing is meaningless,” the man said, drawing his sword.

When the explosion had fully cleared from the air, the temperature around them seemed to have dropped a bit.

Chapter II: Conflict Is Here

Deedee had been the name of her dog when she was a child.

As she was taking apart the new Deedee—her gun—for maintenance, she recalled that fact dispassionately. Guns were weapons of unparalleled might on the continent. But they weren't all-powerful. They might not have even been very convenient. There was more and more risk of misfire after only shooting them a few times, and it wasn't as if there was no risk at all on the first shot. They tended to break down a lot. Still, they were the prized weapons of knights. Holy weapons only those charged with protecting peace on the continent were permitted to wield.

Well, I don't know if that's true...

Even during maintenance, there wasn't all that much she could do. She merely took the weapon apart, cleaned it, and applied some oil to it. Warps in the parts due to the gunpowder reactions occurring within the weapon and metal fatigue all accumulated unseen as the weapon saw use. The structure of a gun was exceedingly simple. Pull the trigger and the hammer would fall, striking the cartridge and igniting the gunpowder. The power of the explosion ejected the bullet, and if you were lucky, it buried itself inside your opponent's internal organs. Of course, there was always the danger of shooting yourself in the foot. This simple mechanism hadn't changed in a long time.

With her handkerchief spread out on a rock and the metal parts lined up on top of it, she felt satisfied that not a piece was out of place. She'd spent ten years with this weapon. It had never left her side in all that time.

Some asked her if she'd rather change out the old thing for something new, both people who'd already died and those like Colgon who seemed like they never would. Even she sometimes wondered why she never felt that urge. But there wasn't any particular reason for it. It wasn't some instinctual refuge either.

Well, I'm sure this sort of thing happens a lot. She swiftly ceased her

speculation and put her gun back together. Holding it in one hand, she carefully inserted bullets into the magazine, switched the safety on, and holstered the weapon. After she'd put the holster on and took a breath upon completing her task, a boy suddenly ran past her.

She blinked in bewilderment.

The boy who'd run past her without even an acknowledgment—perhaps not even noticing her—was Majic, with a rather frantic look on his face. The student of that black sorcerer. Though for being his student, she had to admit the boy didn't look like much.

After him, a woman with long hair came running. She, too, ran past without sparing Winona so much as a glance. For some reason, she was a bit singed, and though Winona only got a glance at her profile as she sped past, she could tell that the woman's face was screwed up in anger.

Winona watched her go past dazedly, and a moment later, a small pair of dwarves came running from the same direction. These two at least noticed her, but only gave her a glance before carrying on after the other two.

Winona watched their fur cloaks fade into the distance for a moment before murmuring to herself, "What was that...?"



"So, where are we headed, anyway?"

Her question was a very reasonable one. But whether or not Orphen could actually answer that question was another matter.

Claiomh had asked it after returning to the campsite where all their gear was—a small cave they'd located between some rocks. Stuffing her protector and wooden sword into a bag, she said, "I thought for sure we were going to the capital."

"Hmm..." Orphen shrugged. "That was my plan too, but... We've got a little errand to take care of now."

"What kind of errand?"

Orphen opened his mouth to answer, then realized what he was about to say

and smiled wryly instead.

Claiomh blinked. “What is it?”

“Well, I don’t think there’s really any point in hiding it at this point. We’re on our way to meet...I guess something like Winona’s employer.”

“Huh,” Claiomh remarked, as if she may or may not understand, and went behind the blanket they’d hung up at the entrance to the cave. She was probably going to change. Adjusting the positioning of the blanket so that she was fully hidden from him, she asked Orphen, “Winona’s kinda...weird, don’t you think?”

“You think so?” Orphen cocked his head, mentally adding, *Coming from you?*

Claiomh quickly clarified, “She seems really curious about Lottecia. She asked me a bunch of things.”

“Like what?”

“Mm, you know when that guy Ed attacked her? Like about that. Not that I was there at the time.”

Ed, eh...? Ed, meaning Colgon. *He made a rather hasty exit...* Orphen thought for a moment about his old acquaintance.

Claiomh finished changing and emerged from the cave. She looked like she’d simply switched out her dirty shirt for a clean one. “Are you curious about Lottecia, Orphen?”

Orphen was taken aback by the question. “What do you mean?”

“Well, didn’t she seem really tortured before? But she hasn’t been like that lately. I kinda wondered if something happened.”

“Yeah...” Several things came to mind, but nothing outside the realm of speculation. Maybe Claiomh wouldn’t mind that, but he didn’t really want to voice his ideas anyway. “She got over it, right? I think it’d be a bigger problem if she were still brooding about it.”

“I do think it’s a good thing, but...” Claiomh picked up Leki, who she’d left outside. The baby dragon was completely riveted by a procession of ants, and even as Claiomh lifted him from the ground, he didn’t notice that they were

getting farther away and continued to bat his front paw in the direction of the ground.

As Claiomh caught his waving paw, Orphen told her, “I’m more worried about you, personally.”

“Are you?” Claiomh asked without a shred of self-awareness.

“When you’re down in the dumps, you should act it. Something really scary happened to you.”

“Well, I was down for a little, but...” She buried her face in Leki’s back. Orphen didn’t think it was to hide her face, but there had been something in her eyes before she closed them. Her voice was muffled, but he clearly heard her say, “But I think I understand what Ryan was trying to tell me. So I’m just more determined not to accept it.”

“...I see.”

“Plus, I have you and Majic. And whether good or bad things happen, if I’m having fun—huh?”

She’d probably raised her head because she’d heard something strange. Orphen turned around too, noticing the same thing. They could hear something like a faint scream coming from the distance.

“AAAAaaaaAAAAaaaah—” It went from high to low, then low to high, sometimes fading out completely.

Eventually, the scream became a recognizable word: “Maaaaasteeeeeer!”

Majic suddenly ran at them and went straight past them without slowing down.

“Heeeeelp meeeee!” And his voice faded into the distance again.

Orphen and Claiomh exchanged a confused, wordless glance.

Then they realized that for some reason, they could still hear his footsteps. No, it felt more like they could hear a new set of footsteps.

They looked back in that direction, and the sound stopped.

Frozen there, in the middle of a running pose, was a long-haired woman.

Their eyes met.

She stood there in a position that defied gravity, like nature's forces had no effect on her. And maybe they didn't. After all, she was something of a supreme being, having surpassed all sorts of things and people.

However... *Why?* That was the only word that came to Orphen's mind, before...

"Heeelp meee!"

"Why are you running too?"

He'd spun around on the spot, about to take off running, when she'd effortlessly caught him by the collar.

When he started to choke, the feeling of his life being endangered digging into his throat, Orphen stopped moving. He glanced back in the direction where she'd been a moment ago, but she wasn't there anymore. In a mere instant, before he could even register the movement, she'd made her way over to him to grab his collar—either that or in the moment he'd seen her, his brain had frozen and he hadn't been conscious of her approaching him. Both options were equally possible.

"Tish!" Claiomh exclaimed.

"Hey, Claiomh," Leticia returned cheerily.

Orphen forced his rigid body to turn around and, sure enough, his sister Leticia was standing right there. "Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?"

"I can be wherever I want, can't I?" she said, finally letting go of him.

Orphen scrambled away a few steps and then turned around again.

Leticia gave him an exasperated look. "And what are you acting all timid for? Is there something you feel guilty about?"

"Well, maybe there is and maybe there isn't." Orphen groaned, backing up slowly. This wasn't a joke. It hardly made a good one.

After all, the only reason he was going to this lord's territory with Winona was to inquire about the whereabouts of his other sister, Azalie.

What'll happen when she finds out about Azalie? Tish couldn't handle that...

What Orphen managed to come up with was: "You can't be wherever you want with no warning!"

"Well, I'm following you because I have business with you, obviously."

"B-Business?"

Just then, the footsteps he thought had faded started up again. But it wasn't Majic—these were coming from the opposite direction than the one he'd fled in. And when they came closer, what appeared with them was...

"Haaa ha ha ha! You're just where I thought you would be, you evil, one-hundred-percent-black black sorcerer! I knew you were the one to stand before me in my life, and I'm kindhearted enough to acknowledge you as maybe just a little bit fitting to be my rival!"

"Umm, I'm sorry. But it's been a while since we've seen each other, so I was hoping you could do the blasting-us-away thing later and pick something else for now?"

"Ah..." Glancing down at the three dwarves standing there, Orphen groaned. "These annoyances again..."

He suddenly stopped and shouted, "Threeee?!"

"Enemy presence confirmed!" shouted a dwarf in between the usual two, Volkan and Dortin. He had a mustache, wore a green hat, and was holding up a telescope-like object at them. "Reconnaissance squad, withdraaaw!" He spun around suddenly and ran off, just like that.

Orphen just stared blankly as the dwarf sped off, holding his feathered cap down as he ran. "Why...?"

No one else had anything more to say. They all just stood there in silence.

The wind blew past them, traveling through the awkward quiet all around them.

In that emptiness, they could all hear Dortin's trembling voice. "B-Brother... Look at that."

“Hmm?” Even Volkan was pale and trembling. “There’s no doubt about it. This is a battlefield!”

“Waaaaah?! A princeeeeeeess?!”

As he watched the two panicking dwarves, a variety of phrases flitted through Orphen’s mind. Lord. Sorcerers’ Misery. Leticia. Dwarves. Three. Battlefield. Princess. He had so much on his mind already...

So why do I feel like I’m about to have even more to worry about?

Maybe this was just his fate.

He did his best to dismiss the first answer that came to mind.



Nothing good ever happens to me... Majic thought, almost on the verge of tears.

He was pumping his arms hard to try to gain as much speed as he could, and his joints were starting to protest against the motion.

I was just practicing my sorcery! And he’d accidentally hit someone who just happened to be passing by at that exact moment.

He didn’t fully understand the sequence of events that had transpired. Even if he had been holding back somewhat, the woman—he felt like he recognized her but couldn’t remember who exactly she was—had taken the heat ray attack head-on and stood back up as if completely unaffected by it, one hand raised and a sunny smile on her face. She’d drawn up a sorcerous composition in a split second, and though he’d tried to decipher it, he couldn’t understand even a fraction of the spell. The one thing he was able to tell was that it was something unbelievably dangerous. Or maybe that feeling didn’t come from the composition itself but from the smile on the woman’s face.

Now that he thought back on the moment, he realized that she’d probably been unaffected by his spell because she’d quickly woven her own spell of defense before it hit her, though completely blocking an attack like that so quickly wasn’t something any old sorcerer could do.

In any case, as a huge explosion rendered the area into scorched earth, Majic

had decided that his best option was to flee. He'd let his terror spur him forward and run as fast as he possibly could. And...

"Huh...?"

By the time he stopped and took a look around himself, he realized no one was chasing him. It was hard to tell exactly how far he'd run since there was never any change in the scenery, but he seemed to have come a fair distance from their camp. From the pounding of his heart, the sweat endlessly coating his skin, and the spasms of his overworked muscles, he could easily imagine that he'd just run a distance he'd never before managed in his life.

"Well, that's not good..."

Naturally, he now had to return the same amount of distance that he'd come, all the while worrying about running into that woman once again.

He shook his head, overcome with melancholy. Nothing good ever happened to him.

"I wonder why... Where'd it all go wrong...? I'm starting to feel like maybe I should just go home... I mean, I never planned on coming all the way over to the east in the first place..."

He looked around. It wasn't like the area he was in now was representative of the east or anything, but he felt like it might as well be now.

"Well, since I can properly control my spells now, Master says I'm a real sorcerer, right? So I don't really need to keep learning from him..." He stopped and held up his right hand. After what had happened earlier, he carefully observed his surroundings to make sure there was no one nearby before he started. "I release thee—"

That was when it happened.

"Enemy sighteed!"

"Huh?!"

"Chaaaaarge!"

He didn't even have time to turn around before the voice was finished shouting.

When he did, he caught sight of what must have made the noise. The first thing he saw was something pointy. It was silver spears, shining in the sunlight. A huge number of them, swaying in the wind like grass.

This wasn't just one or two weapons. An army of children wielding spears was filing out from behind a huge boulder.

Wha— He could feel his brain stop working. He couldn't move a muscle. What immediately came to mind was sorcery, but he could no longer use his half-formed composition. It had left his control and faded to nothing. It would be faster to compose something new than try to bring it back.

But either way, he didn't have any time!

He could see the sky. He'd been sent flying into it, apparently.

His view was quickly blocked as his adversaries piled on top of him. In no time at all, the weight pressing down on him became unbearable. The children were stacking themselves on him. And the whole time they were doing this, he could hear their cheers bellowing all around him.

When what must have been the final body fell upon him, an even louder cheer rang out.

"Victoryyyyyy!"

"Waaaaah!"

With no idea what was going on, Majic managed to flip himself over and crawled across the ground to poke his head out from the crowd on top of him.

And when his head alone was finally free of the weight covering him, he found a sword thrust out right in front of his nose.

He froze.

"Umm..." When he groaned, a voice piped up in response, as chill as a morning frost, so much so that it almost hurt his ears.

"Heh... How foolish of you, not to notice our squad approaching."

It was the voice of a young woman—no, a girl.

When he managed to raise his gaze upward, what he saw was exactly the sort

of girl he'd been imagining, minus the fact that she was wearing a set of heavy armor complete with an oversized helmet. Long, almost transparent blonde hair flowed over the plates of her armor like water. Her skin was pale and her light blue eyes almost threatened to suck him into them. Her plump, pink lips opened slightly as she spoke.

"*This?* This is the giant you say drove our army to the brink of annihilation? Is the princess so incompetent a commander?!"

"O-Of course not!" One of the children leaped off the mound on top of his body and knelt in front of the girl—the princess? "We achieved this only with your personal command, Princess!" he shouted. "You have brought victory to our army!"

A dwarf...?

A dwarf had leaped down from him. At least, that was his best guess at the moment. The dwarf's height was about 130 centimeters, which would put his full body at about chest height of the girl, but he was crouched down smaller in front of her now. He wore a fur scarf and some simple armor and had a green hat with a feather sticking out of it on his head. He looked a little different than the dwarves Majic was used to, but when he got a better look at the bodies piled up on top of him, he realized the rest of them looked much the same. They were apparently also having a hard time staying piled on top of him, and he could hear voices saying "agh" and "ugh" and "civil service sure is tough" and "what's civil service?"

The princess, or whatever she was, sighed. "It's fine... I understand. Your princess perseveres." She pulled her sword back, returned it to its sheath on her hip, and announced, "Now that it's come to this, we'll have to torture the prisoner for information on our enemies."

"What?!" Majic couldn't help shouting.

Before the word was fully out of his mouth, the dwarf crouching next to the princess had planted his foot in Majic's face. With no way to resist, he was forced to take the kick. Everything before him went dark, then it went white, but he quickly returned to his senses when he tasted blood in his mouth.

The dwarf had started berating him at some point. "You fool! You dare object

to the princess's divine plans?!"

"W-Well, yeah..."

"Now, as for the method of torture..."

"Ma'am! If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, I will personally inflict upon this giant the dreadful Headbutt Hell!"

"Aaah! That sounds like it'll hurt a lot!" Majic managed to free his arms and began to wave them about frantically. "And why torture?! I mean, even if you torture me, I don't even know what information I'm supposed to give you! I'll tell you whatever you want if you just ask! Anything!"

"Hmm. What do you think?" the princess asked the dwarf disinterestedly.

The dwarf nodded and responded, "Ma'am. I'd put his credibility at four."

"Why four?! Four out of how many?!"

"Torture, is it...?"

"Right away, ma'am."

"Aaaaaaaaaah?!"

Just then...

"Princeeeees!"

Another dwarf seemed to have appeared. This one looked the same as all the others. He practically slid to his knees in front of the princess and announced, "New enemy reinforcements spotted! No—from their numbers, they might be the main force!"

"What?!" the princess cried grimly. "What are you trying to say?! Are you saying our enemies' forces are limitless?!"

"There can be no mistake that their forces are mighty, Princess!"

"However!" the dwarf from before responded, several blood vessels standing out on his face in places that looked rather dangerous to Majic. "In no war is there an infinite amount of enemies. Do not lose sight of that!"

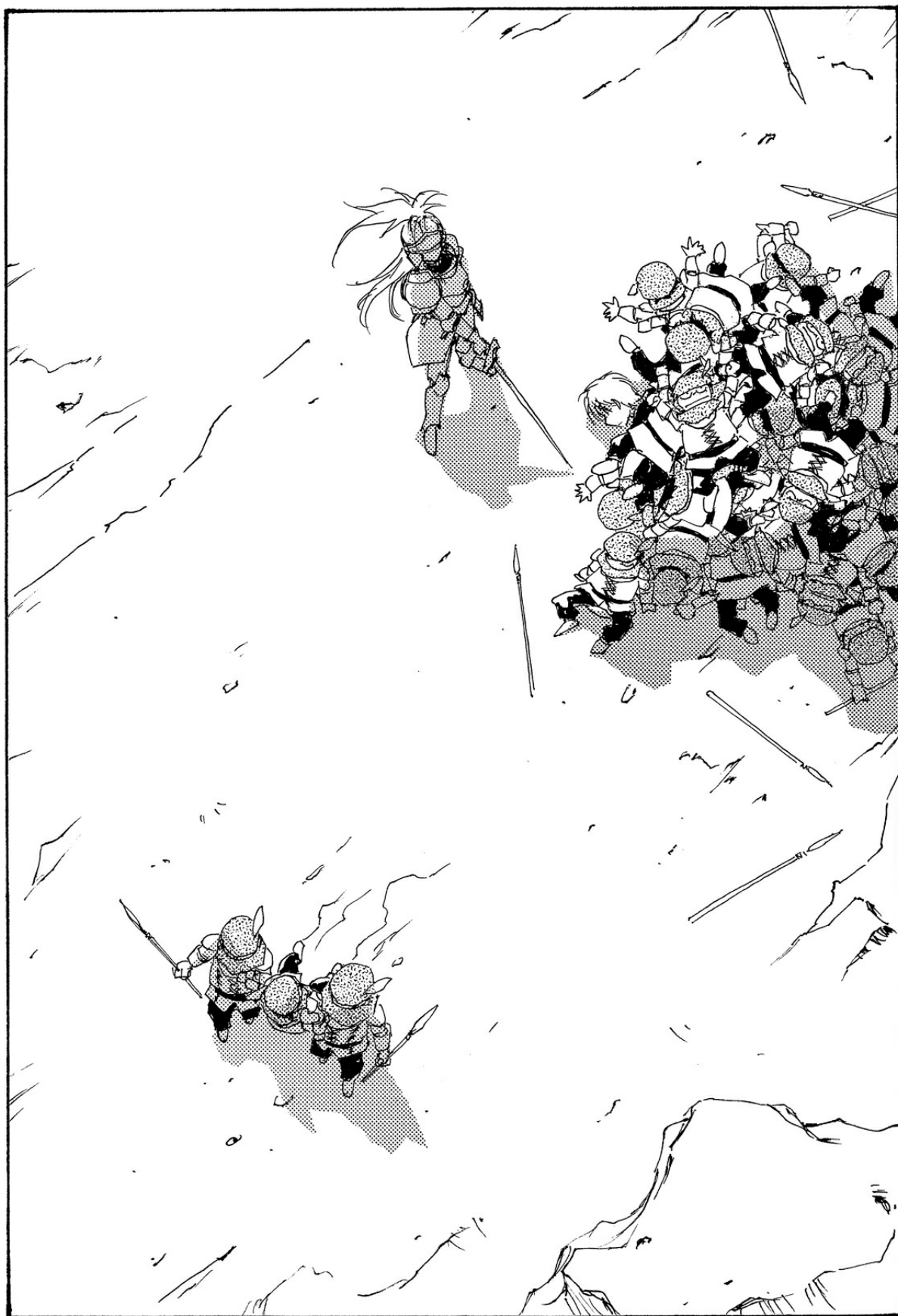
"I am aware! Do not be so arrogant!"

“Ma’am! I’m terribly so—”

“Put him to death. You can bury him in that area.”

“Just for that?!”

As Majic cried out in surprise, two other dwarves leaped down noisily, captured the offending dwarf, and dragged him off behind some tall rocks where Majic couldn’t see what happened next. By now, the princess was drawing her sword again, so he didn’t have time to concern himself with the dwarf’s fate anyway.



“Answer truthfully. What is the scale of your army? How many have you deployed to the princess’s battlefield?”

“Huh...?”

Majic had no idea. The first thing that came to mind when he heard the word “army” was the knight order in the capital, but... He had no idea if something that could be called an army even existed on the continent in the first place. Urbanrama had an armed forces of a sort, but it was more like a vigilante corps in terms of scale. Kimluck’s famous military had been disbanded by the Union of Lords a long time ago. Majic had no reason to doubt this as he had personally been involved in quite a big commotion in Kimluck and nothing like a military had ever appeared during that whole ordeal. Tefurem’s black sorcerers certainly resembled an army, but he didn’t really think the word applied in their case. They weren’t soldiers, so they didn’t risk their lives fighting against other people or countries. Totokanta didn’t have a military either. The whole point of the Royal Security Plan was that cities under its protection had no need of their own military. And what would these armies fight? Who was supposed to be invading them? The whole idea was ridiculous.

And yet...

This princess, or whatever she was, appeared to be commanding just such an army.

An army of dwarves...? That was all he could imagine they were. Every single person here other than the girl was a dwarf.

“Umm.” Majic managed to squeeze his voice out. He carefully responded, “I’m...well...a civilian. I was just passing through here.”

“A civilian?” That didn’t seem to shake the princess. She brought her sword closer to him. “We can’t have him leaking top-secret information. We’ll execute him on extralegal grounds.”

“I’m a soldier! And there’s treaties or something like that on the rights of prisoners of war, right?! If you could, umm, guarantee my human rights, or whatever, I’d really appreciate it!”

“Hmm... Treaties, eh? True, treaties must be respected.”

His hasty excuses seemed to have been effective. She at least seemed to have thought better of killing him, because she drew her sword back from just next to his throat.

“Answer me this, then. What’s the scale of your army here, your goal, and... Hmm...”

“The location of their command center?” The second dwarf from earlier whispered into the princess’s ear when she struggled to finish her question.

“How arrogant!” the princess immediately responded. “Put him to death.”

“Eeeep!”

Two new dwarves leaped down and dragged the offending dwarf back behind the rocks.

“Now...” The princess looked back down at Majic, speaking quietly. Her beautiful eyes were narrowed coldly. It wasn’t a terrible sight, but the sword and armor were an odd mismatch for the rest of her appearance. “Answer me, prisoner. If you answer, we’ll send your ashes back to your own country as per the treaty.”

“Wow, how generous!”

“Answer me! Our army is invincible and undefeated! We will never lose!”

“Augh...” At this point, Majic was on the verge of being overcome by a grim acceptance. He would probably just have to curse his luck and accept his execution.

He had no idea what to say in answer to her questions, and he figured as soon as he came up with something, they’d have no more use for him anyway.

In this hopeless situation, the only thing he could think to do was...

Majic slowly raised his head. “Umm, listen,” he began haltingly. “If I said I wanted to defect...would you...you know...grant me asylum? Ha ha.”

The ensuing silence was lengthy.

Extremely lengthy.

Everyone froze like they’d been petrified, and no one moved for what he

estimated was at least a minute.

Finally, the princess murmured, “Huddle.”

She gathered all the other dwarves to her and they conferred in hushed—though completely audible—tones.

“What do you think...?”

“I’m not sure this is something the army alone can decide...”

“But it’s not like we can contact home...”

“Isn’t the dignity of our nation on the line here, though?”

“I think executing him would probably be simplest...”

“Who wants to go through all that trouble? I mean, doing that annoying stuff would be...annoying.”

“What if we take him in as a prisoner of war, torture him just enough that he doesn’t die, and later we grant him asylum. Wouldn’t that work out in the end for the best all around?”

“How arrogant. Put him to death.”

Whatever they ended up deciding, Majic didn’t wait around to find out.

Since he was freed now, he sneaked off while the dwarves argued.



“When two people don’t agree with each other,” Winona said quietly, the barrel of her gun up against the brow of her target, “they have no choice but to fight. It has nothing to do with grudges or hard feelings. Your death was already determined, but it wasn’t my role to carry it out. Still... It has to be done.”

She was all alone with her target. It was just the two of them out on these wastes. She’d be lying if she said she felt no pity for her target, who looked up at her with fearful eyes. But if you asked her if that pity led to a respect of life, she’d say that was just one of history’s big lies.

“You must have no idea what I’m talking about. Did he not tell you anything? He probably didn’t. I think my misgivings are justified. It just means he’s no real ally to me. I’m the only one. I’m the only one really working for my lord.”

Death is the most reliable solution to any problem. Still, humans tend to avoid it, groping around blindly for other imperfect options. If life was so important to them, why did they find it so easy to disparage other people? Why couldn't they imagine that the thanks they would get in return might be a piece of sharp metal jabbed between their ribs? People who were so easily injured went around injuring others without even anticipating they might get hurt in exchange. That was what it was like in the human world, the truth covered up only by appearances.

That was the wisdom of humanity! Society was just a great silk cocoon wrapped around humanity.

Until they escape from the bounds of society and stand face to face against someone they disagree with, people can forget violence even exists.

"I named this gun Deedee. Deedee was the name of the dog I had as a child."

She shifted her grip on the gun in her hand, feeling the somewhat springy grip press into her palm. It was a comfortable feeling.

Inside that feeling, in the silk cocoon of society, violence was alive and well.

She made her living off it, at the very least.

"She was my partner. We were always messing around together. Deedee would attack anyone I commanded her to. She'd tear off a few grams of flesh and make 'em cry. Sometimes, she got excited by the smell of blood and she'd bite someone two or three times. Everyone was afraid of Deedee and they'd cry and plead with me. I loved it. I felt like I was invincible."

She recited all this glumly. Everyone probably felt the same when they reminisced over their past.

"Then, when I sicced her on this cop, like I always did, he took his baton and split Deedee's head right open. And I was the one crying. I held Deedee in my arms as the blood gushed out of her onto the street and I begged somebody to take her to a doctor. Of course, nobody did. Why would they? They all ganged up on me and beat me and Deedee up. And Deedee died. She probably died before I passed out. She got hard and cold. So Deedee was the one who taught me what death was."

She looked down at her target as she spoke, who still just had that scared look. It was stupid. So stupid. What was there to be scared of, she always thought. Sometimes, she even berated her targets.

After all, there was nothing they could do about their deaths. She didn't consider herself a sadist. She'd prefer to finish with her work quickly, if anything. She felt she was being compassionate. "If you live on after this, do you really think you can expect compassion like this?" she'd ask them.

Her targets tended to not accept her words, but she still found herself mostly satisfied after saying them.

And that was enough.

"A little while later, I was able to move again. It's practically a miracle that I didn't suffer any side effects. I thanked my good fortune. And I set out to have revenge on that cop."

She felt herself trembling slightly everywhere but the hand holding her gun.

"It was right around then. I met my lord. It wasn't planned or anything. We just ran into each other on the street. He was probably just in the capital for some business. He said to me, without hearing anything about my situation—I remember it word for word—'come with me and I'll revive what's most important to you. But I can't do it if you kill a cop.'"

Winona laughed. "Of course, I had no idea what he was saying. I was surprised, though. I thought he'd read my mind. He probably *had*. I thought I'd just ignore him, but for some reason, I ended up going with him. As soon as we got to his mansion, I was thrown into a room with this total demon of a teacher, no ifs, ands, or buts about it."

But... None of that mattered, did it? It did nothing but make her feel better when she committed murder.

"I'll keep the rest short. You can probably guess what comes next without me telling you, right? I'll do anything for my lord. I'll die, and I'll kill. And I won't let anyone ridicule me for it."

Her target's mouth moved, likely a prelude to a plea for mercy.

Looking at her target's—Lottecia's—expression, Winona sighed.

None of it meant anything.

“Well...” Her mouth twisted in a cynical smile. “Hopefully the main job goes this well too.”

She pulled the trigger and the gunshot rang out across the wastes.

Chapter III: Where Did It All Begin?

“Maria Huwon is on our side. You’re aware of that, aren’t you, Forte Puckingham? No... Do you mind if I call you Professor Forte?”

“I do.”

“But you *are* an assistant professor, are you not?”

Their conversation had moved to the Tower, not so much because it was appropriate as because Forte wanted to make his position clear. It had taken an hour for them to make their way here, and the other man had been able to fill all that time with small talk. Forte wanted to meet a man capable of that on his own turf, so to speak.

In a way, Forte thought to himself, we should really be on the same side.

East and west. That was the extent of the divide between them. They weren’t of a different race or ethnicity, their philosophies likely didn’t differ, and there was probably no difference in their sense of ethics either. The only difference between them was that they belonged to different organizations.

The Thirteen Apostles... Court sorcerers. If we at the Tower represent the highest authority on black sorcery on the continent, then the court is where one might end up after moving on from us.

The Tower of Fangs had produced many court sorcerers. Like Kurabe Rashille.

When the man entered the instructors’ lounge, he produced a pendant from his pocket with an exaggerated motion—not hanging it from his neck, but instead gently placing it on a table near where he sat. If his goal was to return the trinket, Forte might understand. After all, a crest from the Tower of Fangs meant little to one who could identify himself as a court sorcerer instead. If he planned on being so spiteful, he didn’t show it on his face, though. Kurabe had a genial smile on his face like he was always prepared to flatter.

He proceeded to do just that. “Well, it’s just a matter of time, isn’t it? There aren’t too many sorcerers of your caliber on the continent.”

Forte smiled wryly. He must change his twisted way of looking at things one of these days—say, if he ever had to propose to his lover, for instance—but for now, it served him well. Something told him he mustn't let his guard down for this man.

Trusting his own instincts on the matter, he responded, "I believe that merit-based systems may seem logical at first, but they can be harmful if taken too far. And joking about something that is by no means on the table for the time being is simply immature."

"Hmm. Well, what are we if not children? Society hasn't progressed that far yet."

"If you'd like to have a children's quarrel, then by all means." Forte shrugged and sat in his usual chair.

"Hmm."

Forte wasn't sure whether the man's response was an agreement or not, but he quickly returned the subject to the matter at hand.

"To put it simply, we heard about the Childman Network from Maria Huwon. She didn't know all that much about it herself, but through our various activities, we were able to ascertain..." He didn't seem to hesitate so much as think better of his wording. This was also a kind of flattery—pretending that you didn't understand something all that well. "We became unable to doubt the existence of a very mysterious, formless sort of information network that spans this continent. It seems impossible to me no matter how I think about it, though."

"Master wasn't trying to hide it or anything." Forte lied with a straight face. "If someone like Maria Huwon knew about it, that much is obvious, isn't it? He would use it for inconsequential things like finding wallets that students had dropped and such."

"Then we could make use of it as well?"

"If you wished to." Forte released the tension from his body as he answered. His chair creaked as he tested its stability and waited for his conversation partner's response.

The other man seemed to be waiting for something too. Kurabe stroked his chin and narrowed his eyes. After a pause, he asked, “Can you explain to me how it works?”

“I don’t believe even Master Childman understood it very well. Does that surprise you? That he merely made use of it because of its utility?”

This too was a lie, though not a completely obvious one. Master Childman Powderfield had never indicated one way or another whether he understood how the Network functioned.

The glint in Kurabe’s eyes shifted. “If it’s a Celestial artifact you’re referring to, you realize this means a significant breach in our agreements, do you not?”

After the dragons disappeared, the Union of Lords inherited all Celestial relics. That was an important historical promise—it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that this agreement was the whole reason the continent functioned as it did today. Without exception, the Union of Lords had the rights to all Celestial artifacts, and if someone else wanted to make use of them, a contract of lending or transfer of ownership had to be negotiated. Concealing a relic the Union of Lords wasn’t yet aware of constituted an act of high treason.

Forte merely shook his head. “You could say that our power itself is inherited from the Celestials. I believe that the Network is something like that as well.”

“What’s your basis for that belief?”

“The fact that it has no physical presence. Celestial sorcery requires sorcerous glyphs as a medium to function. As the Network functions without such a physical presence, I believe it is fueled by something other than Celestial sorcery.”

“It’s possible to conceal the existence of Wyrd Glyphs,” Kurabe pointed out coolly.

Is that his aim...? Forte frowned. Arresting Master Childman Powderfield on a count of high treason? He tried to calculate the general utility of such an objective. It made no sense, he decided. Divesting the Tower of its authority wouldn’t necessarily benefit the Thirteen Apostles. Especially considering that the majority of them were Tower graduates themselves.

So he's just trying to negotiate us down? By shaking them up, he would lower their bargaining power before ultimately demanding something of them.

Forte didn't yet know what they wanted, so he thought it would be better to shut the man down than give him more information than necessary.



“I can provide no proof that Master Childman *didn’t* do that. It’s impossible to prove someone’s innocence in a case like this.”

“Apart from their own testimony, yes.” Kurabe looked around the room pointedly. “I did request a meeting with *him*, incidentally.”

“Master is away from the Tower. No one knows when he’ll be back. I’m acting as his stand-in—hence my title of assistant professor.”

“Away from the Tower, eh? It’s always the same thing with you people. Inside the Tower or away from it. That’s all you measure the world by.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, Assistant Professor Forte Puckingham... If you’re going to act as his stand-in, personally, I think you should just start calling yourself a full-fledged professor.”

“If you’ve come to give the Tower advice about its personnel—”

“You don’t want any, I’m sure. But this has nothing to do with my beliefs. I’m just pointing out something logical here. There’s nothing you can do to assist a dead person. If you’re really going to act as his stand-in, you’ll have to become him yourself.”

Forte swallowed his response. His opponent had played an unexpected card and with it had dealt him a fatal blow. He held his breath, somehow managing to keep himself from saying anything rude and forcing himself to simply remain silent for a moment. Clenching his fists underneath his desk, Forte looked back at Kurabe.

The other man was just sitting there quietly.

It took several seconds for the words he’d choked down to disappear. Slowly, Forte opened his mouth again. His tongue was quivering. “What are you talking about?”

“Surely you don’t have such a low opinion of us. That being said... I wasn’t sure until I arrived here.”

He almost thought the man would stand up. He didn’t think he was the type to kick his chair out from under him in anger, but if he needed to, he likely

wouldn't hesitate to put on such an act.

His enemy had cleanly stolen the initiative. He thought it unlikely that Kurabe had a bigger trump card than the one he'd just used, but he couldn't deny the possibility that the man had several more cards of a similar level.

In any case, if this was a game, then the two of them needed to agree on the rules. They needed to decide what they were playing for. It began there.

"I'd like to know what it is you're after," Forte quietly demanded. "You asked earlier to meet with Master Childman. That's not possible, as he is not currently here at the Tower."

"What we need isn't Childman. It's the Network."

"Then you can ask me."

"Very well. The situation is rather grave at the moment. A certain group of people are trying to commit a crime that will have serious repercussions. I want you to understand this, Forte Puckingham: if you value your current life, then we are on the same side."

"What do you mean by that?" Forte asked, observing the other man's expression carefully.

A tremor went through the faint wrinkles on Kurabe's face. His face tensed and trembled like it agonized his throat to voice such abominable words. But he spoke clearly and plainly.

"This continent is about to be at war."



"A princeeess! A princeeess!"

"Aaaaaaaaah! Hangyara uba sterachi, kontora kontora bentara!"

The two dwarves ran around in a circle, screaming. The new third one was bent down, face low to the ground as he shouted nonsense.

Orphen looked down at them with his arms crossed, groaning. "What's this about? Did you finally lose it? I mean, not that you had much to begin with..."

"Yeah, this isn't really anything new," Claiomh interjected casually.

“What’s going on?” Leticia asked her, apparently electing to shift her interest to this new oddness.

Orphen shook his head, internally grateful for the distraction. He had no idea what was going on in the dwarves’ heads. All he could say was, “Maybe they’ve just ended up where they were always going.”

“You can’t just make up whatever you want!” Dortin suddenly leaped up, crying and wailing. “You people don’t understand! You don’t know how serious this situation is!”

Orphen couldn’t recall too many times he’d heard the fainthearted younger dwarf get so passionately angry, but...it didn’t change the fact that he had no idea what was going on.

“Okay, but I think anyone would be hard-pressed to understand the situation just from ‘hangyara uba sterachi.’”

“They’re words of prayer to our guardian spirits, but that’s not important right now—”

“Actually, I’d like more information on that part.”

“Anyway, that outfit is a terrible harbinger that every dwarf knows!” Dortin clenched his fist and his glasses glinted meaninglessly. “It’s a symbol of war that was erased from history!”

“War?” Claiomh pressed forward, eyes sparkling with excitement for some reason. She stopped when all she met with was the glasses obscuring Dortin’s expression, though. It wasn’t difficult to imagine a look of heretofore unseen sternness behind the light-reflecting lenses staring back at her.

“War... A terrible war you humans could never even imagine.”

“Hmm?” Curious, Orphen asked, “And when was this war?”

There hadn’t been war on the continent in the last several decades. The most recent conflict was the Sand War, a strange, adversarial period between the Church and the Sorcerers’ Association forty years ago. However, there had been battles on a similar scale a few times before that as well. On a naturally limited stage like the continent, if such conflicts went on constantly, they’d obviously

only lead to ruin, so it was hard to say whether this period of fighting had been long or short.

“I’ve never heard of a dwarf war.”

“It was before we were restricted to our current territory... Our memories of it are so terrible that we swore no matter what happened, we would never wage war again. Our ancestors swore, rather.”

“Mhm,” Orphen grunted.

There were many ways to look at them, but plenty of ethnologists asserted that dwarves had a significantly higher level of culture than humans. That even though they’d been confined to Masmaturia, they were an advanced society despite their lack of any sort of environmental advantages.

Noticing something, Orphen murmured, “Well, if you swore to never do it again, what was that about? That guy said ‘enemy presence,’ didn’t he?”

“There’s a legend.”

“You’re not talking about Princess Silvermoon, are you?” Leticia asked hesitantly.

Orphen shot a glance at her. She didn’t seem to notice his gaze and just had her brows knit in her usual expression, turning over the phrase she’d just muttered.

“What’s that?” Orphen asked, and she waved her hand.

“It’s just a local legend. I think it’s pretty famous, though.”

“It is. Dwarves still pass down the name with great terror,” Dortin muttered, a shadow falling over his face.

Volkan, who had been loudly panicking this whole time, finally went quiet and just clung to a nearby rock, trembling.

Orphen nodded. “Is this like a minor or major type thing?”

“Minor, isn’t it?” Claiomh added.

“Please don’t interrupt me,” Dortin protested. “This is serious. We all have to run...”

“Isn’t that just a fairy tale, though?” Leticia asked, and the dwarf shook his head hard enough for his glasses to fly off.

“Absolutely not! It’s historical fact! Some people say it was a curse that visited our people long ago, and some say it was a trap produced by some conspiracy. But without a doubt, it’s led to countless sacrifices among our people for hundreds of years—”

“Say...” Claiomh tugged on his sleeve and Orphen looked down at her. Rubbing her chin over Leki’s head, she said, “This seems like it’s gonna go on for a while. If something dangerous is happening, should I go find Lottecia? I can just hear the story later, right?”

“Hmm.” Orphen reflexively wanted to say no, but he thought it over for a moment. Maybe that would be better. There was no telling if the situation was actually as dangerous as the dwarf insisted, but there was nothing wrong with going and getting Lottecia. “Still, if there’s danger, maybe it’s a bad idea for you to go alone... I’ll go with—”

That was as far as he got before he heard the sound of rocks crunching underfoot, cutting his words off.

Claiomh turned toward the sound. “Lotte?”

But it wasn’t her. Instead, a large woman with a rugged face popped out from behind a rock. Her gun holstered at her shoulder, she looked around curiously at the unfamiliar faces and said, “Nope, it’s me.”

After stating the obvious, she scratched her face awkwardly. “Lottecia’s not here? Or that boy? Why are you guys always splitting up?”

“We’re not *always* splitting up,” Orphen protested, but Winona didn’t seem interested in listening.

She looked at Leticia and boldly asked, “Who’s this? Not really a place you’d expect to find travelers.”

“She’s not a traveler.”

“Well, if you’re here for a purpose... I can’t really be taking extra people along with us.”

Leticia had been silent, but she finally opened her mouth when Winona started to stare at her. The ends of her eyebrows flicked up as if the other woman's rudeness had struck a nerve. "I'm—"

"She's not unrelated."

"You love your 'nots,' don't you?" Winona smirked and said, "Well, alright. You were talking pretty loud, so I heard a little. You want to go find Lottecia, right? If it's too dangerous to go alone, I can come with."

"Huh?" Claiomh blinked in surprise. She was looking at Orphen and moving her mouth faintly like she wanted to say something, and Orphen suddenly realized that she was waiting to hear his reply.

He didn't know why she was, but Orphen nodded. "Please do, then. And could you look for Majic while you're at it?" he asked her. Truthfully, he did sort of feel like it would be better to talk to Leticia without anyone else around.

At that, Claiomh tossed aside her hesitation and raised her hand cheerily. "Okay. We'll go do that, then."

"Great."

"I wonder where Lotte went, though..."

"Who knows. Can't say I'm too familiar with these parts, myself..."

Orphen watched the two of them leave, waiting until they were far enough away to shrug and turn back to the rest of his little group. He took a look at each of their faces—Volkan, clinging to a rock; Dortin, frozen in fear; and Leticia, who was looking sullen.

Now, then... he thought to himself. *What exactly is going on here...?*

He was pretty lost, so he started with what he thought was probably the most logical question. "So, what's this legend about, anyway?" he prompted Dortin to finish his story.

"I told you, the princess," Dortin murmured, face looking pained. "We can't disobey the princess. If she orders us to die, we die, and if she orders us to live, we'll survive no matter what happens to us. The Princess Silvermoon of legend...orders all her subjects to fight until they die to protect our nation."

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m trying to tell you!” Dartin raised his voice. “Princess Silvermoon put her life at stake and swore to take back the continent from the dragons—”

Orphen was still struggling to understand the situation, but either way, the dwarf’s voice was cut off by another voice suddenly echoing from the distance.

“Maaaaasteeeeeer!”

They turned to look, and as soon as they saw Majic, he was already speeding past them. He ran off and disappeared into the distance again, this time in the opposite direction.

Orphen watched him go in a daze before realizing that he could hear a war cry now. All of a sudden, the sound was deafening. At the same time, there were loud, clanking footsteps—and not just one or two pairs. Even calling it a large group seemed optimistic. This was an army.

“Eeeeeeeep?!” A terrified cry joined the tumult. It was Volkan’s cry as he fell from his rock. His expression was frozen in fear as he stared at...

An army of dwarves dressed in green had appeared out of nowhere. They wore what looked like shortened fur cloaks around their necks and held stupidly huge bladed weapons like spears and axes.

“Assault unit! Enemy main force spotted! And since we’re the assault unit, assault!”

The whole group of them shouted at once, not a breath out of sync. As dozens of dwarves leaped out from behind rocks and beyond the road, Orphen’s group was speechless at the intimidating sight.

Orphen leaped back. The dwarves weren’t in striking range yet, but if they began the “assault” they’d promised, they could probably crush him into paste.

He swiftly wove a composition, but before he could release his spell, a cool voice cut through the air.

His sister had her hand up, her hair fluttering in the breeze behind her as she said simply, “Light.”

Not only was Leticia’s spell composed quickly, it was also a precise incantation

releasing a limited amount of power in a small space. His sister's sorcery was some of the best on the continent, he admitted to himself with awe.

A violent tremor assaulted one small point. A ray of light and heat burst at the charging dwarves' feet, exploding.

When the tremors from the explosion had faded...

"Huh?" his sister muttered in disbelief.

Nothing remained there except a mark carved into the ground from the explosion.

"I blew them away? B-But that's not possible, is it? I didn't use a spell powerful enough to kill..."

As if to further confuse her, another group of dwarves appeared out of nowhere once again. They raised their weapons, unperturbed by their comrades' violent disappearance.

"Do not falter! Since we're the assault unit, we assault without stopping—"

"I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!" Orphen released the spell he hadn't been able to get out before. A shock wave washed through the second wave...and they vanished as well.

What are they...?

Just like his sister, he'd held back the force of his spell. And even if he wanted to, he'd have to try pretty hard to cast a spell powerful enough to blow away this number of adversaries without leaving any bodies behind.

That's not it. These dwarves have no physical form.

That meant... He suddenly hit upon something. A sharp pain ran through his chest like he'd been taken by surprise.

And just then...

"Do not falter! I've just personally decided that that is the superior form of 'do not falter!' Since we're the assault unit, we assault without stopping, and since we don't stop—"

Orphen paused his thinking at the appearance of another wave of dwarves.

They had to run. He turned to Leticia, when...

“Charge!”

The voice had come from so close that Orphen shuddered. He spun back around on pure instinct. When he did, a familiar chipped sword swung through the air, narrowly missing his shoulder.

It was Volkan holding the sword, shouting in a tone that was clearly unusual for him. “Since we’re an impromptu assault team, we will assault in an impromptu manner!”

“Assault!” The next shout came from Dortin. He was unarmed, but he’d picked up a stone from the ground and was giving Orphen a ferocious glare.

“Wha...?!” Orphen shouted, unable to quite form words.



He noticed a new person beyond the crowd of dwarves now. Beyond the identically dressed army, there was a girl with silvery blonde hair wearing heavy silver armor and shouting in a voice so beautiful it almost made Orphen shudder.

“Go forth! Your swords protect our motherland! Make these foolish invaders remember the sight of their filthy homeland! Soon, they’ll return there—at least as blood-drenched spirits!”

“That’s...Princess Silvermoon?”

He almost felt like he could have come up with the name himself if no one had told it to him. What had Dortin said about her? Orphen looked down at the dwarf in glasses raising a frenzied battle cry with a rock in his hand and tried to remember. The dwarven princess? They couldn’t disobey her orders...

“Krylancelo!” Leticia called his name. She was completely panicked, looking down at her hands, her shoulders trembling. “No! What’s going on? I didn’t mean to kill them—”

What do we do...? Orphen stopped time in his mind, trying desperately to analyze the situation. The onslaught of dwarves appeared to be unending—there was probably an endless supply of them, if he was guessing correctly.

The threat was right before his eyes. There was no time. Explaining the situation to his sister and calming her down would probably be impossible. If that was the case, then he’d have to protect his panicking sister and find it all on his own.

The heart...of the enemy. If he could find that, everything should end. *But I can’t do it on my own.*

He needed support. He knew the thought was taboo. If he carelessly thought something like that, it could summon something. There was a possibility it would summon something helpful. But it might be something unhelpful too.

Dammit! No matter how hard he’d tried to stop time, it was still moving. Volkan had lifted his sword up, and it was making its descent toward his body once again. Orphen dodged it, trying to squeeze thoughts out of his head. There was no way he could erase all the names and faces of the people he’d

interacted with in the past from his mind, though. He had to concentrate and do so, but...

As he dodged the rock Dortin had thrown at him, a person's face came to mind. A blonde woman with sharp eyes. He had no idea why he'd remembered her face, and he didn't have time to think about it. He hadn't even thought about her for years now. Sometimes, those sharp eyes of hers had softened. She'd seemed to like giving people food. He'd often gotten food from her too. Being strong-willed might have been a trait most sorcerers at the Tower shared, but there weren't many who would willingly compete with his sister Azalie.

Anyone else should have been fine. He had that feeling distinctly. There was no reason for him to be remembering her now.

His memories quickly materialized. On the edge of his field of view, that woman appeared. He had no idea where she'd come from, but all of a sudden, she was there. That must have been all it was. After all, she was something like a ghost.

"Blue Shockwave!" she shouted loudly.

A web of electricity spread out through the mass of dwarves and wiped them away.

At the same time, a man Orphen had never seen before appeared right before him. He was a strange-looking man with a shaved head and layers of cloaks wrapped around him. He had a sword in his hand. He casually ran it through one of the dwarves who had been outside the range of her spell. Just like Orphen thought it would, the dwarf vanished without a trace.

Then, yet another man he'd never seen before leaped forward, yelling, "You're terrible, sweetheart!" He seemed to be addressing the woman who'd appeared earlier. "You know I want to protect you, don't you?"

"That's fine, but I sure as hell don't want to protect you."

"So cruel."

When he heard that conversation, he realized. ...*She's real?* She wasn't an illusion called up from his memories. *She's the real...*

It was Leticia who called her name. “Irgitte? What are you doing here?”

When her name was called, the woman turned around with a start like she’d only just noticed them. She furrowed her narrow brows, looked at Leticia, and asked, “Leticia MacCready?”

The two sorcerers froze, staring at each other. And just then...

“Retreaaaat!” Princess Silvermoon’s voice rang out. A loud, strong voice that seemed like it would reach far into the distance even in a great tumult. “The enemy forces have merged! We’re changing our strategy! Retreat!”

“Retreat! Since we’re retreating, retreat!”

The dwarves acted quickly. The whole group of them spun around and fled behind the same rocks they’d emerged from when they’d appeared.

By the time Orphen recovered his wits, the dwarves were completely gone. There were a few signs of the destruction that had occurred, but nothing else. Even Volkan and Dortin were gone.

The five remaining people there took turns silently exchanging glances. Their movements almost seemed coordinated beforehand, though of course there was no way that could be true.

“Ahh...” Orphen murmured, leaning against a nearby rock. He put a hand to his forehead and looked up at the sky. “Why does this stuff happen even when I’m just being invited to somebody’s house?”



He’d realized that there was no one chasing him anymore, but he still couldn’t bring himself to stop running. In the end, what that meant was that he kept going until he ran out of strength and collapsed. Still, he managed to avoid tumbling to the ground, instead finding a tree to lean against. It was a thin, withered tree that would soon rot away, but it managed to support his weight and fatigue all the same.

He glanced behind him. When he made sure that the strange army of dwarves was no longer anywhere to be seen, Majic finally let out a long sigh of relief. It was a little halting due to how out of breath he was, however.

He still found himself unable to fully relax as he sank into the shadow of the tree to hide.

“What is going on, really...” He wiped the sweat from his forehead and then gave his wet hand a shake. “First I’m getting chased by a super scary sorcerer, and then it’s all this stuff about prisoners of war and torture. Why do I have to do all this running around...? I’m never running again in my life... Ugh. No matter what happens, I’m resting here...”

When he settled down against the tree, muttering to himself, he could feel his spasming muscles finally begin to settle. He knew his fatigue was only temporary, but he was definitely in need of some rest right now.

Majic relaxed and looked up at the sky when he suddenly heard a sharp sound behind him. It was a clear sort of *bang*, like the sound a stick made when whacked against something. Majic grimaced when his rest was interrupted by the loud sound. It had come from behind him, but when he looked over his shoulder, there was a thicket that obstructed his view. He was certain that the sound had come from beyond it, so he reached out and parted the bushes to give himself a gap to look through...

What he saw was a pair of feet, leaving the ground for a second and then turning upright like the person they were attached to had collapsed. Everything other than the feet was obscured by a rock, so he couldn’t see who it was.

But the shoes were familiar. They were small sneakers with worn-down soles. Claiomh’s shoes. Claiomh had fallen between some rocks.

What...?

Majic widened the gap he was looking through and saw Winona looking down at the fallen Claiomh. The large woman was expressionless and wasn’t even running over to Claiomh, let alone trying to help her up. Well, of course she wasn’t, he realized a moment later. In Winona’s left hand was what looked like a small, shiny toy—a gun. Smoke poured from its muzzle, creating a thin haze over the wasteland behind it.

Majic opened his mouth in a silent gasp, and ran from his hiding place as fast as he could.

Chapter IV: The Resolution Might Be That Way

“Long time no see, Leticia MacCready. Has it been two years now?” The woman’s voice was cold and seemed to carry an amount of hostility.

Leticia stepped back when she heard it, responding, “Sounds about right, Irgitte.”

“It’s Irgitte Sweetheart. I have a surname now, just like you. My assets may not amount to much, but I wouldn’t take me lightly if I were you.” Irgitte raised her chin haughtily and Leticia took another step back.

“I wouldn’t do that... Right. You went to the court. With Instructor Maria, wasn’t it? How’s she been?”

“You mean to say I was only allowed in because I was with her, don’t you?”

“No... Not at all,” Leticia said wearily.

“I’m sure you’ve already guessed,” the man with the shaved head interjected. He still held his saber lazily pointed down at the ground, and as his voice was pointed in the same direction, it was somewhat hard to hear. “We were dispatched here from the Thirteen Apostles on a mission. As Irgitte doesn’t seem inclined to introduce you to us, allow me to ask instead: are you *the* Leticia MacCready?”

Irgitte raised her voice to cut off any potential reply from Leticia. Her displeasure was obvious to anyone. “I was about to do just that, Seek—Master Seek, I mean.”

“We’re in a hurry, if you’d forgotten.”

“I know that.” With an exaggerated flourish that was clearly sardonic in nature, Irgitte indicated this man and the other younger one—younger than himself, Orphen guessed—and introduced them. “Leticia. For the time being, this is our temporary, just-for-now leader, Master Seek. Seek Marrisk. I don’t need to explain about the School in the capital, do I? He’s an instructor there. The simple one is Kakorkist Isthian. His student.”

“Simple is best, wouldn’t you say, sweetheart?”

“Some would say that,” Irgitte said coldly, pointing at Leticia this time. “Seek, Kakorkist. She’s Leticia MacCready. From the Tower of Fangs.”

That was all Irgitte said, as if that sufficed for an introduction. And it probably did, because neither Seek nor Kakorkist asked any further questions.

Then, there was silence. Several seconds of it. Orphen waited with his mouth shut, but Irgitte didn’t say anything more. Leticia just blinked, expression blank. As the silence stretched on, the members of the Thirteen Apostles started to exchange uneasy glances.

“Leticia.” Finally Irgitte spoke up, an awkward smile on her face. “That’s it for our introductions. Could you tell us about him?” She indicated Orphen with her eyes.

“Huh?” he couldn’t help muttering.

Leticia sighed deeply. “I had a feeling...” She pressed a hand to her eyes like she was tired and shook her head.

Left behind, Irgitte got a sour look in her eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Leticia pointed languidly at Orphen. “I’m not surprised you don’t recognize him... Believe it or not, this is Krylancelo.”

“Why do I feel like I’m getting the same treatment as Mr. Simple?” Orphen murmured, eyes narrowed.

The next silence was even longer than the first. Orphen heard a strange sound, like some sort of broken whistle, before he realized that Irgitte had been sucking in air for the whole period of quiet.

The sound suddenly stopped, and in the next instant...

“No way!” Irgitte shouted, stepping forward so fast it was almost like she’d teleported. She leaped toward him, snatched his hand, and peered closely at his face. “Whoa! Now that you mention it, you’re right! Long time no see, Krylancelo! How have you been? I headed to the capital a little after you left Tefurem, so you didn’t know about it, did you?”



“...Why do I feel like that was a very different ‘long time no see’ than the one I got?”

“Don’t sweat it, Leticia. It’s nothing for you to worry about. Let’s not be at each other’s throats. We don’t want to upset Krylancelo.”

“Nobody said anything about—”

“By the way, if you’d forgotten...!” Seek interrupted loudly. He sent a stern look Irgitte’s way when she gave a startled jump. “We’re in a hurry.”

“Ah... Umm, Master Seek. This is Krylancelo. Of the Tower of Fangs.”

“Oh?” Seek’s tone changed.

Beside him, Mr. Simple—the word seemed to fit all too well—cocked his head. “Is he famous, Master?”

“I’d heard that he was missing. It’s been a long time, Krylancelo... I suppose I should say. You may not remember, but we’ve met once in the past. If you had attended the hearing, you would be working under me now.” He turned to his student. “He was supposed to be the subject of a hearing for the Thirteen Apostles five years ago. Unfortunately, the hearing never happened. That’s who he is.”

“I see.” Kakorkist nodded with a lighthearted smile on his face. He turned to Orphen and held out a hand. “I understand well. True, the Thirteen Apostles’ hearings are tough, so if you weren’t up to the task, it’s not necessarily something you need be ashamed of. You’ll get your chance one of these days, Krylancelo.”

“...He doesn’t seem to understand at all, but don’t let it bother you, Krylancelo.”

“Uh huh...” Orphen responded, limply grasping Kakorkist’s hand. “I go by Orphen now,” he told them, recalling that he should mention this. “I’m not with the Tower anymore.”

“I’m not particularly surprised they would be so rash.” Seek was likely referring to the higher-ups at the Tower. He hadn’t changed his expression once during their conversation—there wasn’t even any sort of emotion in his eyes.

“You should have come to the School in the capital after leaving the Tower. There was no need to bury a young talent such as yourself.”

“It’s not like that... There was something I had to do,” Orphen muttered, all the while feeling Leticia’s gaze pricking at him. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “By the way, if you’ve met me before, is there a reason you didn’t recognize me?”

“Well, we’re in a hurry...” Seek turned in a different direction without answering his question. “I don’t expect you’re here on a vacation yourselves. If it’s all the same to you, I’d like to know what your business is here. It seems we’ve all been wrapped up in the same predicament.”

“I don’t think it’ll be much of a predicament, really. If you’re talking about those dwarves, I think the situation will resolve itself fairly quickly.”

“Huh?” At some point Leticia and Irgitte had gotten right in each other’s faces and were glaring at one another, but they both turned to Orphen now and made surprised sounds.

“What do you mean? Do you know something, Krylancelo?” Leticia asked.

Orphen scratched his head, not sure what to say. This likely wasn’t something he should be telling Irgitte and sorcerers of the Thirteen Apostles, but there wasn’t anything they could do about it while he kept it hidden. *I’ll just have to tell them*, he thought to himself, apologizing to Forte in his mind.

Shrugging his shoulders, Orphen indicated the marks of the destruction left on the ground and said, “To put it simply, they’re all ghosts.”



“I know that you’re already moving on this. You sent Leticia MacCready to the east, didn’t you?”

“I make no claims about any moves in this game.” Forte denied the other man’s assertion, rubbing his hands together on top of his lap. It wasn’t that he was cold. In fact, he was lightly sweating.

I’m not cut out for this stuff in the first place... He knew that criticizing himself didn’t feel good and there wasn’t any particular meaning in it either.

But he was aware that everyone thought the same behind his back. If he said that he was a fainthearted person, most would laugh it off without agreeing, but he imagined they thought the same thing on the inside.

Still, he was used to putting on appearances at least as much as the average person. He spoke up again quietly, voice low, restrained.

“At the very least, I have no intention of participating in your people’s games. I prefer more...subdued sources of amusement.”

Forte had no idea if Kurabe had seen through him or not. The Thirteen Apostle sorcerer merely smiled wryly the same way anyone else would.

“We don’t enjoy playing with fire ourselves. There’s a...powerful man who’s trying to bring his foolish ‘sources of amusement’ into reality.”

“That’s an odd way to talk around it. Is it one of you?” Forte asked.

As he watched the man in front of him shake his head, the name Forte was thinking of was Pluto the Demon. The Demon of the Capital. The top-ranked member of the Thirteen Apostles, and the strongest black sorcerer. He possessed a different sort of strength than people like Colgon and Leticia, of course, and Forte had seen him once in the past and hadn’t been terribly afraid of him. All he’d thought was that the man seemed very much like a sorcerer of the School.

But in any case, that didn’t seem to be who Kurabe was referring to. And if the root of their problems *was* Pluto, there was no way Kurabe would be taking this to the Tower of Fangs, so it was a mistake for Forte to have thought of the man in the first place.

Kurabe began to speak slowly—“hamming it up” was the only way Forte could think of the man’s deliberate way of speaking. “The man in question—it is a man—is... He’s not a sorcerer. We don’t know his identity, exactly. But we have a vague suspicion that he stands in a place of...being a sort of trump card for the nobility. The fact that our investigation concluded there is a great disaster.”

“Why did it conclude there?”

“Because we couldn’t do any more. Every time we heard the phrase ‘Imminent Domain’ we lost more people. It was like we were just sending

sacrifices to a Demon King. Our current plan may end in much the same way.”

The cunning lines of the man’s eyelids bent as he paused deliberately before naming the person he was talking about.

“The lord of the Imminent Domain. That’s the only name we know him by. He shows himself in the capital sometimes. But we can’t trace him. He has powerful protectors—and I won’t let you say you don’t know any of them. The name Yuis Colgon is familiar to you, is it not?”

“One of those is.” Forte shrugged.

Kurabe rapidly continued, “Don’t lie to me. Childman should have known about that boy. He knowingly welcomed a spy from that domain into his classroom. Well, I suppose he’s not so much a boy any longer...”

“It’d be trouble having Colgon as an enemy. I only know one sorcerer I imagine could go up against him toe to toe.”

“Krylancelo, eh? The Razor-Sharp Successor. Weren’t you the one who sent him to Kimluck?”

This time, it was Forte who smiled wryly at Kurabe. “He found his way there himself,” he told the man, a bitter smile on his lips. “I tried to stop him... Though not very enthusiastically, I suppose.”

Kurabe didn’t seem to believe him, but he chose to move on anyway. “The lord’s other protector... This one’s troublesome in his own way. We don’t have the full picture on this one, but we know his name at least. Damian Rue. He doesn’t take center stage himself, but he’s one of the strongest sorcerers on the continent. I can say this with confidence. He’s a far more skilled user of the Network than you are.”

He was speaking faster now, as if he was getting excited. “A white sorcerer. And an extremely powerful spiritualist who gave his body up decades ago. The lord likely has several more powerful people under his control too. And in the last several years, their actions have been escalating.”

“What are they doing, specifically?”

“They’re provoking the dragons!” Kurabe finally raised his voice, clenching a

fist and raising it up with irritation. “I’m sure I don’t need to explain to you how dangerous that is. They are poking at bushes they should be leaving alone when the snake they scare from them may very well devour the continent itself.”

After spitting the sentence out, he relaxed his fists. His tone softened and Forte had to lean forward to catch what he said next.

“The dragons have actually sent powerful agents of their own to combat this lord’s people. Of course, we don’t know for sure who made the first move. You heard the rumors, didn’t you? That the destruction in Urbanrama two weeks ago had something to do with a Deep Dragon that appeared suddenly there.”

“Hmm.” Forte responded vaguely, waiting for Kurabe’s next words. He glanced out the window. They hadn’t been talking for that long, but the sky was already starting to darken.

If I’d taken someone to the theater, we’d probably be eating right about now. The thought suddenly occurred to him and he became aware of how hungry he was, but Kurabe showed no signs of harboring similar thoughts.

The man’s voice trembled as he went on, “Let me get to the point. We want you to work together with us. The Tower and the Thirteen Apostles... Let’s use the power of the Continental Sorcerers’ Association itself to stop whatever insanity the lord of the Imminent Domain is planning.”



“Masteeeeer!”

Sitting on the ground, Orphen looked up out of the corner of his eye when Majic came sliding toward him.

His student was panting, covered in sweat and dust, and half crying as he wailed, “I-I-I-It’s terrible! Just now, over there—”

Orphen smacked him, still seated. All too easily, Majic tumbled back, going quiet.

“Mhm. So basically...” He took the time to observe the fallen Majic. “This is real, see?”

“What was that foor?! ” Majic shouted, leaping back up.

Orphen silenced him with a hand and groaned. “Ugh. Don’t get upset. I had to do it.”

“You *had* to punch me out of nowhere?! What do you—”

Majic suddenly stopped and looked up at everyone around him, mystified. “Who are these people?” He must have realized he wasn’t familiar with most of them. He was frowning in confusion.

“Ah...” Orphen looked up at them too, trying to find the words to explain. If he wanted to put it simply, it really all was very simple. They all just happened to be passing by. No, that wasn’t true for his sister, he supposed...

Leticia MacCready.

Irgitte Sweetheart.

Seek Marrisk.

Kakorkist Isthian.

As long as you ignored the fact that every single one of them was unmistakably a caster either at his level or possibly above it, that explanation sufficed.

For the time being, Orphen indicated his sister. “Well, this is Tish. She’s my sister...or something like it. You remember her, don’t you? She helped us out in Tefurem.”

“Huh?”

There were hardly any people who met his sister and didn’t remember her—in fact, he’d be surprised if there were *any* before today. Orphen made the observation to himself with mixed feelings.

“Oh,” Majic exclaimed as if only now noticing. “Miss Leticia?”

“Thanks for earlier,” she said, something ominous in her tone. Majic stepped back a few paces, but that was all that happened between the two of them.

Watching them both, Orphen indicated the other three. “Those three are court sorcerers, members of the Thirteen Apostles. They just happen to be passing by at the moment. Anyway, this kid’s Majic. He’s my apprentice—”

“No, this is no time for that, Master!” Majic interrupted Orphen’s introductions, walking up to him with unnecessary bluster. He began waving his arms around as if he’d just remembered the panic he’d been in a moment ago and yelled, “Claiomh! Where’s Claiomh?!”

“She just went to look for Lottecia with Winona.”

“Aaaaah, I knew iit!” Majic’s flailing grew even more desperate.

Growing irritated, Orphen shoved the boy’s face away from him. “What are you wailing about? Things are complicated enough over here—”

“This isn’t complicated at all anymore...” Majic sniffled loudly—he was crying—and shook his head. His voice was choked with despair. “It’s already over. One shot with a gun and she hit the ground, dammit...”

“Start at the beginning, Majic. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Over there, Winona shot Claiomh!” Majic screamed, directing all his anger at Orphen for some reason. “Then Claiomh collapsed—that’s all I saw before I ran over here.”

“Three points.”

“...Huh?”

“Three points out of ten. Just ‘cause someone got shot and fell over doesn’t mean they’re dead. If that really happened, then what you should have done was take down Winona, confirm Claiomh’s condition, and resuscitate her if necessary. That would have gotten you nine points. And if you wanted ten, then you should have caused a miracle to occur and saved the heroine. You get it?”

Orphen told him all this matter-of-factly and Majic just stared back at him, face blank, until his dazed look suddenly turned to anger burning in his eyes. “How can you be so calm, Master?!”

“You better not have forgotten that you’re a sorcerer. Winona committed a crime and you were the only one in a position to do something about it. What does running away do? What could you have done in the time it took to run here and then go all the way back?”

“That’s...!” That was all Majic said before he spun around and ran back the

way he'd come from.

As Orphen watched him go, Leticia asked him, "Is it okay to let him go alone?"

Orphen shrugged, turning to her. "It's fine. His ghosts shouldn't cause much of an issue."

"But what he said... Claiomh might be dead."

"Claiomh's not dead. She probably doesn't have a scratch on her." As he spoke, Orphen organized his thoughts. "Claiomh's most likely the safest person among us in our current situation. She's protected by a Deep Dragon who can read people's minds and wipe them off the face of the world the second they even think about hurting her. I don't think there's anything anyone could do to actually harm her. Winona knows that better than anyone. Oh, that's the woman from before. She wouldn't be stupid enough to try to do something to Claiomh." *She's so much trouble because she's not stupid*, he added to himself. "Considering all that, there's pretty much no chance Claiomh's dead."

"Still—"

"Yeah, I know." Orphen gave in to Leticia's worrying, repeating, "I know. I know. There's always a possibility. That's why I had Majic go check it out. What else was I supposed to do? Me and Majic are the only ones who could tell if it was really Claiomh, and I'm the only one who can explain this situation to everyone. Plus..." He sighed deeply. "Like I said, Winona's not stupid. There's no outward reason she would have to attack Claiomh, and she knows that Lek's not the only one who would have a problem with it."

"Krylancelo," Irgitte piped up. "I don't know anything about this Claiomh person... That's a girl's name, right?"

"Yeah." Orphen nodded. "She's this kid I'm looking after."

"Is that all it is?"

"Pretty much... But we've been traveling together for half a year or so now. She's... Well, she's someone you don't really get tired of talking to. I can introduce her to you later."

"I see," Irgitte said, muttering some other things. "Lot going on..." was all

Orphen caught.

“Well, let me start explaining again,” Orphen began slowly. “Like I said earlier, what we need is—”

“No, wait a second,” Seek Marrisk interjected. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground, cradling his sheathed saber. “To tell the truth, I didn’t really absorb what you said earlier. What was it you said those dwarves were?”

“Ghosts.”

“Are you insane?”

“Well, it’s nothing spiritual or anything like that. The thing that would make the most sense is if it was some sort of sorcerous effect,” Orphen explained.

“But it’s not sorcery, is it?” Seek asked, unsatisfied. “From your tone, at least.”

“Well, there’s no caster, so I don’t think we can call it sorcery.”

“I see.” Seek nodded, now sounding satisfied. “You can’t call it sorcery if it isn’t under someone’s control. I understand that logic. But there’s a contradiction. Without a caster, how can sorcery exist?”

“There’s a possibility. I think it’s an extremely unique type of sorcery. We—” Orphen indicated Leticia, who still looked completely lost. “We call it the Childman Network.”



“Krylancelo...?” Leticia said in surprise.

Orphen used his eyes to tell her that he knew what she was about to say. He understood that this wasn’t something they were supposed to talk about. But if everyone wasn’t on the same page about this phenomenon, they wouldn’t be able to do anything about the situation they found themselves in.

“Well, the Childman Network is just what we call it. It’s actually just supposed to be the Network. I don’t know the specifics about how it works, but—” Orphen explained to Seek, feeling oddly like he was giving a presentation in class. Technically, he was explaining it to the other sorcerers as well, but it felt easiest for him to talk directly to Seek. “In any case, someone making use of the Network can call up information from the past into the present. By negating the range of the information, basically. Someone can use the Network to gain information or contact someone, for example. From what I hear, it’s not omnipotent though, and it can only be operated under some severe limitations.”

“And Childman used this Network?”

“Right. He called it highly advanced white sorcery, but he never explained to me how he was able to make use of it.”

“Hmm,” Seek mused, exactly like a teacher about to grade a student’s presentation. “Well, alright. Thinking about it more won’t make any of this make sense, I suppose. So, how is that related to the army of dwarves from before?”

“Since the Network operates without a caster to control it, it has discrepancies. Perpetual ones, at that.”

“Is this Network dangerous?”

“It can be. Trying to correct these discrepancies is particularly dangerous.”

“Please explain.”

“Master called phenomena like this ‘ghosts.’ It’s a localized malfunction of the Network—not that it can really function properly in the first place without anyone regulating it, mind you. In any case, this phenomenon is caused by a

forced manifestation of information from the past.”

“Information from the past?” Irgitte repeated.

It was Leticia who answered her. “Meaning...those dwarves are just resurrected information? But how do you know about this, Krylancelo?”

“I had a mission to destroy one of these ghost phenomena once. Well, really it was supposed to be Heartia’s job...”

He was mostly lying, but there was no point in telling the truth and he wanted to avoid the minutes of lecturing from Leticia he’d receive for doing so. He was in a hurry right now.

“Oh!” Irgitte suddenly exclaimed, recalling something. “It was a long time ago, but I remember Miss—oh, umm, Instructor Maria Huwon making a fuss about something like that.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Miss Maria showed up as backup for some reason at the time...” He still didn’t know why she had, though. “Ghost phenomena always occur around a core of some sort. To summarize, the whole phenomenon will be destroyed if you can destroy that core. Until then, the ghosts will be endlessly generated inside the area where the core exists from the consciousnesses of the people inside the area. The ghosts will disappear if you apply a sufficiently large shock to them, but the best way to handle them is to simply not let them manifest. You have to quickly find the core while doing your best not to focus on the past. It should be at the center of the phenomenon.”

“And that’s dangerous?” Seek reminded him.

“That’s right.” Orphen nodded. “The ghosts have physical form. They’re not just illusions or phantasms. They’re basically the same as if they were real. Meaning that army from before has enough influence to really kill people.”

“Well, if you ask me...” Kakorkist had been drawing something on the ground like he was bored until now, but he suddenly stood and took a pose like he intended to wrap the conversation up himself. “Look at all the sorcerers we have here. If that army’s such a problem, why don’t we just blow them all away?”

“We can’t do that. There’s two flesh-and-blood dwarves with them now.” Orphen tilted his head when he remembered Volkan and Dortin. “Come to think of it, what’s that about? They seemed out of their minds too.”

“It’s Princess Silvermoon,” Leticia said softly. She slowly stood like she was tired of sitting and leaned on a nearby rock instead.

“Oh yeah, they were yelling something about that, weren’t they?” Orphen recalled.

Leticia nodded. “You said people are influenced by the location, right? That’s exactly what’s going on. Princess Silvermoon is supposedly a real figure from a thousand years ago...”

“A thousand years?” Kakorkist looked up at the sky when he heard the incomprehensible number. “That’s, you know...way longer than I’ve lived, right?”

“I think that’s likely,” Irgitte told him coldly.

Undeterred, Kakorkist went on, “But you know, sweetheart, I believe that eternal love has existed since before humanity.”

“...I’ll shut him up, so continue your explanation, Leticia.” Irgitte slowly began to put Kakorkist into a joint lock.

“Thanks, but I don’t know all that much myself. As far as I recall, in the past when the dragons arrived on the continent, the indigenous dwarves were divided into two factions. One side wanted to welcome the newcomers to the continent and the other side wanted to drive them away. I think Princess Silvermoon was the name of the general who led the latter faction. She fought against the dragons until her death. And their final battlefield was somewhere around here.” Shrugging her small shoulders—no one was quite sure how her powerful arms fit into that tiny frame—she added, “But the time period being what it was, I’m not sure how much of that is truth and how much is legend.”

“Considering the dragons’ power, no matter how many dwarves they had fighting against them, they’d probably all be wiped out in an instant.”

Seek’s observation may have been pertinent, but it was also unrealistic. Then again, what was reality except for the unrealistic happening every day? So

Orphen thought as he said, “True, if they wanted to destroy something, it would be destroyed in an instant. The fact that it wasn’t means I guess they didn’t want to...”

Leticia nodded. “That’s true. The dragons must have felt guilty, so they didn’t want to solve the problem by completely wiping out the dwarves. We still don’t understand a lot about their code of ethics, but that’s all I can think of right now. Princess Silvermoon supposedly fought for decades. Dwarven weapons can’t kill dragons, of course, and the dragons didn’t have any reason to wipe them out, so the situation just went on and on like that for a long time. I think the end of the story was that Princess Silvermoon vowed to fight on eternally, became immortal, and has continued her final battle along with her army ever since then.”

“Story?”

“Well, it sounds like a fairytale or something, right? But the dwarves seem to believe it’s real.”

“And that’s what these ghosts are.” Orphen folded his arms, sighing weakly. “Why’d they go all nutty, though?”

“There are some people who say dwarves are a race of soldiers created by the dragons...but that contradicts known history. There’s a reason they say that, though. Their incredible durability and stamina... They have too many traits that just seem to fit for a race designed for combat.”

“What else do they have?”

“They can’t disobey their princess.”

“Wha?”

“She’s like a queen bee. From what I hear, female dwarves can, on rare occasion, be born as princesses. Other dwarves are absolutely obedient to them, so they form a sort of natural chain of command just by existing. If she tells them to die, they die, and if she tells them to turn to stone, they’ll literally turn to stone. They curl up and don’t move a muscle until they starve to death.”

“*That* seems made up,” Orphen said suspiciously. Still, he couldn’t help considering it when he recalled the expressions on Volkan’s and Dortin’s faces

earlier. "If those two were that obedient, I guess I can't rule it out."

"I didn't believe it myself until I saw it with my own eyes."

"Is this the time to be having such a carefree discussion about this?" Irgitte asked, having completed a complex joint lock move on Kakorkist.

Kakorkist just exclaimed emotionlessly, "Yow! That really hurts, sweetheart!" in a position that didn't seem possible for someone with a human skeletal structure.

Tossing Kakorkist aside, Irgitte said in a businesslike tone that made her seem quite capable at least when she was using it, "We've got pretty much all the info now, right? What do we do next?"

"Please give the rest of us directions, Master Seek." Orphen looked to the oldest sorcerer present for instruction. "There are too many adversaries. I've never heard of a ghost phenomenon on this scale before. I don't think any individual's power will be able to do much against it, so I believe it's important for us to act as a unit as well."

"Makes sense," Seek murmured, bringing his shaved head down before he stood. His voice was muffled. "I see... If we're up against an army, I suppose you could call this war, then."

"And so the tragedy begins anew." Kakorkist stood, clenching his fist.

"As far as I'm aware, no one is actually dying," Seek told him.

"Oh, then it's just a game. Woohoo! Fish in a barrel, everybody!"

Ignoring him, Seek went on, "The question is where that core is. I'd say the enemy commander, Princess Silvermoon, is most suspicious."

Orphen had an idea about that, but he decided not to voice it. There would be no point. It was true that Princess Silvermoon was the most likely suspect, after all.

While Orphen was thinking to himself, Seek was moving things along. "Let's split into teams."

"You want to split up?" Irgitte asked him.

Seek answered her unemotionally, without looking at her. “A squad is different than a group. If we split our roles properly, even individuals can act as a squad.”

“Ah! Then I want to be with Krylancelo—”

“That’s not bad. We can split into those from the Tower of Fangs and those from the School.”

Irgitte’s sunny expression suddenly darkened. She groaned, clearly displeased by this idea. “Does that mean Leticia will be on this team too...?”

“Do you have a complaint about that?” Leticia asked her with her eyes narrowed.

“No...” Irgitte responded sullenly. It wasn’t convincing.

Orphen noticed Seek sighing because he himself had sighed at the same time. Feeling a sort of kinship with the man, Orphen asked him, “Do you have a reason for splitting us that way?”

“Teamwork,” Seek said in a tone that made it sound like he didn’t believe for a second what he himself was saying. “Plus, I’ve put the three with the most precise, accurate, and powerful spells on your team. You’ll be our main fighting force. You’ll also be the bait.”

“What about your team?”

“It’s a little awkward saying this to you, Krylancelo.” Seek closed one eye and smiled for the first time. “But I’m training to become a Stabber.”



“To summarize what you’re saying, you want the Thirteen Apostles and the Tower to form an alliance without informing the Union of Lords. And fight against this ‘lord of the Imminent Domain’ or whatever, who...just to confirm, is one of those lords, correct?”

That would cause a war. A massive armed conflict the likes of which the continent hadn’t seen in the last forty years.

“This isn’t something a mere assistant professor can decide. What we’re doing now is akin to griping about our superiors at a bar. There’s nothing productive

about this meeting. If you want to have a serious discussion, you'll have to meet with the top brass at the Tower," Forte smoothly told Kurabe. Even while he said it, he thought the words were foolish, textbook, but if Kurabe was talking about real peril, it would be effective. Everyone just going by the book, without thinking.

But Kurabe didn't intend to back down. Without changing the expression on his face, he told Forte, "If we were starting a legitimate war, that might be true. But I have no intention of leaving a mark like that on history."

"Well, isn't that convenient for you."

"Spare me your sarcasm. If we go down in history as noble-killers, we'll put sorcerers right back into the position they were in two hundred years ago."

Meaning... Forte hit upon what Kurabe was saying. He became acutely aware of his brow furrowing. Current sorcerers liked to claim their history was one of persecution. One of war. But they were beginning to forget that they had another history—of assassination.

It was an unavoidable specialty of sorcerers. After all, what were sorcerers but human beings who inherently possessed more killing power than any weapon in existence?

Forte took a breath and then said, "Most people think assassination is just as detestable as war."

"You were the one who said the Tower's most powerful Sorcerous Stabber could stand up against the lord of the Imminent Domain."

"Krylancelo has been excommunicated from the Tower."

"Well, we'll take him, then."

"Even though you let him go previously?"

"The Tower's top brass are the ones who prevented him from being appointed the youngest ever member of the Thirteen Apostles. I'm from the Tower originally too, you know. You should understand why I don't care for the elders."

As they traded words back and forth, Forte watched calmly as Kurabe

gradually raised his voice. Then, seeming to realize he was being watched, Kurabe quickly regained his calm.

“We got a bit off topic. In any case, despite what you say, you have two extremely powerful sorcerers approaching the Imminent Domain. I have no interest in debating whether or not you are responsible for their movements. Such a debate would be pointless. I’ve also sent in my most skilled subordinates. If you can just prevent Damian Rue from accessing his Network, we’ll be able to kill their lord.”

“I doubt that,” Forte responded instantly.

“Why?”

“Because that plan ends with you alone not having to move a muscle.”

Kurabe’s face took on a crimson hue.

“And one more thing. There’s something bothering me.” Forte leaned over his desk before continuing, “I just can’t picture Instructor Maria Huwon willingly revealing information about the Network. Did you torture her?”

He waited a moment and then shook his head. “No. You couldn’t, could you? Kurabe Rashille, I trust her more than I do you. I trust her pride. Where did you get your information from?”

Kurabe didn’t answer him. He just glared back at Forte. There was none of the composure he’d displayed when they first met, though it wasn’t as if he was spluttering with panic either.

All there was in his eyes was a cold fury. Someone would probably glare like this if they were trying to curse a person to death—so Forte thought as he returned the man’s glare with a similar expression on his own face.

And, a few seconds later... Kurabe’s body melted away, fading into the air around him.

Did I really curse him?! Forte looked around the room, faintly smiling at the ridiculous thought he had had. He found no trace of the man. He was the only one standing here now.

Or so he thought, until he heard a voice.

“It’s tiring even conversing using a fake. No, that’s not accurate. I don’t exactly feel fatigue, after all.”

“Who are you?”

“You can guess, can’t you?”

As the voice whispered into his ear from nowhere, Forte concentrated every nerve in his body, attempting to locate its source. But the whispers didn’t seem to be coming from a particular direction, so it didn’t seem like someone was hiding in the room with him. He realized that with a chill.

Still, to draw the conversation on longer, he muttered, “So, what’s the reason for the elaborate trick?” The other person likely knew his aim, so he figured there was a chance they wouldn’t answer, but a response came quickly.

“Oh, I learned plenty by speaking with you. Especially since I’m not able to read the thoughts of someone like you directly. I believe you were telling the truth when you said you did not send your people eastward for any sort of reason... I wanted to confirm that.”

The voice continued on dispassionately. It was clearly different from Kurabe’s voice. Forte didn’t recognize it, but if he had to guess, it belonged to an older man. It had a bit of an affect to it too.

“The real Kurabe Rashille will be arriving tomorrow. He’ll go to the top brass of the Tower just as you suggested to discuss something much like this. That’s the natural thing to do, after all.”

Forte stayed silent.

“It will all be pointless if you’re gone, though. Just as you cannot kill me, I also lack the means to kill you...”

When he heard the voice say that, Forte dropped the spell he was composing. He had been planning on destroying the whole room if that was what he needed to do to escape, but his instincts were telling him it would be pointless. The owner of that voice wasn’t here. He was the only one here. All of a sudden, he became certain of that.

I’m talking to someone who doesn’t exist right now... He naturally realized

who exactly it was he was talking to.

While Forte was silent in his thoughts, the voice continued on: “The fewer people using the Network, the better. My lord’s power approaches perfection. And perfection will be necessary for our battle with the sanctuary.”

The conversation came to an end.

“The name is Damian Rue. It’s a pleasure to meet you... And farewell.”

Forte felt himself jump. He didn’t know what the voice had done, but before he had time to ponder it, he was falling from his chair into darkness as his body hit the floor.

Chapter V: If You're Looking for a Hopeless Bunch, You'll Find Them This Way

That was just too mean!

Majic fumed as he ran—he recalled his master's self-satisfied expression and the anger reignited inside him.

He could have been a little more anxious. No, he didn't have to be anxious, but he could have at least taken me seriously. Dammit, I'm sure the one who fell over was Claiomh!

He suddenly stopped, stopping his thoughts as well. A chill washed over him and Majic shuddered.

So... Claiomh died? From being shot?

What happened when you got shot...?

"There are generally three reasons humans die from external wounds."

He heard the voice from behind him. Majic turned and saw a man with sharp eyes—sharp, but also somehow languid—emerging from behind a rock.

"Master...?" he asked, unsure. "Y-You followed me? All the way here?"

But his master didn't answer him, continuing on instead.

"Either their nervous system is destroyed, their vascular system is destroyed, or their organs are destroyed. In any of these cases, they won't stay alive for long. People only live after being wounded when the wound isn't fatal. Let's say their nervous system is destroyed. In other words, the brain."

As Orphen indicated his head during his lecture, Majic found himself stepping back to gain some distance from him. Something felt off about him. He wasn't sure exactly what, though.

His master lowered his hand and sneered. "That's instantaneous. The moment the brain's destroyed, it's all over. Next, the vascular system. That'd be

the aorta or the heart. As blood rapidly leaves the body, blood pressure drops and they die of shock. Or it's a swift death due to lack of oxygen. Doesn't even take ten seconds. Even if you resuscitate someone from this state, there's a good chance there'll be lasting effects."

Majic was listening, but most of it wasn't sinking in. His suspicions were pricking at him like tiny needles. It was his master in front of him. He was sure of that. But something was wrong. There was nothing strange about his style of speech or mannerisms, but...

"Lastly, the organs. They'll suffer for a bit longer, but they'll still end up dead in the end. There's not much difference between the three, really. Either it's instant, or it takes a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes—"

"Are you stupid? There's a huge difference between instant and not." Winona emerged from behind the same rock and pressed her gun to his master's temple. The gun kicked and Orphen's skull warped, half of his face crumbling apart—at least, that was the afterimage Majic was left with when his master vanished into thin air.

"Huh...?" he murmured. But no one explained it to him.

Winona then pointed her gun his way. "Even at this distance..." She was about three meters from him. In the time it took Majic to measure the span between them with his eyes, the black hole at the tip of her gun had settled into place. The hole was entirely too round, hiding within it a small mass of harm even blacker than the opening. It was the same color as Winona's eyes. "I tend to hit pretty often."

"Yaaaaah!" This voice came from behind him as well—but since he'd turned when his master had appeared, it was coming from the opposite direction now.

Leaping over his head and stabbing her sharp sword right into Winona's face was Claiomh. In both hands, she was holding that...he'd forgotten the name of it, but the sword she'd gotten from that Death Instructor in Kimluck, and she was twisting it, pushing it deeper into Winona's face. Before the blade could twist too far, Winona vanished just like Orphen had.

Claiomh's feet finally reached the ground, and she must have lost her balance, because she went crashing face-first into the rock in front of her. Then Claiomh

disappeared too.

“What’s...going on?” Majic muttered, now alone.

The wind of the wastes blew shrilly as it hit the rocks nearby, but that wasn’t much of an answer. It was like a puppet show he’d stumbled on when he hadn’t been looking for one, but it was too incomprehensible. It had felt real, though.

“What is this? It’s so strange... It’s like...”

“Like everyone fits your personal interpretation of them too well? Like your impressions of people given life. They’re far from realistic, though.” This voice came from behind him as well, but Majic couldn’t bring himself to be surprised anymore.

He turned around and Winona was standing there.

Going on the defensive, he asked, “Are you—”

“I’m real.”

How was he supposed to take her at her word? He had no idea, but he still found himself believing her, maybe because she looked different than the one he’d seen before.

She was wearing body armor that covered half of her large frame, and the gun that had been pointed at him a moment ago was safely tucked into her holster. Majic recalled the large bag she’d been carrying and realized that the body armor she had on now would probably have taken up most of its space. It was made up of something like wire placed here and there over her clothes, combining toughness with ease of movement.

Wearing it, Winona looked the very picture of a stout warrior. Majic knew the armor couldn’t be so reliable that it even protected her from sorcery. Still, he was hesitant to test that belief, and it wasn’t because of any fear he had for her safety...

“Don’t move!” Majic yelled, willing his voice to somehow prevent her from taking a step toward him.

She stared back at him for a few moments before she said, “I told you I was the real thing.”

“That’s why I told you not to move.” Majic raised his arm and pointed it at her. He spread his palm out as wide as he could—a gesture that had no real meaning but that he prayed seemed threatening. “Don’t underestimate me just because I’m not Master. You shot Claiomh a little while ago, didn’t you?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Winona said swiftly. “You saw whatever that was before, didn’t you? I’m not gonna explain in detail, but it’s been happening in this area for a little while now. Where’s your proof what you saw before wasn’t the same kind of illusion you just witnessed?”

“Then where’s Claiomh? Master said she was supposed to be with you.”

“We split up so we could find Lottecia faster. The girl’s got that teensy dragon with her, so she’ll be fine.”

She’s the real thing, Majic thought when he heard that. It was a little belated, but he was sure of it now. She was real. She wasn’t a fake. And it wasn’t just because of her body armor that he knew. Was it because everything she was saying and doing went against what he wanted? It was probably something like that. Ignoring the guilt pricking at his heart, he acknowledged that fact. Not that he *wanted* her to have killed Claiomh, but... He just couldn’t bring himself to trust Winona.

Feeling his sweat drip down his forehead, Majic muttered, “Makes sense...”

“Right?”

“But why can’t I accept it?”

“You’re just stubborn.”

“But...” Majic sighed sharply. He felt like the breath leaving his throat shook his whole body. *I can’t*. Those words went around and around in his head.

“I can’t. I can’t accept it until I know for sure that Claiomh’s safe. Okay? I won’t. Where’s Claiomh?”

Winona scrunched half of her face into a smile—a lively, athletic smile, with just a hint of bitterness, that a normal person would never be able to make. A smile that said even if everything was going your way, if you had luck on your side, there would still be things outside of your control.



“Ten out of ten, kid.”

“Huh?!” Was it just coincidence that she was echoing his master’s words? With a start, Majic watched Winona.

Winona didn’t let her smile fade. “But that just now brings it down to nine...maybe eight...”

She stepped forward as she lowered his score. His hand frozen, still outstretched, Majic realized this was something like a riddle. She was speaking with her actions. He had no way of beating her if he didn’t take the initiative with his sorcery. And as time passed, his chances at victory fell. That was what the lowering points meant.

He could simply cast a spell at her as she walked toward him. It would be easy to do. All he had to do was weave a composition and manifest it into reality. He had the power to control the process. He had the will to maintain that control. He recalled the words of his master.

“Your composition was flawless.” A flawless spell. Majic drew the blueprint in his mind onto space in front of him. There was still some distance between him and Winona. She couldn’t see his composition. Only other sorcerers could. She would be driven back without being able to perceive just how much power he was directing her way. There was no flaw in his reasoning.

“A caster always has to be aware of whether he’s in a situation that calls for a one or a nine on that power scale.” How effective would her armor be? He only had his imagination to help him judge that, but even if it helped in hand-to-hand combat, he couldn’t imagine it would do much against sorcery. There was no need to use his full power. As long as he hit her with a single precisely controlled blow, it would be his victory. He focused his mind, completing his composition, centered around his target...

Now! There was no problem with his timing either.

“I release thee—”

A moment later—his last moment, perhaps—Majic saw a fissure run through his composition. He lost his focus and it dispersed.

“You really think that much power is enough?” The whisper took away all the sound from the rest of the world, occupying his ear.

He saw a flash of Urbanrama’s townscape. Of the dragon he’d glimpsed there. A Red Dragon, he later learned. Someone he could never defeat, even with his sorcery. One of the invincible powers of the continent.

“Are you sure your power is enough?”

Master said so! He said my composition was flawless! As soon as he yelled that, the whisper fell silent. Almost too easily.

But by then, Winona was already right in front of his eyes. No, it was just a part of Winona. It was the tip of her fist. And it was about to touch his face.

Her fist was huge. Her blow smashed his face, pierced his skull, and flattened everything inside the bone container that made him who he was into shapeless flesh—

Majic went to sleep meaninglessly waving his hands, trying to put back together his shattered spell.



Winona patted her fist, looking down at the boy who had gone into a picture-perfect faint like some kind of comedy routine. She hadn’t actually hit him that hard—in fact, not even his nose was broken. He’d probably contributed more to his passing out than she had. He was twitching on the ground, a fearsome look on his face.

“Sheesh,” she muttered, exasperated. “What was that about? Feel like this kid should go home already.” She doubted anyone would argue with that, honestly. Not that it was her decision to make.

She looked up at the empty sky. “Well, guess I’ve met my quota now.” It felt stupid to request something from someone she couldn’t see, but she tried not to let it bother her. “Take him away, Damian.”

She watched the boy at her feet disappear and waited for herself to be transported next.



“Now then.” Orphen muttered the vague stock phrase as he stayed low in a dried-up river or otherwise long, narrow indentation in the ground. He poked his head up and glanced out, finding a large group far away in the distance. “We need to get their attention...”

“That’s definitely not normal.” Leticia already sounded fed up.

Irgitte’s voice alone had a cheerful tone. “Hey, Krylancelo, do you remember? How many years ago was it now? When we were doing mountain training—”

“Oh yeah, it was this same group back then, wasn’t it?” He did remember. “I feel like I still have the scar...”

“Aww, really? Why’d you get hurt back then, anyway?”

“Well, as I recall, I had to get in between you two when you tried to fight each other with your survival knives,” he told her with narrowed eyes, but Irgitte didn’t seem to even be listening. Even Leticia averted her eyes, looking off in a random direction.

Irgitte clasped her hands in front of her face, looking up at Orphen with big, sparkling eyes. “Unfortunately, we weren’t alone together, but that’s still a very fond memory of mine.”

“My fourteen stitches?”

“You should have just healed it with sorcery, huh?”

“I had to sew myself up because the wound wouldn’t close with sorcery.” Rubbing his back, where the pain from his memories was reviving in his mind, Orphen sighed. “Now then...” He repeated the same vague stock phrase.

Hiding in the depression in the ground, he looked over at the two women and said, “Our job is to attack and divert their attention. We’ll come at them head-on and get them to focus on us. Then we wait for Seek and Kakorkist to destroy the core.”

“That’s awfully simple.”

Leticia didn’t seem fully satisfied, but this was just how most plans were. At least, that’s what Orphen thought.

He poked his head up from the depression. The enemy army—was that what

he should call it?—that group of Princess Silvermoon and the dwarves hadn't been that difficult to find. They were about a hundred meters away, having some sort of heated debate or discussion. Every so often, two dwarves would drag another dwarf behind a nearby rock, but he wasn't sure what the purpose of that was.

Among the group, he spotted two dwarves dressed differently from the rest of the bunch. They were completely incorporated into the army, gazing at the princess with the same feverish devotion as all the other dwarves. Even seeing it in person, Orphen was having a hard time believing it. "I dunno about this..." He groaned deep in his throat.

It was a completely unrealistic scene. There would never be such a large group of dwarves together outside of their own territory in the first place. It wasn't like they were restricted from leaving or anything, but it didn't seem to do any good for furthering dwarf/human relations either. The two societies had barely any interaction, really. There was only some trade between very small portions of each.

"What do we do?" Irgitte asked, pushing Leticia aside to get closer to Orphen.

Watching his shoved-aside sister clench her fist with a sunny smile on her face, Orphen turned his gaze back to the dwarves and answered, "There's probably no point in a complicated strategy. We're up against ghosts, after all. Destroying them all should be good enough. If we get the chance, we should attack Princess Silvermoon too."

"Right." The response came from Leticia for some reason. She was in the spot where Irgitte had been a split second ago, and Irgitte was a little ways away, upside down on the ground.

Not particularly surprised by this, Orphen continued, "What you need when fighting ghosts is a strong will. You need to truly believe that what you're up against is ghosts. Don't dismiss them as superstition..."

"I see." This time, Irgitte responded. He'd looked away again, and when he'd looked back, she had replaced his sister. Leticia was just to the side of her, Irgitte's elbow in her face.

Orphen closed his eyes, trying to maintain his equilibrium. He went on, "You'll

hesitate if you start to think of them as spirit forms or souls, something like that. Be sure in your belief that things like that don't exist in this world. Don't feel any pity for them. That'll only be dangerous for you."

"Got it," said Leticia. She was stepping on Irgitte, who was flailing her arms underneath her.

Orphen slowly sighed. "Listen..." He put a hand to his head and asked, "Why can't you just try a tiny bit to get along, at least on the surface?"

"Hey, you kinda sounded like the old Krylancelo there!"

"That's not the point!" Orphen pressed closer, hands shaking. He felt a strange sensation under his shoe, like he'd stepped on a rotten vegetable. He looked down, and Irgitte had escaped from under Leticia's foot only to end up under Orphen's boot this time. "Oh."

"How could youuu?!" Irgitte leaped up, crying. "Terrible! Terrible! You're too terrible! Is that how it is?! Is it?! I knew you'd side with the sister-in-law!"

"What are you talking about?!" Orphen shouted. "Argh... Come on, I'm not gonna tell you to be friends with each other at this point, but can we just do this without the two of you fighting?!"

"No way."

"No way, no way."

"What? Why do you get one more? No way, no way, no way."

"Obviously because I'm putting up with more than you! Don't copy me! No way, no way, no way, no way—"

"Gaaaaah!" Orphen got between the two of them and raised his voice even more. "Why are you two on such bad terms?!"

"Are we really?"

"I think today is one of our better days."

"No... Uhh... Oh, whatever." At their simultaneous response, Orphen backed up from the two of them and shook his head. A feeling of despair was sneaking up on him. He wouldn't be able to rely on these two for anything.

That Seek guy better not have put these groups together just 'cause he wanted to get rid of Irgitte. He couldn't deny the possibility. He definitely couldn't.

Doing his best to refocus, Orphen turned around. He was starting to feel like it was pointless, but he couldn't bring himself to give up yet. At the very least, if he didn't manage to wrangle these two into somehow behaving, he would be stuck holding that entire army back himself, and he didn't think he could do that.

"In any case, would the two of you—" he started to say, when he noticed that they weren't looking at him.

Their eyes were pointed at an upward angle, behind him and slightly to the side, surprised expressions on their faces.

"Ah."

At that voice, he followed their eyes...and found a dwarf wearing a green hat pointing a telescope their way.

"Enemy sighted! And since they're the enemy, they're the enemy!"

In the end... *Is there nothing that can be done?!* Orphen took off running as fast as he could, cursing as he went.



"Has it started?" Seek Marrisk murmured, watching from a distance.

Kakorkist nodded at his side. "Seems that way."

"Let's go, then."

"Yes, sir."

Walking off with his pupil, Seek thumbed the sheathed saber at his side. The feeling of metal. A sharp object harder than a human body that could destroy a human body. An ancient tool. It was useful, so it had never been left behind, buried in history. It would likely never be lost to time. It would change shape, change wielders, but it would continue to destroy human bodies in perpetuity.

Still, he had the time to turn around, at least. The dwarf army was on the

move. It was chasing after Irgitte and the other Tower sorcerers.

“I wonder how late they’ll be arriving.” It was a fairly meaningless question.

His student gave a casual guess. “Maybe a day later than us?”

“Sounds about right.” Seek agreed, finding no particular reason to argue.

“Well... There’s no reason for Irgitte to go to her death. The Imminent Domain, eh...?”

The two of them set off.



First, they had to get out of the pit. That was their only avenue of escape. There was no point in resisting head-on—it was obvious to Orphen that they would lose.

“What do we do?!”

Orphen answered Leticia’s quick question. “Get some distance from them and buy some time!”

He started to run through the pit so he could get back up on the ground before he heard a shout.

“Blue Shockwave!” A white spark shot out from Irgitte’s fingertips after her shout and crashed into the rim of the pit. The explosion shot dirt into the air, which obscured their vision for a second, but when it cleared, he could see a gentle slope up out of the pit carved out of the earth.

Irgitte lowered her arm and said simply, “It’ll be faster to climb up here.”

“Guess so,” Orphen conceded and pointed himself in that direction. The sand was still smoldering, but sorcerous heat dissipated quickly.

The scout dwarf was already gone. Orphen had no idea if he’d run back to the main force or if he’d disappeared like you might expect a ghost to. Both seemed equally likely.

“Anyway, we’ll run and get them to stretch out their forces.”

“Stretch out?” Irgitte asked as they ran, side by side.

“We want to try to get their army to form a line,” Orphen explained. “That’ll

thin their numbers throughout and make it easier for Seek to break through their ranks.”

“I wonder if it’ll work,” Leticia murmured behind them. It seemed a more general worry than simply not trusting the plan. She was probably unsure if she could believe in Seek from the Thirteen Apostles, but didn’t want to say so directly in front of Irgitte.

Orphen didn’t answer her, but he was pretty confident in his plan. He couldn’t imagine the dwarves could run faster than them. They had neither the sprinting power nor the stamina to keep up.

He took a look over his shoulder.

A huge mass of dwarves was right on their tail.

“Whaaaaa?!”

“Yeah, I thought you might not have noticed,” Leticia said tiredly.

Orphen sped up, though he quickly realized the dwarves were only gaining on them despite that. “Why are they so fast?!” he screamed.

“I don’t know! They were probably ordered to run fast, right?”

“That’s stupid!” He was about to object when he heard the loud voice of a girl coming from behind the dwarves.

“All troops, charge! As quick as the wind! Pursue the enemy army!”

“Go! And since we’re going, go super fast!”

They seemed to speed up even more after that.

Shuddering, Orphen muttered, “If they can do this, they probably put up a pretty good fight against the dragons, don’t you think?”

Leticia and Irgitte just ran silently, apparently not having any particular objections. One of them asked, “What do we do?” though he wasn’t sure which.

At this rate, they would catch up to them in no time. He was sure about that. They couldn’t just keep running like this. So they had to change tacks right away—but it wasn’t like they had many options.

So he voiced the best one he could think of.

“We’ll split up!”

“What’s the point? They’ll just split up too and keep chasing us!”

“Well, there’s only one princess, right?!” When he said that, the other two seemed to catch on quickly. He swiftly pointed to his right and said, “I’ll go this way—”

“Then I’ll come with.”

“No, I will.”

The two of them replied at the same time, so Orphen glared at them to keep them in check.

He couldn’t put up with the two of them. He took their momentary silence as an opportunity and quickly told them, “Then you two go that way!” before rapidly switching directions and running off to his left.



Left alone with Irgitte when her brother suddenly disappeared, Leticia let out a short sound. It was almost no more than a sigh, but in her current situation, that sigh was more difficult labor than anything else. In any case, it was just a short sound. Nothing more.

“Urgh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, huh?!” Irgitte cried.

She was incredibly annoying, but nothing Leticia could say in response would shut her up. *What meaning are you reading into “Urgh,” anyway?!* she cursed internally. *It is what it sounds like!* Of course, Irgitte was probably shouting with furrowed brows precisely *because* it could be interpreted in no other way.

Because she couldn’t see Krylancelo anymore, Miss Maria Huwon’s worst student—as she’d often been called by students in other classes—started shouting, even more irritated, “Let me take this opportunity to make one thing clear, Leticia MacCready!”

“You don’t have to call me by my full name every time!”

“I’ll stop once you start calling me Irgitte Sweetheart! Listen, you’re too possessive, okay?! You’re way overprotective of your brother, who’s not even related to you by blood, and it’s super unhealthy! Do you understand that?!”

“I’m overprotective?! That boy wandered around on his own for five years! In that time, he proposed marriage to some farm girl, he babysat this weird, totally incompetent police woman, and he even got followed around by some oblivious librarian, and he didn’t seem too unhappy about it—”

“What the heck?! Were you stalking him or something?! That’s gross!”

“I was not! I didn’t know about any of it until recently! It wasn’t me that was following him, it was—”

It was probably less her training and more her instincts that made her aware of the dangerous presence behind her even while she was completely wrapped up in their conversation.

Leticia dodged. Her speed dropped a little, but right where her back had been a moment ago, a huge spear had thrust forward.

Even as she shuddered, a part of her that was completely calm told herself that the dwarves had caught up with them. They’d have to fight here.

She stopped, spun around, and got into a fighting stance. It was all one fluid movement. Next, she wove a composition and manifested it without hesitation. The most effective defense wasn’t to protect yourself forever. It was to protect yourself for just one moment and then to neutralize the enemy with one blow. She chanted in her mind and brought forth from her throat only the simple spell, “Light!”

She wasn’t even looking at her target. She figured they were right behind her, so there was no point in checking. After firing the spell, she looked back and saw just what she expected to: countless numbers of dwarves and a white vortex of light swallowing them all up. The explosion and resulting shock wave wiped out droves of the dwarves in pursuit of them.

In other words, it only wiped out a part of their forces.

The dwarves were practically limitless. The explosion had slowed their progress somewhat, but the dwarves following the eliminated section were still

bearing down on them relentlessly.

While she was composing another spell, a different voice sounded.

“Crimson Gust!” Irgitte, who had dodged the spear in the opposite direction, was casting a spell in a pose mimicking Leticia’s. Irgitte rained fireballs down on the dwarves, which exploded each time they hit. The blasts left scorch marks on the ground still spewing white flames, but no sign of the dwarves remained.

Of course, that was only a *part* of the dwarves’ forces, once again.

“My sorcery defeated more of them.” Irgitte raised her chin haughtily, taking a dig at Leticia.

That was the signal.

Leticia straightened her back deliberately, taking time to do it. She turned her focus not to her target, but to the woman looking conceitedly at her and shouted, “Chaos!”

Matter began to break down. There was a sound like space warping. An explosion expanded, destroying more dwarves who continued to rush them—and leaving a bigger scar in the earth than Irgitte had.

Leticia didn’t say anything.

Irgitte didn’t say anything to her either.

She just put both her hands up this time and shouted, “Green Detonation!” A shock wave.

“Lightning!” The crackle of electricity.

“Colorless Howl!” Turbulence.

“Severance!” Air bursting apart.

“Black Words!” A cold snap.

“Haaah!” They threw in some unarmed strikes here and there.

And...

“Waaaaait!”

Leticia finally returned to her senses when she heard that shout. She’d been

shooting off her sorcery while glaring at Irgitte this whole time.

She looked at the scene before her and the dwarf army was already gone. All that remained was burned earth and countless craters like someone had feverishly dug the whole area up. That and two scorched, half-buried dwarves.

It was one of the dwarves who had shouted. He drew his sword, his voice booming despite his ragged appearance.

“You two... I don’t know how to say this, but...you know...even if the hero of the people, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan may be a threat, you’re like... Aaargh! Too persistent, you thorough destroyers!”

“Please just tell us if you’re going to kill us... We’ll do our best to prepare ourselves...” The other one, in glasses, wept miserably.

Recalling something, Leticia clapped her hands together. In other words... “Oh! The brainwashing is gone.”

“Which means the princess didn’t come this way.” Irgitte nodded in agreement.

Escaping from the scorched earth, the dwarf raised a voice of complaint. “Isn’t there something you two could do before you analyze the situation?!”

“I wonder if Krylancelo’s alright...”

“Before worrying!”

“You’re more worried about something other than us, who suddenly found ourselves burned black before we knew what was happening?”

Leticia looked down at the two muttering dwarves and murmured, “Hmm...”

“For your irresponsible attitude, I seek self-reflection and death!”

“That’s impressive... How are they still alive after taking a matter destruction spell?”

“These two almost seem more monstrous than the ghosts.”

“Don’t be impressed in ways that are hard to appreciaate!”

For now, Leticia ignored the dwarf who was rolling around on the ground and wailing.

If what Krylancelo said was right, then... If the core of this ghost phenomenon was Princess Silvermoon...

The dwarves in this area might not have been destroyed by their sorcery. They might have just vanished because they got far enough away from the core. If that was the case, then... *Wouldn't Krylancelo be facing every one of them back the way he went?*

Leticia shot a look at Irgitte. She seemed to have come to the same conclusion. She was giving Leticia a harsh look without the other woman even having to say anything.

As Irgitte nodded, Leticia told her, "They're pursuing Krylancelo. If we chase after them, we'll be able to take the enemy from behind."

"You're right."

"Let's hurry. We're gonna have to catch up to something we couldn't outrun, after all."

"I know that!"

"Hey! You're running?!"

"Brother, there's no need to go chasing after vicious beasts like them, is there?"

Ignoring that last shout, Leticia clicked her heels just once to catch her breath and get the timing right, then ran off, raising a cry. Irgitte was right beside her.

As she listened to the jeers of the dwarf brothers behind her, she strained all her muscles to pick up speed.



He knew what he'd done didn't even qualify as a gamble; it was an act of sheer desperation.

That's probably what Heartia would say. Forte too. No, would everyone say it? Yeah, probably anybody would look at this and call it desperation.

Orphen looked back and shouted a spell as he took a breath. "I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!"

An explosion that warped the very air shook everything in his sight, stealing away the light.

But his vision quickly cleared and he could see a giant hole left in the ground of the wastes. Yet again, the dwarves crowded into the crater.

There's no point doing this. We have to destroy the core of the ghost phenomenon instead, Orphen thought, clicking his tongue. *Where's that princess?*

He strained his eyes. Beyond the clouds of sand and crowds of dwarves, he could see a silver suit of armor and a sword.

"Can I do this?" He wasn't sure, but he picked up a stone from the ground at his feet. Just attacking her normally wouldn't work, but he had an ace or two up his sleeve for neutralizing defenses.

"I leap over thee"—he held the rock out toward Princess Silvermoon and chanted—"Towering Spire!"

It was pseudo-teleportation. The stone in his hand vanished.

But it hadn't actually teleported. Instead, it traveled straight forward, colliding with all matter in front of it and piercing through it. It should have passed straight through the dwarves crowding defensively around the princess and delivered a destructive blow to its target.

However...

"Block it!"

He almost felt like he could hear a voice shout just before his sorcery activated.

No, he probably *had* heard it. He saw a dwarf in front of him stretch up, reaching his hands skyward.

There was a dry *whap* and the stone was suddenly in the dwarf's hands.

"...Huh?" Orphen stopped for a second, not understanding what had just happened. But if what his eyes had shown him wasn't a lie, then there was no room for interpretation of what had occurred.

They just...grabbed and stopped something that was pseudo-teleported?

It wasn't possible. The dwarf who'd stopped the stone disappeared, and the little rock tumbled to the ground, powerless now. His eyes were glued to it, so when his body moved, it was by instinct, not logic.

"All troops, chaaarge!"

"Since we're charging, press forward and kill all before us!"

As the dwarves all yelled in unison, Orphen spun around and ran off at full speed.

You've gotta be kidding me! Even if it was a joke, it was hard to believe. Orphen shook his head as he ran. *I don't care if they follow every order, that doesn't make any sense!*

Even if he ran, she could order them to catch up to him and they would. There was no way he could outrun them. And if he stood his ground and tried to turn the tables, his attacks wouldn't be effective.

Do her words just become reality? No... That can't be! It's not possible, Orphen told himself. *There's no way she could do that without some kind of supernatural power. Is it because they were reconstructed by the Network as ghosts? Their abilities became somehow exaggerated in this form?*

He couldn't imagine *that* was possible either, though. At least, not unless the Network was somehow manifesting these ghosts with ill intent.

Huh...? Hitting upon that thought, Orphen considered it. *What if this ghost phenomenon wasn't simply manifested by an error in the Network, but—*

He looked back over his shoulder. *If someone created this specifically to cause us harm, then...* Orphen stopped.

The dwarves were gone. Behind him was nothing but a deserted wasteland, Orphen alone standing in it.

"The only person who could do that is..." Right as he muttered that...

Orphen sensed something behind him and spun around. He drew his dagger and blocked a blow from that something at the same time.

The sound of clashing metal rang out. Princess Silvermoon was right in front of him as he deflected the blow from her sword with his dagger. Orphen leaped back, caught his breath, and adjusted his stance. Princess Silvermoon stood alone before him, moving so fluidly it was hard to believe she was wearing that heavy suit of armor. Her sword was pointed straight at him, her glass-like blonde hair flowing in the wind like water.

With no sound, the sword danced out at him!

This time, Orphen dodged it instead of blocking, leaping even farther back, but he couldn't gain any distance from his foe. As the blade lashed out at him again and again, he almost started to get used to the chills running up his back before an attack at a completely different speed came for him. He dodged to the side this time, but even if he could close the distance between him and his opponent, he had no way to attack. He didn't have the time to cast a spell and since his adversary was wearing such heavy armor, it was going to be difficult to get a good hit in with only his dagger.

Sword-fighting... Orphen smiled wryly when he suddenly recalled Lottecia's words. *A struggle for position between two people, eh? For competitive sword-fighting, maybe... But if you're going for a surprise attack, you can also do this!*

He threw his dagger at Princess Silvermoon without aiming anywhere in particular. The princess's reflexes were quick. She probably intended to bat the dagger away and then lunge for him again, but as soon as Orphen saw her sword move toward his dagger, he shouted, "I brandish thee, Blade of Demons!"



I
BRANDISH
THEE,
BLADE
OF
DEMONS
!



All of a sudden, there was a weight in his hand, as if he were brandishing a blade. Lifting up his invisible sword, Orphen aimed for his dagger and swung it down—if he couldn't see the princess's movements, then he just had to create a path that her sword would surely follow. Hence the dagger.

As the princess's sword struck at his dagger, he slashed at her with a sword made up of a sorcerous force field. He didn't need to use that much strength. There was an impact, and Princess Silvermoon's sword snapped in half.

The princess looked at him in disbelief, and Orphen stared straight back at her. The weight of the sword vanished from his hands as he held them up and shouted, "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

A sorcerous explosion wiped Princess Silvermoon from existence.

The wastes went quiet, only the lingering winds still echoing around him.

Orphen surveyed his surroundings and picked up the dagger at his feet.

"Is it...over?" But a moment later...

The dagger fell as Orphen's right arm went slack. He looked down and found a sharp blade piercing through his shoulder. He grit his teeth so he wouldn't cry out from the pain and ripped it out, leaping away. He didn't care which direction. It didn't matter as long as he avoided the next blow, which was sure to be fatal.

As he tumbled away from the danger, he looked up and saw Princess Silvermoon. She stood there with an undamaged sword, as if she'd just appeared there a moment before. No, that had to be exactly what had happened. Ghosts always appeared from outside of your field of view. Orphen groaned, putting a hand to his bleeding shoulder. He probably wouldn't be able to move his arm unless he healed it with sorcery. No, the first thing he needed to consider was...

Princess Silvermoon...isn't the core?

That would mean that something else had to be the core of the ghosts. And that fighting Princess Silvermoon was pointless.

What is it...? But have there been any other ghost phenomena that seem like

the core? Orphen asked himself as he dodged Princess Silvermoon's next swipe.

Every person he'd met had left his sight at some point. Meaning there was a possibility each and every person he'd met had been ghosts. That went for his sister and Irgitte as well as Claiomh and Majic. Even Seek and Kakorkist could have been ghosts manifested by Irgitte. It was also possible that he hadn't even met the core yet.

"Ghosts occur as a result of a malfunction within the Network—they're the Network's answer to an unconscious question asked by someone. Meaning since ghosts have manifested, the Network has contacted someone. If I can figure out who, I can figure out where the center of the ghosts is."

Dodging sharp thrusts and slashes with his whole body, Orphen muttered to himself, "*It was* strange from the beginning. For no one to have been contacted in such a huge ghost phenomenon..."

He bent back to dodge a thrust from head-on. He wanted to jump back, but his dead arm was too big a burden on him. It was throwing off his balance.

"But what if this whole thing is intentional? Then they would never present the core right in front of me."

"Who are you talking to?!" Princess Silvermoon yelled in irritation.

Grateful that her attacks had stopped for at least that one moment, Orphen gained back some distance from her.

He ignored her question and kept talking to himself. "But what's their aim? If they just wanted to kill me, then they could have just let that dwarf army keep chasing me. Why did their method of attack change?"

"You dare question the princess's tactics, giant? Arrogant!"

The princess slashed at him, her pale skin flushed red. It was getting harder and harder to move, but Orphen barely managed to avoid the path of her blade.

"They want to drive me into a corner...but not kill me. Is that it?"

"We kill all those who stand before our army! There is no other choice! Ridiculous!"

“Could you shut up?” Orphen made up his mind and pressed forward, into the reach of her sword, the reach of her arm, even. When he was close enough to touch her, the princess’s expression changed.

He moved past her, slamming his heel into her calf as he went. As she fell with a yelp, Orphen kicked at her heart, ignoring the thick armor protecting it. There was steel in his boots, and as he impacted her, a strange sound came from Princess Silvermoon’s mouth as the air left her lungs—and in the next second, she was gone.

For now, Orphen healed the wound on his shoulder with sorcery and picked up his dagger for real this time. He surveyed his surroundings carefully. Even if he told himself he was fighting a ghost, a meaningless manifestation of information, it still left a bad taste in his mouth. But if he was hung up on that discomfort, he’d never be able to stand up against a ghost phenomenon. He knew that, but...

Still, he was hesitant to throw his dagger as soon as he sensed someone’s presence. The dagger showed no such hesitation, however, and flew straight toward its target, stabbing into it.

Princess Silvermoon, standing a few meters away, spoke in a clear voice despite the dagger in her throat. “You fool... You side with them, giants?!”

Orphen listened to her words, still in the position he’d thrown the dagger from. He didn’t feel like responding.

The princess tried to remove the dagger from her throat, but she couldn’t touch it, her hands already fading. Clawing futilely at it, her voice nevertheless continued. “It’s foolish to believe in them! They destroyed their whole world just to obtain power!”

Her voice trembled with pain and sadness. “And that’s not all... Why do you not understand that they won’t be satisfied with only that?! This is nothing but a temporary peace. Why can you not see that the destruction waiting in the future will far surpass today’s death?!”

Half-disappeared, Princess Silvermoon’s skin was now more blue than white. She seemed to be in pain, either from disappearing, or from the dagger in her throat, and though she was just a fabricated imitation of the dwarven Princess

Silvermoon that had once existed in the past, Orphen still averted his eyes from her suffering.

In fact, the whole dwarven army was the same. They were nothing more than fabricated personalities assailing reality.

The princess, just one actor in the cast, continued her prolonged final moments. “You must think me an insane princess, giant! And maybe I am insane. But it was not war that drove me to madness! It was not our inevitable defeat! Listen to me. Princesses can see what will occur in the future. The hideous destruction that awaits. It approaches now! And if it means we may avoid it, the princess shall live for eternity even as she laments her existence...”

Unable to stand any more, Orphen groaned. “I’ve already heard more than enough about despair.”

The dagger fell from the princess’s body, now fully vanished.

Though there was no one around him, Orphen raised his head and spat, “Don’t try to trick me. I’m not talking to you, Princess Silvermoon. I’m talking to the guy with the sneer on his face pretending to be you.”

A response came quickly: “I’m not smiling.”

The owner of the voice apparently didn’t intend to hide. He showed himself right away.

Fabricated personalities assailing reality, eh...? Orphen repeated his own previous thought with a sigh.

Turning to the white sorcerer—Damian Rue—he muttered, “Are you trying to convince me that the dragons are a threat?”

Damian stated simply, “Those were apparently the words Princess Silvermoon truly left behind when she died. I’m very curious what the giants she feared were. During the time when she lived, there were of course no humans on this continent... At least, that is what we believe to be true. When you recreate the past using the Network, you find all sorts of little inconsistencies like this. I like to show them to people every so often.”

“And that’s where the legend of Princess Silvermoon comes from?”

Orphen smiled wryly when he remembered what Volkan and Dortin had told him—that Princess Silvermoon still lived to this day. Had this happened several times before now?

Damian showed no mirth in response. Instead, there was exasperation in his voice, though Orphen didn't know what it was he was exasperated at. "There may be no meaning in it at all. No significant meaning anyway. It doesn't really matter whether humans came to this continent a thousand years ago or three hundred. In either case, we still only have the history that the Celestials provided us with..."

"So you set up this whole chaotic mess just to tell me these things?"

"No. I just fulfilled my regular duty. There were adversaries to eliminate in our domain and Colgon couldn't apprehend them. I'm rather limited in my capabilities when it comes to eliminating humans, you see. It was going rather well before your intrusion. I had to call it off because of you."

"Adversaries to eliminate?"

"...Never you mind that. There are other things I can still do. And I made use of this little accident as well."

There were plenty of things that Orphen should have asked him, but before he could voice one of them, Damian vanished from sight.

"Krylancelooo!"

"Krylancelo!"

At the same time, he heard two voices calling him from afar.



In the middle of the wasteland, Lottecia came across something.

All she was thinking was that she should probably go back to change soon. She was idly wondering if she'd be able to wipe herself down, since they had a limited amount of water. She figured if she only used a little, the black sorcerer wouldn't mind too much. She knew that he was extraordinarily weak to Claiomh's demands, so if the two of them asked together, she would surely be allowed.

She was walking along with her wooden sword in hand when she realized she'd gone a lot farther than she'd meant to.

"Oh..." she let slip even though she knew there was no one around. "I have to get back..."

That was when she ran into it. She turned around to head back and noticed a man standing at a slight distance from her. Lottecia gasped and put her guard up. She dropped her hips and raised her sword, not breathing. He was just a few meters away from her. It was her husband—her former husband.

"Colgon...?"

"It's meaningless. Lower your sword. I'm not there," the man murmured with his usual gloomy expression, a black cloak covering his body. His voice was quiet and dark; it was a hoarse, cold voice, like a ghost story in the dark...

"What are you talking about?" Lottecia asked him, still holding her sword.

"I'm not there," Colgon repeated without budging. "You're...heading to our lord? With Krylancelo..."

"Don't be stupid," she spat. "You're where that lord of yours or whatever is, right? That's why I'm going. And when I find you, I'm going to—"

"I'm not with my lord right now. I'm...somewhere else. I made a slight miscalculation. But that slight miscalculation may grossly upset the balance of things..."

For the first time, he made a slight gesture. He slowly gave a tiny shake of his head. It was then that Lottecia realized that until that point, not even his lips had moved in the slightest.

"I'm speaking to you through a...chink in the Network malfunction they're intentionally causing. The ghost phenomenon. No one, including my lord, should be able to listen in on this."

An illusion? That was all she could imagine he was. Of course, Colgon would never explain it to her.

He went on, "You can't. Don't go. You don't understand yourself."

"I understand enough. I'm going to kill you," she told him bluntly. She glared

hatefully at the man who never showed any sign of agitation and stepped forward. She didn't care if he was an illusion. All she knew was that she had to attack. But her feet stopped at Colgon's next words.

His voice was still hoarse, but there was a little more strength behind it now as he said, "Then...do not let go of the magic sword for even an instant. Rely on Krylancelo. If he knows I can't harm you, my lord will try to use you. Protect yourself!"

"What are you...saying?" Lottecia murmured, confused. "What are you saying, when you tried to kill me?!"

He didn't answer her. He just lowered his gaze, though she had no idea what he was trying to hide. "I can't speak for long. I'm running out of time..."

"Don't you run away!" she screamed and leaped for him. Her wooden sword flashed.

The arc of her practice sword cut through the space where the man had been standing. Had he still been there, it would have slashed right through his skull.

She didn't know if it was because of her sword swing, but in the next instant, Colgon was gone.

As the wind blew through the wastes, Lottecia stayed frozen after swinging her sword. For a long, long time, she didn't move.

Epilogue

Claiomh slowly opened her eyes. She wondered if she should be surprised that the wasteland she last remembered seeing was no longer before her—she questioned herself and found that, for whatever reason, she wasn't. The trace of exhaustion she still felt upon waking must have been because of how pampered she'd been while sleeping, she reasoned. It was only natural that it would be hard to shake off your drowsiness in a bed as luxurious as this.

"Hmm..." She raised her head suspiciously. She was definitely in a bed. And one with extraordinarily soft cushions—so soft, in fact, that when she stuck her elbow into them to lift herself up, she just ended up buried in them, unable to extricate herself. Fluttering lace. Countless curtains forming a canopy around her. Also fluttering lace. The room was extremely large. Since it had nothing but a bed in it, was it a bedroom? Maybe a sickroom? It seemed ridiculous to her to put a sick person in a bed like this, though.

The fact that there was a window gave her a little peace of mind. She could see outside, so it wasn't like she was being confined. At least...she didn't think so.

Doesn't look like it's the first floor, she thought, looking out at the branches of the big tree she could see through the window. Anyone would think they could climb down that in a pinch to get out, so they wouldn't keep prisoners in this room, right?

She slipped out of the bed and found that she was wearing her usual shirt and jeans. Her sneakers also sat beside the bed, the dirt on them not even cleaned off. It didn't fit the feel of the room at all, she grumbled to no one in particular. It wasn't that she didn't like the outfit, she just felt like there was a time and place for these things.

Isn't that right... Wait. She turned like she always did and then stopped, looking around her blankly. Leki wasn't there.

What should she do, she wondered. But she couldn't come up with anything,

so she just sighed. There was nothing she *could* do. There were things that could be immediately solved upon sleeping and waking, and there were things that couldn't.

If someone walks in right now and goes, "You're awake, I see," they're definitely a villain, right? I mean, that'd be fine with me if they explained what was going on... What exactly happened to me anyway?

She tried to remember and ended up leaning her whole body to the side in puzzlement.

She remembered going to look for Lottecia, but her recollections suddenly cut off there.

She didn't think more thinking would lead her to the answers she sought.

And just then...

"You're awake, I see."

The door opened and someone entered. Claiomh looked up at him.

They had a conversation that lasted a few minutes.

He was the lord of this region.

A worshipper of the Demon King.

He called himself Almagest Betisletha.



"What's going on?!"

She was furious. Of course, that was only natural.

"Where did Seek go?! He acts so self-satisfied and important and then he just disappears like this?!"

"Well, I had a feeling this might happen," Orphen told the howling Irgitte. He'd thought it was a low chance, however.

"That what might happen, exactly?" she asked, and he smiled.

"He just did precisely what he said he would. He used us as bait. And he headed for his own destination."

“But why?!”

“Well, he called himself an assassin, didn’t he?” When he said that, Irgitte’s fury subsided somewhat. He could tell from the movement in her throat that she was swallowing.

“What were you guys doing here in the first place?” Orphen asked her.

“...Probably the same thing you are. Investigating the Imminent Domain.”

“I’m—” Leticia attempted to cut in, but Irgitte raised her voice even higher to drown her out.

“Just investigating! We would never do something as outdated as assassinate someone!”

Orphen thought on the two words in silence for a few moments. Investigate. Assassinate. Investigation with a side of assassination.

“In any case, they’re not here anymore and we know their destination is the Imminent Domain. And... Winona seems to be gone too. Along with Claiomh, Majic, and Lottecia.”

“They might have just gotten separated from us.”

“Not Winona. She’s supposed to be watching me. Well... She’s *supposed* to be guiding me...”

“Which means?”

“Maybe we’re close enough to the Imminent Domain that she doesn’t need to guide me anymore,” he told Leticia and looked around.

Nothing was different about the wasteland around them. There were no sorts of markers or any kind of path leading in one direction or another. Picturing a map of the continent might not actually help, but he figured they were far west of Urbanrama, somewhere near Fenrir’s Forest on the eastern side of the continent. The Imminent Domain...

What is it actually “imminent” to? He had an idea, but he’d never entertained the thought before. Well, now was as good a time as any, he supposed. Winona had already told him they were in conflict with the dragons. In that case, the Imminent Domain must have been where those who challenged the sanctuary

resided. The dragons' sanctuary.

"Let's suppose there's a reason for all this. Seek and Kakorkist. What reason would they have to leave us behind and head to the Imminent Domain first?"

"Well, if they were going to assassinate someone, they probably wouldn't want to do it with people they weren't familiar with. And I'm guessing that goes for Irgitte as much as it does us." Leticia answered calmly while Irgitte raised her voice again.

"I told you we weren't going to assassinate someone! This isn't the Dark Ages!" She pointed at herself. "We're not assassins! We're respectable citizens!"

Orphen didn't respond to her, instead going on, "Winona. Let's assume she took Claiomh and Majic and disappeared. Well, I'm just assuming because Claiomh was last seen with her. And Majic went off to look for Winona. What would the reason for that be?"

Leticia thought for quite a long time, and when she responded, she said exactly the same thing Orphen was thinking. "She either didn't want those two meeting her lord or whatever... Or she wanted them to meet him first. It's one of those two."

"Winona—or rather, her lord—wants something from me. They might be hostages. And even if there's another reason for it, I can't imagine it's anything good. Otherwise, she wouldn't have had to sneak them away in the middle of this chaos."

"...Krylancelo?"

"Dammit!" Orphen shouted, kicking the ground. "I underestimated them. At the very least, I thought they wouldn't be able to do anything careless to us. How could I be so naive?!"

"...Who's this 'Lottecia' you mentioned earlier? I don't think I've heard that name before."

"Yeah, you haven't met her, Tish. I don't know where to start... I can't exactly call her a stranger. She's Colgon's—" he started, before a black-haired girl suddenly appeared from behind a nearby rock.

Irgitte silently put her guard up.

Orphen shook his head. "It's fine, the ghost phenomenon is over. This is Lottecia."

"Orphen?" Lottecia approached, wooden sword in hand, wary of the two women she'd never seen before. She was slightly out of breath like she'd just been up to something strenuous. "Err, no one was where they were before, so I had to search for a while... What happened?"

"Claiomh and Majic have been taken. It was Winona." This time, he was sure of the words as he looked up at the sky. He was also sure that someone was listening. He took a breath, and by the time he'd let it out, he'd regained some of his calm, though all the blood that had rushed to his head didn't fade so quickly.

"You said you wanted to make a deal on even footing, asshole!" he spat.

The wastes were too big for his voice to echo, and the wind was too strong.

Afterword

First, let me apologize. My dear readers who were so looking forward to volume 16, I have no excuses as to the sudden postponement of this volume's publication. I may be a good-for-nothing author who can think of no better way to apologize than to bow my head, but I plan to put even more effort into my work from now on, so I hope that makes up for it at least somewhat.

It may be shameless of me to say so, but I hope you'll pick up the next volume too.

...Now, continuing in my usual way after such an apology seems imprudent, so I think I'll keep going like this, if you don't mind.

This was volume 16. I feel like I write the same thing in every afterword, but how did we even get to such a number? It feels even more like that this time since it was just a setup story before the true climax.

Since it was just setup, I thought I'd be able to write a lighter story, but it turned out a lot darker than I was expecting. It's not really like me, but I think it turned out alright. Or wait, is it like me? I'm not really sure what impression people have of me... Well, I'm sure no one really thinks about the author (lol).

Now then. I feel like every time I publish a book, the afterword gets turned into a section where the author's hobbies are exposed. Akita's current obsession is tracking down DVDs.

...Not like watching movies. I'm into finding the DVDs. When I find a store in town that sells them, I scour the shelves from end to end. I haven't seen that many movies, so there are more titles that I don't know than titles I do, but I pick up anything that catches my eye. And if the price is under 2,000 yen, I buy it!

Ugh... It feels like a pretty pointless hobby now that I'm writing about it. But I

enjoy it. 2,000 yen is a good price range for foreign flicks, and if they end up not being very good, you don't feel like you've wasted a ton of money. It's been a while since I've had a hobby that's not stressful whether you win or lose, so I'm having fun without getting too into it.

Sometimes I go home and watch what I buy right away, and sometimes it takes me a while. One of these days, I'll have a watch party for a bunch of them at once. And when I have time, I actually make the trek to the theater instead of just buying DVDs!

I've also been collecting more toys.

My laptop reached the end of its life, so I purchased a second generation mobile computer. I take it to a family restaurant first thing in the morning to write my manuscripts. But I don't want people to see what I'm doing, so I bought a privacy filter for it, too. I think it'd be nice if I could go on a trip and work at the same time at some point soon. I know nobody cares, but I wonder if there's some way I can get it not to beep when it starts up...

So... I'd like to take a longer trip about once a month this year. My goal is to see every prefecture by the time I'm thirty! Yeah... That's a weird way to spend your youth. It's good! Mhm.

Well, that's about that.

I hope I'll see you at the end of the next book too.

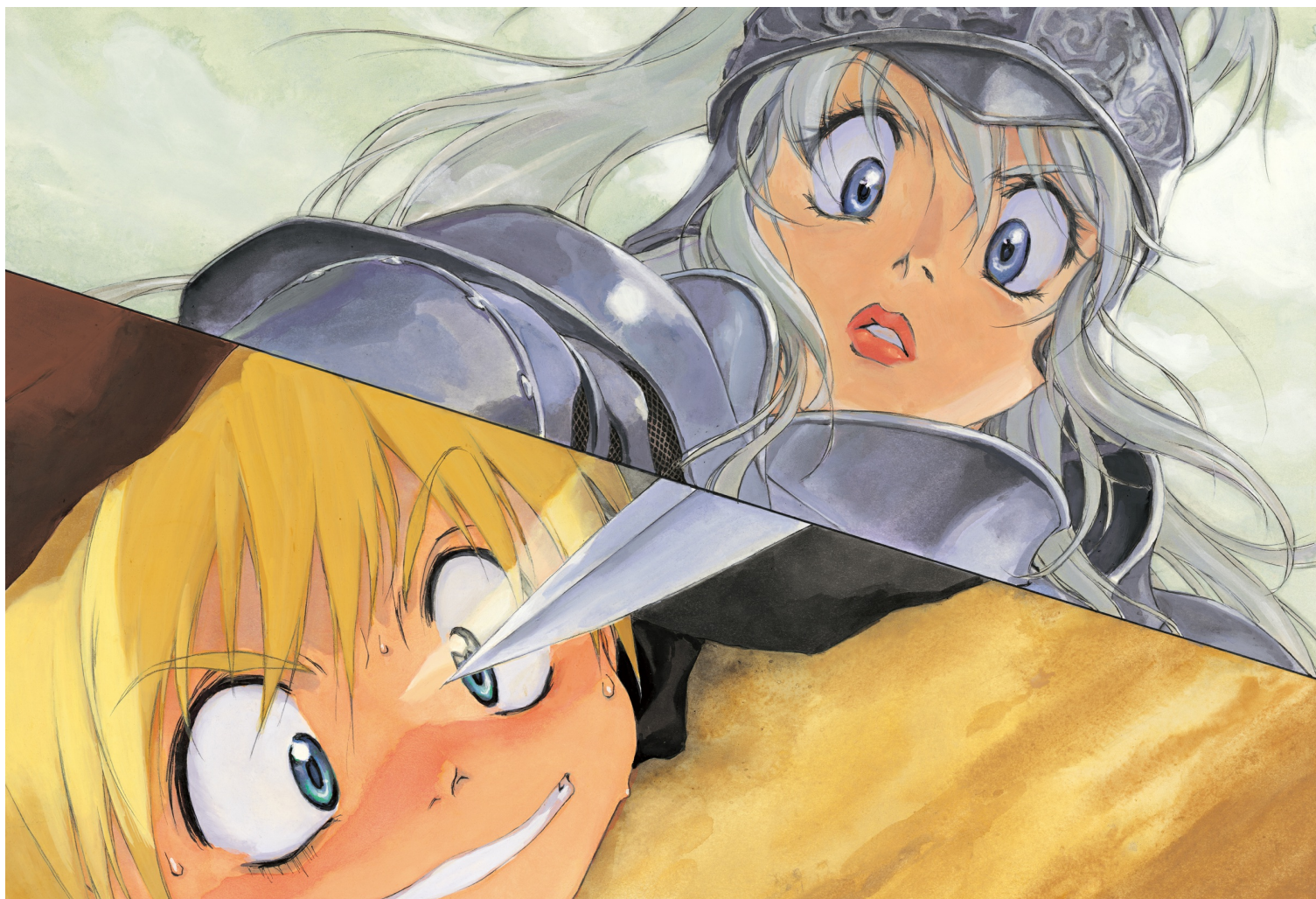
From Akita, writing this at the end of the century, to you, reading this in the new one.

See ya!

Yoshinobu Akita, December 2000











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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 16

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