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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

19. SWING WIDE IN MY SANCTUARY, GATES! (ACT 1)



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***“The whole
reason I have
you tied up is
because it
would piss me
off if you got
away.”***

**I'll keep my promise.
Even if there's some
mistake, you and I will
be the only ones to die.**





There was no human being who had ever fought off a Deep Dragon. Can I... do that? Orphen began to chant.

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Prologue

The Spirit Hall was said to be the closest entrance to the Misty Falls. That being said, flesh-and-blood humans couldn't use it, so in that sense it was nothing but the product of a haphazard addition to the royal castle—a worthless dead end. Still, the things that should have been sealed away in the Misty Falls could be heard whispering here. It was a sort of gathering place for those whispers, and the whispers were worth something.

How had it become that sort of place?

He didn't know the reason for it. In both relative and absolute terms, he had no idea where the Misty Falls was located. It might have been pointless to even think about it. When he'd been bestowed his current position, the people who had given him his authority told him about this, the Spirit Hall. They'd told him that this hall was the one clue to borrowing the power of the Misty Falls. He'd listened gratefully—listened, and obtained what he needed. By the time they realized their error, it was already too late. He'd obtained too much power.

He scowled, feeling cynical. There was no need for him to hide his emotions. He could do whatever he pleased here in the capital and no one would complain. He felt he had done the work to deserve that. Pluto the Demon rolled his thick shoulders. Each time he came to the Spirit Hall, he felt like something heavy settled upon them.

He was getting close to forty, his body transitioning from peak condition to something more mature. For fun, sometimes he went down to the School and kicked around the young sorcerers there with a smile on his face—he enjoyed seeing the hardworking students steal his techniques and grow stronger by the day.

Those students were full of talent. They were the youths who would inherit the future.

Do I have to let them die again? He sighed bitterly, still scowling.

Of course, this continent might not even have a future. It wasn't something anyone could count on.

The still darkness of the Spirit Hall was endlessly deep—it seemed to consume any attempt at illumination within it. The hall was underground. Beyond a door no one knew about in Essenschulbeitz Castle, down a long flight of stairs, and past a gauntlet of guards. Whether there was a point in coming here or not was another question. The residents of this hall operated on pure whim.

It stood to reason. It didn't make sense to expect people without meat or bones or brains or nerves to operate on the same logic humans did.

"However," he said, his voice low. "You were the ones who summoned me here tonight. I deserve more than silence, do I not?" Waves of air spread into the deserted hall.

The sorcerous light he'd produced succeeded in pushing back at least a bit of the overwhelming darkness of the hall. The hall wasn't that big, but because of the darkness, it seemed like space was compounding endlessly on itself.

Eventually, from the endless expanse...

"...The Imminent Domain...has been destroyed..."

...there came a soundless voice.

No, it wasn't from the endless expanse. The demon of the capital shook off that illusion. He couldn't allow himself to succumb to superstition. The being he was speaking with wasn't some demonic monster with limitless power; it was something much more concrete: a spirit. A white sorcerer who had discarded their body, transcending.

If he didn't have a clear understanding of who he was talking to, he wouldn't be able to make the right decisions. He reminded himself of that as he addressed the spirit once more.

"Of course. Seek Marrisk is my most talented fighter. It was a gamble in the end, but I always intended to win."

"It wasn't...Seek Marrisk...who won."

"Kakorkist Isthian, then? Either way, it doesn't matter."

"It wasn't...either of them."

"Hmm?" Pluto asked simply, not understanding.

The voices of the spirits in the hall echoed from farther away. *"The fearful spirit...of the Imminent Domain...Damian Rue...was destroyed...by the Chaos Witch..."*

"What? You were the ones who told me she wasn't coming back. That she was destroyed fighting the goddess." Pluto raised his voice. "You told me that none of Childman Powderfield's pawns were left. That's why I had to send one of my subordinates to assassinate the lord of the Imminent Domain. You were the ones who rushed me. You can't claim to have made a simple mistake! You made me sacrifice one of my brethren!"

"Childman Powderfield...that great sorcerer..." Was it just one voice? Was it a combination of many? Pluto didn't even know. It was a strange scream that seemed to echo off the walls even though it wasn't produced by sound. It went on, *"He made...no plan... He was just...preparing..."*

"What do you mean? What's the difference?"

"He raised...people who could stand against it...when danger arrived... That is all... He did not ready pawns..."

"Hmph. You just want to sing his praises, then. I see how it is. He's one of you, after all, in that he's nothing more than a remnant of ancient times." He snorted. "Why don't you revive him and make him one of you while you're at it? Then he would come in handy. He was not in the sort of position to get killed meaninglessly by his student—"

"He couldn't discard the Chaos Witch. That's all there is to it."

Pluto turned around at the voice he'd heard.

It was a woman's voice, and one he was used to hearing—so much so that his ears were ringing. A harsh voice that made him want to instinctively draw back.

Footsteps slowly followed him into the hall. He turned and asked, "How did you get here, Maria Huwon?"

"I was summoned too. There's no other way to get past the guards, is there?"

she quickly replied. The young witch walked toward him with a boldness that didn't match her age (or her position). With the symbol of the Tower of Fangs displayed proudly on her body, Maria Huwon's appearance naturally brought someone else's name to mind.

Someone else. And a different organization.

She was one of the black sorcerers who represented the Tower of Fangs.

Bitterly, Pluto asked her, "So? What were you called for?"

"I was told Irgitte was dead." She stopped walking when her student's name passed her lips. It wasn't sentimentality; rather, it seemed she just felt she had no need to proceed any further. In the sorcerous light, her face was pale, but it displayed no hint of emotion.

The Steel Cat... She makes me sick, Pluto thought to himself. "Seek and Kakorkist—they're dead too. I didn't think there was anyone on the continent who could best them."

"You can't be serious. You knew Yuis was in the Imminent Domain. He surpasses any other black sorcerer."

"Why would black sorcerers kill each other?!" he shouted, clenching his fists in anger. "Is Yuis—if you really want to call him that, then go ahead— Is Yuis Colgon insane? The Continental Sorcerers' Association is supposed to stand for friendship and unity between sorcerers!"

"They were too closed off, though. You should understand that there are sorcerers who would oppose that."

Pluto ignored Maria's swift response and asked, "Why is he obeying some random lord? I don't understand it..." He turned to empty space (or at least what appeared to be empty space). "And the Chaos Witch. Does that mean the people from the Childman Class are interfering? Do they have something to do with these three deaths?"

"Everything...is...in the hands of...the sanctuary..."

Pluto glanced at Maria to make sure she was hearing the voice too before he raised his voice. "If you want us to do something, give us the full picture! Whose

fault do you think it was that I had to send my people into certain death without even knowing it?!"

"There is much...even we...do not know... We can surpass time...so we often overlook it..."

"I don't need your excuses! Haven't you directed me, directed the Thirteen Apostles, and directed the nobles too? That's right. The one directing the Imminent Domain is that monster who represents you, Damian Rue, isn't it?"

"Damian Rue...was destroyed... We are losing...talented casters...one by one."

Pluto ground his teeth and groaned. "What are you trying to say?"

"They're saying change is coming... Am I right?" It wasn't the spirits who replied to him but Maria. Her voice sounded much more like a spirit of the dead to him, though.

She finally stepped past him. Maria Huwon's voice reverberated through the hall. "We're entering a new age. But if you think sacrifices are necessary, then..." She stopped there, as if she didn't want to make her emotions known. Slowly, like she was swallowing something bitter, she went on, "Even if it's right... For all the people who have died... I'll remain angry about it. I don't intend to just accept this."

"Everyone feels...grief... These one thousand years...were built on the fodder...of countless wails of lamentation..."

"Can you say that that fodder, that fodder that you conveniently call progress, isn't a carrot dangled in front of the noses of idiots? Can you say that it's not all just simple destruction, that you'll actually get something if you chase after it?"

"I admit that sacrifices are necessary. But we cannot overlook beings who needlessly consume lives! If we can't protect our own lives or that of our comrades, then what were we even given power for?!"

"Thirteen days from now...the sanctuary will leave all behind." The voice ignored Pluto's and Maria's shouts alike. It ignored them and went on, "This is not a prediction... If all continues as it has been...in thirteen days...all will be eliminated, leaving only the sanctuary behind... That is the current plan..."

“Whose plan?!” Pluto demanded. If he could see who he was speaking to, he would have grabbed them by the lapel, but the spirits never left their dark abyss.

Their words alone continued. *“No single being’s... The sanctuary...the gods...and you... All wished it...”*

“Who would wish for destruction?!”

“Is it destruction...? It may be rebirth...”

“If you lose your life, then it’s destruction! Idiots may spout sophistry, but science has proved it! Life must fight to protect itself!”

Even as he spoke, Pluto knew how pointless his insistence was. He shook his head as he remembered that he was speaking to spirits who were without life—and people who had become such spirits willingly. This was ridiculous. These spirits were fools who had abandoned science and had fled into the world of delusion and sophistry...and he was trying to rely on their words...

Pluto cleared his throat and began anew, “If you are in support of this destruction, then why do you resist the sanctuary, even going so far as to use me?”

“We do not...support it... If the destruction...is rebirth...then we do not want...the rebirth of the world...”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Quo Vadis Pater?”

Pluto snorted. “‘Where is God’? When they manifested here, the gods revealed themselves as monsters! The worst kind of monsters, who wield their power to destroy the world—”

“So where...are the real...gods? Where is...peace...?”

A shrill sound rang out, distinct from the voices—it was like a sharp scream that chilled Pluto’s spine. This too was not actual sound. It was the bellow of the spirits’ resentment.

“Excluding those like Damian who only sought power...we only sought that...that answer... We ascended...to this existence... It was our escape...from

the continent... But where...is peace...? Where...can we go...? Until we know...we cannot let the world end..."

"Where is God..." *This* was the voice of a human, real vibrations in the air.

Pluto turned with a shiver, expecting to see the spirits made flesh, revived. Instead, it was just the whisper of Maria Huwon, who had been silent all this time. Her head was hung as she stared at a single point on the ground.

Noticing his gaze, she looked up at him. "Are we expected to become priests, then?" she asked with a mocking grin.

Pluto ignored her and asked, "Spirits, you didn't call me here merely to scare me, did you? If we have thirteen days left, then you must be prepared to send me where I need to go within the next thirteen days."

"Of course... Now that Damian has been destroyed...we are free... Damian...the new ruler...who has become the king of demons...the Chaos Witch...they will not interfere with us..."

"You're sure about that?" Pluto pressed them.

"Send you?" Maria asked him.

Pluto responded without looking her way. "I'm going personally this time. I'll use my position as the head of the Thirteen Apostles."

"You can't do that, can you? The Union of Lords has known about this for a long time. They're just waiting for an opportunity to interfere."

"If I had just gone to begin with, we wouldn't have had to sacrifice anyone!" he shouted.

Maria Huwon just responded curtly. "We can't eliminate sacrifice," she said pointlessly. "Sacrifices will happen no matter what we do. It's just a matter of whether they're our sacrifices or theirs. We may not be using the military, but this is still a war."

"You don't care? Your student is likely dead too. And you don't care?!" He finally turned to her and shouted.

When he looked straight at her, he noticed for the first time—Maria had bitten through her lip. The blood painted her lips a vibrant shade of red.

“Who doesn’t care?” she asked him, still biting her lip. Her eyes were wild. “When the out-of-control Imminent Domain and the dragons’ sanctuary are about to destroy the entire continent, we need to become either gods or demons ourselves, don’t we?!”

“You’re not supposed to be this kind of woman.”

“You have *no* right to say that to me.”

Pluto shut his mouth so that they didn’t get into an argument. Instead, he decided to tell her, “If the Imminent Domain is over...then we have to destroy the sanctuary next. This is something we’ve had to do for a long time. We’ll do it, even if it takes every single one of the Thirteen Apostles. And if we succeed, this continent will belong to humanity.”

“No. It won’t belong to anyone. Still...it can’t belong to the gods who want to destroy it all.”

All the way to the end, Maria Huwon argued with him. Pluto didn’t like that.

Chapter I: Despair and What Is Not Despair

The sounds of a flickering flame and of dust falling from the walls. Vague sounds that were hard to pick out even when you strained your ears. Orphen waited, surrounded only by those sorts of sounds. The room, lit only by a single candle, felt small and cramped, like it was host to a great crowd of shadowy residents. In reality, there was plenty of empty space. It was more than large enough for him to sit on a chair and wait until the man on the floor woke up.

He concentrated on anything that could mark the passing of time—there was no clock in the room—and dozed as he listened. He ruminated as he straddled the boundary of sleep and wakefulness. Had time ever stopped since the world began? Even if it had, no one would have noticed, so he couldn't deny the possibility that it had occurred more than once before.

No...

Time had always moved forward. Never changing speeds. Never stopping. Never reversing.

The past, the present, the future. Time moved along, never letting the three mix. The three would never meet. If they ever did, it would be when time's speed changed, when time stopped, or when time reversed.

And that would be the moment the world came to an end.

Orphen raised his head, a question suddenly on his mind.

Why am I wondering about this? Why did I suddenly start thinking about this? There should be plenty of other things I have to think about...

Maybe someone had whispered the thought into his ear.

He lowered his eyelids with a wry smile. His vision went black, but he was still aware of the presence of the one other person in the room. The man still lying on the floor, unmoving.

The lord of the Imminent Domain.

Orphen sighed and continued to wait for the man to wake up.



“I demand to know why you’re treating me like this, girl.”

“What are you talking about? You’re a minion of the assassin who sneaked in here, aren’t you?” Claiomh swiftly responded to the dwarf’s demand.

One of the two bound dwarf brothers raised his voice to reply, “Who’s an assassin’s minion?! I, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, staunchly oppose being treated as a criminal in this way! The rope, specifically!”

“And what are you gonna do if I untie you?”

“Make a strategic retreat.”

Claiomh crossed her arms and told him flatly, “The whole reason I have you tied up is because it would piss me off if you got away.”

“I don’t need your excuses! Just do something about this, dammit!”

“That’s the reason...?”

Claiomh ignored the dwarves’ complaints and looked around.

They were in the kitchen—she got the feeling they were just sort of using it as a base because all the food they’d gathered was there.

The night was long. That being said, it hadn’t been that many hours since they’d returned to the mansion. Time was ticking by frustratingly slowly. Claiomh frowned, glaring at the small sorcerous light source in the room. She was angry for no real reason.

“What’s Orphen doing? He seemed kind of weird.”

“Maybe you should calm down, Claiomh,” replied the boy sitting in the corner of the kitchen.

He had a face Claiomh was very familiar with—they’d known each other since their school days, after all. Those too seemed like a distant memory, but it was really only half a year ago.

Claiomh gave him a somewhat harsh look and asked him, “Calm down? I have no idea what’s happening, but there was a scream, and the lord collapsed, and

after Leki now Lottecia's missing. How exactly am I supposed to calm down?"

"It's better than panicking, isn't it? Mas— Orphen said he'd explain everything later, didn't he?"

"He always says that, and has he ever actually explained anything?" Claiomh grumbled before raising her head as if she'd come to a realization. "So Orphen is waiting for the lord to wake up, right? But what are *you* doing here? Shouldn't you be the one looking after him? Especially after that big show of yours."

Majic looked down to escape her gaze and muttered, "I just wanted to be independent. I didn't want to join the lord or anything."

"Then do something you can do by yourself. I'll think of something I can do too."

"What I can do—" He stopped. Claiomh looked at him expectantly and Majic hesitated a bit before continuing, "What I can do is protect you, Claiomh. It's just like you said. People are disappearing for some reason. We're under some kind of attack. If there's no one to protect you, Orphen won't be able to act."

Instinctively, Claiomh wanted to argue with him, but she couldn't actually find anything objectionable about what he'd said, so she just exhaled soundlessly instead.

With their conversation paused, the kitchen was quiet. The whole lord's mansion was deathly silent. That was only natural, of course, since it was practically deserted. The dwarves were struggling to break free of their binds, but even that sound wasn't doing a very good job of breaking the silence.

There wasn't much that *could* break it. Uncomfortable, Claiomh piped up with, "Just what is going on anyway?"

"You remember what the lord said, right?" There was something melancholic about Majic's voice too. "The Imminent Domain is the base for the people fighting against the dragons' sanctuary. That's why they were attacked...and basically lost, I think."

"I get that, but..." Claiomh crossed her arms again, frustrated. "What's gonna happen to this place, then?"

“I don’t know. But now that that white sorcerer named Damian is gone, there’s no one left here who can fight.”

“So will they be attacked again?”

“Well, the lord’s still here... I think Orphen’s waiting because he wants to ask about that. Besides, even if we ran away, there’s nothing out there, and it’s nighttime too... It’s too dangerous.”

“I wanted to go look for Leki, but...” Claiomh said exactly what she was feeling, then lowered her voice. “But if that’s what the dragons are like, I might just hurt Leki more...”

“The lord asked Leki to do something though, didn’t he? He said that if it went well, their power balance with the sanctuary would be flipped.”

“I don’t want to make him do it.”

“Then what *do* you want to do?”

Claiomh pursed her lips in response to Majic’s question. “I don’t know.”

“Then you don’t know what you can do either, do you?”

“That’s why I said I would think about it... I’ll apologize for taking out my frustration on you. I’m sorry,” she told him.

“It would be great if you could undo the rope you tied us up with to vent your frustration too...” one of the dwarves piped up.

For the time being, Claiomh ignored them and pulled a chair over. One of the chairs in the kitchen was broken, but she’d cleaned up the mess already. That was likely the chair she’d been sitting in yesterday when Lottecia had made hot milk for her. She felt herself growing even more despondent at the memory. Lottecia was now missing too. From what Majic had told her, when Claiomh had disappeared, she’d gone after the killer and had never come back. It wasn’t very comforting news.

Lottecia’s sword had, of course, disappeared with her, and Claiomh had lost her own sword—the sword she’d gotten from that Death Instructor who acted like an old man in Kimluck—in some fracas or another. Of course, it had been an antique she wasn’t very comfortable using in the first place. She’d wanted to

find a better weapon than that, but there weren't any weapons at all in the lord's mansion. And the lodgings where the lord's guards lived had been blown to bits yesterday. She'd considered walking around with a cooking knife from the kitchen, but she wasn't very enthusiastic about the idea, so she gave up on that too. She knew there wasn't anything she could accomplish by swinging around a bladed object in their current situation anyway.

It's probably better if I don't do anything to make the situation worse.

She took an empty breath. No matter the power you possessed, if you didn't know how to wield it, all you could do was create chaos. What made a sorcerer a sorcerer wasn't the power they possessed but the ability to control that power properly. She possessed none of the necessary training or resolve for such a thing. She became well aware of that when she borrowed Leki's body.

I wonder if Leki's sorcery and swords and weapons and anything else are the same, though...

"In any case," Claiomh muttered to nowhere—if she had to pick, then to the silence of the night, "I need to decide for myself."

Her voice was quiet. Maybe no one heard it. No one and nothing responded to her.



"Change into these," Orphen said, entering the kitchen and leaving two pairs of long-sleeved work clothes on the kitchen table. All the eyes in the room gathered on him.

He felt the girl's blue eyes in particular as she timidly asked him, "And...the lord?"

"He's not awake yet. We shouldn't be waiting for him anyway. We're leaving. We'll leave him behind here." Orphen searched for a clock as he spoke, not that he was hoping to find one in the kitchen. He could see outside through the curtainless window, but it wasn't the right angle to see the moon and the stars. Besides, he had a pretty good idea of the time anyway. Dawn would come in about two hours.

"We're leaving him?" Claiomh asked, picking up a set of the clothes.

Orphen nodded. "I'll leave out the detailed explanation, but the lord doesn't really exist. He's a demihuman Damian Rue created; a puppet, basically. Now that I think about it, he might never wake up again now that Damian's gone. More importantly, I've got a bad feeling about this." He shuddered in his leather combat gear. "We should get away from here."

"Get away? How? To where?" She spread out the work clothes and furrowed her brow, evidently not liking what she saw, but pushed the other pair to Majic without making a fuss and asked uneasily, "You're coming too, right, Orphen?"

"Yeah." Orphen nodded again and pointed to the still-open trap door in the kitchen's floor. There was a dried-up waterway beneath them. "We have this underground tunnel. We'll be able to use that to make an exit. As for where we'll go from there, well... I don't know for sure. I just know it's dangerous here. If we believe what Damian said, it seems like there'll be some kind of reaction from the sanctuary come morning."

The man in the priest's robes came to mind, but that wasn't all. The dragon sanctuary possessed power that made that one man seem insignificant in comparison. They had any number of weapons that could destroy entire cities. The difference in power between dragons and humans was all too clear.

Which means leaving honestly isn't even being careful enough. Dammit, Orphen cursed to himself.

"Anyway, it's nighttime and who knows what's going to happen next," he went on. "We should be dressing as warmly as possible. I'll pack what food we can carry—" He looked into the box of food Claiomh and the rest of them had gathered and picked up the mysterious paper-wrapped object on top. Testing the weight of it, he guessed what was inside. "...Is this butter? You're gonna eat this?"

"I thought it might keep if we were careful with it."

"I guess it is true that it's portable, but...I'm not into this rotten military maniac banquet thing personally."

"I don't know what you mean, but I'm not into it either," Claiomh said before leaving the kitchen, presumably to change clothes.

Orphen looked between the three who were left in the room. Majic had been silent the whole time, but he began to change clothes haltingly as well. As for the dwarves...

Glancing at Volkan and Dortin, who were giving him a displeased look, Orphen said the first thing that came to mind. "What's with the getup? Is that your final form?"

"Whaddy mean—mgh?!"

Before Volkan could moan any more, Orphen stuffed the package of butter into his mouth to shut him up.

From beside him, Dortin asked resignedly, "We're just tied up. Why is that our final form?"

"It just seems so natural," Orphen responded coolly.

Dortin didn't seem to understand. He looked up at Orphen, resignation still shining through his glasses, and again asked, "Why do you say that, exactly?"

"Hmm. Well, seeing you two in trouble just puts me in such a sunny mood. It's like something warm comes to life in my chest."

"I think that might be some sort of illness."

"You think so?"

"How dare you two go on like that while I was silenced!" Volkan shouted beside Dortin.

"What the?! He ate the whole thing, wrapper included?!" Orphen stepped back, feeling threatened.

Volkan just licked around his mouth, looking satisfied. "Mm. Feels like the first time in a while I've had some human food."

"Well, it is definitely human food."

"I would like to declare the beginning of a civilized lifestyle, so if you could please remove this rope, which is about as far from the renaissance as you can be..."

"Mmm... I dunno, I hate listening to you," Orphen mused.

“Please forget your hatred and untie us,” Dortin piped up. “We were tied up for no reason at all. I’m almost certain this is a crime, actually.”

“Umm, Orphen...” This time, it was Majic who spoke up. He had finished changing and was speaking awkwardly, looking down as he did so. “I, umm...”

“You’re not gonna tell me you’re staying here, are you? We have no idea if the lord is gonna be of any use anymore and this place is in danger of being attacked by the sanctuary. I may have accepted your independence, but I still expect you to follow logic.” Orphen frowned, picking through the food in the box. He started stuffing smaller items into the knapsacks he’d brought with him.

Majic slowly walked over and took out a packet of cookies to help with the sorting. “I agree that we should leave. I think we should take the lord with us if we can, but... More importantly, you haven’t said where we’re going.”

“...I intend to head for the sanctuary.”

“Huh?” Majic asked.

Orphen stopped stuffing his bag. “That being said, the likelihood of us getting through Fenrir’s Forest all the way to its center in thirteen days—a center we have no way of accurately finding—is pretty close to zero...”

“Is there something you need to do?”

“Yeah. Though I’m not honestly sure what it is myself yet.”

His family would gather in the sanctuary thirteen days from now...

It wasn’t a prediction but a message...

Meaning it wasn’t something that would just happen without input from him. It was something he had to bring about himself, he figured.

Irgitte’s final words, eh...? He *could* just chalk it up to delirious muttering on the verge of death.

But Orphen shook his head. His family. Currently, his sister Leticia was missing. Damian Rue had insisted that she was dead, but Volkan and Dortin had met her after that. They’d been used to lure Lottecia out of the mansion last night, and the ones who had instructed them to do so were Colgon...and Leticia.

Now, she'd disappeared once again, and when Orphen considered where she might have gone... If there was anywhere to go from the Imminent Domain, the sanctuary was a pretty likely candidate.

"It can't be a coincidence," Orphen mused to himself. "I still can't figure out why Tish showed up here all of a sudden in the first place."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." Orphen finished stuffing his bag and closed it, then turned to the tied-up dwarves again. "Come to think of it, you guys were with Tish when she showed up. She didn't tell you anything about why she came here, did she?"

"Nope... It seemed like she just wanted someone to carry her stuff. She also wanted help finding you. She promised to thank us too, but she never actually gave us anything. Do you think we could get anything for suing her over that?" Dortin grumbled resignedly.

Orphen didn't say anything in response, just folding his arms and thinking once again. He sighed and muttered, "Tish...and..."

Azalie. He felt his heart sinking at the name. The only reason *he'd* come here was to find out where she was. The lord—or rather, Damian—was the only one who was able to contact her, but now that he was gone, she was back to being completely unreachable.

"Claiomh wants to go look for Leki," Majic suddenly piped up. He must have been annoyed that Orphen was doing nothing but think to himself. "The last time Lottecia saw him, he was heading for Fenrir's Forest, right? So he'll be in the sanctuary, won't he?"

"Probably."

"I—" Majic started, but his voice faded abruptly.

Orphen gave him a look and—though he knew it was a bit mean—asked, "You're the only one who doesn't have a reason to go to the sanctuary, right?"

Majic frowned in obvious annoyance. He didn't look at Orphen as he grumbled, "No one ever tells me what's going on, but even I've picked up that

something really serious is happening. I'm a sorcerer too, so I want to help stop it. I think that's enough reason to go."

"Hey, I'm not gonna stop you. I promised I'd let you do what you wanted to do."

"Incidentally, what we'd like to do is get away as fast as possible from this place where we're both tied up for no particular reason and unable to receive the reward we were promised."

"Yeah, well, I won't stop you guys either," Orphen replied to Volkan, finally filling his second knapsack. He had no idea how long this food would last and how well it would be able to sustain them, but it would definitely be better than nothing.

The door flew open with a *bam*, and Claiomh rushed in. "Done changing!"

As Orphen expected, the work clothes were too big on her. Both her sleeves and her pant legs were rolled up a few times. "Okay," he said, pushing one of the knapsacks toward her.

"What's this?" she asked, taking it.

"What do you mean? It's the food, obviously."

She blinked. "I mean what'd you put in it? Are the cookies in here? If that purple pâté with glitter is in here, I'm not eating it."

"It's no time to be picky, is it? And what's purple pâté, anyway?"

"There was something that looked like that when I was looking for food with Lotte..." Claiomh glanced at the box, where there were a couple of things still left. "We didn't know if it was edible or not, but we decided if there was a time to put our lives on the line, now would be it."

"Please cut it out with the 'cool' stuff," Orphen said, shouldering the other pack. He turned to the dwarves. "Well, we're gettin' outta here. I'll leave a kitchen knife or something in someplace you can't reach, so get yourselves taken care of with, you know, pain and effort and hard work. You'll be fine. Even if the mansion is blown to bits come morning, I'm sure you two will survive. Pretty sure, anyway."

“I don’t understand why we have to go through such meaningless trials...”

“Black sorcerer! I get the feeling that, could it be that, maybe, possibly, is there a chance that you have something against the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan?!”

Orphen turned his back to Dortin and Volkan and looked down into the waterway below them. Sucking in the wet air, he wove a spell and raised his hands, chanting, “I call upon thee—”

“There’s no need to run.”

His spell shattered when he heard the voice.

Orphen shot a glance over to the door. He’d seen the same thing the night before, the same person. The man stood there as if he’d been waiting for the perfect opportunity to make his entrance. He had an easy smile on his face, looking at Orphen with eyes that were full of life. It was the lord of the Imminent Domain.

From his appearance, it was hard to believe that the man was a ghost who didn’t really exist. His voice was quiet but piercing as he said, “No, if you leave here, all that’s waiting for you is certain death, Razor-Sharp...”

“Can you really say that following you won’t bring us a worse destruction than death, lord of the Imminent Domain?”

“I can, old friend.” With an elegant wave, the lord turned to speak to each of them. First up was Majic. “My Imminent Domain has not yet lost its strength. Majic Lin. It’s too soon to give up on me. I can train you up into the strongest caster on the continent—you can reach Yuis’s heights.”

Next was Claiomh. “Claiomh Everlasting. You wish to reunite with your dragon friend, do you not? All the more reason for you to stay. This is no mere guess. It’s hard fact. Everything follows the plan I have set.”

Finally, he noticed the dwarf brothers. “My. It seems we have even more new guests. I welcome you, of course. Here, we fight for everyone on the continent who does not side with the sanctuary. That is my role.”

“Your *role* is to end this stupid farce,” Orphen shot back at him. He had been

crouching by the entrance to the waterway, but he stood and faced the lord. He took a glance at Majic and Claiomh when he did. The two of them were just silently watching the lord. In the dimly lit room, he couldn't tell with that single glance what emotions lay underneath their expressions. But they didn't seem guilty or subservient to him. They were probably just trying to determine the meaning of his words.

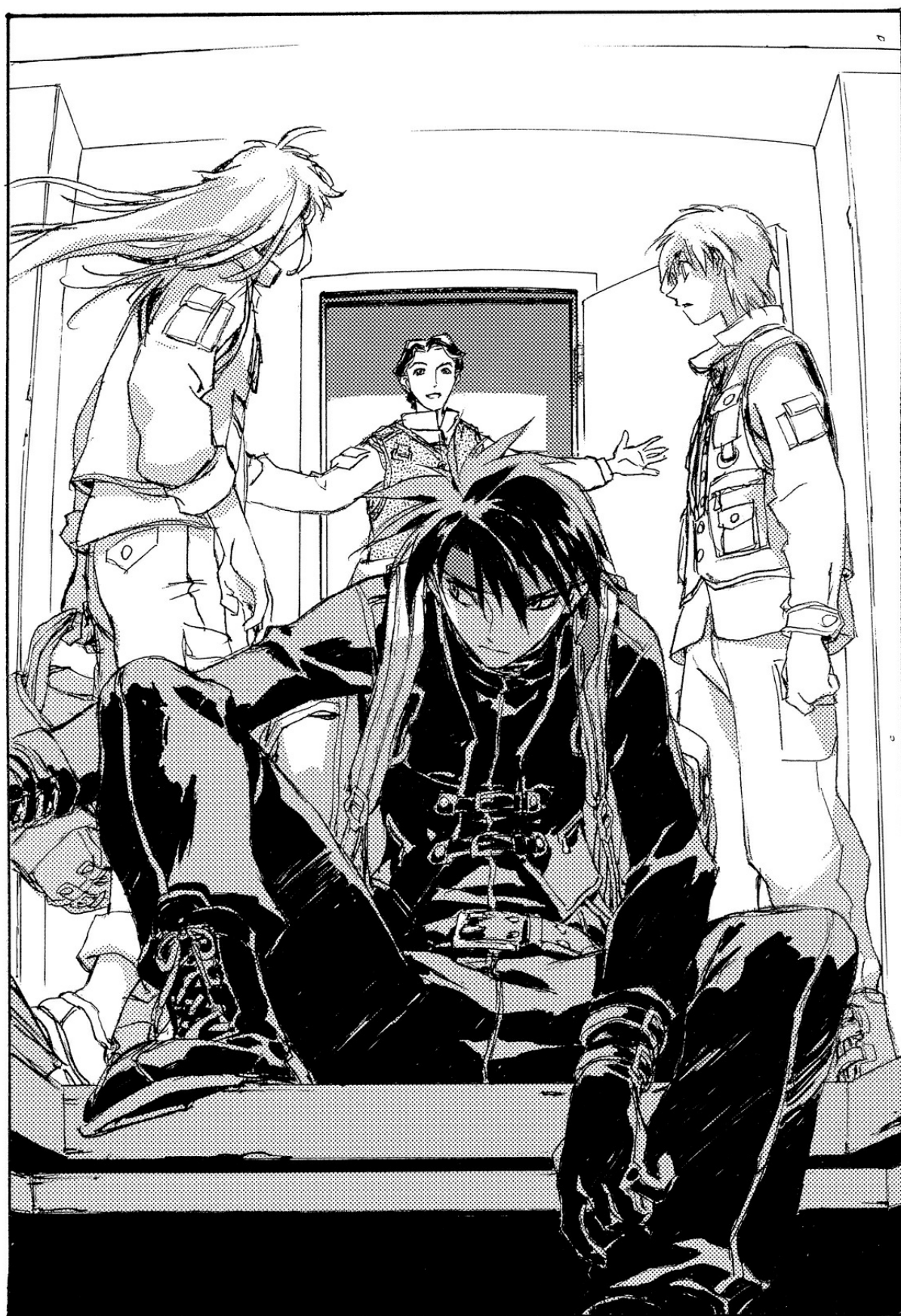
“I got it!”

Orphen ignored Volkan's shout and fished through the box for the remaining food. He found a pot and removed the lid to find a strange purple paste inside.

“Actually, I don't get it, but hey you! If you could blow away this evil black squinty guy and untie me, I'd be really thankful—”

Orphen shoved the mysterious paste, container and all, into the shouting Volkan's mouth and told the lord, “What you're doing is fighting a battle you can't win. I believe I told you the same yesterday.”

“You did. But can you say the same thing now that you know what sort of being I am, old friend?”



The lord took one step inside the room and stopped with Orphen's eyes on him. Orphen smiled wryly. He was just a bit too far away for Orphen to reach him. Not that the man likely feared an attack from him.

"I don't care how well-made a ghost you are. You don't have any actual power to fight back against the sanctuary with anymore—if you ever had any in the first place."

"A well-made ghost, eh? So that's the level of your understanding. You're a sorcerer too, but you're not like Damian. He was thinking further ahead."

"What?" Orphen growled. He was grinding his teeth. He should just ignore the man and leave. There was no reason why he couldn't. But...

He looked left and right. Now, Claiomh and Majic were both looking at him instead of the lord. They weren't saying anything, but there was a clear question in their eyes. The lord had given them just a bit of information that they absolutely had to know more about.

Orphen felt the passage of time all too vividly. There were only a few hours until dawn. But "dawn" wasn't an exact time—it could be one hour from now, and it could be longer.

We should get out of here as soon as we can. We should, but... He had to ask.

But before Orphen could voice his question, Claiomh shouted, "Mr. Lord! Umm, if there's anything you can say about Leki, please tell me!" Much quieter, she continued, "I know I was wrong... I know Leki was only doing what I wanted. And I know I'm trying to leave your mansion without telling you first, but—" Claiomh went on incoherently until she abruptly stopped, leaning on the table almost like she was collapsing. She hung her head, quiet. Her exhaustion must have caught up to her all at once.

She'd been acting strong, but now that Orphen thought about it, she had been up all night running around too. He softly laid a hand on Claiomh's on the table.

All of a sudden, she was wrapping both of her hands around his. And squeezing, hard. If he hadn't been wearing the gloves of his combat gear, her nails might have been drawing blood. If he wanted to pull away from her, he

probably could. As he hesitated, he realized that she wasn't just clinging to him. She was stopping him from asking the lord her question in her place.

Claiomh looked back up and spoke to the lord once more, her voice much more firm. "Where is Leki right now?"

"That Deep Dragon is trying to fulfill its duty. It is out fulfilling the promise it made with me. It will return eventually," the lord said softly, placatingly.

Orphen turned his head to look at the lord, his hand still in Claiomh's, and said, "Seems like you have enough up your sleeve to keep these two here, but you have nothing to offer me. The situation's changed a lot from when I was first invited here. I shouldn't have come here in the first place—I never wanted to know where Azalie was so badly that I would expose other people to danger."

"I do have something to offer you... Just stay here until dawn. If you do, I can send you to the sanctuary at any time. That's where you'll find the Chaos Witch," the lord said casually.

Orphen futilely tried not to let the lord notice that he was holding his breath and waited for the man to go on.

The lord of the Imminent Domain, Almagest, continued, "Let me borrow half of your words. Come morning, I will have sufficient fighting strength to oppose the sanctuary. I will be all-powerful then."

"All-powerful, eh? Well, what do you need me for, then?"

"...I misspoke. Even if I am capable of establishing a perfect defense, there is still one person who has the power to destroy it."

"Who's that?"

Orphen was imagining the figure of a solidly built man in black, the man in the priest's robes—but it was a different name that the lord spoke.

"My old friend... Yuis. Let me confess. When he was captured by the sanctuary, he defected from me. Rather, I suppose I should say I became someone he no longer saw worth in using. He took Lottecia to the sanctuary."

Orphen frowned and asked, "Why? What would he do that for?"

“I’ll explain eventually. But for the time being, you are the only one who can oppose Yuis.”

“I dunno about that. You’re a noble at least in name, right? Can’t you just summon Pluto the Demon or someone from the capital?”

“The era when the Thirteen Apostles were dogs of the Union of Lords is long over. It was over when Pluto came to power. Don’t you think it’s interesting that each time a powerful sorcerer is born, the balance of power shifts?” That was likely a joke the lord actually found funny—his lips curled up into a smile until he wiped it away with a hand and continued, “The problem Pluto had was that he could not prepare a pawn who could defeat Damian or Yuis other than himself... Would Maria Huwon be not quite powerful enough? In any case, that doesn’t matter anymore. He’s probably finally prepared to throw himself into the ring. Things are moving now. They cannot be stopped. This will all end thirteen days from now...”

Orphen raised an eyebrow. “Thirteen days from now. Something’s happening then? What is it?”

“Why do you ask me, old friend? You do not intend to rely on my power, do you? According to you, I’m nothing more than a well-made ghost... Can you believe the future such a thing predicts?” the lord asked mockingly and didn’t wait for Orphen to answer. Before Orphen could even click his tongue, he started up again. “You really might be powerful enough to go toe to toe with Yuis—more powerful than anyone, even Damian Rue.”

There was no mirth in his eyes. His gaze was so sharp, in fact, it was intimidating. Orphen took it, holding his breath. He clenched his fists, trying to push back with all he had.

He’s trying to control me... A well-made ghost. Orphen repeated the phrase to himself. The lord smiled sardonically, like he was reading Orphen’s thoughts.

“Still, I suppose you’re just a sorcerer in the end. Damian seemed hesitant to accept it as well. He had his misgivings, but he misunderstood the meaning of the very thing he had created. What did he call me? The culmination of his power? Sorcerers are all laboring under the wrong impression that they’re controlling their own power.”

“That’s the essence of a sorcerer,” Orphen cut in quietly.

“No,” the lord denied him curtly. “If it were your essence, you wouldn’t have to tell that to yourself and everyone else. You would just do it naturally. If you ask me, there’s never been a single sorcerer who was able to completely control their power. The world itself was destroyed, unable to control its natural laws as sorcery.”

When Almagest paused, Orphen sneaked a glance at Claiomh and Majic. Claiomh had her head bowed. She didn’t seem to even be listening, but he knew she wasn’t missing anything—she still hadn’t let go of his hand, and with each word from the lord, her grip tightened and weakened.

Majic’s reaction seemed unexpected to him too, though maybe it shouldn’t have been. Majic was just glaring sharply at the lord. He looked openly hostile. Maybe it was because the lord had mocked sorcerers—or maybe it was simply because he’d named Orphen instead of Majic as the one who could stand against Colgon. Either way, now that he’d acknowledged the independence of his pupil, it was harder to tell what the boy was thinking.

No, that’s normal, isn’t it? Orphen realized. He felt a little prick in his heart at the thought. *He* was the one who had always treated Majic like he was lesser than him. That’s why he couldn’t teach him anything more than how to use his sorcery, and couldn’t even come up with anything else to teach him. He might regret it now, but it wasn’t something he could take back.

As for Volkan and Dortin...

The younger dwarf brother was staring at the floor, bored. He’d thought the older one was being strangely quiet, but he seemed to be passed out, a strange purple substance dripping from his mouth. Orphen was finally able to let out the breath he was holding when he turned to them. To people like them who weren’t involved, this conversation was just a worthless farce.

After glancing at each of them in turn, Orphen looked back at the lord, who was patiently waiting for him.

He indicated his chest and declared as if piercing something soft slowly and deeply, “I am the devil. That is what I’ve named myself.”

Pawns. The end of all.

It was because he threw around words like this that Almagest ended up seeming theatrical and almost humorous. It was reaching a peak now. Orphen ground his teeth. He was absolutely sure that this existence known as the lord acted this way specifically to annoy his audience.

The lord continued bombastically, “There was something that existed naturally that was much the same as me... It’s interesting to me that it was created almost accidentally, without any sort of plan. If I am the devil, is this other existence an angel? The only thing this world is missing is a demon king. The Demon King Swedenborge...a human king who could kill a god. The hope of humanity. This is what I think. If such a thing exists today, its name would go to someone who wields sorcery.”

In the end, Orphen had no idea what the lord was talking about. Without hiding his annoyance at all, he said, “I’d rather you answered my questions instead of prattling on like this. But first, let me say a few things. Stop calling me your old friend. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I am everyone’s old friend. I’m rooted in the very Aymankar barrier itself—”

“No. I’m telling you the two of us were never friends,” Orphen spat.

Even with harsh words, he could only shut the lord up for an amount of time that didn’t even constitute a short pause.

He just nodded magnanimously and said, “Very well. Let me go through them all in turn, then. First, as to what will change in the morning: the mightiest power on the continent will gather here at that time.”

“...The mightiest power?”

“The entire population of the Deep Dragons.”

Orphen couldn’t easily believe that. But looking at the lord’s face—Orphen had to remind himself that the man wasn’t human but a tool a white sorcerer had used to take control of people—he had to admit it.

The lord meant every word he said. Orphen grinned wryly, massaging his face after all the color had drained from it. “So we can’t even run away.”

“I told you there was no need to. The leader of the Deep Dragons is Asraliel—the new Asraliel. And *she* has pledged to obey me.”

Orphen noticed Claiomh fidgeting after the lord’s confident words.

She must have figured it out before him. Orphen repeated the lord’s words to himself. *The new Asraliel...?*

He voiced them aloud next. “You mean Leki?”

The lord nodded. “That’s right. All of the Deep Dragons will obey me. Thus, the sanctuary will no longer be my enemy. Considering my true goal, however, even that power is not enough... Now, for your second question. What will happen thirteen days from now?” The lord went on and on, never speaking at too fast a pace. The voice of the man who called himself the devil spread through the dimly lit kitchen. “You should be able to figure it out with a bit of thought. I told you that the Chaos Witch would return. The only way to get back onto the continent from outside of the Aymankar barrier is to pass through the hole in the barrier. Her return simply means what was pushed out of the continent with that barrier may also return with her...”

Almagest finally stopped as if to assess the effect of his words.

The lord fixed his eyes on Orphen. What did he want? Agreement? Disagreement? Panic? Submission?

My own angel and devil... Orphen thought cynically.

And as if he’d heard the thought, the lord smiled. Orphen was painfully aware of what the lord was trying to ascertain. It was his level of despair.

He must have been satisfied with what he saw. The lord continued in much the same way, “The hole in the barrier has opened in the center of the continent, the sanctuary. The goddesses of fate will invade the continent thirteen days from now. I’m sure you’ve witnessed the last will of the Celestials before. If you believe in it, then you know that only the Demon King Swedenborge can kill the goddesses. If we do not summon the Demon King within the next thirteen days, we will lose. We need to obtain the summoning device that still functions within the sanctuary, the Second World-Seeing Tower.”

Outside the window...

Orphen thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of green eyes.

That gaze grasped everything, swallowed everything, crushed everything, and blew everything to bits.



“We’re underground, beneath the bottom of the lake. Thanks to that, the sand doesn’t come all the way down here.”

She couldn’t understand why the man was going out of his way to explain all this, but she figured it wasn’t worth thinking about. There wasn’t any ulterior motive, true intention, or deeper meaning behind his words; he had simply said them. It was only natural she didn’t understand his meaning if his words were meaningless.

He wasn’t making a display of his knowledge. He wasn’t being kind. It wasn’t love or friendship or even small talk to kill time. The man had simply voiced a thought when it came to mind. He might have muttered it to himself even if he hadn’t been with someone else. There was nothing more to it than that.

Lottecia Crewbstar looked around vacantly. They were in a passageway with white walls that seemed to extend eternally. There were no seams in the walls and there was no slant to the floor. There were no light sources, but the walls still seemed to glow white. She had no idea what sort of being had the immense power required to build a facility like this underground, but as the gloomy man in front of her led her through it as if he owned the place, she smiled bitterly to herself.

To him, were even altars to the gods something that existed for his own sake? It wouldn’t surprise her.

She had been ready to not feel any pain from her wound anymore, but there was still a dull ache in her chest that made it difficult to breathe. But this wasn’t a physical wound.

Still, she stayed silent, following the man in front of her.

The man who had once been her husband. Ed. The man who had many other

names. No, if the name more people called him by was his real name, then Ed was the fake one... In fact, she was pretty much the only person who would call him that now.

Selfish... You're too selfish.

He was still mumbling pointless commentary as he led the way forward. He never once turned back to look at Lottecia. His back was hard, covered in a black overcoat. Following after it, she naturally started walking faster.

And all the while, she prattled on pointlessly in her own head—just like her former husband.

You're too selfish. You abandoned me when my father died. And when I was trying to forget you, you appeared before me again and tried to kill me. When I tried to chase after you, you told me never to have anything to do with you again. Yet now you've taken me to this place and you're trying to force me somewhere.

These empty mutterings continued on forever just like the white walls of the passageway.

What is it that you're trying to do? What do you want from me? Is everything just meaningless whim?

What time was it now? Suddenly, she found herself wondering.

She'd been captured by this man the night before, and they'd been walking the whole time since then. She had no idea what sort of trick he'd used, but they'd traveled all the way from that mansion in the Imminent Domain to here—Ed called it the sanctuary—in the blink of an eye. But after going underground from that lake where the sand was blowing, they'd proceeded through this facility on foot.

Her heart seemed to dry out the more she walked. She was too tired now to shed any more tears. Lottecia sighed slowly, though the action wasn't any different from her regular breaths now. Ed had her father's magic sword now too. She'd lost everything. She no longer had a way to kill Ed, a purpose for living, or any memories to cling to.

Finally...

“This is it,” Ed said shortly, coming to a stop.

“Huh?” Lottecia muttered absentmindedly. She was surprised she even had the willpower left to seek clarification. “The passageway keeps going,” she said after a pause.

There wasn’t anything else, like a door, anywhere. An unpleasant smile formed on Ed’s shameless face. “You weren’t listening, were you? The hallway looks like it’s continuing because it’s camouflaged.”

“Camouflaged? But...” Lottecia narrowed her eyes and looked down the hall. She didn’t see any sort of trick to it; it just looked like white walls going straight into the distance forever.

Ed waved in the direction that Lottecia was looking. It wasn’t like the scenery changed at all from that, but Ed sighed and said, “If you could use your functions properly, I wouldn’t have to explain things like this to you. This is the dragons’ sanctuary, and the people here aren’t the type to leave the doors wide open. This passageway is protected by sorcery—”

“Functions?” Lottecia wasn’t listening to his explanation, instead focusing in on just that word. There should have been nothing in her heart, but a damp, hot lump began to rise in her chest as she shouted, her voice cracking, “Don’t treat me like something that isn’t human! You have no right to look down on me any more than you already—”

“I believe I went over this in decent detail yesterday. You really don’t listen, do you?”

“Nothing you say is...!” she shouted, but if anything, Ed was the one who wasn’t listening to anything she said.

He completely ignored her, signaled something with his hands, and then headed deeper into the passageway. “It’s me. I’m back.”

Lottecia wasn’t sure what had happened at the same time as Ed’s words. The hallway suddenly went dark, and the only things shining now were countless symbols... Strange lines of what looked like words. She felt flipped all of a sudden, like all her senses had switched, and after the awkward feeling passed...

When their surroundings brightened again, they were in another bright white place that wasn't much different than the one they'd been in before.

What *was* different was that now they weren't in a passageway; they were in a round room. Just a room, with no entrance or exit.

And inside that pure-white space, there was a dark figure, like some kind of shadow.

The first person who came to mind was that black sorcerer—the man who always had something offensive to say. It wasn't that the figure actually resembled that man at all, but some aspect of them was similar. It was an aspect her former husband shared as well.

As for Ed himself, he was staring at the figure, strangely quiet. From how he looked, she guessed this wasn't the destination he'd had in mind. Ed muttered to no one in particular, his voice low, "What are you doing?"

Well, he was probably speaking to the dark shadow who was waiting for them there. But it seemed to Lottecia like he was addressing someone else. In any case, it was the dark shadow who answered him.

"You can guess that, can't you?"

The man was dressed in strange black clothes, like a costume version of the robes a clergyman would wear. They were inside, yet he wore a black hat low over his eyes, and the white light of his eyes coming from under the brim was cold. He was a large man. He was just standing at a distance from them, but there was some strange aspect to him that made Lottecia want to back up.

Lottecia stole a glance at Ed's face. He seemed to feel the same way she did about the man. Even this man, who she'd thought couldn't possibly fear another person.

"I fulfilled my promise. Is this the thanks I get?" Ed muttered. Lottecia could tell that his muscles were tensing under his coat. Maybe he was gripping a weapon.

"You scared Doppel X too much," the man in the priest's robes said without moving an inch. He was standing there less like moving was tiresome and more like he didn't even know how to move without purpose. "Yuis, eh...? Relax, I

won't kill you. I just took a little detour to give you a warning. After fear comes anger. I don't know what you're after, but just make sure you don't go angering anyone you shouldn't."

"Hmph," Ed—Ed called by another name—snorted. "Your technique. Those straightforward blows that pulverize your enemies. With the smallest possible movement too. It's an ideal move for fighting with fists—but having been hit with it, I know why you have to use it. You're called an evil spirit, aren't you?"



To his provocation, the man in the priest's robes responded, "Yes. My body does indeed harbor an evil spirit..."

The incomprehensible men continued their incomprehensible conversation.

Indicating himself without moving, the man in the priest's robes said, "It's not the power of a human being. I have spent the majority of my life controlling that evil spirit. Both my technique and my occupation. I will likely continue to do so. As long as the devil who surpasses my evil spirit does not try to stop me. I may never die. I may be eternal."

His words ended there and the man in the priest's robes moved for the first time. He held his right arm up at Ed as if indicating him and said, "However, Yuis Colgon. You are nothing more than a villain. The devil must be rooted in something far deeper."

"If you fight me now, it'll be you who dies. You know that, and this is how you speak to me?" Ed threatened. "Admit defeat, Jack Frisbee!"

However, the man in the priest's robes—apparently, his name was Jack Frisbee—just calmly lowered his arm and said, "All you have is strength. You've made that girl despair, have you not?" Jack suddenly looked her way. Lottecia started with his attention suddenly on her, but he just continued, "Despair is rampant in this world. You are just clinging to a fraction of it to put on airs. I do not fear that. Even if I'm killed, I won't be defeated. The devil I'm after is both the same as you and the complete opposite."

She felt both like she could and couldn't understand what the man was saying. Lottecia just put a hand to her chest, feeling choked. Her knees slowly bent, though she didn't crumple. Still, she felt an agony she couldn't expel pushing down on her back.

Ed didn't respond. He was just staring back at the man in the priest's robes. A hateful stare, Lottecia thought, but that wasn't right. Ed's eyes were open wide and his mouth was a harsh line, but he wasn't angry. Lottecia understood that from the time she'd spent with the man. Ed was smiling. And not just on the surface, but from the bottom of his heart. This was an expression she'd hardly ever seen even when they were living together.

Ed is...happy. That he's met someone he can go toe to toe with... He believed that he could defeat the other man. That was why he was smiling. He had had the same smile on his face when he'd met her father...

If Jack was feeling something, on the other hand, he didn't show it at all. He moved his gaze to Lottecia and finished quietly, "Or something both the same and the complete opposite of that girl. If something like that, with more power than me, makes me submit...I may be defeated."

Suddenly, everything around them went dark again. Just the strange patterns lit up again, and again, Lottecia's senses seemed to switch.

That must have been the end of his warning. By the time her vision returned, the man in the priest's robes was gone.

They had also moved again. They were no longer in the passageway that was nothing but white or the room that was nothing but white. They were in a garden with a ceiling. The ceiling was a dome, the same pure white as the previous walls, but there was dirt on the ground, a smattering of trees, and even grass. It was like unnatural greenery made for the purpose of imitating the real thing. In other words, the sort of park you'd see anywhere. The grass was all cut at the same height and hardly seemed like it would support insect life. The trees were thin and grew straight up; they had branches, but not many leaves. There were benches here and there, no two placed in a similar way.

The biggest difference from their previous two locations was that there were entrances in four directions—meaning, they were finally actually inside this so-called "sanctuary."

However, Lottecia found herself focused on something else entirely. *The same as Ed and me...and the complete opposite?* Who could that mean?

She looked at Ed. The smile was gone from his face. Instead, he was just blankly taking in the sight of the park.

Chapter II: Friendship and What Is Not Friendship

“It should be dawn soon...”

The words, murmured on an empty street in the early morning, carried farther than he had expected them to. He noticed with a wince—the person in the apartment next door had been increasingly irritable lately. He’d never gotten approval from that neighbor for his coming home at odd hours, and he’d just happened to be passing their doorway as he spoke.

He wasn’t exactly out on the town, but he never came directly home after finishing his boring job. Not a single time since he’d arrived in Totokanta.

He dug through his pockets, looking for his key. Since he didn’t carry it in any particular spot, it sometimes got misplaced. If that were to happen, he’d simply open his door using sorcery. The lock wasn’t that important. It wasn’t as if the apartment contained anything worth stealing.

Luck was on his side today, however—Heartia finally found his key and pulled it out. He smiled wryly at the idea. It wasn’t really lucky. It was just better than the alternative.

“This is stupid. It’s not like I’m unlucky. These were all the result of my own decisions—poverty included.” After muttering to himself again, he took another look at the neighboring door, but he quickly shrugged. He already had one foot inside his room, and he couldn’t be blamed for talking to himself in his own room.

That said, sometimes his neighbor came out with a kitchen knife—the memory quickened his pace just a bit. He closed the door and soon found that he was talking to himself again.

“No, I’m not even poor. There are plenty of people in a worse state than I am...”

It was dark inside the apartment, curtains obstructing the light from outside. It was an empty apartment, but the lack of furnishings didn’t help it feel any

larger. It was even more spartan than the dorm room he'd stayed in as a student.

But there was at least a bed, even if he hadn't changed his sheets in a while. He could sleep in it for the next few hours.

He stumbled over to the bed, unbuttoning his shirt, by the time he noticed. He didn't even *have* curtains on his windows.

His dulled mind turned razor-sharp in an instant. He pivoted, raising a fist toward the one window in the apartment. There may have been no precious belongings contained in the apartment, but if he opted to include himself in that list, that changed things. A number of different spells flitted through his mind that would be effective in this situation.

But who was the intruder in the first place? Had his neighbor finally decided to settle the score with him? As such a nonsensical thought went through his mind, he opened his eyes wide...

The person standing in front of the window was familiar to him.

More familiar than anyone, you could say—

Heartia screamed, all thoughts of his neighbor fleeing his head.

“Waaaaah!” He lunged forward, brandishing his fists. His target didn't even try to dodge, so he landed a blow on the intruder's cheek and then screamed again, “Comicron's dead! He's dead! And Master too!”

The figure fell easily—surprisingly easily—to the floor, head crashing against the wall. The intruder didn't even try to get up, so Heartia kicked the figure in the stomach next.

“Krylancelo left to chase after you! Do you even know what that did to Tish?! And Krylancelo! His name's been erased from the register at the Tower of Fangs... They're not even searching for him as a missing person anymore. One of my current juniors was wondering about that, and when she asked me, I... I... I had to just pretend I didn't know.”

He didn't know what to do anymore, since the figure wasn't getting up off the floor. His shouts quieted gradually until he was almost whispering at the end.

The figure was a woman.

She rose lightly, betraying not the slightest sign of injury, and asked, “Forte filled you in, I assume?”

It was Azalie. He hadn’t seen her in five years, but she didn’t look one bit different from back then. All of a sudden now, she was in his apartment.

Something was strange. He could see her right in front of him, but the sight almost didn’t feel real. Heartia nodded bitterly, feeling a little off-kilter from the oddness of the situation. “Yeah. He—”

“He’s in a coma at the Tower now too. His mind was destroyed. That’s convenient for me, though. It was a monster named Damian Rue who did it, but if he hadn’t done it, I would have had to. I need to have complete control over the Network, after all.”

Heartia raised another wordless scream and lunged at her again. He punched her once, twice, three more times after she stood up. But his punches didn’t seem to connect properly, and her body didn’t even flinch from the impacts. It was like he wasn’t even touching her, but he *was*. It was as if he were laying his fists into the reflection on the surface of a lake.

Heartia kept screaming meaninglessly.

Azalie smiled and spoke with ample meaning. “Be angry. Take out all your rage on me. Go ahead and hit me. Can you stab me right here? It won’t work, though. I won’t be hurt. No one can touch me! I’m invincible!”

Heartia retracted his fist, which wasn’t feeling anything from his blows. He stared blankly at her. “...Azalie?”

In contrast to her words, she was crying.



Just then, there was a knock on the door. Heartia turned around, grateful for the opportunity to take his eyes off Azalie, who was just standing there crying. He ran over to the door and opened it partway, where he found a woman wearing a jacket over her pajamas looking half-surprised and half-uneasy.

Heartia called her name, keeping his voice down. “Kera.”

He knew her. She was his age, and his neighbor on the other side. They ran into each other outside sometimes, and ate together sometimes too. She was something of a friend.

She gave him a worried bow and then said quietly, “Hello. Are you all right, Heartia? I heard you shouting...”

“Huh? Oh, umm... I’m sorry. It’s stress, I guess. I forgot where I was and shouted.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah.” Heartia nodded and she frowned and peered into the room.

“I guess I don’t see anyone else,” she muttered, eyeing the empty room. She didn’t seem quite convinced, however.

“Anyway, I shouldn’t have made so much noise at this hour. I have no excuse. I’m sorry. I’m okay now.”

“Well, all right...” Though dubious, she returned to her room and shut the door.

Heartia turned back to his room and found Azalie standing there.

“To tell you the truth, even my emotions are fading now... This might be the last time I cry,” she said. There was no indication on her face that she had just been crying. She indicated her body which, likewise, showed no signs of the beating she’d just taken. “Sorry, but you won’t be able to kill me. I’ll be destroyed anyway if you just wait, though. Yeah... At most, I’ll last another thirteen days.”

Heartia almost couldn’t understand what she was saying—just one interpretation made sense. Hitting upon the idea, Heartia voiced it to Azalie. “You’re...a spirit.”

She didn't answer, which he took as an affirmation.

Instead, she frowned sadly. "You're not angry anymore?"

"I haven't let you off the hook. I'm just...not in the mood anymore," Heartia spat. He took a step closer to her, but didn't get *too* close. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Is there even a purpose to this visit?"

"A purpose? A purpose..." She tapped at the air with her fingers for a bit—this too was a gesture he was very familiar with. Heartia waited, grinding his teeth. Azalie finally pulled her fingers back, hid her hand behind her back, and asked, "Who were the top three students in the Childman Class?"

Was this a joke? Heartia wondered for a moment, but Azalie's gaze was perfectly serious. He gave what he thought was the obvious answer. "You, Forte, and Tish, right?"

But Azalie quickly shook her head. "I think it's Colgon, Krylancelo, and you."

"What about Comicon?"

"Come on, you don't need to keep bringing him up," Azalie said like she was annoyed at his interruption.

Heartia sighed. He felt the urge to raise his voice mounting again, but managed to keep it quiet. "I don't know what you're trying to say, but I hardly think you can call the three of us the best. Or are you offering some kind of prize?"

"Don't misunderstand. I'm being serious. Let's see... Don't think about it in terms of specs. Those can be left back on the report cards at the Tower. What I need right now is the power to accomplish what needs to be done... And that's something that I don't have." She paused, seeming to spend the time in between her words thinking, and then corrected herself. "You don't know what I mean? Ever since that day five years ago, I haven't accomplished a single thing that I wanted to do. Not a single thing. It's almost funny. That's the reality for my stupid self. But what about Colgon? Anything he sets his mind to, he achieves. Krylancelo too... He probably doesn't think he's doing enough, but everything he needs to get done, he does."

"Well, you can leave me off the list, then. I've never accomplished anything..."

“Do you really think so?” was all Azalie said in response. Those playful brown eyes of hers always seemed like they were seeing through people. They shined alone in the dark room.

Heartia had thrown a fit, but the room wasn’t messy at all. There weren’t enough things in it for it to *get* messy in the first place, but not even the dust on the floor had been disturbed when Azalie fell. Heartia thought about turning a light on, but decided against it. He didn’t really want to see her face right now.

Since she wasn’t saying anything, he opened his mouth and asked, “So? What do you want to say to me?”

“Colgon and Krylancelo. If they tried to kill each other, could you stop them?”

This was also rather sudden. Heartia had no idea what she was saying. But...

He also felt like such a thing was definitely possible. Heartia lowered his eyes—everything about this was wrong. Pulling out his memories of five years ago like this... That alone was dangerous.

The personification of those memories—more so than anyone else—the Chaos Witch continued, her voice cold, “Tish can’t do it. Even ignoring the fact that she’s a step below the two of them in combat ability, she can’t kill her emotions. Fighting at all is too cruel for Tish—even now, I’m not sure she can even do any more fighting. And even if she can, she has a different role.”

“...”

“I can’t do it either. Damian Rue had the same power that I have now, and Krylancelo repelled him easily.”

“Why do you think I can do it?” Heartia finally asked.

But she didn’t answer, looking out the window instead. If she was really a spirit, then she didn’t even have a sense of sight. She didn’t even need a human form. Heartia knew enough about spirits to know that. Still, sorcerers who cast aside their physical bodies—spirits—all did the same thing.

Eventually, they weren’t able to anymore and they disappeared... They became spirits, but they weren’t able to exist as such for long. That’s what people said about them, anyway.

Azalie likely wasn't looking out the window to see the scenery. Heartia understood that. Eventually she said something random again, still not facing him. "It'll be dawn soon. Maybe it's already started..."

"What?"

"Krylancelo has chosen to fight with something that has tormented this continent for a long time. He's chosen to fight in his own way."

"You make it sound so grandiose," Heartia murmured, feeling something dry sticking in his throat.

She faced him again. She wasn't crying, of course, but Heartia saw in his mind the way she'd been crying a few moments ago. "You think so? I'll be a bit more understated, then."

Expressionlessly, Azalie said, "That boy is fighting the entire Deep Dragon race right now."



The lord of the Imminent Domain's mansion was wiped off the map in an instant.

Not that it was ever on a map. The location wasn't known to anyone. But in this wasteland, that mansion looking out at the sanctuary had existed. Quiet people had lived here, fighting a quiet battle that couldn't be won against the sanctuary's dragons.

It had only been a little more than a day since Orphen had arrived. In that short time, all the soldiers who had been here had died—they paid the price of fighting the sanctuary generously, and vanished into nothing.

The Thirteen Apostles who had sneaked in here had died too—choosing to challenge the lord of the Imminent Domain instead of the sanctuary. They had gotten caught up in the Imminent Domain's feud with the sanctuary and had died, powerless to save themselves.

The true power behind the lord of the Imminent Domain, the white sorcerer Damian Rue, had been destroyed as well—a natural ruler who thought only of using the people around him as pawns in his games. Having encountered

someone he couldn't control, he simply gave up on existing.

A vast number of deaths. Like life and the destruction of life was on clearance sale. Someone was watching this and laughing. Someone was scooping up the death that spilled down from the stage and sneering. Orphen trembled with disgust at the thought. This was a place of death. It was only natural it was squeezed dry. He and Claiomh and Majic and the dwarves who had nothing to do with any of this wouldn't be able to escape either.

No. Orphen opened his eyes wide and denied it.

No! I can't accept that!

He couldn't have possibly made it in time. The hands of death encircling this place could have evaporated everything in less time than it took him to blink if they wanted to. They could have ended everything.

Yet, before the mansion shook...before his body trembled with a fierce chill...he was moving. He was shouting something with his mouth, but he couldn't hear it with his ears. Two words with meaning. They were names. Claiomh and Majic's names. Then he shouted, "Jump in."

At the same time, he picked up the two dwarf brothers bound atop the table, one under each arm, and tumbled into the hole in the floor leading to the underground waterway himself.

In a soundless world, he plunged down into darkness. In the damp waterway, he felt cold air and smelled moss.

What good will this do? The murmur came from inside him, but it wasn't in his voice, and he didn't hear it in his mind but in his ear. *What good will prolonging the struggle do?*

There was no way he could win.

He didn't doubt that in the slightest.

Deep Dragons.

Something that surpassed human power. Dragons. This was hardly the only species that was true of, but if you were fighting against some kind of dragon, this was surely the worst of the lot.

He'd seen them before. In Fenrir's Forest, where they protected the sanctuary. If you divided the winds that blow in the forest between noisy and quiet, then these beasts existed only in silence. Huge bodies covered in pitch-black fur. Shrewd beasts. Noble, powerful, silent wolves. Abyssal Wolves. Fenrir. Deep Dragons.

This was a race of warriors, and they existed only to destroy their enemies. There was no room to negotiate or plead with them. Human power could do nothing to defend against or flee from the peerless dark sorcery they wielded with their eyes, their mental dominion. In all of Kiesalhiman history, no one had ever fought off a Deep Dragon before.

There was no convenient weapon that could defeat these beast kings with their dark power, and there were even people who worshiped these dragons as gods. Absolute death was confronting him, as something to pour his tainted life into—as a way to accept his fate.

I have no way to win. These were his thoughts. It had still only been a split second. He was still falling into the waterway. The spell of stopped time soon came undone and he heard the cold sound of his hard boots hitting the stone passageway.

That was the only sound he'd heard in the last few seconds.

I don't have a single way to win. There won't be a miracle. There's no point in praying to God—

"Leki, is that you?!"

There was a reedy voice in the dark passageway. He looked up at the ceiling he'd just jumped down from...

Claiomh's voice was drowned out by a violent tremor.

Orphen prepared himself for the passageway to cave in, but though there was an intense explosion above them, the waterway didn't crumble. It did shake violently, however. Orphen was tossed in every direction, impacting the stone walls several times and getting the wind knocked out of him. He dropped the dwarves he was carrying and closed his eyes, weathering the impacts.

Can we escape from this passageway? Deep Dragons' sorcery uses their eyes

as its medium. They can't directly affect anything they can't see. I suppose they could randomly crush the passageway from above, but...we have a chance.

There was no night sky or anything out of the hole in the ceiling. The building might still be there. A Deep Dragon should have been able to vaporize the whole building in an instant—this passageway too, while they were at it.

That seems strange to me. Can they not attack properly?

"Leki. It's Leki. He's back..."

As Claiomh muttered absentmindedly, Orphen reached in front of her and pointed down the waterway.

The girl's voice stopped like his arm was a conducting baton. Her eyes opened wide. Her expression looked almost deranged. She was giving him an intense look. Majic was too. Orphen returned their gazes with a darker expression.

"Did you get any of the food?" he asked them quietly.

"Just one. This one," Claiomh answered, holding up the backpack she was carrying.

Orphen nodded and shifted his gaze to Majic. He indicated the limp dwarves, who were still passed out, and said, "You carry them. Go down this passageway as fast as you can. If you're lucky, you'll be able to escape."

"What about you, Orphen?" Majic asked, his tone harsh.

Orphen shook his head. "I'll be right behind you."

"Please don't be stupid. Weren't you the one who said you wouldn't let anyone sacrifice themselves?"

"That's why I'm raising everyone's chance of survival. I'll bring the lord."

"Huh?" Majic exclaimed, surprised, but Orphen cautioned him with a hand before he could say anything else.

"I don't know if he just didn't have time, but he's the only one who didn't come down here with us. I don't like depending on it, but I'll need his power," he said, looking up at the ceiling. It had been shockingly quiet since the rumbling earlier, since Deep Dragons didn't make any sound. Neither their feet

moving nor their breathing produced any sound. You couldn't even hear their heartbeats.

"There's no way he's alive!" Majic's shout broke the quiet.

Orphen was by no means certain of this, but he said, "He survived a sanctuary assassin turning his body to mush. Of course, I have no idea if he could survive a serious attack from a Deep Dragon, but..."

"Why do you think we need him? Weren't you just saying we should leave him behind?" Majic asked.

Orphen thought for a moment before responding, "I didn't know if he'd wake up again with Damian gone. Now that I think about it, Colgon told me to work with him... Colgon was working for the lord too."

"...Huh?"

"That means he had something worth using. At least up until that point."

"Then I'll go and save him! I was the one who wanted to use him, after all. I'm not your apprentice anymore, so let me do what I want to do. You should be the one protecting Claiomh, Orphen. Unlike me, you—"

"I can't go either!" Claiomh interjected. She had a look on her face that was far graver than any of her typical expressions. "Leki's up there, right? If he is...I have to see him."

"...All right." Orphen nodded to both of them and sighed. Realistically, their chances of survival didn't change much whether they chose to face their foes or flee—at least according to what was generally known about Deep Dragons. In which case, Orphen felt more comfortable having the two of them within his reach instead of letting them flee before him.

Come to think of it, poor Winona said there were only a few sorcerers capable of standing up to dragons on the continent, and I was one of them. He wondered if she'd been counting Deep Dragons among those dragons, though. He considered the question himself and felt a headache coming on at the bleakness of his own calculations.

"That's fine, then. I just want you both to understand how stupid the decision

we've just made is. That being said," he added, "it's my immature decisions that led to you two being dragged into what should've been my own personal affairs. It's not something an apology can fix, but...I'm sorry."

"I didn't just get wrapped up in this. I wish you wouldn't think so little of me."

"Yeah, we came with you 'cause we wanted to."

The three of them exchanged words as they looked up at the hole in the ceiling.

It was still dark beyond the hole, and they couldn't see anything. They couldn't hear a single sound either.

This too was unnatural—Deep Dragons had no reason to hold back. There was no reason for them to stop their attack here.

Orphen kept his eyes fixed upward as he told the two of them, "I'll go up first. You two decide based on what happens whether you should come up after me or flee. All right? I want you to make the right decision, and carry it out without hesitating. Promise me that. It's possible we'll be killed the instant we step up there."

"...Okay," Claiomh said, while Majic stayed silent.

Curious, Orphen turned to look at his former pupil and asked, "Majic, you started to say something earlier. What were you gonna say?"

In the dark, damp passageway, Majic looked down and hesitated to answer, but eventually he told Orphen, "Unlike me, you're a sorcerer who's needed by a whole lot of people."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I have my hands full just thinking about myself."

Really, why do you think that? Orphen thought to himself as he bent over. Even as he concentrated on composing a spell, he continued to think to himself, using a different part of his brain. *There isn't really anything I can do.*

"I dash across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!" For just an instant, he neutralized gravity and kicked off the floor to fly upward.

He guessed the distance correctly and landed back in the kitchen again. And what he saw stopped him in his tracks.

The kitchen was almost exactly the same as he'd left it. The rumbling had caused some spices to fall over on the shelves and some cutlery to scatter on the floor, but that was it. The rest of the mansion was still there too.

What's going on? He groaned, confused. *Is the mansion immortal too, like the lord?*

"No," answered a cool voice—the lord, sitting in a chair. He was smiling, even. And, needless to say, uninjured. "There was no need to run. I knew that, of course." He pointed to the entrance to the waterway and added, "Plus, Yuis has destroyed the exit to that passageway. I can tell."

"Precognition, eh...? Damian said something about your perception being quicker than the passage of time..."

"That's how it is." The lord merely acknowledged the fact with no show of pride.

Still, Orphen felt smugness practically dripping from the man. He raised his voice in irritation. "Why don't you explain it with that power of yours, then—what is going on here?! What's going to happen next?!"

"I've been trying to tell you. I'm now the most powerful being on the continent."

"What was that attack back there, then? Was that just going with the flow?!"

"I wonder..." the lord muttered, his expression clouding for the first time. He clasped his hands on top of his knees. "What was that, indeed? The Deep Dragons are an insular species. Even for me, it's difficult to tell what's happening within them..."

"So your information's useless!" Orphen clicked his tongue and looked out the window. It was dark outside—impossibly, darker than the underground waterway. It was like a deep featureless black, darker than pitch, whirled just outside. He could tell that air was coming from outside and even the air was dyed black. And all of this was completely soundless. Soundless, black air, moving.

Of the six kings of beasts on the continent, these were the silent beasts, Fenrir.

Orphen put a hand on the back door in the kitchen, all the while writhing from the chill assaulting his body.

He pushed the door open.

There was supposed to be a garden around the mansion. Some of it had been burned down, but most of it should still remain. Now, however, it had been reduced to a wasteland—the same sandy, rocky wastes that surrounded the Imminent Domain.

The pallid light of the moon and stars illuminated everything. Black beasts ran around what looked like the bottom of the sea. It wasn't just one or two—there were hundreds of them, spanning as far as Orphen could see.

It was an unbelievable sight. Enormous beasts several meters tall were running about, attacking each other. Deep Dragons didn't use their fangs. They had reached the pinnacle of attack sorcery, so they didn't use their bodies to fight. Or at least, they shouldn't have. But these Deep Dragons weren't using sorcery. They charged headfirst at each other, crashing together, throwing one another to the ground...and none of this made any sound at all.

The soundless assault hardly seemed real. It was a vicious display, yet it was somehow monotonous at the same time. Orphen was stopped with his foot half out the door, unable to do anything but watch. Black beasts crashed against one another, flying here and there. None of them ever stopped moving. They were all moving, not one of them settling in one place.

What is going on here?

"What is this?" the lord whispered. He stood behind Orphen, watching the same scene, just as speechless.

Without turning around, Orphen murmured, "They're...fighting?" He could hardly believe it himself.

"Impossible! Deep Dragons are incapable of such a thing! They have no individuality; they exist only as a collective—"

“Then how do you explain this?! You’re supposed to be the one explaining things, aren’t you?!” Orphen yelled, leaping outside. The Deep Dragons weren’t using their sorcery. If their conflict became a sorcerous fight, then they wouldn’t just turn everything around them into a wasteland—the only thing they’d leave behind was ash.

Naturally, there was no sorcery that could prevent that from happening. Orphen didn’t even bother composing a defensive spell and instead focused on trying to read the flow of the fight.

“Orphen!” It wasn’t the lord who followed him outside but Claiomh. She must have gotten Majic to help her climb out of the hole. He was with her. The two of them were looking around dumbly, faces pale.

“What’s going on...?” Majic muttered.

Orphen turned around to him. “I have no idea. This might be a good opportunity, though. Apparently, we can’t use that waterway, but if we can find a path through this mess, we might be able to break out of their encirclement.”

“Master!” Majic shouted accidentally. This was no time to be paying attention to what he called Orphen.

Orphen turned and looked where the boy was pointing. There was one Deep Dragon in the pack who had stopped moving. The black wolf had its green eyes pointed straight at them.

Orphen could feel the beast’s killing intent with his skin. It was intense enough to make him shudder. He groaned, sensing that he’d been too optimistic.

Can I defend against it?! He held up his right arm.

His focus sharpened in an instant. All sorcerers dreamed about surpassing the sorcery of a Deep Dragon one day—they were fundamentally utilizing the same power, so why was there such an overwhelming difference in the power they were able to muster? Every sorcerer wondered that and thought at one point that surely *they* would be the one to surpass that unreasonable limit.

But in reality, there was no human being who had ever fought off a Deep Dragon.

Can I...do that? There were no problems with his composition. It was a familiar spell, one he'd cast again and again, hundreds of times before.

His sorcery would bring enormous destruction; if it hit its target without interference, he had no doubt that its power would pulverize even one of these beasts' bodies.

He began to chant. "I release thee, Sword of—"

He knew as he chanted that he wouldn't make it.

However...

In that small span of time, Orphen piled self-restraint upon self-restraint, suppressing his impulse to give in and ordering himself:

I don't need any extra power—

Keep the composition as small as possible—

My normal spellcraft won't cut it—

I need to make this work—

It needs to be perfect—

It doesn't matter who my enemy is—

I don't need to magnify its power, I need to focus it to a single, tiny point—

The words didn't go through his mind one after another.

Rather, it all flashed through his mind in an instant, and disappeared in the next instant.

And he understood it all in a single instant too.

There wasn't that big a difference in Master's level of power and mine. This is the one place there was an overwhelming gulf between us. I have to take my spell one step further forward!

"Light!"

In the space where his fingers were pointed, a ball of light swelled up. It was well-formed. It appeared faster than the timing he was used to—the same speed as one of Azalie's spells, or maybe even faster. The same speed as

Childman, or maybe even faster. He was confident in that.

A heat wave shot in a straight line toward the enemy Deep Dragon.

And after a few meters, it burst in midair.

Compose the...best possible...spell!

Orphen shouted, staring at the Deep Dragon's eyes, shining green beyond the pure-white explosion of his sorcery.

It all ended before he even had time to bend one of the fingers of his outstretched hand.

It's still not enough?!

He tried to think of a way to escape those green eyes. A way to protect not just himself but Claiomh and Majic as well from the Deep Dragon's dark sorcery.

Before he could think of a way to do it, the Deep Dragon went flying to the side.

All of this was happening faster than Orphen could even react to it. He finally got a chance to curse.

"What *is* this?!"

It was another Deep Dragon who had pushed that one away. This one, however, was clearly a little bigger than any other dragon near it. No, it was probably the biggest of the pack. It headbutted the dragon it had shoved aside and slammed into another dragon with its shoulder. Still, none of the Deep Dragons stopped moving, and the chaos only intensified.

"That's..." Two voices followed this murmur.

"Leki!" shouted Claiomh, and...

"Asraliel!" the lord, who had come out with them at some point, shouted, as if to call to the dragon rather than in wonder. "You did come back—just as you promised! You destroyed the old Asraliel and succeeded his name to become the next leader! But..." The lord's voice faded out at the end. "But then, why do you fight with your pack? What's going on here...?"

"How would anyone know the answer to that?" Orphen spat, observing the

pack again. He'd thought that the whole pack was fighting against each other, but now that he got a better look, it was just one Deep Dragon causing the mayhem. That one beast was fighting against every other dragon. It was fighting against its whole pack and not giving an inch. It was the biggest wolf among them. It was using only its body to attack and not any of its sorcery. And it was still soundless. Maybe this was how the race originally was, before they gained the power of sorcery.

The lord's face was twisted with doubt. He was even sweating. But it was obvious to anyone how abnormal this situation was, even without seeing his face. There was a contradiction here.

"If that young Deep Dragon lost to Asraliel...and that beast is still the old Asraliel, then there's no reason for the pack to fight like that. The Deep Dragons should have appeared here as they always were, with no changes at all," Almagest Betisletha muttered to himself. "And if that young dragon beat Asraliel and became the new chief...then why is the pack not listening to him? I don't understand this. Either way, it's fundamentally impossible for Deep Dragons to fight among themselves like this... What's happening?! It doesn't make sense for something that I can't understand to be happening!"

Maybe the lord was looking for agreement from those around him. That's what his voice sounded like.

But Orphen shook his head and told him, "Look with your own eyes. If you do that, you might be able to understand... Something that's overturning logic is happening right now." His voice was shaking. The pack of black wolves were still fighting, their positions all rapidly changing.

He thought he might be seeing it wrong, but now that he'd noticed it, it was incredibly easy to understand what was going on.

"What?! What did you understand?!" The lord tried to grab Orphen's shoulders, but he slipped away.

"Orphen... It's Leki...!" Claiomh seemed to have picked up on the same thing Orphen had. He nodded at her.

Orphen stood still, out of energy. There was no need for him to do anything anymore. They were as safe as they could possibly be right now.

He moved his gaze from the giant beast fighting against all the other dragons to another spot.

There was another dragon here. A Deep Dragon at its maximum size. It stood still, staring at the dragon who looked exactly like it did. With its green eyes.

Orphen sighed and muttered, “There are two Asraliels.”

“What...?” The lord compared the two beasts in shock. “Asraliel multiplied? No, there aren’t two of him. One of them isn’t Asraliel. It became an adult...without succeeding his name. The Deep Dragons increased in number. That hasn’t happened...in the last thousand years.”

“Leki came back... He came back as Leki!” Claiomh shouted haltingly. She broke into a coughing fit and fell to her knees, but her eyes were still pointed at Leki, watching him. “He’s a little...or a lot bigger, but he came back as Leki... He’s fighting without hurting his friends, and protecting us. Leki!”

As if in answer to her call, Leki howled. His voice rang out through the wastelands. And...

“Withdraw, my brethren!”

“Ouch!” Orphen held his head. Leki addressed his pack in a mental message so powerful it struck Orphen’s mind like a hammer.

“My brethren, you are as one will—and I am my own will, separate from you! Only as your entire pack do you match me! Understand that and withdraw!”

“Leki...” Claiomh held her head in the same manner Orphen did. There were tears in her eyes.

“Now is not the time to appear in response to your pledge. You know that and you still gathered here?! When did we warriors become hunting dogs?!”

The pack stopped in its tracks as if afraid of Leki’s voice.

When the already soundless pack also became still, it brought an even deeper silence.

Orphen suddenly realized that the darkness had started to fade. The amount of Deep Dragons was visibly lessening. They disappeared one by one, leaving. Finally, there was only a pair of dragons left—Leki and Asraliel.

They exchanged a glance that lasted only a few seconds before Asraliel vanished too.

The silent tumult departed. The garden no longer had even a blade of grass growing in it, but it was nothing more than the old Imminent Domain again. Dawn was close, but the darkness of night was still pressing down on them. The one remaining black wolf looked down at them—no, at Claiomh—from a terrible height.

“A Deep Dragon with its own will...” the lord muttered in astonishment, his shoulders drooping.

Claiomh ran past him, stumbling over to Leki. “Leki!”

Orphen followed a few steps after her. Majic ran with him.

Claiomh lunged at Leki like a charging puppy and clung to his front leg. As she sobbed, he pressed his nose to her back. It looked less like he was seeking attention from her and more like he was trying to comfort her himself.

As she sobbed, Orphen could just barely make out what she was saying to Leki. “I’m sorry... You’re all alone now, aren’t you... Leki?”

Leki didn’t answer. It seemed he was back to being a silent beast.



Chapter III: Nostalgia and What Is Not Nostalgia

“March on, great big beast~ Aah, deep, dark black, all day long~”

Orphen let his sigh mix with the wind of the wastes as he half-listened to the tuneless song.

The unchanging scenery was starting to warp his sense of time. His sense of distance too—but if he just followed his instincts, not as much time as he thought had passed and Fenrir’s Forest in the distance was still just as far as it seemed.

“But why, great big beast~ Where are you going with me riding you~ Things in black are always so selfish~ I really think the law should step in~ And round up all things in black~”

The singing wasn’t loud by any means. It was more of a whisper, honestly. But the wastes were so silent that it carried farther than it should have. Even with the “great big beast” plodding along, it made no sound whatsoever as it traveled. There was a dry wind blowing in the wasteland, but though it howled above them, the gusts didn’t make it down to the ground where they were. The sky looked unreal, like it was another world entirely.

“On it marches, the great big beast~”

“Will you cut that out?!” Orphen shouted, sitting up on the back of the great big beast—the enormous black-furred wolf—and looking down at its front paw. “I don’t know how to say this any other way, so I’m just gonna be direct: Stop singing all freaking day! Are you incapable of silence?!”

“I think it’d be weirder to be completely silent while being treated like this, personally...” The one to answer wasn’t the singing dwarf but the other one, his younger brother. The two of them were both clinging to the Deep Dragon’s front legs as it walked.

“Actually, don’t you think we’re pretty amazing?” the older brother dwarf said like it was a casual observation.

Orphen ignored him and replied to the other one. “What do you want? It’s not like there are seats on this thing.” Orphen himself was lying on Leki’s back. The Deep Dragon walked incredibly steadily, perhaps out of concern for its passengers, so it wasn’t an uncomfortable ride. Its water-repellent black fur was quite slippery, however, so Orphen couldn’t let his guard down lest he fall.

“Well...it is our second day of traveling like this...” This languid voice came from Majic. He also rode on Leki’s back, but he was gripping the Deep Dragon’s fur as if clinging on for dear life and avoiding looking down, perhaps out of a fear of heights.

Orphen watched him for a few seconds and then sighed. He wanted to argue back but then realized he was thinking the exact same thing himself.

He opened his mouth and the four of them all sang in unison, “Are you listening, great big beast~?”

“Why are you harmonizing?!” Claiomh shouted, raising her fists in the air. She was seated on the Deep Dragon’s head—just like Leki had ridden around on her own head. She turned and went on, “And don’t call him that! Leki’s the one carrying all of us, so just be quiet!”

After a pause, there came another quiet voice. “This really is quite incomprehensible,” the final passenger, the lord, said, as if he’d been waiting for his turn to speak. He was also riding on Leki’s back, but he was sitting slightly apart from Orphen and Majic, who were up near Leki’s shoulders. The lord rode around Leki’s hip area. He sat elegantly and calmly, like a young noblewoman out for a horseback ride with her friends.

“What is?” Claiomh asked, and the lord pointed forward. Fenrir’s Forest was before them, but it was still far in the distance. And...

“We’re not heading straight for it, are we?” The direction he was pointing and the way Leki was proceeding were not quite the same. Leki might have been listening to their conversation—every so often, his pointed ears would twitch under Claiomh—but he walked silently, without responding in any way. With his six passengers. “Not to mention if we teleported, we could arrive at the forest in a matter of seconds. Why are we walking?”

“Maybe he’s saving his strength for something,” Majic proposed, but Claiomh

shook her head.

“He can’t do it... It’s the location or something? That’s what he said, anyway.”

“The dragons’ barrier... But why would Doppel X be able to bypass it and not Leki...?” Orphen muttered to himself.

The lord raised his head as if that made some thought occur to him. “If the sanctuary has anything that could stop the advance of a Deep Dragon, it would be the Fairy Dragons’—”

“—Spirit sorcery? Sheesh, I thought that was just a legend, but I guess we’re gonna be seeing no end of that kinda stuff now...”

“Spirit sorcery?” Majic asked. The term was unfamiliar to him.

Orphen shrugged. He wasn’t too familiar with the concept himself. “Fairy dragons are so legendary they’re basically viewed as superstition. I don’t know of any cases where a human has actually seen one. If the legends are to be believed, they take the form of bright red lions and utilize spirit sorcery. Remember once when I was thrown out of your inn and couldn’t get back inside?”

“Yes...” Majic nodded. “I didn’t really get why, but you couldn’t come back inside for some reason.”

“It was some kinda curse to keep your well-paying clientele out. Real nasty stuff. Spirits are like personifications of natural energy. They can take any form they want and there’s no upper limit to what they can do. Spirit sorcery is therefore incredibly powerful—it uses the medium of contracts to utilize that limitless power unconditionally.”

“That would make it stronger than Deep Dragon sorcery, right?”

“Well, sure, in terms of sheer potential, spirit sorcery could freely make use of all the physical matter and power in the world with a single spell. The problem is the medium. It won’t activate without some kind of contract and its effect only extends to what’s covered in that contract.”

“Huh...” Majic responded vaguely, so Orphen reworded himself.

“Basically, it can’t hurt someone without their agreement and it can’t bind

anyone either. That's what I mean. With the inn incident, I wasn't involved in the contract at all, and it could chase me out of the inn, but it couldn't move me any farther and it couldn't kill me or anything either. To keep the great big beasts out of such a large area compared to a single inn would require their consent. I guess that means Deep Dragons as a whole made some sort of contract."

"...For this being the stuff of legends, you're awfully well-informed about it."

"It's *because* they're legends that they're well-known. But I also can't guarantee what I know is fact," Orphen admitted, adjusting his position. He looked around, but the scenery was still unchanging. Fenrir's Forest, which the lord had pointed to, was still far off in the distance.

He'd stopped pointing, but Almagest must have still been looking in that direction. Slowly—but with some irritation this time—he said, "This march should have been with the Deep Dragon species as a whole... We need to give the sanctuary no other options than its complete destruction."

The lord of the Imminent Domain spoke directly at the back of Leki's head. "But if this lone dragon has power that rivals the entire rest of his race...then I can't imagine he'll be outdone by the sanctuary's spirit sorcery."

"...So it's not that Leki can't get near the barrier; he's taking the long way for some other reason?"

"Well, there likely *is* something that would interfere with teleportation, but if he couldn't get near the sanctuary at all, then there would be no point in even taking the long way."

Orphen couldn't think of an argument, so he just nodded. He lay down on Leki's back and looked up at the sky. He'd rather watch the unchanging sky than the unchanging plains.

So Leki's got his own reasons for things, huh...? We've only got eleven days left, though. I'm sure Leki can make it there before then... We won't be too late, will we?

Orphen stole a glance at Leki's head, not that he was copying the lord or anything. What he ended up focusing on, however, wasn't Leki, who walked

with his head fixed in place like a lady with perfect posture, but the girl sitting atop that head. She wasn't participating in the conversation, but appeared to be saying something to Leki below her. It looked like she was just speaking one-sidedly to him, but they were probably having a conversation of their own.

Orphen took a breath and returned his gaze to the sky. *Well, I have no reason to doubt him...*

No matter how many enemies he made, there were still people he had no reason to doubt.

However...

Leki's pace suddenly changed.

Orphen sank down and grabbed Leki's fur—he'd sped up, so Orphen was likely to fall off if he didn't get a good grip. It was hard to get a sense of his speed because of the lack of sound he made, but he seemed to have instantly accelerated to his top speed.

"Wh-What? What happened?" Orphen groaned.

He heard the lord mutter behind him, "It's battle."

"Battle?" he asked back. He had no idea where that had come from.

He tried to look around, but he could barely open his eyes as the wind whipped at his face. What scant glances he could manage only showed him the ground rapidly moving under them and the still-unchanging scenery, like an optical illusion. Nothing, however, seemed to have changed.

Leki was traveling at a considerable speed. Majic had lost his composure and was only half-clinging to Leki at this point, and even the lord's composure seemed to have frayed a bit. While Orphen was looking behind him, something heavy slammed into his shoulders. He looked back forward and found that Claiomh had tumbled back onto him. The dwarves clinging to Leki's legs surprisingly hadn't fallen off, but they were screaming in two very different tones, their eyes spinning.

"Leki! What's wrong?!" Claiomh shouted. She was more clinging to Orphen's neck than Leki's back at this point. But the Deep Dragon didn't respond to her

voice either, just running at that same speed. He had sprinted a decent distance now and showed no signs of stopping.

“Battle... What? Who’s battling? With what?” Orphen asked no one. As he muttered to himself, he noticed something.

It looked just like a black boulder, but it had arms and legs.

It was just in his sight for a second and quickly disappeared.

He turned and tried to follow it with his eyes, but all he saw was Claiomh screaming with her eyes closed.

Eventually, there was a bright flash and a great boom somewhere in front of them. It was still far off in the distance, but the bright white flames were clearly produced by sorcery. Not even the giant pillar of flames or thunderous noise slowed Leki’s speed.

Orphen kept his head down and tried to get a visual on what was happening as he clung to Leki for dear life. The next glimpse he caught...was of a pile of corpses.

Claiomh was screaming.

“What the— What’s with the scale here? Did a war just start or something?” Orphen muttered.

Some of the corpses hardly even resembled human beings anymore. There were broken weapons lying all over the place too.

Orphen reflexively drew his shortsword and stuck it out against a threat he couldn’t see but could feel. Something long and black wavered, blending in with the scenery as it sped by—Orphen thrust his silver blade into it and pinned it in place.

In exchange for his blow connecting, Orphen felt his body float into the air. He was forced off of Leki’s back and fell, just like that.

He was able to catch Claiomh in midair because she still had her arms wrapped around his neck. In his left hand was Claiomh, pulled close, and in his right was the shortsword stabbed into something resembling a tentacle. He had to land on the ground with his only free limbs, his legs. He relied on his sense of

balance and sucked in a breath, trying not to panic, shouting out a second before he hit the ground at a rapid speed, “I bound across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!”

His spell lowered his speed and Orphen somehow managed to absorb the impact with his ankles and knees as he hit the ground. The momentum caused him to roll and he let it, spinning forward. He let go of the shortsword before he did—if he went crashing to the ground still holding it, he was liable to hurt himself, or more likely Claiomh.

After rolling a few times, he leaped up. There was a corpse in front of him. It was a man’s corpse...probably. There was no head, and nothing below the chest either. It was just a pair of arms attached to a torso, lying there like some kind of strange organism. His wounds made it look like he’d been torn apart by a powerful but not very sharp blade. Orphen had no idea where the rest of his parts were, but it was obvious enough to him that he had no more use for them.

“Orphen?!”

Orphen didn’t respond to Claiomh, instead shoving her to the side. He rolled in the opposite direction and pulled out a throwing dagger from his combat gear.

Before he could release it, something came flying straight for him. He clenched his hands into fists and batted it away. When he glanced over to see what it was, he found his own shortsword lying there. There was a small tear in his combat gear where his arm had hit it. He was sure the sword hadn’t come flying at him coincidentally but had been thrown—clicking his tongue at the pain of the cut on his arm, he held up the dagger again, ready.

“He left us behind!” Claiomh cried, coughing, but Orphen still had no time to answer her.

He was facing off against two figures who weren’t that far away from him.

There was one man and one woman.

One was old and holding a staff.

The other was young and wore a low-cut dress.

Neither of them looked like they belonged out here in the wasteland.

The old man melted away and disappeared. It was almost like he crumbled into sand and mixed with the earth. The woman just stood there gracefully and shot up vertically into the air without even bending her knees. She went so high Orphen had to crane his neck back to follow her.

There was no time to figure out exactly what they were, so Orphen just acted.

He thrust his hand out, holding the dagger, and shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

Light expanded and scorched the earth where the old man had crumbled away. His instincts were telling him to jump back, but Orphen restrained himself. Claiomh was still looking up at him in confusion. He couldn’t get too far away from her at this point.

Letting the wind from his explosion buffet him in the face, he looked up and followed the woman with his eyes. He raised his arm up, composing a spell to use against her this time.

Just then, the woman’s legs stretched down.

Her legs kicked off the ground and she rose up even higher.

At the same time, her legs bent at a right angle on the ground and sped toward Orphen.

This is...

Orphen scrapped the spell he was working on and shouted instead, “I spin thee, Halo Armor!” A chain wall of light blocked the woman’s shoe as her foot sped toward him at an impossible angle.

Before the wall of light disappeared, Orphen grabbed Claiomh and leaped back with her.

He’d predicted this—no, he had been prepared for it. His whole body had warned him. His memories and all five of his senses were sending him warning signals from every direction. He knew exactly what sort of danger he was in at the moment, and he had to deal with it while carrying Claiomh.

The sand at his feet began to roil like waves, but that was nothing that

surprised him at this point. Even when the sand whirled up to form a shape like a cage.

The eyes of the woman floating in the air flashed green and, like some sort of terrible insect that lives in dark places, her limbs shot out to skewer him, but he was prepared for even this.

Orphen quietly acknowledged exactly what it was he was fighting.

One of the kings of the beasts that lived on the continent, the fierce Berserkers.

Red Dragons!

“Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!” He released his sorcery at the sand cage attempting to ensnare him.

He knew these sound waves wouldn’t be able to destroy the dragon, but he was still able to temporarily bind the foe who had transformed into sand to attack.

The sand rose into a pillar and then began to change back into the old man he’d seen earlier—with green eyes, as he expected to see. Orphen whipped his wrist, throwing the dagger right at the dragon’s unnatural eyes.

The dagger stabbed into the right eye of the immobilized Red Dragon.

Normally, it wouldn’t do real damage to stab a Red Dragon anywhere in its body. It certainly wasn’t a fatal wound even though his dagger had hit its target in the eye—but the dragon with the shape of an old man still bent back, frozen for a little longer.

Orphen used the opportunity to make his escape, grabbing Claiomh and pulling her several steps away. He was feeling incredibly anxious because she was having such delayed reactions to everything.

“Orphen, Orphen, Orphen?! What’s going on—”

The enemies weren’t human. They used inhuman strength, inhuman timing, and inhuman spatial maneuvering.

Even now, the woman had predicted Orphen’s retreat and her feet had broken through his barrier, speeding toward him and Claiomh. He had

predicted this when he'd thrown the dagger. He knew her attack would come as soon as he did it.

Normally, he wouldn't be able to avoid her attack—he wouldn't even be able to detect it.

Things were happening in instants, and all of their attacks were fatal. Orphen had to sharpen his mind as much as he possibly could to fend them off.

He had to stay one step ahead of everything that was happening. As everything accelerated around him, he shouted, "I leap over thee, Towering Spire!"

Holding Claiomh, his body traveled a real distance at an improbable speed.

He performed pseudo-teleportation while holding another person. He didn't have time to worry about whether his spell could handle the task. Orphen jumped through space with Claiomh and returned to reality. Behind them, the two Red Dragons who had let their prey escape from their initial trap just stared at them.

"O-Orpheeennn..." Claiomh was limp, her eyes spinning.

Orphen thrust her away and asked her quietly, "Can you run?"

"Huh? Umm, okay..." Claiomh responded, sounding faint.

Orphen looked up at the sky for a second, then stepped forward to protect her. He faced the two Red Dragons and clenched his fists. "Are you Doppel X?" he asked them.

The expressions they showed in response were exceedingly natural for their false forms. They smiled strained, ironic smiles.

He suspected he wouldn't get an answer. "What are Red Dragons fighting in a place like this? I know this is sudden, but I'm the one who killed Helpart in Urbanrama."

He cautioned the Red Dragons with his eyes when they looked like they were about to start moving again. Orphen drew two new daggers, praying that his voice sounded confident.

Even if it was an obvious bluff, he needed to draw their attention to him

completely...

“If you two don’t come at me at the same time, I’ll take you out one by one.”

“You don’t seem like a human,” one of the Red Dragons said. Neither of them opened their mouths, so it was difficult to tell which one was speaking. “It’s obvious that you’re skilled. But it’s also irrelevant.”

Suddenly, Orphen sensed two more presences behind him.

He turned and confirmed that there were two more dragons now, all four of them surrounding him from every direction. Behind him and to his left, there was a young woman in casual clothing; to his right, a well-built man. As soon as he saw them, his enemies all moved at once.

How many Red Dragons are there out here?! There could be any number of them hiding.

His senses were still preternaturally sharp—it was as if he had an additional person’s five senses to utilize along with his own. He had complete control of the space and could read his enemies’ movements perfectly. But...

This is just instinct. If I rely on it completely, it’ll be wrong eventually! And when that time came, it would all be over. Since he was fighting dragons, he could be sure of that. If he didn’t finish off his enemies as quickly as possible, in single hits, he wouldn’t be able to keep fighting like this.

That’s why Master always fought to debilitate his enemies with his first hit. If he could keep this up forever, then maybe he really was a monster! While he thought, he composed a spell.

He released it with a shout. “I release thee, Sword of Light!” As the woman in the casual clothing charged at him, he rolled and shot his hand out, thrusting a current of light at her.

He’d released the spell earlier than he had with his previous spells—if they were observing him and matching his timing, then it would be harder for them to dodge this attack. Still, the Red Dragon transformed her body to dodge to the side. In the process, however, she left behind half of her body to face the attack. The Red Dragon was enveloped in flames and fell to the ground, only her head and left arm remaining. This wouldn’t kill a Red Dragon, but they did

apparently have trouble regenerating burned body parts. He'd learned that in his fight with Helpart.

Of course, they had likely assumed that one of them would go down. Orphen let his momentum carry him behind Claiomh. The young man Red Dragon with the imposing physique—the disguise of one, anyway—was already close, shrinking his body as he approached. There was no time for sorcery anymore.

Take him down...with one hit! His body naturally went into a stance.

He tossed the dagger in his right hand to his left and gripped it there instead.

He lowered his hips, pulling back his right hand. He always prepared to attack this way, but a new feeling bloomed inside his mind as well. As he watched his movements, preparing for what he was about to do, he imagined his enemy.

Not the Red Dragon before his eyes.

The man in the priest's robes, Jack Frisbee.

He had called it the Demolishing Fist. The ultimate striking technique. The basics perfected, and an ideal that could also be called the ultimate exaggeration.

The Red Dragon swung its arm up for a surprisingly direct strike. Orphen dove out of the way and thrust his right fist out toward his enemy's side. Strikes couldn't hurt a Red Dragon—they had neither a sense of pain nor internal organs nor vital spots. Still, he needed to push his foe back with his fist to buy time.

His enemy was swift. He dodged Orphen's fist without even using his kind's trademark shape-shifting. At the same time, his left arm stretched up at an unnatural angle to slap Orphen's face.

Orphen caught the blow with his boot—it had come from that low—and went for another punch with his right fist, leaping forward to headbutt his foe at the same time. His hits connected, but they were shallow. Still, he was able to get his enemy to back off slightly.

Even if I can picture it perfectly, it's hard to pull off! Orphen cursed as he used the time he'd bought himself to throw the two daggers in his left hand. They

flew a short distance and one of them missed, but the other embedded itself in the Red Dragon's head above his eye.

Again, a Red Dragon wouldn't feel any pain from a stab wound, but if he could divert their attention or blind them for a second, then the attack had meaning.

And in the instant the Red Dragon stopped moving...

"Hah!" Orphen brought up his right foot, which hadn't hit the ground again yet, and thrust his heavy boot into the center of his enemy's body.

Seeing the Red Dragon's body fly into the air, Orphen shouted, "I construct thee—" He thrust out both hands and composed his spell. "Spire of the Sun!"

A concentrated pillar of flames hit the Red Dragon's body, and a moment later...

There was an explosion. He'd held back because he and Claiomh were right next to the dragon, so he wasn't able to burn his whole body away. Still, the majority of the Red Dragon's body burned, falling to the ground as little more than a lump of black goo.

That took too much time. Orphen clicked his tongue and turned around. The four dragons had all been coming at him at once. He wouldn't be surprised if the remaining two had already killed Claiomh. *I don't even have the strength to protect myself completely...*

When he turned, he found Claiomh sitting there, looking to the side in confusion. She was still safe. He didn't see an injury on her.

He didn't see the Red Dragons either.

Confused, Orphen followed Claiomh's eyes.

He quickly found the dragons. There were two amorphous white lumps on the ground. They just barely retained some of their human figures, but they had lost their shapes after what must have been frighteningly powerful impacts to their bodies.

Orphen saw two stakes sticking up out of the dragons' torsos. But they weren't stakes: they were the two dwarf brothers.

Catching on, Orphen looked up. As he suspected, Leki had come back

soundlessly to stand guard behind Claiomh.

Leki must have thrown the two dwarves.

With intimidating hisses like insects might make, the Red Dragons swatted the dwarves away and stood back up. They faced Leki for some time, trying to scare him away...then suddenly retreated. Without even returning to their human forms, they collected their scorched allies and disappeared just like that.



Orphen waited a few moments, then sighed. “Guess it’s over...”

“I still don’t really understand what happened,” Claiomh murmured.

Orphen responded only by laying a hand on her head. Claiomh seemed awfully calm. Maybe she hadn’t seen the bodies yet.

Majic was sticking his head out from on top of Leki. The boy seemed more concerned about any threats from the direction the dragons had fled than about the scattered bodies.

“Orphen. Those were Red Dragons... Right?”

“Yeah. That kinda thing is probably gonna start popping up all over now.”

Leki had his head low so that Claiomh could get back on him. Watching them vaguely, Orphen thought to himself, *Leki didn’t hurt the Red Dragons then either. He’s basically rebelling, but he doesn’t see the other dragons as enemies—is there some other enemy he’s expecting to fight?*

Another voice from Leki’s back interrupted his thoughts. This time it was the lord. He must have been indicating the terrain around them, but his hand movements were somewhat unnatural as he said, “I have no idea who all these bodies belong to, but some of them are still alive. In fact, it seems like one group drew the enemy to let the main force flee.”

“...How can you tell?” Orphen asked.

The lord shrugged. “There are signs of a big group moving through—it’s easy to tell from up here. They went that way. The way this Deep Dragon was heading.”

“These guys are...” Orphen started, glancing at the corpses—rather, the scattered body parts—but he stopped when he heard the sound of dragging feet.

He turned around and found the two dwarves walking toward him with glazed eyes. The two of them spoke up in turn.

“Listen up, debt collector. I think there’s something that bears being said at this point.”

“You’re not even going to bring up how we were just treated, are you?”

“...Gimme a break. I’ve got my hands full right now,” Orphen told them for the time being.

They returned to Leki’s back (the dwarves to his front legs) and got moving again, this time not at a sprint and without any of the explosions or Red Dragons pursuing them anymore. The lord seemed to have been right about the bodies being a distraction for the Red Dragons, because there were no more corpses nor signs of battle after that as they proceeded.

Leki moved silently, as if nothing had happened. He must have picked up speed earlier to try to get through the area without engaging the Red Dragons.

On top of the Deep Dragon, Orphen looked back the way they’d come and thought to himself. *What’s Leki’s goal?*

Their destination was the sanctuary. That was surely true. No matter what awaited there... *What reason would he have to take us? If he’s gonna be fighting something, Leki could just go by himself... We’d just get in his way. But Leki doesn’t want to fight the sanctuary. He’s shown as much from his behavior so far.*

In the sanctuary, there was a tear in the Ayrmarkar barrier that surrounded the continent, and the goddess was coming through it—if the lord was to be believed, that is.

That would mean simple destruction for the continent, so if that’s what Leki was going to fight against, it would certainly make sense from the standpoint of the role the Deep Dragons played.

If that’s the case, though, Leki has no reason to stand against the sanctuary... The lord’s conflict with the sanctuary doesn’t even make sense in the first place. Really, the interests of everyone on the continent should be aligned. Orphen glanced at the lord.

The lord of the Imminent Domain simply stared forward, pretending not to notice his gaze.

If the lord’s plan is to summon Demon King Swedenborge, who has the power

to kill the gods, with the...Second World-Seeing Tower or whatever in the sanctuary, why doesn't he just let the sanctuary do that? Why doesn't the sanctuary try to do it themselves? What reason do they have to send Doppel X out to sow chaos?

Doppel X. The mark of betrayal. But who were they, and what had they betrayed?

Orphen grimaced, remembering the words of the doll he'd encountered under Alenhatam—the killer doll, transformed into a being made purely for battle by the Celestials. Everyone was betraying everyone else. No one was telling the truth.

Everything was a lie and everyone was being deceived...even the people telling the lies.

Orphen bowed his head and shut his eyes.

Memories flooded into his mind.

The scream of a monster, transformed by a sorcerous sword...

The portrait of the Celestial priestess Isterviva...

An old sorcerer's cries after entering a device to transform humans into killing machines...

Asraliel's words in Fenrir's Forest...

The showdown with himself waiting for him when he returned to Tefurem after five years...

The ruin of the Tower of Fangs in the same town...

An underground theater performing a tale of the continent's salvation for no one to hear...

The Death Instructors of Kimluck, the center of the Church, and what they served at the cost of their lives for their salvation...

Their only survivor being the one who betrayed what they served...

The Kimluck pope's immortal curse, the goddess, destruction...

What was there in all that? What did I see?

His journeys were all made to know the past.

His past, his family's past, the continent's past.

He had traveled to see it all, take it in, and understand it.

And his journey wasn't over. It wasn't because he still had things to do. It was because after he'd digested all that, what was left inside him that he'd decided to nurture wasn't the him of any point in the past but the him that existed now. It was because of his family that existed now, the world that existed now...

Then, the path he'd traveled since—Nashwater, Urbanrama, the Imminent Domain—what had he seen there? It wasn't the future.

If anything, it was a lack of future. What is that?

"It's despair. It was a journey to learn of despair."

Orphen looked up in response to the voice in his ear. He didn't even need to check who'd said the words. It was the lord. At some point, he'd begun staring at Orphen, a smile on his face.

But the voice he'd heard didn't belong to the lord. It almost sounded like it could be anyone's voice. He wouldn't be surprised if it had come from anyone... Because Eris at the hot spring town, Ryan Spoon, Helpart, Damian Rue, Lottecia, Leticia, Claiomh, Majic, even Leki had all experienced despair!

He seemed to be the only one who'd heard the lord's words. Majic was curled up and dozing; he must have been tired. Orphen saw the lord avert his eyes like he was playing dumb.

The past, the present, and the future. There were three goddesses, and they could never know one another. The past didn't know the present and the future had broken things off with the present. That was how the Kimluck Church talked about fate.

Orphen clicked his tongue, making sure the lord could hear him, and rolled over. His right arm ached, reminding him that he'd forgotten to heal it, so he closed the wound with sorcery.

"Orphen, I think I see something!"

Orphen opened his eyes when Claiomh called his name—apparently he'd nodded off. He shook his head to clear away his drowsiness, surprised at himself. He must have been truly exhausted to actually fall asleep in this situation.

"What's 'something'?" he asked, sitting up. Behind Leki's head, he couldn't see much in front of them.

Claiomh turned around, a strange expression on her face. "Well...something! There's a bunch of people."

"The remnants of the defeated, no doubt," the lord said coolly without looking.

Orphen ignored him and climbed up Leki's head. Leki flicked his ears in annoyance, but Orphen ignored that too.

The rest of the wastes were still unchanging, but it was true that there was a group up ahead of them. And they certainly fit the look of the survivors of that battle. It was some dozen people huddled together as if to stave off the cold.

Orphen quickly realized that it wasn't the cold they were trying to stave off but something else. Even from a distance, he could tell that they were all limp with exhaustion.

They couldn't possibly have missed the enormous Deep Dragon lumbering toward them. It was clear that there was a commotion brewing between a few of them—one giving instructions to their exhausted comrades. Either to retreat or to fight.

Orphen thought of the corpses that had likely been slain by the Red Dragons. These must have been their escaped friends.

Retreating *or* resisting would be futile against a Deep Dragon. They must have known that.

I wonder how much they know about dragons. If they were who he thought they were, then he could guess what they'd do next.

They were attempting to get into a formation while Leki was still at a distance from them. He'd thought there was no way they could be decently organized

since they didn't even have a lookout, but once they started taking action, they moved swiftly. They immediately spread out and formed several groups of four or five people each. In those groups, they'd likely split into those concentrating on offense or defense and then launch an all-out attack. With this method, they'd be able to utilize their maximum firepower without suffering any casualties—if they weren't up against a Deep Dragon, that is.

They had a strong leader. That was Orphen's judgment.

They were still too far away to be able to distinguish any of their faces. Orphen squinted down at them and whispered to Claiomh, "You can talk to Leki, right?"

"Huh? Yeah." She nodded.

Orphen nodded back. "Then tell him to go past that group without hurting them."

"I think that's probably what he'd do anyway, but... Leki, did you hear that?"

Leki didn't reply in any sort of way—of course, if he'd nodded, the two of them would have gone tumbling off his head.

Still, Orphen didn't feel the need to warn him again. Claiomh was right—that's probably what he was planning to do already. If he wanted to wipe them out, they'd be wiped out by now. And Leki's previous behavior had shown that he didn't intend to hurt anyone. So Orphen thought, anyway.

Leki finally entered their attack range and Orphen could hear voices coming from his left and right.

"Ready! Sync up!"

"Embrace destruction!"

That was probably their most powerful attack, but... As the beams of destructive light converged from right and left, they vanished, leaving behind only flashes of light in Orphen's retinas. Leki had erased them all with a single glance.

Orphen could tell how panicked they were from their breathing. They were close enough for that now—and then Leki silently passed by them. They didn't

attack again. By the time Leki had moved past them, the sorcerers who had attacked him were crumpling to the ground like they'd passed out. They must have gotten a light dose of Leki's mental dominion. Leki had dealt with the whole lot of them instantly, without breaking a sweat.

There were some familiar faces among the sorcerers peering up fearfully from Leki's feet. Orphen had seen a number of them at the Tower of Fangs before.

As the black sorcerers panicked, Leki pierced deep into their formation without facing any sort of resistance. One man stood there. Orphen was familiar with both his name and his face. Calling him an acquaintance wasn't exactly correct, but Orphen had seen him before.

The man stood before the Deep Dragon boldly, his arms folded. About as many muscles as could possibly fit were crammed into his huge frame, bulging beneath his black uniform. He was getting on in years, but he was also blessed with abundant vitality, which made him look younger than he was. His golden hair was thinning, but the intense emotion in his eyes seemed to envelop his whole body and whirl around him like an aura—it was enough to make one believe in such things.

"Surrender." When the man opened his mouth it was to make an arrogant command. "You are the ones caught in our trap. We do not stand alone. The white sorcerers of the Misty Falls stand with us. If they all attack at once, they can stop even a Deep Dragon."

His order was directed at the Deep Dragon, but Leki, of course, didn't respond.

Claiomh opened her mouth to say something, but Orphen motioned for her to keep quiet and leaned out himself. "You know you can't stop us. There's no need to bluff, Master Pluto...Demon of the Capital."

The demon's eyes looked up at them for the first time, at the insignificant extras clinging to the mighty dragon like parasites—at least, that's what the look in his eyes said.

"...Are you human?" he asked. "Not those blasted Red Dragons?"

Orphen leaped down from Leki's head. It was a decent distance, but he

landed without sorcerous assistance.

Volkan, clinging to one of Leki's front legs, turned his face Orphen's way and said, "Hey, black sorcerer. Aren't you getting a little too riled up? And I just got comfortable in this position!"

"Huh? You're comfortable, Brother?" Dortin groaned.

"This won't amount to a commotion," Orphen told them. "Just keep clinging down there."

"Mm. We'll do that, then... Though it almost seems to me like you're treating us as if we were moss or something."

Orphen ignored him and turned to face Pluto once again. "You had one of your people try to recruit me once."

Pluto scoffed. "So what? I do the same with plenty of people every year. I turn away plenty of people at the gate too. We are the pinnacle of black sorcery on the continent, the glorious—"

"Thirteen Apostles... I was summoned for an interview five years ago."

Pluto's eyebrow twitched up at that. He gave Orphen an appraising look and then simply said, "You're too young. Five years ago, you would have been a child."

"Guess so." Orphen agreed, waiting for him to remember. There had likely only been one sorcerer called to the palace at that age.

While he waited, Orphen looked around. Leki had broken through the Thirteen Apostles' formation with a show of obscene force, and since he was already right in front of Pluto, there was pretty much nothing they could do now. Not to mention, the majority of them were collapsed on the ground now, and the rest couldn't attack carelessly.

Among them, Orphen spotted a tall woman staring at him in shock. When she finally called out to him, Pluto began to mutter at almost the exact same time.

"You're—"

"Krylancelo!" Maria Huwon called, running over. She was a former teacher at the Tower of Fangs and one Orphen had interacted with to an extent in the

past. She looked a little older, but not much else had changed about her appearance.

He didn't know what she had been planning to do, but a moment before reaching him, she stopped and seemed to remember her current position. She cleared her throat and then began anew, "I can hardly believe it... What are you doing here?"

"I summoned him here, to my Imminent Domain." The lord jumped down from Leki's back, showing himself. He stood tall and proud as if trying to compete with Pluto in attitude and questioned the Demon of the Capital in more of an interrogation than a simple inquiry. "I have my own questions for you. What are the Thirteen Apostles doing here? You weren't even mobilized yesterday. You should still be in the capital—" He was cut off there.

Pluto moved suddenly. He uncrossed his arms and pulled an enormous hammer up from the ground beside him—Orphen hadn't even considered that it might be a weapon, it looked so ridiculous—swinging it into the lord's legs. It wasn't that heavy a hit, but the weapon had so much weight behind it already that the lord went down powerlessly, one of his legs shattered by the blow. The action didn't even prompt a twitch in Pluto's facial expression.

Orphen could hear Claiomh and Majic gasping in silent screams. Orphen himself had just watched it happen without moving. There was nothing he could have done.

The demon looked down at the lord and spat, "As a member of the Continental Sorcerers' Association, one of my objectives is eliminating you, as you would bring harm to the continent—though if the white sorcerers are right and Damian Rue has really been destroyed, then your elimination is of the lowest priority."

"You serve the palace and you would oppose the Union of Lords? Absurd," the lord muttered. His leg was completely broken, but he showed no pain on his face—he might not actually be feeling any in the first place.

An objection came from Maria. "Master Pluto! It's because you do things like this that—"

"You want to call me crude and rash, I'm sure. How many years do you think

I've been fighting this man?! How long do you think I have waited for this?!"

"Longer than you've been feuding with me, certainly, Pluto."

Pluto ignored Maria's sarcastic comment and stood the hammer up on the ground once again. A louder sound than Orphen had been expecting rang out through the windy plains.

Pluto sidled up to the lord. "As the boss of the Thirteen Apostles, I'm not kept at the palace merely as a decoration, Almagest." He'd left his hammer behind, but the demon could probably pulverize the immobilized lord with his own body weight if he wanted to.

Orphen furtively clenched his fists so that he could intervene if he needed to, though he wasn't sure if it was actually possible to kill the lord. He couldn't be completely sure either way.

On the other hand, there was a possibility Pluto's questioning (torture?) would get the answers Orphen himself wanted out of the lord.

And as if he had nothing to hide himself, Pluto belted out, "Let me tell you the goal of we Thirteen Apostles, Almagest. We have long warred with your Imminent Domain, have we not? Now that the Imminent Domain has fallen, our next target for destruction is obvious. It's the sanctuary."

"The Union...mobilized you in secret from me? The Union of Lords has betrayed humanity, which I must protect?"

Pluto scoffed at the lord's question. "Hah! What reason do we have to consult with the Union of Lords about every little thing? Our loyalty is only to the Continental Sorcerers' Association—"

"The Thirteen Apostles are acting on their own... That's a coup d'état!" Almagest shouted, banging his fist on the ground.

This time, Pluto didn't laugh. He displayed his anger openly instead. "The Union of Lords antagonizing the sanctuary without any word to the populace is the true betrayal of the crown! We're simply cleaning up the mess they created."

"If you were able to take on the sanctuary, I would have employed you first,

you fool.”

They were arguing emotionally—it looked that way, at least.

Orphen watched them coldly. The two of them were just performing for their audience. Their argument was meaningless.

Almagest, the lord of the Imminent Domain, the Union of Lords’ assassin against the sanctuary.

Pluto, the boss of the Thirteen Apostles who also worked for the Union of Lords.

They were very similar. Born rulers. Kings of their domains. Even if the words they were saying were meaningless vanity, they were used to commanding others.

Am I getting this impression because I’m a sorcerer from the Tower? It was commonly said that there were differences between people from the west and east. Westerners valued independence and individualism while easterners accepted rulers and being ruled.

Perhaps because she was also from the west, Miss Maria interrupted them, her voice quiet but firm. “You can understand how we couldn’t just sit still, can’t you? The fate of the entire continent is at stake here. We wouldn’t have acted if it wasn’t.”

“So that’s why you went and challenged the sanctuary and piled up all those victims of the Red Dragons. This is why you’re incapable of the task!” the lord barked at Maria, just as harsh as he had been with Pluto. “I am the guardian of all of humanity... I won’t allow any of them to die pointless deaths. Follow orders that have value, won’t you?!”

“I’ll admit our mistake.” Pluto chewed his lip with frustration. “Six of them came at us at once. We sacrificed half our numbers to take down two of them. Here, where we’ve not yet even reached the sanctuary!” Pluto shouted, then lowered his raised fist. With a sigh, the demon continued, “We’ve been staring them down here since morning. The sanctuary isn’t showing themselves.”

“And you’ll be wiped out by tomorrow night. Your arrogance is why I never made use of your fighting strength! You think you can solve any problem with

sorcery and you don't consider any alternatives—”

“Tell me this, then, Almagest. Why have you relied upon Yuis Colgon and summoned Krylancelo here now? Does that not display the same lack of foresight?” Pluto asked flatly, turning to look at Orphen. His blue eyes were strangely faint and gentle in contrast to the rest of his burly appearance. Orphen waited for his next words.

What he said was about what Orphen expected. “Krylancelo, eh? I had thought that none of his students still remained, but I suppose this is convenient. You will come with us. Be glad that you'll get off with just some questioning.”

“I'm coming with you, eh? How are you gonna make me?” Orphen asked him.

The demon's eyebrow rose immediately, like he was either unused to opposition or it was commonplace enough for the reaction to become habit. “If you're a member of the Sorcerers' Association, then you can't disobey the orders of a council member like myself.”

“I'm not a member. I was removed a long time ago.”

“I'm not talking about the Association's worthless rules and regulations! The Association is the very spirit of sorcerers itself—if you're a sorcerer, then you were born an Association member and you'll die an Association member! You must pledge yourself to the Association! If you can't do that, then give up your sorcery!” Pluto roared so fiercely, Orphen felt like there was actual wind blowing at him from the other man.

“He won't submit to those words,” the lord said arrogantly. “Just as Yuis didn't—”

“I don't want you to misunderstand,” Orphen said, not to Pluto but to the lord. “Don't treat me the same way as Colgon. I may be about to overpower the Thirteen Apostles, but that's just because I have my own problems with them. It's not for you.” Orphen looked between the lord and the demon—the first was speechless, the second, scowling.

The next one to speak wasn't either of them, but Maria. “Krylancelo—” She tried to grab Orphen's arm, but he stepped back to avoid her.

Her face stiffened. Furrowing her brow in a way that would have intimidated a weak-willed student at the Tower, Maria raised her voice slightly. “Pluto’s just asking if we can work together. I happen to agree with him on that point.”

“And I’d like you all to return to the capital, but not because I agree with the lord.” He looked not just at Maria and Pluto, but at all the Thirteen Apostles standing by around them. Then he looked down and checked the collar of his combat gear. “No, let me rephrase that. You say you’re here to oppose the sanctuary... If you can’t abandon that goal, then could you please leave?”

“I don’t see a reason why we should have to have your permission to be here,” Pluto snapped.

Orphen chuckled, seeing the irony in his words. “The reason, eh? I guess it’d be because I’m a sorcerer, just like you said. If I didn’t feel guilty leaving you alone, then that’s what I’d do.”

“...Are we really so powerless?” The anguish in Maria’s voice must have been because she too was a member of the Thirteen Apostles.

Orphen shook his head. “I told you I wasn’t agreeing with the lord. It’s not about whether or not you’d be able to effectively oppose the sanctuary.”

“What is it about, then?”

“It’s about *not* opposing the sanctuary,” he said, looking up at Leki and at Claiomh on top of Leki’s head. Directing Maria’s attention to them, he continued, “That’s what an ally I trust says, anyway.”

“Do you think we’re here sacrificing people as a show of vanity or on a whim?”

“I’ll admit that the sanctuary is acting strangely. That’s why I’m going there—”

“What will you going there accomplish?!” Pluto barked, face flushing with anger.

Orphen shot him a look out of the corner of his eye and told him, “If you won’t understand until I teach you a lesson, then I’m happy to do so.”

“You bastard—”

Orphen ignored the demon’s enraged shout and casually brought his elbow

up to block an attack coming at him from his blind spot.

Next, he reached his arm out and grabbed the leg his adversary sent at him with a kick—it wasn't Pluto who'd attacked him but Maria. He held that position, gripping her ankle, as he stared at Pluto in front of him.

"I see," Maria muttered. "It *has* been five years, I suppose. Now that your body has matured, I can't just subdue you with force anymore..."

"I'm sorry, Miss Maria." Orphen bowed his head to her.

"...You're apologizing? Why?" Even though she asked the question, he assumed she already knew the answer.

Orphen let her leg go and formed a fist with his freed hand. "It's not just my physical ability. Right now, there's not a single way you could beat me."

He thrust his fist out at the man before him. Pluto was still enraged, but he had regained some of his calm after witnessing that interaction. "Pluto, Demon of the Capital! You don't need to wait for your turn—come at me! I want everyone here to understand what I mean!" he shouted, loud enough for all the Thirteen Apostles nearby to hear him.

Pluto didn't respond to his provocation. He just silently lifted up his weapon, the hammer.

He didn't yell with the temper he'd displayed up to this point. He adopted a combat stance slowly, the sharp light in his eyes not dimming in the slightest.

Guess he's not quite so simpleminded, Orphen thought to himself. As Pluto lifted up his enormous hammer, Orphen silently drew his silver shortsword. The nameless blade. Fitting if it really had belonged to the man who had discarded his own name long in the past.

Now, then... We're both bluffing. All I have to do now is actually win. He knew it was easier said than done.

They were close, but if Orphen wanted to get into point-blank range, he'd have to deal with Pluto's weapon somehow. Pointing his blade at his adversary, Orphen savored the feeling of their face-off. The distance between them wasn't quite advantageous to him, but it wasn't quite the opposite either. He couldn't

deny that he'd lose in a direct contest of sorcerous power, but he also couldn't imagine the difference was large enough to be the deciding factor.

No one said a word. Not Maria Huwon, nor Claiomh or Majic, nor any of the Thirteen Apostles; not even Volkan or Dartin. The lord, too, just watched them silently, curled up on the ground holding his leg.

Orphen found himself wondering if the lord had already foreseen the outcome of this contest...

Pluto leaped at him.

He swung down fast without any sort of strategy. His tremendously heavy weapon, which would probably shave off half of Orphen's body if it so much as grazed him, passed by in front of him as he jumped back. But the tip of the hammer didn't touch the ground—Pluto used its momentum to rotate it back up into the air, holding it aloft once again. As if loading a bullet.

At the speed he was moving, Orphen could dodge his opponent's attacks, but he couldn't get in close. Orphen waited for his next attack, holding up his shortsword the same way he had before. If Pluto wanted to keep up his speed, he'd have to swing the hammer vertically again—and no matter how fast he was, if he was just repeating the same movement, Orphen definitely had the instinct and concentration necessary to make a move of his own.

Pluto brought the hammer down again and let go.

Orphen was about to jump back again, but he twisted to the side instead. The hammer spun past him like a wheel. If he'd jumped backward, he wouldn't have been able to dodge it. And since he'd jumped to the side...

Orphen grasped Pluto's plan instantly. He had limited Orphen's options of escape to two directions and was planning to make his move after that. Losing his weapon didn't mean much to this demon. His thick arms and heavy weight meant he could likely wield as much destructive force as his hammer with his body alone.

His massive form roared toward Orphen. Orphen caught Pluto's fist with the back of his blade, but his small weapon couldn't stop the giant's terrible strength—before Pluto's foot hit the ground as he lunged forward, Orphen

swept his leg out from under him. Even this wasn't enough to completely neutralize the demon's strength, but by throwing him off-balance, he was able to disperse some of the power of Pluto's punch.

Pluto's vigorous breath hit Orphen in the face—they were that close. Orphen steeled himself and pressed forward. He shrank his stance, hiding in the shadow of Pluto's huge frame, and wound up, pressing his fist to the side of Pluto's black Thirteen Apostles uniform.



Pluto didn't even brace himself. He must have noticed Orphen's plan, but he just kept lunging forward. Orphen put his full strength into the blow he launched at Pluto. His fist dug into the armor of muscle Pluto wore, delivering damage through his ribs and into his internal organs. He felt the hit go through.

But Pluto didn't stop. He swung a log-like arm up, his elbow aimed squarely at Orphen.

I can't avoid it! Orphen prepared himself and fell to the ground. By flattening himself against the ground, he was able to avoid the elbow strike, but...

In the next instant, Pluto's foot came down on his chest.

He stopped.

There wasn't a cheer and Pluto didn't raise a cry of victory. The Demon of the Capital just stood there with his foot on Orphen's chest, neither removing it nor finishing him off.

Wham. Orphen felt the ground somewhere far away rumbling with the back of his head. Pluto's hammer had finally landed.

Pluto cocked his head in what could be an arrogant gesture, but it wasn't a swagger—he was just reeling. He was holding his side and sweat gleamed on his forehead like he was enduring pain. Apparently, Orphen had dealt him a not-insignificant amount of damage. Still, he hadn't lost his balance enough to remove his foot from Orphen's chest.

Unable to escape or move, Orphen was forced to look up at the boss of the Thirteen Apostles. The wind of the wastes blew like a tailwind for him, rustling his blond locks.

"I don't like this," Pluto said solemnly, his voice hoarse. "If you'd used a blade, you could have killed me. Going easy on me?"

Orphen glanced at the shortsword in his hand and sighed. "I didn't even think of that."

"I see. Then it's my win... However..." Pluto moved his foot and stepped back—he almost fell to the ground just like that, but Maria rushed up and held him up.

Pluto whispered something to her and took a step away from her. “Assemble!” he shouted, and he began to give orders to the remaining Thirteen Apostles...

As he listened, Orphen sat up. The lord, who was sitting on the ground in a similar way, smiled at him.

He noticed Maria approaching him. She was smiling too. It was a smile he’d seen a few times before. The wry smile of a teacher exasperated with a student who’d done something reckless. She knelt down and whispered to him, “He asked me if there was any way to get you to return to the Association.” Orphen just stared at her, not sure how to answer, and she burst out into laughter. “It’s rare to get a compliment from him.”

“Orphen!” Someone else rushed toward him.

He turned around and found Claiomh not even hiding the surprise all over her face.

“Orphen, are you okay? Huh? But what was that? Did you lose?”

“You can’t tell?”

“What? But why?”

“What do you mean, why...?”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen you lose.”

“I-Is it really?” Orphen asked dubiously.

Majic peeked out from behind Claiomh, looking deathly pale. “Are you all right?”

Orphen shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not hurt. He’s the one who went easy on me. Since he was supposed to be an even match for my master, I was expecting a little more finesse. I didn’t think he’d come at me with pure brute force like that. But I don’t think he was serious. It was a good lesson for me too.”

“...Between Childman and him, who do you think is stronger?” Maria asked him quietly. She was smiling slightly. Either it was a joke, or she was seriously asking. Either way, it was a question every sorcerer on the continent wanted to know the answer to—and one no one *could* answer.

Orphen gazed at the demon commanding his subordinates at a distance from him and shrugged. "I'd say Master."

"Why?"

"Because I'm sure that's what Pluto thinks."

The boss of the Thirteen Apostles, called the Demon of the Capital, wasn't giving out too many orders. He was mainly just telling his people to stand by and rest. The few sorcerers gathered around Pluto must have been the famous "Numbers"—royal sorcerers who were also qualified knights and thus stood above the rest. He was checking his people's injuries and morale, and telling them to wait for a meeting they'd hold later to reassess their strategy.

Reassess, eh? Orphen thought. He took Majic's hand and pulled himself up. *So he's at least taking my opinion into consideration. But I don't think Pluto intends to send the Thirteen Apostles back to the capital...*

If their resolve were such that they could stroll back to the capital at this point, then they probably wouldn't have defected from the Union of Lords and challenged the dragons so recklessly in the first place. They had come here prepared to die, and Orphen was sure that death was the only thing that would stop them at this point.

Pluto said there were white sorcerers standing with them. So they came to the same conclusion as Damian and the lord... That the continent would be destroyed in the sanctuary less than ten days from now. But... It didn't make sense.

There was no reason to fight with the sanctuary.

He had no idea what reason Doppel X had for harming the outside world for so long either.

And Leki's motivations still escaped his understanding as well.

"Wonder if I can get him to tell me," Orphen muttered to himself even knowing that it was pointless. He looked up at the jet-black wolf standing in the wasteland.

Maria and Claiomh were with the lord, who still couldn't get up off the

ground. Maria was calling a medic. He must have really broken some bones.

The lord of the Imminent Domain. The Demon of the Capital, Pluto. Leki... At least these three could answer his questions; because they could answer them, they were taking action. These three all had people representing them as well. Colgon. Maria Huwon. Claiomh.

Gales blew through the wasteland carrying sand on them like snowstorms. Amid the howling winds, Pluto's strong voice rang out.

"We'll hold our meeting at midnight—sleep in shifts until then. I'm not listening to any complaints about fatigue!"

Evening was fast approaching. When today ended, there would be ten days left.

Chapter IV: Rest and What Is Not Rest

The night was quiet. It also wasn't too dark—while they were nothing lavish, a few torches had been set up here and there.

They didn't have to force themselves to eat the ridiculous foods Claiomh had packed them either. The Thirteen Apostles had brought an overabundance of food with them and, having never experienced any sort of real combat in the capital, it apparently hadn't even occurred to them to try to economize.

"I don't think you're really one to talk, though," Majic said as he scraped a spoon against a can of heated soup, gulping it down. There was another can, now empty, at his feet. "It looked to me like *you* were holding back, Mast...I mean, Orphen. You almost seem like you're way stronger recently, and even if that big guy was the Demon of the Capital or whatever, I'm really surprised you lost to him."

"Way stronger? I haven't changed one bit." Orphen was done eating, lying against Leki's stomach as the beast rested on the ground.

Claiomh was seated nearby on top of one of Leki's front paws, chewing on hardtack. She'd complained that it was so hard it wasn't getting any smaller no matter how much she chewed it, but she'd already put away more than half of it.

It was a little late for dinner. The sun had set long ago and the Thirteen Apostles' camp was quiet. Of course, they could still hear some quiet talking among the supposedly sleeping sorcerers. They couldn't pick out any of the words; it was more like a sense of anxiety that enveloped the camp. Whispers like that whirled about in the night air.

Their dinner was late because they'd all waited for Orphen to have lunch after his midday battle had left him tired and not hungry, but not everyone had done the same.

"Wow, Brother, can you believe it? This is actually cooked! It's real food!"

“Mm. I see no reason to hide it. I predicted this! I knew that if we worked to death diligently, one day we would be rewarded.”

The reason these two were eating was because they had been eating since the sun set.

“But...” Majic argued. He must have been hungry—or maybe he was just finally relaxing now that they were surrounded by sorcerers. Opening up a package of cookies that he’d kept hidden from the dwarves, he continued, “It’s true that you easily took out Red Dragons today, Orphen.”

“If Leki hadn’t interfered, Claiomh and I would have both been dead.” Orphen glanced at Claiomh. She was probably listening, but she didn’t show any sign of being bothered as she continued her battle with the hardtack.

Majic seemed to forget he was in the process of opening the package of cookies for a moment. “Isn’t that just because it was four against one?”

“How strong or weak someone is doesn’t really matter all that much. Just because you’re stronger than someone doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll beat them in a fight.” Orphen stretched, adjusted his position against Leki, and rubbed his heavy eyelids.

Majic pursed his lips and said, “In the situation we’re in now...won’t you just die if you’re weak? Plus, you taught me that sorcerers have always valued strength throughout history.”

“Still, we’ve spent more time *not* fighting by now. Of course, that time runs out as soon as you lose...and that’s why we’ve gotta fight. Either way, there are plenty of things more important than strength.”

“You can only say that because you *are* strong, Orphen.”

“I dunno. I lost to Pluto, but I did get my point across to him. In other words, there was no need for me to be stronger than him. If you can do what you need to do when you need to do it, just as much as you need to, then anything else is extra.”

Orphen looked out at the campsite. Having lost half of their number, the Thirteen Apostles couldn’t be said to be very lively. No, they probably wouldn’t be any different even if they hadn’t lost so many. Orphen couldn’t help but feel

that it was strange. They were the elites of the capital, but the moment they left that comfort zone, they were more like lost children.

Leki stopped heading forward after we got here. I can't imagine he was rushing here just to save the Thirteen Apostles, though... Was it to chase them away? Or...

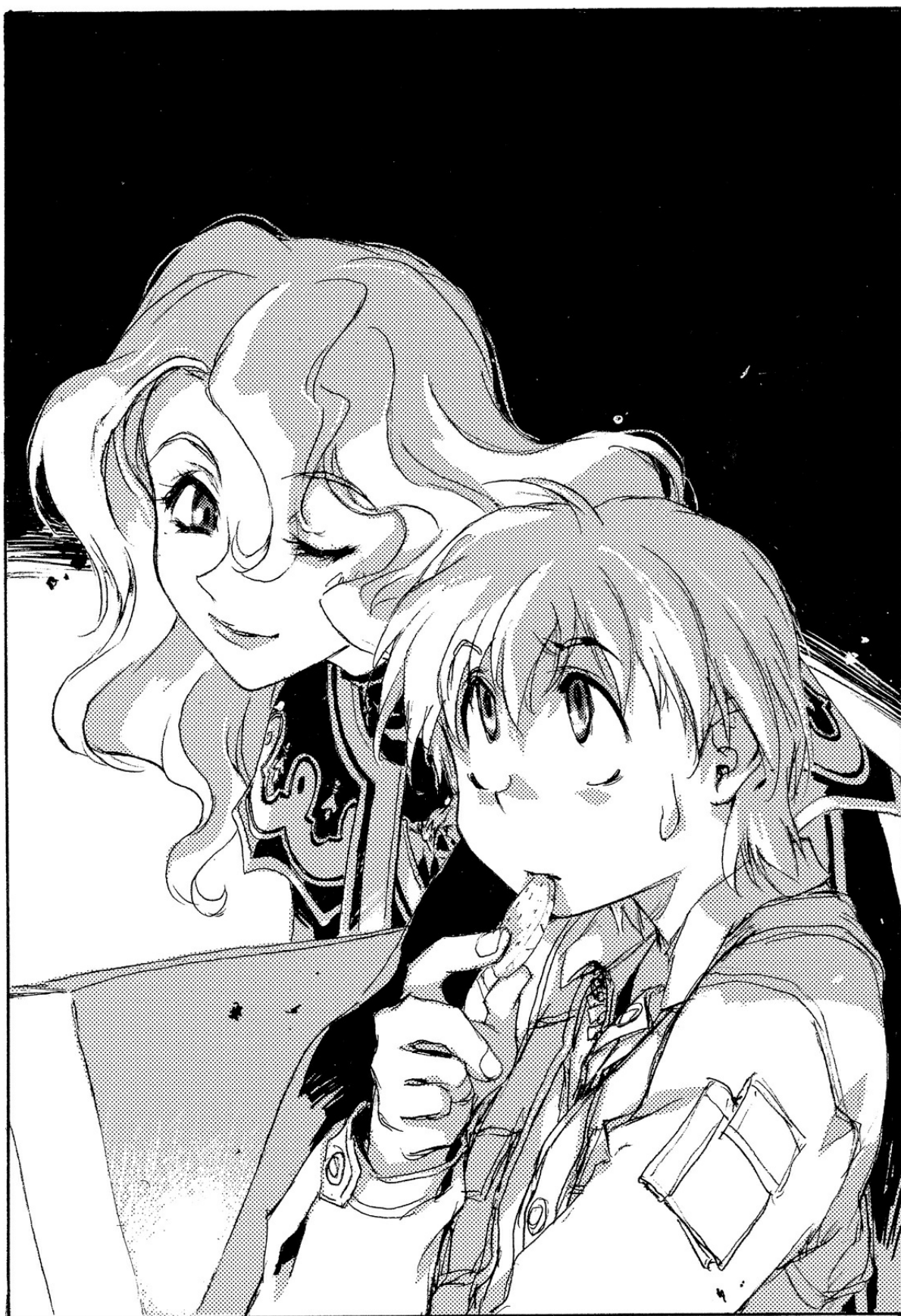
“What are you even thinking?!”

Orphen was so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed the woman approaching until she spoke.

He looked over and found a young sorcerer in a Thirteen Apostles uniform carrying a box of food and looking down at Majic. She winked at Majic as the boy tried to awkwardly hide the package of cookies in his hands.

The woman asked with a friendly tone, “Just how much are you going to eat? You can't eat this yet though, it's for tomorrow... We'll share our food with you, but you have to carry what you'll be eating. We can't have any conflicts between us.”

Orphen sat up when he realized who she was. “Isabella!”



“Yes, hello. Long time no see, Krylancelo. Did you not know that I was here?” She waved after setting the box down—and kicked away the dwarves who had approached the food. It was Isabella, one of Maria Huwon’s students, who Orphen knew from the Tower. She was just as pretty as she had always been, with the same friendly smile she’d often worn five years ago.

“Just so you know, I’m supposed to be in charge of you kids. Is this boy a sorcerer too?” She pointed at Majic. Before Orphen could nod or Majic could answer, she moved the conversation right along. “Well, I’m not gonna go easy on you, then. You’ll do everything I say, right? Good. You’re to call me Assistant Professor Isabella, all right? Raise your hand if you want to ask questions, and only when I’ve permitted them. Who’s the girl? Your sister? Doesn’t seem like it... Also, why do you have these dwarves? And don’t you think it’s a little dangerous, traveling with a dragon? By the way, Krylancelo, how have you been?”

“Huh? Uhh... Err... Hmm?” Orphen grunted, having completely lost track of which question he was supposed to be answering. He sighed and asked, “Isabella, have you heard about Irgitte?”

The smile disappeared from her face. Since she was always grinning, Isabella tended to look particularly forlorn when she stopped—to tell the truth, that had drawn the attention of no small amount of boys at the Tower.

Of course, it wasn’t any sort of performance now. She gave a small nod. “I haven’t heard, but I can pretty much guess what happened. I was prepared for it as soon as it was decided that she’d be going to the Imminent Domain. Did you see her?”

“...Yeah.”

“I see. Fate works in strange ways.” Isabella made a prayerlike motion with her hand. “But it’s not just her. It’s over for the Thirteen Apostles after today. There were even casualties among the Numbers. I’m the only member of Maria’s class who survived.”

“If only we’d come a little sooner,” Orphen muttered, feeling guilty after hearing that.

But Isabella shook her head. “It’s not like you’re some kind of superhero, and we’re not that weak. But...thanks.” She managed to recover at least a bit of her smile and gazed skyward rather than speaking further.

Orphen approached her and Isabella quickly turned to him. He asked her, “Isabella, do you know? What are the Thirteen Apostles doing—”

Isabella held a finger up to her lips, silencing his question. She shrugged. “Master just told me not to say anything to you. She said she would tell you later. I guess that means she’s planning on telling you stuff she didn’t even explain to me. To be perfectly honest, that doesn’t feel great.”

“I see...” Orphen muttered. He looked around and then told her, “Isabella, if you have anything you need, could you explain it to them? Claiomh, Majic, can you give her the rundown of everything that’s happened so far? It’s okay if you summarize. You can trust her.”

“Are you going somewhere, Orphen?” Claiomh had been silent all this time, but she finally asked him that after downing the last of her hardtack.

Orphen waved vaguely. “I’m gonna take a walk. One more thing. Leki?” He didn’t know if the dragon would listen to him, but Leki must have been bored or something, because when Orphen called his name, he looked over to him right away. “Can you step on the raccoons or something so they don’t eat all the food?”

Leki made a gesture resembling a salute with his front paw. “Roger,” Orphen assumed it to mean.

He didn’t actually know where the person he wanted to find was at the moment.

Orphen was basically wandering randomly, simply hoping to stumble into her.

The torches burned weakly, an ineffective ward against the deep darkness of the night in the wastes. Orphen wondered how many people would believe that the group huddling close to these flames burning solid fuel and a little bit of kindling were really the Thirteen Apostles. Majic’s words came to mind at the same time.

It’s all meaningless... The court sorcerers’ numbers had been reduced by half

in a single day.

They would never return home again. They had lost their lives eternally, never to get them back.

No one could take that back.

The rest of them might be wiped out tomorrow. What they'd leave behind was only the most replaceable thing—nothing more than the title of the “Thirteen Apostles.”

“And I have to rely on this meaningless thing. How laughable.”

Orphen turned toward the voice. A man walking with a cane stepped out from the darkness.

It was Almagest Betisletha—the lord of the Imminent Domain. He indicated his broken leg with a cynical grin and said, “Of course, if I didn't pretend my leg was really broken for a time, it would cause some confusion, wouldn't it?”

“Your treatment certainly took a while, didn't it?”

“Treatment? That was an interrogation.”

Orphen responded with his own cynical smile. “You can control other people, can't you? Why not just control the Thirteen Apostles, then?”

“My control takes time. They wouldn't be useful to me anyway.”

“That pride of yours cost you your Imminent Domain.” Orphen tried to leave him with that and pass by him. If the lord was being questioned, then Maria and Pluto must have been in the direction he'd come from. He was planning on heading that way, but...

“Do you think I am evil?” Almagest's words stopped him.

He didn't stop right away. He'd already walked a few steps forward. Orphen glanced over his shoulder and asked, “How do you define evil?”

“I thought you'd say that. That's right. There is no such thing as evil on this continent. It is an impossibility. You could say something trite about how there are merely differences in individual values, but there's no meaning in saying such a thing. Because all that exists on this continent is despair.” The lord

turned his back. He probably wanted Orphen to call out to him and stop him this time.

Orphen wanted to just ignore him, but he knew that was nothing more than a stubborn attempt at defiance. Sighing, he said, “I’ve decided to believe this, at least. I knew it all along, but I didn’t want to acknowledge it. From the bottom of your heart, you truly believe yourself to be the protector of humanity, right?”

The lord stopped. His cane bent and creaked—apparently he was entrusting more of his weight to it than he thought even as he labeled the tool pointless.

Maybe that was the same for everyone.

“I was created for that purpose,” he answered, his voice hoarse. “Damian Rue, who created me, likely had no sinister ambitions—nothing that could be called as such, anyway. He just wasn’t strong enough. That’s all.”

“You lost Colgon, lost Damian, lost the Imminent Domain, and failed to take control of the Deep Dragons. Is there still something for you to do?” Depending on his answer, that might have been a cruel question, but the lord showed no sign of agitation as he responded.

“To borrow your words, I need only use what I need to use, when I need to use it, to the extent that it’s needed... True, I’ve lost most of my uncertain variables, but I also have your help right now, do I not?”

Those should have been words the lord wasn’t there to hear, but Orphen knew better than to point that out. He smiled. “I’m not helping you.”

“I don’t mind. As long as we arrive at the sanctuary and complete the summoning of the Demon King, I don’t care how it happens.”

The lord still wasn’t facing him. Orphen decided to say what he’d been thinking for a while now. “We don’t even know if Demon King Swedenborge really existed and you want to summon him and just hope that he’ll conveniently take our side? Is it even possible to summon him? If it is, wouldn’t the sanctuary have already done it?”

“There are already signs, are there not?”

“Doppel X...?”

“Who is it who bears that name? There’s no longer anyone who can tell us that.”

That must have been the end of that conversation. Almagest walked off for real this time. But he stopped again after taking several steps, as Orphen expected him to. His body swayed with the night wind.

The lord’s voice had taken on a different tone. It was trembling slightly, as if the night air scared it. “What *is* despair?”

Orphen frowned. “That again...?”

“Yes. In searching for answers, that is always where one will end up. You saw the Kimluck Church and the priests there, did you not? Why did they strive for the elimination of sorcery even at the cost of their own lives? I get the feeling I can understand them.”

He must have lost his balance trying to turn around. The lord’s hand slipped from the cane and it fell to the ground, but the lord was still standing. He had a hand to his chest and there was an earnest longing in his face as he asked, “Why do I exist? Everyone must ask themselves this question. Perhaps even the gods.”

“That’s—” *A real pointless question*, Orphen was about to say, but the lord ignored him and continued to speak, his tone growing bolder.

“The gods manifested in this world. That means that salvation of the soul via the gods is impossible. The gods sought by people...are not monsters made of flesh who speak human words. Those with flesh, those with hearts, cannot speak of true love.”

Orphen decided to just let him talk. He could tell from the light in the lord’s eyes that he wasn’t actually trying to have a conversation. Words with no room for an argument—words there would be no point in arguing.

What were words like that called? One description came to Orphen’s mind: delusion. He thought of another one too: will.

“When people talk about the gods, they tend to anthropomorphize them. Humans are simply too young to speak of the gods in any other way. This anthropomorphization closes the way to understanding true love, though—

religious types know this, and that is why they anguish. But in this world, the gods anthropomorphized themselves in the ultimate way. This is a nightmare! It is well worth despairing over! It is my belief that the dragons have been tortured by this despair for the last thousand years...”

Was it delusion? Was it will? Was it delusional will? The lord’s words continued.

“Having lost the gods’ love, this world became hell, to be trifled with by the gods’ mischief... You may think this mere foolish delusion, but I would like to go to a world where there are no gods. Do you believe such a world exists somewhere? In such a world, people would never lose hope. It would be a utopia where people are self-reliant and have an understanding of love.”

The lord finally seemed to be done talking.

Orphen shook his head. “I dunno. If a world like that really exists, I get the feeling it isn’t too different from this one.”

“Is that despair?”

“No. Just looking at it from the point of things I ‘understand.’” Orphen looked up at the sky. He wasn’t feeling particularly sentimental.

The stars were giving off a weak, fading light, illuminating the white wasteland. It wasn’t sentimental.

Orphen felt the time pass by and thought to himself.

It was midnight.

“...It’s time.”

They may have called it a meeting, but it wasn’t like they had a meeting hall or anything like that. Pluto and the other powerful sorcerers gathered on the barren plains—humble earth where even grass didn’t grow. There was one torch in the center that burned solid fuel and around them floated several sorcerous lights.

The sorcerers stood in a circle, but if one looked closely, they were almost all focused on one man. Pluto held the attention of the entire circle. Pluto, the

Demon of the Capital. He frowned, his eyebrows set in a deep furrow. Of course, maybe this was just his neutral face.

Maria Huwon sat next to him as if to act as his aide—since she was to his left and there was an empty space to his right, it made it seem all the more like the two of them had their own special status, though there was no *official* difference between any of the Numbers. At least, Orphen had heard that at some point. It had already been almost twenty years since people started calling Pluto the boss of the Thirteen Apostles though, and the “official” stance hardly seemed relevant at this point.

Before approaching the circle, Orphen counted the number of sorcerers there. It was only seven, including Pluto and Maria. Some were as young as Maria and some were much older.

“Brethren,” Pluto started. The Demon hadn’t waited for Orphen to take a seat, but he *had* waited for him to be in hearing distance. “What I must start with is an explanation. A foolish, worthless excuse for my pathetic, shameless self. But it’s something that must come from me. I’ve confirmed that we lost fifty-four of our Thirteen Apostles today. I do not think there have been as many sorcerers lost in one incident since the dark ages of the Sorcerer Hunts.”

The Demon of the Capital said all this in one breath and then bowed his head deeply. Still facing the ground, he continued, “There would be no point in me apologizing to you for the loss of life. It would be presumptuous of me. After all, I foresaw this the moment I resolved myself to this course of action—I knew that we would be no match for the dragons. You might say I was certain of it.”

Pluto’s head swayed and he slowly lifted it to gaze out at his listeners. Maybe he was waiting for some sort of argument, but the assembled sorcerers said nothing in response.

Orphen stopped before entering the circle, sensing that it would be better not to intrude. He listened, just close enough that the sorcerous light didn’t quite reach him.

Maria’s eyes flicked over to him for a second, but just a second. They immediately returned to the downward gaze she was maintaining as Pluto spoke.

“Still, we *must* fight the sanctuary. There is only one reason why: we are the most suited to it—we are gathered near the sanctuary, we have power, we are able to manifest our full strength in a short period of time, and we are capable of doing it. That is why we were summoned here.”

“By who?” Orphen intruded. From observing the expressions on all of their faces, he was the only one who didn’t know the answer to that question.

Pluto gave him an annoyed look. Orphen almost thought he wouldn’t answer him, but he did. “By the white sorcerers. They’ve seen through the plans of the Imminent Domain and the sanctuary. We were the practical fighting power they summoned,” he quickly explained before turning back to his original audience.

“What we were here to do was eliminate Damian Rue. This has been fulfilled. The next thing to do is to suppress the sanctuary as quickly as possible. That is the reason we are currently stationed here. So, what do we do now? That is what I would like to decide.”

One of the Thirteen Apostles spoke up. “We’ve lost too much of our fighting power.”

Pluto glared at the person who’d spoken, but another person followed soon after. The rough-looking sorcerer with thick eyebrows looked visibly frightened. “We’ve already lost half our numbers. It’s clear that the rest of us will follow. And it’s only been half a day—not to mention that wasn’t even all of the Red Dragons in the sanctuary, was it?”

“And on top of that, we don’t have Seek Marrisk or Kakorkist Isthian with us anymore. It was *your* error sending them to wipe out the Imminent Domain, wasn’t it?” a middle-aged man who looked to be the oldest among them said angrily.

“We should have had more time to gather our forces—”

“In the first place, the reason why the Thirteen Apostles had to take action on our own was—”

“What happened to joining forces with the Tower? You should have been able to do that, Maria. We were only able to add ourselves to this list because—”

“It’s not that we were too weak, it’s that our formation was too sloppy to

fight against Red Dragons. If they need to, they can even attack from underground—”

“Pluto, are you scattering our lives across this wasteland for your own amusement?”

With that last voice, the commotion drew to a sudden stop. Even the person who had spoken hadn’t expected it, and looked around in a panic. No one else was meeting the young sorcerer’s eyes.

No one but Pluto and Maria. Pluto was giving the man a harsh look, though Maria was more sympathetic.

The man was speechless now, so Pluto opened his mouth again, wide, as if to take a deep breath, and said, “Let me answer each of you in turn. You are exactly right about the loss in our fighting forces. You could say that we have already been defeated. We have lost so many of our troops that it’s unlikely that we could even execute a strategy properly. As for the total number of Red Dragons in the sanctuary, needless to say, I have no idea how many there might be. But we know there are at least six of them, and we know it is not just Red Dragons we are up against. Let us also remember that we were powerless to stop a single Deep Dragon.”

After that, he turned accurately and responded to each sorcerer who had spoken. “Seek Marrisk, Kakorkist Isthian, and Irgitte Sweetheart. The three of them were all young, but brilliant casters, and we have lost them forever. Just as we lost the fifty-four others today. I was the one who sent them on a mission that forced them to risk their lives, but I think the only thing we can do to repay them is to not waste their honorable sacrifices.”

Orphen watched Maria lower her head deeper as Pluto spoke. He felt his fists shaking at the same time at the sensation that remained in his arms—he could still feel the weight of Irgitte as she lay dying in his hands. Her burned body had been incredibly light.

If he could, he wanted to linger on the memory for a moment longer, but Pluto was already speaking again.

“Did we have time to gather more fighting strength? The answer is clearly no. We may already be too late. We took too much time suppressing the Imminent

Domain. For the same reason, there was no time to establish a chain of command that would work with those not associated with us. It wasn't that we didn't contact the Tower at all. Maria Huwon had finally gotten the agreement of the leaders of the Tower of Fangs, but they also didn't have sufficient firepower that they could freely wield. The infighting at the Tower is an open secret we're all aware of."

When he finally arrived at the next question, even Pluto was out of breath. "In regards to our formation not being effective against Red Dragons... It's true that we used the most foolish strategy against the most dangerous opponent. They are natural-born assassins. Against assassins, it would have been more effective to have individual sorcerers with equal skill go up against them one-on-one rather than try to defend with a group formation. As that man did." Pluto suddenly indicated Orphen.

"If we had more than six sorcerers who could take on a Red Dragon one-on-one, then that is what I would have instructed you to do. We had no choice but to implement the inferior strategy. As for your last question..."

When the Demon acknowledged him, the sorcerer who'd asked the question trembled. Pluto ignored his reaction and simply said, "No. That is all I have to say."

Orphen was surprised that the Demon had been listening to all of the questions they had pelted him with, and he was also surprised that there was no anger on his face as he answered them.

"...Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

"Want me to tell you how to beat the sanctuary?" Orphen asked, seeing no one else making a move to speak.

Everyone else ignored him, at least for a few seconds, but eventually, Pluto said, "If it's not a bluff like earlier today, then sure."

"It's simple. All you need to do is change your goal slightly. Instead of fighting the sanctuary, make peace with them—if you can even call this idiocy war, that is."

"If we could do that, then—"

“We have Leki. That’s the name of that Deep Dragon. Just swear that you won’t fight against anyone from the sanctuary. If you do that, I bet Leki’ll bring you there. Without letting anyone else die.”

Pluto seemed to consider Orphen’s suggestion for a time, then the Demon smiled cynically and said, “And? We sneak into the sanctuary, take them by surprise, and take control from the inside?”

“Sure, you do that, and I think Leki’ll be the one who kills you. Of course, I’m not Leki, and there’s no way I can understand how he thinks. These are all just guesses on my part.”

“It’s out of the question, then.” Pluto waved his hand, dismissing Orphen. “We cannot coexist with the sanctuary or Doppel X. Not as long as they still intend to carry out their own plans.”

“The sanctuary—” Orphen started to shout before suddenly going quiet. He grimaced and asked, “The sanctuary...and Doppel X? What does that mean? Why do you think of them as two different things?”

“Maria Huwon.” Pluto called out to the sorcerer at his side, though his eyes remained on Orphen. He seemed uninterested, like Orphen’s utter lack of understanding was throwing the whole conversation off. “Explain to him what he needs to know. Apparently, it’s the most complex aspect of things that he’s ignorant about.”

“All right.” Maria Huwon stood up and plodded over to Orphen. She seemed tired, no doubt exhausted by the events of the day.

“Miss Maria—” Orphen started.

She shook her head and took his arm, whispering to him, “Let’s talk somewhere else.”

Orphen let Maria lead him out of the light. The darkness of the sky hadn’t changed at all, but the air seemed to have a weight to it, and the silence around them deepened. They had gone from a circle of people to a thick quiet between just the two of them.

Her voice somehow seemed quieter than one person’s voice, if that was even possible. “I wanted to talk to you about this sooner... I’m sorry. It was hard to

get away from everything.”

“It’s fine. Who knows if I would have even been in the mood to hear it.” Orphen looked at Maria’s face and changed the subject. “You seem to know already, but Irgitte’s dead. I watched it happen.”

“I see... Then I have no choice but to fall to ruin, the same as Pluto. Not that I believe that hell really exists.”

“I’d like for you to work with me so that that doesn’t happen. I don’t want anyone else to die like Irgitte. Otherwise I won’t be able to make it up to her. Please persuade Pluto.”

“He’s already been persuaded.”

Orphen gaped at her, not understanding.

Maria smiled wryly and explained, “There’s a lot about him that’s insufferable, but he’s not that stupid. He always knew taking the sanctuary by force would be impossible. But that was all we could do. He knows your plan is rational too, but...when presented with conditions he can’t accept, he has no choice but to refuse. He’s spent twenty years playing the role of the Demon of the Capital with no complaints. Just like that, he’s playing a role that’s necessary right now and suppressing his emotions.”

“But that’ll just lead to his demise.”

“He can’t do that either. That’s why he’s trying so hard to find a way to avoid that demise. Krylancelo, there’s something I have to tell you. It’s not just the goddess who’s going to destroy our world.”

Under the stars, Maria Huwon looked like a goddess of the night sky in her black robes as she said, “The sanctuary is going to abandon the continent. In the next ten days...before the goddess breaks through the barrier.”



Chapter V: Sanctuary and What Is Not Sanctuary

Lottecia looked blankly around at the room she was being confined in.

White.

It was sheer white. Almost like a void absent of color.

But it was by no means transparent.

In any case, that was her only impression of the space. The walls, the ceiling, the floor, the furniture, even the painting hanging on the wall seemed white to her. In reality, there was a red flower depicted in the painting. A flower she'd never seen before, whose name she didn't know. A painting of a single flower blooming. A flower incapable of reaching out, ignorant of its imprisonment on the canvas.

She was sitting on a bed. The mattress was covered by clean sheets and its somewhat firm springs felt comfortable.

She wanted to lie down, but she couldn't—there was a strange animal camped out in the center of the bed, preventing her from stretching out. She didn't know if it was sleeping, but its only motions were the slow undulations of its side as it breathed.

In short, this room must have belonged to this animal. Having nothing else to do, Lottecia spent her time mostly observing the catlike beast. It was the same size as a cat, with long fur, a crimson mane covering its back. Its features were mostly round except for the angular ears sticking up out of its head. She'd given its back a few tentative strokes, but the creature hadn't responded to her touch. It didn't seem to have even noticed her. Its lack of response made her feel like a prisoner, which just made Lottecia feel more despondent.

This is...where my father used to live? She rubbed at her eyes before the tears welling up in them could spill. *I... As a baby, I controlled my father and made him leave this place? He knew he was being controlled, and he got sick because he wanted to return here?*

Why was she believing what Ed—what that man had told her? Lottecia questioned herself as she stood. She looked around the room. Everything was organized and clean, and there was nothing lacking nor anything unnecessary. Even if she heard a commotion outside of the room, there was no need for her to leave and check it out. She didn't even need to listen to it. Wasn't that how people maintained their mental stability?

I just need to consider everything he says a lie. He used to be my husband, but now he's thrown me away and left; he's nothing but selfish, he's a killer, and he tells nothing but lies. It would be weirder to believe the things he says.

She'd clenched her fists at some point, but they fell limp to her sides now. She knew...

Ed always lies. But I can tell when he's telling the truth...

She knew now why Ed had left her after her father had died. Her father must have said something to him. Ed had left to look into that. And he'd come back after finding his answers.

Father and Ed both hated and scorned me. But I never knew why. I thought I could love and be loved like a normal person. But even that was wrong. There was nothing she could cling to anymore.

There was no love she could believe in anymore.

Her eyes had been wandering but they suddenly settled on one thing. Lottecia started, as if that was some kind of miracle. She held down her pounding heart from outside her skin. Now that she thought about it, she'd really just been staring at the door this whole time.

The door.

She carefully crossed the room and put her hand on the door.

She turned the knob.

It wasn't locked.

She could leave.

If she opened the door, she could get out of this room.

But...

What am I even going to do if I leave...?

Lottecia went back into the room without opening the door. Without even checking what was beyond it.



He only noticed the knob turning because the hallway was so quiet—if it wasn't, there was no way he would have heard a door that was twenty meters away from him. It was one door out of a long line of them. Colgon glanced up at it, but soon returned to his original position. He stood in the corner of the hallway, crossing his arms under his cloak. He'd been standing here like this for hours.

The hallway was completely silent. He couldn't even hear himself breathing in it. However...

Colgon watched out of the corner of his eye as a man approached soundlessly. The man likely had no intention of hiding. If he had, then Colgon probably wouldn't have been able to detect him as he approached. Even in this straight hallway where there was nowhere to hide.

The man was just walking straight down the hallway, his huge body remarkably stable as he moved. A man in priest's robes. Just before passing by Colgon, Jack Frisbee stopped and asked, "What are you doing here?"

Colgon gave him an answer that was nothing if not precise. "I'm not doing anything."

It was clear that the man wasn't satisfied by his answer. Jack's muddy eyes flitted around before he directed them to one door in the distance. His voice low, he said, "If you're keeping watch, you could do it in front of the door."

The response to this was swift as well. "There's nowhere for her to run. I don't need to keep watch."

Jack gave him an irritated look, his voice sounding annoyed. "What are you doing here, then?"

"I told you, I'm not doing anything." Colgon removed his back from the wall in

order to end this pointless conversation. He faced Jack and asked him a question this time. A necessary question. “Has there been any change? How’s the Second World-Seeing Tower?”

“The *priestesses* have it secured.” Jack Frisbee likely intended to speak without emotion, but Colgon could hear the sarcasm in his voice when he said the word “priestesses.”

“However, according to them, a sorcerer is necessary to activate the Tower. Dragons, with the crests of the gods, cannot. It must be the race chosen by the Celestials as their successors—humans, in other words. The summoning likely won’t work unless it’s attempted by a powerful white sorcerer. Either that or someone with equivalent abilities.”

“Lottecia still won’t be able to. She’s not yet aware of her own power,” Colgon said, indicating the room.

Jack likely assumed as much. The disappointment on his face wasn’t especially blatant. “Damian Rue?” he asked.

“He was destroyed. The lord of the Imminent Domain... He might be able to do it, but he’ll demand the submission of the sanctuary in exchange. I can’t imagine the sanctuary will agree to that. We won’t make it if we’re wasting time on such things.”

“I see. So the priestesses have the right of it.”

“You destroyed the Imminent Domain just as the priestesses instructed you to, didn’t you?” Colgon intended to ruffle Jack’s feathers, but the other man showed no indication that he was irritated. He was likely well aware of what Colgon knew.

“The priestesses sent me to suppress the Imminent Domain in order to find out exactly who Almagest Betisletha was,” Jack responded calmly. “And Almagest probably figured that if their assassination of him succeeded, they would back off...”

“I’ve heard the general story.” Colgon interrupted him. “The most powerful white sorcerer, eh? If there’s a chance... No, I wonder. I’m not confident in my own ability to control her.”

“...Who are you talking about?” Jack asked, his eyes glinting from under his dark hat.

Colgon shook his head. “No, no one can tell her what to do, so there’s no point in even telling you. Forget about it.”

“Even Damian Rue was able to be destroyed. No matter who she is, it’s possible we’ll have a chance to control her.”

“She’s the one who destroyed Damian. She might be the one to destroy the continent too. She’s a walking disaster,” Colgon muttered, more to himself than in answer. He changed the subject. “What about the Ayrmarkar door?”

“None of the sorcerous weapons we’ve collected have been able to even put a scratch on it. Of course, everyone knew it was hopeless to even attempt it.” Jack’s expression changed slightly as he spoke. He grimaced like someone had just whispered something he didn’t want to hear into his ear. “It seems the situation’s changed. I don’t know the details, but the priestesses are requesting your presence immediately.”

“They want *me*?” Colgon asked, but Jack preferred moving to explaining. He gestured in the direction he was heading and then turned around.

Watching him, Colgon reached down to the sword at his hip. A sword forged by the Celestials. A straight blade that almost looked like a toy—the Sword of Korkt.

The magic sword Beedo Crewbstar sneaked out of the sanctuary when he fled. Freak Diamond.

Thumbing its grip, Colgon muttered, “There’s one thing I’d like to ask.” He stopped the man in the priest’s robe before he could walk off and asked, “Do the priestesses consider me a member of Doppel X right now? I’ve fought Doppel X as part of the Imminent Domain for a long time. Will they treat me like an ally just because I’m lending a hand?”

Jack didn’t answer, but Colgon didn’t need to hear an answer.

Those priestesses were long accustomed to betrayal.



Strictly speaking, none of the hallways here in the sanctuary actually connected.

It was Azalie who had told her that. In reality, however, *all* of the hallways were connected, and you could get anywhere you wanted to go from any other location. It was an obvious way to build the place for the Celestials who had created it—it was more convenient this way. Because it made sense, they did it that way. That was all there was to it.

But for those who didn't know how the passageways connected, it was a labyrinth with no exit. In the present, when there were no Celestials, the place was just barely managed by a group the sanctuary called priestesses, and no one could disobey them.

If you were to fight in the sanctuary, you had to be certain that you would win. That was what Azalie had concluded.

"In other words..." Leticia muttered as she raised both arms, trying to tolerate the men conducting a rough search. "*You're* telling *me* to control myself?" The thought was absurd enough to make her burst out laughing, though all that came from her was a slight snort.

Azalie stood next to her brazenly, as if she were the one performing the search herself. Leticia told her, "I'm always calm... I've been calm since you called me. I'm calm now, just as I have been this whole time. I haven't complained a single time despite the complete lack of any decent information you've been able to provide me."

"Is that not a complaint?" There was a slight shadow of doubt in Azalie's eyes as she spoke.

Leticia didn't miss that look, but she didn't show Azalie any pity either. "Well, I don't know if you could call it a legitimate complaint. I've been insane for some time now—"

"As far as I can tell, you're sane."

"That's the problem. I killed someone! How can I stay sane...?" Leticia grumbled as her final weapon was pulled out of a secret compartment in her combat gear—a metal rod hidden near her wrist.

There were two men searching her. Well, it was somewhat questionable whether they could be considered “men,” but they had the shape of human men anyway. The only difference was the way their green eyes shone. But when their search was concluded and their fingers, stretched out to find any small hidden implements they might otherwise miss, returned to their original length, the glow in their eyes faded.

The two Red Dragons nodded silently and faced the other two in the room.

There, two similar dragons surrounded Heartia, who was in casual clothes. It was the first time Leticia had seen him in five years, but they hadn’t had a chance to say much to each other yet. He still looked like he didn’t quite understand what was happening.

I wonder if that’s true... Leticia thought, stealing a glance at him. He looked like he was staring off into the distance. *He might be a lot calmer than I am.* She wasn’t even sure herself who she was quipping to.

The room was completely white and contained nothing but walls and a floor. There wasn’t even a door. Either it was made that way because they had nothing to hide or because it hadn’t even occurred to them to do something so tasteful as decorating. Since it was a facility where nonhumans lived, maybe it was natural that it seemed unnatural to her.

On the white floor lay several more human inventions—weapons like knives, wires, and even a shortbow. When she thought about how they’d all come from the inside of her combat gear, Leticia couldn’t help feeling vaguely frustrated.

Fight? These weapons wouldn’t even scratch the skin of the dragons before her.

Leticia raised her head and looked at Azalie. Her little sister. No, to be more accurate, they were cousins, though they had been raised like sisters. The Red Dragons hadn’t even attempted to touch Azalie—either they already knew that she was nothing more than a spirit, or they could tell at a single glance. Though when Leticia looked at her, it was hard to see her as anything other than a normal living person.

After a long silence, Azalie responded to her. “You’re able to remain sane, Tish, because you’re doing something that is absolutely necessary to us. Isn’t

that right?”

“That’s just lip service.”

“Sure. But living is lip service. When you get to be like me...you understand that.” Azalie indicated herself. It wasn’t like there was any sort of mark there, but Leticia didn’t argue.

While they were chatting, the weapons at their feet disappeared. It happened with no warning, without anyone touching them or anything. It was obviously some sort of sorcery, but Leticia wasn’t able to divine any sort of spell composition. Some Glyphs in the floor must have activated or something. The Red Dragons disappeared similarly, without any sort of parting words.

Leticia made up her mind and said, “Heartia...”

But he didn’t seem to have heard her. He was just staring vaguely forward, the same way he had while he was searched. But there was nothing in the direction he was looking save for the wall.

Leticia gasped and rounded on Azalie. “What did you do to him?! You didn’t break your promise...”

“I didn’t. I’m not controlling him,” the Chaos Witch quietly asserted. “I don’t have the capacity for something like that.” The hand at her chest fell, limp. “I’ll keep my promise. Even if there’s some mistake, you and I will be the only ones to die. Heartia and Krylancelo will be fine... Forte too. I don’t know about Colgon, though. His actions are out of my control.”

As she spoke dispassionately, Leticia watched her, something like hatred burning in her chest. “I won’t let you die either,” she snapped. “Or me, for that matter. You’re going to atone for everything you’ve done. Even if it’s not possible for you to atone for it all, I won’t let you disappear until you’ve done it. Otherwise... I just feel too bad for Master.”

Azalie didn’t say anything in response. But she’d gotten worse at pretending to be unaffected than she’d been before—when she was alive. Her eye twitched, her gaze unsteady. She couldn’t hide the reaction.

It was an expression Leticia had seen before. She thought back to that dark garden in the Imminent Domain. At the face of the man who had burned to

death after Leticia's fingers had pointed his way.

A nauseating chill forced her to hunch her shoulders before she heard a surprised voice.

"Tish?!" It was Heartia. He ran over and rubbed her back, and Leticia squeezed her voice out somehow.

"What? You finally noticed? I tried to get your attention earlier..."

"S-Sorry. It wasn't that I didn't hear you. I don't really understand it myself... I was thinking. It just seemed like I didn't need to respond..." He waved his hands, flustered, and then turned in the direction Leticia had been facing and murmured apprehensively, "Wait, who were you talking to? Was Azalie here?"

"Yes. She's still a little unstable—" Leticia explained, looking over at Azalie. "She's not good at showing herself to others without some effort yet. I don't really get it, but that's what she says, at least. That's why she needs people like us, and took us all the way here."

"This is the sanctuary, Tish!" Heartia shouted like he'd just noticed. He backed up and spun around, looking at the room. "Those people searching us were Red Dragons..."

"That's right," Leticia groaned, annoyed.

Heartia was shaking his head like he was still confused. "We're in a place no human being has set foot in in the last two hundred years!"

"If only I could think of it as an honor." Leticia searched for Azalie as she spoke. She'd disappeared at some point, so she really must not have had the capacity to make her presence known. With a sigh, Leticia straightened up and said, "I don't know about there being no humans here for two hundred years."

"Huh?"

As if to illustrate her words, a figure appeared then.

With no sort of warning or indication, he seemed to just slide into existence from thin air. It was a man who looked like he was clad in black itself. Or maybe like blackness wearing human skin.

Heartia shouted, pointing at the long-haired man. "C-Colgon!"

He ignored the shout and, to Leticia, said simply, “That was fast.”

Leticia nodded. “We’re out of time, right?”

“Right. So I can’t give you a very warm welcome.” Colgon glanced up at the ceiling and asked, “You know how it works here, right? You can only move in the way the priestesses want. They control the connections between all the passageways in the sanctuary.”

“Yes.”

“Those Red Dragons oppose the priestesses as well. They fight under the priestesses’ orders, and lost one of their own in Urbanrama, and just now lost two more fighting the Thirteen Apostles. But the priestesses still have enough power that they have to obey them. Do you understand?”

Leticia got sick of confirming every single thing vocally, so she just nodded. She wasn’t trying to be hostile, but Colgon still stopped talking, waiting for her to speak with a harsh look on his face.

So, what... We have to obey these priestesses completely? “I understand,” Leticia said, resigned.

“H-Hey, Colgon—”

Colgon ignored Heartia once more and continued, “This room is a checkpoint of sorts. If your will goes against that of the priestesses, then you won’t be able to proceed past here.”

“...Well, *you* got here,” Leticia said, trying to bait him, and Colgon’s expression finally softened somewhat. He’d obviously picked up on her intentions.

“Yes. I’m able to move here because my interests are aligned with theirs.”

So as long as our interests are aligned, Leticia read into his words. *The sanctuary is at such a disadvantage that they have to work with anyone whose interests align with theirs, then...*

“I’ll give you our answer, then. We’ve brought with us one of the keys to preventing the cataclysm that is about to befall the continent.”

It happened in less than an instant. Before she was even sure if she’d finished speaking or not, the scenery around them changed. She didn’t feel the

unnatural sensation that usually accompanied a spatial transfer. This was an absurdly precise perfect teleportation spell—that was all she could imagine after it had been completed.

Leticia stood there in shock, her mouth still open from what she had been saying. The actual features of the room hadn't changed much. The white walls and floor were the same. But its size was completely different. This room was still sparse, but it had a strangely curved line of chairs. There was no table. There was a podium at one end, and all of the chairs faced it. The chairs were slim and simple. The space was large enough to be called a hall, and it was stuffed with so much silence it was almost suffocating. This was only the second room she'd seen, but Leticia was getting the impression that it was quiet everywhere in the sanctuary. For how huge it was, there was nothing living here.

There was no one other than her in this...assembly hall, she decided to call it. At least, there was no one there when she took a second to glance around. But when she returned her gaze to the podium, someone was standing there. Just one woman, wearing a green robe. She had vibrant green hair and was looking down at Leticia from the raised podium with eyes shining like verdant greenery.

Leticia gulped, her throat feeling dry. This woman's appearance was familiar to her from old stories, legends, textbooks, paintings...

They were the ancient ancestors of human sorcerers.

One of the six kings of beasts on the continent. The silent beasts, Nornir.

Weird Dragons. Celestials.

The woman raised a slender arm. The movement was theatrical, and it made her limbs seem like theater props in themselves. The Nornir opened her mouth and Leticia was forced to stand there waiting in silence like a boy who was seeing a woman for the first time in his life.

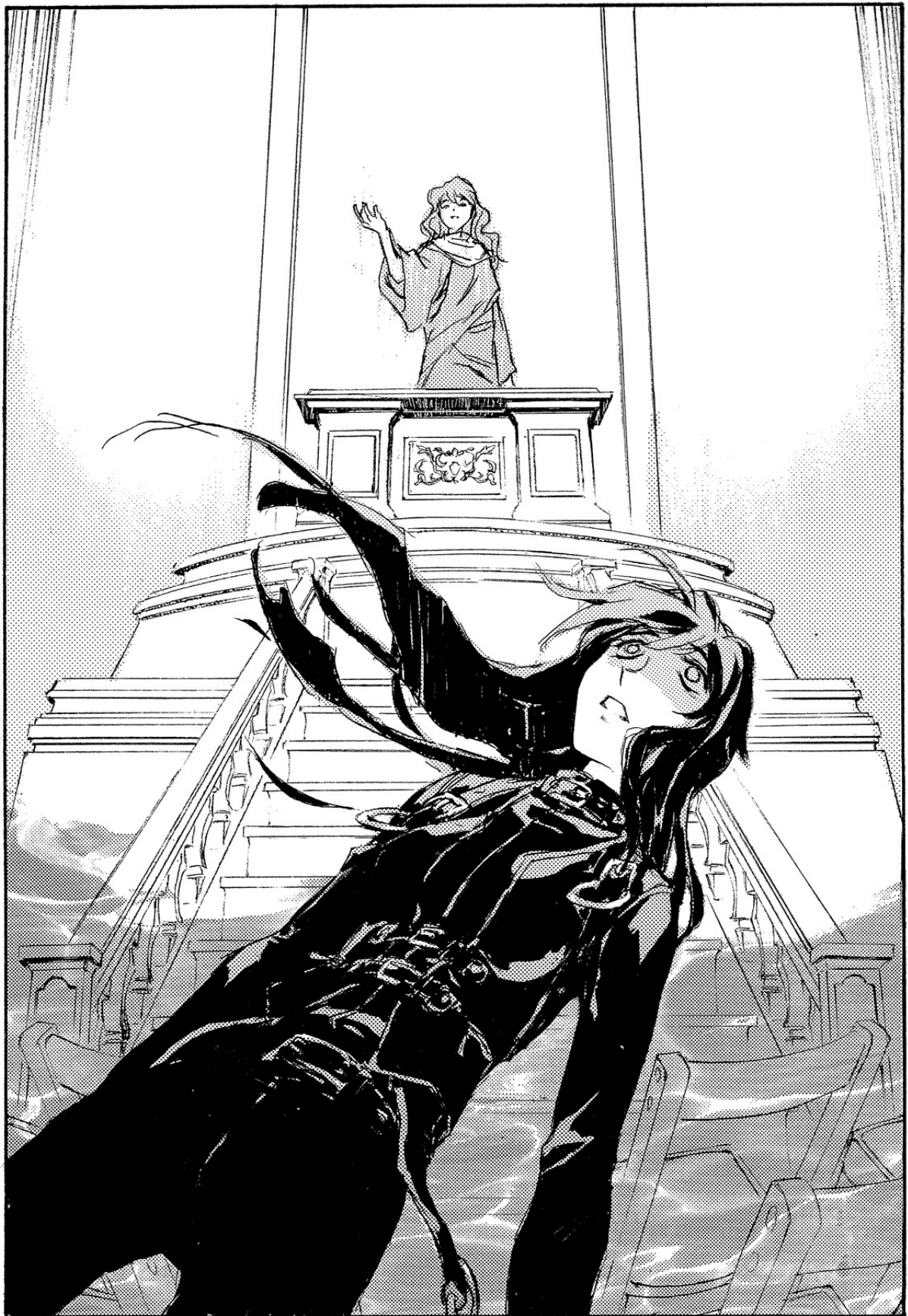
"After a long age—" Even her voice was beautiful. Leticia listened, shivering, captive. "We again greet an age of suffering. You have done well coming here."

Heartia's words revived in Leticia's mind. *"This is the sanctuary!"*

This was the sanctuary. The center of the Kiesalhiman continent. The holy

ground of the dragons, sealed off by the Deep Dragons inside Fenrir's Forest—they were only able to come here now because the Fenrirs were no longer guarding this place.

Leticia shuddered, suddenly finding her combat gear incredibly uncomfortable against her skin. She was struck by an impulse to take it off. No human could put up any kind of fight here. The peace she had never been able to obtain in her twenty-five years of life existed here. She could just go to sleep, and never wake up...



“We will accept you. If you accept us... If you accept the invitation of the sanctuary.”

The Celestial’s voice entered her ears and filled her head to bursting with warm emotions. Warm, peaceful, sleepy...

“...sh! Tish!”

She heard a voice. Someone’s voice, frantic, in her ear. It was grating. She was trying to relax and it was interrupting her. This voice was always disturbing her peace—it had for a long time. Didn’t that mean it was this voice that had taken things she needed from her? This was the woman who had destroyed her family... This woman who was a part of that family.

She turned and saw that woman beside her. She was shouting something, distress in her eyes.

This was the woman Krylancelo had left the Tower five years ago to find. He was still searching for her now. If this woman was gone, there was a good chance her family—at least two of them—could go back to the way they were.

Leticia raised her voice and thrust her hand out. She took the large knife Azalie was holding out to her and turned, leaping forward.

She ran forward at full speed, headed for the Celestial at the podium. She had just barely been able to escape the mental dominion attack, but she still felt pain like there was a foreign object lodged in her head. She ran, fighting against the dizziness assaulting her, and cursed. *How underhanded... This is the sanctuary!*

The Celestial woman raised something like a scream. All the legends agreed that there were only female Celestials. It seemed impossible, yet there was no record of anyone ever meeting a male Celestial. That was the reason Celestials had mixed with humans, giving birth to human sorcerers.

She was far away. Leticia kicked against the ground, each step an effort. She raised the dagger, a ferocious impulse rising up inside her. And...

She leaped to the side, sensing bloodlust. Her body twisted painfully when she stopped herself so quickly. No, that wasn’t the only thing causing her pain.

An enormous figure had appeared at her side and thrust out a fist at her, grazing her.

She didn't think the fist had even touched her, but the shock wave it produced was abnormal. She stumbled to the floor and couldn't get back up again. What would have happened if the blow had actually connected? Leticia shuddered against the cold floor, imagining it. The dagger had flown from her hand and she couldn't find it anymore. It must have fallen somewhere outside her field of view. While she was lying prone on the floor, the huge dark shadow slowly walked before her.

"I see why you're considered the equal of that sorcerer Yuis... You're truly fierce."

"What do you expect me to do when you try to brainwash me out of nowhere?!" Leticia snapped. She was still in pain, but she didn't seem to have taken any actual damage. She'd recovered enough to stand back up, so she did so, backing away from the figure.

The huge man wasn't carrying any weapons, and if her senses weren't deceiving her, that attack hadn't been a sorcerous one. Still, she felt something dangerous about him. His presence alone almost paralyzed her.

The man wore black robes. He wasn't even in a fighting stance anymore. He was looking down at her with his arms hanging limp at his sides. Leticia was tall, so there wasn't actually that big a difference in the height of their eyes, but something about the man made her want to make herself smaller.

"This man is Jack Frisbee. He's a Doppel X." Azalie's whispered voice came from behind her. "If I lent you my strength, you could beat him, no question. But you'll lose if you try to fight him on your own. It's not your role to defeat him. Don't fight him here."

You were the one who riled me up. Leticia growled in the back of her throat even as she agreed with Azalie's assessment. She looked up to the podium, but the Celestial was already gone. Even if they fought and she won, it wouldn't mean anything anymore.

"...I don't know how you brought this in here," Jack muttered, holding the large knife Leticia had dropped. "But I'll have to ask you to stop. Nobody knows

what would happen to the sanctuary if you somehow managed to injure one of the priestesses.”

“Is that why Colgon’s working with you too?”

“He at least got close to killing one of them. But you’ve lost your chance. Don’t try it again.”

“That’s my line. That was self-defense, and a warning. Mental dominion won’t work on me... Don’t try it again.” Leticia straightened her back. “I’m here to negotiate.”

“With a blade on you?”

“I told you it was self-defense and a warning. If it comes to it, I’m prepared to destroy the entire sanctuary!” Leticia spat at the man playing with her knife and mocking her.

The threat was so exaggerated that even she found it ridiculous, and she could see in the man’s face that he didn’t buy it for a minute. She ignored that and took a deep breath to calm herself. Her next bluff, she needed to be convincing.

“I’m here to negotiate with the sanctuary as humanity’s representative.”

“You? What authority do you have as a mere teacher?”

“The negotiation is to place someone with that authority in my position. The lord of the Imminent Domain, who’s been entrusted matters related to the sanctuary by the Union of Lords.”

“He’s—”

Leticia stopped Jack and continued, “Yes. He’s gotten caught up in the fighting right now. But he’s headed here. A colleague of mine is bringing him. You could say I’m the advance party. In any case, you’ll need this. There are no Deep Dragons protecting you anymore, and Almagest has a Deep Dragon on his side, which you no longer possess the power to stop. On the other hand, we don’t have time to wipe the lot of you out first. But we can’t wage war without a negotiation. Do you understand?”

“You know the situation in the sanctuary right now?”

“Yes, I do. So bring out the priestesses once more. But I won’t let you try to control me like that again,” she told him plainly, and waited for his response.

She felt herself breaking out into a sweat from just the conversation they’d had thus far. Now her combat gear was feeling uncomfortable for a different reason than it had before.

“I’m not a politician.” The man smiled wryly. “But even I can tell that you don’t have the authority you claim—”

“May I suggest another ambassador, then?”

It wasn’t Leticia who had spoken this time. She turned around with a gasp. Jack’s expression changed as well as the two of them both looked at this new participant in the conversation.

Azalie had shown herself. She must have made herself visible to Jack too. She stepped forward intimidatingly, but not toward him. She was showing that it wasn’t him she wanted to negotiate with. Instead, she was staring up at the podium.

“Doppel X.”

“...Hmm?” Jack frowned.

“The name has many meanings, does it not?” Azalie asked. “I wonder if anyone who remembers this is listening. The first lord of the Imminent Domain was later called Doppel X as well. He had no name of his own. And officially, there was never an ambassador for the sanctuary. The last name he went by was Childman Powderfield. He died, but his oath lives on, doesn’t it? We’ve come here to fulfill that oath as his successors. Show yourselves. Priestesses of the founding sorcerer Aureole! I’ve brought Aureole’s will with me as well.”

She put her hand to her chest and raised her voice to the empty air above her—it almost seemed like a real voice coming from a real throat. “I am the Chaos Witch. I’ve seen the world’s destruction outside of the barrier and returned!”



“What’s going on?! Explain this!” Heartia rounded on Colgon when they were left alone in the room—he didn’t touch him, though. You could tell what

distance would be dangerous from looking in someone else's eyes. Colgon's distance might have been a lot farther than Heartia's. Still, he pressed forward. "Where did Tish disappear to? Why were we left behind—"

"That's for the priestesses to decide. Like I said earlier, you need their assistance to move anywhere within the sanctuary. No, assistance isn't right... It's more that you need to submit to their control."

"So the priestesses are in charge here?" Heartia asked the unflappable Colgon. He felt like he was being watched, so he glanced around.

Colgon quickly denied it. "No. There are beings the priestesses can't control here in the sanctuary too. The Ayrmarkar, the founding sorcerers."

"Founding sorcerers?"

Colgon frowned in response to Heartia's question. His expression showed a slight bewilderment. "How to explain... Where should I start for you to understand?"

"From the beginning!"

This was likely an unexpected dilemma for this man. He finally removed an arm from his cloak and placed his hand on his forehead. It was a deliberate gesture, like checking if he had a fever when he already knew he did.

Even his muttering sounded vaguely feverish. "Where is the 'beginning' for you? I have no idea..."

"Seriously, as far back as you can go! I don't understand anything that's going on here! Half-assing it isn't gonna help me." Heartia's tone was almost boastful.

Colgon only grimaced harder. "I... I see..." he said lethargically. "Azalie's disappearance, then."

"Oh, I know about that."

"...You're an annoying one, you know that?"

"Gee, never thought I'd hear that from you." The two of them quipped at each other expressionlessly before Heartia cleared his throat in order to clear the air between them. "All I heard was something about this continent being destroyed or something. And Krylancelo was doing something to try to stop it,

so I was supposed to help him by—” Heartia suddenly stopped before he blurted out what Azalie had asked him to do.

Luckily, Colgon didn’t seem to have caught on. He nodded and softened his expression somewhat. “If you understand that much, then it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine! I don’t know any of the details! Like, why are we at the sanctuary? I don’t understand why I was brought here.”

“You teleported here directly? You must not have seen it, then. The monster known as the goddess of fate will be manifesting directly above the sanctuary sometime within the next ten days. If it appears fully, the continent is doomed.”

“That’s stupid,” Heartia said, but Colgon ignored him and continued.

“The sanctuary doesn’t possess the power to stop the goddess. You know what the Ayrmankar barrier is, right?”

Heartia shook his head. Colgon sighed, obviously annoyed that he had to explain, but he explained anyway.

“Long ago, the dragons stole sorcery from the gods. In order to escape from the gods, they fled to Kiesalhima. This is a myth, but it’s not far from the truth. The dragons covered the continent in a barrier, establishing a boundary of logic that the gods could not penetrate... Well, never mind all that. In any case, things were secure for a time after that, but there was a flaw to this grand spell.”

“A flaw?”

“The barrier was created by immortal spellcasters called the Ayrmankar, the founding sorcerers. Put simply, they were the beings who codified sorcery as it exists today. The group consisted of one member of each dragon race. There was also a founding human sorcerer, but they weren’t involved in the creation of the barrier, and we can’t expect any help from them.”

Heartia did his best to keep up with Colgon’s fast-paced explanation. “So...?”

“If sorcery was created by the dragons, it means there was once a world without sorcery. The Ayrmankar thus act as a sort of linchpin to manifest sorcery in this world. They will never die or even grow old. As they function as

the root of all sorcery, they are able to make use of the most powerful of spells. It must have gone to their heads. They didn't understand that even their power had its limits."

"Hmm?"

"Their power wasn't enough to cover the entire continent. The barrier wasn't perfect. There's a gap in it wide enough for the gods to break through. And one such goddess is attempting to do exactly that now."

"Huh..."

"...I can't help but feel like you're mocking me with each response of yours."

"Really? That's the first time anyone's said something like that to me." This time, it was Heartia's turn to look puzzled.

Colgon took a breath, his expression turning rather melancholic. "This must sound completely ridiculous to you."

"Yeah. I mean, you say the world's ending in ten days, but... I've got a date the week after next, you know?"

"I see. You should look forward to that, then. I'm an agent working to prevent that calamity, and I'm still hard at work now. Therefore, the world will not be destroyed. I can guarantee you that. Which means you can go home." Colgon spoke not confidently but frankly.

Heartia cocked his head and groaned before saying, "You sound like my subordinates when they hold stepladders steady for me...but I've never once felt secure on one of those things. Weird, right?" Colgon didn't say anything in return, so Heartia gave him a look and kept going. "And where's Krylancelo, anyway? He's not with you?"

"No. Just so you know, I'm not working with him. I offered him up to my employer as a substitute for me. He's just distracting friends and foes alike. No, maybe there was a different reason... In any case, I don't imagine he'll agree with the way I'm doing things. He's always been like that."

I see... Heartia mused to himself. It seemed Azalie's request wasn't total nonsense.

Heartia put a hand on his heart to indicate himself. “Then just so *you* know, I don’t intend to work with either Krylancelo or Azalie.”

“Is that decision based on personal feelings?”

“Yeah, it is. I mean, who is it who let Comicron die?”

“It might have been me. If I had participated in the first squad sent after Azalie five years ago, we would have dealt with the witch before she had time for any of her petty schemes. Then Master and Comicron wouldn’t have had to die, and I bet Krylancelo would have come back right away. That would have been the best option for limiting the changes within the Tower as much as possible,” Colgon said matter-of-factly.

Heartia opened his eyes wide and Colgon smiled grimly like he’d said something clever. “In that case, your enmity would be directed at me,” he said. “That’s all those emotions of yours mean. A scorpion’s always pointing its barb at something, so the scorpion’s the only one who cares *where* it’s pointing.”

“...Master said the same thing.”

“He said it to me too. Apparently, a wealthy friend of his enjoyed sayings like that and shared quite a few of them with him. In any case, I didn’t accompany the group that went after her five years ago. Master was afraid I’d kill Azalie. I was afraid I’d lose to her. For better or worse, she could only be a threat...” Colgon muttered before looking around in search of a chair, but there was nothing that could even be called furniture in the room. Having no other option, he leaned against a wall and bent his legs as if it were the back of a seat.

Heartia watched him for a moment before asking, “Is that comfortable?”

“It’s comfortable for me.” Colgon didn’t seem to be joking. He wasn’t the type, of course.

Heartia considered it for a moment before adopting the same position against the opposite wall. He quickly gave up. “There’s no way. That’s exhausting.”

“It’s comfortable for me,” Colgon repeated stubbornly. After a beat, he said thoughtfully, “You’ve never been afraid of me.”

“Neither were Comicron or Krylancelo,” Heartia said.

Colgon nodded neutrally, but still narrowed his eyes like he didn't quite understand. "That's true. It's not like I went easy on you, though."

"I could tell."

"If you still can't forgive Azalie, then you should take this opportunity to use her as you see fit. You should be the one to decide your role in this."

"...Huh?" Heartia was caught off guard by the conversation suddenly getting back on track.

Colgon ignored his confusion and knocked on the white, unadorned wall as if signaling something. "This is the sanctuary. It's a dangerous place. What do you think they eliminated in order to preserve the purity of these white walls? It's the sort of place where you learn the answers to questions like that."

"What do you mean?" Heartia asked. His question felt inevitable, like some terrible premonition had forced it from him.

Colgon was silent for a short time. He didn't do anything, but Heartia had the impression the man was trying to measure something about him. The room remained unchanged, as deserted as it was before.

Still, whatever measure he'd made must have been satisfactory. Colgon nodded. "Looks like the priestesses have forgotten to keep an eye on us. Leticia must have put them in an awfully tight spot. That's convenient. I'll give you some information now, while I have the chance. But before that..." He stood from his sitting position and murmured, "I'm exhausted..."

"I don't get you." Heartia's posture crumbled, and it was instead he who seemed tired.

Chapter VI: Victory and What Is Not Victory

“We’ll begin in the early morning, before dawn—say, four o’clock. That’s exactly an hour from now.” The Demon’s voice sank into the darkness as he peered at his pocket watch. It was impossible to see the depths of his emotions, obscured as they were by the muddy darkness.

The cover of Pluto’s pocket watch had been broken off, either because it was more convenient that way or simply because it had been damaged from overuse.

“It’s dangerous to move at night when we’re up against dragons that can see in the dark, but the danger will remain even if we wait longer. That’s why I’d like each person to be notified. Our objective is the dragon sanctuary.”

The Numbers all nodded and stood as one—no, not quite at the same time. There was a varying amount of hesitation among the group.

Pluto extinguished his sorcerous lights and the darkness deepened. Orphen glanced around and found that the Thirteen Apostles now had only the bare minimum of light to illuminate the area. The stars and the moon in the sky were much brighter. Their light reflected off the wastes, creating geometric patterns with beams of light.

Pluto puffed up his chest in front of the line of Numbers and wrapped the meeting up. “If we were given this power by a mere trick of fate, then it is my belief that in times of danger, we must use it to protect those without power. What we stand against now is the destruction of the very continent itself. Be ready.”

“Yes, sir.” The Numbers were surprised to hear Maria Huwon answer that way. Even Pluto raised an eyebrow slightly, but the expression was quickly gone. With a quiet signal, they dispersed.

Orphen watched them from a few meters away. He turned on his heel, just as silent as the rest of them.

Orphen returned to his companions and found them snoring. He looked around in the dim light and saw Majic curled up in a blanket, the dwarves lying spread-eagle on the ground, and Claiomh leaning against Leki, all of them asleep. Orphen sneaked around, careful not to wake them, and kept looking. Leki wasn't sleeping; he had his head raised and was staring straight at the forest. The lord stood at a slight distance, leaning against a cane and looking in the same direction.

Isabella raised her head from where she sat on the ground, hugging her knees. "Done talking?"

She must have been awake all this time. She looked tired. No, maybe she *had* slept, but she couldn't have had good dreams. Orphen groaned, remembering the piles of corpses littering the wastes. He wondered what dreams Majic and Claiomh might have been having.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the thought, Orphen muttered, "Yeah. We'll be setting out soon... Under an hour now."

"You want to wake everyone?"

"No, we should let them sleep a bit more. I'll get everything ready." He glanced at the luggage but found that Isabella had already gotten everything together. She'd even dug a hole in the ground to get rid of their garbage. It was just like her to be so efficient.

Orphen looked up at the sky. Dawn was still far off. "Are we really so impressive?"

"Huh?"

Orphen gave her a slight smile—it wasn't a thought he'd had in relation to her. He didn't know what sort of expression he should be wearing on his face. "Pluto believes we should bear the burdens of the entire world."

"He sure does. What about you?" Isabella wore the same kind of wry smile.

Orphen shrugged, relieved to see it. "I...don't think we can. I can't think that way. All this time, I haven't even been able to bear my own problems."

“I know what you’re trying to say. You think we’re too arrogant, don’t you?”

Orphen didn’t agree completely, but he said nothing, simply waiting for her to continue.

Isabella straightened out her hunched shoulders and stretched her limbs, still sitting. “I talked with that Majic of yours. He’s angry with you. Wants to know why the world’s greatest sorcerer doesn’t have any confidence.”

“I saw all sorts of people trying to save the world in Kimluck. Ironically, they all died. Azalie was one of them. When I see Pluto and Miss Maria acting the way they are now, I just can’t bring myself to support them.”

“Knowing the situation, I’m sure you can’t stop them either, though.” Isabella’s voice cracked slightly. “I’m the same way. I tried to stop Miss Maria and asked her why she made the decision she did about Irgitte. But when I heard her reasons...”

“If I let you and Miss Maria die, Irgitte’ll haunt me... I know I should try to think of a way where no one has to be sacrificed.”

“That’s just an ideal. But reality is pressing...” She stopped.

Before she could resume talking, Orphen shot a glance at Claiomh, Majic, and Leki—even the snoring dwarves, and said, “There’s nothing more pressing to me than a reality in which someone has to die.” He probably didn’t need to say something like that to a member of the Thirteen Apostles, who had lost over fifty members just half a day ago.

Orphen walked away, unable to bear the awkward atmosphere any longer. Isabella didn’t stop him. He naturally found himself heading for the lord.

After a few steps, Almagest turned toward him. He must have noticed Orphen’s approach. The man stood with his cane under the moon. The shadows on his face made him look much older than he normally seemed. The word “prophet” came to mind when Orphen looked at him, as well as the word “reaper.”

“Can you really call this a war?” Those were the first words out of the man who looked like a prophet—or possibly *was* a prophet. His voice continued, foretelling a dark future. “We have no hope of victory. Even if we do win, we

don't receive anything for being victorious. All I can see is despair."

"You make it sound like if we fulfill some kind of condition to make it into a proper war, there *is* something we could get out of it," Orphen said bluntly. "We've already lost people. There's nothing we could get that would make up for that."

The lord must have sensed some hostility in Orphen's tone. He smiled magnanimously as if to say he was forgiven and continued, "We cannot avoid a confrontation with the sanctuary. Even Pluto and I could not join forces. We share a goal, yet could not accept one another. And the sanctuary plans to abandon the whole lot of us."

"They want to shrink the Ayrmarkar barrier... Is that true?" His breath was white now. The night was cold out in the wastes. Either that or his body temperature had risen. Orphen felt it was the second.

The lord nodded. Determining that no one was watching, he tossed aside his cane and made a shape with his hands like he was holding something round. Then he brought his hands closer together, shrinking the invisible object. "If the hole is because the barrier is stretched too thin, then all they need to do is shrink it. It's a natural assumption. The problem is exactly how small they plan to shrink it."

He brought his hands so close together there was practically no gap between them before continuing. "The sanctuary has been planning this for over ten years. No...over two hundred years, perhaps. Either way, it doesn't matter. Now that they've lost Aureole, the Celestial Ayrmarkar, they're finally committed to betraying the continent. What surprises me is the existence of Doppel X."

"Meaning?"

"At first, I thought Doppel X appearing outside of the sanctuary was a mere show of force. But I was also aware of how questionable that idea seemed. The sanctuary was perfectly defended by the Deep Dragons. A show of force was completely unnecessary. I only learned the truth recently."

The lord neither tensed nor frowned. He merely spoke slowly and clearly. "The problem was the region the barrier would shrink to cover. The Ayrmarkar didn't want to gamble again. They decided to shrink the barrier to its smallest

possible size to ensure the elimination of the gap. They decided to save only the burial chamber housing the Ayrmankar and abandon the rest of the continent in its entirety.”

He’d heard the same thing from Maria, but the lord had slightly more information. Damian had probably sniffed out the information from the Network of the Misty Falls’ white sorcerers.

Almagest kept going. “Doppel X are those who have been abandoned by the sanctuary. A group called the priestesses lead Doppel X. They’re trying to collect whatever power they can to pressure the founding sorcerers. Even though they know it’s a fool’s errand.”

“Then we should work with Doppel X—”

The lord cut him off immediately. “Impossible. Don’t misunderstand. The barrier *must* shrink. Doppel X simply want it to encompass the entire sanctuary. They still plan on abandoning everyone beyond that.” He lowered his hands.

The lord bent down and picked up his cane. “I wish to use the Second World-Seeing Tower to summon the demon king and push out the goddess who has already begun to manifest in this world. Then I need to think of a way to reinforce the barrier somehow. Needless to say, this is a far riskier endeavor than the plan of the sanctuary, or that of Doppel X. You might even call it nothing more than buying time. In addition, just as you said, we have no idea if we’ll be successful in summoning the demon king or not. Even the Celestials required a great deal of time to summon a single book. And even if we succeed, we may simply double the number of threats we face.”

He planted his cane on the ground and continued, “We’ll need to think of the government after, as well. The sanctuary will have to be subjugated so that they never betray us again...by force or whatever else.” He paused.

Then his voice deepened. “The Union of Lords was able to make use of the Thirteen Apostles. I know what I said earlier today, but the reason I didn’t want them in the line of fire was because if we wage full-on war with the sanctuary, I know they’ll be wiped out completely, and if that happens, it will diminish the power that humanity wields. If we’re going to take control of the sanctuary after this is all over, I’d like to prevent any additional losses among the Thirteen

Apostles. So our interests align in that we'd both like to stop the Thirteen Apostles, do they not?"

"They do."

What was it the lord was trying to say? Orphen had an idea, as if he'd stolen the lord's prophetic powers. Because he was prepared for it, he didn't back down when the lord leaned forward to look him in the eyes.

"Let me give you some advice, then. That said, you might already know this. In short, Pluto is the key." He lowered his voice as quietly as he possibly could and Almagest whispered to Orphen, his voice rasping with intent. "The Thirteen Apostles are done if Pluto dies."

"...True enough," was all Orphen said in response.

He looked around and noticed the Thirteen Apostles beginning to stir with movement in the night air, having been told their departure time. There were still some ten or twenty minutes before they really had to get up, though.

Pluto moved away from the group when he left. From his disposition, I doubt he has any guards or allies nearby. Besides, they hardly have the personnel for that now anyway. He gazed into the darkness, continuing his rumination. In this short time, is it possible to go after Pluto...?

Orphen ran off without saying anything to the lord.

There's no god who will save you if you pray to them... Not in this world. People can only believe in gods that don't exist.

He wasn't trying to hide his footsteps, but they still didn't make a sound in the night. He slipped forward in the darkness as if he'd lost his physical form. Forward. Forward again. Pushing through the night air. He took air into his lungs and expelled it, but even that, he couldn't hear.

He wished he could quiet his thoughts as well—though he knew there was no one listening to them, he wanted to just run without carrying their burden.

Humans find disappointment in the things they can see and touch. The real thing can never measure up to their expectations. It's the same for everyone.

When I spent five years searching for Azalie and finally found her, I was left with only disappointment when I heard what she had to say to me. The disappointment was only stronger the more you could see or touch something.

Finally, with a grimace, the noise in Orphen's mind subsided.

He wasn't running knowing where Pluto was. He was just searching for him with a general direction in mind. He didn't have much time, and he knew that he was starting to panic a little. If he screwed up, he might end up sacrificing something he could never get back. He was no superhero, but he still had to do whatever he could.

He arrived at the location of the meeting he'd attended earlier. He did his best to recall the direction Pluto had left in and took off once more.

Still...even with disappointment and despair, humans have to keep living! Orphen picked up his pace, trying to drown out the restless thoughts his halt had brought to the surface.

All he could do now was run.

His consciousness faded into darkness, so much so that he didn't even notice if he passed anyone by. He imagined himself as nothing more than a dark shadow on the night wind.

Eventually, he arrived before a giant figure standing ahead of him in the darkness.

He didn't stop moving, sinking low for a moment before raising his right foot.

His foot thrust out like a spear, and it almost looked like it had pierced the figure. That was the intent with which he'd raised it, aiming for the spine in the center of the body. If he hit, he knew he could seal the figure's movement for a few seconds. He could immobilize his opponent without even giving them the time to scream.

But the figure swiftly sidestepped to avoid the blow. In addition, they threw out a sideswipe while Orphen's balance was still thrown off. Orphen gritted his teeth and bent back almost far enough to hit the ground as he dodged the attack. He knew that this wasn't the sort of foe he could stumble against, even if it was just for a second. He maintained his balance and stood up swiftly.

His foe was still moving too. By the time Orphen was back up, a fist was flying in his direction.

Should he dodge it or catch it? He had to make the decision in less than a second.

He knew the enemy's strength. He couldn't catch it.

But Orphen didn't avoid the blow. Instead, he raised his right foot again. He kicked out as tightly as he could in a circular motion. The blade hidden in the heel of his boot caught his enemy's fist. Once he'd thrown off the trajectory of his opponent's attack, he raised his foot even higher, bringing his heel down in an attack of his own.

His kick caught the figure in the shoulder, but Orphen clicked his tongue, feeling how shallow the connection was. He'd managed to block his opponent's blow, but he hadn't been able to counterattack with any force, and he was off-balance now. He was trying to make up for the difference in their statures by taking his opponent by surprise and using kicks instead of punches, but the force his adversary was able to muster overwhelmed even those advantages.

And it wasn't just force. The way they moved their feet, the speed of their attacks, each and every movement was precise and as small as possible.

This guy's a force to be reckoned with...

Orphen wove a complex spell in a second and shouted, "I leap over thee, Towering Spire!"

He used pseudo-teleportation to retreat several meters and rematerialized.

With the benefit of distance, Orphen's enemy was actually easier to see in the darkness.

He stared back at Orphen calmly. Orphen finally found himself slightly out of breath from the enormous pressure the man exuded. Orphen got back into his combat stance, remembering facing off with the Deep Dragons a few days before. An enemy he could wield his full strength against, and it still wouldn't be enough.

"Krylancelo... Is that you?!" The voice came not from the enemy before him,

but from behind him and to the side—low to the ground. Pluto, the Demon of the Capital, called out to him with shock in his voice. “You came to protect me?”

“Well, we’ll see if I *can*...” Orphen muttered tensely. Pluto was trying to get up, but the way he was moving made it obvious that he was wounded already.

If Pluto’s already hurt...then I can’t rely on him here. Orphen returned his attention to the foe before him. He used every nerve in his body to sense his enemy.

“The Thirteen Apostles are done if Pluto dies. Anyone could come up with that. I thought you might show up.”

“The Red Dragons proved unreliable...as unbelievable as that is.” There was no reason for the man in priest’s robes, Jack Frisbee, to answer him, so Orphen was taken aback when he spoke up, expecting him to simply attack without a word.

The Doppel X went on, his tone downright amicable. “I remember you. I remember every foe I’ve fought. But hardly any have lived to face me again. Who are you?”

“I’m just me,” Orphen spat, clenching his fists.

At the same time, Orphen noticed something and hissed, not at Jack in front of him, but at Pluto behind him, “No! Don’t call anyone! This guy killed Seek Marrisk without breaking a sweat. If you don’t want to lose any more men, don’t call anyone.”

Pluto groaned. He seemed more speechless about Orphen sensing without looking back that he was about to speak than about him guessing what he was about to say.

Still, he seemed willing to listen to Orphen’s hasty command. Staggering to his feet, Pluto said, “This...isn’t a dragon. He’s just a human, right?”

“So what? Does that mean something?” Orphen spat, irritated, as he shifted forward slightly. He was in a dangerous, unnatural stance, but he’d judged that he wouldn’t be able to win if he fought fair.

“It does mean something...” Jack said. He raised his left arm toward Orphen, his right still lowered. “The last to stand in the way of superhuman sorcerers like you will be regular people like me. Isn’t that right? Demon of the Capital... I am an evil spirit.”

He leaned forward in imitation of Orphen, but so slightly that it was almost unnoticeable from the front. But if his fists struck even a few centimeters deeper, it could mean Orphen’s entire body being torn apart.

“An evil spirit?” Pluto repeated.

The man who called himself an evil spirit, Jack Frisbee, was totally composed as he responded. “An evil spirit possesses my body. That is the source of my power. A demon who nests in the mystery of the human body.”

“Move, Krylancelo! I’ll blow you to bits if you don’t!”

Orphen shuddered when he heard the voice from behind him. Injured and enraged, Pluto had lost his ability to make rational decisions. He might really do it. But...

Jack’s eyes, peeking out from under his hat, weren’t agitated at all. *He’s waiting for the moment we rely on our sorcery*, Orphen thought to himself.

They were the ones who were agitated.

The second Orphen blinked, his adversary disappeared from his field of view.

He exploded from the place where he’d been standing, but without sound. Those black priest’s robes he wore made the darkness his ally as well, allowing him to easily slip into cracks in Orphen’s perception. Before Orphen could even determine what direction Jack had moved in, he released his spell.

He leaped toward the one place his adversary wouldn’t be able to chase him—the sky. “I dash across thee, Snowcapped—”

He was too slow. No, the gravity nullification spell was already throwing his body skyward, but at the same time, he could already see Jack.

He was probably two meters into the air, but Jack was jumping that same distance. His body was balled up, taut like a bowstring, with his left fist extended.

Narrow the composition!

“—Mountain!” He transformed the spell with his last bit of breath.

Orphen groaned in pain, feeling like his insides were being squeezed by his midair change in direction. Still, his spell functioned. He rapidly switched from ascending to falling, spinning to avoid his enemy’s blow and landing on the ground. Crashing on the ground might be more accurate. He’d broken his fall, but he wouldn’t escape a few bruises.

When he got up, Jack was continuing his charge, straight for Pluto this time. He was fast.

I won’t make it... Still, Orphen took off, aiming for Jack’s back. Pluto stood with his arms extended, on guard.

“I witnessed a tragedy!”

Was it an incantation? Orphen lamented as he observed Pluto’s composition. The spell the Demon was trying to cast was without a doubt powerful, and its precision and speed were nothing to sneeze at either. But it wouldn’t be fast enough to beat Jack’s speed.

Pluto was about to be killed, but Orphen got an idea and swiftly wove a spell. He prioritized speed above all else and raised his right arm, facing off against Pluto.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!” He matched up his timing with the activation of Pluto’s spell. At almost the exact same time, white light expanded out from both his and Pluto’s extended hands.

He saw Jack glance back at him just before it happened.

Orphen’s spell burst, vying for supremacy with Pluto’s sorcery. The earth shook with the explosion and heat. The blast faded in an instant and Orphen hit his knees, buffeted by the aftershocks. Pluto was staring at him from the same position.

They didn’t have much time to exchange a glance. Orphen quickly noticed Jack standing unbelievably close to him.

He noticed the pincer attack before it happened and moved all the way over

here before getting hit...? He didn't even want to try dodging the left hook Jack was about to swing at him, so he leaped back before it came.



It shouldn't have surprised him, he supposed—he knew Jack had the speed to hit Pluto before the Demon could get off a spell. Still, Orphen decided on the pincer attack because he knew that Jack wouldn't be able to kill Pluto and dodge an attack from behind him at the same time. He'd made the man abandon his attack to dodge their spells, forcing him to focus on evasion instead of offense.

Pluto roared. He charged Jack, swinging his fist at him. Jack didn't even turn to look, just spinning and deflecting Pluto's punch with his left arm. But he didn't just deflect it; he dragged Pluto's whole body to the ground without even taking hold of him. Jack held his fist low as the Demon of the Capital was forced to crawl around on the ground.

Orphen thrust out his right leg before Jack could land a killing blow. Jack backed up to avoid it, opening up a few steps of distance between the two of them.

He feinted like he was going to attack again, but stepped back farther instead. Orphen took the opportunity to draw his shortsword. This wasn't an opponent he could hold back against.

The quiet wasteland rumbled with the aftershock of the explosions, but that wasn't the only noise. The Thirteen Apostles were starting to stir, alerted to the disturbance. The white flames burning on the ground illuminated the group of men like torchlight.

Jack looked the same as ever—he showed no signs of panic, anger, or anything else.

Orphen, on the other hand, couldn't be happy about the prospect of the Thirteen Apostles rushing to join them. This man had massacred dozens of people in the Imminent Domain. He might not find over fifty highly talented sorcerers such easy prey, but that didn't mean the results would be much different.

"I'll bring you down..." Pluto whispered viciously. The Demon of the Capital was enraged, sand slipping through both of his hands on the ground.

Orphen stepped forward to get in front of him. Pluto's groaning was causing

the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end, but he couldn't pay attention to that right now.

The man in the priest's robes was watching him carefully. It was the same as when he'd first appeared... At least, it looked that way at first, but Orphen suddenly noticed a difference. At some point, Jack had reversed his stance, no longer attacking with his right fist. Now, his right shoulder was forward, his left fist pulled back.

Orphen shifted his position as well with a grunt of suspicion. Now that he got a better look, Jack's right arm was dangling limp in front of him, not a finger moving. He'd hurt his right arm. Enough that even moving it was difficult.

What? When did he injure himself?

There was one other thing too. Another difference in his foe. He was smiling. The man's rugged face had a strange smile pulling up both cheeks. It really did look like he was possessed by an evil spirit. The expression was in part mocking and in part celebratory. A dark smile, lit by sorcerous white flames.

"So your name is...Krylancelo," the man in the priest's robes suddenly muttered. "It's a name I believe I've heard somewhere before. You're interesting. I know just one other sorcerer as strong as you. But you're not like him... You're similar, but the exact opposite..."

"Your right arm's broken, isn't it?" Orphen said, ignoring his remarks. He stared down his enemy, practically praying. "Go back to the sanctuary. Your victory yesterday was overwhelming, yet you're still sending out an assassin to try to take out the Thirteen Apostles. It really shows just how desperate you are right now."

"I won't deny it. The sanctuary is ruined. Just as the rest of the continent is." The Doppel X raised his uninjured left arm and the smile faded from his face. His now expressionless face tilted upward as if he were staring into empty space.

The sky stirred with black and gray as dawn approached, lightened by the white of the stars and illuminating the flames smoldering on the earth. The man's voice dissolved into the chaotic mix.

"It's not a large problem... I just want to answer Ryan Spoon's despair. As one

who despairs in the same way...”

“That’s—” Orphen started, but he swallowed his words. Jack had disappeared. He looked around with a shudder, thinking the man had escaped his field of view again, but he didn’t sense him anywhere. The sanctuary must have collected him somehow. He was completely gone.

“What was that...? Does the sanctuary have so much contempt for us?!” Pluto griped, grinding his teeth. He no longer had a target for his anger.

Orphen shook his head. The flames had gone out by now, the curtain of darkness descending once again around them.

The chaos, however, grew. There were quite a few pairs of footsteps approaching, all panicked. Orphen heard screams as well. Maybe some sorcerers had finally reached the ends of their ropes after this surprise attack.

There were only fifteen or so minutes until the time Pluto had set. Orphen groaned to himself.

...Did they really plan on leaving now? Did they really think they could?

Afterword

I know, there's an afterword even though this is Act 1 of 2. I know, it's ridiculous, I'm sorry. But my editor told me I had to write one.

Apparently we don't have many pages to spare though, so I can't write much. I was told to keep it to one page. So this'll be short, but I'll make my apologies and such.

It's the nineteenth volume of the series, but there was a long gap between the last volume and this one. In my other series, I said in an afterword that I'd tell you the reason when volume 19 comes out, but unfortunately all I'm able to write is an apology.

Yeah, I was kind of hoping we could release Acts 1 and 2 at the same time, but...ugh.

Well, I'll be praying that we can meet again at the end of my next book. See you!

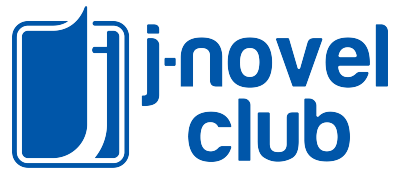
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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 19

by Yoshinobu Akita

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