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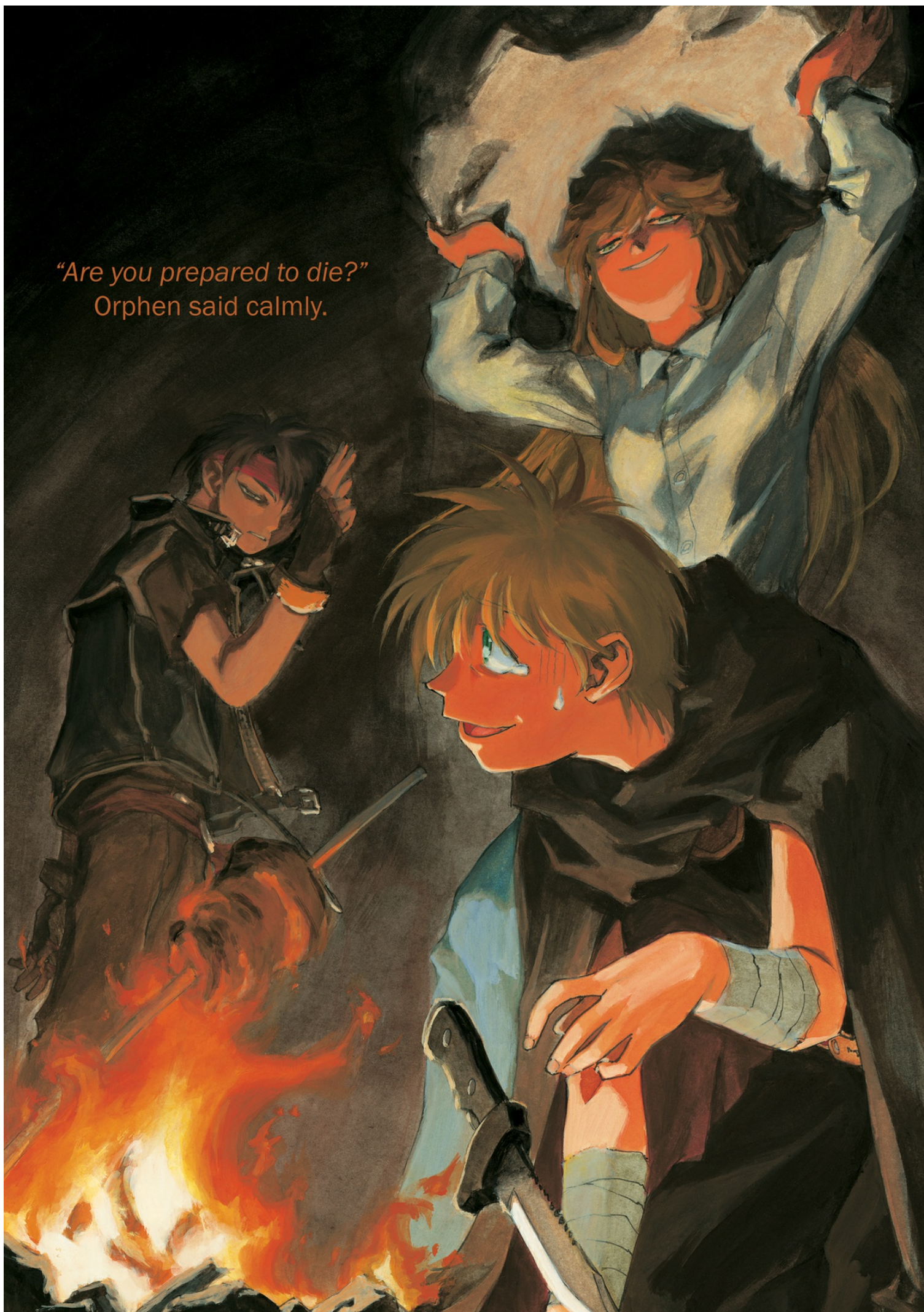


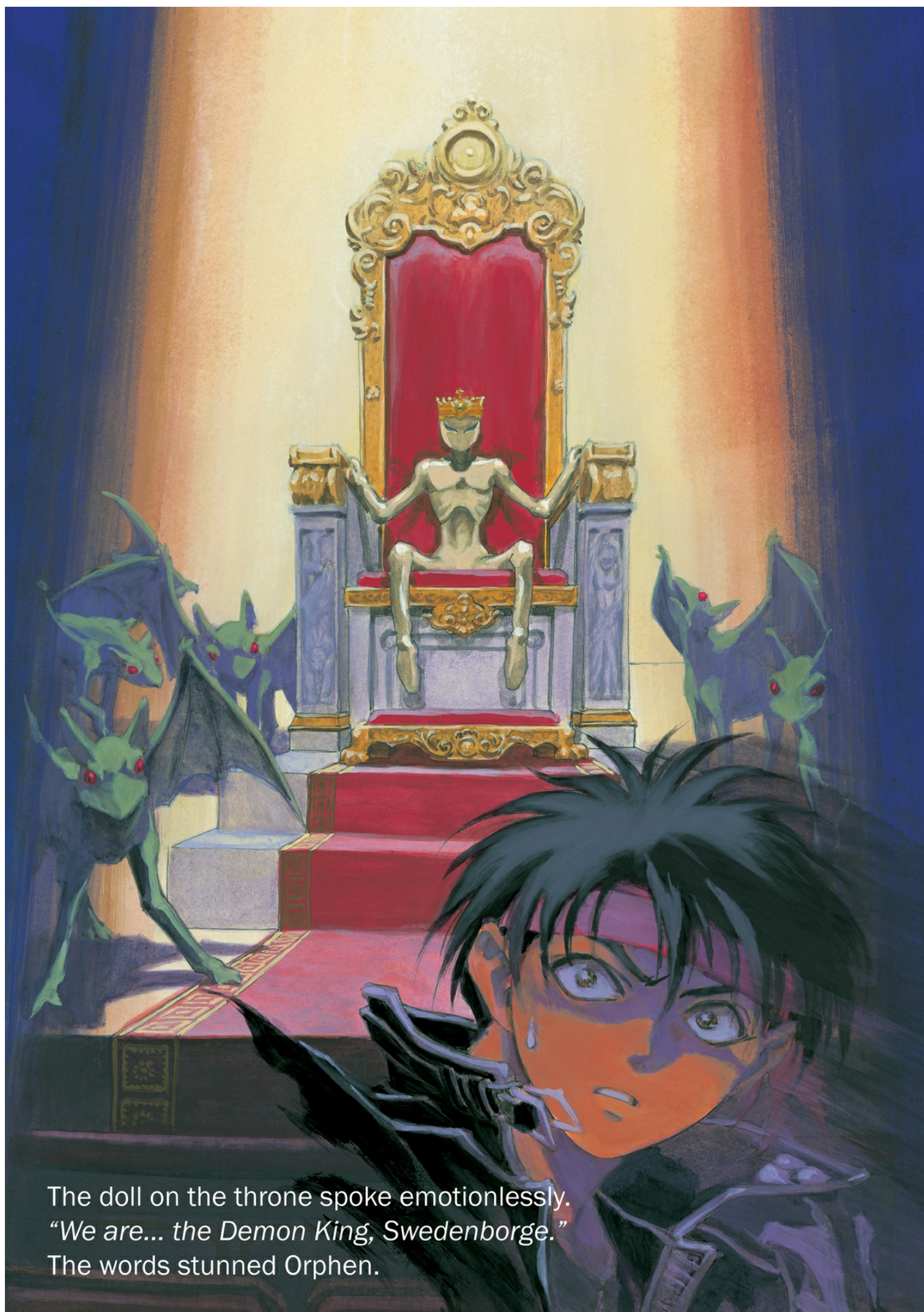
7. CONVEY MY WILL, DEMON KING!



SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

"Are you prepared to die?"
Orphen said calmly.





The doll on the throne spoke emotionlessly.
"We are... the Demon King, Swedenborg."
The words stunned Orphen.

“Yaaaaah!” A woman leapt through the doorway with a shout and thrust a sword into the back of the doll!



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Prologue

He fidgeted atop a chair, unable to relax, as he'd been doing for some time now. It wasn't exactly a room one *could* relax in. In fact, it was more like a shed, a space filled with haphazardly placed furniture that wasn't being used anymore. He was seated, but it wasn't as if anyone had offered him the chair. He'd pulled it out from where it was lodged, slanted between a chest and a dresser, and sat down in it of his own volition.

The gas light on the ceiling swayed dubiously. This place having gas despite not being in a town was unexpected and disconcerting. Tools that weren't maintained always broke, and when gas was involved, breaking could mean an explosion or suffocation. But none of that mattered...

Dortin fidgeted again. He had on his heavy fur cloak (which he never removed, even while indoors) and his thick glasses. He was a young dwarf, part of a small race that had a nation on the south of the continent. He was about 130 centimeters in height—short and stout, with thick, black hair. He was the stereotypical dwarf, and the cloak he wore was stereotypical dwarf garb.

For a little while now, he had been stealing glances at another chair, atop which sat his brother. The older dwarf had the same fur cloak but no glasses, instead holding a sheathed longsword. He did nothing but yawn every so often, meaning he probably hadn't realized the precarious situation they were in.

That's when—*bam! bam!*—there were two loud knocks. Dortin jumped and turned toward the door, his expression like that of a falsely accused criminal. After the two knocks, there came an annoyed voice, like the speaker considered the ensuing words a waste of oxygen. "Hey, we're leaving! Are you unable to even come out if I don't come and get you?!"

Of course not, Dortin thought, but he didn't say anything, merely standing slowly. His older brother, who never seemed to have a thought in his head, leapt off his chair like he didn't have a thought in his head. In other words, this was typical behavior from him. "...Of course, I'd never think that," he muttered to himself sarcastically. Though, even Dortin was unaware of exactly who the

sarcasm was for.

In any case, Dortin sighed as his nearby brother—Volkan—nodded to himself.

“I get it, Dortin.”

“...You get what?” Dortin responded feebly.

Volkan clenched his fist and declared, “I get why you’re sighing! You’re itching to put your skills to use on our first big job in a long time, but you don’t want anyone to know, so you hide your excitement behind a sigh! Your big bro knows exactly how you feel!”

“...In what world would someone do something so roundabout?” Dortin groaned, but Volkan wasn’t hearing any of it. Of course, this too was business as usual.

Dortin sighed again and looked around—just like always. Inns like these on the outskirts of town were never very safe. *Inns where we can easily sneak into a shed, in other words*, he thought to himself.

The inn itself was a den of thieves who stole the guests’ traveling money. When he thought about it, it was a solid business plan that anyone would be able to think up. Meaning the inn they were currently staying at was merely the lair of a banal group only capable of thinking up such banal schemes. There shouldn’t be many inns like this around these days, and yet they had strolled right inside, on purpose, which was yet another thing that was just like always. That was the third just-like-always thing so far.

And the fourth thing: for some reason, his brother had hit it off splendidly with the people who’d made this their base.

Fifth: He’d dragged Dortin into it as well.

Sixth: They were now trapped with these thieves and murderers with no way to escape.

...Of course, it wasn’t always that so many of these things all happened together. Dortin sighed again.

“You ready?!” someone shouted with utmost sincerity. It likely wasn’t directed at Dortin, but at everyone, and a chorus of voices responded.

“Yeah!”

“I’m rarin’ to go!”

Why? he thought, looking around bitterly.

The first floor of the inn was supposed to be a dining hall or tavern, but with bandits living there, it was more like a gathering spot. Now it was for preparing for a day’s thievery. Fifteen—including Dortin and Volkan—had gathered in the messy dining hall. They were all armed (except for Dortin) with various weapons. Some had proper swords on their belts, while others only wielded blades that may as well have been kitchen knives. One even had a weighted chain, though Dortin had no idea what he thought he’d use it for.

If one thing was for certain, it was that if they ran into the police, this group would have no way of talking their way out of it. Like, for instance, “Oh, sorry, this is just a group meeting for metal tool enthusiasts.” Still, Dortin hoped they’d run into the police, even though he knew there’d be no patrols this far on the outskirts of town.

He glanced at his brother, who was gleefully nodding to himself for some reason or another. It was hard to imagine that expression on someone who just last night had been discovered devouring the vegetables left in the shed and had been about to trip his brother and run off by himself.

He held up his sword, sheath and all, and exclaimed proudly, “Mm! No matter what the job, for the great Bulldog of Masmaturia, it’ll be just like stepping through thin ice!”

“...That’s so wrong, it’s actually right,” Dortin muttered next to him, but Volkan continued, just as oblivious as the rest of the group.

“With my help, and this is just an example, but say we imagined what sort of enemy could stand before us, and we said for instance, a good-for-nothing, penniless, villain of a sorcerer, well, I could kill him just like adding too much dried seaweed to your soup!”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You add just a little bit more and it all spills out.”

Volkan let out an approving huff as the men around him all came to a baffling sort of agreement with his words.

“Well, in any case,” started the stern man who’d shouted, “You ready?!” earlier as he shouldered his sword, “nothing wrong with having more hands. I’m sure you’ll work enough to earn back the food you stuffed yourself with.”

...So we’re working for free? Dortin asked himself. He answered himself, too. The answer was obvious, after all.

What was also obvious was that, considering the various tools the men were equipped with, the job they were about to do was definitely going to be far from savory.

Just then, silence descended upon the room. Dortin looked around, worried that he’d muttered his last thought out loud, but that didn’t seem to be the case. The bandits were all carefully lining up before a door leading deeper into the inn.

The door opened, just like that, and from it emerged a woman. Not a particularly striking woman—she was listless, her eyes suggesting that whatever she was up to was not worth the trouble. She wasn’t the kind of person who would draw your gaze if you saw her in town. That is, she wouldn’t be if she wasn’t armed.

She was 24, maybe 25, with short, sleep-tousled hair. She rubbed her face, which she clearly did nothing to maintain, and yawned. She had slightly oversized (made for a man, probably) leather armor on and a sword at her hip. Looking over the lined-up men with eyelids still heavy from sleep, she asked, annoyed, “We ready?”

“A’ course, Boss!” One of the thieves bowed his head.

Ignoring his excited shout, the woman—the boss—gave a slight nod. She strolled through the men, taking a cloth from a pocket and swiftly tying it around her head. It was sky blue and clean. *Organdy, maybe?* Dortin thought for a moment but then quickly decided not to dwell on it. The bandits watched as she left the inn.

“Awright, let’s go!” somebody shouted, and more voices followed.

“...So, where are we headed?” Dortin nervously asked a nearby man.

The man cradled a handaxe (and Dortin *really* didn’t want to know what he planned to use it for) and answered simply, “Kamisunda Theater.”

Chapter I: It Began to Function

The night sky was at least beautiful. That was the extent of its usefulness, however.

Three figures sat around a crackling fire, silently watching the flames. A single piece of dried meat on a skewer was warming over the fire.

“.....Hey,” Orphen muttered. “...What do we do?”

He was a young man of about twenty who frequently sported a mean look in his eyes. Right now, however, his expression was more gaunt than anything. He had dark hair and dark eyes, the only one among the three who looked just like an average non-noble. He was dressed in black, with a pendant of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword—the symbol of the foremost school of black sorcery on the continent, the Tower of Fangs—hanging at his chest.

His question was answered by the boy sitting to his right with his arms around his knees. “What do you mean, what do we do? There’s only one truth.” The boy had thin blond hair and green eyes and was fourteen or fifteen in age. He was also dressed in black but had no pendant. The black shirt and cloak he wore didn’t suit him in the least.

The last of the three sat to his right and Orphen’s left with the fire in between them all. She was a girl of about seventeen with long blond hair. A jet-black dog sat atop her ripped jeans as she gazed at the fire like the other two. “The question is who gets to eat the one piece of meat we have, right? Not that it matters to Leky, since he never eats anything. I wonder if he’s photosynthesizing or something.” She pet the dog on her lap, who closed his brilliant green eyes and nuzzled his head against her hand.

“Can we just... split it three ways?” The blond boy spoke up.

Orphen glanced his way and said in a low voice, “Majic...” He continued to Majic, for that was the boy’s name. “The choice is we either all take a bite and merrily starve together or one of us gets some energy and heads to the nearest town for help.”

“The nearest town?”

“It’s twenty kilometers away,” Orphen muttered empty and looked up. They’d built this fire in a field a little bit off the road. They could no longer see Fenrir’s Forest, the great woods that covered a fifth of the continent, and as they headed north, the terrain changed gradually from woodlands to prairie. They were smack dab in the middle of that prairie now, and down the road twenty kilometers—or a little more than 23 to be precise—there was a town.

Orphen glanced in that direction and added casually, “I’m guessing I’ve got the most stamina.”

“No way.” Without taking his eyes off the meat, Majic continued, “I think the teacher should rest and entrust his hopes to his young pupil.”

“Girls must be treated with care... wouldn’t you say?” The young woman’s voice was quiet but her tone was hard.

Orphen’s ears pricked at this remark and he traded a quick glance with Majic, both of them nodding.

“Nah.” The two men agreed.

“Why not?!” she shouted and leapt to her feet.

Orphen glanced up at her and responded, “In a word, because this is all your fault.”

“I don’t accept that!” She clutched her head and shook it, still standing. Since she’d stood so suddenly, Leki had dropped to the ground. He was looking blankly up at her next to the fire.

The girl clenched her fist and went on, “Fault implies error! But this was just inevitable!”

“Oh...?” Orphen nodded calmly. “Making all the food we brought with us inedible through your cooking was ‘just inevitable,’ Claiomh?”

“Inedible?! That’s uncalled for!” The girl—Claiomh—drew closer to Orphen, pointing her finger at him. “You ate like two bites of it! That means you could have eaten the whole thin—”

“The only reason I even thought about eating that stuff was because I hadn’t

had anything to eat for half a day! I bet if you dropped that stuff in a field, it'd make all the weeds in it die, you numbskull!" Orphen stood up somewhere in this and was now face-to-face with Claiomh. They were both pointing at each other, their fingers almost touching.

The wind blew somberly.

"Well, you two still seem full of energy," Majic commented quietly. "In which case, how about I just—"

Shunk!

A knife flew through the air and stabbed into the ground, grazing Majic's fingertips as he reached out for the meat. Majic looked up, the color draining from his face.

Orphen said calmly, still in a knife-throwing pose, "Are you prepared to die?"

"Er... over a single piece of meat...?"

"It could happen." That voice belonged to Claiomh, of course, who had, in an instant, moved to the opposite side of the fire from Majic. She was standing ready, a large rock in her hands and a cold gaze focused on him.

Shff—Majic slid back, apparently cowed.

Claiomh, unperturbed, went on, "Our carriage got wrecked, so we had to walk from Tafurem, then we stayed at a suspicious inn and all our money got stolen and we couldn't pay for our lodgings, so we had to work our asses off for free, and we spent all the pay we had left in the end on food that I lovingly cooked for us, yet no one would eat it... After all this, I wouldn't be surprised if somebody ended up dead soon..."

"If one of us died, we'd have one less mouth to feed..." Orphen said, slowly picking the knife up off the ground. Sliding the back of the blade over his cheek, he turned to face his apprentice.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Majic cried tearfully, crawling back from the murderous pair. In fact, there might even have been real tears on his cheeks. The boy wailed desperately, "I got it! I get it already! I don't need any, so you two split it!" Majic turned his back on them and sulked. He sat cross-legged with the fire at

his back and muttered to himself.

Orphen watched him for a bit and then put the knife away in the sheath sewn into his jacket. He turned to Claiomh, who let the rock drop with a *thud*.

“Now then...” Orphen said to Claiomh, taking up a fighting stance, “Majic’s heroic sacrifice means the battle’s come straight to its climax...”

She turned to him and readied herself as well. “Now it’s just a matter of which of us dies...”

Orphen shifted, scraping the ground with his boot. He lowered his center of gravity, putting his fists up as Claiomh raised her hands to strike.

“So it’s finally come to this...” Orphen muttered grimly, steeling himself. He stared at Claiomh before him, but his eyes were looking far away, at some vision that overlapped with her form. “On the life of my descendants... I cannot die here.”

“Master...” came Majic’s quiet voice from where he bore witness to the spectacle. “Please don’t get so worked up over a single piece of meat.”

Ignoring him, Orphen shouted, “Awright, look out, Claiomh!”

“Come at me!” Claiomh shot back, when— “GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

In other words, it was a typical sort of night, but then an earsplitting scream pierced the air around them. Then as quickly as it came, it faded into the starry sky.

The battle was won in an instant. Orphen threw Claiomh to the ground while she was distracted by the scream and, with only a glance at her as her face hit the grass, he triumphantly snatched up the skewer of meat.

“Victory is so meaningless...”

“Orpheeeeen?!” Claiomh leapt up, the tip of her nose scraped. She clung to Orphen’s arm the second before he could put the meat in his mouth, wailing, “That didn’t count! It’s invalid!”

“Wh-What?! You can’t be such a bad sport just because you lost—”

“Master! Claiomh!” came a shout from beside them, so Orphen looked over.

Majic was frozen in a pose like he was about to take off running somewhere.

Orphen held the meat up and stretched tall so that Claiomh wouldn't be able to reach it. "...You goin' somewhere, Majic?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Majic shouted back, looking rather agitated. "Didn't you hear that scream?!"

"I heard."

"I got knocked down 'cause of that scream." Claiomh continued blithely.

Majic waved his hands. "If you heard, then you get it, right?! That was a scream!"

"Mhm..." Indeed it was. And from the volume and echo, it had probably come from pretty close by. On top of that, it had sounded pretty panicked. Orphen thought for a moment then raised his head, expression sunny. "I get it! At some point, you turned into a pervert who hears screams and gets excited and wants to run around! Yeah, that can happen when you live a stressful life like ours!"

"Congrats, Majic! You're finally an adult now!" Claiomh wasted no time congratulating him, but this brought no joy to Majic.

"Nooooo!" he shouted, stomping his feet. "That's not it! Don't you normally go help when something like this happens?!" Majic had reached the end of his patience and was even crying a little. Deserted as the area was, the person who'd screamed had more than likely heard the boy's shouting. Though only God knew what that person had made of the noise (not that this world even had a God).

In any case, Orphen brushed his hair back as he looked at Majic—using his other hand to protect the meat from the jumping Claiomh. He sighed and said, "...I know that. I was just teasing you."

"Teasing me...?" Majic groaned, fatigue washing over him. "Anyway, it's an emergency. I don't know what happened, but we should go help—"

"Majic..." Orphen sighed again. As he fended off Claiomh's relentless attacks, he looked up robotically at the starry sky. He found a cluster of stars close to the horizon and pointed with his free hand. "Beyond those stars is Totokanta."

“...Right.” Majic was jogging in place, but he still nodded faithfully.

Orphen nodded back at him. “It’s been three months now since we left Totokanta...”

“Has it been that long?”

“Yep. A lot’s happened...” He went on, counting with his fingers. “First, I got the shit kicked out of me by a laughing doll in Alenhatam. Then, in Kink Hall, I got attacked by ghosts and lizards, and in Fenrir’s Forest, a Kimluck Church assassin and a deep dragon tried to kill me. *Then*, after all *that*, I got arrested because some idiot burned down a protected forest, and when I finally thought maybe I’d get to take a frickin’ break in Tafurem, I ended up right in the hospital and had to fight assassins around the clock after that. Plus, I went through all this shit and didn’t get a single thing from any of it, and I haven’t gotten my money back from those dwarf swindlers yet.”

Orphen spat all this out and Majic nodded at him, puzzled. “...So?”

“So! I wanna get out of this life where all that shit happens to me in the span of three months and all anybody has to say about it is, ‘so?’!” Orphen hollered, squeezing the skewer of meat. “Why is getting into trouble like this a daily occurrence for me?! I like when it’s peaceful, okay?! I’m not getting involved in trouble from now on!” He rattled all that off, and when he finally stopped and took a breath, he looked over at the meat.

But the skewer was broken, the meat gone.

He turned and found Claiomh holding the other half of the skewer, fingers up in a “V for victory.” The meat had left the skewer—it was in her mouth.

“Odryaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” Orphen hollered, launching himself at her, but Majic grabbed his belt from behind and stopped him.

“Wait, Master! Please calm down!”

“You want me to *calm dooown*?!”

“It’s nothing to cry and scream over, is it?!”

“I’m gonna bury her up to her neck and have chickens peck her eyes out! Don’t stop me!”

“I can’t let you do that! Just calm down! I’m sure Claiomh’s not really going to keep it all to herself!”

Orphen finally managed to stop (after dragging Majic behind him) and turn to Claiomh with an expression that said he was just barely keeping his emotions under control.

She was about three meters away and no longer had the meat in her mouth. It was in her hand. She’d called Leki to her at some point and was calmly watching Orphen. She sneered and let out a short breath, shrugged her shoulders, and... slowly put the meat between her teeth.

“I’ll kill her and eat heeeeeer! Don’t stop meeeee!”



“I have to stop youuu!”

Orphen yelled and started dragging himself forward again, when—

A scream rang out.

Again.

“GYAAAAAAAAA!”

Orphen stopped again and looked up at the night sky. Of course, it wasn't as if the person screaming was flying around up there.

Still, after a little while, he muttered, “Sounds pretty close...”

“It does.” Majic's face was blank, his hand still holding Orphen by the belt.

Claiomh looked surprised too, glancing around the area in search of its source. Still chewing on the meat, of course.

Orphen put a hand to his chin, nodding gravely to himself. “...Well,” he said, frowning. Thoughts swirled in his head, and from the center of the squall came a single conclusion. “Alright! Let's go!” he announced to the other two.

They both looked at him in disbelief.

“Why all of a sudden?”

“But you were so against it a second ago.”

Orphen smirked and held a hand up to Claiomh. He waved a finger at her and explained, “Just think about it. It's simple. A scream... that means trouble. Probably somebody being attacked by something. I dunno what happened, but it's probably not too gory. Like a wild dog or something. It's probably over by now. So we show up and—”

“Finish the job?”

Orphen was speechless for a moment after Claiomh's dead serious interjection. “What? No. We show up like we're ready to help but we're too late. But we could still get a reward or two out of that, right?”

“...Either way, isn't that really underhanded?” Majic said, eyes and voice cold.

Orphen paused again. This time, however, there was a cold sweat dripping

down his face. He ignored it, slowly lowering the hand at his chin. Then he put one hand on Majic's shoulder and pointed the other up at the sky again. The stars almost seemed to be looking down on them.

"Majic. Take a look at the nature we find ourselves surrounded by."

"Okay..." Majic answered dubiously.

Orphen continued with a deliberate tone. "I'm sure you'll understand once you grasp the true splendor of nature..."

"Comparing your shallow ideas to the grandness of nature isn't going to fly," Majic shot back, eyes still cold.

There was a slight twitch in Orphen's cheek. He turned his head as if to hide it and said blithely, "Majic. Look how deep the color of the sky is. Sometimes the true depths of the world can betray what we think to be truth—"

"Anyway," Claiomh interjected. They looked over at her and found her putting together her things, Leki on her head. "If we don't hurry, we won't make it."

"Aaah! You're right!" Orphen let go of Majic's shoulder and grabbed his own things. He shouted as he stuffed his blanket into a scraped-up leather duffel bag, "Times like these, it's all about speed! We're gonna get that reward and break our unlucky streak! Come on, come on, put out that fire or we'll have forest rangers on our asses!"

"...Maybe I should have just stayed at the tower..." Majic muttered to himself regretfully from behind Orphen, but Orphen paid him no mind, instead counting out the reward he was sure he'd be receiving.

He'd been thinking ever since they heard the first scream that the voice wasn't coming from very far away. Maybe two or three hundred meters. There was a forest nearby, so visibility wasn't great, but he could narrow down the direction the voice had come from. The scream had been very clear and had carried well. Most screams were like that, he supposed.

"Though..." Orphen murmured as he took off at a jog, "Who the heck's getting attacked out in the middle of nowhere like this?"

Travel between towns had increased a lot in recent years due to the

completion of a system of major roads. That, and the relatively cheap price at which full maps of the continent could now be bought. On top of that, it was a lot safer outside of town now than it used to be due to the newfound coordination forest rangers had with city police forces. The establishment of the roads was the main thing, but with that, there were also a lot more inns that went up along those roads. It used to be that you only had crummy lodgings that charged exorbitant fees—or the inns themselves would be the dens of bandits—but there were a lot fewer of those now. Travelers really didn't need to camp outside unless they were extremely hard up for cash. And if they didn't even have the money to stay at an inn, it didn't really make sense for thieves to attack them.

“Plus... if somebody's camping out here, they might not even be able to pay us a reward...”

“Just like us,” Claiomh added, but he ignored her. Incidentally, her belongings amounted to a single black artificial leather knapsack. It didn't have a speck of charm or character to it, but she'd gotten it from Leticia, who'd used it for her outdoor training in the past and who'd helped them out in Tafurem, so she couldn't complain.

“If there's no reward, then aren't we just wasting energy running over here?” Majic was a little bit behind them, but he still heard their conversation and piped up then.

Orphen turned to him and responded, “If they don't got cash, then we'll take goods. 'Specially if it's food.”

“You're just going to shake them down, huh?” the boy said in a low voice, eyes narrowed.

Orphen scrunched up his face. “You're really on my case today, aren't you?”

“Of course I am!” he shouted. “And here I was thinking you might actually be pretty incredible despite your looks, since we met that elite sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs in Tafurem and he was kind of singing your praises and all,” Majic grumbled.

Orphen smiled sunnily. “Haha... You're such an idiot, Majic. No matter my past, I'm not gonna change the way I act now.”

“Isn’t that actually... kind of really sad?” Majic ran, carrying his heavy pack.

Orphen thought about responding but decided against it.

Of the three of them, Majic was carrying the most. In fact, it looked more like a bunch of luggage was flying through the air; you could barely see a glimpse of him in between pieces of it. Needless to say, most of it was Claiomh’s, but it wasn’t all clothes like one might expect. The most eye-catching piece of it was probably the hilt of the sword sticking out of the topmost pack. She’d lost it some two weeks ago, but Leticia had pulled some strings and gotten it back for her. Orphen had complained that it was better off gone at the time, but Claiomh had been so happy to get it back that she’d given Leticia a big hug. The rest was just whatever personal belongings they’d managed to salvage from the carriage wreckage.

In any case, they ran along until a path started to open up before them. They were in the forest, a little way from the road, but the trees were starting to thin. The pale light of the moon was the only thing piercing the veil of night around them, and before them, they could see the giant silhouette of a building.

“...Was there a building like this on the map?” Orphen wondered aloud, quickening his pace.

Most of the maps circulating the continent were published by the Sorcerer’s Alliance—not because their surveying methods were particularly superior but just because they were one of the only organizations that functioned on a continental scale. The only other one would be the police force controlled by the aristocracy, but they didn’t distribute maps for travelers. Since the maps were compiled by the Sorcerer’s Alliance, they tended to be rather vague on the northern and southern parts of the continent. The regions were both either outside of the alliance’s reach or maybe just not of much interest to them. *Still*, thought Orphen, narrowing his eyes, *the building ahead of us looks big enough to be a temple or something. There’s no way they could miss a building so huge.* Plus, the area wasn’t yet under the control of the church in Kimluck that the sorcerers didn’t get along with.

“Orphen...” came Claiomh’s voice from behind. “Sounds like... a brawl?”

“Yeah.” He’d noticed, too. Even in the dark of night, he could pick out a large group fighting near the building. He wasn’t sure exactly how many there were, however.

Then—

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

There was a third scream. But it wasn’t coming from the fight near the building. It was coming from the bushes just next to them, from someone passing them by.

“Wha?!” Orphen stopped in surprise, turning toward the bushes. A figure leapt out from them noisily.

“Aaah!” Claiomh yelped.

The man was a bloody mess. He was covered in wounds, his leather armor shredded and his sword broken. He tumbled out of the bushes and staggered toward them, but he passed out before he made it too close. He lay on the ground unmoving.

Next... Orphen instantly went into a combat stance, moving on information more from his sixth sense than any of the other five. He dropped his center of gravity and put his left shoulder forward. He clenched his right fist at his waist and in his mind formed the magic he was about to send forth.

At roughly the same time... a dark shadow flew out from the bushes! It drew toward them, much faster and more intimidating than the injured man had been. The shadow wasn’t very big, though, maybe a meter in height.

Orphen stared straight at the center of the shadow and exclaimed, “I release thee, Sword of Light!” A flash of light surged from his thrust-out right hand. A thermal shock pierced the shadow, which exploded and went up in flames. Orphen stepped back during the blast and watched the shadow fall to the ground, powerless.

The charred, unmoving object... resembled a dog. But it wasn’t a wild dog. That much was obvious.

“Master...” Majic muttered. He continued in an utterly unconcerned voice,

“That’s a strange dog.”

“...Sure is. It’s got bat wings on its back.”

“How are you two just keeping your cool?!” Claiomh shouted, waving her hands. She continued waving her arms in distress despite the very un-dog-like dog-like thing currently perched on her own head. “There’s no way that’s a dog! What is that thing?!”

“How should I know...” Orphen scratched his cheek, looking from the (not) dog’s corpse to the group of people fighting near the building. “Maybe we can find out if we ask them.”

Claiomh slumped her shoulders and asked Majic this time, “Maybe, but... how are you so calm?”

The boy gave her a somewhat awkward look and responded, “Just ’cause, I guess. Master’s still calm, so it feels like I don’t need to freak out yet.”

“Is that how it works?” Claiomh narrowed her eyes.

Orphen quietly crossed his arms, watching them. “I mean, a monster like this...” Claiomh returned his gaze dubiously and Orphen went on, “True terror and panic don’t simply come from something bloody jumping out of a bush.”

“...?”

“They come from something that seems proper at first glance but turns out to actually be incredibly selfish and stubborn.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Claiomh shouted, but Orphen neglected to elaborate.

He sighed a resigned sigh and started off toward the building again. What looked like a steeple protruded from the roof of the building, almost like it was raising a fist up toward the moon.

“Plus, we still have our plan to help out and get rewarded. Let’s head over slow so we get there when most of the bad guys have already gone down.”

“You’re so cheap!”

They complained, but they followed nonetheless. Slowly, too.

“...In the end, we’re getting caught up in something again anyway, huh?”
Majic muttered.

Orphen turned to him and responded mournfully, “...Might have been stupid to even think about living a peaceful life with this bunch.” It was the sad reality of someone entirely used to getting into trouble that their feelings came down to such thoughts.



On the roof of the building, a steeple stretched up, though it wasn’t too tall. The tower was surprisingly bright, thanks to being directly illuminated by the glow of moonlight. It served no particular function; the building was just designed with this feature. The tower was of course aged and tilted. Its pillars and walls were brightened by the same light as the rest of the structure. Toward the top of it, there was a window open. And though the moonlight shined down into this window, no one would notice if something squirmed inside.

Pale fingers wrapped around the battered frame of the old window, but the figure the hand belonged to hung back in the room, concealed by the shadows. It merely writhed in excitement in the darkness of the room. Soundlessly stirring.

It wasn’t afraid. No, perhaps it was. It had awakened during the disturbance. And just as it had been ordered to, it began to function.

Chapter II: The Silence was Like a Song

Claaang! A shrill sound rang out. A man gave a cry of frustration and fell as one of the dog-like beasts bit his sword away from him. He tried to leap back up, but another dog rushed him from a different direction. The man wailed in despair, but just then— “I release thee, Sword of Light!” Orphen shot a bolt of light that pierced the dog like an arrow. It was a large dog with wings like the last one, and its eyes stuck partially out from their sockets, giving it a strange expression. Of course, it was no threat after being impaled. The impact sent it backward, where it collapsed to the ground feebly.

Fwoom. Another dog began to howl when its packmate went up in flames. It set its sights on Orphen and gave a shrill howl, charging his way.

Orphen looked at it head-on and shouted, “Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!” Orphen pointed his finger at the dog and ultrasonic waves converged on it as a strange sound caused his eardrums to itch. The dog froze mid-charge and collapsed with a yelp. Blood spurted from numerous lacerations all over its skin. Orphen jogged over to the dog as it writhed on the ground and brought his heel down on it as hard as he could. His sturdy boot fell on the dog’s head and silenced it. The dog went still, a dark fluid oozing from its mouth.

Claiomh spoke up then, having trotted after him. “...You’re so nasty, Orphen.”

Her eyes were narrowed in disapproval.

Orphen returned her gaze, pursing his lips. "What do you want from me?"

"Can't you figure out a way to take them down that's like, cute, that a girl would like?"

"I mean, I guess..." was all he said in response.

Meanwhile, Majic ran up to the man who was lying stunned on the ground looking up at them. "A-Are you okay?"

The man's only response to the question was to stare, dumbfounded. He'd forgotten to even pick up the sword he'd dropped.

Majic went on as he dropped his luggage here and there on the ground. "Are you hurt? What's going on here? We're sort of in trouble too, but since we saved you, maybe you could reward us? But don't you think we probably shouldn't get involved in this?"

"You're all over the place, Majic."

"I meant every woord!" Majic yelled, clutching his head in his hands after Claiomh's observation.

That's when the man finally spoke. He opened his mouth wide, pointed behind Orphen, and... "Aaaaaaaaah?!" It wasn't a particularly elucidating comment, but it was easy enough to tell from his tone what he was getting at.

Orphen quickly readied himself and turned to face what the man was pointing at. Three of those dogs were making a beeline for him. Behind them on the ground was the body of a likely already lifeless man.

He raised his arm like he always did, but Claiomh interjected from beside him, "Remember, cutely!"

"Got it!" He sucked in a breath after responding and formed the magic in his mind, intoning, "I release thee, Sword of Light♥"

The flash of light ripped through the darkness and transformed into searing heat, charring the three targets black in an instant...

Staring at the unmoving pieces of charcoal on the ground, Claiomh

murmured, “What... just a ‘♥’?”

Orphen nodded gravely, wiping the sweat from his brow. “That was *real* risky.”

“Is that all you’re capable of, Orphen?!”

“Shut up! Are you stupid?! Of course I can’t do that!”

“What on earth are you two doing?!” came a complaint from Majic. He was pointing all around him. “There’s still weird stuff all over the place! This is no time for your stupid—”

The dogs weren’t exactly moving to surround them, but there did seem to be an overwhelming number of them in every direction. There were human bodies lying in several places nearby as well—probably the man’s friends—but they were all unmoving, likely deceased. There was still some fifty meters between them and the building, but the dogs were pouring out of it.

But Orphen and Claiomh paid that no mind, continuing their back-and-forth.

“I just hate the way you hit people. It’s always like, ‘wham.’ Can’t you do a ‘bop’ every once in a while?”

“Sure, if I’m up against someone I can take down with a ‘bop.’ But the way I was taught to fight was pretty much ‘knock ‘em over and stomp on ‘em.’”

“Will you listen to meeeee?!” Majic wailed.

That’s when— “H-Hey...!” An unfamiliar voice called out and they turned to find the man on the ground getting to his feet. He continued in a trembling voice, “What is all this? Who are you people? Did you save me?”

“That’s right.” Claiomh answered only the last question.

The man seemed to only get more suspicious at the girl’s magnanimous nod but went on anyway as if willing to cling to anything he could get his hands on right now. “R-Really? Well, that’s great. Can I... ask something of you?”

“You want our help, right? Well... can’t really say it’s fortunate, but you seem to be the only survivor, so...” Orphen looked around flippantly. The dogs relentlessly continued their attacks on the bodies on the ground, possibly eating them, but they would likely tire of that eventually and all rush at this group.

“If it’s just you, I’m sure we can get you out. We’re not surrounded yet.” Orphen turned back toward the direction they’d come from, but the man grabbed his arm and held him in place.

“No, wait! That’s not it.”

“Hunh?” Orphen turned back around.

“You’ve got the wrong idea—if we sit around here, we’ll just join the ranks of the dead,” the man insisted, face pale. He pointed at the building with his scraped-up arm, panting heavily. “D-Don’t worry about me. You’re a sorcerer, right? Then, please... please save our boss!”

“Boss?” Orphen returned, but before the man could explain, he gasped and whispered to him, “Wait, are you guys some kind of thief gang?!”

“No!” The man quickly shook his head. He picked his sword up off the ground and groaned. “No... We came to... tomb raid...”

“Tomb—” Orphen’s face twitched as words failed him. “Tomb raid?! Dammit, what a pain...”

“Orphen?” Claiomh asked curiously.

He gave her a look and scratched his head. “...Well, whatever. It’s got nothing to do with me. So? You want us to save your boss?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s right. Please...”

Just when the man muttered that, there was a *fwap*, and a shadow fell over them. They looked up and found one of the dogs with the moon at its back, gliding toward them on its wings.



“So they *do* fly! Ack!” Orphen yelled, pushing the man aside and leaping back.

The dog descended on them so fast it was almost in free fall, and when it hit the ground, it leapt at them almost like it’d ricocheted off of the ground.

I can’t counterattack! Orphen realized in an instant, covering his face with his arms. If the dog stopped for just a moment, he’d be able to hit it with his magic—so he just needed to endure one attack. He waited, prepared to take the hit, and just a second later, the dog was right before his eyes.

The dog struck with unexpected strength and Orphen was knocked back, hitting the ground. But as he fell, his magic took shape. “Fire, Lightbolt Bullet!” He raised his left hand at the same time, but the bullet of light he’d summoned to his palm couldn’t find its target and dispersed. Orphen paled and looked up at the empty air. The dog had been there just a second ago, lunging at his arm.

No...! Orphen leapt up. And...

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaa!” A scream.

The dog was on top of the man he’d pushed out of the way, swinging its head with its bulging eyes hard enough to hurt itself. Each time the dog’s head impacted the man, there was a spray of blood. It was... eating him.

It knocked me over and jumped to him instead...!

Just a moment later, the man’s screams stopped.

“Dammit!” Orphen groaned and made to run over, but the dog immediately noticed and jumped back. It landed on the ground and sent a fierce look at Orphen as if sizing him up. Then... it turned around.

“...?” Orphen stopped, unsure of what had just happened. He followed the dog’s gaze to Claiomh. She was just standing there, frozen at the sight of blood.

The dog howled. It leapt toward her to attack—and disintegrated in a burst of white flame. Orphen looked up to find the small dog on top of Claiomh’s head with its green eyes wide open. This pup that was for some reason rather attached to Claiomh was not any normal beast. It belonged to one of the most feared species on the continent—the warriors that defended the holy land of the dragons deep within Fenrir’s Forest. It was a baby deep dragon, wielder of

the most powerful magic of all the dragons. The abyssal wolves, as they were commonly known, had complete control over dark magic, which gave them mental dominion over their targets. These dog monsters were no match for such magic.

“Th...Thanks.” Claiomh pet the baby dragon on her head as Orphen rushed over to the man. She and Majic started after him, but he held his hand up to deter them, looking down at the torn-up man’s face.

His nose, his cheekbones, even his eyes were gone. Orphen could hardly bear to look. Not even magical healing could help him now; there was nothing Orphen could do.

The man groaned in a faint, barely audible voice. It was hard to pick up among the howls and screams, but Orphen managed. “The boss... had an... eye on... this theater...”

“Theater?” Orphen asked, looking up at the giant building with the towering steeple.

The man continued, “It was... built 200 years ago... Kamisunda... Theater. It has... some secret. The boss... found out about it... and took three of us... plus two newbies... and went... inside. Ghack!” He choked on his blood. Orphen wanted to help him clear his throat, but that would probably only worsen his bleeding. “We were... supposed to... wait here... for the boss. But... after a little while... these... monsters came... from inside... and everyone... died—” He managed to choke that out, but then his voice grew quieter.

And just like that... the number of survivors fell to zero. Well, unless that boss of theirs was still alive somewhere.

“...I got it.” Orphen nodded to the body that likely couldn’t hear him anymore. He looked up at Claiomh and Majic, who stood at a distance from him. “Do you guys—”

Claiomh butted in, head turned to avoid looking at the corpse, “We won’t run off without you. Like we keep saying.”

“Plus...” Majic went on. He looked around, face pale. “It’s too late now...”

“What?” Orphen looked around and stepped back, gaping. “When did that

happen...?” His voice shook not from fright, but hopelessness.

The countless dogs that had been attacking the corpses before had surrounded them at some point without him realizing. There were dozens of them, their eyes glinting in the darkness. They stood ten meters away, cutting off all avenues of escape. Some of them growled and pawed at the dirt at their feet. With the dogs fanned out around them, their only escape—if it could be called that—was the entrance to the building.

Dogs were no longer coming from the doorway of the building—the Kamisunda Theater. The empty blackness of the doorway pulled at them like the center of a whirlpool.

“You want to... break through them?” Majic asked, but Orphen shook his head.

“There’s too many of them... and we wouldn’t outlast them if we ran. We’re not gonna be able to get away from dogs that can fly.”

“Th-Then what do we do?” That was Claiomh.

Orphen reluctantly jerked his chin in the direction of the building. “We hole up in there. There’s no other choice...”

“But these monsters came out of there!” Majic wailed, almost crying.

Orphen sighed and took a tone that brooked no argument. “Well, they’re not anymore. We just gotta hope they’re all out.”

“But—”

“Come on!” With a shout, Orphen spun around and ran off toward the theater. Claiomh and Majic followed, but for some reason... the dogs didn’t.

Of course, having no idea when the monsters would change their minds and attack, they made it to the doorway in about ten seconds at a full sprint. Despite being a theater, there was no grand hall waiting behind the door; it was more like a slightly large apartment. The double doors didn’t make for a particularly wide entryway either. There were no lights inside, so they were plunged into darkness, but they sensed no indication of any more dogs waiting in the wings. Once he was sure of that, Orphen had Majic and Claiomh enter

first and then leapt in himself, slamming the doors behind him.

With the doors closed, there was nothing to let the moonlight in, and the darkness became total. They'd been able to see windows from outside, but they must have been blocked off with something.

"Are... Are we safe?" Majic asked, trying to catch his breath.

He couldn't see his face in the darkness, but Orphen turned in Majic's general direction and said, "No, they could still come at the door from outside. We can't let our guard down." He held his palm up and intoned, "I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits," and some bluish lights appeared above his hand with a quiet *bomf*. They didn't provide much illumination, but it was better than nothing.

Orphen wasn't too familiar with what theaters typically tended to look like, but the building didn't have the look of something that would be found in a big city. They were still just by the entrance with its large, heavy doors. If the dogs had been attacking them, they wouldn't have been able to get them closed so easily.

The area they stood in now was something like a lobby. There was a red carpet that looked more purple in the blue light. It might have also darkened with age. It was worn out in places and covered in footprints, though that was only to be expected if those dogs made this their den.

The lobby was pretty spacious, about twenty meters in length and maybe fourteen or fifteen in depth. It wasn't overly decorated, but it did seem like the furnishings had been worth a pretty penny. Everything was made of wood, including the reception counter to their right, currently unmanned, of course. There was no door or hall deeper into the building from the lobby, just a large staircase heading to the second floor.

On a landing, two statues stood with the stairs in between them. One was a woman whose arms became wings above the elbow and the other was a man with the head of a bull standing on his hands.

"Those statues..." Something about them jogged his memory, but before Orphen could spend time on the thought, he was interrupted by a shriek.



“Aaaaah!”

Orphen jumped and turned to the source of the scream, Claiomh. The girl was staring at Majic, her blond hair bristling.

“Wh...What?” Majic asked, anxious.

Claiomh pointed a finger at him. “You didn’t bring my stuff!”

“Y-Yeah, but...” Majic groaned. He raised his hands and protested. “In all that... I couldn’t run with all that stuff!”

“You could have at least brought my sword!”

“...Personally, I wish that thing could stay forgotten forever,” Orphen piped up, but Claiomh didn’t even spare him a glance.

She had grabbed the boy by the collar and was making a racket. “I can’t believe you left all our stuff in the middle of all those weird dogs! They’ve probably taken it all and buried it somewhere by now! Dogs do that, you know!”

“I-I’m not sure that’s exactly the issue...” Majic protested weakly, though his arguments had never swayed Claiomh before.

She shouted, now shaking Majic hard enough that his head was swinging back and forth. “And Tish even went and found it for me! The next time I lose it, *you’re* gonna go looking for it, okay?! That thing’s like a memento of my dad, you know!”

If it’s so important to you, maybe you should carry it, then, thought Orphen, but ultimately, he didn’t care. Watching her meltdown as if it had nothing to do with him (for her wrath was not pointed in his direction), Orphen noticed the baby dragon on her head getting to his feet.

Leki stretched his tail straight out and looked up toward the landing with his brilliant green eyes. Those eyes, the proof that he belonged to the most powerful species on the continent, were staring straight at something, and somehow Orphen knew what it was. The statues.

He looked up at them, too. These were not, of course, naturally occurring beings, but Orphen knew exactly what they were meant to represent. *Those*

are... Then, this is... Right. Kamisunda Theater! Why didn't I realize it before? The king was summoned here 200 years ago—"I got it!" Coming to a realization, Orphen spun around... to Claiomh strangling Majic, whose eyes were rolled back in his head, arms hanging limp at his sides.

"Hey..." Orphen was speechless for a moment, but he quickly spoke up, fists trembling. "Why's he passed out all of a sudden?"

"Heh?" came Claiomh's surprised response. She blinked and looked down at Majic's face as if only just realizing. He was unconscious, head lolling back, body completely limp. Seeing this, Claiomh started shaking him. "Yeah! What are you doing getting taken down by a couple of light elbow jabs?!"

"I was asking you!" Orphen exclaimed, walking over to her and jabbing his finger into her nose.

"Huh?!" She made a face like she had no idea what he meant, dropped Majic, and then hurriedly picked him up again as if that would make up for it. "Well, he's terrible! Don't you think it would have been fine if he at least brought my sword with him?"

"What would have been fine?" He tore Majic from her hands and sighed deeply, laying the boy down on the floor. "You know, I've been meaning to ask... why the heck are you so violent?"

"I'm not violent at all," Claiomh protested, completely nonplussed.

Orphen closed his eyes... contemplated closing them forever, right then and there... and then took a breath and stood up. "Listen, I'm not saying this 'cause you're a girl or anything like that, but if you can't be kind to people, you're a failure of a person."

"...That's real convincing coming from you, Orphen."

"Shut up. You just need an example. When I was little, my sisters would—" Orphen suddenly stopped there. Remembering all sorts of things, he completely lost a handle on what he was going to say. Hesitating for a moment, he came to a conclusion with a clap. "Right. You might actually be pretty tame."

"...I really want to know exactly what memory you're comparing me to, but I wouldn't want to ruin the mood we've got going now, so I won't," Claiomh

murmured, turning pale.

“Good.” With that short reply, Orphen waved a hand in front of Majic’s face, sending some air his way. He was secretly thankful, since those weren’t memories he particularly wanted to recall. Of course, none of this had solved anything, but that was all the more reason not to worry about it.

“Anyway Orphen, what were you about to say before?” Claiomh asked, crouching down next to Majic. Her lower position meant Leki had to crane his neck back even farther to look up at the statues on the landing, and he toppled backwards right onto the floor.

Watching him, Orphen answered, “...It’s this building. This is the Kamisunda Theater.”

“Yeah, the guy said that before.”

“No, I’d forgotten. You probably learned about it in your history lessons too, right?” Orphen waved up at the statues. In the dim fairy light, the two figures were eerie and otherworldly. “Those. The statues. A pair, an angel and a devil. They’re called the Swedenborge Angel and the Swedenborge Devil.”

“...What?”

“It’s... Ugh, this is such a pain. It’s a myth from before Kiesalhiman history. I told you about how the dragons stole the secrets of magic from the gods, right?”

“Yeah, I remember that.” Claiomh nodded, carefully picking up Leki and holding him to her chest.

Orphen continued, pointing at the baby dragon who was the perfect prop for the conversation, “But there was one god that these guys—the dragons—couldn’t steal from. He was the supreme ruler of all creation, Swedenborge. He challenged all the other gods to battle so that he could reign as the one true god, and he’s called the Demon King because of that. Demon King Swedenborge.”

“Huh...” She returned, not sounding at all interested. “...So, what about him?”

“So, Demon King Swedenborge was served by Swedenborge’s angel and devil.

Get it?”

“Well, his name is attached to them.” Claiomh listlessly blew a breath into Leki’s ear. The dragon jumped and backed away, but she gave him a smile and picked him up again.

“So you don’t get it.” Orphen sighed, exasperated. “The name of the Demon King is anathema to the Kimluck Church, which is the official religion of the continent.”

“...Anathema?” Claiomh repeated, perhaps not understanding the word.

Orphen cleared his throat and amended, “They consider it dangerous, like it’s taboo. They don’t like it, in any event.”

“Just say that, then,” Claiomh pouted. “You’re just saying exactly what’s in the textbooks, aren’t you?”

“Oh, shut up,” Orphen said, though she was exactly right. “Anyway, the Demon King is the supreme ruler of the gods. He tried to destroy the three goddesses that the Church worships. Make a statue of the servants of the taboo Demon King and the church is gonna complain about it. But this is the only place on the continent where those things are—it’s a really famous place.”

“Well, *I*’ve never heard of it.” Claiomh shrugged matter-of-factly. “All I remember from history is the nobles sentencing the last king to death and putting his severed head on display. Oh, and how the thirteenth governor or something of Urbanrama was a total pervert who threw cow innards around with his wife every Sunday, and when their son saw them, they committed suicide. Did you know that?”

“I think your history tutor was a little skewed with their lessons...” Orphen groaned, eyelids drooping, and continued. “Anyway, it’s fine if you don’t know, but the Kamisunda Theater is a historical building that was constructed 200 years ago. It’s where the famous Demon King play was performed. The king at the time was invited here.” He stood and looked up at the landing. The angel and devil, who likely stood in the same place now as they did then, stared down at the lobby expressionlessly.

“It’s all worn down now, though. I mean, it’s the den of those dogs,” Claiomh

said, paying more attention to Leki than the conversation.

Orphen brushed his hair back and nodded. "You're right... I mean, not that the dogs had anything to do with it. The performance the king was invited to was their last one. The king was said to be so displeased he had everyone connected to the theater executed and ordered that the theater be demolished."

This finally caught Claiomh's attention. She raised her head and sent a puzzled look at Orphen, who smirked.

He continued, also puzzled, "Yep. It's supposed to have been destroyed and not exist anymore. The Kamisunda Theater..."

Majic finally woke up a few minutes later. "...We're gonna explore a creepy place like this?" He spoke up, voice trembling, as they climbed the stairs.

Orphen looked over his shoulder at him. "That 'Boss' is in here, remember? If we don't look for 'em, it won't sit right with me."

"I-I guess, but..." Majic moaned wordlessly.

Claiomh spoke up from beside him, placing Leki on her head, "But what are we gonna do when we find 'em? Those dogs have us surrounded outside."

"You raise a good point..." Orphen stopped when he reached the landing. He fingered the knife inside his jacket. "We'll think about that when it's time to get out. Plus, if those monsters came from the theater, maybe if we search it, we'll find some weakness of theirs."

"Can't you get Leki to teleport us, Claiomh?" Majic suggested dolefully.

In response, Claiomh merely shrugged and shook her head. "Nope. I wouldn't know how to ask, anyway."

At the end of the day, the baby deep dragon did follow Claiomh's commands (for some reason), but he ended up slightly missing her intention from time to time. Plus, for her part, Claiomh had no idea how to get across to him that she wanted him to form a complex spell like teleportation magic. They'd have more luck with a command like, "Burn up all those weird dogs over there," but with the numbers they were up against, that'd be a risky move too.

“We’ll just have to do something about them ourselves,” Claiomh said with a sigh.

By that time, all three of them had reached the landing. To their right and left were the angel and devil statues, and they noticed now the plates embedded in their bases. Orphen read the inscriptions and related to the other two, “‘Donated by the royal family at the time of the theater’s construction,’ I guess. They’ve got the royal seal on them... That must be why the Kimluck Church couldn’t do anything about the statues at the time. It’s the same now; the Church gets all its power from sucking up to the aristocracy.”

“...Oh yeah?” Claiomh and Majic nodded along, like students on a field trip.

Orphen took his eyes off the plates and continued. “The Sorcerer’s Alliance went along with it, too. Basically, both the Sorcerer’s Alliance and aristocracy decried the Dragon Faith, which had been commonplace until then, for various reasons. They had to promote the Kimluck Church.”

“What do you mean by decrying the Dragon Faith?” Majic asked, confused.

Orphen stuck a finger up and explained (though he was just quoting a textbook). “The motive the sorcerers had was obvious—they were at risk of being hunted down. The Celestials disappeared 200 years ago, but they had incited the Dragon Faith to basically try to exterminate the sorcerers all by themselves. As for the aristocracy... they didn’t want the Celestials around. They wanted control over the ruins on the continent... and the Celestials had always been the true rulers of the continent. As long as they were around, the nobles would have no valid claim to rule. Members of the Dragon Faith, who believed the Celestials still existed somewhere on the continent, were a hindrance to them.”

“Hence the Kimluck Church...”

“Yep. Of course, it didn’t mean much in the end to the Sorcerer’s Alliance, since the Kimluck Church announced they’d be putting all sorcerers to death right after that,” Orphen said casually.

Claiomh, who was listening intently, made a face like it didn’t sit right with her. She pursed her lips and muttered, “So they were just trying to use each other. That’s pretty sneaky.”

“I won’t deny that, but... it was sort of all they could do at the time. It was even before the dawn of human civilization then. The Sorcerer’s Alliance, the aristocracy, the Kimluck Church... none of them had the capability to even maintain their organizations independently yet.

“Hmm~...” She still didn’t seem to fully get it.

Orphen gave Leki, who was on top of Claiomh’s head, a pat and gestured toward the end of the landing. “Well, that’s enough sightseeing. Let’s keep moving.”

At the end of the landing was a set of double doors. Orphen strolled up to them and tried a knob. It wasn’t locked. “I’m gonna open it. Stand back.” He gestured for them to keep their distance, then he turned the knob... and quickly pulled the door open.

Just as he opened the door, Orphen leapt back and sent the fairy lights through instead. The darkness beyond the door was instantly illuminated. And at the bottom of the brightness...

Orphen hurriedly shut the door. This time the lights were trapped on the other side and they were once again plunged into darkness, but after a moment or two, they slipped back out through the cracks in the door and they had light once more.

Orphen timidly sent a look back and found Claiomh and Majic standing bolt upright, eyes wide, just as he’d feared. Claiomh was even tearing up, and when their eyes met, she started trembling.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” she wailed, unimaginably loud. “Orphen! Just now! In there! There was a d...dead bodyyyyyy!”

“Shut uuuuup!” Orphen yelled as well, as if in opposition. She’d sunk to the floor in her panic. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders. “There was a whole field of dead bodies outside, too!”

“But! But! It was dark outside and I couldn’t really tell if they were dead or not! Aaaaaaaaah!”

“Just calm down!” She didn’t seem like she’d stop unless he poured water on her, but Orphen just shook her by the shoulders for now. He saw Majic

crouching down next to them and turned to the boy. “Hey, you help calm her doowaaaaah?!” His words became a scream as Majic silently sat down right there... and vomited. “What are you doing?! If you’re gonna hurl, go do it in a corner or something!” Orphen felt himself starting to lose it as well as he rubbed Claiomh’s back, the girl still wailing and screaming. Leki had backed up as well, surprised.

Majic lifted his pallid face and groaned, voice hoarse, “What do you want from me? I wasn’t expecting to see something so gruesome...”

“God! I wanna throw up too!” Orphen cursed and gave up on comforting Claiomh.

He stood up and turned back to the door. “Well... I’ll go in there and, you know... investigate, so try and help Claiomh feel better.”

“Okay...” Majic nodded weakly as if he didn’t even have the energy to complain.

Orphen turned around and walked over. “I’m taking the lights with me, so make your own. Don’t move from here until I tell you to.”

“I know...”

Orphen grabbed the knob again. This time he opened it just a crack and slid in, not wanting to escalate Claiomh’s panic. “You okay back there, Claiomh?”

“Nooooooooooooooooo! There’s like a sour smeeeeeeeeeeell!”

Orphen closed the door behind him after hearing that.

A few minutes later, he returned to the landing in the lobby, opening the door wearily. He poked his head out and found Claiomh and Majic sitting in a corner, looking completely recovered for some unfathomable reason.

“Are you done?” asked Majic.

Orphen nodded and sent a look Claiomh’s way. Judging that she was fine now, he signaled them to come through. “You can come in now.”

“Are you sure?” Claiomh grumbled but nevertheless stood up.

Majic followed her, standing sluggishly and sending a suspicious look at

Orphen. “You’re not just saying that so we go in and see something even more terrifying and burst into tears right on the spot, are you? I’m gonna cry for a long time if you are.”

“Don’t make threats like that... It’s really scary.” He groaned as he beckoned them through.

After the lobby was a hall. It was spacious, but it wasn’t decorated with chandeliers or anything like that—everything was still made of wood, after all. If anything, it looked more like a gymnasium. The floor had been polished by the soles of countless shoes, and there were several wooden pillars and white benches here and there. It must have been used as a waiting room.

At the end of the hall was another set of double doors and a staircase leading down just before them. The stairs were quite wide as well, and their rails and embellishments looked like they’d cost a good amount of money and labor.

In the area just after entering—in other words, where the corpse had been a few minutes ago—there was a pile of ash and charred remains. Majic and Claiomh both noticed it right away.

Majic pointed and asked, “Umm, Master, is this...?”

“Yeah. I burned it. They were clearly dead, and I couldn’t stand looking at them.”

“Yeah...” Claiomh muttered solemnly, peering down at the ash.

Orphen didn’t stop her, but he quietly added, “There was enough for two bodies.”

“Huh? There was another dead body?” Majic asked.

Orphen nodded. “Here and there.”

“...Huh?”

“One was dismembered. I gathered up the pieces and it was enough for another body.”

“Ugh...” Majic groaned, clutching his stomach.

Orphen sighed, scratching his head and swallowing to try to settle his own

stomach. “Burned that one too. And when I did, I noticed...” He pointed at a wall. Any wall would have worked, so he pointed his right hand at the closest one and shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The burst of light and heat shone and impacted the wall. However... there wasn't a single scratch on it when the flames subsided. It was dirtied with soot, but that was all.

“Huh? What's going on?” Claiomh blinked her eyes, shocked.

Orphen brought his hand back and said in a low voice, “You can't damage the walls or the floor at all. I did think it was weird that this whole building's made of wood yet it's been standing for the last 200 years without any sort of repair, but it must be magically shielded.”

“Magically?”

“Yeah.” Orphen turned back to the other two. “I'm guessing there are defensive Wyrd Glyphs somewhere in this theater, and if they've managed to remain effective for hundreds of years, it must be because they're the Celestials' silent magic. Which would mean the Celestials built this theater...”

“Which means what?”

Orphen looked up at the smooth ceiling where the spirit lights flickered. He took a moment to let his gaze wander then looked back down. “It'll take a while to explain, but it's not all that complicated really. Remember how that man said they were here to tomb raid?”

“Yeah. You said, ‘what a pain.’”

“Well, it is a pain. Right now, all the ruins on the continent are the property of the aristocracy. Or there are some that the Sorcerer's Alliance has obtained through negotiation. And there are a lot that the nobles are hiding...” He shrugged. “Ruins like these are things the Celestials left behind when they disappeared. Most of them are like the Basiltrice fort under Alenhatam. All the ruins and artifacts the Celestials left behind belong to the nobles, who proclaim themselves the Celestials' successors, by continental law. Tomb raiders ignore that law and raid ruins like this. And what's scary about tomb raiding is, it isn't treated as simple theft or burglary but treason. They call it “treason against the

ruling authority,” and it’s a really serious crime.”

“Huh...” came Majic’s half-hearted reply.

Orphen went on. “Though, we’re in the west, so we don’t really need to be afraid of the aristocracy. What we *should* be afraid of is...” He stopped. Three pairs of eyes—Leki included—stared blankly at him. He pointed at the wall he’d hit earlier with his spell. “This theater appears to be related to Celestial magic. And some group figured that out and snuck in to ransack it. That can only mean one thing: this theater is a Celestial ruin. It was likely built by Celestials 200 years ago.” He retracted the finger pointing at the wall and pointed his thumb down at the floor—or the ashes on it. “There have already been victims here. Statistically speaking, most Celestial ruins have a guardian or the like in place to eliminate intruders...”

“Wait! Then...” Shocked realization finally dawned on Majic’s face.

Claiomh’s face, on the other hand, was still rather blank.

“Yeah.” Orphen nodded, looking out over the hall again. The empty space returned no echoes. “It’s definitely not safe in here.”

The silence was like a song, a chorus of fear and worry.

Chapter III: And Everything Began to Whirl Around “You know, I’ve been thinking,” came a voice.

“...About what?” Another voice.

“Where is this place?”

“Good question.”

“When’d it end up just us? Where’d our new brothers go?”

“We got separated when we were suddenly attacked and ran away.”

“Hmm. I do remember that happening. You need a little more nerve if you ask me.”

“I was just frozen in place. It was someone else who grabbed my collar and ran off somewhere with me. I won’t say who that was, of course.”

“Hmm. I don’t recall seeing anyone doing that... Anyway, this is a theater, right?”

“Right.”

“According to my memory, a theater is a place of sadism and debauchery, where people watch someone be put into a box and cheer when they’re cut in half or where they’re moved by the sight of a young girl having a cloth put over her and being turned into doves.”

“...I think you’ve got the wrong idea about a couple of things, but it’s fine. I won’t let it bother me.”

“Anyway, a stage makes sense, but what’s the deal with a hole opening up while we’re walking through a corridor and sending us falling down to a lower level?”

“I also have to say I disagree with such practices.”

“Mm. Well, fortunately, with our steel wills, we withstood the terror of falling, and with our natural grit, we weren’t injured at all.”

“...Yeah, I guess so.”

“Still, if we were boring old humans, we’d probably be seriously injured.”

“We did fall some ten meters. And if I could hazard a guess, I’d say it’s likely that hole was put there for that exact purpose.”

“Well, no matter the nefarious plot that hole was put there for, I would never have fallen for such trickery. It’s just because you fell into it that I had to go falling in after you to save you.”

“...Incidentally, when we fell, you ended up under me. Do you understand the reason for that?”

“Mhm. It’s because I’m heavier. Must’ve gone past you while we were falling. Well, we really don’t need to keep going on and on about your numerous failures.”

“...Thanks.”

“In any case, it’s because all of these things happened that we now find ourselves here...” Volkan scratched his chin, his sword in one hand, and looked around the area. The darkness around them was almost complete. He went on, “What exactly is this room we’re in, you think?”

“My personal guess would be it’s a ‘bottom of a pit trap’ room,” Dortin answered with a sigh, rubbing his bruised butt.

Volkan didn’t seem entirely convinced. “But if that was a pit trap, isn’t it strange for there to be an exit there?” He pointed to a hole high up on the wall with a grate over it. At the bottom of the pit, there were no other holes or hints as to a possible escape route, just four walls surrounding them. It was a small chamber, too. There wasn’t much room for even two dwarves to move around in.

Looking up at the hole his brother had pointed out, Dortin calmly mused, “I’m guessing water or something comes out of that hole, like, ‘mwahahaha, it’s the end for you now, foolish trespassers.’”

“Hahaha. You’re so stupid, Dortin.” Volkan laughed heartily. “No trespasser would be courteous enough to meet their end just from a little water splashed

on them.”

“...Not unless the water rose to over two meters, no.”

Volkan froze at that. Structurally, dwarves were not built to float. “Umm...” Volkan said mechanically, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. “This is just a guess, but would those intruders be...”

“Traditionally, I believe the word would apply to those at the bottom of pit traps with no way to escape.” He wasn’t being sarcastic, he just didn’t want to admit it himself, either.

“.....”

Silence heavier than a boulder descended upon them, until there was a mechanical-sounding *clank*, and three seconds later, water began to spew from the lattice-shaped grate.



“...Did you just hear water or something?” Claiomh questioned as they walked.

“Probably just your imagination,” was Majic’s reply. He was glancing around, looking nervous.

“No it wasn’t. It came from under us, a big rush of water.”

“Then there’s water under us, sure,” Majic responded absent-mindedly. Claiomh got a miffed look on her face, but the boy didn’t notice.

Heading down the stairs from the hall, they found themselves in the audience seats—rows and rows of hard-looking seating. Looking up, they could see seats for the nobility on the left and right, probably accessible through the doors that had been in the hall.

“What a big theater,” Orphen remarked, looking out over the audience seating. The building had looked big from outside, but that hadn’t prepared him for the sight of this spacious theater. The seats were on a slope so that the ones in the back were higher, and they were at various angles so that they all faced one area—the stage, naturally.

The stage itself was high up, raised about three meters from the floor. There

were no seats right next to the stage, of course, the closest row beginning where the slope of the floor had also risen two or three meters from its lowest point. Orphen wasn't sure what the space between the stage and the seats was for. *An orchestra, maybe?*

"Still pretty nice-looking for having been abandoned 200 years ago," Claiomh said as if the thought had just come to her.

Orphen nodded. "That's probably because of the Wyrd runes, too. They could make it withstand the effects of—wait, we still don't even know if it's actually been abandoned for 200 or not."

"What do you mean?"

Orphen shrugged at Claiomh's question. "The records say it was demolished, but it's still here. I've got an idea why that could be. It's pretty typical for the Sorcerer's Alliance to hide the existence of ruins like these from the nobility this way. On paper, they say it's been destroyed when they've actually left it alone. Since the capital doesn't pay much attention to the west, it's pretty easy for them to get away with. That's why it's also possible that sorcerers come digging through it every so often... Though, if there were something of value here, I'd probably know about it, so..." More accurately, his master or his sister who specialized in Celestial magic would have known about it, but he didn't bother clarifying that bit out loud. "Maybe they hid it but didn't find anything worthwhile in it and just left it after that?"

"What do they usually find in these ruins?"

Orphen smirked at his pupil's question. "What? You getting itchy fingers again?"

"No! Maaasteer!" Majic flailed his arms in protest.

Orphen laughed and gave him a wave. "Well, it's not a fortress or anything. I'd like to think there won't be anything too dangerous in a theater. Of course, the magical goods Celestials created were just everyday tools for them, but they can be incredibly dangerous to us humans..."

"Like what?"

"I was called to a Celestial spa once as backup, and there was this broken

automatic cooking machine in the kitchen. That was a mess. It mistook us for ingredients and wouldn't stop chasing us."

"That's pretty scary..."

"I wish there was food here..." Claiomh put her hand to her stomach, suddenly remembering how hungry she was.

Just then—*BOOOOM!*—there was an explosion.

"What the—?!" Orphen groaned, looking left and right. The explosion had sounded pretty close.

"It came from across the stage!" Claiomh whispered and pointed.

Orphen looked that way. "Backstage...?" He ran off, headed for the stage through the slanted audience seats. There were stairs leading up to it on both sides, so the three of them headed for them. They quickly arrived and looked to both sides.

"Looks like you can get backstage from the wings." Claiomh quickly spied doors to the sides of the stage—and one of them was open.

"Let's go," Orphen uttered, and just then...

Wham! There was a short explosion and the door they had just set their eyes on was blown clean off its hinges from the other side. ...No, it was blown away by something crashing through it.

The object that had blown the door away and rolled through onto the wing of the stage was a person. A person with burns all over them, clothes charred black. It looked like a small man, but they couldn't be sure without getting closer. The figure was still alive but would probably die if not tended to.

"What happened?!" Orphen yelled, about to run over, but before he could move, another figure stepped over the remains of the door.

This one wasn't human. It was hard to tell at a glance what its body was composed of. If there was a viscous glass, that would probably come close to the luster of the material. Its skin was smooth, its limbs long and thin, aside from where they jutted out at the joints. The body was hairless and unclothed. There were odd protuberances in its chest to simulate ribs. Its head was round,

far too round to be human, and hairless. And at the top of its head there was a dent.

They'd seen something like this once before. "A doll...!" Orphen stopped in his tracks, uttering that word in shock. It was one of the human imitations the Celestials had been fond of making long ago.

The doll slowly turned toward them. "More intruders?" It took a step toward them, raising its arm in a movement that was not at all graceful... and something behind it sent it flying.

"Yaaaaah!" A woman in her mid-twenties leapt through the doorway with a shout and thrust a sword into the back of the doll. Pushed by the sword, the doll fell forward, and the woman stepped over it, pulling her sword out as she went. She then rushed to the man who was still collapsed on the floor.

"Freddin!" came the woman's quick whisper—likely the man's name.

The man's head twitched toward her as he looked up in her direction. "B... Boss..."

"Good, you're conscious. Don't talk." That was all she said. She held her sword up once more and turned back to face the doll again.

The woman had short black hair and an earnest-looking face—at least, from the side it looked that way. She wore oversized leather armor and expertly wielded a lightweight sword. There was a cloth wrapped around her head that was an eye-catching sky blue.

She's... the boss? That's what the man had called her, so it was likely true, but Orphen got a bit of a weird feeling seeing her. Her solemn gaze was fixed steadily on the doll trying to pick itself up from the ground beneath her... until her face whipped up to look their way.

"Hey, you!"

Orphen was only able to give a dull "...Huh?" when she suddenly called out to them.

She continued, unbothered, "One look between me and this thing and you can tell who the bad guy is, right?! Don't just stand there, help me out a little,

why don't you!"

"Wha—?!" came Claiomh's indignant shout. "What's with the attitude?! As far as I can tell, we're only in this trouble now because *you guys* came here to steal stuff!"

"Didn't we only come to get a reward?" Majic said quietly, looking for agreement, but Orphen purposely ignored him.

The woman quickly retorted with, "We're not thieves! We came to tomb raid!"

"That's the same thing!"

"It's not! We're here because sorcerers monopolize—" She stopped when the doll returned to its feet.

"So you weren't dead," it stated coldly.

The woman held up her sword again and faced the doll with a fearless smile. "Heh. You thought that was enough to take the Great Mädchen down?" She cut a striking figure... that was completely ruined by the shrill cry that came immediately after her declaration.

"What?! Who does she think she is?!" Claiomh held Leki to her chest and pointed a finger out at the woman who'd called herself Mädchen. "Just leave her be, Orphen! If she can even beat that thing, I'll finish her off myself!"



“Yeah, I don’t think I can do that.” Orphen shot her a look and stepped forward. “This wasn’t a doll made for combat... so I think we can win.”

“You can tell just by looking?” asked Majic. He hadn’t taken a combat stance or anything and was just standing there absentmindedly.

Orphen shook his head. “No, I can’t, but... if it were a combat doll, I doubt it would have failed to take down a simple tomb raider with a single blow.”

He hadn’t meant much by the statement, but the doll raised its head in reaction to it. It sent an analytical look at Orphen with its narrow eyes and said, “A sorcerer...”

Mädchen also whipped her head up at Orphen at that statement. She apparently hadn’t noticed the crest hanging from his neck. “Did it say sorcerer?!”

That gave the doll the opportunity it needed to strike. It barreled at Mädchen and pushed her aside rather artlessly, but since it had taken her by surprise, the blow was enough to knock her to the ground. The doll then ran past her and headed for the burned man—she’d called him Freddin—behind her.

“Dammit!” Mädchen grunted.

Orphen lowered his stance and shouted out, “I release thee, Blade of—” but before he could finish...

“Wait!” Mädchen interrupted his spell. “You’ll hit Freddin!”

I’m not a greenhorn. I’m not gonna hit him. Mentally cursing her, he had to spend another few seconds reforming the spell after his concentration was broken. In that time, the doll had picked up Freddin’s body. It spun around and headed for the door it had busted open at a fast pace. “I release thee, Sword of Light!” Orphen’s spell chased after the doll but only grazed its back and hit the doorway beside it. The doll vanished behind the stage as the explosion sounded.

“Freddin!” Mädchen shouted and jumped to her feet. She picked up the sword she’d dropped when she fell and ran after the doll through the door.

“Don’t just chase after it!”

But she didn't seem to hear Orphen's voice (or she just ignored him) and disappeared backstage as well.

Orphen clucked his tongue. "What does she think it took an injured person with it for? It's obviously trying to bait her with it."

"Bait her?" Claiomh asked.

"Into a trap. It's a Celestial doll. It's trying to kill intruders. It was probably behind those corpses we found earlier. That means its creator ordered it to protect this place. Which means there's something here worth protecting."

"Th-Then that means we really need to go after her or she'll be in trouble!" Majic yelped, already about to take off through the door.

"I know." Orphen groaned, and he sped in that direction.

"Right. It won't sit right with me unless I see something terrible happen to her with my own eyes."

Orphen was somewhat perturbed by Claiomh's muttering, but he decided it was better than her saying she wouldn't go with them.

The explosion the doll had produced earlier had completely destroyed the door, while Orphen's spell had merely singed the wall beside it. The difference in their sheer destructive power was clear from this. *Those dolls use silent magic... We've got to watch out for that, at least.* Orphen stepped backstage cautiously.

It was spacious behind the stage, and deserted. In addition to the doors leading backstage, there should have been some openings for moving props around as well, but they couldn't see anything like that. It was possible Celestials had some other way of easily transferring matter on and off stage, of course.

A doll carrying a man was running through the wide space, Mädchen following it. Orphen wanted to launch some magic at the doll, but Mädchen was in his line of fire so he couldn't. He settled for just calling out as he pursued them. "Wait!" But she didn't even turn to acknowledge him. She merely chased after the doll, sword in one hand, and the doll ran from her, faster than she was despite carrying a human being. Of course, Orphen could see no exits in this

backstage area. If it kept running, it would eventually hit a dead end.

Maybe that was why the doll suddenly stopped and turned around. It swiftly raised a hand and straightened it for a strike. With Freddin still on its shoulder, it smiled in challenge at the approaching Mädchen.

“Damn you!” she yelled, raising her sword without slowing her charge. A split second later, it swung past the edge of the doll’s hand. Mädchen’s sword went for the doll’s torso as the doll struck at Mädchen’s face.

There was a *clang!* as the sword impacted the doll’s body and bounced off of it. The recoil sent Mädchen spinning in the opposite direction of her swing and she passed by the doll, whose hand only managed to graze her forehead. They both lost sight of each other for a moment then found each other at the same time again. But as they drew closer, this time, Mädchen didn’t swing her sword.

The doll raised its hand to strike at her chest.

That’s why I told you—She’s done for! Orphen hastened his steps, sure that she was about to go down. He didn’t think he’d make it in time either way, but if the doll missed a vital spot, there was a chance he could save her.

However... the hand raced toward her chest. She could only avoid it by crouching down or hitting the floor, but it was too late to crouch, and she was bent forward too far to fall face-up on the floor. Instead, she went face-down.

“—?!” Orphen was stunned. Not just at the speed with which she’d made the decision, but also because there was no way for her to act further from this position. It wasn’t something he could imagine anyone doing, but the real surprise was what came after that.

When she sunk to the floor, the doll’s hand struck empty air again. For the doll, all it had to do was finish her off with its next blow, and it pulled its hand back to do just that, aiming this time at the top of her head.

In that instant, Mädchen’s sword swung up from below to cut into the doll’s chest.

“Wha...?!” Orphen stopped inadvertently. Mädchen had thrust up from the floor—without using any of the strength of her lower body—to pierce the doll’s chest. It was a feat of incredible strength.

Since he'd stopped suddenly, Majic and Claiomh ran into him, *thud-thudding* into his back. The three all stood there, Orphen doubting his eyes.

But in actuality, Mädchen's sword had fatally wounded the doll. It took one step, then another, silently backwards. Mädchen stood, watching it. She held her sword up once more and said, "You underestimated me. I'm used to fighting things like you."

"Oh? However..." A pained expression on its face, the doll put a hand to its wound. "Have you seen anything like this?" With a smooth motion—much smoother than any of its previous robotic movements—it fluttered its fingers. Moving all five freely at the same time, it drew something on top of its wound, a silver light following the path of each finger.

"Wyrð runes!" Orphen exclaimed. But he was too late to act.

The doll had completed its rune. It was ancient silent magic, Wyrðography, the specialty of the Celestials. Its potency was incomparable to any sorcery humans could use. The rune shone bright, and when it faded, so too had the wound on the doll's body. At the same time...

"Gfh?!" Freddin's body, still slung over the doll's shoulder, convulsed in pain. A sword wound had opened up on his chest—in the same place there had been one on the doll's chest just a few seconds earlier.

Without a shred of concern for the blood gushing from Freddin's wound onto it, the doll told them, "Usually that rune is used to save lives, transferring wounds from the injured to a doll, but it can be used to do the opposite as well."

"Bastard!" Mädchen's voice cracked as she screamed in fury. She was about to leap at the doll, but Orphen was already running past it to tackle her away.

"Don't get in my way!"

"Just calm down!" Orphen yelled back, holding her as best as he could. He got his hands under her arms, pulled her to him, and kicked her in the back of the leg to bring her down. She was still struggling to stand back up, but he swept her legs out from under her to keep her down. "You can't beat that thing with a sword! Don't you get it?!"

“That’s not true!” she screamed, sounding desperate. “I’ll kill it!”

“You can’t kill it. It’s a doll. You break it,” Orphen said quietly, turning around. The doll was merely waiting, smirking at them.

Words soon came from its sneering mouth. “You do not acknowledge my personality? Am I not human?”

“You aren’t. All you do is follow your master’s orders. Isn’t that right?”

“Are there not humans who do the same?” came the doll’s swift retort. Coolly, with no emotion.

Orphen noticed Mädchen jump in response to that, but he went on nevertheless, “Sure, some humans are their own masters, some aren’t. There’s all types.” He took a step closer and faced the doll. “But you guys are simple. You’re all being controlled.”

“...My warning to you would be to not consider that a *virtue* of humans...” The doll began drawing another symbol on its body. It was a complicated rune that was taking some time to complete, but Orphen merely stared at the doll and waited for it to finish. It was a familiar symbol to him... Eventually, the doll finished and disappeared from sight. It had teleported.

“It ran away...” Orphen muttered, shoulders sagging.

Mädchen had stood but didn’t say anything back to him. She was just staring blankly at the spot where the doll had been.

The same overwhelmed look was on Majic’s, Claiomh’s, and Lekí’s faces as well.

Then, a voice sounded from above them...

“*BY THE WAY...*”

They whipped their heads up and found a Wyrd rune on the ceiling. The doll was nowhere to be seen, but its voice was coming from the rune.

“*A PARTING GIFT...*”

There was a sound like something releasing from under the floor and the Wyrd rune burst open, a corpse appearing in its place.

“Freddin!”

It was a little cruel to think that he might answer Mädchen’s cry, but... the corpse merely fell. It passed by their eye level in no time at all and crashed onto the floor. And where it hit, the floor split open and the corpse tumbled down through the hole.

“A hidden passage?!” Orphen exclaimed, peering into the opening. His face had fallen along with the corpse. The floorboards must have been hiding a secret door. That sound was its lock opening. It was a sizable door, four or five meters in diameter.

“A path underground...” someone murmured.

The doll left them with its final message. *“I’LL BE SEEING YOU...”*

They took a few minutes after that to catch their breath, staring down into the hole wordlessly. Claiomh had a melancholic look on her face as she rubbed her grumbling stomach. Leki joined her, poking her stomach with his front paws.

Watching that, Orphen also surreptitiously glanced at Mädchen from time to time. She was sitting slumped over by the edge of the hole.

Mädchen was the first to break the silence. “There are some ropes we brought with us out in the seats. If we use those, I bet we can get down.”

“You’re gonna go down there?!” Orphen exclaimed incredulously. “Your friend, Freddin? He’s dead. You can be sure of that! You’re gonna go down there just to fetch his corpse?! When a Celestial doll’s rolled out the red carpet for you?!”

“Oh, but...” Majic started, counting on his fingers. “Your men, underlings, whatever. There are still two more of them, right?”

Mädchen shook her head. “I took five inside with me, but we were attacked by that doll on the stage. Two of them were blown away somewhere by those runes. Another two broke off from us then, and Freddin...”

“The two that were transported ended up in the hall. I burned their bodies.” Orphen waved his hand in an appeasing gesture. “If I had to guess, those dogs

weren't living here; they were transported here. When you passed through, they probably came to the hall. Your two men were transported there and became their prey. Then the dogs went out the entrance and..." He hesitated there, but Mädchen interrupted him, confused.

"Dogs?"

"Dog monsters. They wiped out the men you left outside and have the theater surrounded now. They chased us in here."

"Then... we have no escape...?" Mädchen asked, going pale—however, though she looked nervous, she didn't seem to be giving up.

Orphen nodded. "That's right. We were about to search this place for some way out of the situation when we ran into you."

"I think I've seen most of the building at this point, though..."

"It looked like there was a tower from outside. We haven't been there."

"We went. There was nothing there," Mädchen said wearily, clutching the hilt of her sword. "There's something weird about this place... traps all over. In a theater!" There was a sort of self-deprecating sarcasm in her last sentence.

Orphen peered at her for a moment then said, "I can't imagine they were present two hundred years ago, so that doll must have added them later. There must be some reason it doesn't want humans getting inside."

"Well, whatever questions you have," Mädchen stood and said matter-of-factly, "we go in here and you'll have your answers. We don't and you won't. Right?" She pointed at the hole in the floor.

But Orphen wasn't buying it. "In that case, I don't need answers. Let's get out of here."

"But, Orphen..." Claiomh said quietly, entering the debate for the first time. "What are we gonna do about those dogs?"

"We can snipe them one by one from the roof or something, I don't know! Either way, it'll be better than fighting that doll!" The second half was directed at Mädchen.

But she didn't back down, instead glaring at him and saying, "Then I don't

need your help!”

“You—” He pointed his finger at her and started, but he was interrupted. However, it wasn’t by Mädchen.

“Seriously, what is with you?!” Claiomh yelled, standing so quickly that Leki fell off of her lap. “After we saved you out of the kindness of our hearts!”

“No... I’m pretty sure we were after a reward...” Majic mumbled, quiet enough that they might not have heard.

Orphen shot a look at Claiomh as she squared her shoulders, then he turned back to Mädchen. The woman looked back at him, her own anger roiling under the surface. Just as she had been the whole time, even during Claiomh’s outburst. She was ignoring the girl, evidently.

Orphen took a moment to think and then asked her, “Are you trying to get revenge for your men?”

“...What if I am?” That fearless smile again.

Orphen’s response was quick. “You think you’ll be able to take revenge all by yourself against a thing that killed dozens of people?”

He thought she’d have a retort for that, but she was silent, merely staring at him, complex thoughts moving behind her eyes. Eventually, she spoke. “Fine. I’ll tell you the truth. Part of me does want revenge. But I also have a reason I can’t leave empty-handed.”

Orphen arched an eyebrow. “A reason?”

“I can’t tell you what it is.”

“What do you mean you can’t tell us?!” Claiomh finally started walking over to her at that. Majic stepped forward to get between them, but she put her hand to his face and shoved him aside. “I don’t think I like you very much! Do you understand how selfish you’re being?!”

“Pot, meet kettle...”

“I can hear you, you know!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Claiomh suddenly changed directions and started strangling Majic after his unnecessary comment. Deciding to leave them be for now, Orphen ran a hand through his hair, face troubled. He and Mädchen had a staring contest for a few moments, then Orphen let out a puff of air and shrugged.

“Fine. We’ll go with you.”

“Orphen?!” Claiomh turned to him, tossing Majic aside.

Knowing there was nothing he could say that would convince her, Orphen ignored her and went on, “We can’t just abandon you. But we’re turning back if things get hairy. Got it?”

“Orphen, Orphen, isn’t that kind of dirty, or like prioritizing her over us and not treating us equal at all, I mean it’s unfair, I tell you, unfair!” Claiomh rattled off, striding toward Orphen.

Orphen only continued to ignore her, instead observing Mädchen. But her expression didn’t betray anything, no gratitude or annoyance.

“I’ve done something like tomb raiding myself before, under Tower orders, so it’s not like I have any room to criticize.”

“...”

“Don’t you think you kind of go easy on strangers, Orphen? And you’re always calling me selfish and stuff, too!”

“I just don’t want to die doing this, and I think it’s stupid to let someone else die, too. Maybe it was stupid of us to get involved in the first place.”

“And isn’t this *you* being selfish? I mean, it’s not like we have to do this or anything! So why don’t you drop the easygoing dandy thing already, you selfish jerk!”

“So, in short, what I’m trying to say is...”

“I don’t want to do this, okay?! All this work for a woman?! There’s no point in it! And what are you gonna do if somebody gets hurt?! When we’ve got somewhere important to be after this!”

“What I mean is... uhh...”

“Weren’t you saying there could be trouble in Kimluck?! I’ve been looking forward to it since I’ve never been to a church town bef—”

“Will you *shut up* already?!” Orphen shouted and shook off Claiomh, who was grasping at him.

“You guys are going to Kimluck?” Somehow this was the first thing to surprise Mädchen. “A sorcerer like you?” She pointed at Orphen’s chest.

Orphen looked down at the dragon crest as well, replying in the affirmative. “Wasn’t really planning on showing this off all the way to the main city of the church, though.”

“Hmm...” Mädchen put her hand to her chin, thinking. She smiled like something had caught her interest. “Why don’t we make a deal, then? I don’t exactly like the accusations that child is throwing around about me.”

“Child?! Do you mean m—mmgh?!”

Orphen reached around and forced Claiomh’s mouth shut, stopping her verbal rampage. She was still flailing her limbs about, so he held those down as well and asked, “A deal?”

“That’s right. I grew up right outside Kimluck, so I can show you the way there, and I could even help you make it past inspection and get inside.”

“Inspection?”

“You didn’t know? You really are taking this lightly, huh? You thought you’d be able to just waltz right into the center of the church?”

“No, I just... I’ve got no data on Kimluck, really,” Orphen admitted. He’d assumed there would be some sort of gate, but he had no concrete plan to get through it. It was rather careless, but he couldn’t see the point in thinking about it before they actually got there. “They’re not bad terms... Pretty good ones, in fact.”

“That’s right. There aren’t too many sorcerers who make it past the famous Walls of Learning.”

“Got it.” Orphen nodded and let Claiomh go. Without looking at the girl now emitting a dangerous growl, he went on, “We’ll work with you.”

“Then... there’s something I’d like to ask you to do.”

Orphen smiled wryly at her quick response. He’d realized that he’d never really managed to turn down a request from a woman her age. “What is it? You left the ropes in the audience area, right? Want me to go get ’em?”

“I don’t mind if you do that, but...” She peered frightfully down the hole as she spoke. “When we go down on the rope, can you carry me?”

“Hunh?”

“I hate heights...”



“Grrblrlrblgrblh!” came the sound from his brother, as if he was spewing bubbles from his mouth meaninglessly. Volkan flailed his limbs wildly in the water, and Dortin was all too aware of exactly what he was trying to say to him. *“Do something, Dortin!”*

You can demand all you like, but... If anyone could stay calm at the bottom of a pit who knows how many meters deep completely flooded with water, it’d either be someone with a person panicking about a billion times worse right next to them... or maybe someone whose ancestors just happened to have gills. It was for the former reason that Dortin found himself remarkably calm in his current situation. Of course, whether that was actually doing anything for him at the moment... *All I really know is that I’m gonna run out of breath in a few seconds here...* He wasn’t exactly one who thrived underwater.



There was actually a reason dwarves couldn't swim, and that was that in the frigid land of Masmaturia, there wasn't any water. Only ice covered the surface of the region. River deltas were evidence that in the distant past, the area was home to lakes and rivers, but none still existed today. Water was something of a luxury for dwarves.

Of course, being shut up in a room full of it, the only escape high above them and closed, it was less a luxury at the moment and more an instrument of torture or method of execution.

"Grblrlblbrrllglbgh!"

Dortin watched his brother's dance, much calmer than he should be in his predicament. He crossed his arms in thought. *So, it's a pit trap, right? Once the prey falls in, water pours in after them.*

"Bbglrlbrhgbrglrbh!"

The water comes in from a hole near the ceiling. For a human that can float, they might be able to use the rising water levels to escape. Of course, I'd assume the trap closed again after we fell through.

"Bbrlglrbblblgrblh!"

But we can't do that, so I shouldn't waste time considering it. Even if we could get up to the opening the water is coming from, it's got that grate over it, so we couldn't get out that way. And anyway, it's not like you can swim up through pouring water against the current. But there aren't any other exits...

"Grblrlblrglblrgglrglbggrblglbrgh!"

That's what bothers me... There's no exit. Isn't it strange for it to be completely sealed? There isn't even a slight gap in the floor or the walls—so when the water pours in here, where does it drain to?

"Drain." Once Dortin hit upon that idea, he stopped thinking. If he thought, his brain would consume oxygen. Even without that, he'd probably long since passed his limits—that is, he would have, were he human. Were they human, the two dwarves would already be dead. His one hope, he thought, even as he reminded himself not to use his brain, was... *If this is a trap made for humans,*

maybe the mechanism would be damaged by prolonged exposure to water, so it'll drain right away.

“Grblrbglbrghblrgh!”

It might have just been wishful thinking on his part, but under the ruckus his brother was kicking up, Dortin thought he heard another mechanical *ca-clack* from somewhere far below them. An ominous sound, one that shook everything around them.

And everything began to whirl around.

Chapter IV: He Flew into the Light “I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits.” New fairy lights appeared with a *pomf* in response to Orphen’s summons. The sudden additions extended branches of light into the oppressive darkness surrounding them. They weren’t too bright, illuminating the area with the same amount of light a portable gas lamp might produce.

At the same time, he reached the bottom of the hole. He let go of the rope and jumped down to the same type of flooring that had been present behind the stage. In other words, he’d landed right on the lid of the hole that they had followed down. Freddin’s corpse lay nearby, thoroughly smashed from the fall.

Orphen averted his eyes and called out behind him, “You can get down now.”

“Huh? Oh... yeah?” Mädchen twitched when he addressed her. She’d likely been closing her eyes all this time. She hurriedly jumped down from his back.

Orphen rolled his shoulders and looked up toward the top of the hole, calling, “We’re down!”

His voice bounced off of the walls of the pit and reached the higher floor. A moment later, there was the faint sound of some sort of dispute happening up above, then the rope tugged once and began to shake intermittently. Majic had started his descent.

“...Freddin. Poor bastard,” Mädchen muttered. She was standing next to his corpse, face twisted in regret. “He was a great partner. They all were...”

Orphen wasn’t sure exactly who she was trying to convince of this, but when he looked, he saw her staring solemnly at him. She seemed like she was waiting for some sort of response.

“Y-Yeah...” He nodded awkwardly and cleared his throat. “You were just unlucky,” he told her, looking around. Right at the bottom of the pit, there was a passageway heading to the side. There were no lights inside, so past a point, it was nothing but pitch blackness.

“I...” Mädchen started, causing Orphen to look over to her. She went on, observing the spirit lights floating around them, “I don’t think it’s that simple when everyone but me was wiped out.”

Orphen wanted to say something to her, but didn’t feel like it was his place to. He figured the best thing to do was just focus on the practical. “Hey—err, I mean, Mädchen, where’d you get your information on the theater?”

“In town. I bought it. Can’t say more than that.”

“That’s fine, just... Did you hear anything else about it when you got the info? The history of the theater or something like that?”

She cocked her head a bit at the question and put a hand to her cheek, hesitating a moment before speaking. “The history, eh...? I only really know what everybody else does. The theater was built to perform the famous ‘Demon King’ play, and the leader of the aristocracy at the time, the king, was invited to see it. He then ordered the theater shut down for some reason.”

“But the king ordered the theater destroyed, right? Didn’t you think it was weird that it was still around?”

“I dunno...” Mädchen huffed and un-cocked her head. “All legends about old relics are the same, right? People say they don’t exist anymore, but they really do. So I didn’t think much of it. Plus it was 200 years ago, so I figured maybe the real Kamisunda Theater had been destroyed but was rebuilt afterward or something...”

“Guess it could’ve been...” Orphen tentatively agreed with her. “Did you know part of it was underground?”

“No, the only other information I got was that there was some ‘secret’ here.”

“And that was enough for you tomb raider types to go on?” Orphen raised an eyebrow.

She just shrugged, not looking particularly bothered. “Well, it’s not like there’s gonna be any actual treasure left in a ruin that people have already investigated.”

“Guess that’s true...” Orphen looked around again. Going by the volume of rope remaining at the bottom of the pit, it must have been some 20 to 25 meters deep. “That means these ruins must be untouched... This is gonna be more trouble than I thought.” He clucked his tongue and ran a hand through his hair.

“Trouble?” Mädchen asked curiously.

“Of course. I mean, you know, don’t you? Most Celestial relics are way too much for humans to handle. Whole trained investigation teams have been wiped out a few times before.”

Mädchen was silent at that.

“Plus, Celestial relics aren’t my specialty, so if we find something, I’m not gonna know how to use it or what it does—and I’m guessing you can’t read Wyrd Glyphs, can you? This is like fooling around with something that might explode when it’s hit by sunlight. Not my idea of fun.”

“You’ve got no sense of adventure.” There wasn’t a hint of apprehension in her voice.

Orphen looked away, slightly irritated. “Anyway, best thing to do would be to get home as soon as we can. We should try to find a way to escape.”

And just when he’d made that lighthearted comment... a vague unease suddenly sprung up inside him. Orphen pushed Mädchen to the ground and leapt back in the opposite direction of her, looking up in a ready stance.

The light didn’t reach terribly far, so when he looked up, he couldn’t see all the way to the ceiling. The only thing above him was blackness—total darkness—and something falling through that blackness.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

THUD! The impact shook the whole pit. What had fallen was... Majic.

He stood there for a few moments, enduring the impact his legs had just

taken... then whipped his head up. “What was that for, Claiomh?!” the boy shouted upwards into the hole.

A reply quickly followed. “You shouldn’t have taken so long!” Claiomh slid down the rope at basically the same time. She made a deft landing and Leki swooped down after her, alighting skillfully on her head.

Claiomh pointed her finger at Majic and shouted, “We can’t just leave Orphen alone with this untrustworthy woman! It’d be dangerous!”

“But me free-falling five meters *wouldn’t* be?!”

“...Maybe we should’ve just gone on ahead without these guys...” Orphen muttered, eyes narrowed. He looked over at the opening of the path the spirit lights were illuminating. It looked almost like a ghostly gate in the pale blue light.

That was when he realized, for the first time, that the opening was flat on the bottom but semicircular at the top. In other words, shaped like a dome. The passageway seemed to share that same shape as well. The ceiling was high up, three meters or so, and there was a small plate at the top of the opening.

The rusted copper plate had something written on it in what was now called Old Kiesalhiman. Orphen squinted and called up his memory of the ancient language. He was garbage at grammar but could manage vocabulary at least. It read *Kamisunda Underground Theater*. Then there was another line—*Hall of Selection*.

Celestials were capable of all sorts of things. To people now, a light source that didn’t require gas or anything and functioned eternally would be a priceless commodity, but to Celestials, that might be something they used every day and could make in their sleep. That’s how powerful the magic they wielded was. If beings like that made weapons, it didn’t even need to be said how dangerous they would be.

“But just like that plate says, whether we’re underground or not, this is just a theater, so there shouldn’t be anything too dangerous here. Still, say there’s magically activated security.”

“...What would happen?” asked Mädchen.

Orphen answered annoyedly, “The dolls created by Celestials aren’t at all flexible. Some of them were built for battle and were ordered, ‘kill all sorcerers,’ and if one of them were still around in perfect working order, it would still be following that order even when it was made 200 years ago. Plus, what’s really annoying is, on top of being inflexible, they’re weirdly intelligent, too. Say there’s a security doll here, it’ll probably try to eliminate us with everything it’s got, seeing as how we’re in here without tickets. And I don’t know if ‘eliminate’ would mean throwing us out or shoving us in jars and pickling us overnight.”

“I see,” Mädchen mused, sounding like she didn’t understand the danger at all.

Orphen looked back at her and found himself momentarily struck by the urge to grab her by the head and swing her around... but he resisted. It would be meaningless.

“That doll from before was probably just an assistant or something. That’s why it could use magic to start fires and only had that weird Glyph to move wounds to itself. But put another way, that means a doll with only limited capabilities was as powerful as it was. If it was a combat doll, we wouldn’t stand a chance. Plus...” Orphen added gloomily, “I just hate dealing with those dolls. Every time I run into one, it’s nothing but—”

That’s when Orphen suddenly collided with something. He looked ahead to find that Majic had stopped in his tracks. He couldn’t see the boy’s expression from behind him, but the muscles in his back were tensed up. He’d stepped back from the impact and realized that Majic and Claiomh were forming a sort of wall before him.

“What? What’d you stop for?” Orphen went around them to look at their faces. He’d sent the spirit lights ahead to light their path, so he was sort of jumping into their light. When he looked at their faces... Orphen’s face went blank with confusion.

Majic’s and Claiomh’s eyes were completely unfocused. They were standing stiffly in place like scarecrows, their mouths hanging open and slack, their breathing deep and rhythmic, as if they were sleeping...

Orphen came to a sudden realization. He turned forward again, where the lights were, facing the deep darkness behind them. Thrusting his fist out and taking a low stance, he shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A bright white light burst a few centimeters before his extended hand, tearing through the darkness to far ahead of them. The light raced into the dark, shaking the air it passed through.

An explosion—if it had hit, its target should have gone up in flames; however, though he felt the shake of the explosion, the flames that should have burst from it simply faded into the darkness. Although...

“Gyaaaaaaaaa...!”

There was a faint scream amid the sound of the explosion.

Orphen looked up. It had connected. But the scream turned to silence a moment later.

“Wh-What happened?” Mädchen asked from behind him.

Orphen didn’t turn back around, instead raising a finger to his mouth. “Quiet.”

He strained his ears.

Tap, tap, tap... There was a steady beat of footsteps heading away from them. The sound quickly faded to nothing.

“It got away,” he muttered.

Majic suddenly collapsed like he’d been struck. “Huh?! Oww...” He must have lost his balance.

Claiomh hadn’t fallen, but she was blinking, a confused look on her face. She’d stumbled a little, so Leki was scrambling a bit to stay on top of her head. “Wh-What just happened?”

“Simple hypnosis. Celestial dolls pull it sometimes,” Orphen said, stretching. He glanced down the passageway the footsteps had faded into. “It’s a good thing it wasn’t very powerful. Really strong dolls can take a number of people under their control all at once. We would have been wiped out.”

“Wiped out?” Majic’s eyes darted about in surprise.

Grinding his teeth, Orphen took a moment to take a deep breath. “*That’s* why! I keep *saying* this place is dangerous! Again and again and again and again and again and again and again and—”

Right when he ran out of breath, Claiomh interjected with a placating laugh. “Ahaha. But we’ll be fine if we have you with us, Orphen, won’t—”

“I’m gonna tell you right now that I will never claim to be able to take down a doll.”

“Oh, come on. Alenhatam wasn’t a huge deal, was it? And just now... I mean, it’s not like I saw, but...”

“Yeah!” Orphen snapped at the blithe girl. “Maybe for now! But there’s all kinds of dolls! There’s shitty stone golems that you can put holes into with a good spear thrust and there’s killing dolls you can’t hope to stand against! If a bunch of those things showed up, we’d be out of options!” he wailed, stomping his feet, and a shadow of apprehension began to cross Majic and Claiomh’s faces. *Finally, they’re starting to get it*, Orphen thought.

However, the apprehension quickly turned to disenchantment.

“You’re so...” Majic muttered.

“...Weak, Orphen,” Claiomh finished.

Snap, went something, audibly, inside Orphen’s head. He managed to control himself, somehow, clenching his fists and putting on a very forced smile.

“Th-That’s right. So it’s dangerous to be here...”

“How disappointing...” Claiomh lamented, a hand on her cheek. Leki scratched under his chin with his hind leg from on top of her blonde hair.

Majic was next to speak, of course. “Kinda makes me want my money back, you know?”



Orphen felt all sorts of things bursting inside his skull, but he endured that too. He crept closer to the two, cracking his knuckles. “R-Right, so, since there’s danger, and the danger is dangerous, and in order for you to have a life to live, you need to not die...”

The two of them didn’t seem to be hearing a word he said, however.

“This sucks. I’m bored, my feet hurt, it’s all dark and moldy down here. What are we even doing here, anyway?”

“Sheesh. What, indeed? I’m paying a hefty tuition, too. How many days do you think it’d take to get back to Tafurem if I turned around now?”

Orphen quietly, and with all his strength, gripped Majic by his lapel and shook him back and forth, screaming, “I AM RESTRAINING MYSEEESELF!”

“...You really aren’t,” Mädchen calmly pointed out.

Orphen froze and closed his eyes (though he didn’t let go of Majic’s lapels). He sucked a deep breath in, paused, and let it out. After doing that three times, he said quietly, “I’m sure you understand, but this is just my lot in life.”

“I think I’m starting to...” Mädchen groaned, an uneasy smile on her face. That look quickly turned serious, however. “Wasn’t that dangerous, though? Attacking without looking, I mean. Some of my men are still in here; they could have been in between you.”

“...I wouldn’t say so.” Orphen let go of Majic. He looked down the passageway, now empty of any presence, just a monotonous black, and closed his eyes. It wasn’t like he could see through the darkness, but he kind of gave off that image.

“No?” Mädchen asked dubiously.

He opened his eyes again and shook his head. “I shot at a height of three meters. It wouldn’t have hit a human.”

“Three... meters?” This time it was Majic who replied, startled. “It was that big?”

“Dunno. But...” Orphen put a hand on his hip and went on, calmly and slowly, as if saying the words to himself as well, “It’s not its size that you should be

afraid of. It's not like ones made for combat are gonna be bigger necessarily. I just keep coming back to this. This is a theater. It's not a fortress. But why would the Celestials feel the need to make an underground theater below the theater proper? If we just knew that..."

"If we knew that?" Claiomh looked a little anxious.

Orphen looked at her and answered calmly, "If we knew that, we'd probably know the nature of the danger we're in."

The hall was a straight shot. No matter how far they went, there were no changes in the walls, floor, or elevation. Orphen had counted up to his 87th step, but then the earlier incident had occurred and he'd found it too much trouble to continue. It didn't really matter.

He proceeded carefully... for a time, at least. They'd already been attacked once. Now he was just making sure to walk quickly, with long strides.

He signaled the three behind him to stop with his hand, then he stopped as well. "Wait here, would you?"

"Huh?! What f—"

But Orphen was already running. He sped off, keeping low and overtaking his spirit lights. Though he plunged into the darkness, he was strangely unafraid. He could see nothing, but he kept up the pace. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, there was some variation to the previously uniform darkness. He'd trained his eyes to adjust quickly to the dark.

He used his instincts along with his limited vision to make his way through the darkness. He was starting to breathe harder, so he'd probably run 80 meters or so in ten seconds.

He stopped there, turning around and going perfectly still. In the distance, he could see the spirit lights and the figures of three people inside their illumination. He held his breath and waited, watching. And after a little while... another figure appeared in the light, with no warning.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" The three screamed at the figure that had appeared from nowhere, the sound echoing off the walls of the corridor.

“I knew it! It was lying in wait!” Orphen clucked his tongue and then took off again in the opposite direction—back toward them. He sprinted at his full speed, forming his magic.

“I brandish thee...” As he chanted, he focused on his target, the doll in the light. “Blade of Demons!” he shouted, and he felt the weight of an actual sword in his outstretched hand.

By then he was already back in the range of the light and could easily see the shocked faces of three humans and one dragon, and the new figure among them: the doll. It looked the same as the one they’d seen up above; it was likely the same one.

“*Take... thiiis!*” With a war cry, Orphen slammed the sword of air in his hand into the back of the doll. It pierced the doll with almost unnatural force, propelled by his charge.

The doll bent backwards without raising so much as a cry. The sword had cut clean through its body, almost bisecting it. Orphen pushed even harder and finally overpowered the doll, pushing it down on the spot—and at that point, the magic faded and the weight of the sword disappeared from his grasp.

A second scream also came from Claiomh then, but it stopped in half a second, all too unnaturally.

“Wha—?!” Before the chill could even race up his spine, he saw the change in her expression. Her face was frozen in shock for a moment, then it went slack. Leki blinked on top of her head, confused as he sensed Claiomh’s will leave her.

Orphen looked down. The doll’s barely-there eyes and mouth thinned to ghastly slits, its hand clutching Claiomh’s ankle. Its fingertips slithered over her ankle, drawing a glyph there.

“Claiomh!” Majic screamed, but she didn’t respond.

“Dammit!” Orphen kicked at the doll’s wrist, crushing its spindly arm under his thick boots, but the doll still held on. “Damn you! Damn you!” After two more kicks, the doll’s fingers stopped.

“Everyone, get back!” Orphen yelled. It took Majic and Mädchen a moment to comprehend the command, but they quickly complied after that, looking up

and scrambling away.

A moment later—taking only the time to breathe and concentrate after his shout—Orphen released his magic, stabbing it into the doll with his incantation. “Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!” A burst of destructive sound focused in on its wrist. The invisible attack shattered the material of the doll, little bits of it splintering off in every direction. Countless tiny cuts opened up on Claiomh’s ankle as well, but there was no way to avoid that right now. The next time he brought his heel down, it smashed clean through the doll’s battered arm.

“Eeeeeeeeeeee!” the doll screamed, clutching its broken arm. It rolled around, apparently in pain, which further cracked open the wound on its torso.

“I release thee, Sword of—” Orphen aimed at the wound there, intending to sear it with scorching light. His hand lit up as he lifted it and chanted, but—

Off to his side, he saw Claiomh, still frozen there expressionless, suddenly vanish, taking Leki with her.

“Ugh...!” The magic misfired as he realized... “That rune it was writing on her was teleportation magic!”

Claiomh was gone, leaving only the doll’s broken hand in her place.

Celestial dolls could utilize silent magic almost as powerful as that of the Celestials themselves, and the range on their teleportation magic was absurdly wide. For all he knew, she could have been teleported a thousand meters straight up into the air, or she could be embedded inside the wall right beside them.

“Where’d you send her?!” Orphen whipped around to the doll, but it was already dragging itself by the elbows over to Majic and Mädchen, ignoring his question. The two of them were frozen in fright, almost clinging to each other. *I knew it...* Orphen shuddered, looking down at the doll’s off-white back. *It’s not after me...*

Mädchen screamed then, cutting off that line of thought. The same cut-off scream that had been Claiomh’s last utterance. Orphen looked and found empty expressions on Mädchen’s and Majic’s faces. The doll was crawling along, drawing runes in the air with its still intact hand. The lines its fingers

traced in the air left a silver glow in their wake, the power of the strange glyphs strengthening.

“Will you cut it out?!” he grumbled. Orphen caught up to the doll and brought his heel down on its wounded torso as hard as he could. One final crack split out from the fissure and the doll’s body broke apart, half of it flipping over from the force of the kick. The runes it was drawing in the air vanished.

Orphen swiftly and silently drew the knife in his breast pocket. Flipping it around to hold it underhand, he drove it into the back of the doll’s round head like a stake. It felt like putting a trowel through hardened clay. As the doll screamed, Orphen twisted the knife. Dolls probably didn’t have vital spots or internal organs, but it still seemed to be having an effect; the doll was spasming like a snake that had been run over. It bucked under him, its movements slowing until finally it went completely still.

There was a beat of silence and Orphen raised his head. Majic and Mädchen stood there, shaking their heads sleepily, now freed from the doll’s mental control. It was said that the more powerful and more sophisticated the hypnosis magic was, the less fatigue the victim felt when freed from it. From the pained expressions on the pair’s faces, Orphen guessed they hadn’t been under very deep control.

He breathed a sigh of relief... and the two vanished, the doll on the ground disappearing at the same time.

“Wha—?!” He couldn’t help the surprised yelp that came from his mouth. The doll should have been completely destroyed, and even if it could still move, it shouldn’t have had the strength left to cast teleportation magic on the two of them.

Orphen stared down blankly at his feet, where the doll had lain a moment before. He had no way of following them if they’d been teleported. He thought back to the state the doll had been in, its torso split in two, eyes unfocused and staring into the distance as the knife dug into its head. It was broken. It had to have been broken.

No... Orphen gasped and spun around. He reached out and grabbed the only thing left on the floor, his knife. Turning, he squinted his eyes. The spirit lights

were still floating there. He was more panicked than he thought he'd be, but he'd managed not to drop them. And in their light, a giant figure stood, not even bothering to hide itself.

"The one from before!" Orphen cursed and dropped down, tilting the knife to show its blade to his adversary.

At its full height, the doll's head almost touched the ceiling—it was nearly three meters tall. And despite its height, it was stocky in build, the opposite of the doll he'd just destroyed. Its arms and torso were thick, but its hands were oddly small—probably a configuration optimized for drawing Wyrd Glyphs. Its body seemed to be composed of the same material, shining with the luster of glass or some sort of hardened gelatin. It couldn't have been completely stiff however, since the doll could move despite having no visible joints. On its chest, about two meters from the ground, was a bit of soot from where Orphen's earlier attack had struck it. The doll merely stared down at him.

"...Well, you got me," Orphen muttered. He'd been able to destroy the previous doll because he'd taken it by surprise from behind. He had no hope of winning a fair fight with a doll that could use dragon magic.

That wasn't the only reason he'd given up, however. The doll was almost blocking the passageway with its frame—almost, but not completely. And from the slight gap between its shoulder and the wall, Orphen could see them... countless dolls of the same type, standing in a long line down the hall.

It's more than ten... Could be dozens if I'm honest. There wasn't room for more than one of them at a time in the hallway, so he wouldn't get swarmed, but he knew he couldn't take them even one-on-one. They were strangely not as frightening at this size, but the creep factor was definitely still there. And because they were so big, he didn't see himself having any luck slipping past them deeper into the hall.

Orphen looked up, a thought occurring to him. Maybe this was the reason for their shape. If these dolls were made to block this passageway...

While he was stuck there, the first doll in the line spoke up in a monotone, "You have the right to choose."

"Lemme guess, life or death?" was Orphen's biting reply.

The doll went on without acknowledging him, its tone businesslike, “Let us take you, or proceed under your own power...”

“What are you getting at?!” Even as he asked, he thought it a stupid question—it was clear as day what the doll meant. He could either be sent somewhere by teleportation magic, though he didn’t know where, or he could go where they told him to on his own two feet.

As if determining that the question didn’t need answering, the doll instead said something else. Either that or it just had a script it was following. “Do you not seek knowledge of the Flood of Emergence?”

There was no change in the doll’s voice or expression, so Orphen had no way of guessing at its intent. “...Knowledge of what?” he asked incredulously.

The doll didn’t answer, merely staring back at him with its eerie gaze.

Fully aware that he was being kept in suspense, Orphen asked again, “Will you answer my questions?”

“...I cannot, as long as I do not know your intent.”

“What intent?”

“Do you not seek knowledge of the Flood of Emergence?” The doll repeated the exact same question it had just asked him, at the same speed and with the same intonation.

The Flood of... Emergence? He repeated it to himself, but it didn’t ring a bell. Several disastrous floods throughout history came to mind, but he didn’t think it meant any of them. *I’ll have to just take a gamble...*

Orphen put on his poker face and nodded. “That’s right. I seek that knowledge.”

“You lie,” came the doll’s quick reply. “You brought humans with you.”

“What? *I’m* human. You mean I should have come alone?”

“You are not human. You have Celestial blood.”

“Well... yeah, but to humans, that just means I’m human!”

“The fact that you have brought humans here means you know nothing of the

truth of the Emergence.” The doll cleanly ignored Orphen’s argument and carried on.

It irked Orphen, but he knew that wasn’t what his concern should be at the moment. There was something he needed to ask. “What did you do with the people who were with me?! Depending on your answer—”

“...They’re in the production room.”

“Things could get—huh?” His feeble response came a moment after its answer. He’d heard what the doll had said but hadn’t understood it.

“The production room.” The doll coolly repeated itself. “Normally, intruding humans are killed. However, one of our kind was just broken in battle. A human must be used as its base to repair it.”

“You wouldn’t!” Something snapped inside Orphen and he found himself lunging at the doll, knife in his hand forgotten. Of course, the doll was so large that he couldn’t get his arms all the way around it. But he didn’t care. He put his hands on the doll and fired his magic at it from point-blank range.

“I release thee—” But by then, there was a light flashing before his eyes. A silver light that looked like letters or glyphs...

“Your choice is made.” The doll’s voice was emotionless, right up until the end.

His magic finished forming. “Sword of Ligh—” At the same time that the doll exploded, everything around Orphen disappeared.

“—t!” came the tail end of his incantation. Everything faded... then appeared once more. And there he was.

Orphen was speechless for a moment, eyes wide. He was no longer in the hallway he’d been in just a second ago. The space he found himself in instead was much vaster, and brighter.

He stood atop a seat upholstered in red velvet. One of many in a sea around him. He was still standing poised to release his magic, facing the opposite direction that the seats were.

The seats numbered well into the hundreds, and he stood in the center of

them; it was like a grand music hall, of which there might be one or two in the royal capital. In the direction he was currently pointed—opposite the facing of the seats—there was a door, probably the entrance one traditionally used to enter the room...

There were two levels of seats. Orphen currently found himself on the first. He was just at the point where the second level was out of view for him, so he didn't know what was up there, but the space was silent—empty, he presumed. He could sense no one around him. He didn't see any dolls... at least, in the direction he was facing...

Orphen slowly turned around, moving his shoulders, his neck, his head. When he'd fully turned, he found himself facing a gigantic stage. There was a bit of space between the seats and the stage, perhaps for an orchestra. Its general appearance seemed to match the theater he'd seen aboveground.

In any case, he found his gaze drawn to the stage, for atop it, there sat an aged throne. A small doll sat draped upon the broad throne, its slender limb upon the arm rest. A small head and small eyes... it wasn't childlike in stature though, merely a miniature version of a human.

Aside from its size, there wasn't anything in particular that set it apart from any other Celestial-made doll, though its eyes were a little peculiar. Beyond its narrow eyelids peeked irises of an unimaginably deep blue... Those eyes languidly moved to meet Orphen's gaze.

A king...? Orphen couldn't help thinking despite his confusion. The doll lounged atop its mismatched throne... a crown on its head.

"We thank you... for coming. Though normally... in order to arrive here... one must continue down the hall you were traversing... and descend a set of stairs..." It spoke slowly, stiffly, as if not used to it.

Orphen put his guard up and grumbled, "Not a very convenient route."

"It must be that way... so that the guardian dolls... may determine your worthiness... It is the Hall of Selection..."

"Worthiness?" Orphen asked, but he got no response. He realized that the doll on the throne couldn't move from where it sat, and he relaxed somewhat.

Looking around the theater once more, he sighed. "...Feels weird moving somewhere instantly."

"It must... be instant... Time must not... factor in... Moving even... a few seconds... through time... is difficult... even for us..."

He wasn't quite sure he got what it was saying.

While Orphen struggled to come up with a response, the doll gave him a belated nod of greeting, though it was a little off from how a human would do so, as if their builds differed slightly.

It then told him, "Welcome... member of the Seventh Race. We..." A strange creature shuffled onto the stage just then from the wing. It was one of the winged dogs they'd seen so many of outside. Ten, twenty, thirty of them swarmed onto the stage, but the doll on the throne continued as if it hadn't even noticed they were there. "We are... the Demon King, Swedenborg."

For just a moment, the words stunned Orphen.



It was practically a miracle that he hadn't lost consciousness in the water. Of course, there were no particular merits to this; it was just that much more painful.

Dortin pondered as he felt the water wash him away, powerless to resist. *How is it that my brother is always happily passed out when things like this happen?* He cursed his lot in life as the raging waters battered him, black in the lightless underground passageway. And still, his brother remained unconscious.

Some time ago, the bottom of the pit trap had opened up and they'd been flushed out of it with the water. After that, it was a journey through a long, long, pitch-black tunnel—here, in other words. In the harsh current, Dortin had lost all sense of direction and which way was up or down. He knew that his brother was somewhere in the water near him (meaning, he bumped into him on occasion), but he couldn't even guess how far they'd traveled. It wasn't hard to imagine that at some point in the near future, his brain would be so severely lacking oxygen that he would be forced to panic.

It would be better if I could just pass out. It's not like I can see anything,

anyway... But as he thought that, he finally sensed light around him. The light of an exit was slowly approaching.

In the end... unable to lose consciousness, he flew into the light.

Chapter V: He's Gotta be Around Here

Somewhere He'd heard the legend. He didn't know too many details, but it was a legend, not history. It was from *before* Kiesalhiman history. A thousand years ago. The age of myths.

But...

"No fucking way." Orphen weighed his response carefully, but what he ended up saying was brash even for him. He observed the dogs on the stage as best he could. To put it in one word, and in a way that was very unfitting for one who had received the highest education in Black Sorcery, they were all hideous. Their basic appearance was that of a dog but with a reptilian, no, an amphibian look to them. Aside from their eyes sticking half out of their heads and their bat-like wings, they had short tails, and from a distance, their feet appeared to be webbed. Orphen had close to no knowledge of biology, but even a layperson like himself could tell that these creatures did not exist in nature.

Still, he shook his head. "The Demon King?! There are no gods in Kiesalhima!"

"It is... as you say..." The Demon King—or whatever it was—nodded solemnly and agreed. "So you possess... at least that much... knowledge..." It put its elbow on the arm rest and its chin in its hand. "How much... do you retain...? How much... has been passed... down...?"

"How should I know?!" Orphen spat. "I can't sit here and answer your questions! But I've got one for you! How do I get to the production room?!"

However... the Demon King merely ignored him. "Answer... us..."

Orphen almost lost his temper, but he managed to control himself. He repeated himself, a hostile expression on his face, "I told you I don't have time to! How do I get—"

"Answer... us..."

“I’m serious...”

“An...swer... us...”

Orphen grit his teeth, swallowing his response. His fists had clenched tight at some point without him noticing, nails digging into his palms. He mustered up all his remaining willpower and slowly let his fists unclench.

Either way, I’ll have to ask it about the production room... He took a deep breath, steeling himself. Meeting the Demon King’s composed gaze, he spoke up once more. “Once upon a time, dragons stole the secrets of magic from the gods. The furious gods tried to destroy the dragons in retaliation, but the dragons fled to this continent. The angry gods still chase the dragons to this day, but they haven’t managed to find the continent yet. If they do, they’ll destroy the whole continent! Not that I know how much of that’s true!”

“Has... knowledge of the Demon King... been lost...?”

“Swedenborge, the supreme ruler of all creation, plotted to destroy all the other gods and become the one true—”

“Enough... Your ignorance... is clear to us now...”

“What was that?!” Orphen yelled reflexively, but then he realized he didn’t care. He rolled his arm once then shot a vicious look at the Demon King.

“Whatever. I answered you! Now you answer me! Where are my friends?!”

“What the hell... guards do... is none of our... concern...”

“Then tell me where the production room is!” Orphen made his shout into an incantation and finally fired his magic—a ray of heat stabbed into the right side of the stage and one of the dogs went up in flames. As the beast became charcoal without so much as a yelp, he continued, “I’m not in the best mood right now! If you don’t want to be next, you’d better tell me what I want to know!”

“It is... useless... to threaten us...” The Demon King went on in that same sluggish tone. “We exist... only... to carry out our Master’s orders...”

“It’s always that with you things!” Orphen bit his lip in frustration. He was getting nowhere. “Fine. I’ll find it myself.” He spun on his heel and leapt down

from the audience seat into the aisle. He began to make a run for the exit, when...

“Are you... sure...?” The Demon King called out to him.

For a second, he thought about ignoring it, but he decided he had to stop and hear what it had to say. “Why wouldn’t I be?” He eyed the stage over his shoulder. The Demon King hadn’t moved an inch. None of the dogs were moving either, save for the one still smoldering and twitching.

The Demon King indicated an area of the audience seats with its eyes. Orphen followed its gaze and couldn’t help crying out when he saw what the doll’s blue eyes were focused on. “Majic!”

The blond boy was sitting slumped in one of the seats. He was curled up, which was why Orphen hadn’t noticed him until now. If he’d heard Orphen, he made no effort to move. He must have been unconscious.

“He was transferred here... He’s being controlled again.” Orphen cursed in annoyance. Majic had made unimaginable progress over the last few months (not that he was aware of it), but protecting himself against mental control wasn’t exactly on the curriculum. *Guess it should’ve been, though.* Orphen ran over to the seat Majic was in, thinking something unreasonable. He wasn’t close, but he wasn’t that far, either. Before long, he’d made it to his pupil.

Orphen lifted Majic up. The boy was completely limp. It was like he was comatose with his eyes open. But if he was under hypnosis, it would be difficult to wake him.

“That boy... arrived here first... so we began to prepare... for a performance...” the Demon King said from the stage.

Orphen looked up at him. “Performance? What are you talking about?!” he shouted back, irritated.

The Demon King merely continued on in a monotone, “As we said... the Demon King... The play that imparts the truth...”

“Then, you’re...”

“Indeed... We are... the actor who plays... Demon King Swedenborge...”

“Th—” Orphen was speechless for a moment. He cleared his throat and continued incredulously, “*That’s* the reason the Celestials built this huge underground theater? To perform a single play?”

“It cannot... be performed... aboveground...”

“...Why not?” he asked, baffled.

The Demon King raised its head from its hand, saying plainly, “It cannot... be seen by... humans... Not the true... Demon King... play... That, and...”

“That, and?” Orphen asked, uneasy. He got ready to run to the exit with Majic.

The Demon King finished, “Those who... are undeserving of the knowledge... must be eliminated... And that must... not become known...”

Just then—the large double doors at the exit opened with a harsh *creak*. They were maybe three meters wide, and the only exit, unless there was another one up on the second level. And the reason he was suddenly thinking about that was because when the doors opened, they opened to a long line of those enormous dolls.



“O God, I am truly fortunate. Even soon after death, I cannot see you.”

“Hunh...?” Claiomh furrowed her brow at those words. It wasn’t because she didn’t know what they meant. What she didn’t get was why the person had to thank God even after dying. Not that that mattered all that much either.

Her eyes were closed. Naturally, that meant she couldn’t see anything. Something cold and hard was pressed against her cheek—from that, she realized that she was lying down on a stone floor. It was slightly damp and she could easily imagine a mark being left on her face when she got up, which made her even more annoyed.

However, the voice carried on, regardless of her feelings on the matter. “I am an apostate. I have lived my life in opposition to your teachings. If I could meet you, I’m sure I would be struck down. I love you...”

...What a noisy ghost... Claiomh thought, irritated. *It’s noisy enough... in my*

head right now... She'd decided she was most likely suffering from a hangover. If her head was spinning around on her neck, then it was the work of an evil spirit, she decided, though it was also entirely possible that her head was perfectly still and it was just the contents whirling around inside. It felt a lot like that when she went overboard at her thirteenth birthday party. But back then, her sister had also passed out in a corner of her room, and she'd gotten vomit on her father's pants while he was taking care of her, so she didn't think she'd had it worse... *Wait, who cares about any of that?* she thought to herself, cracking an eye open.

All she could see was white. White clouded by a little moisture—meaning the room she was lying in had light.

I thought we were... walking down a hallway... She searched her aching head for the last thing she could remember. They were walking. Orphen suddenly ran ahead and a doll appeared like it had been watching them... and that's when she'd lost consciousness.

Then, I wonder if I actually died... she thought blearily. She wasn't sure either way, but she felt like she should probably figure it out soon. There were few fates worse than being dead and totally unaware of it.

Wait, what if like, half my body's all smashed up, but I'm still alive by some miracle? What would I do, then? Suddenly assailed by unease, she opened her right hand and then closed it again. She could feel it pretty clearly. So she had that at least. She did the same with her left. Neither hand felt wet with blood.

Reassured for the moment—she seemed to have her upper body still, at least—Claiomh finally opened her eyes all the way and sat up. She felt something light topple off of her head. "...Leki?"

The black baby beast landed on the floor upside down but managed to right himself. He stretched out his front legs and looked up at her with his green eyes.

"Oh... you're here, too," she murmured, and as she did, she felt the headache fade away. Leki must have healed her. "Thanks♪" Claiomh lifted up the blank-faced baby dragon and placed him on her head. She then looked left and right... and froze, letting out a bewildered, "Huh...?"

The first thing she noticed was the strange air about the room—it was the lighting. Bright white and cold. It wasn't the light of the sun or a gas lamp. She'd seen light of this color before. It was the light of magic.

She looked up and found a ball of light floating near the ceiling. There were symbols of some sort flickering inside it. The ceiling was high. She probably wouldn't be able to reach it even riding on someone else's shoulders.

The room was a square of about four or five meters, and she was sitting in one of its corners. In the center of the room was something like an operating table... a woman's body lying on top of it.



“Ack...” Claiomh recoiled, groaning. She thought it was another corpse... but on a closer look, she quickly realized that the woman was still breathing.

“Mädchen?” she asked tentatively.

It was Mädchen atop the table. She appeared unharmed but was behaving strangely—maybe because of that hypnosis or whatever?

“What do you wish me to speak of? The voice I heard in my dream? But I never desired to dream. I wish to go to you without meeting you...” Mädchen muttered, hands clasped and facing upwards.

“...What are you talking about?” Claiomh asked bluntly.

Mädchen responded quietly, tears spilling from her eyes, “Are you saying my wish will come true? Am I allowed to rejoice? To feel such joy that a loyal hound might?”

“What’s there to be joyous about?” Claiomh asked, pursing her lips, but Mädchen made no acknowledgement of her.

She remained facing upwards, tears still spilling. “The only lives I took were your enemies. I did as you did. Yet your anger never ceases. As I knew it would.”

“...Hmm... Don’t you think that’s kinda selfish?”

“I shed tears, but not because of the pain. It was because I knew what it was to be filthied. Even as I filthied myself, I knew...”

Claiomh looked around the room again, figuring ignoring her was probably for the best. It was a complete mess; the reason she hadn’t gone to Mädchen’s side immediately was just because she wasn’t sure where to put her feet in all the clutter. All sorts of tools were lying around on the floor, from hammers to rusty saws to things whose purpose she couldn’t begin to guess at. It would be dangerous to move around in here too carelessly. In fact, the only empty space on the floor was right around where she’d woken up.

What is this room for...? What she supposed was an obvious question came to mind. But an even more obvious question followed, taking priority. *And how do I get out?* She didn’t see anything like a door in any of the walls. In the middle of the ceiling, there was a square hole, maybe for ventilation, which could serve as

an exit, but it was too tall for her to reach.

“I’m kind of at a loss here...” She frowned, and Mädchen answered her from the table.

“It stands to reason. After all, I am dead.”

Is she really dead? Claiomh wondered, not at all concerned. She kicked apart some of the junk at her feet. Plenty of it looked dangerous, but she didn’t spot anything she could use as a weapon. She didn’t feel like she was in immediate danger, but it didn’t sit right with her being unarmed.

“Would be nice if I had all my stuff right about now... oh well.” She settled for the closest thing to her on the floor, something like a dagger, and scooped it up. It was only “like” a dagger because it also seemed largely non-functional. It had a crimson sheath, a grip, and inside the sheath it likely had a blade, so it could definitely be called a dagger. But the grip was shaped like a cone, getting bigger as it went down. It would be hard enough holding it if it were round, but she probably wouldn’t be able to accomplish much with it like this. The sheath was slightly less odd in shape, but it also looked ornamental, and kind of evil... At first glance, it reminded Claiomh of the murky pond the frogs would reproduce in, at the corner of her old school grounds in the spring. It had a similar shape. It didn’t look particularly suited for stabbing or cutting. Maybe it was just a French curve in a sheath, but she’d never heard of such a thing.

She casually pulled the blade from its sheath and found it was the same shape—*Figures*. She’d been hoping it was going to be more normal inside. The blade was metal, but it wasn’t the color of steel or silver, and it was covered in tiny, creepy-looking letters.

Not even Father had anything this weird in his collection, she thought, holding the blade up above her head to show Leki. “I don’t suppose you can read this?” But Leki just moved slightly, not seeming interested at all. She heard a “kwaaah,” and realized he was yawning.

Just then, “Have you not realized... why the Deep Dragons do not speak...?” came a sudden voice.

Claiomh jumped and looked around, but she couldn’t see anyone in the room that the voice might have come from—there was just Mädchen muttering to

herself.

“Who’s there?!” She held the dagger out and turned in the direction the voice seemed to be coming from.

The voice slowly continued... “They were not speechless in ancient times... They lost their words. Their speech and their writing. If they did not possess the ability to convey their will through magic, they would have lost everything, their entire culture... Of course he cannot read that text. It is our writing, besides.”

“Huh...?” Claiomh froze, unable to say more. It wasn’t at what the voice had said (frankly, she’d barely been listening). It was that she’d noticed an arm sticking up out of a mountain of junk in the room. An arm she recognized.

It tensed and trembled and then began to push its way out of the junk pile. It was thin and cold, just its joints bulging oddly. Hard and smooth, flexible yet awkward in its movements, an inhuman arm...

“You’re that doll! What are you doing here?” She groaned, taking a step back. She felt her back bump up against the wall.

The arm continued to pull itself from the pile, and the voice continued on dispassionately, “I remain broken.” The doll’s head had emerged now. Its other arm soon followed, broken at the wrist and pushing aside junk. Its upper body was now jutting out of the pile, and it turned to Claiomh and smirked. “A human is required to fix me...” It used both hands to begin drawing a glyph in the air. “How unfortunate for you. If I’d revived before you regained consciousness, you wouldn’t have had to feel any fear...”

“Leki!” With her shout, an impact sent the doll’s body flying. It bounced off of the floor and hit the wall then fell once more. There was nothing under its waist and it was missing a hand. Still, it picked itself up easily after hitting the ground.

“That won’t be enough to stop me, I’m afraid.” The glyphs the doll was drawing began to glow silver.

“Oh, crap!” Claiomh panicked and readied herself once more. She pointed the dagger at the doll... which then slid out of her fingers. Its stupid cone handle hit the floor, standing it up like some sort of monument. Either way, the doll was on the other side of the room. It wasn’t like the dagger was going to be any help

anyway.

“Leki, help—” She cried out, but before she could finish, the runes of light sped out from the doll’s hand. They shot across the room, headed for her at a considerable speed.

Shit! She put her hands up to cover her head and knelt reflexively, but just then...

Fwop. It was a sound like holding a sheet out and flapping it around. And with the sound, a sort of wall of light sprung up in front of her, stopping the glyphs flying at her. The runes simply fell to pieces when they hit the wall.

“Huh...?” came Claiomh’s somewhat belated response. On a closer look, the wall was entirely made up of letters. A bunch of tiny letters of light. They had a warped shape that was somehow familiar to her.

“That... dagger?” she murmured, looking down at her feet. The dagger stood straight up in the air, and the letters carved on its blade were projecting the wall of light like a lantern. That must have been the tool’s actual purpose.

“Tch... You figured out how to use it, I see.” The doll clucked its tongue at her.

Claiomh snapped back to attention at that. “Leki!” she shouted, turning her head to face the doll. She pointed at it and commanded, “Destroy that doll!” She could feel him perk up on her head, and in the next instant, the doll’s body suddenly twisted unnaturally and broke into pieces.

Claiomh watched as the doll was smashed as if by an unseen giant hand, and even after it stopped moving, she remained tense, watching it for a little while longer... After giving it a few minutes, she finally allowed herself to take a deep breath and relax.

“Guess this thing was actually a pretty good find...” she muttered, picking the dagger up off the floor. The wall of light vanished when she did. It must only form when it’s stood up on the floor. “Wonder if there’s anything else like this lying around in here. Not that I want to stay all that long to look...”

Putting the dagger back in its sheath, she looked around. There were a few things that looked like they might be useful, but she didn’t know enough to tell. She settled on shoving the dagger into her pocket and then suddenly realized

something. “Mädchen! Were you listening to that?!” She looked over at her. “They’re gonna use us to repair that doll in here...” She stopped, feeling her face twitching.

Mädchen seemed to have cried herself to sleep.

“Honestly...” Claiomh let her shoulders sag, suddenly feeling exhausted. “Doesn’t look like she’s gonna be awake anytime soon... It’d probably make more sense for me to escape on my own and then come back and save her, I guess.” Coming to a bit of a self-serving conclusion, she looked up at the hole in the ceiling. She put a hand to her chin and muttered haughtily, “If it’s an air vent, that means it leads outside. And since it’s in the ceiling, that means we’re still underground. That’s logical, right?”

After that, she fell silent for a time. She thought for a while and finally came to this conclusion: even if she knew that, she still had no way to escape.

“Hmm...” She cleared her throat, closed her eyes, crossed her arms, and said to herself, “I just want to say right now that I’m not a one-trick whatever, and I know you-know-who is supposed to help those who help themselves. It’s just that I’ve determined this to be the most logical option for me right now. It’s no fun putting in effort just to make yourself look better, and you probably won’t even look better in the first place.” She explained all this to no one in particular and then opened her eyes. Even then, she glanced around, looking embarrassed, and finally said in a low tone, “Leki... I’d like to get out of this room.”

In an instant, her vision blurred, and she felt something burst within her ears. She’d probably lost consciousness, but only for a moment. It was like she blinked, and there was suddenly something new in front of her eyes.

And it felt like she was falling...

“Hyaaaaaaaah!” She stuck her limbs out without thinking. She and Leki had appeared in a vertical shaft. It was square-shaped and not very large; by sticking her arms and legs out, she was able to hold them in place in the shaft. The color of the walls and the size of the shaft rang a bell... Holding herself in place with her feet and her back against the wall, she looked down and narrowed her eyes. Underneath her, she could see Mädchen sleeping with a strangely pleasant look

on her face. In other words, Leki had teleported her up through the air vent.

“Well, I am outside the room now...” Sighing, she tensed all her muscles and concentrated on sliding her way up the shaft. Luckily, it looked like it was only three meters or so until she’d reach the room above her. Of course, she didn’t know if her stamina would last that long... but if she reached the room above and could find a rope or something, Mädchen would be able to escape as well, as long as she regained consciousness at some point.

“Oh, whatever. I’ll take it.” Glancing upwards as Leki relaxed on her head, she grumbled to herself. She brought her hair around to the front, since if it was behind her, it would get in the way of her shimmying. “I’m pretty stubborn, you know.”



Thump, thump, thump, thump...

Dortin felt himself remembering something as he listened to the steady rhythm. He seemed to recall reading in a book that everything in the world had a rhythm. This led to the thought, *Are there any words that someone hasn’t written in a book?*

But anyway, the rhythm. A toothache had a rhythm, and so did breathing, and so did the dull *thunks* he could hear when he fell down the stairs. Right now, he could feel a faint vibration striking his head with a steady rhythm.

He opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a crayfish. He slowly sat up and the crayfish, which had had his nose in one of its pincers, fell to the floor. As his blurry vision clarified, the sound he’d been hearing—the pulse in his own blood vessels—slowly faded.

Coming to more fully, he asked himself, “Where am I?” A rectangular room was his first impression. Most rooms were rectangular, but this one was particularly easy to identify as such, for there was nothing in it. It was spacious enough, with a waterway about two meters wide in its center. That must have been where the crayfish came from. The room was damp because of the waterway. Its walls, ceiling, and floor were all black with mold.

There were three levels to the waterway. First, the entrance, where water

flowed in fairly rapidly. This was about a meter off of the floor until it fed into a drain to the second level. The second level was a wide pool that then fed into the third level, the exit.

He must have washed in through the entrance and then fallen to the floor from the second level—Volkan, incidentally, was caught on the exit on the third level. He was still unconscious, though he didn't seem to have drowned.

"I see. The water from that pit trap led here." So he was inside the drainage system. *Makes sense. But...* Dortin sighed. Even if he knew that, it didn't really help him at all. There was no door for people to enter or leave the chamber other than the exit the water was leaving the third level from. It did seem like a viable escape route; he was just worried that there was a good chance of his soul escaping his body as well.

"Nothing for me to do now..." Not that he was really doing anything in the first place, he mused as he returned the crayfish to the waterway.

"Why isn't there a door? People have to get in here to maintain the drainage system, don't they?"

"People don't maintain it. Dolls that can teleport do, so they don't need doors."

"...Huh?" Dortin turned around at the sudden voice and found a black-haired woman sitting on the edge of the waterway and smiling. He had no idea when she'd gotten there. He hesitated a moment then said, "Umm... you weren't there a second ago, were you?"

"Exactly. This is precisely why *they* don't need doors." The woman tucked a small black box into a pocket as she spoke. She looked around the room and said, "So this wasn't it either. I guess searching at random's not going to get me anywhere."

"Umm..." Dortin was getting nervous.

The woman sent another look at him. She looked to be a human twenty or so in age, and there seemed to be something mischievous in her eyes and her smile. Dortin could have sworn he'd seen her somewhere before. She had black clothes that matched her hair and an air about her that seemed at once

perfunctory and untouchable. So Dortin thought.



“Who are you?”

“Me? Well, I happen to know a lot about you. It’s basically from spying on you, but I’m here at this theater now because of that, so you can’t really complain, can you?”

“...Sure...” She had very plainly not answered his question, which left Dortin somewhat at a loss, but he didn’t really want to tell her that and upset her. “So... what are you doing here?”

“Well. Krylancelo found a ruin I didn’t know about, so I hurried on after him. Thought I’d swipe anything interesting, but these places tend to have their vaults shielded, so I can’t really find my way in...” She shrugged as she spoke but then suddenly stopped.

“Wh-What is it?” Dortin asked, but she didn’t answer.

She just looked like she was thinking about something, but then she stared at him and suddenly smiled with her shapely lips. “I don’t suppose Krylan—I mean, Orphen, gave you two something a little while ago? A book, bound in black, but with no title or anything.”

“...Do you know Orphen?”

“I do. In fact, we’re *very* close. So? How about that book?”

“He did. To my brother,” Dortin answered, not seeing any particular reason to hide it.

The woman’s eyes practically sparkled at that in triumph. “So? The book. Where is it?”

“I-I dunno.” Dortin shook his head. “It was my brother who took it, and I don’t know what he does with his things. I asked him to let me read it, but he wouldn’t.”

“He didn’t sell it somewhere, did he?”

“I don’t know. It is my brother...” That phrase had all sorts of meanings to it, but he wasn’t sure whether or not she knew that.

She tilted her head and thought for a moment and then grinned at him. “I

don't suppose you—both of you—would do some work for me?"

"Huh?" was his first response, and before he could ask more, she went on.

"I want you to come to Kimluck with me. That's all. You'll get a hefty reward, too." She took a coin purse out of a back pocket and tapped it then shook it. It made a lot of noise, demonstrating the considerable amount of coin inside.

Just then—"En gaaaaaaarde!" A strange shout passed by in front of Dortin.

A dark shadow leapt at them and snatched the purse out of the woman's hand with incredible speed—then splashed right into the waterway, carried by its momentum. It sunk down into the depths, bubbles escaping as it went... It was Volkan.

"...What was that?" The woman asked, with a face like she'd just discovered a being from another world.

Dortin sighed and answered, "My brother flew at your money completely on instinct, even while unconscious."

"Uh huh..." Luckily, the woman didn't question this. "So, that an 'okay'?"

No answer came from the water. Volkan's hand with the coin purse in it was the only thing sticking up out of the waterway. A couple coins fell out of it and sunk down into the water, gleaming the whole way down.



"The... Demon King play?" Orphen asked, facing the army of dolls rather than the stage. Majic didn't seem like he was going to wake up any time soon, so he set him down on a seat again.

A little belatedly, the Demon King on the stage answered him. "That is... the purpose for which... we were created..."

"Just for that, the Celestials made this whole underground theater? They must have just been drowning in money and free time," Orphen spat out sardonically. However...

"On the contrary... our creators... had no power to spare... at the time..."

Orphen turned back toward the stage, shooting it a glance. Something

bothered him about the way this Demon King was acting now.

The Demon King sat on its throne and raised a small hand, fingers trembling. “That is why... she could not... fulfill her wish...”

“What do you mean? This theater was built 200 years ago, wasn’t it? The Celestials were supposed to have powerful magic.”

“If not... for the curse...”

“The curse?” he repeated, confused.

“Their futures were stolen from them.”

It wasn’t the Demon King who’d spoken. Orphen spun around to the line of dolls who’d come through the open doors. One of them, standing in the middle, twisted the side of its mouth up in a smirk at him.

“Even with their magic, they were destined to disappear—that sort of curse.”

Another doll spoke. “The same fate will befall you.”

Yet another doll continued. “This place was built to deliver to you that warning...”

“Then,” Orphen interrupted, “what was the point of restraining me and my friends?”

The doll’s answer came quickly. “The knowledge is not for humans. The theater draws in sorcerers and we judge who among them is worthy. That is our purpose.”

“And we judge you, who brought humans here, unworthy.”

“That is why—”

After all that, the dolls suddenly went quiet. They all looked past Orphen to the stage, faint smiles on their faces. Orphen did the same, turning back to the Demon King, which raised its head as if given strength by all the eyes focused on it.

“That is why...” It was the Demon King who continued for the rest of the dolls. The dogs that shared the stage with it all slowly, suspensefully began to make their way into the audience seats. “That is why... we cannot let... any of you

leave... alive..."

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" Without waiting for the Demon King to finish, Orphen released his magic at full power. With a roar of sound, the blast of light hit one of the dolls, taking it by surprise and blasting its body to pieces.

Suddenly, all the dolls began to write in the air at once. Even just one of their light runes was sure to contain devastating destructive power. Since ancient times, there had never been a human sorcerer who was a match for silent magic.

Watching the dozens of dolls drawing their dozens of runes, Orphen was fairly sure he was headed toward certain defeat. *Still...* He shouted to himself as he formed his own magic. *I'll do everything I can, including run—All I can do is give this everything I've got!*

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" This time, the magic he shot off fizzled out before it even reached its target. The doll must have defended against it.

Those were your words, Master. And if you were wrong, my fist's gonna have something to say about it in the afterlife!

Picking up the still-sleeping Majic, Orphen took off at a run.



"I wouldn't say I'm complaining, necessarily," Claiomh grumbled as she made her way up the ventilation shaft. "I just think there's something wrong with the world that physical labor like this is forced upon such a frail maiden as myself." She held herself in place with her legs and her back against the walls and took a breather. Then she slowly began to climb once more.

There were no foot-or handholds, so the climb required concentration—and stamina. A climb up a cliff face was hard labor even with some bumps to hold on to, but climbing up a vertical shaft with nothing at all to grab was a task that was too much for the average person to handle. In fact, the pain was starting to get to Claiomh, and she didn't know how much trust she placed in her back at this point. As things stood, it was a struggle just to hold her position here. She could only hope she'd get away with just bruises.

Also, she hadn't realized it until now, but there were a bunch of shallow cuts

on one of her legs for some reason. They didn't hurt that much, but they were bleeding a little, which annoyed her.

"Yeesh. It never quite works out how I want it to when I ask Leki for stuff," she muttered, climbing with all she had. Her effort thus far had brought her fairly close to the exit of the shaft. In a little bit, she'd be able to reach out and grab the edge of the hole she was climbing toward.

"It's not like I mind. I mean, you're still just a baby, so it's not like I'm expecting a *ton* from you. I'm just saying, I asked you for some food, and you couldn't come up with any, and now I'm stuck here proving my athletic mettle or whatever it is I'm doing... My back hurts and I'm really tired..." But at that point, her hand finally reached the exit.

She looked up with a sigh of relief. "I just hope all this effort isn't for nothing," she muttered and tensed her arm to pull herself up—but she must have been too tense somewhere else as well. *Snap*. All too easily, the thin belt at her waist split apart.

"Huh?" She was moving before she could even think... grabbing her torn belt with both hands, and bending her knees so her loose jeans didn't slip down.

As a result... everything she was using to hold herself in place was no longer doing that.

"Aa—" She closed her eyes and started to scream, bracing for the fall and the impact she was sure to feel in the next moment. But... neither came, no matter how long she waited. With an inquisitive grunt, she looked down. The bottom of the hole, and the room full of junk, was far below her. Mädchen's peaceful, sleeping face as well.

"I'm not... flying, am I?" she murmured. She wasn't. She was floating. Suspended in the middle of the shaft, defying gravity. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. There could only be one reason for this. She scratched her temple. "Leki... I don't suppose you can take me up to the room up there like this?" And she started to rise. Slowly.

Soundlessly drifting up, she soon escaped the shaft. She entered the room, drifted slightly to the side, and was deposited onto the floor. Hitting her butt slightly on the landing, she put her head in her hands, but not because of the

pain or anything. “Well... I made it, but I feel like all that trouble I went through really wasn’t worth it...”

While she was grumbling, Leki hopped down from her head and landed on the floor. He rolled around a bit and then looked up at her.

“...I know. I’m not blaming you, really.” Claiomh gave him a pat on the head and looked up. Fixing her belt, she took a look around the room. “Looks like... I can make it the rest of the way on foot.” She was relieved by that and stood, her sore back protesting. There was an actual door in the wall in front of her. It might have been locked, but she figured she’d deal with that some way or another. She had her ways. One-trick, etc, *etc*.

Right beside the hole in the floor—the air shaft she’d climbed up—there was a rope ladder all piled up, secured there by a hook at the rim of the hole. Claiomh gave it a kick, sending it down the shaft. Now if Mädchen woke up, she could probably just climb her way up.

But rather than wait for that... Claiomh put Leki back on her head, took the dagger she’d found earlier out of her pocket, and held it firmly in both hands. She took a deep breath, gave a quick rub to her aching back, and strode over to the door.

I know exactly what I need to do. She said the words only to herself, without voicing them aloud. *I know*, she repeated. She had no idea where she was right now, had no clue what the purpose of this place might be, but still, there was only one thing for her to do. *Find Orphen and help him with whatever he’s doing. He’s gotta be around here somewhere.*

Chapter VI: His Own Angel and Devil *Whoom*
—when the letters touched them, the audience seats vanished like they’d simply evaporated. Orphen watched them turn to black dust out of the corner of his eye as he ran. Majic was slung over his shoulder and he could hear the boy’s head making quite the racket as it banged into the backs of the seats he was running through, but he didn’t have any time to adjust his hold on him.

There were only a dozen or so dolls in the room, but there were sure to be more lying in wait in the hall outside. Even if he could slip past them, he doubted they’d make it far. And... He glanced back. Those dogs were making their way toward him from the stage, slowly but surely. They would be quicker if they ran, but they kept their pace slow, maybe because of how narrow the aisles between the seats were. There were a dozen or so of these as well.

“I release thee... Sword of Light!” He put his hand up behind him as he ran and released a bolt of light that intercepted the runes chasing after him. There was an explosion, but the glyphs didn’t disappear; they just kept coming, albeit a bit slower.

I’m gonna have to take care of them one by one, I guess. He glanced at the dolls as he ran nimbly across the seats. There were over 20 runes cast by the dolls all chasing after him. *Their speed’s not much to worry about, but if I can’t defend against them... Dammit. And they can block my magic...*

He’d been running sideways across the seats all this time and was beginning to approach the wall. In other words, he was about to be cornered. “Guess I’ll

try it...”

With those words, Orphen threw Majic forward as hard as he could—and the boy’s still-hypnotized body hit the wall and fell to the floor without so much as an arc through the air. He still showed no signs of waking, but Orphen didn’t have the time to wait for that.

Massaging his now lighter shoulder, Orphen stopped in place and spun around. The Wyrd glyphs chasing him continued on without stopping, and the dolls who commanded them stood in a line behind them, blocking the exit.

“I release thee—” Orphen took a wide stance atop the seats, raising his right arm. He put his left hand on his right shoulder and brought his right arm down, pointing his finger at the first doll on the right. “—Sword of Light!” The light that formed before his finger shot out and veered far right from its target but suddenly changed course as if reflected by a mirror.

The light slammed into the side of the doll’s head, exploding into flames, the heat quickly overtaking the doll’s body. By the time the flames died down, the doll’s head had crumbled to nothing. The doll collapsed on the spot and stopped moving.

Unease seemed to course through the rest of the dolls. A couple of the runes headed toward Orphen fizzled out, likely cast by the now-destroyed doll.

Dodging the rest of the runes with a jump to the side, Orphen murmured, “So I can get them if I take them by surprise. Guess this’ll work...”

The question is... He wiped the sweat from his forehead as he watched the dolls file in through the exit. *How far will my stamina get me?*

“I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!” Orphen’s magic released exactly as he’d formed it. With his shout, a section of space he’d indicated warped. From that point, light burst out into an explosion.

Orphen crouched and leapt back, letting the gust from the explosion carry him down several levels of seats. And after the explosion cleared—the remnants of two destroyed dolls remained in its wake.

This caused another stir to go through the dolls. Some of them even dropped the runes they were casting.

“Heh.” Orphen gave them a cocky smile. “This magic didn’t work on the killer dolls. I guess since you guys weren’t made for combat, your offense and defense kinda sucks.”

Okay, I’ve taken down three of them now... Forming some new magic, he glanced at the stage. The dogs were also slowly closing in on him. Soon, he wouldn’t be able to ignore them. And dolls were still coming in through the entrance, too.

...That’s another four of them. He clucked his tongue as he counted them. “They’re increasing faster than I can take them down. Should I go for the door? ...No.” There would be no point to that. The dolls could teleport, after all. In fact, they might just all teleport in here.

So the only thing I can do is take them down one by one...! Steeling himself, he thrust out both hands in front of him.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

Taken by surprise, one of the dolls burst into flame, no time to defend itself.

The dolls seemed to have two glyphs at their disposal for battle—the homing runes for offense and the interception runes for defense. The defensive runes floated around the dolls and blocked any magic that came near them. Then they had their hypnosis, but that wasn’t too powerful. Not against a sorcerer who’d received training to resist such effects, at least. They were likely aware of that, which was why they weren’t trying it now. From what Orphen remembered, killer dolls had much more powerful hypnosis and were equipped with hundreds of glyphs, but the dolls here didn’t seem to have a fraction of that power. They did have numbers, though...

“I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!” A vortex of flames engulfed several of the dolls at once but disappeared soon after. The defensive runes must have interfered with the spell.

“Dammit,” he spat and kept moving. The runes chasing him were getting close.

There’s no end to this. Can I take them all out at once? While he questioned himself, the dogs were only getting closer.

“I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!” Keeping the dogs at bay with a shockwave, he ran back toward Majic. The attack was too spread out to finish any of the dogs off, but it did slow them down. He watched as they faltered, dodged the runes flying at them, and ran.

In the fan-shaped audience seats, Orphen was trapped between the dolls coming in through the exit and the dogs coming from the stage. The only place for him to run without going toward either group was across the seats, back to where Majic was collapsed at one edge of the theater.

Orphen suddenly choked, assailed by a chill running up his spine. His instincts were sending him a warning, and he obeyed it, throwing himself under the seats. He squeezed himself into the tight gap between them and looked up over his shoulder at the ceiling, but it was the second level of seats that he saw instead of the ceiling. Along with several glyphs sailing over his head.

The glyphs went past him and then turned around and headed back his way. Trapped between the seats, he couldn't even roll to get out of the way. “Shit!” Orphen elbowed the seat in front of him as hard as he could. The wood creaked, and with another elbow, the chair's legs snapped. Shoving the chair out of its place, he dove through the new gap in the seats. The glyphs slid past him once again, flying low, close to the floor.

He stood up and took off running again, quickly making it back to Majic. “Will you wake up already? Geez...” he grumbled, shouldering the boy once more. He stood quickly and turned back to the stage. Watching the approach of the dogs, he leapt back onto the seats and this time began running down toward the stage.



The dogs were slowly closing the distance between them... According to legend, the Celestials had attempted to synthesize many artificial creatures like their human-based dolls. But the creatures they created were biologically impossible. Even with their silent magic, they were incapable of creating life. All they could make were imitations... And no matter how elaborate their creations were, they paled in comparison to true creatures of nature. Compared to creatures chosen by natural selection, their creations were based on concepts that were too simplistic.

Perhaps that was why there was no intelligence to the dogs' movements. They knew how to walk, fly, and attack, but the way they picked between those actions was awkward, as if at random. Which meant that it wasn't just their appearance—the Celestials' magic wasn't enough for this either.

Orphen raised his free left hand up to the dogs and shouted, "I repel thee, Glass Hail!" The forcefield that bound them indiscriminately wasn't strong enough to send any of them flying, but the dogs inside it all crumpled to the floor.

Orphen ran as fast as he could through the fallen dogs. He was fairly certain the dogs couldn't use Wyrd glyphs, but he didn't want to find out what other tricks they might be capable of. If they had poison, he'd be done for, and he didn't want to risk them jumping at him either way.

In any case, he got through without incident. Running up to the stage, Orphen turned around. The dogs were slowly picking themselves up and getting back into formation. And behind them, past the audience seats, there were now dozens of dolls lined up near the exit. He looked up even more to the second level of seating.

"Oh...?" The Demon King murmured from behind him, but Orphen ignored it.

"I dash across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!" The next instant, his body became almost weightless. Orphen leapt from the floor up ten meters to the second level. The magic lost its effect then and his weight returned. He winced at Majic's returned weight as well and began concentrating on a large-scale spell.

"Stop... him..." the Demon King ordered its subjects.

Orphen slowly opened his eyes. In his dim vision, he saw the same fan of seats laid out on the second level as the first—and at the last line of those seats—*foom, foom*—two dolls teleported there, barely making a sound.

“You’re too late!” Orphen raised his arm and shouted, “My left hand paints thus, Scene of Hades!” In that instant, a black swirl appeared in his left hand, a few centimeters in diameter. It merely appeared with no sound, no flicker like a flame. It had no weight or substance. It was simply information, a factor. It had no function on its own but to serve as a trigger for something else.

Master Childman’s most powerful secret magic—matter obliteration. He brought his hand down. Released from his fingertips, the “factor” sped off toward one of the dolls. It must not have been able to defend right after teleporting. The doll let itself take a hit, ignoring the factor and preparing its attack magic instead.

That backfired. The factor vanished when it hit the doll. Touching its target and vanishing fulfilled its role as a trigger. Its vanishing caused a change to occur in the doll’s body. Without warning, half of its frame disintegrated into nothing. The surrounding air was immediately electrified, sparks flying here and there. All of this happened in an instant. And finally, an explosion.

A flash of light turned everything before Orphen white. The roar and the crash assaulted his senses and Orphen crouched down into a defensive stance, still holding Majic. Then he just left things alone and stopped thinking about it.

The explosion must have produced flames. Pain raced through his body and he became unable to breathe, but that lasted only an instant—Orphen opened his eyes when he couldn’t feel the heat anymore. The explosion had done considerable damage to the whole second level, not just the dolls. Not even one of the dolls’ defensive walls could protect against power like this. All the seats in an arc around the explosion’s center were blown down. There was a great fissure in the floor as well, running deeper close to the wall where the blast had originated. The whole floor of the second level slowly... shifted... sinking.

Just like I planned... Orphen readied himself.

And the second level dropped.

It didn’t drop too quickly, but the dolls still had no time to prepare

teleportation glyphs. Orphen braced himself for impact... and like a door closing, the second level seats smashed down over the majority of those on the first level. Orphen fell along with the floor, hitting his backside pretty hard on the landing, but he picked himself up afterward, leaving Majic beside him. He looked around his razed surroundings. Based on their positioning, all the dolls around the entrance should have been flattened. Same with the dogs, probably.

“Did I... win?” Orphen asked somewhat anticlimactically as he stood in the mountain of rubble that was once the underground theater.

“It won’t be... that easy...” The Demon King spoke quietly from the unharmed stage, still sitting on its throne.

Orphen turned around—and when he did, he sensed something behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, he found several dolls blinking into existence, apparently successful in their teleports. Keeping his attention on them, he boasted to the Demon King on the stage, “Just six, though? I think I’ve got pretty good chances now.”

“You are... skilled...” The Demon King didn’t sound very impressed. “But... you are not... smart...”

“What?!” Orphen clenched a fist and took a step closer to the stage, but he stopped when he saw the Demon King lift a trembling hand. “You wanna go?”

The Demon King had no response. It merely snapped its fingers, and a doll appeared beside the throne, one of the large ones it had called hall guards.

“So seven, then,” Orphen grumbled, staying where he was. The doll suddenly turned its back to him and Orphen furrowed his brow in suspicion, but then those same brows shot up at what he saw.

The doll’s back was transparent like glass, and inside it, Mädchen was trapped, arms out in a cross shape.

“A hostage...!” Orphen cursed, but the Demon King was quick to correct him.

“That is not... entirely accurate...” It brought its hand back down. “After we... dispose of you... we will also... eliminate this human...”

“What on earth are you trying to accomplish here?!” Orphen screamed in

desperation, throwing both his arms out and glaring at the Demon King. “I just don’t *get* it! You have something you need to tell sorcerers, but not humans, and I don’t count, ’cause I brought humans with me?! Explain it to me in a way that makes *sense*!” Orphen froze after his outburst. He composed himself and waited patiently for the doll’s response.

The Demon King merely sat inside the destroyed theater, as composed as ever. “It is... the purpose of the true... Demon King play...” There was no concern in its voice. “We exist... only to carry out... our master’s orders...”

Orphen’s mind went blank at that. “Uwooooooooooooooh!” He lost control—didn’t even think about regaining it—and screamed, his roar becoming an incantation for a simple spell.

There were probably five meters separating him from the throne, accounting for the height of the stage. A beam of heat drew a straight line through those five meters from him to the doll. Orphen groaned in pain as the electric charge of the expanding light burned his own body as well. His anguished cry became a scream of pain that burned his throat.

“Ooooooh—!” And when his voice cut off, he ran out of strength and his magic dissipated. However, when the light faded and the dust sent whirling by the shockwaves settled, he saw the throne without a scratch on it.

The Demon King hadn’t moved an inch. “We were not... given glyphs... to attack... however...” it explained slowly, “no one... shall stop us... For that is... our role...”

“D...Dammit...” Orphen fell to his knees, out of strength. Sweat was pouring off of him. He looked to his side, at Majic’s face as he lay on his back, and clutched at the ground with powerless arms.

“I won’t go down—”

“—That easily, not if you account for me, at least!”

Orphen raised his head in shock (but not relief). It was a girl’s voice, one that he’d heard so many times now he could never mistake it. The voice of a girl who was always jumping out from who-knows-where when you least expected it.

Claiomh leapt from the wings of the stage, her blonde hair fluttering behind

her and Leki clinging to the top of her head. She ran out, holding a strangely shaped dagger close to her hip.

Taken by surprise, the dolls couldn't do anything to stop her. Claiomh practically slid over to the doll that had Mädchen trapped inside it. She leapt up and thrust the dagger into the doll's back, and with the momentum from her charge, the blade was embedded deep into the doll with a dull *shunk*. Claiomh then kicked the doll, jumping nimbly away from it.



Once she was two or three meters away, she got Leki down from her head and shouted commandingly, “Trip it!”

The baby dragon’s eyes snapped open and the doll was powerless to resist as it fell on its back—driving the dagger into it like a stake. The impact splintered the doll’s body, and what happened next... Orphen didn’t really understand. The dagger suddenly glowed, and the light expanded out from it like a wall. The barrier widened the crack in the doll’s body, completely splitting it apart in a matter of seconds.

Mädchen tumbled out from the splintered doll. She was unconscious but appeared unharmed.

Claiomh acted swiftly all the way to the end. She returned Leki to her head and grabbed Mädchen, ignoring the assembly of dumbfounded dolls. She then jumped down from the stage, taking Mädchen with her and effectively slamming the woman’s body to the floor due to the difference in their heights. Mädchen, for her part, was not awakened by this.

Orphen snorted as he watched Claiomh rush over, finding the situation slightly absurd. “Heh... I can’t believe this... I’m here struggling and you just show up and do it like it’s nothing...”

“Orphen! Are you okay?!” Claiomh carelessly tossed Mädchen aside and knelt down to look at his face. Then she noticed Majic. “What, you’re still sleeping?”

She signaled the black lump on her head (curled up rather comfortably) and said, “Leki, heal him, would you? And that nasty lady too, while you’re at it.”

She stood and sent a furious glare at the throne. Drawing her petite body up to its full height, she crossed her arms and shouted, “What gives you jerks the right to do crap like this?!”

The Demon King’s only reaction to Claiomh’s entirely too frank question was to give her a confused look, as if it couldn’t even find the words to reply to her with.

But Claiomh went on, unconcerned, “I’ve got a broken belt here and an aching back... Why don’t you think about all the trouble you cause people doing this stuff!” She suddenly turned, giving a swift, sharp glare behind her, and as if

her eyes had caused it... three of the dolls that had been surreptitiously casting Wyrd glyphs were vaporized. Of course, this was Leki's work.

"I'm mad about this, okay?! Just so you know!"

"Aaah... I don't know why, but I'm sorryyy!" Majic groaned in his sleep like he was having a nightmare. Nobody but Orphen heard this, though.

Still on his hands and knees, he looked over to see Mädchen groaning and climbing to her feet. They both seemed to be free of the hypnosis.

"Looks like... the tables have turned," Orphen said, voice trembling, just loud enough for the Demon King to hear. "What are you gonna do now, Mr. Demon King?"

"We suppose... we shall do... this." The Demon King's tone was plain and unworried as it raised both hands and began drawing a complex rune.

"Leki!" Claiomh shouted and turned back to it... but nothing happened. Not because Leki hadn't done anything, but because it had been blocked by the rune the Demon King was drawing.

It completed the rune, and a giant, blinding light... engulfed them.



"So, you changed?"

"Yes."

The voices belonged to a man and a woman. They didn't sound youthful, but there was no weight of age to them either. They simply sounded unweathered by time yet, in some way, altered too. And that alteration was the subject of their discussion.

In addition, Orphen wasn't picking these things up with his senses. Someone had explained it. It was likely those white glyphs.

"Well, I'm disappointed," the man muttered from one end of a round table. The table was vast. So vast that its edges grew hazy in the distance. There was one more at the table, the woman. She was seated opposite the man. Because she was so far away, Orphen couldn't see her face. Of course, it wasn't as if he could see the man's, either.

"You know who's to blame for this, don't you?"

"Of course. It's them. And you want them to take responsibility for it?"

"No." The woman's voice was confident. There was a sort of conviction to her that transcended emotion that women—mothers, really—sometimes displayed. *"I want the same thing you do. To stop this flood."*

"How?"

"The same way the great majority intend to."

"Your specialty, the behemoth Basilitrice?"

They were clearly speaking some unknown language, but Orphen was nevertheless easily able to understand their conversation. If he couldn't, then there would've been no point to any of this.

"We'll use that, too. And I hope you'll lend your angel and devil to the cause."

"That's not happening." The man snorted. *"I'm sure you know. There's nothing we don't know, after all. We know all. Or, I should say, we knew all. In fact, if there's anything unknown to us, it would be that angel and devil. They're more powerful than me. I have no power to lend them to you. They wouldn't agree to it."*

"You're not completely without blame yourself for the collapse of the magic system."

"I know that. I shouldn't even be talking to you right now. But I have very different thoughts on the solution to this problem than you do..."

"I'll use the Basilitrice. I'll use the vampires. And I'll use—"

"—The dragons."

"Yes."

"They're your own angel and devil. Are you sure you can handle them?"

"The destruction of the world is my angel and devil," the woman said in a tone as strong as steel. *"I'm going after them. The ones who caused the world's destruction, and our birth."*

"Those of the Yggdrasil Unit are cunning. Far more than we, who have not had

these organs known as brains for long.”

“It’s us who haven’t had them for long. You—”

“Yes. But the time I originally had flesh was a mere 32 years. Can you believe that? And in that brief flicker of an existence, I pondered on the meaning of life.”

“Sentimentality will only hasten the collapse. We’ll both have to be careful about that.” With those curt words, the woman quietly stood from her seat.
“It’s time for me to leave.”

“I won’t stop you. Though I will kill you eventually.”

“So I assumed...” The woman’s voice was pained.

“It’s unfortunate, but it’s the best option available to me.” The man’s voice lacked any sort of guilt and had none of the sentimentality he’d been accused of having earlier. He was simply expressing an unfortunate truth.

“Goodbye, Swedenborge.”

“Farewell, she of fate. Though I know not who you are, past or future...”

The table was vast. Orphen didn’t even know where he was in relation to it, but wherever it was, he only had a hazy view of the man and woman’s faces.

All he could do was listen. And watch. And when he realized that this was the true Demon King play, the light faded.



Orphen’s eyes shot open. He was outside. The scent of earth filled his nostrils. The grass all around him was damp with morning dew.

It was morning. In fact, the sun had just risen. It was still low in the sky, however.

Orphen stood—all of his joints hurt, but he ignored them—and looked around. Majic, Claiomh, and Mädchen too were all lying on the ground near him. They were all sound asleep. Almost like everything that had happened had just been a dream.

And... all around them, there were mountains of dog monster corpses.

“Wh...” He was speechless. They were clearly the dogs that had surrounded

them last night and chased them into the theater. But if any of these dogs had attacked them while they were sleeping, they never would have woken up again. The massacred corpses he'd found in the theater suddenly came to mind. The memory must have dropped his body temperature. Orphen shuddered and counted the dog corpses—63. And every single one of them was dead. Each from a single hit with a spell.

“What’s going on here...?” Orphen glanced over at Majic, wondering if he or Leki could have done it while he was asleep. But Majic was sound asleep himself, and so was Leki, wrapped up in Claiomh’s arms. There was no sign of them having acted.

“Well, whatever...” It didn’t really sit right with him, but he didn’t want to think about it. He plopped down, too tired to even do that. Then he noticed something strange...

“The theater’s... gone?” With all these dog corpses, they should have been right next to the theater. But no matter where he looked, he couldn’t see anything resembling it. From the trees around them and the luggage that Majic had dropped last night, they were clearly still in the vicinity of the theater. And it was such a huge building. Even if they’d moved a short distance away, it should still be visible.

“None of this makes sense,” Orphen muttered, frustrated, then he noticed something else. On top of their luggage (most of it was Claiomh’s, of course), there was a small piece of paper. It was right on top of Claiomh’s sword.

Orphen walked over to it and picked it up. It was just paper that looked like it had been torn out of a notebook or something. He ran his eyes over it, then he read it again as if to make sure.

““Try and clean up your own mess next time,’ huh?” There was no signature, but Orphen could tell who’d left it there from the handwriting.

“Azalie...” His mouth twisted bitterly. “My own angel and devil, huh...” Orphen crumpled up the note and threw it on the ground, taking his frustrations out on it.

Epilogue

There was a darkness the color of amber. It wasn't true darkness—there was a faint light. It was a darkness with blood pumping through it. The muddled air carried no scent of the outside world. There was no breeze trapped here, divorced from the outside, either.

There was a throne. And a king who sat upon it. Though it was less like the king sat on the throne and more like the throne had devoured the king, fusing the two together. Just those two. King and throne. Throne and king.

A hall guard stood before the king. The king did not move but murmured in a quiet voice that almost melted into the darkness, “Even broken... Even if it is all for naught... We will likely... wait here forever... won't we...?”

“If you do not know, there is no way I could,” the guard answered in a voice with no emotion—a strange tone completely devoid of humanity, really. It made no movements, either. “Because you didn't tell them?”

“We cannot... give them... prophecies...” There was a hint of disappointment in the king's voice.

“But you made predictions,” the guard stated.

“That is... the reason... we were created...”

“Created, abandoned, and told to wait?”

“Abandoned...?” The king laughed. “Abandoned... eh? That's wonderful... but it's wrong... They ran out... of strength... They lost... their futures...”

“I am aware. But they have conquered the present. To be frightened of the past, and lose sight of the future...”

“Perhaps... they expected too much... of the present...”

“And that is why they lost so much?”

“Indeed...”

The guard had nothing to say to that. Instead, it repeated the king's earlier question. “How long will we wait, I wonder.”

“You know... the answer to that... As do we...” The king seemed to raise its face. “Until... a person who is... deserving of the knowledge... appears...”

“Or until we turn to dust.” It seemed almost to be smiling bitterly as it spoke. Of course, there was no real change in its tone... but the bitter air also spread to the king.

“You have... doubts...?”

The guard was silent for a moment but then said, “Will there really come a person worthy of knowing the truth...?”

“No... there won’t...” the king answered with a self-deriding air. “If they are worthy... of the knowledge... they will likely... discern it themselves...”

“...You might be right about that...”

The voices cut off there.

There was a darkness the color of amber. It wasn’t true darkness—there was a faint light. It was a darkness with blood pumping through it. The muddled air carried no scent of the outside world. There was no breeze trapped here, divorced from the outside, either.

And when they remembered once more, or perhaps when they forgot, the king and the guard asked each other the same questions.

They scoffed, they fell silent, and the amber darkness returned.



It was, once again, just like always.

“A thousand.”

“That’s ridiculous. Hundred fifty.”

“Not even worth considering. Nine hundred fifty.”

“You’re joking, right? Two hundred.”

“Have you no shame? Nine hundred!”

“Two hundred twenty! That’s as high as I’ll go. What do you think your options are without me, anyway?”

Dortin walked a little ways behind them, eyeing his brother and the woman wearily reciting numbers at him. The three traveled down the highway, walking at a leisurely pace.

In Volkan's hand was a book with no title, bound in pitch-black leather. In the woman's hand was her wallet.

If asked how exactly it was just like always, Dortin wasn't sure how he would answer, but nevertheless, he felt in his heart that that was an accurate description of the situation. Just like always. There was no meaning to it and no basis for it either.

"Eight hundred eighty-five!" Volkan shouted a number that had gotten very exact.

"Two hundred twenty-five!" the woman answered, equally exact.

Two hundred was already—at least to these two—quite a bit of money. *Of course, getting our hands on that much money is not like always in the least...* Dortin remarked to himself calmly.

"Haven't you heard the saying that greedy people will always lose out? Eight hundred seventy!" Volkan said, fanning himself with the book.

The woman grinned as she walked along. "I've heard the second part of the saying, too: 'Of course, everyone loses out at some point.' Two hundred fifty!" From the woman's untroubled expression it was clear enough to Dortin that she'd be buying the book regardless of the price. The only ones who hadn't realized this were his brother and the woman herself, who somehow hadn't caught on that anyone could catch on to what she was thinking by seeing her face. If they could meet in the middle at five hundred, it would be an excellent deal. For his brother, at least.

This is unusual, too. And this wasn't the only strange thing that had happened.

After their earlier meeting, the woman had used some sort of black box (a Celestial teleportation device, apparently) to escape from that room without an exit. When they'd left the theater, they'd found that debt collector and assorted companions lying around on the ground, and they had been

surrounded by some sort of strange dog monsters... which the woman had casually exterminated. Dozens of them. A sorcerer with such immense power was having a decent conversation with his brother. That was unusual.

If she bought the book from his brother, they'd be able to get a decent meal in the next town they stopped in. That meant his prospects were rather good at the moment. That was unusual.

The debt collector seemed to have been caught up in something troublesome, but they'd gotten through it without crossing paths with him. That was... well, that was becoming more common.

In any case, things were different than usual. Dortin cocked his head. Heading north on the road to Kimluck, he pondered. Why, when things were so unusual, did he feel like nothing had really changed...? That was when...

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAA!" There was a scream.

It was a familiar scream. It belonged to Volkan.

Dortin looked to find that the woman had stopped at some point and had, with one hand, grabbed his brother's head, dangling him in the air. She possessed extraordinary strength, it seemed. Underneath Volkan's screams, he could hear the faint groaning of his brother's cranium under the strain.

Still, the woman had that same bright smile on her face. "I'll take it at your price, then♥ Eight hundred forty-five, was it? It's just... there seems to be some immutable force causing my hand to crush your skull, and I don't think I'll be able to stop it without seven hundred ninety-five gold. So we'll subtract that and you'll get fifty."

"Dwaaaaoooooh?! So you resort to threats in the end?! People who refuse to engage in equitable business transactions get cuddled to death by white reptiles, you kn—agyaaaaa?!"

"Oh! Oh no! It seems I'm only gaining strength the longer you refuse to agree!"

"Fine! Fiiiiine!"

Dortin stopped walking as well, looking up at his wailing brother. All of a

sudden that five hundred had transformed into fifty. There went his good prospects. Maybe this was a clue as to his sense that things were just like always.

I get it now. Dorton nodded to himself, finally understanding the reason it felt rather mundane when he looked at her. *She's just like that debt collector.*



Orphen watched the sky until midday. Not for the whole time, of course. He'd spent most of the morning creating graves. He'd lined up thirteen impromptu grave markers and the woman with the sky-colored bandanna had silently prayed in front of them.

He slowly lowered his gaze, from the sky to the cloth of the same color, and to the woman wearing it, whose frame suddenly seemed much smaller than he remembered.

He said in a low voice, "You're not a tomb raider."

"...And you're not very polite. Talking to a person while they're praying at a grave." Mädchen was curt. But she didn't deny it.

Orphen went on uninterestedly, "I thought it was weird. For the 'boss' of a group of tomb raiders, you were too ignorant about Celestials ruins."

"It was my first mission. To a ruin, anyway." She kept her head down, answering with her eyes still closed.

There was a wind blowing. Majic had been elected to deal with the dog corpses, so he was a ways away starting a fire to incinerate them. And past him, Claiomh was shouting, "Hurry up already!" Still, the work was slow. The monsters were scary enough alive, and now they were corpses on top of that. There were still about half of them left.

The wind was unpleasant and filled with the scent of death.

"You hired those guys just for this mission?"

"Yep. You sorta get attached when you share meals with people for a couple weeks, though." She finally opened her eyes. Turning to Orphen, she continued, "So, did I give myself away?"

“Nope. Just my instinct. Though, it would be strange for a tomb raider to not know how scary Celestial ruins are.”

“I guess so... But I couldn’t turn tail and run.” She shrugged and winked at Orphen, a faint smile on her face. “There’s one thing you’re wrong about. Those ruins *were* hidden from the aristocracy. But it wasn’t the Sorcerer’s Alliance that did it.”

“It was Kimluck,” Orphen said bluntly.

Mädchen nodded. “200 years ago, the royal family at the time ordered the destruction of the theater—they must not have liked the play. It was an unabashed eulogy for the Demon King, after all. So the king entrusted the church with destroying the theater. And the church has been periodically investigating the ruins since then. Not that they would find anything—”

“Since the dolls in there were only waiting for sorcerers.”

“It’s stupid once you know the answer, but when I think about all the victims of this place over the last 200 years... Well, whatever. I fulfilled my mission. All that’s left is...” She put her hand on the sword at her hip. “I’ve only got one standing order. If I find a sorcerer, kill them.”

“You’re...” Orphen remained relaxed. He was close enough to her that if she took one step and drew her sword, she could take his head clean off. But he didn’t feel like moving.

“Maybe I should introduce myself again,” Mädchen said with a smirk. “My name is Mädchen Amick—and it was rather careless of me to not catch on to who *you* are, too. A black sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs with that much power at that age... And you’ve run away from the Tower. There’s only one person you could be. Krylancelo, right?”

“Did you hear about me from Salua?” Orphen named the church assassin he’d encountered in Fenrir’s Forest.

She nodded easily. “That’s right. He also said you’d definitely be showing up in these parts at some point.”

Orphen watched her draw her blade a few centimeters from its sheath and asked, “You a Death Instructor too?”

“I am.”

Orphen recalled what she’d said to the doll last night. “I’m used to fighting things like you.” He couldn’t imagine what sort of skills she’d mastered training to assassinate sorcerers. However, Orphen was shockingly confident. If they fought, he’d probably win. He was also thinking about insignificant things like how that would probably make Claiomh ecstatic. But there was one other thing he knew.

“You’re gonna take me to Kimluck, right?”

“Yeah.” She finally burst out laughing and pushed her sword back into its sheath. Spreading her arms with her hands up, she said casually, “The little lady over there saved me, after all. I won’t do anything that’d make her cry. Until I’ve paid back my debt to her, anyway.”

“We’ll be enemies in Kimluck, then.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that. Right?” She removed the cloth tied around her head, letting her short hair dance in the breeze.

“What about your mission, though?” Orphen asked, feeling a little mean-spirited. He watched her face, hoping to get a rise out of her.

But she hardly reacted. “What do you think gods are?”

“Hunh?” It was all too abrupt a question, or maybe it was the sort of question that could only be asked abruptly. Orphen blinked, unsure of how to respond.

Mädchen wiped her face with the cloth and answered on her own. “I don’t know what you think, but I’m a priestess—an instructor. I don’t serve the Head Instructor. I live for the Weird Sisters.” She laughed again. “But I wonder what they want. Devotion and peace? They may not even want that. They’re all-powerful. You haven’t forgotten that, right? I can’t imagine my sword is actually of any use to them.”

“Then... why are you an assassin?”

“So I can stay in Kimluck. And because only priests of Head Instructor class, or we assassins, are permitted the Final Audience.”

“Final Audience?”

“That’s all the freebies you’re getting from me. Find out the rest yourself.” With a mischievous smile, Mädchen purposely averted her eyes then. And as if drawn by those eyes, the pitter-patter of feet approached them.

“Orpheen...” It was Claiomh, with a notable lack of her usual energy in her voice. She tottered over and sighed, holding Leki. “I’m hungry...”

“What... do you think I’m not?”

Rumble... came both of their stomachs at once. He was suddenly all too aware that they hadn’t put anything in their stomachs for a full day.

She grumbled with her finger in her mouth miserably. Her gaze flicked to the nearest corpse, the glint of a last resort in her eyes. “Do you think we can eat these dogs?”

“Stop.”

“But don’t you think if we cooked them right we might be able to get away with it?”

“Stop. I don’t want to eat them, whatever they taste like,” Orphen insisted and shot a look at Mädchen.

She’d been fairly shocked by Claiomh’s words and had taken a step back. Her words were rather flustered. “Uhh, err, oh! If we go back to the inn we were using as our base, there’ll be food left there, I’m sure.”

“...Really?” Claiomh said suspiciously. “Maybe we should take one with us just in case.”

“Seriously, stop it!” Orphen groaned and knuckled her blonde head.

In the distance, the fire Majic had set sent its flames up toward the heavens, and its smoke billowed to the north on the wind.

Afterword “Hellooo! There was no one-off heroine this time, so as your hasty substitution, it’s the imaginary character, Ratsbane! Yeees!”

Author: “...What’s that supposed to mean...?”

“Basically, I show up in the author’s secret notes that he’s constantly working on in private but not in the main story! Yeees!”

“Mm~, yeah, I guess that’s true. But it was notes I cobbled together right when the series was starting... And I had some weirdly specific stuff planned out, but not stuff that I actually needed, so that was a bit of a problem... Oh hey, aren’t you the protagonist’s (future) daughter?”

“You thought me up yourself, but you forgot, didn’t you?! Yeees!”

“(Ignoring her) That was a character I came up with when I was desperately imagining a *Back to the Future*-type scenario. I scrapped that, though.”

“What?! Is that true?! Yeees!”

“...You know, you don’t have that annoying way of talking in my notes.”

“I’m just embellishing a little! Yeees!”

“Well, whatever... I should actually write an afterword. I think it’s safe to say that you readers are probably getting pretty used to this by now, right? We’re on the seventh afterword of the series now. It feels like I haven’t written all that much, but I guess I have.”

“No self-awareness! Yeees!”

“Oh, shut up. Anyway, at the end of the last one I was all like, ‘it’s gonna be short stories next time!’ and now we’re here, at the end of a book that was definitely not short stories.”

“You’re a liar! Yeees!”

“Shut up! Can it! I have an excuse!”

“An excuse is just a lie that you tell after the fact! Yeees!”

“...”

“Oh. He looks kinda mad now! Yeees!”

“...Nah. I’m not mad in the least. By the way, did you see this vase here? It looks like it’s just big enough for you to fit your hand inside.”

“It is! Yeees!”

“There’s candies inside it.”

“There are! Yeees!”

“Have some.”

“Thank you! Yeees! ...Argh! Now that I’ve grabbed the candies, my hand’s stuck in the vase! Yeees!”

“...Well, she’s occupied now. Okay, getting back on topic, so if I do a volume of short stories in the middle of this series, then my plans get pushed back four months. And with the already glacial pace of this story, if things get even more delayed, well—”

“Aaaargh! Yeees!”

“That scares me a little, so I decided to just move ahead to the Kimluck Church arc already. My plan is for this arc to cover three volumes (See? What’d I say about slow?), and then maybe I’ll do some short stories after that. Since I’ve got the opportunity, I could really do some wild stuff... Like Bakumatsu Orphen or something. No, I guess that wouldn’t work... Curry Shop Orphen, then. I guess that’d be even worse...”

“Graaaaah! Yeees!”

“Well, that’s the sort of stuff I’m pondering...”

“(Shatter!) I did it! Yeees! I got out by smashing the vase with a rock! Yeees!”

“...”

“But my hand’s covered in blood! Yeees! With this much blood, the gators are gonna start circling! Yeees! Do something, author-man! Yeees!”

“I *would* like to do something about you... What do you mean, gators?”

“They’re gator skin, but they walk! Yeees! You don’t know about them?! Yeees!”

“I see. Well, uhh... let’s see here... ‘The poor protagonist’s daughter was devoured by gators.’”

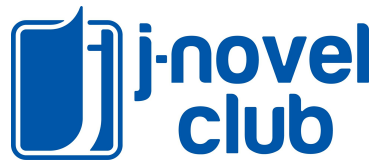
“Aaah! He’s writing something on his own now! Yeees! This is author tyranny! Yeees! Stop it! Yeees!”

“Shut it! Go fight gators or something! ...So, everyone, I think I’ll bring you the three Kimluck Church arc books from what I’ll call ‘the scrapped character graveyard’...”

“Gaaah! Gators are actually pretty fast! Yeees!”

“Please look forward to it without getting your hopes up too high. See you!”

Yoshinobu Akita, July 1996



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by Yoshinobu Akita

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