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**SORCEROUS STABBER**

**ORPHEN**

**THE WAYWARD JOURNEY**

**20. SWING WIDE IN MY SANCTUARY, GATES! (ACT 2)**



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**Orphen put  
the other  
crest that  
matched his  
own around  
his neck  
as well.**





**She was right behind him, looking exactly as she had in life. Azalie took his hand and laid it on her cheek.**





**So don't cry!  
There's  
another way!  
Maybe there  
aren't miracles,  
but there's  
something  
like them!  
If there  
weren't,  
how would  
anyone  
live?!**





# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter VII: Trouble and What Is Not Trouble](#)

[Chapter VIII: Infiltration and What Is Not Infiltration](#)

[Chapter IX: Pettiness and What Is Not Pettiness](#)

[Chapter X: Resolution and What Is Not Resolution](#)

[Chapter XI: Enmity and What Is Not Enmity](#)

[Chapter XII: Salvation and What Is Not Salvation](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



## Chapter VII: Trouble and What Is Not Trouble

The troop got moving without waiting for daybreak.

They marched through the dark wasteland, feeling only the premonition of sunrise. Progress was sluggish. Dragged along in the wake of the others, Majic hung his head, looking down at his own feet while he walked.

Before them lay a black forest that seemed to melt into the dark sky around it: Fenrir's Forest, with its jet-black foliage. It was still far away—despairingly far. He sighed for the umpteenth time.

"You tired?"

Majic jumped when a concerned voice called out to him. He groaned, realizing the reaction came in part because he had gotten unused to people showing concern for him. He turned around in time for Isabella to begin speaking again.

"You should have just ridden on the Deep Dragon with Krylancelo and your friends." As she spoke, she indicated the enormous wolf walking with them a short distance away. The black beast that moved without making a sound seemed like a walking shadow.

Majic responded quietly without looking up at Orphen, Claiomh, the lord, or the two dwarf brothers who rode upon the beast. "It's fine... I feel like I'd be more tired riding up there."

"Oh yeah?" Luckily, Isabella didn't pursue the matter any further.

Feeling guilty, Majic murmured, "Oh, I'm sorry... If I weren't walking, you wouldn't have to walk to keep me company, would you, Miss...Assistant Professor Isabella?"

She smiled. It was a sunny smile, with just a bit of shadow in it. "Don't worry about it. If I were with Krylancelo, we'd just end up talking about Irgitte...and that would be painful."

"Umm, you're a sorcerer, right?" Majic suddenly asked her. A beat later, he



realized what a stupid question it was and flushed red. It was like asking a hawk “You’re a bird, right?”

Sure enough, Isabella nodded with a bit of a mystified look. “Yes. I’m a sorcerer. I wasn’t in the same class as your teacher Krylancelo, but I’d say we’re contemporaries.”

“Umm, well...what I really wanted to say was, you’re a really amazing sorcerer, right...? Like, capable and strong...”

“I’d say I’m as good as your teacher, sure.” After saying the words, she shrugged, a chagrined smile on her face. “No, maybe not. I’d never try to stand up to Pluto, after all.”

“How good do you suppose Orphen is?”

“Huh?”

“Well, he’s the only other sorcerer I know, and I can tell that he’s really impressive, but I don’t really know *how* impressive he is...”

Isabella gave him a wide-eyed look for a few moments, but eventually moved closer and said, voice low, “It doesn’t sound like you’re just asking to make small talk. I’ll give you a serious answer, then. That depends on who you ask.”

“It depends?”

“Objectively speaking, Krylancelo has some serious sorcerous ability. Anyone would think the same, watching the way he fought yesterday. But to me, he’s just the younger brother of a person I considered a rival a long time ago, and to Miss Maria, I bet he’ll always be a kid. How do you see him?”

Majic wasn’t sure what to say in response. He looked down and eventually managed, “I don’t think I’ll ever compare to him, no matter what I do.”

“I see. You might be right about that, but you also might already have something that surpasses him.”

“Huh?” Majic looked up and Isabella smiled.

“I said the same thing before, didn’t I?” she continued. “If you’re a sorcerer, then I’m going to treat you like one. But frankly speaking, you look like a novice, and I’m not expecting much from you. Krylancelo, however? It seems to me like



he's trying to change the way he sees you, like he's trying to acknowledge you as an equal."

"He is?"

"Well, I can't be sure, since I've never had an apprentice of my own...but I bet it's pretty hard for the teacher to deal with their student becoming independent too. If you don't try to change the way you see him in the same way, you might end up being the one left behind in the end."

Majic walked silently for a time, ruminating on her words. He felt his emotions rising, but an actual answer to his question still eluded him. After several false starts, he eventually managed, "I wanted to stand on my own as a sorcerer."

"I see," Isabella said gently.

Majic hesitated briefly, but eventually shook off his indecision and gestured at the crowd walking a short distance away—the frightened, tired, helpless crowd. Just as frightened and tired as them, he went on, "But are these really the strongest black sorcerers on the continent? It's shameful..."

The Thirteen Apostles, the court sorcerers, stood above all other sorcerers as the pinnacle of their kind. But half of them had fallen before even reaching the sanctuary, and the other half marched on haggardly now, fully convinced that the enemy they were about to face could wipe the rest of them out with nothing more than a thought. They dragged onward with resignation, not moving forward so much as allowing momentum to carry them the only way they felt they could go.

Isabella looked back at her companions like Majic and sighed. "You're right. It's pathetic." Her voice contained not a hint of sarcasm.



In the end, he hadn't been able to stop the Thirteen Apostles.

Orphen pondered to himself from atop the Deep Dragon, watching the black sorcerers' march under the gradually lightening morning sky. They weren't fools—they were challenging the sanctuary knowing full well that they didn't stand a chance against their foe.



*What can I actually do here? Just try to limit the sacrifices on both this side and the sanctuary's? From how Leki acted yesterday, that's what he wants to do too, right?* He put a hand on the black beast's fur.

Leki just kept plodding on silently—literally, without a single sound—toward a clear destination. Now, just like the Thirteen Apostles, he was headed straight for the sanctuary.

*If the sanctuary is really planning on sacrificing the rest of the continent and just saving themselves when the goddess invades in ten days' time, then...it's true, we may not be able to avoid a clash between them and the Thirteen Apostles.*

He couldn't let the sanctuary execute that plan, but at the same time, humanity didn't have their own plan to stop the goddess's destruction. Well, they did, but it had too many uncertain elements...

Orphen glanced out of the side of his eyes at the other people riding Leki with him. The dwarves, who had complained amply about their treatment over the last few days as they were forced to cling to Leki's front legs while they traveled, were now riding on his back. They were only up here because Majic had insisted on walking, but his departure had only opened up one spot, so they were piled on top of one another on Leki's back. As a result, they were still not really getting equal treatment.

Behind them was the lord. Almagest Betisletha, the lord of the Imminent Domain. Still pretending to have a broken leg, he was seated with his right leg extended in a splint, gazing out at the horizon.

Recalling what this lord had finally revealed to him last night, Orphen groaned, a hand to his forehead. Almagest, an artificial being created to save the continent from destruction, was the only one with a way to resist the goddess. But to execute his plan, they had to bring the sanctuary under their control.

*I have no choice but to continue on this path at this point and keep heading for the sanctuary...* he admitted to himself with some resignation. And he might need the Thirteen Apostles to get the lord there. Leki was powerful, sure, but could he get past the full force of the sanctuary fighting against them? Orphen



didn't know.

"Orpheen."

A voice pulled Orphen from his reverie. He looked up and Claiomh slid down Leki's neck from atop his head.

She stopped nimbly right before Orphen and said, "Leki says it's about to get hard to proceed, so you should watch out."

"...He does?"

"Yeah. He says to let everyone know."

Orphen thought for a moment at the girl's matter-of-fact tone before he asked, "Wouldn't it be faster for Leki to tell everyone himself?"

"I thought so too, but apparently it's really tiring for Leki to try to convey his will to other people. He says it's something he's not actually supposed to be able to do."

"He can't?"

"Yeah... He said a bunch of other stuff I didn't really get too... I guess it has something to do with the curse on his kind." Claiomh cocked her own head as she explained.

He understood it himself well enough from that, but Orphen still asked just to confirm what he was thinking, "So he can only convey his will to you?"

"Huh? Hmm... Yeah, I think so. I don't really get it, though..." she said quietly, folding her arms.

Claiomh herself apparently had no awareness of this, but Orphen knew exactly what had happened. *She's his familiar. Claiomh and Leki are sharing their consciousness and senses.*

Deep Dragons' mental dominion allowed them to connect their minds to less powerful beings. Depending on the strength of that dominion, a Deep Dragon's familiar could even tap into the dragon's power and utilize sorcery themselves. Orphen had seen an example of this himself in the west a few months ago. Though Claiomh didn't seem to be so deeply dominated.



“Anyway... ‘Hard to proceed,’ eh?” Orphen muttered, getting back on track. The way Claiomh had delivered the warning, it was hard to feel much of a sense of crisis, but their situation being what it was, this was news Orphen couldn’t take lightly. “I got it. I’ll tell everyone.”

Orphen stood and looked down, preparing to jump off of Leki. The closest people to them were Majic and Isabella, who seemed to be discussing something.

*Isabella, eh? My impression of her from the Tower was that she was hard on herself and others, and prone to making rash decisions. Hopefully, she’s not getting on Majic’s case or anything.* When he saw old acquaintances, he couldn’t help recalling the way he thought and felt as a child.

“Hey, Orphen?” came Claiomh’s voice. “At the lord’s mansion, you said that everyone should be doing something, but...it seems like you’re just trying to do it all yourself now.”

Orphen looked back at her in surprise and Claiomh hung her head apologetically.

“I guess you’re right. It took some time to think it over, but putting it into practice is even harder.” Orphen smiled at the blonde girl and leaped down from the Deep Dragon’s back. As he fell a few meters, he heard the dwarves raise a cheer behind him.

“Hmm?! There’s a space open, Dartin! Go now and claim your space!”

“...I think it’d make more sense if you got off my head and moved there yourself, Brother.”

*Whatever,* Orphen thought as he landed.

Isabella yelped in surprise, leaving Majic to run over. “What is it, Krylancelo?”

“Leki’s getting nervous,” he said, indicating the giant black wolf who moved without making sound.

When Isabella gave him a confused look, Orphen realized that what he was saying made no sense. “I mean, I know I don’t need to tell anybody to be careful at this point, but...if Leki’s going out of his way to warn us, I figure something



pretty intense is about to happen.”

“I suppose you’re right. If you’re concerned, you should tell Master Pluto or Miss Maria—” She indicated the Thirteen Apostles. The two she’d mentioned were commanders, yet they walked at the front of the group.

Until that very moment, they had been there.

Orphen turned to them and saw just a flash of them.

What happened in the next instant was exceedingly simple.

There was one loud sound, a burst of pressure.

An explosion, followed by a gust and screaming voices.

And the two sorcerers walking at the front of the pack—one of them a large man, one of them a woman—sprang into the air like they were rubber toys.

They shot up, spinning, drawing an arc above Orphen and the rest of the party.

Orphen watched, uncomprehending. The procession stopped.

As the court sorcerers clamored, Isabella’s muttered words came through to Orphen strangely clear.

“Th-There go the two monsters of the capital...”

“We traveled here instantaneously from the capital with the assistance of the white sorcerers.” The strong will was still present in the Demon of the Capital Pluto’s voice even after he crashed into the ground, a lump forming on his forehead—it was a miraculously small injury for someone who had gone flying a few dozen meters. He had rejected even a tiny bandage over the wound. It was probably a point of pride.

Maria, who’d been sent flying the same distance, had a similarly insignificant injury, though in contrast with Pluto’s stony countenance, she was barely concealing her displeasure at the situation.

In any case, it was their subordinates who were much more panicked than the two so-called “monsters of the capital.” Some were even approaching whatever



invisible wall the two of them had hit and trying to find the sorcerous composition that no doubt sat in the air somewhere. As there was sorcery functioning here, there necessarily had to be a composition somewhere for it to function, but the spell was so different from the sorcery everyone present was used to that it was proving extremely difficult to identify. A couple people got too close and were sent flying in much the same way Pluto and Maria had been. Thankfully, like the two of them, they weren't injured.

Pluto watched as another of his subordinates went flying with a yelp and clicked his tongue. Instead of scolding the careless sorcerer, he decided to prioritize explaining the situation to the gathered Numbers.

He went on, "The reason they couldn't transport us directly to the sanctuary was because the white sorcerers feared the Deep Dragons. That, and the barrier in this location..."

"If you come from the west, you can get into Fenrir's Forest, though," Orphen muttered, his arms crossed.

Pluto nodded and disagreed at the same time. "This was once part of the forest too. The trees just receded."

"A barrier, huh?" one of the sorcerers repeated.

Pluto indicated the slight bruise on his forehead and responded, "That's right. A barrier. Our lack of injury wasn't luck, and it wasn't a laughing matter." He rubbed his finger against the bruise, his tone frustrated. "If I'm not wrong about this, this is spirit sorcery. So it can't hurt us...but neither can we pass through it. There are very few ways to foil spirit sorcery, after all."

A young sorcerer bounced on the ground in the distance after being flung back by the barrier. A few of his companions rushed over to him and they all sighed, discouraged, at the power they had no way to thwart.

Orphen sighed as well, watching them. "Fenrir's Forest is protected by the Deep Dragons. So the sanctuary has two lines of defense?" he asked Pluto.

"Not that they have a reason for such a thing," the man said in defeat, though Orphen didn't know if the sentiment was directed toward him or the dragons. Pluto indicated Leki, who was seated on the ground, and asked vaguely,

“Couldn’t the Deep Dragon break through?”

“...Apparently, Leki said it was going to get ‘hard to proceed.’ He didn’t say ‘impossible,’ though, so I think he could still make it...”

Leki had let down the weights on his back, but Claiomh remained perched atop his head. The enormous Deep Dragon sat, looking toward the sanctuary. The spirit sorcery barrier should have been just a few meters in front of his nose.

“Let’s retreat a hundred meters and come up with a countermeasure,” Pluto called out to everyone. Then he turned and said only to the Numbers, “Put another way, that means that if we can just get through here, the white sorcerers will get us to the sanctuary. If what you said about the Deep Dragons abandoning their protection of the sanctuary is true, then this is the last trouble we should encounter.”

There was more anxiety in the Demon of the Capital’s voice than disappointment—that meant this barrier wouldn’t be that big of a problem for him. The real difficulty would come *after* breaking through the barrier.

“We’re a hundred meters away from the sanctuary...”



He wasn’t listening at the door, but he could still hear voices from within.

The content seemed to be harmless small talk. He couldn’t hear the words all that clearly, but the voices were unexpectedly cheerful, which made him suspicious. At the end, he even heard laughing, which left him speechless. Most of the laughing came from Heartia, but he distinctly heard the faint laughter of his conversation partner as well.

He wasn’t waiting in the hallway all that long, but by the time the door opened, he’d re-crossed his legs several times.

Eventually, with no fanfare, the door opened and the red-haired man stepped out.

“Hey, thanks for waiting, Colgon.”

He eyed his underclassman for a bit, then signaled for him to leave. Heartia



said goodbye into the room and closed the door before following him down the hall.

When they'd left the vicinity of the room, he asked, "How'd you break the ice in less than five minutes?"

"Huh? What do you mean? Isn't that normal?" Heartia said lightly. His words were easy, genuine. He frowned and crossed his arms before adding with some befuddlement, "I guess because...she's hot? Ow! Why are you kicking me?!"

"I explained it to you, didn't I? It's not human. It's an artificial being, created here in the sanctuary for a certain purpose. It can predict the future, fool the Network, and control the people and creatures around it. It's dangerous—"

Heartia interrupted his explanation. "What's wrong with a little control? She's hot, after all."

"You're an idiot, you know that?"

"Huh? Why?" He seemed utterly serious about this as well, looking genuinely hurt.

Colgon changed the subject. "Whatever. If you can take care of Lottecia, it'll help me too. We're in a difficult situation, but things are generally going pretty well."

"Like what?"

"On the outside, Krylancelo and the Thirteen Apostles are drawing Doppel X's fighting power, and on the inside, Leticia has the priestesses' attention focused on her. The sanctuary is ripe for the taking," he murmured, speeding up.

He suddenly stopped and looked back at the door in the distance—to Lottecia's room. "I'll get a weapon ready. You don't plan on helping me, right?"

"That's right. I'm sorry, but I'm neutral here," Heartia said, returning to the practical tone of a proper sorcerer. At the same time, he looked at Colgon and frowned as if realizing something. "What do you mean by 'weapon,' anyway? Aren't you already armed?"

When it was pointed out to him, Colgon remembered the weapons he had on him under his cloak. The sorcerous Sword of Korkt. He also had a rather large

knife, some wires, and files on the ends of his gloved fingertips that proved useful in a close quarters fight. Damian had destroyed his gun, so he no longer had that.

“These hardly count,” Colgon said frankly.

“I see...” Heartia didn’t sound convinced.

“I need a more serious weapon,” Colgon supplied. “It’s a slim chance, but if the Thirteen Apostles show up in the sanctuary, I might need to fight them off. Depending on what happens, Pluto could be a tough opponent. I need to prepare if I want to make sure I can win.”

“Against Krylancelo too?”

Colgon shrugged. He had no reason to answer.

Heartia must have come up with his own interpretation of Colgon’s reaction. He asked something different instead. “Lottecia’s your wife, right? Why don’t you talk to her?”

“The marriage isn’t official. My identity is falsified.”

“Isn’t that marriage fraud?”

“Her identity was also made up by her foster father.”

“...I see.”

As they walked through the halls, the connections between locations in front of them changed rapidly. The halls of the sanctuary were controlled by the priestesses, so if you got on their bad side, they could make your life hell.

Normally, you couldn’t even have a conversation like this quietly, but Colgon was fairly certain that the priestesses had their hands full dealing with the Thirteen Apostles and Leticia, so they didn’t have the energy to spare to listen in. And even if they were listening, it wasn’t like they could throw him in a dungeon. The priestesses were just another exhausted part of the sanctuary right now. No, they might be the *most* exhausted part of the sanctuary right now.

Heartia suddenly piped up like he’d just thought of something. “But you married her because you loved her, right? I mean, you’d never do anything you



didn't want to do."

Again, Colgon didn't feel like answering. He just kept walking, not even shrugging in response this time.



It was a large hall for the number of people present in it.

Really it was just her, Leticia thought to herself with some irony. She felt like the only living person in the space. The spirit form of Azalie next to her certainly didn't count, and the man in the priest's robes staring at her from a slight distance, Jack Frisbee, looked more like a ghost than anything else with his killer's eyes. Then there were the three women sitting across a table from her.

These looked entirely like spirits of the dead.

*...More than me?* Azalie spoke into her mind, apparently having overheard her thoughts.

Leticia ignored the comment, but she more or less agreed with it. The women were dressed like the Celestials she had only heard about in legends—much like the one she'd seen earlier up at the podium. Beautiful women with green hair. Once she freed herself from their mental dominion, however, it was easy for her to tell that the color was simply dyed. Their eyes weren't the distinctive green that dragons' eyes were either. On the podium, the woman had used a transparent sheet in front of her face to give her eyes a green appearance, but they weren't utilizing such methods now.

The women were human. That was clear enough to Leticia. Humans dressed as Celestials. Spirits masquerading as an ancient, destroyed race from the continent's past. She couldn't help the sardonic comments springing to mind about them.

One of the women was the first to actually speak between them. "Firstly... May we ask how you teleported here directly?"

The leftmost woman had spoken. She was the oldest of them and likely the leader. She spoke in a self-important, grandiose manner, but there was a shadow in her expression that never left her face. Leticia suddenly wondered if it wasn't her age that made her seem older than the others.

“I used the pact Childman Powderfield swore.” Leticia said what Azalie whispered to her. Unused to being a spirit, Azalie apparently had trouble even conveying her voice to living people. Leticia sighed, eyeing Azalie—she was the only one who could see her here.

“The pact...”

Leticia returned her focus to the women in front of her. The woman dressed as a Celestial, calling herself a priestess, nodded bitterly.

“I see. If you know about that, then it means you weren’t just bluffing, I suppose.”

“The pact summons warriors to the sanctuary when the time comes. As the sanctuary’s representative, Sister Istersiva formed it with the lord of the Imminent Domain two hundred years ago.”

“Istersiva was expelled from the sanctuary!” The rightmost woman suddenly raised her voice.

Leticia couldn’t respond to her right away—she was only conveying Azalie’s words, after all—but she glared at the woman nonetheless. “The pact still stands. As proof, the Fairy Dragons’ spirit sorcery didn’t attack us.”

“If the pact still stands, then that’s all the more reason why we should have the full story.” The woman in the middle was the most calm of the three of them. She was the one who had stood up at the podium, and from her age, Leticia judged that she likely had a certain amount of responsibility even if she wasn’t a leader.

She continued, “The pact that Sister Istersiva formed with the then-lord of the Imminent Domain summons warriors to the sanctuary under certain circumstances...and it allows those warriors to make use of the sanctuary’s facilities and equipment in order to fight the sacred beasts of the gods. But we do not know the details of these circumstances.”

“Misuse of this pact could lead to rebel forces overtaking the sanctuary,” the woman on the right added with a huff of breath from her nose.

The woman in the center shot a look at her but didn’t protest at the interruption. “The Deep Dragons are also a part of the pact. They must have



abandoned their defense of the sanctuary because someone is plotting sedition using the pact as a shield!”

“I don’t know how it is now, but there was no way the sanctuary at the time wasn’t aware of the pact,” Leticia said coolly. “I’m sure that’s the reason they started the sorcerer hunts.”

“What reason would the sanctuary have to fear humans—” The woman on the right stood from her chair and shouted, and this time Leticia voiced her own thoughts instead of speaking Azalie’s words.

“If you’re really not afraid, then go ahead and throw me out!” She banged a fist on the table. The high-quality, heavy piece of furniture didn’t so much as budge. Leticia ignored the pain in her fist and kept going. “Go ahead and kill me like you killed everyone in the Imminent Domain! Do it! If you do that, you’ll have no way to negotiate with Azalie—”

“There’s no need to rush to your death now when the whole world will end in another ten days. I apologize for our rudeness,” the middle woman said calmly. “But I would ask that you refrain from slandered our ancestors as well. Much about history is only known by those who lived through it. It is not simply an argument that can be won.”

“Right.” Leticia pulled her fist back, taking a deep breath. She glanced to the woman on the right, who had returned to her seat, her face flushed red.

At the same time, she caught a glance of the man in the priest’s robes, observing their conversation with a smirk on his face. He sneered like he was watching a farce. It was a nasty smile. Leticia shot him a loathing look. There was nothing she could do but agree with the woman, however. And not just about history. There were many things that only a person with firsthand experience could know.

The woman in the middle began speaking again. Leticia was glad for the excuse to focus on something other than Jack’s smirk. “I presume you were caught up in the battle with the Imminent Domain. You do not look like someone on Almagest’s side... Your anger is reasonable, but there was a reason we were forced to take such an action. I believe the sorcerer hunts two hundred years ago occurred for much the same reason.”

“Then what about what’s happening right now?” Leticia asked, returning to her job interpreting for Azalie. “Damian Rue and the white sorcerers foresaw that the sanctuary would attempt to shrink the Ayrmarkar barrier. Just how small are they planning on making it?”

“The barrier must be dissolved in order to be remade. The fewer tries it takes to reform it, the better. Additionally, now that we’ve lost one of the founding sorcerers, Aureole, we don’t know just how small the barrier has to be to form fully. This means that we must shrink it to its smallest possible state. Its most *safe* state.”

“So...leave the sanctuary, and abandon everything else?” Leticia clarified.

The woman in the middle smiled wryly. “Don’t act ignorant. What do you want, a guarantee?”

“I *am* ignorant. I have no idea, for instance, why humans like you rule the sanctuary.”

The woman’s only answer was to continue smiling wryly.

After waiting for a time, Leticia realized that she wasn’t going to say anything more and took an irritated breath. She was just supposed to be conveying Azalie’s words, but the more she did so, the more her own emotions were finding their way into those words.

“How many dragons remain in the sanctuary?” Leticia asked.

“What an insolent question—”

“None,” the woman in the middle muttered, cutting off the woman on the left. The other women opened their eyes wide at her, but she ignored them and said again, “It may as well be none. Who remains with the power that they can truly be called a dragon? The War Dragons stumbling around the dwarves’ nation? The Weird Dragons who died out? The Deep Dragons chose the pact over the sanctuary. They’re sure to challenge the goddess in the next ten days and be wiped out.”

By this point, the two other women had such fire in their eyes, they seemed openly hostile toward the middle woman, but she just coolly ignored them, even smiling.



She waved her hand mockingly as she continued, “Speak or strike them and the Fairy Dragons don’t even respond...not since they lost all five senses in their previous battle with the goddess. They’re nothing but living corpses! The Red Dragons are loyal, but *all* they do is obey. Their lethargy is their only rebellion.” The woman spoke faster and faster, like some kind of dam had burst, but her words remained precise even as her emotions rose.

Leticia just listened in silence, partially because there was no room for her to get a word in.

“Silence, Sister Preenia.” The old woman finally reached out to grab hold of the middle woman, but Preenia knocked her hand away. It was practically a slap. The old woman yelped in shock, and the third woman ran to her side when she fell over, calling a name that Leticia didn’t catch.

Meanwhile, Preenia’s diatribe continued. “What use are the wandering Mist Dragons? Well? Are there any dragons remaining on this rotten continent? That’s not a question that I want to answer...”

No one could stop her. They had to just wait until Preenia stopped herself. She hung her head, brushing aside her dyed-green hair when it fell in her eyes, and returned to the resolute expression she’d worn earlier. Then she said, “Do we seem insane to you?”

*Yes, and I’m sure I do too.* But Leticia swallowed her own response and instead waited for Azalie’s words to convey them precisely.

“I think that exchange wasn’t entirely irrelevant. It connects to what we were talking about before. From your perspective, the sanctuary as it is now doesn’t possess the power to resist the goddess, does it?”

“You speak as if this doesn’t concern you, Chaos Witch.” Preenia glared at her viciously—the woman’s eyes were looking at Leticia, but it was Azalie that she was trying to see.

Her tone was vicious. “*You’re* the one who undid a seal that shouldn’t have been undone in the cursed city of Kimluck. It was *your* meddling that upset the balance between Aureole and the goddess and invited the calamity we face now. We spent two hundred years leaving Kimluck and that accursed pope alone, and you proved that we were right to do so.”

“I see. Everyone would have been able to remain happy if we’d just sacrificed Aureole alone for the rest of time.” After immediately coming back with that, Leticia—or rather, Azalie—realized that the woman wasn’t going to be provoked and changed tacks. “I’m kidding. But you can’t foist the responsibility onto me completely either. Aureole foresaw her own end. As the founding sorcerer, Aureole shared her senses with Sister Isterviva, her familiar, which is why Isterviva was able to predict the destruction of the Ayrmankar barrier two hundred years ago.”

As Leticia said all that smoothly, she watched Preenia’s expression carefully as the other woman listened and noticed that it wasn’t changing at all. She realized Preenia was already aware of everything Azalie was saying. “Aureole was right on the verge of death—more than that, she *desired* death. The goddess had a way to kill the founding sorcerer. And if the immortal founding sorcerer despaired, she would die. That’s why the goddess never let go of Aureole’s neck. She waited for hundreds of years for Aureole’s willpower to run out.”

“Hmm... Let me confess, then. We also foresaw the destruction of the Ayrmankar barrier and made our own preparations for the event, though almost all of it proved useless. Frankly, Aureole lived much longer than we anticipated. Was that the will of Aureole you mentioned?”

“No,” Leticia murmured. She had been leaning over the table toward the other woman but sat back now. Suddenly curious, she glanced at the man in the priest’s robes. The man was unmoving, just watching the proceedings. It wasn’t even obvious to her if he was listening to them or not.

Rather than the three priestesses, it was more like they were exchanging information with just Preenia now. The other two seemed to agree, since they had moved their chairs back from where Preenia’s was.

It was a pitifully small gathering for such a grand assembly hall, Leticia thought to herself. This whole thing was a stupid farce. No one here really believed that they would be deciding the fate of the world. They were just buying time here, after all.

*Isn’t that right, Azalie?* Leticia asked silently, but her sister ignored her. Or had

she not heard her?

With all the eyes focused on her, Leticia suddenly realized she'd been silent for too long. She hurriedly opened her mouth once more. "Her will was nothing so emotional, and I didn't bring it up for a reason like that either. But there are a few things I'd like to confirm before I go into that. Depending on how you answer, maybe everything really was pointless."

"At this point, everything is pointless. Every single thing..." Preenia cursed, though her eyes—her not-green eyes—didn't seem entirely lost to despair. Not as much as Preenia professed to be, at least.

"You called yourself Sister Preenia, right? Let me ask one more time. Are you truly in charge of the sanctuary right now?"

"If you're asking if we represent the empty house of the dead that is the sanctuary, then without question, that is us, yes."

"And how did that come to pass? From what I've seen and heard, I can't even understand how humans came to be in the dragons' sanctuary at all."

"I do not know the extent of your knowledge, but when our ancestors first drifted to this continent, they were taken into the protection of the sanctuary. You know that, I'm sure."

Leticia couldn't help rising to the other woman's provocation. "So you stayed here ever since, like rats in a ship's hold? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Preenia was offended by her words, just as Leticia expected. "The Celestials' decline had already started by then," she added, obviously annoyed at Leticia's interruption. "They had already lost more than half of their population due to the poison of the basiltrice unleashed upon them a thousand years ago by the gods. More than half. Including every single male of their population. They may have been a long-lived race, but their extinction was staring them in the face."

"And?"

"Even putting aside that imminent problem, they required a labor force. When humanity drifted here, having lost our culture entirely, they educated most of the species outside of the sanctuary, but invited a small number of them inside as workers. Those were our predecessors. Time passed, and when



conflict broke out between the sanctuary and the outside, they were called traitors, Doppel X... It wasn't just your master who was called that."

She cleared her throat, resting her chin on her hands, both elbows on the table. "What do you suppose happened to the sanctuary when the Celestials died out? It was utterly foolish. The Celestials created almost all of the sanctuary's systems, but when old age began to degrade their bodies, they left most maintenance and operation of those systems to their servants. Before we knew it, we were the only ones who could manage the sanctuary."

"Did they ask you to do so?"

"Hmph. Of course not. Naturally, we made use of the situation for self defense. We'd lived in the sanctuary for generations and couldn't just leave at that point. If those ferocious Red Dragons wanted to live as equals to us here, then we were forced to make use of everything we could to do so."

There was no shame in Preenia's face, but she still kept it bowed for some time. After her long speech, there was an equally long period of silence. She was the picture of a Celestial—a beast of silence—but she was human.

While she waited, Leticia recalled Heartia's words. This is the sanctuary. The dragons' sanctuary.

They were without a doubt in the sanctuary. But there were no dragons here.

Leticia shot a look at Azalie. *I wonder if it's true that Azalie only shows herself to me unconsciously...* She had no choice but to doubt her words. But if Azalie was lying, the truth would never come to light.

*There are too many lies in this world.*

The sanctuary exists. A lie.

There's no war on the Kiesalhiman continent. A lie.

Master Childman Powderfield is an invincible black sorcerer. A lie.

Family never parts. A lie.

Leticia MacCready is a tough fighter. A lie.

The thoughts bubbled to the surface of Leticia's mind, where she was forced

to confront them.

She sighed, unable to rid herself of them, and began again. “Outside of the sanctuary, Celestials and humans mixed... Let me just ask, since it’s a possibility. If Celestials mixed with humans inside the sanctuary too, are you sorcerers?”

Preenia looked at her with one eye through her hair. “We are pure-blooded. The sanctuary opposed involving humans in the gods’ curse. Sister Isterviva was banished from the sanctuary for clinging to the experiment to leave offspring by mixing blood with humanity.”

She continued, her voice a low growl, “The Celestials must have been desperate, faced with the destruction of their race. They were fumbling in the dark with all sorts of ridiculous plans like mixing their blood with humans. Revival devices, body transformation, artificial beings... Each scheme failed, of course.”

With a slight smile, Preenia included mixing their genes with humans as one of the Celestials’ failed plans. She noticed the change in Leticia’s expression at her implication and laughed ironically. “You understand the reason why they could not be creating human sorcerers as their destruction loomed closer, do you not?”

“It’s not as if you saw the end of the Celestials yourself.” Leticia returned her own sarcastic remark, but Preenia’s expression didn’t change.

“Their despair seeped into the sanctuary, left behind by them. It never fades, so we carry it with us...”

It wasn’t as if she didn’t have a comeback. In fact, that’s exactly what Leticia opened her mouth to deliver, however...

The words didn’t come. And her boiling blood cooled in the deafening quiet of the hall. It was true. Despair did remain here.

“Destruction...” Preenia muttered to herself. “If the founding sorcerer Aureole is truly dead, then the Celestials’ sorcery goes with her...”

Leticia straightened her back with a jolt—but it wasn’t her reaction; she was sensing Azalie’s anxiety. She wasn’t sure if the priestess would touch on this topic, but this matter was more important than anything else to confirm.

Depending on how things went, this could all become completely pointless.

Calming herself—or rather, willing Azalie’s spirit to calm herself—Leticia asked, “Have you seen any signs of that thus far?”

Preenia went on, still as if she was talking to herself. “There’s no precedent for it, so who can say? Wyrd Glyphs may remain effective for eternity, and they may all suddenly vanish. For the time being...none of the sanctuary’s functions have been affected.”

“Including the Second World-Seeing Tower?” Leticia asked and waited for Preenia’s response.

She turned her head and said aloofly, almost like a true Celestial, “Is that your aim, then?” The slight smile on the priestess’s face was one of pity. “The Second World-Seeing Tower is under our control. It’s functioning, but we have no casters who can control it. In the past, we once used the sanctuary’s facilities to attempt to artificially create such a summoner, but...”

She waved her hand and shook her head. “It was pointless. We were trying to develop an idealized person using the Network, but what we created was...fragile. It immediately escaped the sanctuary...this place of despair.” As her words faded, Preenia’s hands fell powerlessly to the table.

Leticia immediately heard Azalie mutter, “Did it really flee?”

Leticia asked with her eyes whether that was a question she should ask the priestess, but Azalie’s emotions told her it was just a question she was asking herself. The spirit was still muttering to herself, seemingly not even aware of Leticia’s eyes on her.

As if the priestess could see her too, she directed her next words at the invisible Azalie. “It won’t work, Chaos Witch. The Second World-Seeing Tower’s summoner will not function. The summoning of the demon king was nothing more than the Celestials’ final delusion.”

Azalie didn’t answer. She didn’t even seem to be listening.

Leticia was the only one watching as Preenia’s gaze froze over. The voice of the human woman dressed as a Celestial echoed through the hall, shaking. “We chose to answer your questions. Now you will answer ours. We are only



interested in one thing.”

She leaned on the table and, as it creaked under her arms, she asked, “If the pact allows you to pass through the barrier, will it open the Aymankar burial chamber as well?”

## Chapter VIII: Infiltration and What Is Not Infiltration

The shadows of night burned the wastes gray, the level plains growing darker the further away they stretched.

The deepest patch of darkness was right on the border of the ground and the night sky: the shadow of a black forest—Fenrir’s Forest, a vast sea of trees encircling the sanctuary.

Fur deeper than the black of those trees carefully moved amid them. Once the enormous black wolf began to move, it stopped hesitating. It took several soundless, swift steps. There was a dissonant patch of gold in its otherwise black fur. It was Claiomh, riding on its back. She was a lot more tense than the wolf, but still clung steadfastly to the Deep Dragon’s neck.

He didn’t go too far. It was just a few steps for the Deep Dragon’s body. A distance of four or five meters. He went that far and nothing changed.

Orphen expelled the breath he was holding. He stood with the Thirteen Apostles, hanging back and watching Leki. Orphen folded his arms alone, listening to the sighs coming from the black sorcerers behind him.

No, it was hard to call him truly alone—Majic and Isabella stood just a bit behind him. But the rest of the Thirteen Apostles were farther back. He could see Pluto standing at a slight distance with his hammer, a sour look on his face. Maria Huwon stood at his side like always.

“Will he break through?”

Orphen nodded at Isabella’s question.

Leki was moving on ahead. The area he was attempting to pass through appeared to be nothing but empty space, but there was a spirit sorcery barrier there—Orphen suddenly sensed something and unfolded his arms, lowering his stance.

“No...” he groaned. “Here it comes.”

The air around them rapidly changed. Leki stopped. A sharp wind lapped at the Deep Dragon's body, attempting to remove the massive wolf from the ground. The invisible air current whipped up the sand from the ground, forming into a rapidly moving wall. The whirlwind of sand made the barrier visible. Leki fixed his feet to the ground, bowing his head but attempting to keep his eyes open.

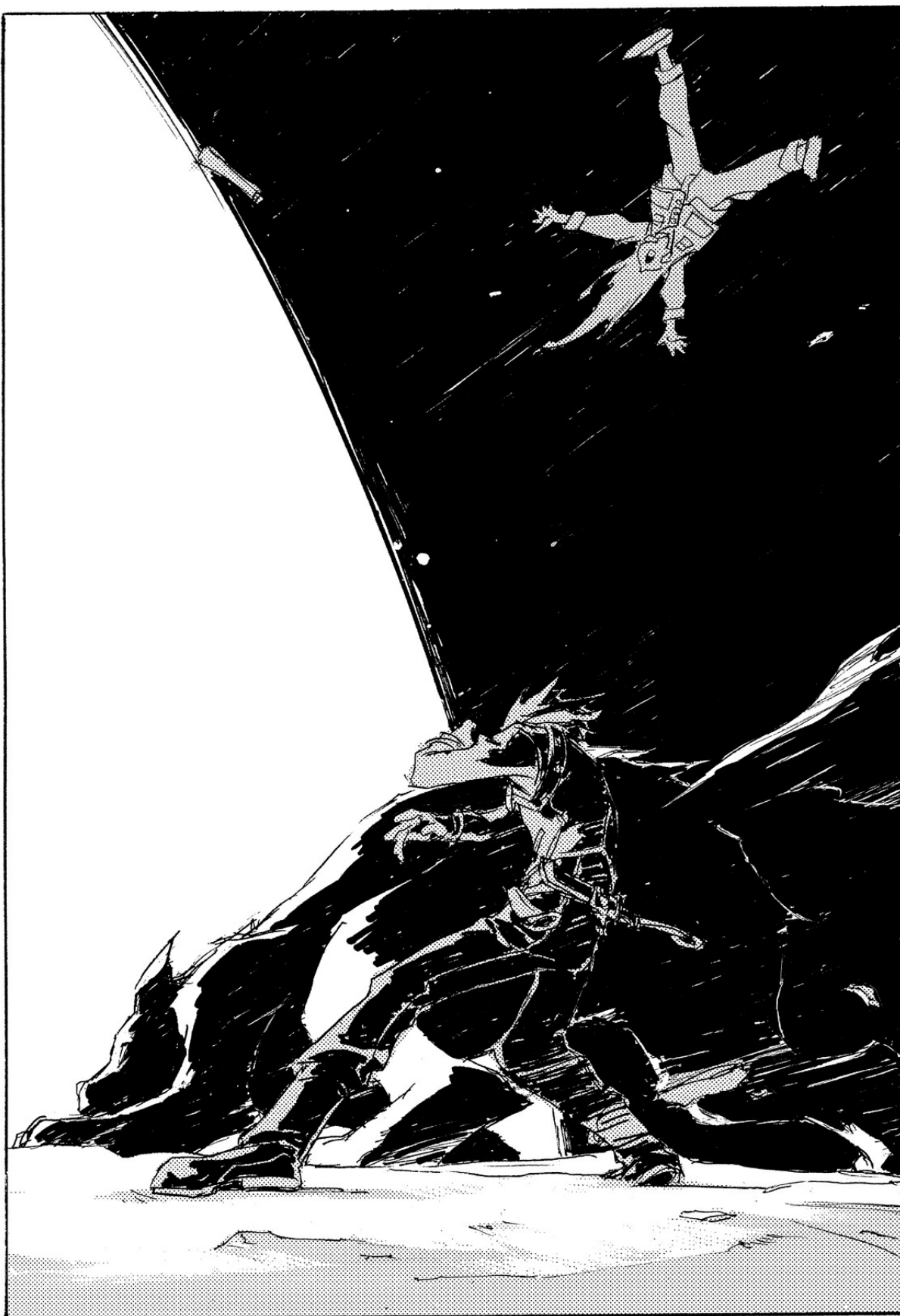
When the Deep Dragon's eyes flashed green, the ferocity of the wind faded in an instant, but it whipped back up almost immediately. This back-and-forth went on a few times, neither's sorcery giving an inch.

*He can fight back directly against spirit sorcery, huh?* Orphen thought to himself as he batted aside a stone the wind whipped his way.

But there was no way to win against spirit sorcery. Leki's dark sorcery couldn't dissolve the spirit sorcery barrier. Eventually...

"Waaaaagh?!" Claiomh went flying with a shriek.





She flew in an arc over the Thirteen Apostles' heads. The spirit sorcery should have prevented her from getting hurt, but...

"Fate draws near!" the Demon of the Capital shouted, and a spell shot out toward Claiomh. The girl's body changed trajectory, plunging straight down instead. It even changed the tone of her scream. A second later, Claiomh landed safely in Pluto's arms, her voice cutting out abruptly.

Leki continued his resistance for a while longer, but as his upper body lifted higher, the ferocity of the wind only increased. Orphen was far back enough that he shouldn't have been affected, but even he was starting to be pushed back by it.

Eventually, Leki leaped back himself instead of being blown away. He flew over Orphen and the other black sorcerers, landing soundlessly on empty ground. The wind instantly died down when he moved back, leaving only a small whirlwind of dead branches instead.

"I didn't think that would work," the Demon of the Capital said bitterly as he lowered Claiomh to the ground. The girl sank unsteadily to the ground, her eyes spinning.

With a glance back at her, Pluto stepped forward and held up a hand at the spirit sorcery barrier that he couldn't touch. He sucked in a breath and began to chant an incantation, an enormous spell forming in front of him. "The day of destruction—"

"It won't work," Maria Huwon cautioned him, pushing his hand down. She lent a hand to Claiomh, pulling her up before adding, "Even I can tell that. We could all come at it together and it wouldn't do anything. Can the spirits not get through this?"

She looked around sourly as if expecting the spirits of the dead to suddenly make themselves seen around her. "Can't white sorcery ignore space?"

"I imagine they're already through it." This time, Pluto stopped Maria. He shook a fist angrily. "But the spirits' goal is for us to infiltrate the sanctuary—those ghosts can't even knock on the door."

"I guess Damian shouldn't have been destroyed."

This voice was neither black sorcerer. Orphen looked and saw the lord approaching with a cool smile on his face.

Orphen seemed to be the only one who'd heard him. He took a breath and added, "Winona too."

He'd meant it as nothing more than a jab, but the lord raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. "You think she could get through here?" he asked, amused.

Orphen ignored him and looked away, but he couldn't help smiling wryly. It really was people like her who tended to figure out solutions in situations like these.

There were some twenty black sorcerers here near the barrier while the rest hung back. Pluto ordered his men to group up and the Thirteen Apostles all fell back to the rest of the group, shoulders heavy with disappointment.

Still standing in front of the invisible barrier, Orphen scratched his head, irritated. Leki wasn't moving, and Claiomh was standing still as well. The blonde girl gave him a vague look. Majic and Isabella were just staring anxiously at the sea of trees in the distance.

The lord planted his cane on the ground, following after Pluto slowly, deliberately. Giving each of them a look in turn, Orphen finally settled his eyes on the enormous Deep Dragon. He knew the beast would never answer him, but he still found himself mentally asking, *You got through here once, right? You went to the sanctuary, broke things off with your pack, and came back.* But now he couldn't get through the barrier.

"I exist simply to execute my orders." He suddenly found himself remembering the words of the doll who had said that everything was a lie. The memory was completely random, but maybe there was some truth to it.

*Can only those who follow the sanctuary's orders pass through here? If that's the case, then we'll never get through here unless we destroy the sorcerers responsible for creating the barrier...*

Suddenly there was an explosion. Orphen looked back at the gathering of Thirteen Apostles behind him and saw a pillar of flame in the telltale white of sorcerous fire. One of the Thirteen Apostles must have made it. There were



three more explosions in quick succession.

“Fuck!” Orphen ran back toward them. He could see an indeterminate shadow dodging the flames at high speed. The black sorcerers’ screams echoed among the explosions.

Leki had changed positions before Orphen even passed by him, but the Deep Dragon didn’t move. The second Leki’s eyes fell upon it, one of the shadows froze and collapsed as if colliding with a wall.

Leaving Claiomh at Leki’s side, Isabella ran to meet up with Orphen. A moment later, Majic joined them.

Putting a hand to her ear, Isabella picked out the orders among the screams and muttered, “The battle’s still going. We were taken by surprise. It’s Red Dragons!”

“They’re attacking even though they know we have Leki with us? What’s got them so worked up?” Orphen asked, still running.

Isabella shook her head to say she didn’t know. She had a long blade in her hands, though Orphen had no idea where she’d been hiding it, and her expression was harsh. “The attacks are coming from underground. They’re trying to kill just us, attacking from the Deep Dragon’s blind spot. There’s nothing we can do!”

“Then—” Orphen started, drawing his own blade like she had.

There was no warning. The ground didn’t rise up, and it didn’t split. Sharp, bladelike attacks simply sprang up from cracks in the ground too small to be seen. Orphen parried one with the back of his dagger and took half a step around, holding up his left arm to release a spell—but by that time, the Red Dragon who had jumped up from within the ground was already gone.

The next attack came from behind, just as Orphen expected. He avoided it without even turning to look, moving the spell he was already composing to aim behind him instead.

“I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!” A flash of white flames illuminated the area.

Once he'd made sure that the Red Dragon tentacle coming out of the ground had burned away to nothing, he raised his hand to signal Isabella, who was watching him with wide eyes.

"You can deal with it if you just get the timing right. Stay calm."

"What if you can't get the timing right...?"

"If you team up and give yourselves fewer blind spots, you'll be able to focus more. It's true that one Red Dragon is powerful enough to kill dozens of us, but we also each have enough power to take out a Red Dragon. Majic! Watch her back!" He went through all that in rapid succession, then realized that the area around them was as bright as midday. One of the Thirteen Apostles was trying to burn the ground in a large area.

Orphen clicked his tongue. "Trying to burn up all the enemies in the ground, eh? But you'll just die from lack of oxygen if you do that."

He looked at Isabella and Majic. Claiomh was being protected by Leki, and he could probably leave Majic to Isabella, since she'd been one of the top casters at the Tower.

Isabella returned his look with a nod, catching on to what he was thinking. He returned the gesture, then took off running once again, heading for the area where the fighting was most intense.



"Sneak, sneak, sneak... Pretty impressive that I can really be quiet while I'm saying that. I guess I'm not totally quiet, since I'm saying it, but I still think it's impressive. As impressive as someone who really pitches faster when they yell. Yeah."

As Heartia muttered to himself, he looked down at the notebook in his hands. There was a small piece of paper with tiny text scribbled on it. "Let's see, next is..." The text looked like nonsense, but a message revealed itself if he read it in a certain way—he confirmed what his instructions were.

"Hmm, hmm. At this time, the priestesses have to perform maintenance on the connections between passages 230 to 256, so they won't be observing here... Can't believe Lottecia can figure stuff like this out if she puts her mind to

it. It's pretty impressive. Guess that's why she's a part of the sanctuary."

He raised his head and looked down the hallway. It looked like it just extended straight forward, but Heartia's sharp eyes caught sight of the rift in space ahead of him. This wasn't something normal people could see. You needed to be able to perceive sorcerous compositions as well as slight changes in the atmosphere.

"Five...three...nine...there we go." With a nonsensical countdown, he passed through the rift.

There was no change in what he could see beyond the rift. It was just the same hallway, still extending forward. But Heartia was satisfied with his progress, and continued forward quickly.

*So this is the sanctuary,* he confirmed to himself in the passageway sandwiched by white walls.

The whole sanctuary was a huge sorcerous device with Wyrd Glyphs left in all sorts of invisible places. The residents of the sanctuary were protected by these Glyphs—they had been for a thousand years.

And it would all come to an end in ten days.

Heartia sighed, remembering what Azalie and Colgon had told him. *I don't know how I'm just supposed to believe them... Is it really true? What's everyone gonna do if ten days pass and nothing happens after all? I bet they're so confident about all this weird stuff that they don't even have a Plan B.*

As he thought to himself, he proceeded down the hall, turned, waited for the correct moment, and jumped through space. He hid from the observers Colgon called the "priestesses" and headed for the depths of the sanctuary through the shortest possible route.

*No matter how far I go, there isn't anybody around... This place really is empty.*

The quiet and clean reminded him of a hospital. A forgotten hospital that no longer had patients or people looking after them. One that couldn't fall into disrepair.

“No, that’s not right,” he muttered to himself, stopping. He looked back at the note and confirmed to himself—he was about to do things in the wrong order.

But he hadn’t muttered those words because he was about to make a mistake.

“That’s not it... This is a graveyard.” Correcting himself, he took his final step forward.

A strange vague sensation assaulted all of his senses, but he remained calm and waited for it to pass. There was a slight resistance during this transfer as he jumped to a deeper floor. Once it was over, there was new scenery before his eyes.

This was no passageway.

There was a high ceiling and wide walls, a hazy white boundary that gave the impression he stood within a strange void.

There were only two points that had any meaning to him.

One was the spot where he himself was standing. The light here was dim, but there was just barely a shadow at his feet.

The other was the enormous door on the wall in front of him.

There was nothing about the door that could be called ornamentation, but it stood out a lot from its surroundings, its black color making it look awfully grave. It looked about five meters high, and equally as wide. It had to be so huge, Heartia supposed, because of what had to come through it. He smiled wryly at the thought.

“Guess this is it,” he said. “The door to the Aymankar burial chamber...” A door that the ultimate sorcery prevented from opening.

The door that was the linchpin of the Aymankar barrier.

At least, that’s what Colgon had said. The sanctuary was currently throwing everything they had at this door, and they couldn’t put a scratch on it. They had sent fighting power out of the sanctuary for the last ten years, taking back sorcerous weapons and trying them here, but none of them did a thing to this door.

“A door that won’t open, huh?” Heartia murmured once again, dropping the notebook in his hand along with the piece of paper stuck between its pages. He let a fireball drop from his hand, which burned up the notebook.

*I’m sure I won’t be coming back here...* He stomped out the burning scraps of the notebook, put his hands in his pocket, and waited.

He was waiting for some change to occur.

Eventually, he felt someone behind him.

Heartia turned around casually. Figures appeared one by one, surrounding him. The first two were shaped like humans, but their eyes shone with an unnatural green color. Their fingers were stretched out to several times their normal length, which Heartia took to mean they were ready to fight. They were Red Dragons.

There was no way he’d win if they fought, of course. Heartia shrugged and put his hands behind his head in surrender.

The next things to appear looked like women, though Heartia didn’t know if they were appearing in response to his surrender. These also looked human—they resembled the Celestials of legend, but the eyes they glared harshly at him with were faint blue, not green. Their hair was dyed green.

“Are you the priestesses?” Heartia asked, focusing on the women despite the aggressive entrance of the Red Dragons.

The priestesses didn’t nod, instead expressing their acknowledgment much more aggressively. “We are the priestesses who revere the sanctuary,” one of them spat. “So you’re the intruder... How did you appear here? There’s no way you could possibly evade our detection and make it here.”

“Oh... I just got a little lost,” Heartia told them, playing dumb.

Colgon had told him that there were two places the priestesses never stopped observing. One was this door. The door to the Ayrmankar burial chamber.

“We’re taking you into custody,” one of the priestesses said, and Heartia didn’t resist.

On the inside, he was listening to another voice, repeating what Colgon had



told him.

*“There already aren’t enough priestesses, and they have to deal with Azalie and Leticia right now. The burial chamber is a vital part of the sanctuary—if an intruder appears there, the priestesses will be taken by surprise and might divert attention away from somewhere else important. They’re not used to intruders penetrating so deeply. I’ll take advantage of your distraction to seize the other location.”*

*It’s not like I’m helping you out, Heartia reminded his memory of Colgon. But we are old acquaintances. I’m just glad they’re only arresting me, he added with some anxiety. If they said they were gonna kill me, then I’d have to figure out how to fight them.*



The sun rose over the burned wasteland, illuminating the dull scorch marks on its surface.

Orphen sighed, looking out over the hunched over human beings sitting on the ground. He felt an itch on his cheek and scratched it, finding dried blood and sand sticking to his face.

He wasn’t stopped. He was walking. His destination was a gathering of several Thirteen Apostles, one among them a large man spewing orders in rapid succession.

“Just keep the wounded from panicking. You can use the medical supplies—sorcerous healing likely wouldn’t be enough. I want Squad Two to meet up with Squad Four. What? What’s the issue?”

“Well, it’s just...there are fewer survivors in Squad Two, but the leader of Squad Two, Prick, is older than the leader of Squad Four, so should the new squad be called Squad Two or Squad Four...”

“Just vote on something stupid like that. But I want them to answer to me whether I call them Squad Two or Squad Four, all right?”

Each time he ordered something, one of his men nodded and ran off. Orphen slowed down and arrived next to Pluto right when he finished giving his final order.

The large man glared at him in irritation. “What is it? You here to give me some pointless advice again?”

“No.” Orphen didn’t bother rising to Pluto’s provocation. “I just want to know what the damage is from that attack.”

“And what’ll you do with that information? You want to use it to lower our morale?”

“Stop that—no, I’m partially at fault too. But I won’t tell you guys to go back to the capital anymore.”

“Oh?” Pluto clearly didn’t believe him.

Orphen sighed. He put his hands on his hips and groaned. “If the sanctuary’s attacking this aggressively, then we’ll need some fighting power even if we just want to negotiate with them.”

“Are you still saying things like that?” After he spoke, the Demon of the Capital seemed to realize his volume. He picked up his warhammer from the ground and shouldered it before more quietly saying, “Let’s talk while we walk. We stick out like a sore thumb here.”

“All right.”

As they walked, Pluto made his mountainous frame even more noticeable by producing loud footsteps as he moved. Orphen knew that the man could move without making the sound dust made when it hit the ground, so he was being so loud either to intimidate him or because he was just that tired. Orphen figured it was probably the latter disguised as the former.

Pluto started things off, speaking haltingly. “You’ve seen how the sanctuary does things now. You still believe they’ll negotiate with us? You’re not Maria Huwon; I can’t imagine you’re that naive.”

“I’m not pretending at pacifism here. But this situation is ridiculous. Say you conquer the sanctuary—what do you do then? If you have no way of dealing with the goddess coming in ten days, then what difference will it make?”

Pluto’s frown deepened. He was no doubt annoyed by the validity of Orphen’s argument. “Let me tell you the same thing, then. It’s even more idiotic

hoping that the sanctuary will show us compassion. Their whole scheme is to survive by abandoning everyone who isn't them."

"That's why we have to get hold of them both," Orphen told him.

"What do you mean?" Pluto asked instead of immediately arguing with him. He'd finally managed to pique the man's interest.

"There's no point in conquering the sanctuary by force—we need to take it without damaging it. I'm starting to think that's what Leki—that Deep Dragon—what he's trying to do."

"That's still rather abstract. I hate the way you're speaking right now; it sounds exactly like that master of yours... Speak plainly."

"Well, I've been trying to figure out what Leki's goal is here. Considering the strength he wields, he doesn't need us, so why is he protecting us?" Orphen indicated the black wolf some distance away. Claiomh had led him over to the heavily wounded to get him to help them. "There must be some reason why Leki needs us. That's when I got this idea. Leki can bring us to the sanctuary, but what Leki can't do is convey his will to someone else. He has Claiomh as his familiar right now, but even they aren't able to understand each other completely. It's impossible for a Deep Dragon."

"But the Deep Dragon couldn't get through the barrier either. So what do we do about that?" Pluto asked the obvious question.

Orphen thought for a moment before answering. "If there was really nothing we could do about the barrier, then the sanctuary wouldn't bother attacking us, right? There's a way through somehow... There must be."

"If we could just break through it, we'd be able to force our way right into the sanctuary." Pluto glared at the invisible barrier.

Orphen kept pushing him. "We need someone who can negotiate with the sanctuary as the representative of humanity. To the Union of Lords, that's probably the lord of the Imminent Domain. To the Continental Sorcerers' Association—"

"That would be me, a council member," Pluto responded boldly.

Orphen nodded without comment, satisfied that they were on the same page. He moved on to the next item on his list. “If we can make use of the sanctuary’s facilities, the lord at least seems to have a plan...”

“What kind of plan?”

“Well, I don’t know its chance of success, but if it goes well, we could drive back the goddess without having to shrink the Ayrmarkar barrier.”

Pluto closed his eyes in thought, reminding Orphen of his relatively young age. The man was in his forties, if he recalled correctly. Old enough to be called experienced, but still young to be leading such a large number of people. The Demon only hesitated for a short time.

Turning back to face Orphen, he said, “Krylancelo of the Tower of Fangs. You didn’t have a surname, is that right?”

“Hmm? Y-Yes, sir. My parents didn’t leave me with anything.” He ended up answering like he was still a student when Pluto asked him a question about his past.

The Demon of the Capital went on, unconcerned, “The Razor-Sharp Successor, eh...? I’ll certainly acknowledge you as such. If Childman Powderfield were still alive today, I bet he’d be standing right where you are now.”

“...Thank you.”

“I seek your counsel like you’re my equal despite your youth out of respect for that man. So let me ask you. And I want you to answer in good faith—not out of any respect for me, but out of respect for those who died here. What do you suppose our chance of success is?”

Pluto’s tone was almost threatening. Choked by it slightly, Orphen cleared his throat before answering. “We need to consider the fact that this is a plan the sanctuary’s already dismissed... For that reason, I think our chances of success have got to be pretty low.”

“Yet you still...”

“Yeah. There’s no other way to prolong the continent’s survival.”

“What is the plan, specifically?”

He was prepared to be asked the question, but Orphen was hesitant to actually explain it himself. Lowering his voice, he said, “It’s to use the sanctuary’s summoning device, the Second World-Seeing Tower, to summon the god-killing Demon King Swedenborge to destroy the goddess. The lord can apparently use the device.”

“...Mind if I point out a flaw in this plan?”

“I’m guessing it’ll be the same thing I asked the lord about. But just listen. I was skeptical too,” Orphen said bitterly, but Pluto’s voice was still cold.

The Demon of the Capital slowly said, “Let’s not debate the question of the demon king’s existence. After all, we have a monster of myth and legend staring us in the face right now.”

“Right.”

“What guarantee do we have that the demon king will fight the goddess?”

“None. But I received a message from the Celestials once, and I interpreted it to mean that the demon king could be used to kill the goddess.”

“I received a report about a similar message. You’re talking about the Demon King play, right?” He shifted his warhammer on his shoulder and asked, “Then what guarantee do we have that the demon king can *beat* the goddess?”

“None. I don’t even know what the demon king really is, and what powers it might have,” Orphen said glumly.

At least Pluto was considering his words in good faith. His tone wasn’t exactly warm, but he wasn’t being harsh either. “Say we kill the goddess, what do we do about the demon king then?”

“That’s exactly what I asked. The lord seemed to be aware of the danger as well. But there’s nothing on this continent that can fight back against the goddess anymore. The sanctuary is spent. So all we can do is call on power from the outside.”

“We can’t tell anyone else about this... It’ll affect morale,” Pluto said heavily. As a commander, he had to concern himself with such things. It was true that this plan wouldn’t give anyone hope—it was basically nonsense that would only



confuse people.

Orphen shrugged his shoulders in agreement with that. “Unfortunately, this is our best plan. The Celestials made this summoning device. I’d like to believe it’ll allow us to send him back as well. At least consider it.”

“I don’t have much choice. I’ll have the spirits consider it too—if those whimsical, useless fools will even help us anymore. Maybe they can even improve it somehow.”

Pluto strode away, likely wanting to contact the spirits somewhere where his subordinates wouldn’t be able to overhear him. Orphen didn’t want to leave him alone considering the attack by Jack Frisbee the night before, but he didn’t follow. He figured the Demon of the Capital wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. And the man in the priest’s robes likely felt the same way.

*Jack Frisbee, eh...?*

The lord had called the man in the priest’s robes an evil spirit.

*“The last to stand in the way of superhuman sorcerers like you will be regular people like me.”* Orphen recalled the sneering man’s words.

*“I am an evil spirit.”*

*“An evil spirit possesses my body. That is the source of my power.”*

In their first encounter, Orphen had lost, powerless to resist—he remembered the taste of blood and death on his lips and exhaled a disgusted breath.

You could say he was easily killed by the man. The only reason he was still here now was because Damian Rue had revived him.

And after their second encounter...

*Doppel X. If all traitors are called that, then I’m one too. Pluto, the lord of the Imminent Domain, the pope of the Kimluck Church, everyone’s Doppel X.*

Everyone’s lying to everyone else...

Everyone’s betraying everyone else...

He could hear Almagest’s words—it was because there was only despair on

this continent.

*Even Master... He was raised by the Celestial Isterviva, but he had to betray her in the end too. The sanctuary right now is betraying the entire continent. The existence of this continent itself is a betrayal of the gods. And the gods have betrayed the world and are trying to destroy it.*

The demon king might simply choose to act the same.

Would he betray them? Orphen asked himself. It had taken sacrifices to summon the World Book with the World-Seeing Tower. The Celestials had put all their hope into the possibility that they could summon knowledge from outside like in the Demon King play. And now humanity was putting their hope in the demon king. Would he betray that hope when they summoned him?

Even if he did, they couldn't blame him... After all, there was only despair here.

Orphen had killed the Death Instructor Name and the Red Dragon Helpart with his own hands.

He'd seen the deaths of Quo Vadis, Azalie, Irgitte, Winona, Ryan Spoon...and countless others.

*"I just want to answer Ryan Spoon's despair. As one who despairs in the same way."* He remembered Jack Frisbee's words once again.

"That's—" Orphen muttered the words he hadn't been able to say the night before to himself. He felt the anger smoldering in him lighting up. "That's not something you have any right to say as one who only despairs. Claiomh was the one who answered Ryan's despair."

There was only despair here? That wasn't true.

With those words still on his tongue, Orphen walked away quickly. It would still take some time before they could figure out a way past the barrier. There were tons of things he had to do in the meantime.



Isabella of the Maria Huwon class. Isabella of the Thirteen Apostles.

Neither of those titles meant anything to Majic. He'd never heard of a

sorcerer named Maria Huwon when he was in Tefurem, to say nothing of her student Isabella.

He had to admit being somewhat annoyed that Orphen, who had so easily fought off Pluto, a sorcerer lauded as one of the strongest on the continent—no one else seemed to see it that way, but that’s how it had looked to Majic, at least—trusted someone like Isabella who Majic had never heard of before so much.

However...

He’d leaped at her and had almost grabbed her, but was in the air before he knew it, and on the ground a second later, left asking himself what had just happened. When he picked himself up off the ground, Isabella was just standing there without any sort of combat stance. She hadn’t even moved from the spot where he’d tried to grab her.

It was like his body had gone right through her. Isabella looked down at him, frowning.

“Hmm... I see...” she groaned.

Before she could say anything else, Majic yelped from the ground, “N-No! This is just... It’s just me, it’s not that Mas—that Orphen did anything.”

“I can tell,” she said bluntly. She folded her arms and cocked her head. “So Krylancelo hasn’t taught you how to fight yet.”

“H-He did teach me a little bit, at least.” Majic stood as he spoke, figuring that he’d remain at a disadvantage if he was still seated. As he dusted off his pants, Isabella continued speaking without moving closer to him.

“He just taught you how to cast spells?”

Hearing a bit of blame in her voice, Majic hurriedly said, “Y-Yes, but that’s because I—”

Isabella waved her hand, cutting him off. “Listen, I’m not trying to criticize Krylancelo’s teaching methods, so you don’t have to keep leaping to defend him.”

Majic went silent, finally realizing that her irritation was with him and not

Orphen.

Isabella asked something else. "Majic, what's bothering you?"

"Nothing..."

Isabella smiled. "I have an idea from what we were talking about earlier. It's the Sorcerer's Misery."

"Huh?"

"That's what they call it when a sorcerer hits a wall and gets depressed," she said, her shoulders slumping like she was sighing. "Any sorcerer worth his salt has to train to control their abilities and is called upon to use those abilities for something or another, so they end up brooding about it. And kids have always got stuff they're worrying about anyway."

Majic couldn't say anything in response.

Isabella smiled knowingly. "It's a path everyone takes at some point. I have, and I'm sure Krylancelo and the Demon of the Capital Pluto have as well. But you figure it out eventually. Stretch as much as you like, you can only reach so far."

"So I should just be satisfied with what I've got?"

"No, but at some point you need to realize your grasp is limited while you stand in place. If you wish to reach the horizon, then you'll have to walk."

"Have you reached what you grasped for, Isabella?" Majic asked without thinking.

She looked around as if to confirm something. If she was seeing the same things he was, she was looking at the ruined wastelands, their destination far in the distance beyond their reach, her injured companions, the gusting winds, the broken-up clouds in the sky... That was about it.

No, the one thing she couldn't see was herself. Isabella, black sorcerer of the Thirteen Apostles. Hair wind-tossed, face dirty with sand she couldn't clean away. Probably hurt in some way from the battles she'd faced up to this point.

"Not...here, I'd say," she murmured. "But when I think about my comrades who have died, I suppose I should be proud that I'm still here."

Proud.

The word stuck in his chest. Majic hung his head and thought to himself—he had never once felt pride.

*I see... It's not about being strong or weak, or what you can or can't do. It's pride, and I'm the only person here who doesn't have that...*

“Umm!” he shouted without thinking and then blushed.

“Yeah?” Isabella asked, looking surprised.

“Umm, you can fight, right, Assistant Professor Isabella? Judging from how you reacted just now...”

“I’m Maria Huwon’s best student. You should consider me an equal match for her.”

When she showed him a determined smile, Majic pressed toward her. “Then, umm, at least until we reach our destination...could you teach me a technique or something?”

“Huh?”

Majic indicated his chest. “I’d like you to teach me something I could use to stop someone.”

“Were you actually listening to me, Majic?” Isabella asked, crossing her arms.

Majic nodded and lowered his voice. “I think it’s true that I’m simply reaching in vain right now, but as I am... I can’t protect anyone. In that attack just now too, all I could do was let you protect me.”

“I suppose that’s true...” She thought for a time before reluctantly looking back toward him. She waved her finger at him, arms still crossed. “If you can understand what I’m about to tell you, there might be something I can teach you.”

“O-Okay.” Majic nodded, groaning, and she gave him a harsh look.

“First, you can’t ever use this unless you’re in a situation where fleeing is impossible.”

“Okay...”



“Second, if you use this technique on someone, you must not attack them any more after that.”

“...Huh?” Majic didn’t understand.

Isabella took a breath and continued, “Basically, you can only use it as a surprise attack. You land one hit on your opponent and then you have to run. Don’t trust it too much.”

“All right...” Majic answered this time.

Finally, Isabella unfolded her arms and grabbed Majic’s shoulders. She squeezed and said, “And you must not screw it up.”

“I...”

“Don’t talk back. I won’t teach anything to someone who thinks he’s gonna screw up. Especially not if it’s some short-term, stopgap thing. It’s not just your life at stake here. You’ll get the person you’re trying to protect killed too.”

Majic realized he was holding his breath, overwhelmed by the intensity of the woman in front of him. There was a light in her eyes that allowed no hesitation or compromise from him.

*But... I’ve never won anything that could be called a fight before.* Majic couldn’t stop trembling when he thought that.

He’d been through danger before, certainly—but every time, he’d been saved by someone else.

*But that’s exactly why...* He calmed down and expelled the heavy air in his throat through his nose.

“Okay,” he said.

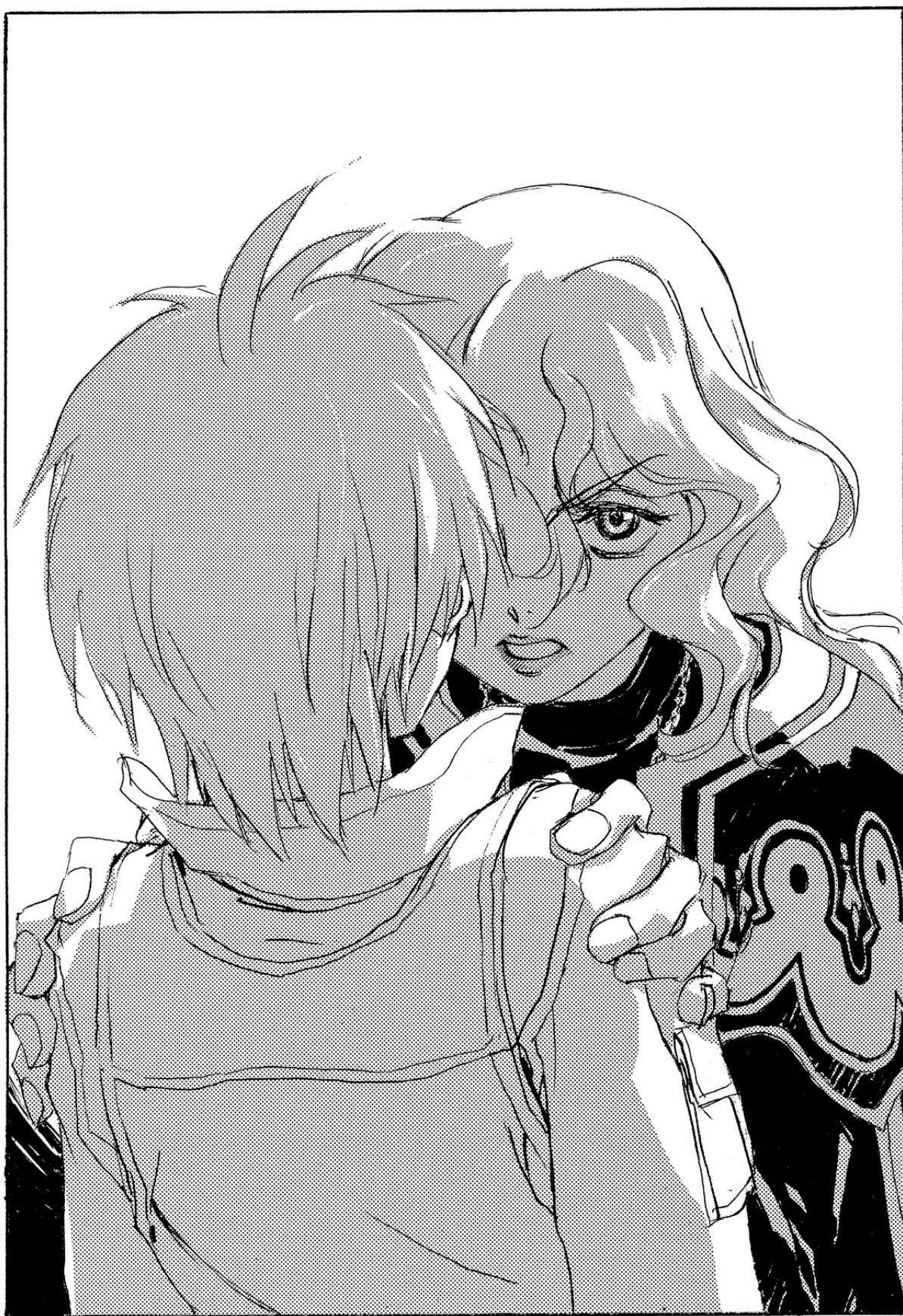
Isabella immediately let go of his shoulders. She took a few steps back, adjusted her posture, and told him, “I’m not taking on some troublesome apprentice. I’m just teaching you a single skill. It’ll be up to you to decide when and how to use it.”

“Okay.”

“Also, I just want to make sure you understand this, in case you’ve got the

wrong idea about something.” The look she gave him was already saying what she was about to. “I can’t teach you nicely like Krylancelo.”

The pride he was just starting to grasp slipped through his fingers and Majic began to regret what he’d asked.



## Chapter IX: Pettiness and What Is Not Pettiness

Leticia MacCready spent the long rest period she'd been given in her room, head bowed and hands in her hair. How much time had passed with her elbows on her knees, her back hunched over? Her sighs and groans led her to question if she even had the sanity to keep track of time.

*What is this room, anyway...?* She scanned left and right despite there not being enough in the room to see to justify looking around.

Should she just be thankful it wasn't a cell? What she'd even offer thanks to, she had no idea.

The walls were white, the room filled with clean air. The door locked from the inside and there was no one outside of the room keeping watch. The bed she was sitting on was clean too, with fresh sheets every time she returned. The only hint of color in the room was a singular painting on the wall, and the crimson fur of the strange cat sitting in the middle of the floor. The cat sat so still it could be mistaken for a decoration, but after leaving the room and sitting in some stupid meeting for hours, she'd come back to find it had shifted in its sleep. It didn't respond to touch or sound, though—despite obviously being alive. Even when she picked it up, it didn't respond in any way.

It was one of the six Kings of Beasts on the continent, the beast of peace, a Fairy Dragon.

After seeing it yawn several times, she'd finally come to that realization.

"They've lost all five of their senses." Azalie's explanation was short. She must not have been very interested in the beasts. "They can't take in any information about the world around them. It's terrifying to think about, isn't it?"

Azalie, her spirit sister, was in the same room. This was another fact that annoyed her, but Leticia shook her head, enduring her irritation. She was plagued by a vicious drowsiness and fatigue, but her irritation prevented her from sleeping. If she could lose all her senses like this cat, perhaps then she

could finally get a good night's sleep...

Azalie's voice came to her ear. "You should get some sleep. There's still two hours until our next meeting."

Leticia looked up, cursing under her breath. Azalie was standing at the door to the room like nothing was wrong.

It wasn't completely accurate to say she heard her voice with her ears. Leticia sighed, looking down at her hair tangled in her fingers. An even more depressing feeling bit at her. Azalie's voice didn't travel on sound waves; it came from somewhere else. This room was definitely bugged, Azalie had told her, but she'd also said that they had no way of listening in on their conversations.

Though initially dubious about it, Leticia had gotten used to conversing with her through thoughts instead of her physical voice.

"How many days have we been here?" she asked her.

Azalie responded quickly. "Three."

"And how's our progress?" Since she wasn't speaking out loud, she couldn't put her feelings into her words—no, maybe it was the opposite. She wasn't sure, but she didn't hide the dark thorns in her emotions as she asked the question.

Azalie gave no indication of whether she'd sensed them or not. "We haven't made any," she said, her face neutral. "Krylancelo and the Thirteen Apostles are still stuck at the spirit sorcery barrier."

"If you know how to get them through it, you should just go and tell them."

"This deadlock is necessary right now." She didn't hesitate to say this either.

"...What do you mean?" Leticia tried to ask her, though she got the feeling Azalie wouldn't answer. When they were conversing with feelings like this, they could read each other's responses before they came, which was neither convenient nor inconvenient. But when she could predict the answers to her own questions, it only increased her senseless irritation.

Azalie didn't answer, just as she predicted. Instead, she said something



slightly off-topic. “It seems the priestesses’ attention is split between us on the inside and the Thirteen Apostles on the outside right now.”

“...And on the goddess appearing above the sanctuary,” Leticia groaned, pointing at the ceiling.

“Yes,” Azalie agreed.

“I never thought I’d be killed by an actual goddess.” Leticia rolled her own emotions over her tongue. They didn’t taste like anything. They were neither bitter nor spicy.

But her throat was parched.

Azalie must have been sensing the same thing—even though she was one of those cursed spirits? Leticia wondered, but she didn’t ask.

Once again, Azalie spoke without revealing any of her emotions. “It’ll happen soon...she’ll complete her invasion into the continent.”

“Is there really something we can do? Is there any hope at all?” Leticia raised her voice—her real voice—admitting her own hopelessness.

When Azalie glared at her in reminder of the priestesses’ ability to listen in, she swallowed the words she was about to continue with.

“I’m only here because you said there was a way to save everyone...”

“The Celestials left behind many relics for precisely this time. Including a certain Childman they pseudo-transported to the future.”

“And will those relics amount to anything?”

This debate was one they’d had countless times before, any time there was an opportunity to have it, so Leticia knew what Azalie’s response would be—each time this happened, she said something vague and tried to change the subject.

“Since there’s a possibility Wyrd Glyphs will cease to function when Aureole meets her end, we should really summon the demon king as soon as we can...”

In the end, Azalie didn’t know the answer herself. Leticia sighed, despairing.

“Why are those priestesses against it?”

“Probably because it’s too risky...” Azalie said straightforwardly.

Leticia waved her hand, incredulous. “Still, they’re insane. Trying to abandon the rest of the continent and just save themselves.”

Their meetings were really just them speaking to one of the priestesses—specifically that composed one, Preenia. Each time they spoke, Leticia wanted to dig her nails into the woman’s skin, cold and pallid from spending her whole life in a place like this and never once being in the sun.

The man in the priest’s robes had only shown himself on that first day, but since then, Red Dragons had presided over their meetings. The priestesses had never shown themselves without a guard. It had been one-on-one in that first moment when she was beckoned to the assembly hall, but they’d also used some device to try to take over her mind.

“I don’t know if they’re just being cautious or if they’re cowards, but they only care about themselves.”

“I wonder about that.”

Leticia was shocked by Azalie’s disagreement. “...What do you mean?” she asked, and Azalie gave her a calculating look.

“Nothing,” she said eventually. “I just feel like I can understand them. I don’t think surviving is all that important to them. If they remain trapped here in the sanctuary, they’re just forced to continue with their obligations.”

She kept going without giving Leticia an opportunity to interrupt her. “There’s no life for the residents here. They spend every day just struggling to maintain that barrier. And the people they’re trying to abandon glorify their lives while knowing nothing about the sanctuary. I wouldn’t be surprised if the priestesses are just doing this out of spite.”

“Would they really be so petty?” Leticia said disgustedly when Azalie was finished.

“Of course they would. Isn’t everyone like that? *You* try turning into a monster and having your friends chase after you and try to kill you for five years. With your back against the wall, even you would kill Master without so much as—”

Leticia snapped. “You brought that on yourself!”

But Azalie just kept going after Leticia’s outburst, like she was talking about someone else. “You think that matters? If it was an accident, would it suddenly be okay, then? That’s not the really petty thing, though. When I got back to my original body, I suddenly started regretting killing Master and my old friends. Wouldn’t you say that’s far more petty?”

“...I don’t want to talk anymore. I feel sick. Leave.” Leticia hung her head again, a hand on her chest where it felt like the contents of her stomach were about to come up into her throat.

Still, Azalie didn’t vanish. She whispered as if to torment Leticia, as if to curse her, “I’m sure the people here would regret it if they actually succeeded in abandoning the continent... It’s easy to feel guilty after the point of no return.”

There wasn’t much difference between what was pettiness and what wasn’t. Despite her feelings on the matter, Leticia understood perfectly well what Azalie wanted to say. Maybe it was because their senses really were connected somehow. The sheer depth of her understanding surprised her.

“If you can’t accept the sanctuary abandoning the outside world, then you have to consider that the sanctuary can’t accept taking risks for the outside world either.”

Even covering her ears, she could still hear Azalie’s grief-tinged voice.



“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

When Orphen released the heatwave at the Red Dragon disguised as a child, it split down the middle to avoid it—then both halves charged at him to attack.

*Which one’s the real body?* He knew that one of them was fake from his battle with Helpart. The fake would disappear a few seconds after detaching from the real one. He had no way of telling which one was which simply by observing. As the two halves of the Red Dragon came at him, green eyes shining, Orphen swiftly composed another spell.

“I bound across thee...Snowcappedand Mountain!”

He jumped back, dodging the hands thrust out by both Red Dragon halves, and opened up some distance between him and them. He couldn't say whether he had bought enough time for the fake to fade with that one move, so he thrust his arms out before he landed.

"To my fingertips, Shield of Amber!" A wall of compressed atmosphere sprang forth between him and his enemy, buying him more time.

Repelled by the wind pressure, the Red Dragon staggered back. The fake finally reached the end of its life then, fading to nothing in an instant.

Staring down the remaining half, Orphen shouted, "I release thee—"

But the Red Dragon he was targeting suddenly disappeared.

Letting his spell fizzle, Orphen drew a knife with one hand. *Did it flee underground? ...No!*

The location where the dragon had been standing quivered...like a warping picture, or the view through a pristine window.

*It went transparent?!* The dragon wasn't fully invisible. If they weren't outside and at a distance from each other, it would have been a lot easier to spot it.

Light couldn't fully pass through it, and it couldn't transform its glowing green eyes. The closer the dragon got, the more clearly Orphen could see those things. He readied himself as those floating green eyes approached.

The moment he was about to thrust out his fist, the transparent Red Dragon showed itself once more. And it shriveled and sunk down.

*It's splitting in two again!* Orphen clicked his tongue as his enemy crumbled before him. He focused everything he had into sensing his adversary. But before he could find it...

*Wham!* He was struck, but not directly.

The impact seemed to come from the ground. He turned around and the Red Dragon, who must have come up from the ground underneath him, was frozen, split in half.

Pluto's enormous warhammer had scraped off about a third of the Red Dragon's body, embedding it in the ground. That must have been the impact

he'd felt.

When he'd leaped, he must have gotten closer to the Demon's position. Of course, damage like this didn't mean anything to a Red Dragon—it quickly crept out from under the warhammer and began to transform back into human shape.

But this time, Orphen's chanting beat it.

"I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!" A fireball with an extremely narrowed range enveloped the Red Dragon's form.

Incinerated in an instant, the dragon collapsed into a lump of charcoal. Even this wouldn't kill a Red Dragon, but burning its surface would prevent it from transforming. This was the quickest way to take away its ability to fight.

Orphen rubbed his chin, finally able to catch his breath.

Shouldering his warhammer, Pluto asked him, "You get a little distracted when you fire off so many spells in quick succession, don't you? Getting exhausted?" His tone was somewhere between a strict teacher listing his mistakes and simply concerned.

Orphen nodded wearily. He sat down with a weight that affirmed Pluto's words. "Even if they're not trying to kill us, when they come at us every day like this..."

"Looks like it's calmed down for now," Pluto said neutrally, glancing around the area.

Orphen looked at the Thirteen Apostles nearby as well. Those who still had the strength to fight were grouped around the injured, protecting them. Orphen was one of them. But compared to yesterday and the day before that...they were gradually running out of those who could fight.

The Thirteen Apostles hadn't suffered any casualties since Leki had joined them, but day by day there were more and more of those whose injuries would require time to heal or those who had simply lost the will to fight.

Eyeing Leki, who sat in the middle of the wounded to protect them, Orphen muttered, "The enemy is avoiding fighting with Leki, focusing on wearing down

the humans.”

“I agree.” Pluto had naturally noticed this as well. “I have to admit it’s effective, considering we can’t leave this spot.”

“But the sanctuary’s losing even more fighting power than we are,” Orphen said, indicating the immobilized, smoldering Red Dragon.

Pluto disagreed verbally, not shaking his head—he was probably trying not to make any negative gestures in view of his subordinates. “It’s been five days since we were stopped by that spirit sorcery barrier. Our morale is nearly at its limit. The next time we take a casualty, that might be it.”

“...That’s awfully pessimistic of you. Did something happen?” Orphen asked, curious.

The Demon of the Capital just gave him a wry grin. “No, I’m just being objective. That’s all.” He left.

Orphen groaned, still sitting. *Our limit, huh? He’s right...*

When he returned to the rest of them, that reality was plain to see.

The sorcerers were visibly exhausted. Physically and mentally. When Pluto had mentioned their limit, he was speaking quite literally.

They had been stuck here for five days now. In that time, they’d been attacked again and again, more and more of them getting injured each time.

The Thirteen Apostles were not novices when it came to combat. Palace sorcerers were treated the same way knights were; they were first-rate sorcerers who worked directly for the Union of Lords. They had plenty of unofficial missions they went on. Orphen thought to himself as he recalled the face of the Sorcerous Stabber he’d encountered on his way to the Imminent Domain, Seek Marrisk. The court sorcerers here were all doubtless first-class casters, far more powerful than Orphen, who’d abandoned his training at the meager age of fifteen. They should have all far surpassed him in combat skills, morale, willpower, and every other area.

*But they’re still not enough when we’re up against dragons...*

That being said, it wasn’t as though they’d started out at their full capacity,



but these last few days had stretched their wills to the breaking point.

The black sorcerers didn't even talk, merely sitting in gloomy silence as the wind blew around them. No one so much as raised their head when Orphen passed by. Orphen suddenly found himself remembering Lottecia. Something about the despair the Thirteen Apostles were all beholden to brought to mind her dark eyes.

*Come to think of it, the lord was about to tell me something about her after she left. I should see what he was going to say...*

He looked around. He couldn't see the lord among the gathered sorcerers. But instead of him...

"Haaa ha ha ha! You look like you're so tired you're about to die, black sorcerer!" A familiar voice—no.

Orphen sighed and muttered, "Wow, that takes me back..."

He slowly turned around. Actually, he was about to pass by without taking notice, but the dwarf brothers were standing there—Volkan and Dortin.

Volkan's voice rang out, especially loud among the silence of the area. "Ha ha ha! A brief moment of peace is but brief! What awaits you is unending terror and pain! Writing/Script: Me. Sponsored by: Me. It's all your fault for letting your guard down around me, so dwaaah!"

Dodging Volkan's sword swing, Orphen punched the dwarf into the ground before turning to the other one—Dortin—and narrowing his eyes. "So?"

"Er, there's not really much I can say if you're asking me about my brother's antics..." Dortin said plainly.

Orphen decided to ignore that. Stepping on Volkan's head to pin him in place as he flailed about, his face buried in the sand, Orphen asked, "Are you guys bored or something?"

"It's true that we don't really have anything to do," Dortin said bluntly.

Orphen was at a loss for a moment before he remembered something and asked, "I don't suppose you two can pass through the spirit sorcery barrier, can you?"

“Brother charged at it a few times in his boredom, but he flew back in a really amazing way every time. It was like...a rainbow, I guess.”

“No good, eh? Wait, why was it like a rainbow? Not that I really care...”

He hadn't really been expecting anything when he'd asked, but he felt like he was understanding less and less as time went on. He sighed. “Maybe there's no way to get through it. And even if there is, there's no way for us to understand how dragons think...” he grumbled.

Orphen turned around, noticing footsteps approaching. They dragged slightly as the lord of the Imminent Domain approached, faking an injury with a cane. Almagest showed himself with an affected smile.

The lord thanked the dwarves and then turned to Orphen. “How are you going to negotiate with them if you can't understand the way they think?”

“Do you know something about them? Or about that barrier?”

Orphen glared at him, but the lord shook his head, unperturbed. “Nope.”

“You were planning on attacking the sanctuary with the Deep Dragons, right? Are you sure you didn't know about this barrier from the beginning?”

“I'm sure it would be thrilling if I said, ‘actually, you're right’ here, wouldn't it?” He laughed as if that were a truly funny joke. “But old friend, that wouldn't be fighting fair. It's true that I have somewhat expanded perception compared to you, but I'm not omniscient. Just like how your considerable strength doesn't make you omnipotent. I'd predicted the sanctuary's defenses, but I didn't think a Deep Dragon would be unable to penetrate them. It was rather short-sighted of me.”

“So you're not smirking at us because you knew this would happen?” Orphen pressed the point, ignoring the lord's sarcasm.

He got down from Volkan's head and stepped closer to the lord, though he didn't touch him. He stopped close enough that his fingertips would be able to reach him and said, “You seem rather calm for how much you keep saying we don't have any time.”

“Well, I'm not busy running around doing pointless things like you are. I have

plenty of time to keep calm.”

Suddenly... “Now! He’s once again made the foolish mistake of looking away from the immortal fighter, the Great Vulcano Volkan! Hence, I shall use this opportunity to launch my fatal surprise strike, uhh—doryaooooah!”

After a shout, Volkan leaped up from the ground and flew at Orphen in a rainbowlike manner, so he hit him with his fist to slap him back down to the ground.

Volkan had charged speedily at him only to be handily repelled, but he still had the strength to mutter to himself as he crumpled to the ground. “Why... Why did my surprise attack fail...? I should have been able to kill him after reuniting under the same sky...”

“How many seconds do you think passed between when you said ‘now’ and when you attacked?”

“Hmm... Now that you mention it, maybe I should have just gone with ‘die, you bastaaard’ after all...”

Volkan popped back up, surprisingly unhurt, though Dortin ran over to help him anyway.

Looking down at the two of them, Orphen sighed and asked, “The reason you two are here is just because you can’t get back through the wasteland on your own, right?”

“Yes.” Dortin nodded.

Orphen looked between the two brothers.

Now that he thought about it, he didn’t know that much about how dwarves lived. He had never tried to find out. Common knowledge said that they lived on the southern tip of the continent, confined to their own territory where they lived quietly in an area of extreme cold. Orphen had come to know a little more than that from what he had experienced, which couldn’t really be called common experiences. He knew they were sturdy, and that they would find a way to survive most of what was thrown at them. They were smart...either equally or more intelligent than humans.

If the ghosts the white sorcerer Damian Rue had summoned were to be believed, there were male and female dwarves, but he wasn't sure if that meant the same thing it did for humans. There was a story about a scholar traveling to Masmaturia to learn about dwarven biology. Dwarves had a similar society and family makeup to humans. The scholar decided that it wasn't that difficult to understand dwarves—at least compared to incomprehensible creatures like dragons.

But the scholar realized that dwarves had a strange custom. Once per month, they would gather in a square at night and all clobber each other until morning. What kind of festival is this? the scholar asked them. The dwarves said it was propagation.

One hundred dwarves gathered in the square. They spent all night indiscriminately fighting one another, and when morning came, all of a sudden there were one hundred one of them. Not even the ones who had been fighting could tell who had multiplied.

The scholar soon grew ill after witnessing such an occurrence, and was still recuperating today. People said his study was sure to be published after he fully recovered.

That scholar didn't actually exist. A lot of people believed it was nothing more than an urban legend. Orphen had never taken it very seriously himself. But he found himself remembering that story now, and he found himself somehow more inclined to believe it than he once was.

After bowing his head for some time, Orphen finally looked up and opened his mouth. What he was about to say weighed heavily on his heart. "Your debt..."

Volkan swiftly cocked his head. "Hmm? What debt?"

"...It feels like you really don't remember it. Well, that's fine. You don't need to repay it anymore," he spat it out quickly. "I'm gonna bring it up to Pluto tonight. We should send the wounded and those who can't stay here for much longer back to the capital... If you go with them, you should be able to make it back there."

He looked down at the two of them and they were just staring up at him blankly, not looking particularly surprised.

He waited a few moments and there was no reaction.

Orphen finally pressed them. "What, you don't have anything to say?"

"Well, we've fallen for that one once in the past..." Dortin said coolly.

Orphen shook his head. "No, I'm not asking you to do something in exchange or anything this time."

"Really?" He was very incredulous.

Orphen nodded, his eyes narrowed. "Yeah."

"You're not gonna say, like, 'I won't ask you to do anything in return, so repay your debt instead'?"

"No, there'd be no point in that..."

Finally, Orphen felt like he saw Dortin's eyes move behind his glasses, though Volkan still didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

Opening his mouth wide with shock, Dortin shouted, "Wh-Wh-Wh-Why?! I thought that was the one thing that would never happen even if the world was destroyed!"





“I mean, it’s currently *about* to be destroyed,” Orphen said unenthusiastically before ending the conversation and turning around.

But the lord was already gone.

“Orphen!”

Orphen turned around, hearing his name, and saw a blonde girl standing there with her hands behind her back, looking up at him.

There was a bit too much distance between them for them to talk, so Orphen took half a step toward her and asked, “You need something?”

It was a stupid question. He knew that even before seeing her face. It was likely that she’d called out to him precisely because she did need something, but even if she didn’t, it wasn’t like she couldn’t call out to him anyway.

Still, he was curious as he looked her over. She wasn’t with Leki. He glanced back at the camp where the injured were gathered and found him still sitting there like he had been before. But he didn’t think Claiomh had parted with Leki since they reunited at the lord’s mansion.

She cleared her throat and told him, “I just thought we could talk.”

“Hmm...” Orphen nodded, not seeing any reason to turn her down. Then he remembered what he was currently up to, so he waved an arm and told her, “I’m looking for the lord. Can we walk and talk?”

“Sure.” Claiomh jogged after him.

As they walked side by side, Orphen began, “Is anything different?”

“Huh?” Claiomh gave him a blank look.

“Well, I was just remembering the girl who was a Deep Dragon’s familiar that we met before,” Orphen explained. “Mental dominion like that can affect your personality.”

“Hmm... I can’t really tell, myself. Is there anything weird about me?”

“We can’t tell either. It’s not like you have a mark on you or anything,” Orphen told her, not sure how to proceed.

Claiomh giggled. "I guess you and Majic are a little weird."

"Well, circumstances being what they are... Come to think of it, I don't see Majic around." He glanced about.

The wasteland extended all around them, but it was so vast that there were plenty of protrusions and shadows all around them. It wouldn't be that strange if he were simply out of sight at the moment.

Claiomh stopped for a moment, her hair blowing in the wind. Orphen almost stopped with her, but at the last moment, he decided to keep walking, figuring she'd catch up to him quickly.

"Maybe I really am weird... I've been thinking."

"Is that a new experience for you?" Orphen responded without really thinking himself.

She jogged a little to catch up to him and then said, "Mm... It kind of is."

"Yeah? I don't think that's really true..."

"Orphen, what are you thinking about right now?"

Orphen sighed. "How to get through that spirit sorcery barrier, I guess..."

"Are you really? Or are you just making sure that you can't?"

This time, Orphen did stop. Taken by surprise, he looked back at Claiomh, who was also stopped, staring at him like she was waiting for him to respond.

She rubbed her nose with a small smile like she was embarrassed. "Maybe that's all thinking really is...or at least, that's what I've been thinking lately."

"I guess so," Orphen admitted. "Why, do you have some kind of idea?"

"No... I'm sorry. I didn't actually have anything else to say." She stepped past him, taking the lead this time. Looking back over her shoulder, she said, "It's five more days now?"



“Hmm? Yeah.” Orphen nodded.

Claiomh held five fingers up and looked down at them—with that empty, emotionless look she sometimes got. “It’s kinda like...how do you even react to that, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“What kinda stuff can you do in five days?”

“Hmm?”

She folded down her fingers in thought. “You know, like... I was thinking, what’s something I want to make sure I do? Is there even anything I can finish in five days? I don’t really think I have anything like that. I wouldn’t be satisfied with just five days. No matter what I did.”

“Claiomh, is something wrong?” Orphen asked, sensing something strange from the things she was saying.

But she just shrugged as if to dodge the question and said, “I mean, you haven’t said anything but ‘yeah’ this whole time either, Orphen.”

“Oh...” Orphen went quiet for a moment before hastily following up with, “No, it’s not like I haven’t been listening to you or anything, really, I just...” He tried to make excuses for himself, but Claiomh held up a hand to stop him.

She smiled and said, “I’m sorry. I know you have a lot of stuff to worry about right now, Orphen. I’ll tell you when things have calmed down a little.”

The girl spun around and left, and as Orphen watched her golden hair sway in the winds of the wasteland, he simply stood without chasing after her. She wasn’t far enough away that he couldn’t still call out to her, but he would have no idea what to say if he did. There was a mysterious unease in his heart, but he knew he didn’t have the guts to figure out what it meant exactly.

Stewing in self-hatred for hurting someone with his ineptitude, he thought to himself, *Our limit... Now that I think about it, Claiomh is probably more worn out than anyone else.* That could probably be said about himself as well.

Five more days. It was too little time to do anything, averting their doom included.



She knew it was getting to be that time.

She hadn't looked at a clock and no one had come to get her, and she still couldn't gauge how much time had passed by looking out a window here in the sanctuary, but still.

Leticia MacCready rolled out of bed, sure that the time had come. She almost stepped on the Fairy Dragon sleeping on the floor, and it made no move to get out of her way. Leticia twisted in annoyance, managing not to fall.

She straightened up and ran her fingers through her hair to get it back in place. She knew there was no point in worrying about how she looked at this point, but she was all too aware of how she must look from the stress and fatigue eating at her. Suddenly she found herself wondering what would happen if she tried to go back to her routine right now. She had wandered the wasteland, scrabbling to survive even if she had to kill people to do it; her skin was breaking out from the pressure of something so ridiculous as the end of the world; and she was on the verge of losing her mind with an evil spirit possessing her. Her wounds had been forcefully healed by Azalie, but she still felt the phantom sensation of a bullet ripping through her gut.

Since coming to the sanctuary, she'd had to engage in fruitless debates and fend off constant attempts to dominate her mind. She could barely sleep and she had no allies. She was worried about Heartia going missing, but there was nothing she could do to find out where he'd gone.

*Am I even worth anything anymore?* She smiled bitterly, unable to stop her cynical thoughts. *I wonder. If I went home looking like this, would Tiffes even open the door for me?*

*Could she go home?*

She shook her head in answer to her own question. *I want to go back... I don't want to do this anymore. The world can just be destroyed for all I care. Five more days... If everything vanishes...there's nothing I'll miss.*

There was nothing, since that day five years ago.

Her siblings had been more important to her than anything else, and they'd

scattered that day, leaving her with nothing.

“...Really?”

When she heard the voice, she clenched her fists, a mask of rage coming over her face. Leticia searched for her enemy, unmistakably ready for combat. But she didn't see the spirit anywhere in the room. She was sure that it was Azalie who had projected the thought into her head. It wasn't teasing, it wasn't sneering, it was just baffling, and she was sure she'd heard it.

“You think there was something left for me?!” she asked, grinding her teeth.

Azalie still didn't show herself, but her voice now sounded nearer to Leticia's ear. “You had a starting point all your own.”

“That's twisting things!”

“But it's not petty.”

Azalie appeared right before her eyes.

Leticia held her fists at her sides, just staring at her.

“Let's keep fighting,” Azalie said quietly. “Krylancelo will be here soon.”

She was being too direct. Unable to bear it, Leticia looked away and spat, “I'm sure he's getting sick of this too.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. Krylancelo chose the role he's playing, after all. So did Heartia and Colgon.” Azalie sounded sure of herself.

Leticia shook her head again. “What are you trying to say? That I'm the only one spinning my wheels—”

“I won't deny that. But isn't that better than the alternative? I don't even exist on the same plane as the rest of you anymore. I'm a ghost.”

“If you're aware of that, then why are you still here, huh?” As she looked up at Azalie, all of the emotion left Leticia. Her rage and sadness didn't last long. Not while she was mired in despair.

Leticia reached out. She wanted to pull her sister close to her, but her fingers felt nothing when they touched her. Azalie didn't even seem to notice that she was trying to touch her, as if she could no longer even mimic having a physical



form.

She took half a step back. "I'm sure as long as my mouth works, I'll be able to keep fighting with you at least." She faced the door. "Come on, let's go. It'll be easier for everyone else if we're attracting the priestesses' attention."

"...Yeah." Leticia nodded, closing her hands after they failed to connect to anything.

She should have known already that even if her hands couldn't feel it, there was still something there.

## Chapter X: Resolution and What Is Not Resolution

“Krylancelo... Krylancelo...”

Someone was shaking him and calling his name. His mind snapped into alertness at the agitation of the voice. Orphen shook his head as he woke from a rest too short for him to say whether he’d had a dream or not.

“Ugh... Time to switch already?” He squinted up at a darkened sky.

Orphen sensed a hand on his shoulder. He felt it trembling with unease as it attempted to lift him up.

“No. I’m sorry for waking you up early, but something’s weird.”

It was Isabella. The night sky didn’t illuminate much, but even in the low light, Orphen could tell she was pale. Obviously, there was no way she would be wearing makeup in a place like this, but it wasn’t just that—her face was unnaturally pale.

Orphen sat up and there was a sudden flash of light. Probably a sorcerous explosion some distance away from him. He felt vibrations in the earth.

“Another attack?” Orphen asked without waiting for Isabella to speak up.

But it was too quiet for that to be the case. Orphen looked around, a deep sense of strangeness settling in his chest. The wasteland looked the same as it always did, the darkness of night still present all around them.

While the sporadic attacks every day had left the black sorcerers sleeping lightly, they’d somehow managed to avoid suffering casualties yet. Though they were exhausted, the Thirteen Apostles were starting to get used to the situation they found themselves in; with Isabella this uneasy, Orphen knew something significant had changed, which made *him* uneasy. Maybe they’d finally taken some casualties, Orphen thought, remembering Pluto’s warning that their morale would really collapse in that event.

But Isabella’s words betrayed his expectations. “No... Though we’re always

getting attacked. But the location's a little off."

"The location?" He looked around from where he'd been sleeping.

Orphen slipped out of his blanket, checking through his combat gear to see if he could move his stiffened body. There was nothing wrong with him. He'd like to think so, at least. There was nothing wrong with his surroundings either. The scenery nearby seemed to be the same as it always was. This resting spot had tents for the off-duty black sorcerers to sleep as well as spaces set up for the injured. Though Orphen was sleeping curled up in a blanket slightly outside of it, unwilling to stay with the Thirteen Apostles for whatever reason.

But there was an enormous black wolf lying on the ground protecting them... He blinked.

"Leki's gone."

"It's not just the Deep Dragon. There are more missing." Isabella was finally getting to the point now. She took several deep breaths to try to quell her confusion. "Master Pluto, Miss Maria...the Numbers are gone too. It's only about half the Thirteen Apostles who are left, including the injured..."

"What?"

It was hard to comprehend, but Orphen wiped his face with his hand, trying to keep calm. He tried to list off what exactly he needed to verify first. His thoughts were frighteningly sluggish, as if the brief rest had actually left him *more* tired rather than less.

"What about Claiomh and Majic?"

"I'm right here," came a nearby voice.

Orphen focused and finally spotted Majic standing behind Isabella. He was hunched over like he had been dragging his foot.

"...Are you hurt?" Orphen asked him, but he shook his head.

"No, I just...twisted my ankle."

"Oh." Not feeling any particular way about that, Orphen turned back to Isabella. "What about Claiomh?"

“She’s gone,” Isabella said darkly, but frankly. At times like these, she always spoke plainly.

Orphen pretty much expected that answer after hearing that Leki was gone. Punching one hand, he continued down the list. “The dwarves and the lord?”

“The lord is gone. The dwarves are still here. They’re with the group going back to the capital. Though they haven’t left yet...”

Orphen was surprised to hear that. “Pluto allowed a group to leave?”

Last night—only a few hours ago, really—he had said the same thing he’d been saying about it this whole time, that he’d think about it. And if that meant the same thing that it had meant previously, it was the same as saying no.

Isabella, who worked for Pluto, seemed to be just as surprised about it. She frowned solemnly and said, “Yes. I thought it was strange at the time.”

“Where did everyone who disappeared go?” He asked the question because Isabella was still so dependable even at times like these, but he knew it was stupid even as he said it.

Isabella fixed him with a look and then asked, “Do you think they ran?”

“Pluto, Miss Maria, and the elite of the Thirteen Apostles, huh...? If it were anyone else, yeah, I would think they had run.”

“The Deep Dragon too.”

“It’s hard to believe they were all killed in an instant before anyone realized it too. Especially if Leki’s among them.”

Hitting upon the only remaining possibility, Orphen looked up at it. The starry sky stretched out over the vast wasteland, and the black forest far in the distance... Before it stood the spirit sorcery barrier, though it wasn’t as if it was visible to him.

“If they went past the barrier...” he heard Isabella whisper. “Pluto explained that if they managed to get through it, the spirits would instantly teleport them to the sanctuary. Maybe they got through it somehow and all went to the sanctuary before we noticed...”

“Not somehow...” Orphen said with a sigh. “The list of missing persons is too

perfect. This was intentional. Pluto left behind just the injured and the bare minimum of people who can fight to protect them.”

The winds blowing during the day and at night were coming from different directions and they were different temperatures, but they were both heavy with the dry sand they brought with them. Orphen stood still, glaring in the direction of Fenrir’s Forest as he felt like the harsh wind was scraping away at his skin. He had let his guard down—he thought back to Claiomh’s halting words, the words that she’d almost said to him. The repetition of pure exhaustion and short bursts of rest had paused his thinking entirely.

*Is it all over now?* He felt goosebumps forming under his clothes.

If Pluto and the rest were already at the sanctuary, then the fighting had probably already started. Since he’d taken the lord, he most likely was going along with the lord’s plan to capture the Second World-Seeing Tower. Orphen had brought up the lord’s plan with him as a point of negotiation, but he might have just pushed Pluto to further action.

Swallowing spit hard with sand, Orphen turned back to Isabella. “How many people are still here? Who’s in charge at this point?”

“It’s mostly young people. I guess Dick’s taken charge since he’s the oldest. He’s also leading the group who were going back to the capital. We’ve got the wounded, those who can no longer fight...and just a few people who still can.”

“Including us?”

“Yes. Including us.”

There was another explosion, and a rumbling underneath his feet that shook his stomach. It was trying to get him to remember something. Whoever Dick was, he was probably fighting off Doppel X somewhere at a slight distance from them right now. The sounds of fighting he’d been able to hear for a while now were sporadic, and he hadn’t yet decided whether that was a good thing or not. But now that Leki was gone, they were more or less cornered.

Orphen pulled his shortsword from its sheath, gave it a look, and put it back. “Can we fight off the attack?”

“I don’t know. If Miss Maria had at least stayed behind...” Her voice had

remained firm until now, but it shook for the first time when she said that.

Orphen looked around out of the corner of his eye—the wounded were still in their tents, but in the quiet of night, those with sharp ears had probably heard their conversation. A panic might start soon.

He gave Isabella a pat on the shoulder and asked her, “Miss Maria went with Pluto?”

“...Yes,” she said weakly.

He gave her another pat on the shoulder, harder this time. “Then it was for something more important than staying here and protecting you. She’ll be able to keep Pluto from doing anything too rash.”

He saw another explosion somewhere far off. Pointing at it, he added, “So let’s just leave that to her and not think about it. I’m sure she left you here because she trusts you. We should prioritize what we need to be doing right now—for the time being, we need to make sure as many people as possible live through this.”

“You’re right.” Isabella nodded.

Before making eye contact with her, Orphen shifted his gaze, beckoning Majic forward. “Team up with Isabella and protect the tents of the wounded. I’ll go check on the attack—”

“I disagree,” Majic said before Orphen could finish. While Orphen was taken aback for a moment, he continued, “You’ll be in trouble acting on your own, won’t you? You’re the one who needs help, Orphen.”

“No, I—” Orphen started, but he cut himself off when he felt someone touch him on the arm.

It was Isabella. “You’re exhausted right now, aren’t you? I’m doing okay. And thanks to the Deep Dragon, even most of the injured are at least mobile.”

“...All right,” Orphen acknowledged. “Then Majic, can I ask you to help me? Isabella, what did you mean about the location earlier?”

Isabella grimaced. “I don’t have the full story myself... How should I say this? Up until now, the enemy has been afraid of the Deep Dragon, so they’ve been



taking shots at us from afar just to keep us in check, right? But tonight, they're even farther away."

"They're farther?"

"Yes. Like they're trying to draw our forces away."

"That's a bit too obvious to be a diversion, isn't it?" Orphen asked, focusing on the faraway combat sounds.

Hesitantly, Isabella said, "I think so too... Dick knows that as well, which is why he sent me here. And even if it is a diversion, they're using their own fighters to draw ours away, so it doesn't feel like they'd have enough forces to come at us in two places anyway..."

"Yeah."

"I can't imagine they'd do something so meaningless, personally. Let's be careful, and only do the bare minimum. First, we've got to neutralize the threat."

"Yes."

After Majic responded, Orphen began to move. Since it was so far away, it didn't make sense to run, but he hurried in the direction he could hear the fighting coming from.

He didn't turn around and look back at Isabella as she faded into the distance behind him.

He'd lied, and he was sure she'd noticed.

Orphen thought about that as he moved.

Isabella must have known. It was all a lie. The only reason Pluto and Maria had left him, Isabella, and the other young sorcerers here was because they knew entering the sanctuary was a suicide mission.

They'd known bringing them all here would mean sacrificing the entire Thirteen Apostles, but right up until the end, Pluto hadn't been able to bring himself to do it—so he'd decided to head into the sanctuary without them. If he hadn't, then he would have explained everything to them and *then* gone.

*Damn you, Pluto... That's why you're a hero, I guess.* He couldn't call the decision foolish considering their circumstances.

No matter what they did to resist, their chances of success were incredibly low. With a big group or a small one.

All he did was choose to limit the collateral damage. If he were in Pluto's position, Orphen even thought he might do the same thing.

He could see a few figures in the sorcerous light that was swelling far in front of him, but it was only for an instant, and he couldn't tell what it was they were fighting.

He wasn't acquainted with Dick, but he'd heard the name before in relation to the Thirteen Apostles. It was probably Dick Simosoon. He was a young sorcerer from the School in the capital who was a candidate to join the Numbers one day. There was one sorcerer who had been performing particularly well in the attacks these last few days. Maybe that was him.

"Orphen."

Orphen looked over his shoulder when Majic called his name. He didn't stop, since they were hurrying. "What?"

"Did Claiomh disappear without saying anything to you too?"

Orphen glanced at him. The boy looked hurt. "No. She tried to tell me something, but I couldn't figure out what it was."

"Why... Why would Claiomh do this?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't think I've ever really understood anything she was thinking," he muttered, and Majic didn't pursue the matter further.

They hurried onward, listening to the sporadic explosions coming from their destination, until...

"Stop!" a strong voice commanded them.

They turned around to find a young sorcerer with an angular physique coming out from behind a rock. He approached with both hands up, signaling his friendliness.

Red Dragons could disguise themselves as humans, so Orphen remained cautious as the man approached. Dragons' eyes would flash green before they launched an attack, so as long as he was watching for that, he could probably avoid being caught by surprise.

"What's the situation?" Orphen asked the man.

He was probably being cautious of the same thing. He didn't get closer than he needed to, answering quietly, "Everyone's—"

Instantly, the man's body bent sideways.

The sudden severity of the movement had Orphen thinking it was a Red Dragon's transformation at first. In reality, the man had been struck with such force that he was snapped in half at the waist, falling to the ground. He didn't scream. Instead, he expelled some sort of liquid from his mouth. Giving a little bit of moisture to the dry earth beneath him, the man died.

Orphen didn't see anything. He just sensed the man's life ending. Before he could shout, before he could click his tongue, he was jumping backward. Something sharp and heavy cut through the darkness before him. From one blind spot to another. It flew at him with a powerful lunge forward.

He knew exactly where Majic was. As he jumped back, he grabbed the boy's collar and dragged him with him. It was lucky he didn't trip.

He still hadn't laid eyes on the enemy, but the black figure was jumping around faster than humans possibly could and always launching blows from his blind spot.

*Jack Frisbee!* He named the enemy he couldn't yet see.

He dove to the right and left, relying entirely on instinct as he tried to find an opportunity to counterattack. He didn't have time to weave a spell. Even a defensive spell would only barely deflect one of his blows. And an offensive one... He would probably be hit before he could finish composing it.

There was a sound, and Majic's body, which he'd been dragging with him this whole time, suddenly became a lot lighter. Orphen was horrified, thinking the boy had been blown away; that he hadn't been able to protect him.

Then he looked down at his hand and realized what had happened. Majic's jacket had torn, and Orphen was only clutching the piece of it in his hand. Majic himself was kneeling on the ground. Orphen almost relaxed for a moment, but the situation was a lot more dangerous now. If he continued to dodge and left Majic behind, he was sure Jack would kill Majic.

*I have to stop and face him—*

No. Orphen stopped, but he was looking at something else and not his enemy. Majic was still on the ground, closing his eyes and focusing instead of trying to get up. Lacking though it might be, Majic was swiftly composing a spell. An attack spell.

*He won't make it in time.* He wouldn't make it by himself. But realizing his intention, Orphen began to compose his own defensive spell.

"I spin thee, Halo Armor!" he shouted.

And a moment later, Majic's voice rang out too. "I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!"

An explosion tore through space outside of the wall of light that surrounded Orphen and Majic.

There was a blast and the ground shook...and after that, the sorcerous wall vanished. Orphen stood on the still-shaking ground and looked around. That blast would hurt anyone it hit no matter what sort of monster they were. But of course Jack was nowhere to be seen.

Orphen caught his breath and said to Majic, "That's Thirteen Apostles tactics."

"Huh?"

"That coordination. One person defends while another attacks. You saw them doing it against Leki, right?"

"Oh...yes," Majic said vaguely as he stood up.

"We're out of the enemy's range now," Orphen went on. "Thanks to you."

Majic hung his head and Orphen looked away, raising his voice.

"Jack Frisbee! Come out here... You have to fight me first! If you start

attacking other people, you know I'll be able to get behind you easily!"

"I wonder about that," came a rough voice.

The huge man suddenly appeared right in front of Orphen. Orphen had no idea where he'd been hiding. His black priest's robes seemed to dissolve out of the darkness.

The large man continued matter-of-factly, "You're the last ones left." He didn't even spare a glance at the destroyed body at his feet. "I've taken out almost all of your fighting power. I could just go home right now, in fact." He seemed to remember something then. "No, I suppose that's not true... I can't leave you alive."

"Our main force isn't here," Orphen spat. His emotions were honing his concentration to a sharp point. "Or do you really claim that you've killed Pluto and a Deep Dragon?"

"That would be impossible... Pluto wouldn't fall for this. I guess I missed him," Jack said simply. "If you think I am a mere diversion, then naturally you would send the bare minimum of forces to deal with me. And a small force is easy for me to deal with..."

"Majic," Orphen said, still facing Jack. As he spoke, he honed his senses to their peak in order to draw out the absolute zenith of his combat abilities.

"Y-Yes..." Majic answered.

"I'll handle him," Orphen continued.

"But..."

"I'm going to fight him using every single technique I have in my possession. You won't be able to keep up with me, will you? We can't work together if neither of us knows what the other is about to do."

He sensed hesitation in Majic's response, so he spoke quickly in order to quash the boy's doubts.

"I want you to do something more important than beating this one assassin. I want you to report the situation to Isabella. No matter what you have to do. There's most likely another squad of Red Dragons attacking the tents of the

wounded. I want you to protect them.”

“M-Me?”

“Hurry up and go... You’re the only one who can do this right now!” He raised his voice and Majic didn’t protest further. The boy spun on his heels and raced back the way they’d come.

Watching him run out of the corner of his eye, Orphen thought to himself, *He’s faster than I thought, huh...*

He couldn’t just start thinking of the clumsy boy as reliable, Orphen had to admit to himself. Majic might be one of the weakest casters on the continent. The same as he was five years ago—the inexperienced, unskilled, rash Krylancelo who had nothing but the title of Razor-Sharp Successor going for him.

Him then and him now.

Majic and him.

He didn’t know what was different between them. Or would the differences slowly fade over time, like how Krylancelo had naturally become Orphen? Maybe none of this would end up mattering.

*So Majic... Figure it out.* Orphen clenched his fist and stood ready, thinking to himself. *You’ll become a caster of your own one day. It doesn’t have to be now. It’ll happen one day, for sure.*

He was about to step forward when Jack’s voice stopped him.

“Chase him away, eh?” said the man in the priest’s robes, hanging his arms at his sides and letting the rim of his hat cover his eyes.

Orphen glanced at his right arm, but whatever damage it had sustained was healed now. They must have had ways of healing it back at the sanctuary.

Orphen steadied his breathing once more. He waited for his five senses to dominate the area just like he might control it with sorcery. He spread his awareness out all around him, sensing farther and more acutely.

“No. I almost went myself,” Orphen told him, and Jack’s mouth widened, his lips ticking up at the ends—it had to be a smile, but it didn’t seem anything like

one.

“You’re not strong enough to protect them all... No one is. That fact is just another seed of despair. No one can avoid it.”

“I’m not going to protect them all. I’m not a superhero. I’m just a sorcerer.”

Orphen didn’t panic in the face of his enemy. No matter what Jack told him, he wasn’t about to falter. Not yet.

He imagined one move—the best possible move—to stop an opponent completely. No, it wasn’t just his imagination. Jack Frisbee’s fist could do exactly that.

Orphen thought harder as he stood ready. “I’m going to stop you here, though,” he told Jack. “It took me a little long, but it happens now.”

“Acceptance of one’s fate also fosters despair. Your fate cannot be avoided.” Jack ignored his provocation and continued, “You’re going to use every technique at your disposal to fight me, eh? Let me tell you, then... This power that I wield is the power of an evil spirit.”

He raised his right hand and pointed it at Orphen. “An evil spirit possesses my body. An evil spirit that cannot be exorcised. That is where my life began.”

Orphen remained silent, continuing to hone his concentration as he listened to the man in the priest’s robes ramble about his past. The words merely became part of the world he desired to create.

Jack had been keeping his voice down until now, but he suddenly spoke much louder. “One morning, I woke as a child to find that several of the bones in my body were broken. A local apothecary spotted a demon in my shadow. My parents tried every method they could to exorcise it and eventually grew weary...” He spread his arms wide as if to embrace something. His great, mountain-like arms towered toward the night sky.

“Nothing could be done. At its worst, the bones in all four of my limbs were broken. My body was mangled. Eventually, I couldn’t walk anymore. One day, when I could no longer even speak, my parents declared that it was I, myself, who was the demon. It was a country village. There’s no point in blaming them for being uneducated.”



“You’re free to talk, but I’m going to attack you when it’s convenient for me,” Orphen warned him, but Jack ignored him.

Still, Jack Frisbee left no openings as he spoke. His voice swirled around Orphen like a formless, inescapable evil spirit haunting a bedroom.

“I needed to escape, but I couldn’t even walk. That’s when I began to hear the voice. I obeyed the voice and I was able to protect myself. By obeying the voice, I was finally able to move my broken arms and legs. I fled the village...and entered a town. I must have been lucky. I met a martial arts teacher and learned what the evil spirit was for the first time.”

Jack made a sudden movement, but it wasn’t to charge forward and it wasn’t to attack. He snatched the hat from his head and threw it at his feet. His exposed head revealed lumps of flesh all over his face and forehead.

“My muscles have been abnormal since birth. They were powerful enough to crush my bones. My master taught me how to use that power. I had to waste nothing in my movements so that my bones could handle the strain. I had to make the smallest possible movements I could. The voice I heard taught me the most powerful martial arts completely naturally.”

Without even pausing to breathe, the man in the priest’s robes took a different stance, his face bared. He extended his fingers instead of making fists, holding his hands palm-up at his waist. The hands like spears declared his intent to do even more damage to the human body than he previously had.

This stance was to strike Orphen down, split him in two, and tear him apart.

“Honing one’s fists requires diligence. Living itself was diligence to my fists for me... If I did not do so, I would break my legs simply by standing. I would break my elbows simply by holding my hands out.”

“...Sounds like sorcery,” Orphen finally said.

Jack smirked. “It does, doesn’t it? You can’t live unless you control your power and your emotions.”

There was no more need to speak.

His enemy was an amalgamation of despair. Jack Frisbee despaired too. And

he was most likely an enemy Orphen could not defeat with his fists... He rained despair down on even his opponent.

Orphen steadied his breathing and clenched his fists. He made his entire body into a lethal weapon. A thin, sharp knife that would pierce through his enemy upon contact.

From his vast combat experience, he called up similar situations. *It's the same as with Name Only... But Jack Frisbee's abilities are natural, and he's extremely skilled at controlling them. There's no point in comparing them.*

Jack Frisbee raised a battle cry.

With the shout that would likely extend from this moment into Orphen's nightmares tonight, he struck out mercilessly fast.

The speed made it look like a head-on blow, but it was anything but. Jack charged at him with strange footwork, weaving left and right, the darkness coiling around him as he moved. The rhythm of his movements made Orphen feel like he was seeing things, lending further power to Jack's arms as they whipped toward him.

Orphen leaped forward silently, but not to take the blow and not to flee it. Jack's arm struck out like a whirlwind and Orphen sank low and spun to get past it...

He struck twice, hitting no vital areas, but making his fists connect with Jack's body. He didn't cause the juggernaut any pain though, merely finding out just how powerful his enemy's body really was.

If they were both charging forward, they would have simply passed by each other—but Jack wasn't moving forward. He leaned into one of his swings, easily turning. Every move he made was unnaturally quick.

And Orphen didn't intend to simply show the man his back. He found an opening in his enemy's relentless pursuit and slid into it, shoving Jack with his shoulder and back. It was like shoving a boulder.

*But he's not a boulder...* Orphen told himself, stepping forward to add impact to his blow. *He's walking on two legs. I can take him down!*

The difference in their weight was rather stark, but Jack knew that Orphen wasn't going to run, so he pulled back, fearful of contact. Two more hand strikes came at Orphen and he moved into Jack's blind spot to dodge them, aiming at his enemy's ankle with the edge of his boot—he aimed to sever the tendon with his counterattack, but Jack swerved once again like he was dancing, putting distance between them.

Orphen jumped out from inside Jack's arms like a tornado was spitting him out, spinning in the air to change directions. His momentum put him a decent distance away from Jack in an instant. Jack didn't chase him, going back into the same stance he'd taken earlier.

Orphen changed his stance. Half of it was the same, but he'd drawn his shortsword from its sheath and raised his back foot—he wasn't attacking with his fists this time, so he didn't need to be so low to the ground. He could build up some speed like this.

Jack struck forward with his right arm without hesitating. Orphen evaded the blow and attempted to hit Jack's elbow with his blade, but Jack pulled it back faster. He was no match for the other man's speed—Orphen told himself—unless he got his timing right.

He swung the blade sideways quickly, limiting the area available for his enemy to move. At the same time, Orphen drew two throwing daggers from a hidden pocket with his left hand. In a scooping motion, he threw one at Jack's throat. Knowing he would dodge it, he threw the other one at Jack's elbow.

It shouldn't have been easy to dodge two daggers flying at him from different angles—one from above, one from below—but Jack repelled both daggers like he was swatting a fly. No...

It was only one dagger that fell to the ground. The moment Orphen noticed that, Jack flicked his wrist, throwing the other dagger back at him. Orphen didn't dodge the blade as it glinted in the dark. He knew that if he dodged, Jack would be there to finish him off. He held his breath and readied himself, taking the blow with the chest of his combat uniform.

The bladeproof uniform repelled the dagger with only a scratch to the leather. Still, the sharpened blade had pierced his armor. Orphen ignored the pain and

took another step forward. They were close enough for their toes to touch now.

They stood, directly facing each other. It was foolish to wait for his enemy to make the first move, but Jack was always going to be faster than him.

*I'll evade his first attack and finish things from super close range!* He vowed, and...

An impact came.

For a moment, he had no idea what had happened. He felt something dark and heavy overwhelm all five of his senses like water cascading down over his head. He couldn't breathe.

His instincts were commanding his body to do something—flee—twist—jump—it all pushed his sense of logic to the side so there was nothing for his mind to do in the moment. Feeling his body go flying, Orphen struggled against sleep. It wasn't fatigue. An unimaginable amount of pain was closing the world off from him.

*I was hit...* The thought finally came to him when his back hit the ground and his senses returned. He must have reflexively tried to defend himself. He was still conscious. But the pain piercing through his stomach to his back, ignoring all his internal organs, was preventing him from breathing. Orphen screamed at himself like he was scooping up shattered fragments of something, *Get up... Stand up!*

For just an instant, the pain disappeared.

He grabbed at the ground, dragging himself upward. As he expected, Jack was stepping forward to finish him off.

He had no time to determine which parts of his body were still functioning. He dragged his feet, retreating as quickly as he could, but he'd forgotten that with Jack's reach, he couldn't escape the other man by retreating. He wouldn't make it in time. Jack's right fist connected with his gut.

There was no pain.

He thought maybe his sense of pain had gone flying with his body, but that wasn't it.

The force of the blow sent him backward as Orphen realized the difference. That blow hadn't punctured the armor of his combat uniform.

Holding his stomach, Orphen looked at Jack, confused. The man in the priest's robes just stood there in the follow-through position of his attack. But his right fist had transformed.

"It seems that blow destroyed my fist." He spoke like he was talking about someone else, smiling wryly as he lowered his arm. "To think I let my target into my range and screwed up the actual strike... It was my blunder. Or maybe your reflexes."

"Got crushed, eh?" Orphen groaned, somehow getting back into a combat stance. The blow he'd taken hadn't been fatal, but it had still dealt him some serious damage.

Jack switched to a stance with his left fist at his waist and said, "If I do not use truly perfect strikes, it destroys my body. But... I have only lost one fist. You took a blow to a vital area. You can no longer move like you have been."

*I know that.* Orphen's body wanted to collapse on the spot—it was crying out, bile rising in his throat, desperate to writhe on the ground and shut down completely. But Orphen stuffed all those impulses into the back of his mind, maintaining his fighting stance.

"What's your reason..." Orphen squeezed his voice out, his lungs spasming with pain. He slowly, carefully asked his question. "What's your reason for fighting so hard for the sanctuary? It doesn't seem like you value your life at all."

"One is to honor the death of my friend," Jack answered, then lowered his voice. "Another is to find a place to fight, to meet the demon who crushed everything I believed in."

"...You believed in something?" Orphen asked the one part he could pick out.

The man in the priest's robes closed his eyes as if in prayer. "Once."

"You despaired?"

"That's right."

“So now you’re an assassin.”

“This sin and punishment might love me.”

Orphen felt like he was hearing a confession—it was so out of place for the situation that he smiled wryly to himself. He also said, “No light reaches rock bottom. You have to climb and look up...and then there’s something.”

“And what’s that?” Maybe he was used to hearing such platitudes. Or maybe he was just bored of hearing his prey plead for his life. Jack didn’t sound at all interested in what Orphen had to say.

Orphen coughed and groaned. “Couldn’t say. How should I know? But there’s something there. Something.”

“You’re a privileged man to think so.”

“You think so...? Maybe...” He was exactly right, Orphen added to himself.

When this world obtained sorcery, it took on the annoying sickness of despair as well.

The unavoidable path of the gods attempting to destroy the world after obtaining life and bodies.

There was nothing anyone could hope for in such a world. Orphen knew that. He understood it.

*But...* He poured everything he had into his chance for a last strike: his senses, his remaining stamina, his self-restraint as he endured his pain. He’d lost his shortsword somewhere when he’d been struck earlier. He ran his eyes over the ground, but he didn’t spot it.

*There’s gotta be something!* Orphen screamed to himself, stepping forward.

He dragged his sluggish body toward yet another exchange of blows.

Jack didn’t move. He was just waiting with a sneer.

Orphen didn’t know the meaning of that smile—if he charged forward and one of them died, he’d never be able to ask about it. Combat reduced so many things to meaninglessness.

*Still, I’m going to stop you—with a killing blow!*

He didn't have enough speed. His body hurt with every step he took; his concentration was in pieces. Orphen closed his eyes when he had half a step left to go. He knew his damaged reflexes wouldn't be able to dodge anything. He had to entrust everything to instinct. He used every bit of fighting experience he had to predict Jack's move.

He twisted not even half a step—and felt a gust blow past his face. It must have been Jack's attack. After dodging it, Orphen opened his eyes. In a special stance with both fists together, he thrust his arms up at Jack's chest.

*I need to hit his heart with all my weight—*

Could he taste blood in his mouth or was he just imagining it? His mouth was fine.





Orphen stopped. His fists hadn't reached Jack's body.

His shortsword was already there. It was stabbed deep into Jack, thrust straight into his heart through his ribs.

Blood spilled from it. Dripped down the hilt of the sword as from a faucet.

Jack exhaled a heavy breath. He tried to grab Orphen, but his body was sluggish and Orphen easily stepped back and escaped from his reach.

Jack's huge body crumbled to the ground. His knees hit the earth and the man in the priest's robes said, "The battle...was already over..."

Looking at the shortsword stabbed into him, Orphen thought to himself, *I must have stabbed him with it instinctively when he hit me.*

"Truly...fearsome!" It was ludicrous that he could speak with his wound. He should have died instantly from the blow, yet Jack Frisbee was still trembling. "What is that...? I couldn't dodge it... No one could...!" He finally collapsed onto his back.

Orphen stepped forward as the ground shook with the impact. He knelt down beside Jack's face and found that the man in the priest's robes was still breathing somehow.

"But what will you do now...? Can you kill the goddess with that skill?" The man's labored breathing grew feverish, forming a white fog against the chill night air. "There's no way you could... There's no way you could. Even if you defeated the goddess, what remains for this continent then...?"

He knew it was meaningless nonsense, but Orphen still shouted in response, "We'll remain! Everyone who we were able to protect will remain! You could have remained too! You could have!"

"What does living on matter...? All you're left with after destroying the goddess is the sin of slaying a god," Jack shot back. "Of course, there will be no punishment. There will be no one left to mete out that punishment. But that is why those wounds will never heal."

"Shut up..." Orphen groaned, but Jack kept going.

"Do you think the continent will be able to bear that sin forever...?"

“Shut up!” Orphen shouted, though he knew he would never be able to stop the other man. The incoherent muttering would cease when he died. And the person listening to a dying man’s last words couldn’t stop them.

A part of him thought Jack knew that and was taunting him. There definitely seemed to be ridicule in his words. But it wasn’t sour grapes, Orphen admitted with frustration. If anything, Jack seemed to be pitying him. Pitying, mourning, sneering at the fool who would survive.

Just as he sneered at Jack himself, who had lived all this time without anyone killing him. The despairing lips of the man in the priest’s robes didn’t allow his words to cease.

“If you’ve escaped the death you were destined for, now you must spend an agonizing eternity in a life you didn’t wish for. Even if people wished for the gods, what they found wasn’t them—that’s the sort of world this is. But if you kill those gods, then you’ll really be forced to admit their lack of existence. Humanity is fated to die out! They have been since the day they decided the gods existed!”

His breath must have finally run out then. There was a pause before he kept going. “No matter how long we extend our lives...all that awaits us is doom.”

“So you despaired?” Orphen asked.

Jack nodded. A satisfied smile seemed to come over his thick, meaty face—as if he was simply happy to finally find a place to speak. “Without peace...there is no point in life. People should desire a life like sleep, they should desire peace and mental stability.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s been nothing but trouble for me up until now, but...it’s also been pretty fun.”

“Heh... Heh heh... Even you will despair one day. The strength in your heart will run out. Just like the pitiful Ryan Spoon Killmarked...and like me!”

With those final words, Jack Frisbee expired. With his eyes still open and his limbs splayed out, his huge body finally stopped moving.

Orphen touched the giant’s face, closing his eyelids. He stood without collecting his shortsword.

Orphen looked toward the tents of the wounded. He couldn't hear any fighting, but he should still probably return as soon as he could.

With that decision made, he ran off.

Sparing only a single howl.



Majic stood in front of a burning tent. How had it caught fire? It wasn't sorcerous fire. Maybe a lamp inside it had fallen over. Whatever had happened, it had collapsed and smoldered now, leaving him doubtful whether anyone could still be alive inside.

Maybe there wasn't even a body inside. Majic decided that after looking around. The Thirteen Apostles had likely all left their tents and tried to fight against their attackers. Yet now their bodies lay scattered, dead all around him. It wasn't just the sorcerers, though; there were flaming remnants of disabled Red Dragons as well. If that strange man in the priest's robes hadn't occupied their main forces, they likely would have been able to defend themselves...

There was no point in thinking about that now. Majic began walking, wiping away the tears that had fallen before he knew it. Someone was still alive. A woman sitting dumbfounded in front of a tent much like he had just been. Isabella.

The tears in her skin and bloodstains soaking her clothes told him just how fierce the battle that had occurred in this short amount of time had been. She was on the ground as if her legs had simply given out from under her. Her hands were on the ground, her head hanging as she repeated to herself, "I... I..."

The words of self-reproach tinged with tears were probably not spoken with the knowledge that he was listening. She wasn't looking his way. She was just crying. Just wailing, lamenting, vomiting in pain with her comrades' corpses all around her.

Her wounds were not at all trivial, Majic soon realized. He wondered if he could seal up the most serious one, a laceration on her back, with sorcery and kneeled down, reaching out to her, when she looked up at him.

The movement was sudden. She looked at him and then grabbed his hand.

“You’re...still alive?” Her eyes swam, and when they settled, Majic realized that she was in shock.

Isabella shook her head and groaned as if finally realizing the pain she was in. “What about Krylancelo?”

Majic summarized what he’d seen, and she took a relieved breath as if to say she couldn’t imagine Orphen losing against a single enemy.

Majic couldn’t bring himself to confirm her feelings, so he didn’t say anything about that. He looked at the tragedy around them and finally said, “There was an attack here after we left.”

His face screwing up with regret, he asked, “I really should have stayed here, shouldn’t I?”

Isabella simply shook her head. “You would have just been another corpse. I only survived by good luck. The first attack knocked me out and threw me into the spirit sorcery wall—which tossed me somewhere far away.”

“There are no survivors?”

“No,” she said. There was a pause, and then she burst into tears. Covering her face with her hands, she wailed, “What is this?! I was ready for this... I should have been ready for this! But why did I have to be?!”

“W-We...” Majic started slowly. His hand shook after Isabella let go of it. “We have to do what we can.”

“What can we do?!” she screamed at him.

Majic swallowed and told her, “Stop crying. The enemy could hear it and come back. If that happens, I won’t be able to protect you on my own.”

Isabella stared at him. Her expression was hard to describe, but she’d obviously been taken by surprise. It was like she’d lost whatever words she was about to say.

Majic bowed his head. “I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that...”

But when he looked up again, she was no longer crying. Wiping her tears away, she said resolutely, “No. It’s fine. I feel so pathetic, I don’t want to cry anymore. I didn’t think a kid would say something like that to me. What was

that? You want to protect me? Irgitte never even said that to me when she was trying to act like my guardian.”

She closed one eye and stood up, adding, “Let’s meet up with Krylancelo. We can think about what to do next then.”

“Okay!” Majic said, taking off after her.



After some time of running through the cutting winds, he forgot the pain of his wounds. His legs were heavy, his shoulders were leaden, and he couldn’t run straight, but Orphen didn’t stop. The shock of committing murder had long since passed. He still didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop.

He never lost sight of his destination. He was headed for the tents of the wounded, where he’d sent Majic back. No, maybe he *had* changed direction at some point without realizing it. It was taking too long to get back there. Or was the damage to his body too great, and he could no longer run adequately?

He sent oxygen to his lungs, which felt like they were on the verge of bursting, again and again, but his feverish vision never settled into something more stable. The palpitations swinging through his body only grew more intense. He was starting to feel like if he kept running, he’d either run out of strength and collapse, or he’d explode in every different direction.

Orphen suddenly sensed a presence and stopped. He caught his breath instantly and readied himself for combat. His senses, spread thin, reached out in awareness of the presence.

Standing there was a man in a black cloak. He stood there, his black hair swaying in the night air, staring at Orphen with eyes the same color as that darkness.

A mouth that didn’t move very much—scarred lips—told him, “That’s right. The power that your mind has to control your body is always at that level.” His tone softened some and he added, “I can’t say with much confidence anymore...that I could beat you.”

“Why do I have to fight you?” Orphen asked him, but the man just shrugged.

“Who knows.”

Colgon. Orphen named the man to himself. The reason he didn't say it out loud was because he didn't know what name he should actually call the man by. Maybe it was because he hadn't heard what name the man would call him yet.

He'd gone into a fighting stance reflexively, so if he didn't sense any hostility from the man in front of him, then he could just relax. He knew that, but his fists stayed clenched. He didn't actually have the self-control the other man said he did, he thought with some irony.

Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon. He bared an arm from under his cloak and indicated himself, saying, “Just so you know, I'm not actually there. This is a fake I've sent to you using the Network.”

“...You can do that?”

“The current master of the Network isn't interfering with every little thing I do...out of fear of me.”

Orphen knew he wasn't boasting. Colgon had simply won and was utilizing his natural rights as the victor.

“You abducted Lottecia, didn't you? Why?”

“I don't mind explaining, but I don't really see what it has to do with you.”

“Is there anything I'm not involved in at this point?” Orphen spat, irritated, and tried to step forward, but...

“Don't move any closer. Have you not realized?” Colgon asked. “If you take another step, the spirit sorcery barrier will fling you far away. You won't be hurt, but we'll both feel rather foolish as you make your way back here.”

It irked him to heed the man's warning, but Orphen stopped nonetheless. So he was staring at Colgon's fake image with the spirit sorcery barrier between the two of them.

The fake slowly continued, “I'll spare you the details, but Lottecia is an artificial human created by the sanctuary. The same way Damian created the lord.”

“Huh...?” Orphen grunted, not expecting to hear anything like that.

Colgon continued matter-of-factly, “She was made to operate a certain device in the sanctuary. I’m guessing the lord has filled you in somewhat about that...”

“The Second World-Seeing Tower?”

“That’s right. No one can see into the outside world from inside this continent—in order to accurately summon Demon King Swedenborge from outside the barrier, a summoner who can detect and predict the future is needed.”

“You knew that, and that’s why you got close to Lottecia?!” Orphen shouted.

“No. I only learned that recently. But it can hardly be called a coincidence. After all, I was investigating Doppel X at my lord’s request and it was a Doppel X, Beedo Crewbstar, who smuggled Lottecia out of the sanctuary.”

“I’ve told you this before, but I don’t understand a single thing you’ve ever done.”

“Maybe so, but isn’t that the same for everyone? What about Pluto? He brought his people here prepared for every single one of them to die on the battlefield, and when he changed his mind and decided to send the wounded back to the capital so that they might live, this happened instead.”

The man’s calm tone was enraging Orphen, but he squeezed a response out all the same, though his shaking voice was almost drowned out by the wind around them. “You came here...just to tell me that?”

“No. I’ve completed all my preparations, so it’s about time for you to do your part.”

“Your preparations?” Orphen’s sweat was starting to cool on his skin.

Colgon was just as indifferent and honest as always. “That’s right. While you and the Thirteen Apostles were occupying the priestesses’ attention, I took control of a vital part of the sanctuary.”

“What?”

“But I’m still lacking in the necessary components to take real action... If you come to the sanctuary, they should fall into my hands, though.”

“What are you talking about?” He was a broken record, but he didn’t understand any of this. He felt his self-restraint crumbling. He wasn’t even able

to suppress his emotions in front of Colgon, but the other man spoke in a controlled way as if to prevent Orphen from collapsing.

“I can’t tell you that. It’ll be too much trouble if you use it to stop me.”

“Why would I stop you?”

“Because you probably won’t agree with what I’m about to do.”

“What are you gonna do?!” He didn’t step forward, but he thrust all his emotions out before him.

The barrier wouldn’t even allow his thorns through—or maybe it was just pointless to direct a thing like that at a sorcerer like Colgon. He turned around, completely unperturbed, and seemed to listen to something whispered to him. That’s what the movement made Orphen think, at least.

Then he turned back to Orphen and said, “Hmm... Maybe telling you would make your movements more predictable to me.”

“Is someone there with you?” Orphen asked to hide his annoyance.

Colgon nodded easily to *this* question, at least. “Yes.”

“Who? Lottecia?”

“Yes, that’s here as well.”

“There’s someone else?” It felt unexpected, probably because Orphen was so used to the idea of Colgon being alone from his time at the Tower. He was going to ask something else, but Orphen stopped himself. Depending on the situation, this was information that he should probably pay attention to. “Who’s there with you? You said you took control of a vital part of the sanctuary?”

If Pluto had already made it to the sanctuary, there was a chance they were working together. If that was the case, then it was possible he could confirm that Claiomh and Leki were safe.

But the name that came out of Colgon’s mouth was the last one he expected to hear.

“Heartia’s here. He’d been locked away until now, but I broke him out.”

“Heartia...?” The first thing that came to mind wasn’t the man he’d reunited



with half a year earlier in Totokanta but the stupid face of the boy he'd known in his student years.

Colgon seemed to read his mind and turned back to him. "Yes. That stupid face. It's polished to perfection now."

"..."

"It's completely natural. That's not something you can teach someone—  
Hmm. Wait one moment." Colgon raised a hand in a signal to stop.

He faced to the side for a time, looking like he was listening carefully to something, before finally turning back to Orphen expressionlessly. "He just expressed his anger to me in a rather fearsome way because of you."

"Don't make this my fault."

"I just got showered with the type of abuse that can cause lasting damage to a person's sense of self."

"You'll make it. It won't leave a single mark on that skin you wear." Orphen took an annoyed breath, thoroughly uncaring about all this, before shouting out the fundamental question that he had. "Why is Heartia in the sanctuary?!"

"I didn't call him here. I didn't want to involve everyone if I could, but there's a fool who's doing unnecessary things. In fact, you might say you can count on her to do so. Even to death."

"What are you—"

"No, I don't have time to waste talking about this." Colgon cut short their chit chat and pointed at his feet. No, a little in front of his feet. He must have been indicating the barrier. "I'm sure you know, but this barrier is produced by spirit sorcery."

He began a slow explanation. "Normally, the sanctuary is protected by the Deep Dragons. This barrier is pointless, but it was left behind as a result of Childman Powderfield's pact with the sanctuary. He promised the sanctuary this...that one day human sorcerers would surpass Deep Dragons, rendering the sanctuary's protections obsolete. And that that time would be the time of the pact."

“The pact? Leki said something about that too...”

“By the time humans drifted to this continent, dragons were already fated to be destroyed. They had the Ayrmankar barrier to fall back on, but because of its flaws, they couldn’t defend against the gods’ attacks perfectly and fought with them again and again, whittling down their strength.”

“And?”

Colgon quietly continued, “The dragons’ sanctuary was going to be destroyed. One faction thought that after the dragons, there should be someone to inherit the continent. Successors who would be able to push the gods back and complete the barrier. The representative of the sanctuary at the time, Sister Istersiva, and the first lord of the Imminent Domain, Childman—”

“Huh? W-Wait a second...”

“Get caught up on things on your own time. I told you we don’t have time for this. Anyway, on the verge of their secret agreement becoming official as the ‘pact,’ the sorcerer hunts began. Another faction challenged them—let’s call it the anti-Istersiva faction—and tried to bury their pact. And it *was* buried functionally, but it survived in a part of the sanctuary that they couldn’t control.”

After that lengthy explanation, Colgon raised an arm and held up three fingers. “As part of that pact, this barrier was formed. It prevented anyone who shouldn’t come to the sanctuary from approaching it.”

“How does it decide who can and can’t?” Orphen asked.

Colgon nodded, folding one finger down and replying, “First, those who have been to the sanctuary before. The barrier can’t stop them.” Another finger. “Then, those who are led through the barrier by those who can pass through it. The barrier can’t stop them.” He folded down the last finger. “This is the barrier’s normal state. The last exception is those who prepare themselves for death...and truly desire to go to the sanctuary.”

After hearing all that, Orphen felt like he could actually see the barrier in front of him for the first time. He reached out to it but pulled his hand back to his chest at the last moment.

He felt sweat drip down his forehead. He'd just fought that battle and then run here, so it was only natural. He made the excuse to himself, but he knew that wasn't why it was there.

On the other side of the wall, Colgon was still going, the same as ever. Orphen heard his voice but wasn't taking in much of what he was saying. "To tell the truth, I only discovered this information myself very recently... I pressured one of the priestesses into telling me. It seems the sanctuary itself only recalled the existence of this pact a few days ago."

Orphen looked up, readying himself. "So it's a wall you can get past with a simple change of heart..."

"They're simple yet cruel conditions. This wall only allows those who truly desire to pass through it to do so. Krylancelo, can you pass through it? It's time for your resolve to be tested..."

"If what you say is to be believed, then my resolve hardly matters. You can just invite me in, can't you?"

"I'm not there. It's just an image. So I can't lead you through." Colgon's voice sounded awfully cold—of course, that was probably how it had been this whole time.

"I have to be ready to die?" Orphen spat, unable to keep his emotions tamped down. He glared at Colgon. At his image. "So everyone who went through here was ready to die?"

Colgon didn't answer. He stood there in his black cloak like a ghost, his eyes wide open.

"Even Claiomh?" Orphen asked him.

Colgon still didn't move. Maybe he didn't even remember who Claiomh was.

He tried to remember how she'd looked the last time he saw her—then bit his lip when he realized he wouldn't be able to. She hadn't looked at all like herself when she'd left with that sad smile.

Orphen took a deliberate step forward. He stepped into where he thought the barrier was. A wind whipped up around him and enveloped his body...

Then passed through it.

It was just a night breeze. It was a strong breeze, but not strong enough to send him flying. He took another step forward, then another. It really wasn't that far. Before he knew it, he was right in front of Colgon—his image.

He didn't have the emotional leeway to be relieved, and he wasn't so confident that he was excited by this. He just wanted somewhere for his anger to go as he glared up at Colgon's face.

"Ready to die? I'm not going to die. But I got through." He considered that for a moment before saying, "Don't underestimate people so much."

"I'm not so surprised," Colgon said so simply it was a bit of a letdown. "If you reveal the mechanism, it's easy enough for most people to get through... Likely because what was only a subconscious rejection of death is brought to the conscious part of their mind. It's as simple as changing one's mindset. I'm sure Childman kept the conditions secret because he was aware of this flaw." Colgon stepped back as he spoke, pulling away from Orphen.

Unsure how to feel about this, Orphen realized something. "Did you tell Pluto the same thing?"

The question didn't even merit answering, apparently. Colgon simply tilted his head and said nothing. He simply began to fade into the darkness, his purpose fulfilled, but... Orphen realized he couldn't let him leave.

Orphen reached out to grab Colgon by the shoulder before he disappeared, but the image was fading and he couldn't touch it. He pulled his hand back—an indescribable, gross feeling remaining on it—and shouted, "Wait! You haven't told me yet!"

"Told you what?"

"What I asked first! Colgon, what are you trying to do in the sanctuary?"

For just a second, Colgon hesitated. He opened his mouth, clearly intending to answer him, but what came out instead was a denial. "I've changed my mind. I want you to find out for yourself. Either way, I won't be able to do anything until then. You'll be the deciding factor."

He faded completely, though his black shadow disappearing from the darkness didn't change much about the scenery.

In Colgon's final message, he mentioned names he hadn't yet spoken. "Hurry and come to the sanctuary. Leticia's here...and Azalie too. Your family's all present."

*"This is a message, not a prediction."* To the other voice that echoed in his mind, Orphen said, "That's right. It's just a message."

He groaned, pain throbbing in his heart. *Jeez. Everyone's the same...*

He raised his head and looked around. If he passed through the barrier, the spirits would likely transport him to the sanctuary, but when that would happen was probably up to their whims.

Orphen decided to meet up with Majic before then.

## Chapter XI: Enmity and What Is Not Enmity

“He gave me a pretty fearsome glare.”

“Huh,” Heartia said before resuming his unenthusiastic inspection of the weapons—his ear was pointed Colgon’s way, so Colgon was relatively sure he was at least listening to him. But the weapons probably held an equal amount of his interest.

Piled chaotically on the floor were all sorts of sorcerous weapons the Celestials had created in the past. Most of them were completely useless, since their mechanisms weren’t understood. It took a good amount of time to decipher the Glyphs written on them and figure out how to use them.

They were looking through the pile of junk from one end to the other, but once they’d looked through them all, a new mountain would appear that they hadn’t inspected yet. This went on for some time. It was never ending.

“Err,” Heartia turned around awkwardly and said, “I think this is good for now. It’s getting kinda cramped in here.” He indicated the room around them.

The junk was starting to fill the space. His words had been directed at the girl standing in the tallest spot in the room—she didn’t look back at him or react in any sort of way, but she stopped transferring the items in when he asked. Heartia sighed, looking up at Lottecia as she peered into a device with vacant eyes—morbidly so.

The whole room was the device, really. It was cylindrical, with a tall ceiling. The piles of junk were so high they almost touched the ceiling; Heartia was a little worried they would crash down around them. The floor was pure white, a gentle concave slope. The whole sanctuary was made up of these seamless, pure-white walls and floors, but in a sealed space like this, Heartia couldn’t help feeling like he was at the bottom of a pot.

There was no sort of door leading in or out. Unlike the floor, the walls were packed with complex patterns. They weren’t carved in or pasted on or drawn

with paint. The walls were simply crowded with Wyrd Glyphs as if they were a natural inclusion.

The walls also had one other difference from the floor and ceiling—about halfway up them, there was something like a terrace where someone could relax, although with no ladder or stairs leading up to it and no railing around it, Heartia didn't know how relaxing it would be. The only furnishings present were some small chairs, but they were bafflingly numerous. Dozens, all around the circumference of the room. Lottecia was sitting in one of them.

The ceiling was blank like the floor.

"Pluto's here," Colgon muttered, and Heartia looked up.

Colgon was standing on the floor like him, but he was looking at the wall. Of course, it wasn't the actual wall he was looking at but the shining Glyphs on it that were showing images of the outside on them. Heartia didn't know what location the Glyphs were showing, but he assumed it was somewhere just outside of the sanctuary. It was a dark forest with a sandstorm obscuring the darkness almost like snow.

Colgon must have noticed his gaze. He turned around quickly and, after noticing the short blade in Heartia's hand, said, "Seems the summoner is functioning."

Heartia nodded wordlessly. This device—the room—maybe the entire sanctuary? Colgon had told him what purpose it served and what name it went by.

The Second World-Seeing Tower. The Demon King Summoner.

All Heartia was curious about was whether Colgon was going to look up at Lottecia, but he showed no signs of doing so, concentrated purely on the junk all around them, the Celestial sorcerous weaponry.

Heartia thrust the shortsword through his belt, liking the feel of it for some reason. The junk in here was all summoned from elsewhere in the sanctuary by Lottecia as a test of the summoner's capabilities.

"Still, if it were just moving things around, the Celestials should have been able to do that with a much smaller device," Heartia said as he picked up

another sorcerous weapon. This one was a whip with a much more impractical shape. He didn't like the weight of it, so he put it back down and added, "This device is more powerful than that, right?"

"Yeah. We haven't drawn out its true power yet," Colgon said with the slightest glance up at Lottecia.

Heartia watched him out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to see the way Colgon looked at her. If there was any emotion—he wouldn't go so far as to say affection—in his eyes. Or if he really thought of her as nothing but an artificial human like he said.

But it happened so fast, he couldn't tell much from it.

He went back to looking through the weapons, concentrating on the closest mound to him.

"...Colgon, what's this?" Heartia suddenly asked.

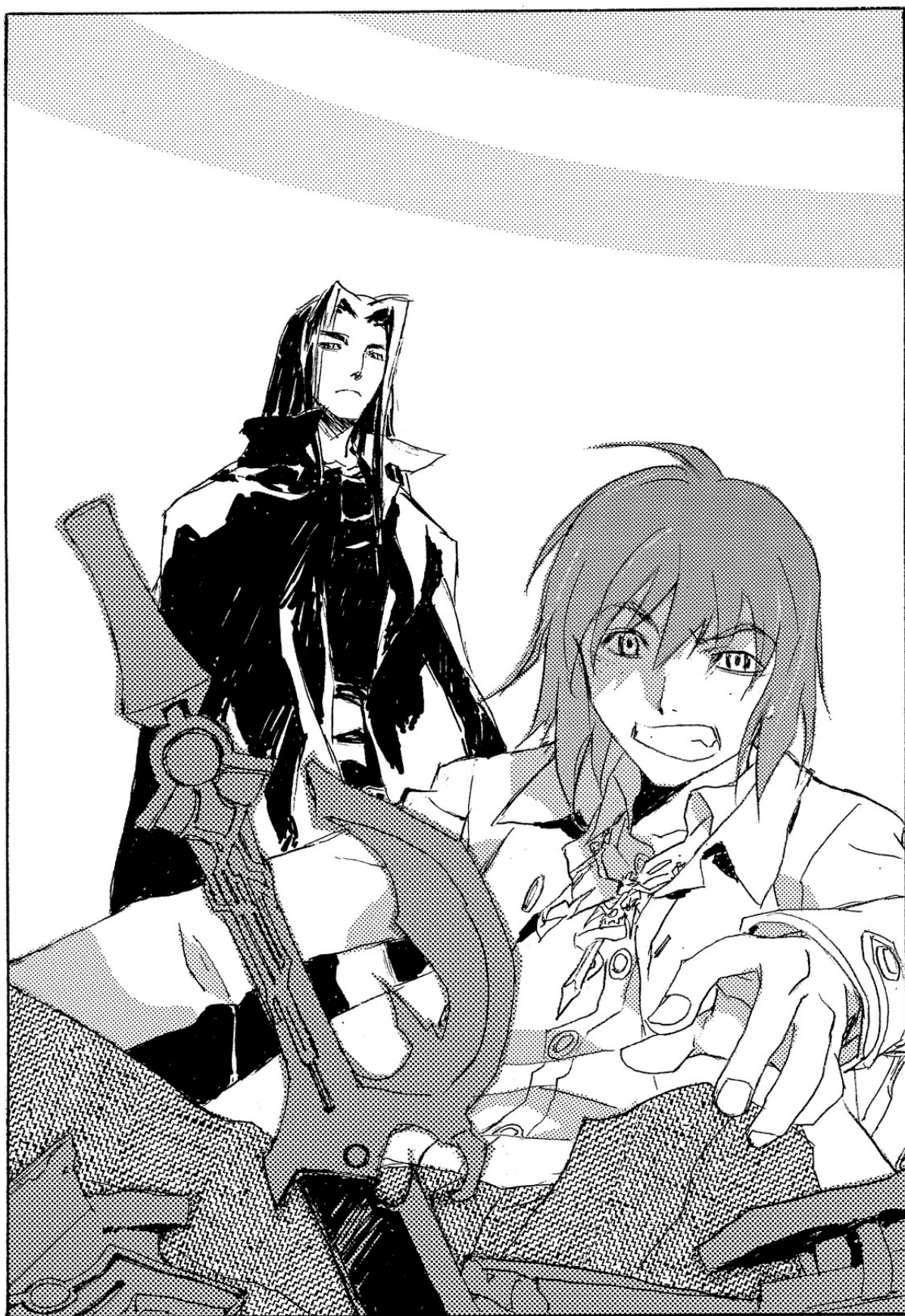
"Looks like a sword." Colgon walked over soundlessly.

Heartia could tell that it was a sword. Grabbing its hilt, he said, "I've seen this shape in a painting somewhere."

"I'm sure you have. That one's famous."

"This is the Sword of Hypnocayen!" Heartia exclaimed, dropping the sword and backing away from it.





“So it is,” Colgon said appreciatively.

“What do you mean ‘so it is’?! This is a legendary monster-slaying sword, isn’t it?! It killed the Kesion Vampire—”

“That’s why I said it is. Where else other than the sanctuary did you think it would be?”

Heartia opened his mouth to argue, then realized that Colgon had a point and shut it again. He sighed deeply. “I see... This *is* the sanctuary. It hardly feels real, though.”

“If you want it, go ahead and take it,” Colgon said disinterestedly.

Heartia looked back at the Sword of Hypnocayen, but said, “I don’t want it... If I’m carrying around something like this, it’ll be obvious that I stole it.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone who would be bothered by that at this point.”

“We could have been attacked with something like this if we screwed up, huh...” Heartia was really starting to get annoyed. He looked down at the shortsword in his belt, contemplating putting that back as well, when he noticed that Colgon had gotten awfully quiet at some point. He glanced back at him to find the man staring at the image on the wall again.

*What’s going on with these two, really?* It was Colgon who had taken control of this device from the priestesses while their attention had been elsewhere...and it was Colgon who had spent several days instructing Lottecia sufficiently to manipulate the device this well herself.

They appeared to be working together, but they’d barely exchanged any direct words with one another. At this point, Lottecia had no expression, like a doll, and was just sitting in one place without moving. As far as Heartia knew, she wasn’t eating or sleeping at all, but that didn’t seem to be affecting her health any. Of course, that didn’t mean she seemed like she was in *good* health either...

Heartia pressed a hand to his forehead. Lottecia was like a doll, but if a dollmaker actually crafted a doll with an expression like hers, he would be called insane.

“It’s a war outside. Pluto’s certainly got guts,” Colgon—the insane dollmaker himself, perhaps—said casually.

He wanted to say something completely different, but Heartia asked Colgon a practical question instead. “It’s four days now, right? Is this checkmate? I dunno for which side, though...”

“I’ve never lost a game.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Heartia said, used to his bragging.

But Colgon was uncharacteristically insistent. “It’s true. There’s a secret to it. If you’re able to win, then you can just play the game as normal.”

His curiosity piqued, Heartia asked, “And if you’re losing?”

“Simply get up and leave. No one would bother stopping you and forcing you to continue playing.”

“...Can you really call that winning?”

“That’s what winning is, really. Betting your life on something everyone else thinks is pointless for the sake of your own satisfaction.”

Heartia understood to a degree what Colgon was saying, but before he could speak up, Colgon turned around.

His cloak flapping behind him, he said, “It looks like I have to get going.”

“What about Krylancelo?”

“He’ll be here soon...or it might take a little while longer. It depends on the spirits. But he’ll be here eventually. Before that, I have to—” Colgon disappeared before he finished.

Heartia looked up. There was no change in Lottecia, but he was sure it was her who had transported him. Even without Colgon ordering her, she did what he wanted her to as if she could predict the future now.

*What is going on with these two, really...?* Heartia averted his eyes, unable to understand the two of them.

Still there in the Second World-Seeing Tower after Colgon had vanished, he muttered, “If you’ve got money riding on the game, then I don’t think you’d be

able to get up and leave so easily, though..." You could end up owing someone without meaning to.

*In other words, you're not as logical as you think,* he added silently, yawning.



Leticia took the opportunity to kick her chair out from under her.

She slid over the table between them and raised her fist at Sister Preenia, who sat before her.

Preenia had been listening to the whispers of another priestess who had run into the room, her expression tense, and it stiffened even more at this. What was she anticipating, Leticia wondered in the short time it took her to close the distance between them. Was it fear of pain—so late in the game? Would she really fear being struck after all that had happened so far? After they had gone on and on about their despair?

Still feeling a twinge of guilt, Leticia nevertheless struck Preenia in the face. Ignoring the swarming priestesses and swatting aside the tentacles of the Red Dragon guard standing at a distance—it had only begun to move *after* the priestess was struck—Leticia rushed over to the collapsed Preenia.

She wasn't knocked out. Leticia grabbed her by the collar and lifted her up, getting behind her with her hand still around her neck. With a hostage now, she turned back to the rest of the hall.

"Don't move!" she shouted, stopping everyone there in their places.

Not only did the two priestesses at the table and the young one who'd rushed in with the news stop, but even the two Red Dragons who had begun to get into serious combat positions stopped, which was surprising to Leticia—she'd been prepared to slaughter Preenia and everyone else there if she had to. She was half-relieved and half-disgusted with herself. She was getting more and more savage, wasn't she...

"Are you satisfied, sorcerer?" Preenia asked, panting. Leticia was silent, so the priestess continued, "That's right, it's our loss—the Second World-Seeing Tower is in the hands of the traitors now. The World-Seeing Tower has priority over the tunnel connections as well. The sanctuary has been taken over!"

The expressions of the other priestesses—who hadn't yet heard the report—all turned to ones of shock. Even the Red Dragons exchanged a look.

She must have been trying to alert her allies of the situation. Preenia went on, "While we were distracted by you...you so easily evaded our sight! That's something no one's been able to do in two hundred years. Did you use Lottecia?!"

"I'm sure they did," Leticia said simply, annoyed by Preenia's shouting so close to her.

But that wasn't all Preenia had to say. She dug her nails into Leticia's arm as the other woman strangled her, struggling desperately. "Was this your plan? To dangle the pact in front of us and make us think it might benefit us in some way?"

"Yes. The pact does nullify several of the sanctuary's external defenses, but it can't do anything about the door into the Ayrmarkar burial chamber."

"So you distracted us, and while we couldn't take action—"

Leticia finally lost her temper at the moaning priestess. She shouted into her ear, "You couldn't take action?! But you didn't have any trouble attacking the Thirteen Apostles to minimize the threats to you!" She tightened her grip, keeping everyone else away with a glare. "Master's pact shouldn't have to have been used for something like this. If you would have just looked outside every once in a while—"

"If you had...considered us..." Preenia's voice dripped with anger, a lurid grin on her face even as she began to pale from lack of oxygen. Her voice scratched as she coughed and shouted, "It's we of the sanctuary who are slaves! Are we not?!"

"Yes, you're strange rulers who made yourselves into slaves!" Leticia shouted before sensing someone behind her. She had never believed in a sixth sense, but if it existed, it was probably something like this. In fact, that must have been exactly what it was, since she was sensing a spirit.

With a voice only she could hear, the presence told her, "You don't need to buy time anymore. I've finished my final recovery. I can transport you now."

“Your timing always sucks.”

If she was being honest, there was still more she wanted to say to them, but Leticia cursed to Azalie and shoved Preenia forward at the same time.

In the same moment, she felt her senses warping. She felt freed from gravity, space, and time as she was transported—she was used to teleporting like this by now, but Azalie, who was somewhat lacking in power, still couldn’t make the trip instantaneous. It exhausted her too.

After a little time—she wasn’t sure exactly how much—she passed through space and stood once again in...

*KABOOM!*

A heat wave that burned her hair and a loud explosion that dug into her eardrums took her by surprise and Leticia fell on her ass. The feeling of the damp ground underneath her made her feel nauseous for a second, but at least she quickly figured out where she actually was. She was outside.

It was still dark out, but dawn shouldn’t have been too far off. Leticia flailed her limbs, trying to find purchase, and righted herself somehow, then strained her eyes. The explosion had occurred somewhere near to her, and there were still flames rising from the ground. The white fire was without a doubt produced by sorcery.

She heard a voice from somewhere in the darkness.

“Silver Flash!”

A white light shot straight at Leticia from the darkness, grazing her. In the sea of trees behind her, there was an explosion twice as large as the one that had just occurred. She was almost knocked off her feet by the tremors, but she managed to keep herself upright by clinging to some nearby ivy.

Several things were clear to her: First of all, she was outside. And secondly, she would die unless she did something.

“Seriously, your timing sucks!” she spat at the invisible Azalie once more, taking off running. She used the direction she’d heard the spell come from as a reference and just ran without looking at what was underneath her.

*That was vocal sorcery... If it's a sorcerer, then they're not my enemy.*

"Aside from one of them, that is," Azalie's voice echoed in her head once more.

Even with the ringing in her ears and the continuous sorcerous explosions going off all around her, she could hear that voice perfectly clearly.

She couldn't understand what Azalie had said, though she got the feeling it didn't mean anything anyway. Frustrated, she asked her, "What do you mean?"

"Who's got the best view of the situation right now?"

Leticia didn't say anything, but her thoughts must have given Azalie her answer. She went on without a response from Leticia.

"I had no choice but to use Colgon to take the Second World-Seeing Tower from the priestesses, but...now we have to stop Colgon."

"Why?"

This time, Azalie didn't answer, and Leticia couldn't read her mind. It was unfair, Leticia thought with a grimace. She tripped on a tree root and almost fell over. It wasn't easy to move through a thick forest without any light.

By the time she'd righted herself, she heard Azalie's voice again.  
"Krylancelo...killed that man in the priest's robes."

Leticia stopped, a shock racing up her spine.

Killed. Azalie had said the word like it was completely natural, and now she was speaking again.

"He's coming here to the sanctuary as a more powerful sorcerer than Master."

"And what does that mean?" Leticia asked hostilely, but Azalie didn't rise to her provocation.

She just went on, "Colgon's just become invincible, but there's a possibility Krylancelo can still stop him."

"So?"

"So he's going to make the decision now that I no longer can, since I'm dead..."

With full knowledge of Aureole's will."

Leticia had started moving forward again, but she stopped once more. She glanced back, though she knew she wouldn't see Azalie there, and spoke to the deserted darkness behind her. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"You don't need to understand. It's just pettiness anyway."

As expected, Azalie simply shut her out. Leticia sighed and kept moving.

Eventually, the sorcerous attacks lessened, the explosions fading away. She had no idea if that meant they had fought off their enemies or if they had simply been wiped out without being able to put up a fight. Leticia kept walking, not worrying about it. She couldn't expect any good news at this point. Still, recalling Preenia's face as the priestess was shoved to the floor did bring a twisted sort of feeling to the surface. She'd cried herself several times over the last few days, but if you acknowledged your loss, then all that was left for you was to become a slave.

You'd lose a home to go back to.

*That's not happening to me... I'm going home. We're all going home together,* she thought to herself.

"Is Colgon really so unbeatable at this point?"

It was true that he had been one of the top casters in the Childman class. She admitted that, but she'd never thought of him on the same level as the world being destroyed or dragons or anything like that. When it came to the strength of his sorcery, he was either on the same level or slightly below Azalie, and though he was more powerful than Leticia, she figured if they went toe to toe, she'd be able to hold her own against him.

Leticia heard water somewhere nearby—she was careful of her surroundings and by the time she had stepped over a nearby embankment, Azalie was answering her.

"His abilities had already reached their peak five years ago. On top of that, he gained a ton of experience working with the lord of the Imminent Domain."

"So he's just more experienced with fighting?"



“Yes. Perhaps even more than Master when he was working as an assassin.”

Leticia groaned, pulling her shoe out of some wet earth. “So the only one who can oppose him on equal footing is Krylancelo, since he’s also been wandering around getting experience these last five years?”

“Me, you, and Forte don’t compare, right? Especially not if you’re humoring the idea of trying to go toe to toe with him.”

Leticia felt her cheeks burning at that, but she didn’t think anyone would be able to tell in the darkness as she ran on.

Her footing was so unstable and the night was so dark that she wanted a light, but she didn’t know if conjuring one would be a good idea. With Azalie’s assistance, she could make it through the darkness one way or the other. But that was also as good as Azalie could do right after teleporting her. The water made her nervous too. Trees and water. This must have been the forest above the sanctuary, but...

“Who *is* Colgon?” she found herself muttering. They had learned together in the same classroom for years, but she didn’t know a thing about him. She had no memories of ever exchanging small talk with him.

Azalie should have been the same way, but she had an answer ready anyway, it seemed.

“He’s Colgon. He’s always just done whatever he wanted.”

“How is that any different from you?” Leticia asked reflexively, not meaning anything by it, but apparently *that* was a question Azalie hadn’t been expecting.

Leticia almost felt like she could feel laughter coming from whatever abyss where Azalie resided. “I guess you have a point. The Chaos Witch and the Night Knocker... They’re both nothing but trouble, aren’t they? Maybe I really am like him.”

“Then we have to stop him. Since no matter what he’s planning on doing, I’m sure it’s something stupid,” she jabbed and bent forward, watching her path carefully. Eventually, a shape seemed to shift in the darkness. It was hard to tell, but it looked like it might have been a person.

*There's someone there... An enemy? An ally?*

She quieted her breathing, trying to be even more careful, though Azalie's telepathic communication continued blithely all the while.

"I have another idea about who he is."

"Oh yeah?" Leticia couldn't be so carefree. She whispered her question.

Azalie lowered her voice as well, though it wasn't out of consideration. It was just a matter of emotion, Leticia was sure. "I think that maybe the superhuman Lottecia Crewbstar left the sanctuary in order to find him."

Leticia blinked. She didn't understand what that meant. "To find him?"

"Yes. If she was looking for someone who didn't exist within the sanctuary...she'd have to leave it."

"What was she looking for?" As she asked, she raced down the hill—she couldn't waste time on this conversation any longer. She had to hurry to her target and figure out just who she was dealing with here.

"Basically, he would be someone who both a devil and an angel had their eyes on."

Leticia jumped with all her might, ignoring Azalie's incomprehensible words. Small branches grazed her cheeks. Leticia passed through trees, jumping over roots, and focused all her senses forward.

Suddenly a different color emerged amid the darkness obscuring her sight.

Sparks flew and danced. That's what it looked like. The taste of the air changed as well. It wasn't flame, but it was incredibly bitter.

*What is this...?!* She tried to cough it up, but she couldn't stop.

Leticia charged through the now heavy air and finally reached the limits of her endurance. She thrust both hands forward and shouted, "Light!"

She kept the brightness down and only lit up her surroundings for an instant. When she sent the faint illumination forward, she confirmed that there was one figure standing before her. With her spell and the light it had created, she was sure they had noticed her as well. It would be a gamble, but she decided to

name herself before she was attacked.

“I’m Leticia MacCready of the Tower of Fangs!” Her voice cut through the night air. “Who are you?!”

There was no answer. From the glimpse she’d caught in the moment of light and her speed, she would have to stop soon or risk crashing into them.

No, if they were an enemy, they likely weren’t even there anymore. They might have already gotten around her and were preparing to attack.

*I’ll have to get ready too...* But the moment she began to prepare a defensive spell...

The ground gave out from under her.

There was nothing she could do. She fell. There was a splash and a stabbing cold—a sticky darkness coiled around her limbs. Water flooded into her mouth and throat and she couldn’t even scream. Despair beat down on Leticia.

*I’m going to drown!* She couldn’t make sound to cast a spell. The night was dark, and her feet didn’t reach the bottom. This was the worst possible situation.

*Azalie! Help me—*

Something grabbed her arm and yanked her upward. Leticia writhed, momentarily too blinded by the new sensation of pain to be relieved that someone had saved her. She might have hit something in her flailing, but she was pretty sure her fist was just cutting through the air. The hand that had her by the arm lifted her with unnatural strength and then simply tossed her aside. Thankful that she was falling on solid ground this time, Leticia finally opened her eyes. She only realized now that she’d closed them when she fell in the water.

There was a light.

Again, it was very dim, and it looked like it was pointed in one direction. Aside from that one spot, nothing else was lit up. The spot being her herself. And the face she saw on the other side of the light was...

“Miss Maria,” Leticia whispered, and the sorcerer she hadn’t seen in a very

long time nodded tightly.

It wasn't just Maria. There was someone else too. The large man must have been the one who had pulled her up—he was drenched, himself.

The man silently signaled to Maria as he wrung out his wet hair. It looked like a signal to withdraw.

Maria quickly acquiesced, shifting the light. A moment later, Leticia could barely see it anymore. In other words, she'd switched to illuminating the direction she'd come from. No one explained anything to her. The large man took the lead and Maria signaled for her to follow. Leticia nodded wordlessly. Maybe it really was foolish of her to raise her voice earlier.

While the explosions had ceased, there were still sounds of combat around them. Maria moved quickly and Leticia hurried after her, dragging her wet combat gear with her. When Maria had shifted her light, she'd illuminated one thing other than their path for just a second. It probably wasn't even on purpose.

But Leticia understood now that that was what she'd seen earlier. It hadn't been on land—it had been above the lake. She wasn't mistaken that the shape she'd seen was humanoid. It was a woman.

A woman stood above the lake, posed as if in prayer, her long hair lifted skyward like she was suspended from it.

She'd also realized that what was coloring the darkness was sand, and she couldn't for the life of her remember what that wind mixed with sand was called.

Until Azalie whispered quietly, "The wind of the goddess—the dust."



As soon as they were transported and she parted with Krylancelo, Isabella put a hand to her chest. She told herself: They were in the dark. They'd arrived at their final destination. There was no time. Things were bad. Her colleagues were undoubtedly fighting a hard fight.

So she knew what she had to do. She had to take whatever steps forward she

could in order to make it to the best possible future awaiting her.

She raised her head and looked out at the dust storm on the other side of the darkness. The faint sounds of battle she could hear told her just how vast the battlefield of the sanctuary was. This was only the forest on top of it, not even the entrance to it yet.

“Are you going to look for the Thirteen Apostles, Assistant Professor Isabella?”

Isabella turned around, a little surprised that Majic was still there.

She nodded at the boy giving her an uncertain look. “Yes. I have to find Miss Maria and Master Pluto. Are you coming with me?” she asked him.

The boy shook his head. “No... Orphen said he was going to go look for Claiomh, so I’m going to go with him.”

“Shouldn’t you hurry up, then?”

“It’s fine. I can catch up to him later. If he knew I was going with him, I’d just get in his way, right?” Majic said, looking into the darkness where his teacher had run off.

Isabella didn’t pursue the matter.

The boy hesitantly started again, “I just wanted to, umm...thank you, Assistant Professor. Thank you for staying with me for the last few days. I won’t forget what you taught me.”

“I hope you won’t forget my warning either.” Isabella winked at the boy as he bowed to her and took off into the darkness without waiting for a response from him. All trained sorcerers could see fairly well in the dark, but the darkness of this forest was unnatural—after wading into it, she realized soon enough that she would have to make herself a light.

*How many hours is it until dawn?*

She created light with a spell and looked up into the sky as she let it float in front of her. The complex web of foliage created a canopy above her that pressed a bluish black shadow down to the earth underneath it. The small light only served to emphasize how vast the darkness was.

*This is no time to succumb to primitive fear.* She took a cord out from her pocket and tied her hair up securely, focusing her gaze forward. After that last attack, she had no food or weapons left, but her will to press forward still remained. She wasn't afraid of the darkness—at least not that much. Nothing was as frightening to her anymore as the flames that had burned the tents of the wounded.

*Damn the sanctuary. They won't get away with this.* With the light illuminating her path, she took a step forward, and...

She felt space warping with her whole body.

It felt almost like teleportation. A pressure against her skin and a compression of air around her she couldn't fight against. She felt a faint sense of nausea and an impact, though it wasn't clear to her where she'd been hit or how hard.

She fell to the ground. When she fell, she saw the tree behind her snapping like something had cut straight through it. There was a rupturing sound, loud but short. Was the impact she'd felt from that rupturing? The hole in the tree was a spiral. And...

Once she'd seen all that, she heard a sound from somewhere far away. A long clatter like a mop falling down in the corner of a hallway. The sound echoed and eventually faded.

Isabella tried to get up, hopefully just confused—and more likely concussed. She swayed to the right and left a few times before that same shock assaulted her. This time, it was at her feet. It dug into the ground, the earth bursting up around her. It was a small blast, but the power in it was incredible. She fell to the ground again without so much as a scream. A moment later, that same dry sound came.

Her eyes darted about in search of understanding before she realized with a start, *They're aiming at the light!*

When she realized that, she snuffed it out. She didn't know if she'd made it in time—her surroundings had returned to their original darkness, but Isabella was still collapsed on the ground, unable to move. She was lying where the impact on the ground had occurred a moment ago, unable to get away.

*Wait a second... What's even attacking me?* She felt an indignant fury heating her body. She wasn't sure if she could trust her emotions to get her back on her feet, but she would cling to anything she could at this point.

Would another attack come? She strained her ears and waited. And right into one of those ears, she heard...

"It's a firearm."

Isabella's eyes snapped open at the voice next to her ear and saw a figure.

A man was looking down at her where she lay on the ground. His voice, calm and quiet, continued, "Sorry about this. It's me they're aiming at. I came here because I sensed the presence of the Razor-Sharp Successor, but...you're not him."

"Who are you...?" Isabella asked, coughing.

She ran the word he'd said through her memory at the same time. Firearm? Such a weapon was an open secret at the Tower—they were developing a prototype that could shoot accurately from several meters away.

But it was strange that she wouldn't sense someone's presence if they were close enough to shoot at her. Plus, the way that tree had been carved up wasn't something a gun's power could do.

The man held a hand up and touched her face—she had no idea why he would do so, but strangely it wasn't unpleasant.

Then he explained, "The range and power of this weapon are nothing like those of the firearms at the Tower of Fangs. It utilizes rifling... Basically, the bullets and gun barrel are far more advanced, but knowing that doesn't actually give you any way to counter the weapon... They've finally made a weapon that surpasses sorcery. It can shoot from several hundred meters away, and as the bullet rotates over that incredible distance, it packs quite a punch as well...as you can see."

Isabella suddenly found her body growing lighter—she didn't know what the man had done, but her injuries seemed healed. Maybe he was a white sorcerer or something of that nature. In any case, she sprang up, deciding to leave her questions until later.

The man seemed able to easily follow her movements even in this darkness. He turned to face her without expressing any surprise and continued, “If they have a weakness...I suppose it’s that there aren’t that many bullets. I didn’t even have a hundred of them made. It cost too much to produce them at the requisite quality.”

“You had them made?” Isabella asked, but the man ignored her question.

He stood up wearily and said, “Maybe there’s one more. It requires extreme concentration to fire it, so the shooter should be quite fatigued. Blink once and you could let your target escape. Normally, there would be a stabilizing drug required...”

“Are you...the lord of the Imminent Domain?” Isabella guessed with a chuckle, finally putting together the sound of the voice with the content of the conversation.

“That’s right. If you feel at all indebted to me, I hope you won’t mention that you saw me when you meet up with Pluto—I snuck over here without telling him.”

“Wait a second. If you made that weapon, then who’s shooting it at you?” Isabella reached out, trying to stop him, but...

He seemed to disappear as if fading into the darkness. Of course, maybe she’d just missed him.

She could vaguely see his shadow as he shook his head, but it was less a denial and more like he was making sure of something.

“The person shooting at me...is the one who’s trying to take me away,” he said, and, “Considering the distance he’s shooting from, he’s moving awfully quickly. Is he teleporting using the summoner? Say, could I trouble you to produce that light one more time on my signal?”

“Huh?”

“After that, I’d like you to rely on your own instincts. Do whatever you feel is right in the moment, and I’ll back you up.”

“Err, I...”



Before she could sort out what he was saying, the man clapped his hands. “Now!”

“Argh, fine!” Isabella cursed, releasing her spell at the same time. Her sorcerous light reappeared, illuminating the area with a bright flash.

Isabella doubted her own eyes at what she saw next. The light split the darkness except in one place where it remained—a shape like some kind of winged humanoid. The wings flapped, a single sharp claw at one end of each.

The strange creature with the black wings leaped up, headed straight for the lord, but the lord of the Imminent Domain was calm in the face of the monster attacking him.

The winged beast cried, “Almagest Betisletha!”

And the lord answered him, “Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon Swedenborge!”

Isabella had no idea what meaning there was in the two of them calling each other’s names.

She moved instinctively without needing to be told to do so, lifting her leg and kicking at the strange creature. The blow felt so satisfying it gave her goosebumps. Pushed back by her boot, the creature tumbled to the ground at a distance from her, and she finally realized that it was just a person—a familiar face, in fact. A man with black hair, wearing a black cloak.

The creepy guy in Childman’s class—Colgon!

“That’s the end of the incantation. We’re not there yet!” Colgon shouted at the lord, ignoring Isabella’s kick. He swung the sword he held underneath his cloak to the side, striking out at the lord somehow.

The lord jumped back and dodged. “It’s not too far. The end of the world is just before our eyes.” He was perfectly composed.

Colgon clicked his tongue and sheathed his sword—he must have been carrying a scabbard somewhere underneath his cloak. “It’s a ways off yet—I thought it would be easier to activate the summoner with Lottecia, but one isn’t enough. You’ll have to join us, my lord.”

*What are they talking about?!* Isabella rushed forward, still not

understanding. She had some confidence in her hand-to-hand skills, but she'd never thought she could go toe to toe against someone from the elite class where it was obvious at a glance that they'd trained to be assassins. But her body felt strangely light as she moved it forward, attacking Colgon from a blind spot on his side. She grazed Colgon's shoulder with a simple front kick, then hit the side of his face with a high kick. He probably fell on purpose, because he was quickly back up again, looking like he hadn't taken much damage. His hand peaked out from under his cloak as he regarded her for the first time.

There was a small knife in his grip.

"The Thirteen Apostles, eh...?" Colgon muttered with a twist of his scarred lip.

She remembered him, but he had apparently forgotten her. Of course, they were only two people who might see each other in the hallway and wouldn't even exchange a greeting, so maybe that was only natural. Isabella smiled wryly, taking a defensive stance to match the blade her adversary had drawn.

She could hear something like the chirping of a bird coming from the blade in time with its movements. Was it Colgon's breathing? Was it her own tongue clicking? The moment the sound stopped, Colgon thrust the blade forward in a half-circle, aiming for Isabella's throat.

*Is he trying to kill me?!*

Isabella leaped back and he followed her, thrusting again and again at different angles. After several thrusts, Isabella reached out to grab Colgon's wrist—she saw an opportunity, so she went for it, trapping Colgon's right arm between both of hers.

But the knife wasn't there.

In a split second, he had shifted it to his left hand, and she saw it glint out of the corner of her eye. If she didn't do something, she would die. Momentarily stunned by this revelation, she fell to the ground—the sudden movement allowed her to dodge the knife, but the fight was all over.

Immobilized, she could do nothing as Colgon's foot impacted her side. Isabella curled up on the ground, groaning in pain as her vision flickered. She spat saliva out of her mouth and looked up, but Colgon was no longer there.

“...You really think I can stop now?” His voice came from a slight distance as he moved away from her.

He was facing the lord now, who shrugged and said with some chagrin, “It’s foolish to take pride in strength.”

“I can kill you and take you with me that way. I know you’ll come back to life, after all.”

They both seemed to be intimidating each other, but their tones were almost gentle.

Isabella lifted her head up, trying to pay attention to the conversation and not the pain she was in. She at least wanted to comprehend the situation by the time she could move again.

Colgon stayed put, but as he drew another weapon from his pocket, he seemed to close the distance between himself and the lord somehow. It must have been a gun, but...the shape of it was completely different than the handguns Isabella was familiar with. It was something completely unique, just like the lord had said. The barrel alone was almost a meter long. She had no idea how one wielded such a weapon, but she couldn’t imagine you could do it with one hand. There was something like a small telescope on top of the barrel. It likely didn’t do much good on a dark night like tonight, but it must have meant you could aim at things at a distance that you could only see through that scope.

He’d likely drawn the weapon just to make a point, and having intimately experienced the weapon’s might herself, Isabella shuddered at the sight of it. She looked at the lord, but he didn’t seem particularly concerned by it.

“Lottecia hasn’t mastered the device enough to transport someone unwilling yet. But with a simple thought from you, you could do anything you liked with it for at least one moment.” Colgon was the one starting each interaction between them.

“I see...” the lord responded. “So you’re trying to entice me with words.”

She didn’t understand the relationship the two men had. Old friends, if she had to guess, but she had no idea how a member of the elite class at the Tower

of Fangs and the lord of the Imminent Domain, the trump card of the Union of Lords, could know each other.

Colgon's low voice brought to mind the intimidating hiss of a snake. "I've already captured the Second World-Seeing Tower. The sanctuary has no choice but to capitulate to me—I'll easily be able to control the sanctuary once we've killed the goddess. The World-Seeing Tower is the center of the sanctuary, its vital point. All we need to do now is summon the demon king. Every condition you wished for has been fulfilled."

"The question is whether the summoning will work. If it fails, it will all be for naught."

"That's why I want you to work with Lottecia. Even if one isn't enough, if you work together, you'll be more likely to succeed." Colgon stepped forward, his cloak billowing behind him. "Come, my lord. Let's finish this."

"I'll..." The lord had always been eloquent, but now he seemed at a brief loss for words. With a wry smile, he began again. "I'll be there in time. I swear it."

Colgon was silent for a long time. No, maybe it was only a few seconds. But it was a long silence. Eventually, he said, "Very well. Now that you know our preparations are complete, you'll have to come at some point." Colgon vanished as soon as he was done saying the words.

Isabella staggered to her feet, eventually able to move again. The lord was staring out at nothing—not at the place where Colgon had vanished, but just meaningless space. Empty air, that he hadn't even been looking at before.

He turned toward her when he heard her footsteps. Bowing his head slightly, he told her, "I'm sorry. I used you as a shield."

"What were you talking about...?" Isabella approached the lord, still holding her aching stomach—or she would have, if she could move her legs properly. What she actually did was simply wobble on the spot a bit as the lord turned his back to her.

"You want to join Pluto, correct? The direction you were originally headed in was right. You should probably hurry. As soon as he finds the entrance to the sanctuary, he'll charge in to take control of it."

“Is that...another shield?” she asked, a bad taste in her mouth. She pushed herself to take half a step forward, but the lord moved a full step back in that time.

His voice alone returned to her. “I told you at the very start to head back to the capital... That would have been your best choice. After all, there’s no meaning or worth in your deaths.”

“Are we...!” She tried to chase after him with her words, but they wouldn’t reach him. His back was getting smaller and smaller now as he retreated.

Soon, he left the area her sorcerous lights illuminated. Though she could no longer see him, she raised her voice anyway. “Are we...nothing more than our circumstances?!” That was as far as she could move.

The lord’s leg was supposed to be broken—it was at this point that Isabella remembered that. She shook her head at the thought. Someone must have healed him. Or was there some other reason for it? She didn’t know, but what she did understand was that there was no way she could catch up to him.

*I’ll catch up to Miss Maria.* She raised her head and confirmed her current objective. *Then, after I give her a piece of my mind... I’ll fight with her.* No matter what happened, she couldn’t let herself simply rot here.

Crying was all right, but if she didn’t want to regret anything, she couldn’t rot. She told herself that and turned back to the direction she’d originally been heading.



Krylancelo Finlandi.

Krylancelo of the Tower of Fangs, no last name.

The Razor-Sharp Successor.

The name Orphen, which he gave himself.

Or the name Orphen, whose meaning changed depending on who was saying it.

As he went through the names he’d held, he inevitably sifted through his memories alongside them.

He removed the shortsword sheath from his shoulder—after all, he no longer had the shortsword—and discarded it into the darkness at his feet. He'd gone through almost all of the armaments contained in his combat gear by now. He'd used up all his daggers. The exploded gun remained back at the lord's mansion. He could sort through all these weapons just as he had his past names. His life could have come to an end in any of the places where he'd used them. But he'd gotten through each of those fights, paying a cost each time.

He struck his fists together, causing a sound to ring out in the frozen night. The wounds he'd received in his fight with Jack weren't fully healed, but he could get by with sorcery. He closed his eyes and concentrated on each of his senses. Everything was in order, his explosive power still present even in his current calm state. He didn't need much time to feel confident.

Even without weapons, his will was present.

Even without allies, he could move forward on his own.

What remained in his possession...

Suddenly remembering, Orphen reached into the chest of his combat gear. He unzipped it slightly and pulled out a silver pendant—a crest of a one-legged dragon curled around a sword. Proof that he'd studied at the highest authority on black sorcery on the continent, the Tower of Fangs.

He stared at it for a while before letting it hang outside of his clothes. It would probably be in the way in a battle, but he wanted it out.

Then, from another pocket, he took another one out—that exact same pendant. They looked the same, but this one wasn't his.

On the other side of the crest was carved the name of its original owner.

It was just one name, but like his, he knew there were more.

Azalie Cait-Sith.

Azalie of the Tower of Fangs, no last name.

The Chaos Witch.

Each name meant something else depending on who said it.

He put that one around his neck as well.

*The three members of his family would come together in the sanctuary...*

His family was here.

He asked the darkness where those words meant.

And before receiving an answer, Orphen set off. For the sanctuary. His final destination.

A moment later, a burning light enveloped everything around him.

## Chapter XII: Salvation and What Is Not Salvation

Had everyone heard the voice inside the light?

Orphen wasn't sure. The flames definitely burned his skin and made it hard to breathe, but the pain wasn't unbearable, almost as if they had been held back.

*"It comes... The time of the pact...!"*

*Deep Dragons!* Orphen placed the voice resounding painfully in his mind.

The heat wave blew through in an instant. Orphen looked up, chasing the whirls of sparks as they vanished—the forest was catching fire all around him. Strangely, the swaying flames didn't seem to be spreading. The small streams and underground water from the nearby lake were preventing that, but the flames weren't dying out either. They illuminated individual spots around him as if they had cut out small sections of the world from the darkness. The roots of trees, sections of the surface of the lake, leaves dancing on the wind, the frenzied hind legs of small animals as they darted into the dark to hide.

The flames seemed both random and as if all gesturing toward the same direction in tandem. Orphen watched as he leaped over countless torches. The wind must have been blowing. There was a place where sparks mixed with grains of sand in the air. There was a lake. If circumstances weren't what they were, it would probably be beautiful—giant trees grew close together, mixed with smaller ones, their roots all extending down into the lake.

There was something above the lake.

There were torches above the lake as well. Illuminated by two large flames was a being with the shape of a woman, her hands clasped in front of her chest, her eyes downcast. Long hair, far longer than the height of her body, extended upward as if she hung from it, though the hair wasn't taut, so it was more likely that she was simply floating. The light didn't reach all the way up into the air, so he couldn't see where the hair descended from.

She was far away. So far that he couldn't distinguish the figure's face.



A pack of black wolves stood at the edge of the water, staring at the figure.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds of black wolves, staring at the woman with their green eyes—though it wasn't as if they couldn't enter the water. Deep Dragons were originally aquatic creatures, it was said. But the wolves were waiting for something.

*The pact... When it comes into effect...will they challenge the goddess to battle?* Orphen asked himself, running toward the lake. It was perfectly plausible that Leki and Claiomh were among this group of Deep Dragons. Fortunately, the dragons were focused on the woman above the lake and didn't seem to mind him approaching them.

He glanced up at her. The woman above the lake. He'd seen the same thing before. But that was at an underground lake, and it was just an arm...

*That's the goddess...* The goddess of fate, who would fully invade their world three days from now.



Sand whirled above the lake. It was likely what was burning on the water's surface, having fallen down and piled up there. He ran through the Deep Dragons, which obstructed his path as much as the trees did, trying fruitlessly to find Claiomh anywhere. He thought about calling out to her but decided maybe that wasn't a good idea since she'd left without saying anything to him.

Just then...

"She's not here." The lord's head abruptly intruded on Orphen's field of vision, his face utterly composed.

Orphen stopped, asking, "What?" with a slight sense of regret.

"Though Leki is among this pack somewhere." The lord indicated the group of Deep Dragons after squeezing through the small gap between two of them. "Claiomh Everlasting, however, has separated from Leki and entered the sanctuary proper."

"Why?!" Orphen shouted impatiently, but the lord suddenly changed the subject instead.

"So you finally caught up. I'm relieved for now."

Orphen opened his mouth to shout again, irritated at the lord's clumsy dodging of his question, but he shoved his emotions down before he could actually raise his voice again. He knew that the lord would only answer questions he wanted to.

"If you were just going to wait for me here, then why did you go ahead in the first place? Because of you—"

"Precisely because of that situation, you were able to defeat Jack Frisbee and come to terms with what was to come, were you not?" the lord said breezily. "Was that wrong?"

"...I just can't bring myself to like you."

"That is inevitable. It seems easier to guide you through provocation than by earning your trust, after all."

Ignoring the inhuman lord's every sarcastic comment, Orphen questioned him, "Where's the entrance to the sanctuary? Are the Thirteen Apostles all

right?”

“Pluto’s already defeated the sanctuary’s final defensive unit and infiltrated the sanctuary proper.”

“Where?”

“I’ll take you there.” The lord beckoned him and started walking.

Orphen wasn’t exactly raring to follow him, but he did so anyway.

The lord walked toward the lake. The flames hadn’t gone out, but the forest had regained its silence, the shadows of the fire dancing quietly around them.

It was hard to tell in the darkness, but Orphen eventually noticed signs of fighting on the ground. Marks, almost like tears in the earth. Disabled Red Dragons. And empty husks that were once members of the Thirteen Apostles...

The lord made no moves to stop and observe any of them, merely striding over the lumps of earth torn out of the ground by the explosions. It probably hadn’t been all that long since the battle occurred. Scorched air, the mist from the lake, and the whirling sand were all competing to dominate the atmosphere.

The lord turned around to him. “Be careful. We’re almost at the lake’s edge.”

“I know.” Orphen groaned, looking up at the woman floating above the lake. They weren’t terribly close to her yet, but they were closer than they were before.

“That’s right. That’s the goddess,” the lord said unnecessarily. Then he added, “It’s said that there are three goddesses of fate, but who knows how they think of themselves.”

“...She’s not moving at all.” Aside from her hair swaying in the wind, the goddess didn’t budge.

The lord smiled at Orphen’s observation. His usual wan smile. “Her eyes aren’t even open. Either she’s perfectly confident that she can get through the barrier the whole way this time, or...maybe she’s merely showing us a few days of compassion.”

“Are the Deep Dragons going to attack her?”

The enormous black wolves surrounding the lake were simply staring up at the goddess. But their gazes had the power to bring any substance under their control, to subjugate and destroy whatever they wished.

Almagest's smile faded for just a moment. He looked around pityingly and said, "If they came at her with everything they had right now, they would simply be wiped out instead. The Deep Dragons know that."

"Then..."

"They're waiting for their chance. For the moment the goddess fully breaks through the barrier. They hope that in the few days before then, there might be some opportunity for them to land at least one blow on her. That is the Deep Dragons' pact. Childman Powderfield promised Asraliel that humanity would give them that opportunity. And strangely enough, Asraliel believed him, despite his words being completely baseless two hundred years ago."

Orphen shook his head when he heard that name. "It's because Master believed it himself."

"I wonder about that. Still, the Deep Dragons have believed it all this time and accordingly they wait here now. So they rejected my pact and believed in the previous lord instead... Things may still work out, but it's still rather frustrating for me," the lord spat, almost self-deprecatingly. He didn't sound all that frustrated, but he probably wasn't lying.

Orphen pointed ahead without responding to him. They were right up against the edge of the lake now. If they went any farther, they would fall straight in. They stood on the shore, almost a cliff overlooking the lake, and the lord peered down at the water's surface. Orphen had no idea what he was checking, but he nodded to himself and said, "It's here."

"Where?" he asked, though he had an idea already. He approached the edge of the cliff and looked down as well at the dark water. There was something like a stone pedestal underneath the surface.

"That's the entrance to the sanctuary. To be more precise, it's a teleportation device."

He could see the device under the dark water because it was faintly

luminescent—complex Wyrđ Glyphs flickered on its surface, signifying something about its functionality. Together, they formed the complicated composition of a teleportation spell, but they also resembled the glow of a flame beckoning moths to it.

The lord must have read his mind. “If you jump from here, you’ll be transported inside the sanctuary before you touch the water’s surface,” he prompted Orphen. “Of course, normally it wouldn’t activate, but someone inside released the controls.”

“Who?”

But by the time Orphen had asked the question, the lord had already jumped for the lake. He fell for a mere half a second before disappearing without a splash, just like he’d said. Orphen saw a few specks of sand and dirt leave ripples on the water’s surface. They must have fallen when the lord jumped.

Orphen took a breath and then jumped after him. This wasn’t the pseudo-teleportation he himself utilized. He’d experienced genuine dragon teleportation a few times in the past, but it wasn’t a pleasant sensation. It didn’t take long, though. With a sensation like some unknown organ rising from his gut to his throat, the teleportation completed.

When he became aware of his surroundings again, he didn’t see the two colors of the outside, darkness and flame, but a single shade coloring everything around him—white. A white floor, white walls, and a white hallway, extending endlessly before him. He felt extraordinarily out of place with his combat gear covered in dirt and blood. A sense of guilt surfaced in his mind, like even the air he was exhaling was dirty.

This must have been the sanctuary. He looked up and found the lord, unmoving, before him. He had his arms confidently folded and began to speak when Orphen looked at him.

“From here on, you’ll need my guidance or you won’t be able to get anywhere. The hallways and rooms of the sanctuary are all divided from one another, connected by teleportation devices. You won’t be able to figure out how they all connect to one another as you go, will you? Normally, it would be almost impossible to evade the surveillance of the rulers of the sanctuary and

proceed all the way to its center.”

“But right now...?”

“Those who have long ruled the sanctuary have lost their authority over it.”

“And who took that authority?” He repeated the question he didn’t get an answer to earlier. He worried that the lord would dodge the question again, but Almagest was forthcoming this time.

“Yuis. He obtained the Second World-Seeing Tower for himself with Lotteicia’s assistance. The authority of the Second World-Seeing Tower’s summoning device has taken precedence over the connections between the passageways now. I’m sure the sanctuary is trying to take back control, but I have little doubt they’ll fail.”

“So Colgon’s basically calling all the shots here...” Orphen murmured anxiously, though even he didn’t know why the thought didn’t sit right with him.

He’d seen an image of the man in the wasteland. Orphen thought about his voice at the time, and what he’d said.

He thought about what he hadn’t said.

As he thought, he only got more confused.

Eventually, the lord interrupted him. “There *is* a slight chance we could evade Yuis’s sight, of course.”

“Evade his sight and do what? What’s your game plan here?” Orphen asked sharply.

The lord shook his head, a slight smile on his face. “I’m not the one who will decide that.”

*Yeah, I figured,* Orphen thought bitterly, looking down the passageway before them. The white halls seemed to go on forever. The clean tone was so uniform it almost made him sick.

He would only dirty it, he was sure. There was no place for him in the sanctuary. No matter how he struck the dust from his body, his very presence polluted this space.

*Claiomh comes first*, he confirmed to himself as he set off for the end of the hallway.

The lord followed him silently.

As he walked straight down the hall, he could understand what the lord had said if he paid close attention—it wasn't a normal hallway extending through physical space; instead, he was being forcefully teleported through it here and there. He didn't sense the presence of individual spells likely because the sanctuary as a whole was one huge device. No one else was here in the halls and there was no trace of battle like he'd seen outside.

There were no guideposts and the visuals of the hall never changed, so Orphen was struck by anxiety after walking down it for a bit. He grimaced. He wasn't even sure where he was going.

In the end, he and the Thirteen Apostles both were probably just winging it in here.

*See?* Orphen started running when he finally noticed something strange after several teleports. Around a corner far in the distance, there was an explosion and a burst of white, sorcerous flames.

While he was waiting ahead of the turn for the flames to die down, the lord caught up with him. He looked around the corner cautiously to find a wide-open space, very different from the corridors he'd been moving through until then. It looked like a large conference room, with seats arranged neatly around a single platform. There were a few people standing at a slight distance from each other throughout the room—

No, they weren't necessarily *people*, Orphen reminded himself.

A small group on the platform looked like Celestials to him. They resembled what he'd heard described in myths or seen in paintings a few times. However...

"Those are the priestesses. They're humans pretending to be Celestials. They're the descendants of humans brought here long ago to be slaves. They've long ruled the sanctuary, but now...well, see for yourself."

The lord refused to describe their situation in more detail than that, but Orphen naturally came up with a comparison himself looking at them—huddled



together on that small platform, they looked like rats crowding together on a ship they knew was sinking.

Around them, among the chairs, were the Thirteen Apostles. Of course, they weren't just sitting around leisurely; they were standing on the chairs and tables. If these were all who still remained alive of the hundred plus elite black sorcerers of the continent, they had been reduced to less than a tenth of their original number. Observing them from behind, Orphen put a number and a name to their faces. Closest to the priestesses, looming over them imperiously, was the Demon of the Capital, Pluto. Next to him, being cautious of their surroundings, was Maria Huwon. He saw Isabella a bit behind her as well; she must have caught up to them. She was the only young sorcerer among them, the rest being court sorcerers highly ranked enough to be part of the Numbers. No, there was one other young sorcerer.

Orphen gasped and inadvertently said, "Tish!"

The final figure he saw, his sister in her combat gear, stood apart from both the priestesses and the Thirteen Apostles. She must have heard his exclamation. Her eyes turned his way. Irgitte's voice went through his head then.

*"Your family will come together..."*

He leaped out reflexively. As soon as he entered the room, he felt bloodlust and his head swiveled up.

He'd forgotten the ominous flames—the signal of a battle. What he'd seen must have been a heat ray. One of the Red Dragons was up against the wall above the entrance to the room. The upper half of its body was fine, but the lower half was a smoldering wreck burned to the wall, and the upper half was now attacking Orphen with its whiplike arms.

*Tch!*

There was no time to defend himself with sorcery and he didn't have any equipment to protect him. All Orphen could do was thrust out his arms to protect his head. His combat gear wouldn't do much against a Red Dragon's might, but as long as he survived the first hit, he'd be able to make his next move. Either way, there were no more enemies to face that he had to be in top

condition for like Jack.

He wasn't thinking all this through in the moment, he was just instinctively prolonging his death somewhat. Relying entirely on his self-control, he waited for the blow to come.

And the Red Dragon's arm was repelled, soundlessly.

Then it vanished, as if...as if it had never even been there in the first place.

And a moment later, he saw someone in midair, curled up almost teasingly, as if they were dancing.

Black, wavy hair, brown, round eyes. She didn't look all that much like her cousin, but they acted like real sisters, so no one questioned their relationship. She appeared in midair and, with a wave of her hand, fixed herself there.

She opened her mouth and Orphen heard in his mind a voice that sounded just like her real one.

"Come on, you can't let something like that kill you..."

There was no mirth in her eyes. Maybe she would never smile again. The grim light cast by her gaze gave Orphen that impression.

"I thought so. You can see me too..."

In fourteen days, his family would come together in the sanctuary.

There were still three days until then, but...

Orphen finally took a breath after the Red Dragon's attack.

"Krylancelo!" Isabella shouted. Orphen looked over at her and raised a hand to show her that he was fine.

Then he turned back to Azalie in the air, but she was gone, as if she was hiding now. It was like she'd only been a hallucination. He took a deep breath, trying to keep himself calm, and looked around the hall. All the Thirteen Apostles and priestesses had been startled by his sudden intrusion. As he surveyed the room, he noticed immobilized Red Dragons and wounded priestesses and sorcerers behind chairs and in hallways that he hadn't seen on his first look.

Claiomh was nowhere to be seen.

In the silence, Orphen asked, “Is there family of Ryan Spoon here?” He had been asking the priestesses on the platform, but he didn’t care if he got an answer. He went on, shouting, “He’s dead. You know that, right? He killed a ton of people and eventually died himself. As did Helpart and Jack Frisbee! Do you even understand what you’re doing? Cut it out already!”

“You come out of nowhere in your assassin’s garb and speak that way to us? Who do you think you—” What looked like the leader of the priestesses began arrogantly, but Orphen ignored her, annoyed, and turned to Pluto instead this time.

“Did you hear from Isabella yet? The rest of your people were wiped out!”

Pluto remained facing away from Orphen, responding without so much as a tremble in his voice. “It was bad timing. Doppel X’s main force must have attacked there without realizing we had already advanced into the sanctuary.”

Even though there was no emotion in his voice, however, the muscles on his neck were tense and bulging. “As a result, we managed to infiltrate the sanctuary without much resistance... If this incident is left behind in the history books, I suppose this will be called my strategy. So be it. If this continent has a next generation, if it has a future, then I don’t mind going down in history as a villain!”

“That’s all well and good, but those priestesses don’t even control the sanctuary anymore, Pluto. Scaring them will do you no good.” The cold response to Pluto’s dramatics came from Almagest. He strolled into the room and cast a cold look across the scene before continuing, “Your work here is done. I appreciate it.”

Pluto turned around and stared the lord down emotionlessly. Orphen felt like he might even throw a lethal spell in Almagest’s direction.

But the Demon sighed instead. “I know.” There was no fervor or emotion in his voice. He just shook his head with an exhausted sigh and said, “Ultimately, we have engaged in an utterly pointless conflict, but you youngsters don’t need to lecture us about it. It may have been foolish, but it was for *your* survival that we did it.” Pluto sighed, looking at Orphen.

The Demon raised his hand and commanded his subordinates, loud enough to

be easily heard in this large room. “We will take control of the sanctuary, using this as our temporary base! Tie up those priestesses and question them about the way to control this facility!”

“They won’t speak under simple threat of death. They’ve ruled the sanctuary for two hundred years with their authority alone—”

Pluto interrupted the lord. “Quiet, monster. How did you reattach that broken leg of yours?”

With a sidelong glance at the arguing pair, Orphen snuck over to Leticia. She had been stubbornly refusing to look at him ever since Azalie’s appearance, but she must have noticed him walking over, because she suddenly started to make her way over to the apparently injured Isabella.

“Wait!” Orphen grabbed her arm before she could get far. He could tell she was trembling as if she was afraid of something.

Orphen went around her to get her attention and said, “Listen, I won’t ask for the details... I’m sure a lot happened. But what I just saw, was that...?”

“Just an evil ghost,” Leticia said, turning to Isabella as if she was searching for a way out. “Isabella, are you hurt—” She seemed to realize the futility as soon as she began speaking, however. The words petered out before she even finished saying them. Maria had already peeled off Isabella’s clothes and was giving her first aid.

Leticia finally gave in and turned to face Orphen. “I’m a little relieved. The first time I saw it, I was vowing to myself that I’d never drink again. I thought I should go see a doctor like Forte told me to. At least now I can say it wasn’t just a delusion or a hallucination only I was having. Maybe this is a good sign.”

She seemed a bit confused. Orphen reached out to touch her arm reassuringly, but she recoiled as if struck. “So you can see her too, Tish?” Orphen asked insistently.

“Apparently, she can show herself to other people if she really tries to, but it’s exhausting, I guess. I think she’s already close to her limit...” She looked around—she must not have been able to see her right now either—and waved her hand apprehensively. “I won’t give you the details if you’re not asking, then.

Colgon's in control of the sanctuary right now."

"What's his goal?" Orphen asked, and Leticia's eyes darted about in hesitation for a moment, but this time she didn't try to run away.

She nodded and said, "Summoning Demon King Swedenborge with the Second World-Seeing Tower."

"...So the same as our plan. So why does he think I'm gonna get in his way?"

"Azalie too..." Leticia muttered. She quickly added, "I don't know. I have no idea what those two are thinking at all."

"And Claiomh?" He hadn't forgotten, but he finally had an opportunity to ask now. Claiomh wasn't in the room. He thought she'd be with the Thirteen Apostles, but apparently he was wrong.

Leticia shook her head again. "I don't know that either. We were together up until we entered the sanctuary, but she just ran off... I probably should have gone after her, but I couldn't say whether we were really safe inside the sanctuary yet, so I couldn't be reckless."

"Why would she do that? She's not one to throw her life away like that..." Orphen had almost just died himself battling Red Dragons, and there was a possibility the sanctuary had more of them lying in wait somewhere—either that or traps that they didn't know about.

Orphen gave the silent Leticia a reassuring look. "I'll find her. I'm sure I'll be able to manage..." Pluto and the lord seemed to be done arguing. Orphen glanced at them and said, "Annoys me to have to rely on that guy, though."

"Krylancelo, I—" Leticia started, but just then...

A shadow fell over her. The Demon of the Capital, Pluto, suddenly stood beside her.

"Leticia MacCready. I thank you for your cooperation. That being the case..." The large man folded over into a bow. "That being the case, I beg of you to follow my instructions from now on. We are gravely undermanned at this point."

"Huh? Oh...sure. I'm a member of the Association, so of course if you request

it..." she mumbled.

Pluto raised his head. Whether or not you could say that the Thirteen Apostles even existed anymore, he was still leading them. That's what Orphen thought when the man turned to look at him. Pluto himself probably understood the situation he was in better than anyone else. But he didn't pity himself.

This giant of a man was the embodiment of the pride of the Continental Sorcerers' Association. The ideal of every sorcerer across the continent. He was proud, restrained, robust, and powerful. He was also erudite and traditional.

"Krylancelo." Pluto bowed his head again and said, "I'm sorry. And thank you."

Orphen didn't understand what he meant. "Sorry?" Orphen asked him.

Rising slowly, Pluto said, "My decision put you in danger."

"And thank you?"

"Isabella, at least, survived thanks to you defeating the man in the priest's robes."

His face was perfectly serious as he spoke—the words were likely heartfelt.

Orphen let his shoulders sag and decided to be truthful as well. "I'm no match for you, really."

He turned around and found the lord watching him, waiting for him to finish.

He was smiling. No...the usual cold smile on his face didn't really count as one.

*Why is he waiting for me?* Orphen thought to himself.

This ghost, the lord of the Imminent Domain, wasn't waiting for the pinnacle of black sorcerers, the hero Pluto, but a cruel drifter who was starting to get used to the act of murder.

On one hand, it was hard to understand. But Orphen also felt like he was starting to get it.

*What is despair?* He'd heard the word several times on his journey. It was his

final destination.

Orphen told himself that instead of letting someone else tell him, and as the lord approached him, he challenged himself, *Why have I not despaired?*

It was *he* who was walking toward the lord now. When he was right in front of him, Orphen said quietly, “I want to find Claiomh. I know she’s somewhere in here.”

“Easy,” the lord said simply with a nod.



The device showed no indication whatsoever that it was operating.

He wasn’t particularly displeased by that—he had to remain inside the device, so if it began to stir in some way, it would likely be somewhat unnerving. But it was a bit underwhelming. He was surrounded by a lukewarm, uniformly white silence, and the moment he became conscious of that, he began to feel restless.

Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon. He recited his name to himself, laying the rifle he held down at his feet. It was still loaded, but there was no reason for him to use it anymore. Everything was going perfectly. He had captured the sanctuary’s vital area and it had crumbled all too easily, and the Thirteen Apostles were losing more and more of their forces as they closed in on him. There was only one entity who could threaten him...

*Threaten?* But he hadn’t done anything to be threatened in the first place.

He was trying to save the continent. And he would not fail—he lived with that conviction always. Plus, once everything was finished, the continent would be more secure than before. If anyone would get in his way, they would have no basis for doing so.

He looked around the device again.

The junk piled up haphazardly on the floor was now nothing *more* than junk. He’d summoned it as a test of the device and to lower the sanctuary’s ability to resist, but it had lost that meaning now and there was no need for him to return it either. Heartia, who had been sifting through the junk to kill time, had gotten bored of that, so he was sitting in a seat for the summoner in the middle of the

device now. He was speaking to Lottecia, who was next to him, but she wasn't paying much attention to him.

Heartia's harmless small talk was nothing but background noise; it was basically silence if Colgon didn't listen for it.

"Work's not really interesting, though, I mean why would it be, it's not like just getting paid for it suddenly makes it entertaining—"

The center of the floor was a gentle concavity, not at all steep with how big the room was. There was no particular reason for this device to have the shape it did. As evidence of that, Tefurem's World-Seeing Tower, which performed a similar function, looked completely different.

What *was* necessary were the endless Wyrd Glyphs spanning all the seen and unseen space in the room. The intricate spell this composition wove would summon whatever they needed from outside of the Ayrmankar barrier.

What they were calling was not the demon king himself. It was the demon king's power. He would summon just the power here.

What he needed was a summoner. A caster who could accurately capture what he was looking for and reel it in.

And a caster who could control the demon king's summoned strength—someone to play the role of the demon king.

The power being summoned would be near limitless. It would make almost anything possible. Killing the goddess with it should be simple.

He could surely also grant his own small wish.

He looked back up. Heartia's small talk continued.



"She's around that corner."

Should he speed up at the lord's words or pause and take time to compose himself?

Which was the correct option—the least unnatural? That was the first thing that came to Orphen's mind. In the end, he did neither, instead continuing



forward at the same pace as before. He went down the unchanging halls of the sanctuary and turned corner after corner at the same pace. One more corner wouldn't change anything.

He turned.

Yet another corridor awaited him. It branched to the left and right, but curved as if going around some sort of pillar. There was a white door directly ahead of him, shut.

Just as Almagest had told him, Claiomh was there, her back facing him.

She was headed for the door. Her hand was reached out toward it, but she noticed his presence then and turned around. It was definitely Claiomh—she almost looked like she'd lost weight somehow since the last time he'd seen her, but perhaps that was simply the expression on her face.

"Orphen..." Her surprised voice echoed off the white walls of the sanctuary.

"Claiomh." Orphen stepped forward, calling her name. He waited for a response, and when there was none, he continued, "What's going on? Why are you doing...err...this?"

It was a vague question, but it was enough for her. She looked down and turned halfway back to the door as if attempting to flee. Still, she answered. "I thought about talking to you...at first. But you had a lot on your mind, and I knew talking about it wouldn't change anything, and it was my fault in the first place..."

"What are you talking about? Haven't you always forced your feelings on me before even when I had a lot on my mind or when talking about it wouldn't do anything or when it was your fault?"

"Well, things are a little different this time."

"Different?" They didn't seem to be quite on the same page, so Orphen forced himself to smile. "There's pretty much nothing for us to do anymore at this point. All we can do now is leave things up to other people. Frankly, our odds aren't great, but—"

"We're going to lose," Claiomh said suddenly. Her tone wasn't strong, but she

spoke swiftly enough that Orphen didn't have any time to think. "Any plan is bound to fail, and Leki and the other dragons can't beat the goddess. The world is going to end and we're going to lose everything."

"...Why do you think that?"

"Leki's sure of it." Claiomh pressed a hand to her forehead like she was enduring a headache and said, stressing the negative in every phrase, "We *can't* erase this enemy, we *can't* beat this enemy, we *can't* win, we *can't* survive this. That's what Leki's telling me!"

"Typical symptoms of a familiar," the lord whispered into his ear. After confirming that Orphen had heard him, he explained, "The familiar manufactures a sense of self for the Deep Dragon, who doesn't originally have one—"

"You're wrong!" Claiomh shouted, trembling with the effort. Her hair bristled as she shouted at the lord, "I realized after talking to him these last few days—Leki's already dead. You said it was a miracle back at your mansion, but it wasn't. Leki separated from his pack and attached himself to something else. Neither is dominant, and it's not the same as what happened in Urbanrama... We merged together and became the exact same thing!" Claiomh shouted with a sob and spun around, throwing open the door.

Before Orphen could see inside the room, Claiomh, the door, and the hall all disappeared together.

"Claiomh?!" Orphen ran over and pounded on the wall, but nothing happened. He whirled on the lord and shouted, "What was that door?!"

"This is bad. It'll take time to catch up to her using another route..."

"Where is Claiomh going?" Orphen asked after giving the wall another good smack.

The lord narrowed his eyes, thinking. "If she's able to move freely through the sanctuary, then she's definitely making use of a Deep Dragon's mental abilities. In which case, what she said isn't necessarily false. As for where she's headed, there are only two locations left in the sanctuary that still have value."

"Where and where?"

“The Second World-Seeing Tower and the Aymankar burial chamber. We can’t get into the Aymankar burial chamber no matter what we do.”

Orphen finally stepped away from the wall and caught his breath. He was more panicked than he thought he’d be. Everything that Claiomh had said was raising Orphen’s hackles.

He waited until he could reasonably call himself calm and asked, “And the Second World-Seeing Tower?”

“It will be difficult, but there should still be a way there. This is actually one of the pathways I planned on using to get there.”

“Are there others?!”

“We’ll have to take the long way and there’s a good chance of Yuis apprehending us—”

“I don’t care!” Orphen cut him off. He gave the lord a look before considering which way to go, and the other man pointed.

“This way.”

“Dammit, what’s going on?” Orphen cursed as he started heading in the direction the lord had pointed out to him. *There’s pretty much nothing for us to do anymore at this point. All we can do now is leave things up to other people.* Of course, he didn’t actually believe that from the bottom of his heart. Orphen’s irritation grew now that he’d told another stupid lie. He was getting antsy, worn down by his injuries and fatigue.

“Do you feel the same way as Claiomh?”

“In what way?”

Orphen was hurrying, but the lord was keeping up with him with rather languid steps somehow.

When the other man responded calmly, Orphen sighed and asked, “Are we gonna lose in the end?”

“You said yourself that our odds aren’t great.”

“I guess I did...” Orphen couldn’t argue with that, so he proceeded silently

from there.

He knew their odds were bad, but they had to believe they could win and bet anyway. That was what he'd prepared himself for when he'd come here.

*But why does Claiomh feel that way? Is it Leki's influence?*

"It's easy for humans to fall into despair when they lose what they believe in," the lord said, even though Orphen wasn't listening to him.

He wanted to just ignore it, but his anxiety won out in the end. "What did Claiomh lose?" he asked the lord.

"Well, based on what she said..."

"Leki."

The route they were taking wasn't particularly convoluted, but as he followed the lord's instructions, he began to feel like the man was taking a purposely roundabout route to their destination. That sensation was made all the worse since there was no sense that they were actually getting closer as they went. Orphen had to suppress an urge to ignore the lord's instructions several times as he walked.

They went in circles through an unchanging labyrinth until suddenly Orphen noticed the expression on the lord's face change.

"...Yuis has spotted us." None of the composure the man previously had remained in his voice.

Running now, Orphen asked him, "So what's gonna happen?"

"Yuis doesn't think he can control the summoner properly with just Lottecia, so he wants to bring me to the Second World-Seeing Tower too."

"But isn't that where we're going?" He didn't understand the other man's concern, and the lord's explanation wasn't helping matters.

"If you listen to Yuis's full incantation, I think you'll understand why I don't want to let him do it. Unfortunately, I'm not certain yet."

Orphen had no idea what he meant, and the lord made no attempt to explain further.

Instead, he said something a little more practical. “Even if we hurry, it won’t be enough... Claiomh will likely make it to the Second World-Seeing Tower before we do.”

“What is Claiomh trying to do?”

Orphen leaped into another connection between hallways and continued hurrying as he endured the odd sensation of the teleportation. Even if they wouldn’t make it, he still had to hurry, he thought with some irony. Was he just wasting his time?

The lord and his response caught up to him at the same time. “She’s likely trying to stop Yuis.”

“Why?”

“Once the pact has been ratified, the Deep Dragons will enter the battle. And they’ll likely be wiped out. That’s why,” the lord said calmly.

Orphen knew he was getting upset at the wrong person, but he couldn’t help shouting, “But if they don’t—”

“Maybe she thinks it’s just as well since we can’t win anyway.”

“Dammit. She wants to stop Colgon? She’ll just be the first one killed if she does that. He’ll... He’ll kill her.”

“I suppose he will,” Almagest agreed all too easily. Then he added, “It’s this next door. It’s an emergency entrance to the summoner. It will probably be difficult to pry it open, but—”

Orphen looked at the door on the right side of the hallway. It did look different from the other doors he’d seen, more sturdy—but it was open.

Orphen peered inside suspiciously. It was pitch-black, so he couldn’t see much.

He gave the lord a questioning look and the other man seemed somewhat let down as he said, “This door should have been the next most secure after the door to the Aymankar burial chamber. Needless to say, the priestesses didn’t want any other dragons getting anywhere near the Second World-Seeing Tower.”

“Did Colgon leave it open to wait for us...?” Orphen muttered, carefully nudging the door open.

The lord quickly shook his head. “No, the summoner’s just past this door. If a single Red Dragon made it here, Yuis would be in grave danger. There’s no reason for him to put himself in that kind of jeopardy.”

“Then—”

“Yuis was betrayed.” That was all the lord said before he leaped into the room, taking the lead for the first time.

He vanished in an instant. Orphen clicked his tongue and followed.

Just because it was the final hallway didn’t mean anything differentiated it from any of the ones before. The entire sanctuary was maddeningly uniform. Maybe it was because a small number of Celestials had created the whole thing.

He resolved himself to leap; there was a short, strange feeling, and after that... It was the same process as always. And the next time he opened his eyes, he saw the same exact white walls—but since everything was so uniform, the smallest difference suddenly shattered the whole illusion of the sanctuary.

In the assembly hall, he’d seen corpses. Here... If he had to describe it, he saw chaos.

There were tools and objects heaped up in the room of all different sizes and shapes, no rhyme or reason to their placement. The ceiling was incredibly high, making Orphen feel small under it. The rest of the room was spacious as well, cluttered though it was. The random tools almost seemed to be floating in the otherwise pure-white space. Strangely, they didn’t seem entirely out of place in the sanctuary. That must have been because they too had been created by Celestials. He could tell at a glance that they were all sorcerous weapons.

Orphen let his gaze wander for a second. The room was cylindrical, with a walkway circling around the center some ten meters off the floor. Chairs were packed along the walkway and in one sat a familiar figure. It was Lottecia, staring blankly into empty space, and beside her...Heartia.

Only Heartia looked surprised at Orphen’s intrusion. Lottecia hadn’t reacted at all. And...

“Colgon!”

It was a strange sight.

Colgon stood in the center of the room. He had his sword drawn and was holding it straight out in front of him.

Claiomh was on the floor before him. She had no visible wounds. It looked more like she’d simply fallen in surprise. Her mouth was open as she looked up in front of her.

Between the two of them—what they were both looking at—was the lord. He had caught Colgon’s sword in his hand. The blade was stabbed deep into him, but he wasn’t bleeding. He clearly seemed to be protecting Claiomh.

The lord made no particularly aggressive moves, but Colgon leaped back to distance himself anyway. He backed up to the wall behind him, still holding his sword. The sword was a straight blade, glowing with sorcerous light. There was a buzz in the room like the wings of insects.

“Claiomh!” Orphen ran up to her. He grabbed her shoulder and shook it, and she looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears.

“I was glad it wasn’t you here, Orphen,” she whispered, her teeth clattering together. “I didn’t want you to kill me. But, but...”

“What are you talking about?”

She slowly removed his hand from her, but she didn’t pull away. If anything, she got closer, close enough to wrap her arms around him, and said, “But...I hate the idea of killing you more.”

“Huh?!” Orphen leaped back the moment he sensed bloodlust from Claiomh.

The small knife in Claiomh’s hand flashed—Orphen had no idea where she’d been hiding it. She must have gotten it from one of the sorcerers on her way here. The blade grazed Orphen’s stomach, but his combat gear deflected it.

Claiomh shouted, in tears, “So...don’t get in my way!”

“If you’re worried about Leki, I don’t intend to just let him sacrifice himself either. I owe that big beast too, so...”

“What are you gonna do? Are you gonna kill the goddess, Orphen?” Claiomh tossed the knife to the floor—it was useless now that Orphen had seen it—and shouted, “You can’t, can you?! So many sorcerers died on our way here... Even if you won, the people who died would stay dead. Even if he can beat the goddess, Leki will die, won’t he?!”

“So you—” Orphen jumped forward to try to grab her, but even in her state of confusion, she was quick to see him coming and dodge his grasp. She turned around and headed straight for Colgon, who still held his blade in his hand.

Of course, Orphen was a lot more athletic than Claiomh, but the pain of his wounds and his frayed concentration were slowing him down. His hand caught nothing but air, Claiomh’s blonde hair slipping through his grip.

Claiomh jumped toward Colgon’s blade...

But when she went past the lord, Almagest shoved her to the ground. It looked like a simple shove, but Claiomh flew to the other side of the room and hit the ground rolling. The movement was so violent, it looked like she could have seriously hurt herself, but she still had no visible wounds. She got right back up with only a look of shock on her face.

All of a sudden, Orphen ran out of patience. “Claiomh!” he screamed, enraged. He raised his fists and ran.

It was simple to bring his fists down on her. Claiomh didn’t move, just turning pale as she looked up at him and closing her eyes...

His fists grazed her cheeks and smashed into the wall behind her.

He didn’t hold back. It hurt more than he expected to strike the hard wall. Claiomh opened her eyes when the fists didn’t strike her. It wasn’t relief or anger in her eyes. It wasn’t resignation either. It wasn’t even confusion. There was a light of determination in her eyes.

His fists still pressed against the wall, Orphen slowly said, “You’re lying.”

“Orphen, I...”

“Tell me. Why hold back at this point? If you tell me, I’ll handle it somehow. I’ll kill the goddess if I have to. If I absolutely need to, I’ll figure out a way.”



Orphen pulled his numbed hands from the wall and wrapped his arms around Claiomh's head. He feebly pulled the sobbing Claiomh to him.

He listened as she quietly said, "In Urbanrama...when Leki switched places with me...I said it would be easy to switch back, right?"

"Huh? Yeah..."

"That was a lie. The truth is that we mixed completely and couldn't change back on our own. That Damian guy warned us about that."

Orphen didn't answer. Not because he didn't understand, but because he sensed that it wasn't time for him to speak.

Crying quietly, she went on, "That's what Leki did this time. He made the two of us the exact same. Why do you think he did that? It was the sanctuary, right? The people here saw through the lord's plan and were trying to get the Deep Dragons to kill us and the lord."

"...Yeah."

"Leki thought that if he separated himself from his pack and connected with me, he could stop it. He did it because he had no other way of stopping his pack."

"An individual Deep Dragon doesn't have the sense of self to—" Orphen tried to deny the possibility, but he felt Claiomh shaking her head in his arms.

She sniffled and punched him lightly in the stomach. "It looks like Leki is thinking and acting for himself, but he's just doing what I want him to do. That's why Leki didn't head straight for the sanctuary. Because I didn't want him to go! Since Leki and I share a mind now, Leki's not Leki anymore and I'm not me. Leki and I are both dead... We just sacrificed Leki. Isn't that right? There's no way such a convenient miracle could have happened!"

"There's no way to go back?" Orphen asked her.

"No, there is!" Claiomh screamed in a fit of anger. "There's one option and it's the worst one! If either Leki or I die, then the other one will go back to normal." Claiomh said all that in one breath and then slumped like she'd run out of strength.

Hanging her head, she muttered, “The goddess has nothing to do with it. Whether we win or lose, Leki plans on dying. Because that’s the only way he can set me free.”

No.

Orphen felt a shock run through him. Claiomh hadn’t slumped down or hung her head because she had worn herself out crying.

He heard a tiny metal *click*. Claiomh had no intention of hiding it. It was a warning. Then...if he didn’t move, she’d shoot.

He slowly pulled his arms back and stepped away. Two steps. When he backed up, he could see what she had in her small hands. She had cocked the hammer with both thumbs. That was the sound he’d heard.

It was the Hailstorm. He could almost read the inscription on the weapon.

Pushing the barrel out from her, Claiomh said, “But if I die first...Leki will at least fight without trying to die, right?”

Two new teardrops fell down her already wet cheeks. “The worst thing is...that Leki’s thoughts mirror my own. Leki wants to set me free because I want that too, from the bottom of my heart. That’s terrible, isn’t it? And I said I’d never let Leki do something like that again.”

“There’s no way you could have that...” Orphen said, staring down the gun barrel. He searched his memories—he’d destroyed that gun himself. There might still be bullets left, but there was no way it would shoot them. Well, there was a chance, he supposed. Freak accidents were always a possibility.

Facing each other like this, he wasn’t sure if it was him or Claiomh who was in more danger. Orphen continued his questions.

“It’s strange that you know how to use it too. How—”

“It’s so strange here, isn’t it? It’s like... It’s like...before you know it, there’s a weapon in your hand. I know how to use it too...” Claiomh’s eyes drifted like she was dreaming.

Orphen flinched in surprise. “Something’s controlling you.”

“That doesn’t matter. It’d be so easy to shoot myself with this thing, so I

wonder why...I can't do it."

Was it out of fear or disgust? The barrel of the gun shook in Claiomh's hands. Her finger was on the trigger. It could go off at any moment.

"Orphen... You can't say for sure that you won't let anyone die, right? You can't stop me from dying, can you?"

"Even if you threaten to shoot me, I won't kill you. You don't need me to tell you that, do you?" Orphen told her, determined.

Claiomh nodded, uncharacteristically honest. "Yeah...you're right. I couldn't shoot you anyway." She shifted, turning the gun to point toward someone else—toward Colgon.

She wasn't shaking anymore either. She held the weapon with perfect form, aiming straight at her target.

*She'll hit him if she shoots like that...*

He was more nervous now than when the gun had been pointed at him. Colgon was just staring coldly at Claiomh. If she shot him, Colgon would kill Claiomh. Orphen was sure of it. But he couldn't be sure that he could stop it if he intervened...

He got a sense of the distances for a second. He was still a few steps away from Claiomh. Colgon and Claiomh had more distance between them, but Colgon wouldn't be picky about how he killed her. The lord was right next to Colgon and seemed to be protecting Claiomh from his earlier actions. On the other hand...

*He's not trying to stop her from pulling the trigger...?*

It was only instinct, but that was the sense Orphen got. The lord wanted to kill Colgon. He might not stop her if Claiomh tried to.

Heartia was right above him, but he was farther away than anyone else. The same went for Lottecia.

He couldn't upset the balance of the situation. Orphen took a quiet breath and slowly said, "You're right. There are no miracles in this world. There are no gods. There's nothing for you to pray to."

His composure didn't last long, though. His voice cracked as he stared at Claiomh aiming the gun. "That's why...we have to think hard for ourselves. You said that to me. No, I guess you didn't say it, but you granted me that thought."

Normally, he wouldn't consider the distance between them significant. He could close it in an instant. But he couldn't reach out to her and he couldn't run over. All that could reach her was his voice.

"So don't cry! There's another way! Maybe there aren't miracles, but there's something like them! If there weren't, how would anyone live?!"

There was no change in Claiomh's expression, but her lips parted ever so slightly. It wasn't enough movement to shift her from her shooting stance. "Leki...cried. In Nashwater. In front of me. In front of Ryan. Why did he cry? I didn't know. I never figured it out. I still don't know. He sounded so sad. So..."

She was concentrating, so there was no inflection in her voice. It sounded like she was reading the words off a page. "I thought he would leave. But he came back right away."

Her composure didn't last long either. She screamed fiercely, "If that was a miracle, then it's all the more reason why I need to do something for Leki!"

*Don't shoot!* Orphen willed the thought, since there was no time to voice it.

Claiomh squeezed the trigger and the hammer fell, firing a lead bullet from the gun's barrel.

The gun jumped, the recoil slamming into the girl's arms.

Orphen couldn't follow the bullet's trajectory with his eyes, but the first shot hit somewhere to the side of Colgon, deflected with a metallic sound—the sword in Colgon's hands shone and the buzz of the insect wings intensified. He must have utilized some defensive effect. One powerful enough to protect against a bullet.

She pulled the trigger again on momentum. Another bullet flew after the same sequence of events.

However...

The lord had reached out casually. His hand was extended toward Colgon, but

it wasn't Colgon that he'd touched. His fingers landed on the glowing sword and the light of the blade suddenly vanished along with the buzzing of the insect wings.

For the first time in a long while, Orphen saw distress on Colgon's face.

With an eardrum-piercing cacophony, Colgon's sword fell to pieces—the bullet must have struck it. Colgon couldn't even keep the grip of the sword in his grasp—it flew from his hand and hit the wall, falling to the floor.

It wasn't over.

Claiomh was bent backward from the recoil of the gun. It would take her a second to adjust her position.

Orphen kicked the floor, intending to make use of that moment.

At the same time, something shoved him from behind. He tried to get low and avoid it, but he didn't make it in time.

Shoving Orphen, Majic leaped forward, completely unexpectedly.

Claiomh was already in position again.

She was only aiming the gun at Colgon, but she must have noticed Majic. Her gaze wavered for a second.

If he got too close, she could shoot him accidentally. In that situation...



Majic shouted, “I love youuuuu!”

...

Claiomh definitely faltered.

Her eyes widened and she turned toward Majic, however... However...

Claiomh probably didn’t even see Majic. By that time, he was already sliding across the floor, having slipped into her blind spot.

He used his momentum to launch himself forward.

His foot struck Claiomh’s calf. And not just one of them. Majic kicked with both feet, hitting both of Claiomh’s legs. It was probably just dumb luck that it worked—Claiomh may have been an easy target, but he was going for two places at once, which wasn’t smart.

Still, if the attack landed, then the rest didn’t matter. Claiomh toppled to the floor, powerless to resist, and the gun flew out of her hand, drawing a gentle arc in the air...

Colgon leaped forward and snatched it out of the air. Then he spun and aimed it at the lord without hesitating.

But the lord was already gone. Had he jumped up? Somehow, he was in the upper seats, opposite Lottecia’s position.

“You shouldn’t oppose me inside the summoner, Yuis. I’m a more skilled caster than Lottecia. I can teleport the sword’s insects outside of the room if I want to.”

Colgon lowered the gun without responding. His eyes fell on the broken sword.

But that wasn’t important right now.

Orphen turned his attention to the fallen Claiomh and Majic, who was holding her down. Maybe it was more accurate to say he was holding her *up*. Claiomh was unconscious; maybe she’d hit her head. It wasn’t a *good* situation to be in, but it was better than before.

Holding her, Majic looked more surprised than anyone else. “I-It worked...”

“What was that?” was the question Orphen settled on asking.

Majic looked up at him and said, “Well, uhh... She said I could definitely take someone by surprise with that... Assistant Professor Isabella, that is...”

“Gotta say, it really didn’t land.”

“I know. I know. But what else was I supposed to do?! If this is the only way I can be of any use, then I don’t care if it doesn’t land! I’ll do whatever I can, damn it... Uuugh...”

“You don’t have to cry about it. I guess you’re starting to think like a sorcerer now, though...”

Orphen pushed the speechless Majic aside and peered down at Claiomh’s face. Her eyes were closed, tear trails running down her cheeks. There was no response when he touched her face, but she was breathing steadily. Orphen opened her eyelids to check her pupils before he finally allowed himself to feel some relief.

The silence must have made him uncomfortable. Majic spoke up like he was trying to explain himself. “I took a different route than you, so I was worried I might not catch up.”

“How’d you get here?” Orphen asked him.

Majic took a vague look around before saying, “Well, it’s kind of creepy, but a weird voice guided me here... I kind of understand what’s going on here too.”

“I see,” Orphen said simply, standing back up. He had an idea who that voice might have been, but there was no point in dwelling on that now.

Colgon stood before him, looking down at his broken sword with the same dark eyes he’d had five years ago. Even when there was emotion on his face, it wasn’t obvious. That was the kind of man he was. But there was a distinct anger in his eyes as he looked at the sword now. It must have meant something to him.

“Please finish things by the time she wakes up,” Majic said as he dragged Claiomh’s body away. “Can you do that?”

“It’ll get done.”



Orphen thought about looking at Claiomh's face again, but he decided against it.

He thought about Jack Frisbee and Claiomh.

About what Helpart, Ryan, and everyone else had said.

Orphen smiled wryly. "I see. There are no miracles."

Colgon reacted to his muttering. The supreme assassin Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon turned to look at him.

Orphen kept speaking, though not to him. "If you rely on miracles, you can't beat a god, can you? You need to use a method only a human could use to kill a god. I see. I get it now."

"Lottecia, remove everyone we don't need."

Colgon's order was quickly carried out. Majic and Claiomh vanished in an instant. Heartia remained—Colgon gave him a dubious look, like he didn't agree with the judgment, but he made no further comment about it.

"The same, but opposite... Is that it?" he muttered, lifting his hand as if considering the weight of the gun in it.

The hand holding the gun seemed to drift into place of its own volition, and he said threateningly, "But now everything's in place. You came in with the boy because you thought I'd suspect you entering with Krylancelo...what shallow thinking. Stop hiding, Azalie."

"I'm not hiding, it's just more difficult for me to show myself." Azalie appeared as if she was sitting upon the gun barrel.

"That's everything." There was a hint of emotion in Colgon's voice. "Three summoners who can control the Network. We have the best chance of success possible now."

"...True, the *summoning* might succeed," Azalie said bluntly. She hopped down off of the gun and then floated up before she hit the ground, ascending to the same level the lord and Lottecia were on. She didn't go to the seats however, instead remaining in the center of the device.

"I see. It was convenient for you that I replaced Damian. This sorcery would

deplete his power, so he wouldn't have participated in it."

"That was your aim, wasn't it?" Colgon shot back, just as calm.

Orphen watched them silently. He shifted his position bit by bit, aiming to get in the blind spot of Colgon's aim, though he knew it was like searching for shade in a field on a midsummer day.

Colgon wasn't ignoring Orphen. Their eyes met every time Orphen spared a glance at him. Still, he continued to search for his opportunity.

"And when we perform this summoning, you'll complete your spell?" The lord interrupted their conversation.

Voice low, Colgon answered, "The dragons are suffering a big misunderstanding. They fled, thinking the arrival of the gods was merely disastrous." He shifted the gun into a more comfortable position and continued, "They should have changed their perspective. The gods did them the favor of manifesting into something as easy to understand as limitless power. The dragons should have made use of them."

"That would have been difficult, considering the dragons' emotions at the time."

"They were weak. If they were going to challenge the world, they shouldn't have given up halfway through the fight," Colgon asserted. "I'll use the demon king's almost limitless power to become a demon king myself. No matter how many times the gods come, I'll prevent their intrusion myself. I'll protect the continent forever."

Someone spoke up to question him—Heartia. "You'll become...a demon king? You'll stop being human?" He sounded less surprised and more exasperated. His voice cracked a bit as he spoke.

Colgon, on the other hand, was just getting more confident. "What's wrong with that? I'm already unrivaled on the continent. I might as well be a demon king already."

"Using an omnipotent power to create an omnipotent being... Ha ha ha, I wonder what sort of god that contradiction will invite." Almagest laughed dryly at Colgon's words, but the other man's confidence didn't falter.

“It doesn’t matter what shows up in response. A demon king will be able to kill whatever appears.”

“I see. Then the question is whether you can become the demon king or not—to do that, you must become the only caster capable of it here.”

With the lord’s words, Orphen felt the eyes in the room settle on him.

He’d stopped moving by that point, but not because he’d found Colgon’s blind spot.

In the end, Orphen ended up right in front of Colgon, finding it stupid that he’d even tried to run from him.

“Colgon, you’re not omnipotent.” He was a few steps away from him. Orphen took a fighting stance as he spoke.

From the same distance, Colgon lifted the gun up again and pointed it at him. “You say the same things as Jack Frisbee, Krylancelo.”

“Yeah. Perhaps his ‘evil spirit’ decided to possess me now.” He didn’t feel any fear, but he also didn’t feel the elation he’d felt when facing off against the man in the priest’s robes.

He just knew he would win.

“Colgon, Jack Frisbee sneered at me. He mocked me with full confidence after I’d beaten him. I remember his ridicule, so I won’t lose to you.”

“With those wounds?” His words weren’t provoking. Colgon was likely fully confident in his victory.

Orphen knew Colgon wasn’t the type who’d hesitate to shoot if he needed to.

Taking everything in, Orphen still felt composed. What came to mind was the emotionless face of his master when he’d faced off against him in his youth, back at the Tower of Fangs. Was this how Master Childman had felt back then? He asked his distant memories a question he knew he wouldn’t get an answer to.

“That’s as far as the two of you go.” A cautioning voice came from above.

It was Heartia. Looking down at them, he said, “Put your hands down and look

this way.”

Orphen did as he asked and looked up at Heartia to find the man holding a shortsword—likely a sorcerous weapon—at Lottecia’s throat. Lottecia herself was just staring emptily into the center of the room, not reacting at all to Heartia.

He likely didn’t intend for them to hear it, but Orphen could hear Heartia quietly mutter, “So this is my role in the end...”

Then he said, “Hold on. That’s enough, Colgon. Move again and I’ll kill her. If I do that, then your grand experiment is done for, right?”

After warning him, Heartia continued, “You haven’t forgotten, have you? It was my job to perform assistance for the Network...to get rid of ghosts. Ghosts have their own weak points. Don’t think that just because you couldn’t do it, I can’t.”

“I think you’re mistaken, Heartia. This is the only way to stop the destruction of the continent,” Colgon said, returning the gun to its original position after he’d started to move it.

Heartia was unmoved, however. “Man, I dunno if it’s good or bad, but I really am the perfect person for this part. The destruction of the world? The world is nothing more than a dinner date two weeks from now for me. It’s trivial. Just stop fighting before you go too far. Isn’t that obvious?”

“What is going on with you two anyway?” he added with disgust. “Are you stupid? All this stuff about being strong or weak. Is that all you know? If you want to decide something, why don’t you just draw lots?”

There was a brief silence before Colgon turned to look at Orphen. His face utterly serious, he said, “Shall we draw lots, then?”

“Huh?!”

A second later...

There was a hard sound like something being pushed followed by a scream and something crashing to the floor. It was Heartia. He had fallen from the upper seats.

Orphen looked up and found that Lottecia had shoved him. She had stood up from her seat. And she was drawing something with her finger in the air...

With no sound, a massive weapon appeared in her hand.

It was like a gun, but much bigger. Lottecia held the weapon, unconcerned by the length of its barrel, aiming it straight at Colgon. She stared down the sight atop the barrel and froze in a position to shoot.

*That's...* In concept, at least, such a thing had existed at the Tower. It wasn't much different from the handguns Orphen was familiar with—if you took those handguns to their natural conclusion, you might end up with something like this.

It was a rifle. With a gun this accurate, even an amateur with no training could land a hit from this distance.

And a hit would mean death. A bullet from a gun like this would pulverize a human body with a single shot.

Colgon aimed his gun at Lottecia as well, but the weapon disappeared from his hand in the next instant. The lord grinned.

Reaching out with his now-empty hand, Colgon groaned, “What do you have...to complain about...Lottecia?!”

It was completely out of place, but the interaction seemed almost romantic. A man reaching out and shouting to a sheltered maiden...

“I should have just submitted to your control...is that it? Wouldn't that only cause *you* pain? What do you want me to do about you not being human?” But there was rage in his voice.

“Is that what upsets you? You're not controlling me... Anyone could see that. But I need you... For this brief moment, at least. Is that not enough for you?!”

A gunshot quieted him.

Just one gunshot. Colgon fell at the same time. The assassin's body hit the floor with enough force to bounce. Then it went still.



Lottecia threw the gun aside like she was tossing out a piece of trash. The cutting-edge weapon embedded itself in the pile of age-old, Celestial-created junk.

“I want the question to torture you. Did I miss on purpose, or did I simply not hit you? Did you master this moment or did I? When I’m destroyed, you’ll never learn the answer for the rest of your life,” Lottecia told the unresponsive Colgon before falling back into her seat.

“That will suffice for revenge. After all... I still remember the good times too.”

Orphen didn’t see any wounds on Colgon, but maybe the bullet had grazed his head, because he was completely unconscious. Heartia had fallen to the floor and passed out in the same way. The two of them vanished together. They must have been transported outside the device.

The device began to operate.

Who had done what? Orphen had no idea. But Wyrd Glyphs flickered at random points around him. The light expanded, mixed together, and changed shapes again and again. It was soundless, but Orphen also felt like he could hear someone calling from somewhere. The only one remaining on the floor of the device, Orphen made sure he was ready for whatever was coming. There was nothing he could do at this point, but that didn’t mean he could take it easy.

Almagest, Lottecia, and Azalie. The three of them were in position. The lord and Lottecia faced each other, Azalie in between the two of them.

Looking up at them, Orphen tried to comprehend the spell being amplified by the device, but he quickly gave up. This was power beyond comprehension. The three non-humans activated the spell, chaining the power together into one effect.

All they were doing was “weaving” a spell just like normal, but extremely accurately, extremely finely, and extremely effectively. As if the Wyrd Glyphs on the device weren’t enough, the spell grew exponentially more complex as they worked together to activate it.

Orphen became curious about something as he stood inside it. He repeated the word Lottecia had just uttered. “Destroyed...?”

It was the lord who answered. He was seated now too. “Some sacrifice is needed to activate the summoner—or rather, merely casting a spell of this scale will destroy the caster. Artificial humans are convenient in that sense. We can die if we need to.”

“But that’s...” Orphen stepped forward, but before he could say any more, the lord cut him off.

“Someone has to do it, and if it’s not us, then a lot more people will die. You understand that the number of seats here is not merely for the sake of decoration, yes?” Almagest said with a cold look. “I only brought you here because you’re capable of killing when you need to. You understand that, yes?”

“...Dammit!”

“You must be careful, Razor-Sharp Successor. You must not waste our efforts. To claim victory means to continue onward after making the necessary sacrifices.”

First the color faded from the lord’s appearance, then his outline blurred, then his voice seemed to echo and become difficult to make out.

As the spell accelerated within the device, the lord’s body disintegrated feebly. Lottecia was next to vanish in much the same way.

“Azalie!” Orphen called out to the figure floating in the center of the device.

Her body was tearing in two. Her limbs were splayed out, almost like she was trying to maintain her balance though there was no way for her to do so in her current position. She gradually lowered in the air, her head drooping as if it was unable to withstand the gravity in the center of the room. She was hanging on with a ghoulish expression on her face, but Orphen could see the outcome of her battle already.

Cursing his powerlessness, Orphen said quietly, “You’re...going to disappear too?”

The string of Glyphs formed a spiral that ascended throughout the device. Some of it appeared to rain down in an arc when it hit the ceiling, and some of it appeared to vanish. Inside this torrent of power, Orphen’s feeble groans were entirely too powerless.



Still, he could at least hear Azalie's whispered response. "Damian was much better at economizing his strength. I waste too much just trying to exist like this. This is probably the last time I'll be able to speak with you."

Orphen tried to answer, but he choked on his words and just shook his head instead. He couldn't even run to her with her floating in the air like she was.

For how her figure seemed to be writhing in agony, Azalie's voice was gentle. So gentle that Orphen felt like he hadn't heard her sounding like this in years.

"Watch me, Krylancelo."

"..."

"I'm going to fight, so watch me."

"Azalie! I—"

Orphen looked up and tried to stare at her, but Azalie's form had already degraded so much that he could barely make out her shape. Her body faded, dissolving out into a shape that spread across the ceiling.

But it was still Azalie. He could still hear her voice.

"To you, I leave the founding sorcerer Aureole's last will and...what I saw of the world being destroyed outside of the barrier."

"To me?"

"I'll tell only you. So I want you to decide. The limitless power, the magic that Swedenborge governs... *Because* it's a power with no impossibilities, I want you to manifest it in its ideal form."

A pain pricked in his heart. It wasn't the pain of his wounds. Orphen pressed his fist to his chest and murmured, "I can't do that..."

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that you're specially qualified or have better judgment than anyone else. But it's still something that you have to do."

Azalie's warning didn't exactly relieve Orphen's pain, but it removed some of the weight crushing him. His hand naturally came away from his chest...

And Azalie was gone. The chaotic mass of Wyrd Glyphs froze as well. Orphen looked around, feeling a chill.

She was right behind him, looking exactly as she had in life.

Azalie took his hand and laid it on her cheek. He felt nothing but could just barely sense a chill in the air where she was.

That wasn't the only thing he caught from her. Her words and something more than them pressed directly into him.

"You can remake most everything about the world too, if you wish. You can rewrite the history you wish for. What you will have defies such petty descriptions as 'power.' However..."

She removed her hand just as suddenly as she'd appeared. She drifted away from him and vanished, just like that. But as always, he still heard her voice.

"What you need is to act in defiance of your despair... Do you understand? Not to lose it."

"Yeah."

Azalie imparted to him her memories of the outside world with her touch...

Absorbing them, Orphen responded, "I understand... At least, I think I do. What we need. If everyone's going to be saved, then everyone's going to have to sacrifice equally. No superhero's going to save this world."

"Krylancelo."

The frozen Wyrd Glyphs began to move once again...

"Goodbye."

"Good...bye."

They exchanged their farewells and she disappeared.

Orphen closed his eyes as he touched the flooding power. Where was it going? What was it doing? He didn't need to think about that. As soon as he touched it, he understood. It was all awaiting his command. The demon king's power, called forth by the summoner and controlled by the device.

No, it was too vast to even be called power. It was almost limitless.

He was afraid to pause his consciousness—if he stopped time, he could easily

traverse thousands of years. He only had to move a tiny bit to pass through the most solid wall on the entire continent. Orphen quietly made the command.

After the teleportation, he looked around.

He'd never seen the place where he currently found himself. It was possible no one had seen it in hundreds of years, maybe even thousands.

A hand still on the completely unblemished floor, Orphen muttered, "The burial chamber..."

He observed the room.

It was dim. There was nothing that could be called a light inside, but it wasn't total darkness.

It was spacious. A small sports field could have fit inside it. The entrance where he currently stood was one side of a hexagon that made up its walls. There was a door that didn't open there. At each corner, there was a large box extending all the way from the floor to the ceiling—ten meters or so tall. They all had a lid facing to the front that was closed.

They were coffins, Orphen realized. Six coffins, indistinguishable from one another.

There was nothing and no one in the room. The Ayrmankar burial chamber was dead silent.

Orphen shuddered, the deep chill of this chamber rendering the tumult of the device almost fictitious in his mind. He had no need to fear, but he still paid attention with every bit of his senses. Inside the coffins were immortal beings, something far removed from the dead.

They had been sealed inside this chamber for a long time—trapped here.

Eventually...

"Who goes there?!" Voices echoed in the mausoleum. The voices of the entombed.

Without sound, each coffin opened. Orphen watched the lids lift. Of the six, five opened. He didn't need to think about it to know who belonged in the one that was still closed.

Green eyes glowed from underneath the lids, pointed his way.

An enormous beast emerged from the coffin in front of him to his left. Even at a distance, it was obvious how large the creature was. Orphen had to crane his neck back to look up at it. It was a steel steed. It stood with the pride of an invincible, flawless creature, shaking a mane of a similar metal.

Equally enormous creatures emerged from the coffins beside that one. One crawled forward almost like a heavy boulder rolling. It had a shell like a fortress, and it seemed to barely fit inside the spacious chamber. Steam spouted from it at irregular intervals, painting pictures in the air above it before dispersing with each movement of its body.

The six kings of beasts on the continent. The beast of ruin, Sleipnir.

The six kings of beasts on the continent. The beast of immortality, Troll.

The other. A quiet hound, holding itself low to the ground. Its form resembled the wolves Orphen was familiar with, but this one was even bigger than those Orphen himself had seen. Its glossy jet-black fur was less armor and more shadow, less shadow and more night... It was as inexorable as fate itself as it loped forward soundlessly.

Unlike these, there was one creature that was incredibly small. A tiny lion with crimson fur. Its tail was raised in catlike arrogance.

Lastly, there was one that resembled a human. Orphen was very familiar with these, including the fact that this wasn't their true form.

The heads of dragonkind stood before him, almost surrounding him. One of them must have spoken for them as a whole as well. The steel warhorse's voice was like thunder.

"Who are you? This is the most sacred place in the sanctuary. The cornerstone of the continent—"

"I know," Orphen told it, standing up straight. "I'm here to stop you."

"To stop us?" the Aymankar asked, uncomprehending.

"That's right." Orphen cut them off and stepped forward. "It's been about a thousand years since you guys made the Aymankar barrier—of course, it's not

like I've experienced those years myself."

"We have," the warhorse said more smoothly than Orphen had been expecting. If he couldn't see the creature he was conversing with, he would have thought he was speaking with a human, but the voice sounded like all the years that had passed, it had really experienced. Augustly, the Aymankar continued, "One thousand years... The time extends the sleep of those who have lived it. But we will likely experience even more time."

"Aureole is dead. She won't experience any more time." The words couldn't eliminate the stench of immortality that filled the room, but they at least served to make the War Dragon's nose twitch. Orphen continued in the opportunity the beast's surprise afforded him, "I'm here to deliver her will."

"We know that Aureole is dead."

"But you don't know what she saw before she died, do you?" Orphen shrugged and looked at each of the Aymankar's faces in turn. Each had the distinctive green eyes of a dragon. His eyes finally settled on the still-closed coffin before he said, "She saw the end of the world before she died."

"The manifested gods will overrun everything outside of the barrier. We know that—"

"I don't know about that. Was the end she saw of the outside world? Or was it..." Orphen stepped forward, walking artlessly toward the middle of the chamber.

Would the Aymankar stop him? He thought they might, but no one raised a voice in protest. Suddenly, Orphen found himself wondering if they even knew of the existence of human sorcerers. Did they know what had happened outside of this burial chamber for the last thousand years? They knew Aureole had died and had come up with the idea to shrink the barrier, so they must have had some source of information.

"You're not of the sanctuary," the War Dragon asked, and Orphen nodded.

"I'm not. You might not know what I am. We're called humans—"

"The giants," supplied the warhorse, pity in its destructive gaze.

Orphen hesitated for a moment before deciding to agree with the beast.  
“That’s right.”

“They were destroyed along with the gods. And when the gods manifested, you too appeared with a fearsome power. You drifted to this continent and humanity made a great fuss...”

“...Now, we call those humans dwarves. We’ve made most of the continent our home.” He was half-guessing, but the Ayrmankar’s words solidified his ideas, which he told to them.

Reaching the spot he was headed for, Orphen stopped. And with the Ayrmankar everywhere around him, he asked, “How much information are you keeping to yourselves?”

“None of it is of any use now. Just as the gods manifested and became something unlike the old gods, you cannot truly be called giants anymore. Our information is not worth sharing.”

“So with that useless information, you came up with the stupid idea to abandon the rest of the continent and shrink the barrier? Without taking a step outside of here and seeing what was happening out there?”

“If the goddess penetrates the barrier, she is sure to end the world—it could be the descent of Miðgarðsormr. Some thought to summon the demon king here in the sanctuary to fight the goddess, but that won’t work. In fact, if we direct the sort of power that could kill the goddess at her, it might just encourage her to make the decision to end it all. The end cannot be avoided as long as there is a hole in the barrier. There’s no other way to extend the life of the continent.”

Orphen argued with the War Dragon. “So your final option is to sacrifice the entire continent and leave only this ridiculous burial chamber behind?”  
However...

The beast wasn’t moved by his remonstrations. “The entire continent?” it asked solemnly. “Do you say that knowing what the Kiesalhiman continent is in comparison to the entire world that used to exist? We ran, leaving behind our grand homeland. It is mere dust compared to the whole. A piteous island...”

And it was pity in the dragon's eyes. The steel warhorse looked down at him with the compassion of a god.

An enormous thing and a small, weak thing. Between their gazes, the War Dragon's piteous words sat.

"It's the same thing. You cannot call this one continent the same thing as the entire world. It's hardly different from this burial chamber."

"That's sophistry."

"So is sorcery itself. When you get down to it, the very manifestation of the gods was nothing more than wordplay given true form." The heavy voice grew even more heavy, laden with resignation. "This world was trifled with by wordplay and so it shall end. We merely struggle against that. If this is true wordplay, then there is meaning in only a fragment of the world surviving..."

"But—" Orphen interrupted as soon as he was able to. "But shrinking the barrier won't get rid of the hole. That's what I think."

They must not have expected that. The Aymankar moved a heavy head as if waking from a dream and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"You can't make the world safe. The barrier only exists *because* of the hole."

"Do you have a basis for what you say?"

"No. But it doesn't matter. I don't intend to submit to your tests," Orphen said, holding his hands up.

It was no empty threat. A sound from far away still remained in his ear. The summoner was still active. It had used some power to teleport him here, but the demon king's strength still remained.

The Aymankar were all pushed back half a step. He hadn't exerted any strength, but they must have sensed the connection between the summoner and the spot where he stood.

He still had complete control. Too late, he found himself appreciating the strength of Azalie's will as a white sorcerer. All of the sacrifices up until this point had led to this. So many people had lost their lives and the sanctuary had been ruined.

It wasn't a moment someone had waited for, and it wasn't an ending someone had sought out. But he had to bring it to an end here.

Orphen said quietly, "The Aymankar barrier is a will that seeks perfect safety—so the gods appeared to pry it open. It's simple equilibrium. Because the barrier attempts flawless protection, a flaw naturally appears in it, and a will of destruction invades through that gap. That's the balance. They come *because* the barrier exists. They wouldn't go out of their way if it didn't. You said everything is wordplay, yeah? You're right."

"But if we remove the barrier, we'll be defenseless against the manifested gods!"

Orphen didn't know who said this—it wasn't the War Dragon.

He didn't let that bother him and responded, "That's right. There's a slight chance the goddess will coincidentally choose to attack and wipe out one race or another, but that's how the world should work. It's a risk that comes with being a living thing."

"Nihilism?!" The Mist Dragon raised a cry.

Orphen shook his head. "No! No matter how cruel the world we live in is, our wills will reach out toward what they wish for! We simply didn't need the barrier—the wall that sealed away the world—in the first place!"

"You're insane..."

"I'm saying despair was only born into this world when the Aymankar barrier closed it off!"

A passageway opened.

The Wyrd Glyphs that had appeared in the Second World-Seeing Tower transferred one by one into the burial chamber. The demon king's power gave the sorcery its potency.

Trembling with that power, Orphen chanted. "Swedenborge's power told me this. Swedenborge was once a human, a hermit who became akin to the gods wielding no power but his own mind. So long ago I can hardly conceive of it, he existed as a human—but he did not become a founding sorcerer. Because it



wasn't power he desired!"

There was a scream as everything died. Destruction came. The voices of the Ayrmankar were almost pleas at this point.

But Orphen resolutely ignored them. "*You're* the ones who wanted the warped power of sorcery. A stupid power you can't even control! Well, fine. We all have to live with it now that it exists. But we won't bow to it. We'll believe that we can live even in despair, and do this!" he shouted, bringing his arm down.

"With the power of the demon king, I bring down the Ayrmankar barrier! From the inside, it goes down easily!"

His body shook, and as the two crests intertwined, there was a sound almost like a muted cry.



A maelstrom whirled in the sky.

From the crimson of the dawn horizon to the still-dark summit of the sky.

The flow of atmosphere spiraled, ripping apart dark clouds.

Like a drill piercing through something. Like a saw slicing through something.

Just above the sanctuary, it rocked the surface of the lake below.

The jet-black wolves stationed at the lake's edge finally rose and lowered their heads, ready to fight.

Foam bubbled on the quiet surface of the lake, taking in the sand floating above it and sinking it below.

A woman hovered above the lake. Her hair fluttered down around her.

Maybe she was confused about why she'd slipped through the barrier sooner than she'd planned.

She might have been suspicious about why a barrier she had been trying to get through for hundreds of years had suddenly vanished.

Her brain, both that of a god and yet not, decided to open her eyes wide before contemplating that.

The beasts howled. A long howl.

The wolves all rose and answered their companions' cries.

The song of their howls resounded far into the distance before the now-freed goddess. All at the same time...

At the dawn of Kiesalhima's final day.

The jet-black forest wolves kicked off from the lake's edge and charged the goddess.

As if to drown the dawn in the hue of a second midnight.

At the same time, far away...

On the plains stretching from the Imminent Domain to the sanctuary.

The scars of battle still remained. The bodies piled up there were gradually being covered by the ever-blowing sands.

The scorched tents still remained. And from the ground...

*Crack.*

A hand sprung from one of the scorch marks underneath a tent.

It scrambled around a bit and eventually a torso pulled itself free of the dirt. And not just one. Two torsos.

"Man, thought we were dead there, Dortin."

"...Well, maybe I shouldn't say this after almost dying, but this might just be what living is," Dortin muttered, hacking up some sand.

The two who were stronger than anyone else were, of course, still alive.

# Epilogue

It wasn't a long time that she spent in the capital, but it was a comfortable one.

Of course, there wasn't much excitement about life in a sickroom.

But it was a large hospital run by a noble, so she got a brilliant view of the capital from her window. She wasn't unfamiliar with life in a hospital from her childhood. Claiomh adjusted the collar of her pajamas and set her feet down on the floor to get out of bed...then remembered that there was nothing for her to do, so she pulled her legs back up.

She'd spent the past week gazing dreamily up at the ceiling of this room. Their transport to the capital had been hasty and after arriving, everyone she knew had been busy. A doctor had informed her of the weakened state of her mind and body and she'd been hospitalized here, but she thought it was equally likely that they'd just left her here to keep her out of the way.

Society was all abuzz and nothing had changed—in this capital, at least, she was sure that nothing was different at all than it had been a week ago. People had marveled at the “rainless storm” that had occurred for a few days, but they'd still gone to work and school the same as they always did.

*Oh.* Claiomh realized she was about to cry and stopped thinking about that. She'd been doing this for days now, so she'd gotten pretty good at it. She wiped away the tears that hadn't yet fallen and any trace that she might have been crying was gone.

Then she just needed to take a few deep breaths to calm herself. At some point, her wounds would heal...

When a knock broke her concentration, Claiomh felt more surprise than anger—she didn't have many visitors, and it wasn't yet time for the doctor to come check if she was still alive. She hurriedly pulled the covers up to her chest and answered the door even as she worried about her bedhead that was worsening

by the day. Maybe she knew who was coming.

She got that feeling as the door opened.

Orphen stood there. The sorcerer with the sarcastic-looking expression on his face that never seemed to bother her. He'd returned to his usual outfit, discarding the combat gear he'd been wearing over the last few days. He set a stuffed, misshapen backpack on the floor and raised a hand in greeting. Claiomh nodded her head wordlessly in response.

He looked around silently for a moment before his gaze settled on the window. "The sand is done falling," Orphen said. "It was pretty hectic there for a minute, but now that the goddess is gone—"

"That window doesn't open," Claiomh told Orphen when he put his hand on the window frame. He blinked and looked over at her and she continued, "It's not glass, that window... You know, 'cause...I was pretty confused at first."

"Oh... I see," Orphen said awkwardly, as if he'd just remembered what sort of room this was. It wasn't the completely isolated rooms they had on the first floor, but the dreary hospital room was meant to provoke the patients in it as little as possible.

Claiomh hung her head and murmured, "The goddess is gone... The Deep Dragons...jumped at her to teleport her somewhere far away and they all died." She wasn't blaming him, but as she peeked out from under her bangs at him, she saw the exact dark shadow on his face she expected.

Orphen sighed. "Yeah... The Deep Dragons didn't miss their opportunity. They took the initiative the destruction of the barrier gave them and used it to teleport the goddess. I don't know where she ended up... She may never return here, or she could be back tomorrow."

"Is that okay?"

"I dunno. But I think it's like worrying about a meteorite falling on us. I don't think the gods will worry about this puny little continent now that the Aymankar barrier's gone. At the very least, we've avoided certain doom."

The explanation came fluidly from him, since he'd given it to countless people over the last few days. She was sure many people had asked him about it

before her.

Claiomh gripped her blanket hard enough to tear it and muttered, “I think you did what you needed to do, Orphen... But I—”

“I don’t think there was anything we could have done about Leki. Lottecia and the lord died too. And Irgitte. Even Ryan died. And plenty of other people.”

As he spoke, he went over to the backpack he’d left on the floor—Claiomh hadn’t noticed, but he must have had something hidden inside it. Opening it up to take something out of it, he suddenly changed the subject.

“Leki said he left his pack and became his own individual will, right?”

“But that’s...”

“But that’s what Leki said,” Orphen interrupted her when Claiomh protested.

He stood, holding a little black lump in his hand and said, “I found this outside.”

What he was holding really was little more than a lump of black. But it was alive—shivering, like it might be cold. It was a tiny black dog, only as big as Orphen’s palm. Its eyes and ears were still closed.

Claiomh stopped breathing, feeling like her breath had been lodged somewhere around her heart. Even she wasn’t sure what she’d say next, but as Orphen approached the bed and she looked down at the living creature on his hand, one word escaped her lips. “Outside...?”

“Just outside. Outside the door.” He pointed to the door he’d just walked through.

Claiomh reached out and took the dog from him, expelling the air she was holding in her chest. “It was right there. If I’d opened the door and went outside, it would have been right there...”

She looked down at the dog trembling in her hand. Was it sleeping or weakened? She couldn’t tell. But it was definitely alive. She couldn’t even pull it to her chest because she was afraid of crushing it, but it was there.

“...Leki? Is it Leki?” she asked.

“I dunno,” Orphen said. “But that whole race left just this one individual behind. It hasn’t even opened its eyes yet and there’s nobody out there who knows how to raise a Deep Dragon. Who knows if it’ll make it to adulthood, but...” He’d already turned around and picked up the bag he’d left on the floor.

“That’s for you to decide. If you don’t want to feel the same way again, then there’s nothing I can do about that.”

*Don’t cry*, Claiomh commanded herself, holding the tears inside. This wasn’t a miracle. If she thought of it that way, she was sure this tiny, weak life wouldn’t make it. She had to help it.

For the time being, the still-blind Deep Dragon seemed cold. The temperature in the room wasn’t that low, but the creature must have just been too small. She placed it on top of her blanket, warming it with her hands, and looked to Orphen.

“You look like...you’re going somewhere with that bag.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “This was just a wayward journey. I thought I’d go back to being on my own for a bit. I asked Tish to look after you, so you can get her to take you back to Totokanta, all right?”

“I’ll miss you.” She said exactly what she was feeling. The words spilled from her, though there weren’t that many of them in the end. “I’ll really miss you. Won’t you, Orphen?”

These were parting words, whether she wanted them to be or not. She knew that somewhere as she said them.

Orphen was smiling. There was still a tinge of his usual sarcasm to it, but she thought it was just about the biggest smile he was capable of.

“Of course I will. That’s why we’ll see each other again sometime. But for now...” He put his arms through the straps of the backpack and waved, facing away from her. “I still have to say goodbye.”

He took a few steps and walked right out of the hospital room. And just as soon as he opened the door and disappeared through it, there was another knock.

She answered, thinking he had come back, but this time it wasn't Orphen who came in but Majic. Just like all the other times he'd come to visit her, he was carrying some food that wasn't a very thoughtful gift—if he brought it because hospital food wasn't good, then why was he just buying things from the hospital café, Claiomh thought every time he came.

In any case, as Majic cheerfully entered the room, Claiomh asked him, “Did you see Orphen just now?”

“Hmm? Yeah.”

“You should have talked to him, then. Orphen said he's leaving,” she said, pointing at the door.

Majic looked back at it a little guiltily, but he remained steadfast in his mission. “Nah, I talked to him a little earlier.”

“Still...”

Majic left his offering on the side of the bed and started cleaning up the remnants of what he'd brought the day before.

“You shouldn't make too big a deal of it. Of anything, really.”



Five years ago, he'd visited the capital in high spirits and was practically turned back at the gates, but now that he got a chance to really walk through it, it was magnificent. Maybe it was strange to feel nostalgic about it, Orphen thought while stifling a wry smile, but he did. Now that he thought about it, he felt like his journey had started here.

For exactly whom did the plaques by the roadside list the names of the nearby trees? He didn't know, but if you didn't feel like reading them, then that had nothing to do with you. Orphen walked down the streets of the capital, on a journey where he felt no particular need to hurry.

Where would this journey lead him?

To the rest of his life, he could say if he wanted to be witty, but he didn't think it would go that far.

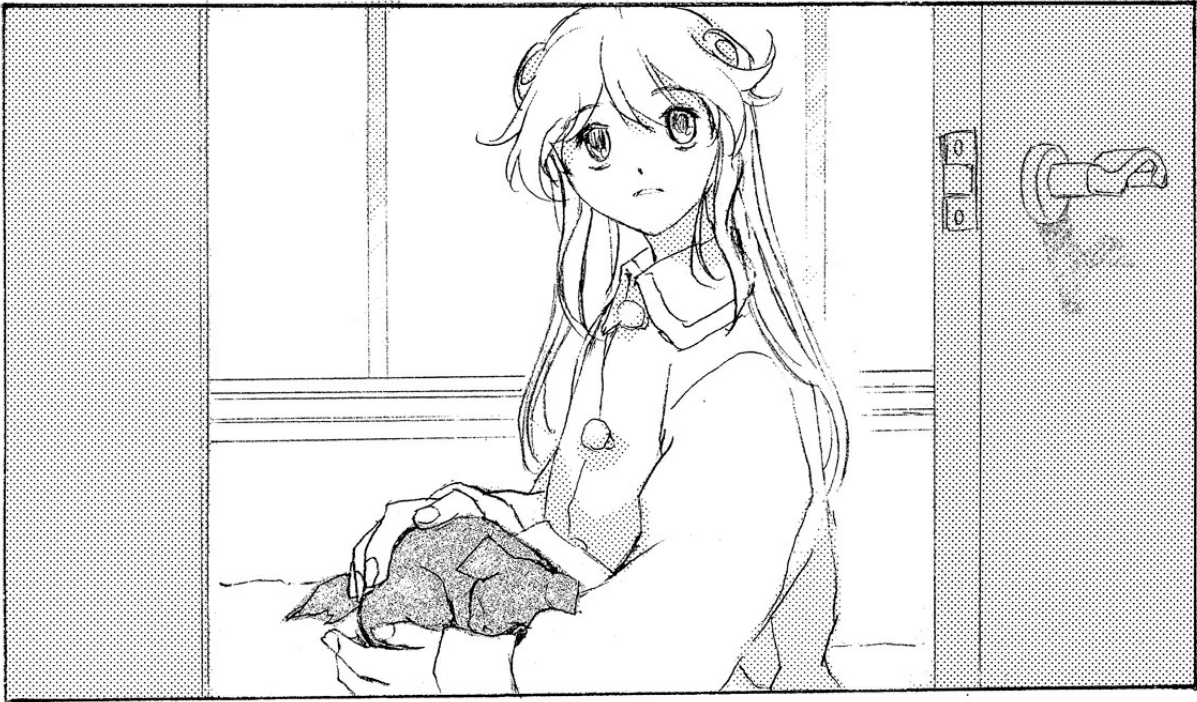
The sky in the capital was clear.

He looked up at it and spread his arms, but even if he stretched as far as he could, he didn't bump into any other passersby. The streets were that wide.

"Let's see... For now, I think..." he muttered to himself. "I'll just head for the farthest place I can from here. I don't care where."

He pointed up at the sun shining in the sky.





# Afterword

It's over... It's all over...

In addition to the harsh weight loss, Yabuki's strike to his temple in the sixth round and the rope's blow to the back of his head when he went down caused a cerebral hemorrhage...

Now that I think about it, that fight wasn't even a title match or anything, was it?

Sorry, this is no time to be messing around.

Firstly, I apologize for how long it took to get this out. There were delays up until the very end.

To come clean, I was actually supposed to have finished this manuscript in December 2002. The first half was already written, so the hope was that if things went well, we could release them both together, but...

My health took a turn for the worse right after I finished writing the first part. When the first part came out, the publisher asked me, "Can we announce part two coming out around summer?" and I said, "Yes, I'll try to finish it by then..." but I didn't get better for a long time...

My writing pace slowed considerably, but I couldn't just drop my magazine work, so I ended up focusing on that pretty much completely.

Actually, I think I started feeling unwell the year before last, really...

So while I was carrying on working pretending that my body wasn't broken, it eventually broke enough that I couldn't work, you see. I finally learned something that even a child could figure out.

I know I have no way to apologize to those who were looking forward to this work, but I'm sorry all the same.

In any case.

This volume marks the end of the Orphen series.

Firstly, please allow me to thank everyone who was involved in this series and everyone who was involved with Akita without being involved in the series. Thank you so much.

I'm sure there are those of you who know this, but this series started ten years ago at this point, getting this far on the author's uncertain steps. So many people supported me and I caused them trouble at every turn, but even a pathetic creator like me has gotten this far without running away... Those are the kind of shameful things I think about myself.

But anyway, since I have the opportunity, I figure I'll talk about how this series came about, at my editor's request.

I won Fujimi Shobo's third Fantasia Novel Award for new authors. In 2003, they'll be giving out this award for the fifteenth time. So it's been twelve years since I won my award.

I think I talked about this in an interview once, but at the time I was in high school and I worked part-time to save up for an MSX (a PC that was already on the way out at the time) and submitted a story I wrote as typing practice on the word processor included on the machine (that was how it started, really).

The really amazing thing about that is that one file in that word processor was only the size of about twelve sheets of manuscript paper. So it took me over thirty files just to write one book. If I wanted to add one line, I might have to edit ten plus files individually if I was unlucky. How ludicrous.

Anyway, I think the story I submitted was probably the first thing in my life that I actually wrote from start to finish... Wait, that's not what I wanted to say. People get this wrong a lot, but that story wasn't the first volume of the Orphen series.

It was a completely different book. And after I debuted with that book, I took story proposals into the publisher for about two years. I was a student at the time, so things were easy in that sense, but I think I brought them five or six different ideas (and I wrote more than that considering all the ideas I threw out

myself...) I wrote SF-type stuff and mystery-type stuff and it was definitely fun, but my editor always gave me a sour look when I brought my stories in.

“I mean, I won’t say they’re boring, but... How should I say this? There’s a certain kind of fun that anime and manga have, right? Can you make something like that?”

*I see*, I thought, and I tried to think of something, but...

Huh.

There wasn’t really a reason, but I suddenly stopped watching TV after I started middle school.

When I was about twenty, I bought a TV for my place (again without any particular reason) and started watching it, but I had this long gap in my knowledge of TV and entertainment for those years when I wasn’t watching. I didn’t know any of the anime my editor brought up as examples for me. The only anime I knew was the mecha war stuff I watched a lot in grade school...

Fortunately, right when I heard that advice, a new series of that anime I’d watched as a child was airing. It was a story about a family living in a crazy palace with horns fighting a war of independence against the Earth Federation... It was like, this is sad, but this is what war’s like... Anyway, it was a new series like that and it was pretty great. It had like, a space battleship with tires that went, “Now I can trample everything on the surface.”

I watched the show in the evenings and went, “I see. A story like this.” My brain was festering.

Thus.

I got the idea for a story where magic users flew around in space and shot beams at each other and locked blades and shouted lines like that.

I gave up on the space part quickly enough... I thought it made sense to do so, but at the same time, I kind of wish I hadn’t.

“For the protagonist... I guess I can’t make it the white Federation guy, can I... Black, then. Black works.”

Here’s something I’ve never told anyone, or rather, I’ve kept hidden.

People asked me a few times when the series started why I didn't write sorcerer in the normal way. Of course, part of it is just because I think the normal characters are uncool, but the truth is that the last character comes from that anime.

I had some of the stories I'd rejected myself before bringing them to the publisher at the time, so I took some of the characters and pieces of the setting and changed them up into the first volume of this series. I've said this in an interview too, but Orphan (that was his name at first) was a subcharacter in the original story, a wisecracking magic user. The model for the character was that one guy, with the hourglass eyes.

When I wrote the first one, I had no intention of continuing it, but my editor suddenly told me, "write the next one too, just in case," so I kind of panicked. At the time, I had already graduated and gotten a job. But I was still in training at the time and going home early, so things weren't that different from when I was a student. I somehow managed to think up the story for volume two on. Having to expand a story that was finished meant I was better off ignoring most of the stuff I'd established in volume one, so that's just what I did with volume two.

Around then, the first volume went on sale and luckily it was well-received, so I ended up being able to write volume three as well. But I was starting to get busy at work. Plus, I was an operator at a printing company, so I was going home in the middle of the night as a matter of course (I'm so thankful to the people whose job it is to make this manuscript into a book). Having no other choice, I would go home late, write until morning, go to work, and then sleep on my lunch break, and that's how I wrote volume three, but...

Naturally, I couldn't carry on like that forever, so I quit my job sometime around when I was writing volume six, I think. At that time, I began to focus completely on this job.

And so with all that, I wrote this series for nine years. Almost ten years now. In terms of the world at large, it's only a mere ten years, but it was a lot of fun for me. I never cease to be dissatisfied with my inexperience, and there's probably been more pain than pleasure on the whole, but it was a lot of fun.

That's what I think looking back at it now. I can only hope that my readers have enjoyed it too.

Phew.

Well, I went against my own policy and wrote a lot about my work. It's a little mortifying, but it was a good opportunity, so.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who helped get me here once more as well. I think I'll probably start a new series after this, so I hope you'll join me in that one as well.

Huh? There's more Reckless left?

...Shit. There's one book left!

Yoshinobu Akita, August 2003

















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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 20

by Yoshinobu Akita

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