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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

18. WANDER MY MANSION, FALSEHOOD!

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**There was one gravestone.
As Orphen stared down at it,
she quietly approached him.**

They were all staring at him. Was it some kind of prank or just his imagination? Either way, it was a strange sight.



**With a scream,
she vanished.
In her place,
they could hear
a racket of
footsteps and
shouts from
below.**

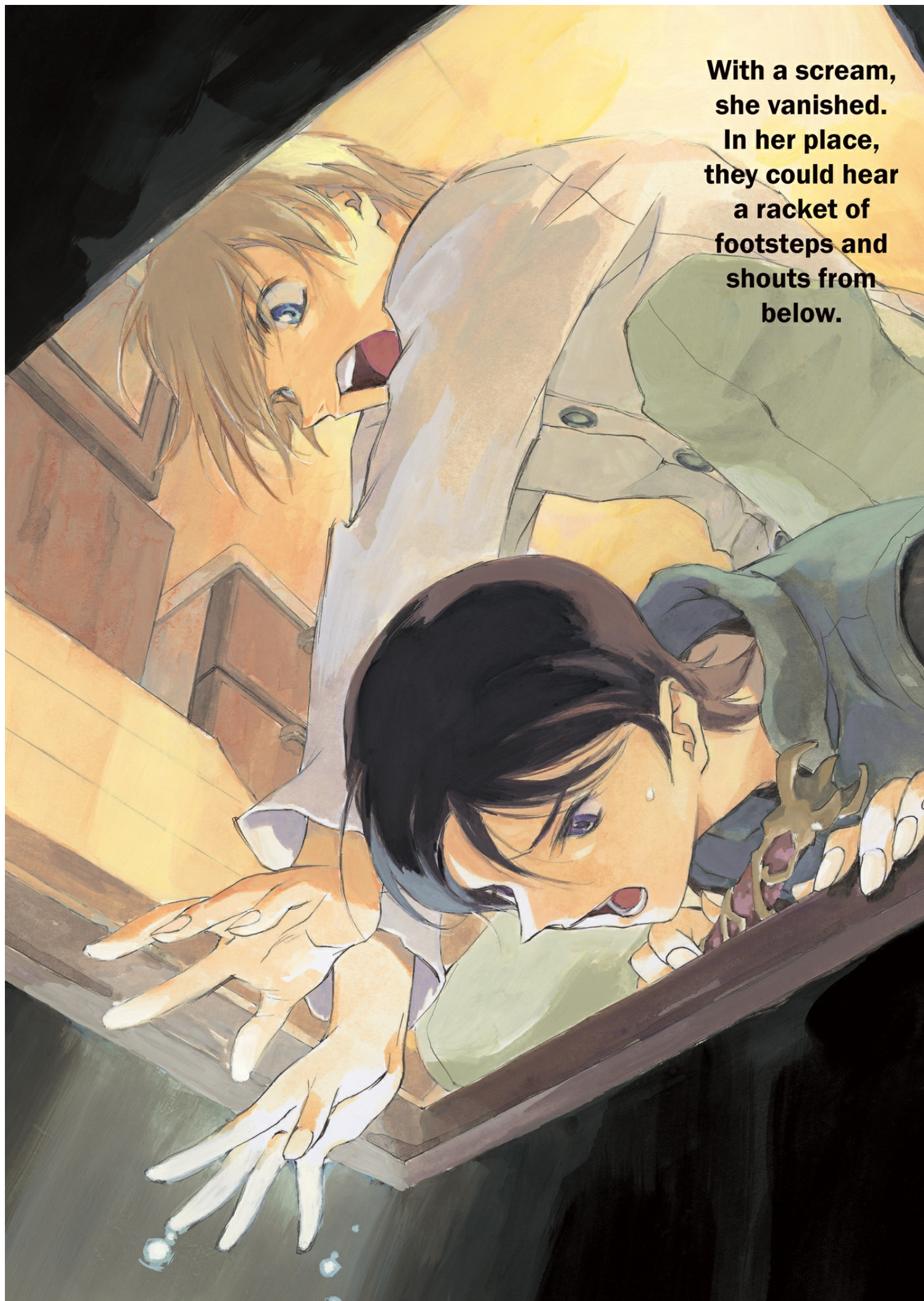


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Prologue

My thoughts turned to the dragons...

Once, they had been the species that thrived the most on the continent. The six types each wielded a certain power—the power to bend the world’s natural laws to their will. They birthed the power of sorcery, and with it, they destroyed the world.

Why did they develop sorcery? From an outsider’s perspective, there should have been no need for them to obtain more power... They also developed it communally, during a time when things were almost miraculously peaceful between the six. It wasn’t a response to any sort of strife or competition.

They’d developed sorcery in a time filled with a peace that they should have been satisfied with.

I couldn’t help wondering why that was.

If they hadn’t desired sorcery as a source of power, or as a weapon...then they must have wanted it for some other reason. That was what I thought.

“What does that matter?” my confidant, Damian, had asked. But I continued to think.

I thought because I felt it was important—no, that would be a lie. To tell the truth, even I didn’t think solving this puzzle would alter the outcome of the war.

Still, I contemplated it nonetheless. We were already on the verge of grasping victory, so the war didn’t really demand consideration. That was why I was thinking about other things.

The dragon races.

War Dragons, Sleipnir.

Weird Dragons, Nornir.

Deep Dragons, Fenrir.

Fairy Dragons, Valkyries.

Red Dragons, Berserkers.

Mist Dragons, Trolls.

These were the ones.

The six that had developed and utilized sorcery.

The natural laws governed everything in the world, but they'd developed the skills to biologically manipulate those laws. In order to utilize their sorcerous power, they required some manner of signal to serve as a medium, and their power only affected an area that medium could reach. Still, the power they displayed was mighty, and they became akin to all-powerful beings.

With sorcery, the dragons became a true apex species. They stood at the summit of all living things in the world. Beings without sorcery could never hope to reach the heights of the dragons' power. The six types of dragons shared the world among themselves and no one else.

They'd ruled the world. At least for that one brief moment.

For something else was brought into this world with sorcery. When they obtained sorcery, they obtained a natural enemy that sorcery could never defeat at the same time. And before they'd even had time to blink, the world was snatched out of their grasp. They had triggered terrible disasters, personifications of the world's natural laws. The laws should have had no will of their own, but they manifested then as living creatures. The ultimate apex of the world, in the true sense of the word...

The dragons called this the manifestation of the gods.

Why did they think these were gods? That was my first question.

Most likely, when they manifested, they'd identified themselves as such—that is the most logical conclusion, I believed.

The traditional gods, existing as natural laws, were all-knowing and all-powerful, while at the same time they knew nothing and could do nothing. But these manifested gods were neither. They were not all-powerful, but they

possessed a power only slightly less than omnipotent. If we took the legends at face value, these gods instinctively recognized the dragons as their enemy. They opposed them immediately.

I felt this was key. Why did the gods try to destroy the dragons? It would be unnatural.

If the gods manifested as living beings, then they should have felt some attachment to and gratitude for life. Was it because of the dragons that they manifested? Even if it was a foolish mistake on their part.

From an outsider's perspective, the gods should have had no reason to fight with the dragons.

If the gods manifested as living beings, they should have feared death, should they not? Was abandoning the living bodies they now possessed and returning to nothing not the same as suicide to them? True living things could do nothing about the fact that they had been born, so they had no choice but to live their lives. If they didn't feel this way, could they even be considered living things? Was that not going against the very natural laws that they embodied?

Why did the manifested gods try to destroy the dragons? Why did they try to return to nothing? Should they not have simply ignored such a trivial thing and exulted in life?

Maybe...it was actually the dragons...who tried to kill the manifested gods first...

Sometimes, I'd think that.

And if that indeed was the impetus for the dragons' conflict with the manifested gods—then this becomes the new question. Why did the dragons start such a reckless fight? One they should have known they had no hope of winning.

I could imagine. That brought me back to my original question.

Why did the dragons desire sorcery?

What were they after? What could a species as fulfilled as themselves

possibly want?

This is my theory:

They desired unconditional love... As a species that celebrated themselves, they desired proof of affection from some higher being. Just as lovers desire to marry. As they desire proof in writing of their love.

The dragons believed that if the gods loved them, then the world would grant them the power of sorcery. The dragons desired sorcery as a manifestation of the gods' affection for them... If they had sorcery, they could believe that the gods loved them above all else.

That was what they had thought.

As a result of their obtaining sorcery, they'd also summoned the gods into existence. What actually occurred differed from what they desired.

In other words...what appeared denied the existence of a higher power.

Gods did appear, but they were not the gods the dragons had hoped to find.

The gods betrayed the ideal that the dragons had believed in.

They desired love, but their desire was betrayed.

The dragons did not want to acknowledge this betrayal of the love they sought.

I thought that was possible. Even for that powerful race.

In the end, I was unable to find a certain answer...

There were none on the continent who knew the truth. No, there might have been, but they had garbed themselves in such lies that we couldn't locate them with the Network. They...the people living in the sanctuary, they themselves may not even have known which words they spoke were truth and which were lies. It was highly possible that was the case.

Perhaps there were those outside of the continent who might know. Would the manifested gods answer my questions? Even if they would, their response would mean the ruin of the continent.

Surely the answer was not worth all that.

But all those trivial questions.

Those infinite questions that no one paid any mind to.

Futile questions that weren't worth thinking over, that would not reward you for finding their answer.

Who could answer them?

Who was supposed to answer them?

It was my task to think on this—on who would face these questions and answers.

Who was the successor?

Chapter I: False Grave

There was no body inside the grave. It was a grave he'd made himself, so he was sure of that. Then, where was the body? He couldn't bring himself to look for it.

It might not even exist anymore. That was an undeniable possibility. In the quiet garden, Orphen looked down at the grave. Rather, at the large stone he'd placed there in imitation.

Even he thought it was a ridiculously simple display. His lips twisted in a cynical smile. *It's like a pet's grave.* He huffed out the lukewarm sigh that had settled in his chest and continued to himself, *I wouldn't want to make a proper one in this godforsaken place anyway. I'll make you a proper one later, in Tefurem, perhaps...*

Or, maybe...

He raised his head, the smile gone from his face. With no expression, he thought, *Maybe there's already one for you in the capital...*

She had been sent here as part of the Thirteen Apostles. It wouldn't surprise him if their bosses had never expected them to return in the first place. What reason could they have had to force them to come anyway?

I guess they must have had one. Dammit.

There was only one grave, and nothing marked it as hers, including the lack of body underneath it. She wasn't the only one who had died in this garden. Even just counting the deaths of those associated with her, there were two more. The Stabbers from the Thirteen Apostles had also lost their lives here, but he hadn't made them graves. There were several reasons for that, but in the end, he summed them up with "he didn't owe it to them."

If he simply left it at that, then he'd be able to avoid thinking about unnecessary things...

"What are you doing?"

The question came from a girl who had approached him from behind.

Had she meant to surprise him? He thought that might be the case, though he couldn't bring himself to ask her. The girl, wearily cradling a sword to her chest, continued to approach, still treading quietly. She was a girl of thin lines and pale colors, though she didn't look frail, exactly. Quite the opposite; one could sense from the way she walked that she was a highly trained athlete.

"Lottecia?" Orphen muttered her name.

The girl from the Nashwater sword dojo, Lottecia, asked with a sour expression on her face, "Who did you think it was?"

"No one in particular." He didn't mention that he was imagining another girl around the same age as her. Instead, he looked down at the grave. "Let me ask you, then. What did you think I was doing?"

"Standing," Lottecia stated plainly. She circled to his front, still cradling the sword, and continued. "It doesn't look like...you're doing anything else."

"Well, I suppose that's all I'm doing, then," Orphen said offhandedly and turned around. His gaze passed by her, drawn instead to the large silhouette behind her—the mansion, rising out of the ground like a mass of shadow cast by the garden's trees. "I can't relax in there."

"Neither can I," Lottecia murmured, her voice weary.

There was nothing particularly unique about the mansion, when looking at it from the outside.

Still, as Orphen stared at it, he got the feeling that if he observed it for long enough, he would find something strange...

There was a long pause in their conversation. She must have found it awkward. In a forced, unnatural tone, Lottecia asked, "You're not going to change out of those clothes?"

She was referring to his leather combat gear. It didn't quite cover his entire body, but it protected a good portion of his physique and had weapons hidden in a few places. Needless to say, it was incredibly uncomfortable, and while it didn't impede his movements at all, wearing it for a long time *was* rather

exhausting. He had to take it off to wash himself, of course, but it took a long time to put it back on afterward as well. All in all, it was hard to call it a practical outfit.

A wry smile coming to his lips unbidden, Orphen told her, “I get the feeling I should keep wearing it for a while yet still.” Not even he was sure why. “Plus, I don’t even remember where I left the clothes I’m used to wearing.”

“Couldn’t you just wear the clothes provided to you here?” Lottecia herself was wearing brand-new clothes. They were well-made and looked easy to move in, probably something like work clothes. To look at her with the mansion in view, she seemed like a servant.

Wearing the same thing as her... Orphen imagined it, scratching his head. Being taken here against his will and then being put into servant’s clothes... Maybe he didn’t need to worry about it, but as long as he recognized the irony, he didn’t think he’d be able to do it.

“I don’t want to let my guard down,” he told her vaguely, and Lottecia responded emotionally.

Her eyebrows shot up, her tone harsh. “Are you saying I’ve let my guard down?”

“...I wasn’t taking a dig at you. It was just a figure of speech. If I offended you, I apologize.”

“I want to see Ed.” She suddenly faced a different direction.

Orphen blinked and looked at Lottecia. While he struggled to respond, he noticed something in the girl’s eyes. Maybe it was simply her pupils, but to him, it looked like a deeper, muddier darkness. An undefined darkness. He had no idea what it might become one day.

Without looking at him, she said, “Last night, you said Ed wasn’t here, right? Do you know where he is?”

“I don’t.” Orphen quietly denied it. He saw Lottecia screw her face up in annoyance.

“Are you playing dumb?”

“Why do you think I know where he is?”

“Well...” After hesitating for a moment, she admitted, “You’re the only one I can ask.”

“If I just happened to know that, you’d have some impressive luck. Ask Damian. If anyone knows something, it would be him,” Orphen grumbled, turning around. He began to slowly circle the mansion, and Lottecia neither responded further nor made a move to follow.

The garden might have been a pleasant place if he hadn’t had his preconceptions about it. But it shouldn’t have been possible to maintain so many plants in a wasteland like this. Or did the master of the mansion, the so-called lord, keep a skilled gardener in his employ? Maybe that wasn’t as stupid an idea as he had first thought. If the garden was important to him, then naturally he would require a gardener.

He didn’t care, though.

“Umm!” Lottecia ran up ahead and turned to face him, cutting off his way forward. “Were you...making a grave?”

Orphen bit his lip and denied it. “It’s nothing so grand.”

She wouldn’t back down, though. “If so, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten in your way.”

“You weren’t in my way.”

“You don’t need to spare my feelings. I’m sure you’re in a lot of pain...”

Then you spare my feelings. Orphen was about to berate her, but held his tongue. He wasn’t sure how to handle her well-intentioned intrusions. He found his expression growing sharper and averted his eyes to hide it, but Lottecia seemed to interpret that as him sparing her feelings. It seemed she had no intent to stop talking.

“I lost a member of my family too... I mean, it was due to sickness, but I still felt it was unfair. My father left this sword and the dojo to me—”

“Yeah, I heard.” Orphen found himself replying, unable to be too cold to her. The girl before him had done nothing wrong—he told himself that as he mulled

over the empty feeling in his heart.

Well-intentioned intruding. Irgitte and her strong sense of justice. Orphen ground his teeth, remembering not the woman he'd reunited with yesterday but the girl he'd known five years earlier. He hadn't forgotten. He hadn't been able to do a thing for her.

He at least wanted to mourn her. So...

Just be quiet... Please...

He couldn't bring himself to be cold to Lottecia, so he just waited for her rambling to come to an end.

"She was your sister, right? You don't...really look alike, but... Oh, no, I'm sorry..."

You're just bored because you've got no one to talk to, aren't you? He finally heard the words she was saying then. *Sister...?*

Back at the Tower, Irgitte had been nice to him every so often, but they hadn't been close enough for him to consider her family. He couldn't understand what Lottecia was saying, so he just gave her a puzzled look. But Lottecia didn't pick up on that and just kept rambling.

"We only spoke a little bit, but she seemed very intellectual. I've always looked up to people like that."

She was probably just giving him the sort of platitudes anyone at a funeral would give to a mourner, but...

"Oh," Orphen exclaimed. He finally understood what Lottecia was saying. What she'd misunderstood, and what he'd misunderstood.

Lottecia looked back at him, puzzled.

Without a wry smile or an expression of anger, Orphen calmly thought to himself, *She's talking about Tish dying*. He stopped thinking, just standing in the deserted garden with his mouth half-agape.

There was no trace left of the destruction of the mansion's front entrance. Damian had likely erased both the scene of destruction as well as the body that

had been inside. Orphen turned the heavy knob and pulled the door open. It was cool and dark inside the mansion.

He dove into that cool air. It was like entering a tank of water. There wasn't a speck of dust in the lobby. It was impossible to tell which of the floorboards had been cracked before.

The chilly air seemed like spoiled water to him, maybe because he couldn't sense a single person inside the mansion. The air felt like a tank with a dead body in it.

It was just yesterday... People died here. There had been countless corpses strewn about the garden.

He would bet the population of the Imminent Domain had been reduced by almost its entire number. When he considered the air of the mansion grounds and its deserted silence, he got the feeling he wasn't far off about that. At least dozens of people had died, maybe more. They had all been slaughtered in one night.

That was the feel of the place, Orphen thought to himself. It was nothing so vague as the spirits of the dead. The feel of death permeated the place, stroking his neck with cold fingers. He couldn't shake it off. He couldn't run either.

Lottecia was still talking. Orphen realized he wasn't the only one who didn't know anyone here, where there was no place for him.

"What was all the commotion yesterday about, in the end?" she asked. While there was no warmth in her voice, it was better than the cold air here.

Orphen glanced at her and said, "This is the mansion of some noble called the lord of the Imminent Domain. This lord is in conflict with the remaining dragons. And one of their assassins decimated his domain in one night."

"An assassin..." Lottecia didn't seem to believe it.

Orphen shrugged. "Maybe if Colgon had been here, he would have been able to prevent it from happening."

"But the assassin wasn't a sorcerer, he was just a normal person?" she asked, confused. "That...Damian person asked you why you couldn't defeat him, right?"

I don't really get it either."

Orphen realized what she was getting at when she paused awkwardly after that. But he just waited for her to continue, not letting on.

"...Does that mean there's a way for a normal person to win against a sorcerer?"

That's what she wanted to ask. Orphen sighed and answered her. "Sure, if it had been a situation where I could use my sorcery, I probably would have won."

"There are situations where you can't use it?"

"We were indoors, and he closed the distance between us very quickly. On top of that, there was a possibility Claiomh and Majic could have been hiding somewhere nearby. I couldn't be careless. Then there was his skill... I saw that a Stabber from the Thirteen Apostles was killed head-on by him, so I knew if I faced him the same way, the same would happen to me." It had happened in the very place they were standing, in fact.

Orphen looked from the floor in the lobby to the door behind them. That was where the assassin Seek Marrisk had been lying when they'd found him.

When he remembered the sight, he felt the hands of death spreading repulsively from his neck down to his back. Rubbing his arms, which had sprouted goosebumps underneath his combat gear, he shook his head. "Sorcery isn't as convenient a weapon as you might think. There are a lot of situations where any little restriction means you can't use it at all. Though I've tried coming up with a few spells you can use from close range... When it comes down to actually using them, the potential problems prevent me from considering them effective..."

He stopped there, realizing that he was telling Lottecia things she hadn't asked. She was looking up at the stairs like she'd noticed something. Orphen looked up too and noticed the person looking down at them from the landing.

The lord of the Imminent Domain. He was looking at them with a refined, good-natured smile on his face. This was probably his morning greeting to them. He gave them a bow of his head and then disappeared into another room.

Orphen watched him go without saying anything. Lottecia was also silent, and the stillness of life, quieter than that of death, filled the mansion.

He remembered seeing a much more wretched face.

It wasn't a failure of the man called the lord—even if it was gross negligence for him as a noble to let harm come to the citizens under his rule. The Royal Public Safety Plan guaranteed safety to all the citizens under the Union of Lords. Their decree secured the lives of all humans living on the continent, giving them the right to a natural death.

Like all such decrees, the Union of Lords' decree was idealistic, and like all such ideals, the Royal Safety Plan didn't quite line up with reality.

Last night, the garden had been full of corpses, and Orphen had almost died too. Looking down at the garden from the second floor of the mansion, Orphen turned his head left and right as if staying wary of his surroundings. Right under the room was the gravestone he'd set up. This was no coincidence; he'd wanted to keep it close to him.

An ironic thought came to mind. *Making the corpses disappear may be a way to bring the world closer to your ideal.* If there were no corpses, it was as if the tragedy hadn't even occurred.

It wasn't a good joke, so Orphen shook it off, leaving the window and looking around the room that had been given to him.

It was a guest room good enough to justify coming all the way out here on the lord's invitation, he supposed. There wasn't a bed with a canopy or anything, but Orphen didn't want such a thing anyway. He sat down on the springy mattress, his body still weary with fatigue. The squeak of the bed's springs and the soft down comforter brought on a bout of sleepiness.

Rejecting that desire, he covered his face with both hands and took a breath. His memories from yesterday revived vividly in his mind.

"...The lord," he muttered quietly. The face he'd seen the night before.

The moment he'd stepped into the room, he'd seen the face of the man who was supposed to be the lord. It was a wretched face, undoubtedly. But he

couldn't say that was a failure on the man's part. Because there was nothing he could have done about that face...

His death had been caused by a fatal strike far beyond the bounds of normality. He'd had most of his organs squashed by one blow, his throat and tongue hanging out of his open mouth. There was no way he could have gotten a good look at the man's face in the room illuminated only by moonlight, but still, the sight was burned into his mind.

Why? Another question also wouldn't leave his mind. *He was dead. There's no way he wasn't dead.*

The corpses of the lord's soldiers littered the garden. Every single one of them had been destroyed beyond a shadow of a doubt, dead. And just like them, the lord had been dead as well last night.

So why was he alive this morning?

His breath shook as he struggled to take in the reality of the situation. Orphen tensed his hands as he held them over his face. His knuckles scraped against the inside of his gloves. He groaned, playing back his memories from last night with as much detail as he could recall.

The assassin who had murdered the lord had almost killed Orphen as well—the only reason *he* was still alive was because the lord's subordinate, the white sorcerer Damian, had saved him. He had regained consciousness this morning, and by that time, the lord had already come back to life.

Does Damian Rue have enough power to bring someone back to life...? There's no way, dammit... He raised his head. *Maybe it was just someone else who died. After all, I only saw his face in death. It could have been a body double, he could have been playing dead, it could have been an illusion, maybe it was all just a dream I had... What are some other tricks he could have used?*

There was a knock.

His thoughts had been interrupted once again, and he had an idea of who it was interrupting them. He ignored the sound until there was a voice from beyond the door.

"Umm... Orphen."

What do you want?

Orphen stood up and turned the knob, unlocking the door. It was a simple lock, easily openable by anyone with a mind to try, be they a sorcerer or not, and it would have no point at all against someone like Damian.

Still, he'd locked it because he hadn't wanted to be interrupted.

Come to think of it, if I lock it from the inside, I can't pretend to not be here, can I? If he locked the door, it was proof that he was inside, and if he didn't, they would open the door and find him inside anyway. It didn't make a difference whether he locked it or not. He opened the door, cursing his own foolishness.

Just as he suspected, Lottecia was hiding in the shadow of the opened door. Doing his best—his very best—to not be cruel to her, Orphen asked, “Did you need something else?”

“Well, you never actually answered my question.”

“Your question?” he asked, not remembering what she'd asked.

Lottecia took the opportunity to step into Orphen's room. Still holding her sword, she stayed silent for a moment before asking, “Why isn't Ed here?”

It was the same question she'd asked earlier and also a completely different one. Without pointing that out to her, Orphen instead asked back, “What do you mean?”

“I came here because I heard he was here. But he's not. Why?”

“I feel like I've never actually managed to find Colgon when I wanted him for something.” Orphen cut across the room, leaning against the wall farthest away from Lottecia.

He looked over at her to find her leaning toward him, a complex expression on her face that didn't quite read as either anger or disappointment to him. Maybe she didn't even know what she wanted to express. “But you—” she protested, her voice nasally.

“Wait. I just want to say that I'm not your guide here. You just followed me. I have my own business to worry about...” He hesitated, taking a breath before

continuing. He felt like his dry lips were leaving a bad taste on his tongue as he said, “Colgon told you to rely on someone named Krylancelo...right?”

“Huh? Yes...” Lottecia didn’t seem to understand why he had asked that. She blinked in confusion.

There was a long silence. How would he think if he were someone else, he wondered. Colgon, for instance.

What is he up to anyway...? Everyone was hiding their intentions and pushing all sorts of trouble on him. Colgon, Winona, Damian, the lord of the Imminent Domain. Leticia too.

Considering that, the girl holding the sword with the grim look on her face in front of him was at least straightforward. If nothing else, he doubted she could manage to tell a lie.

In the end, I need allies. Maybe he just needed to resign himself to it.

“All right. I’ll work with you,” Orphen said reluctantly.

Even that seemed unexpected to Lottecia. Maybe anything he said would be unexpected. With some surprise, she asked, “Work with?”

“Work with. I don’t mean anything else by it. It’s hard to say our goals are aligned exactly, but we’re at least pointed in the same direction. We want to hear the truth from the people here. Or you could say we want to expose their true identity.”

Orphen carefully chose his words. “Let’s organize what we know. I’ve probably already told you all this, but please just listen. The big picture is this: this continent is ruled by the dragons. But in reality, humans have largely taken over governing the region. The dragons have secluded themselves in a place called the sanctuary, and they don’t ever show themselves to us.”

Orphen waited for Lottecia to nod before he continued. “The Union of Lords’ official position is that they’ve inherited the right to rule from the dragons, and that’s true in practice as well. Still, if the dragons, for whatever reason, emerged from the sanctuary...humans would simply fall under their rule again, since we have no way to resist them. We can’t really know the true motives of the Union of Lords, but I think they would naturally oppose the dragons. And

the person carrying the burden of that opposition is the master of this mansion, the lord of the Imminent Domain. For the time being, that's the role they themselves proclaim to be playing as well. I told you all this yesterday, right? If we take what Winona says at face value, then that's how it is."

"I don't like her," Lottecia spat. Then she hung her head as if realizing how rude she had been and said, "No, I'm sure she doesn't like me either. She irritates me. It feels like she's really looking down on me."

"If they both work for that lord, then Winona and Colgon are on the same side. If you're against Colgon, it would make sense that she'd be against you, right?"

"I suppose..." she said gloomily.

Orphen averted his eyes from her, pretending he was just shifting his position against the wall. It didn't take much time, but Lottecia seemed to pull herself together before he was done. When she was ready to listen to him again, Orphen continued his explanation.

"The dragons seem to have some agents who are working outside of the sanctuary. These agents can be humans or dragons, and they're called Doppel X, which basically means 'traitor.'"

"Ryan was...one of them, right?" Lottecia asked hesitantly.

Orphen waved his hand to stop her. "Yeah, he was trying to get ahold of your magic sword, but Colgon was getting in his way. Colgon seemed to also want the sword."

Orphen noticed Lottecia's expression clouding when he said that, but he ignored it and went on anyway. "But it was also because his lord asked him to do it. I think Colgon's job is basically to seek out and kill Doppel X."

"Then he should have just told me. If he'd explained everything to me—"

"What would have happened? Would you have listened to him?" Orphen asked, and Lottecia went quiet. He could see her fingers going white as they tightened with frustration around the sword in her hands.

Orphen shrugged. "For what it's worth, I think he should have talked to you."

That would have made way more sense than attacking the dojo. I asked him about it when I met him in Urbanrama, but he didn't answer. I'd like to say he has his reasons, but in his case, I wouldn't be surprised if he's not thinking at all about why he does things. There's a reason he's sometimes called the Night Knocker—it's because he has a habit of showing up when you don't want him to. And he has no guilt when it comes to hurting other people. His personality is the absolute worst, but I really didn't peg him for the type to do people actual harm..."

He was waiting for Lottecia's reaction—the reaction of the Night Knocker's former wife—but she didn't say anything. She was just squeezing the sheath of her sword with white, frigid hands. He almost felt like they were probably much colder than they looked.

He didn't want to touch those hands.

Orphen changed the subject. "At the end of the commotion that got all of Urbanrama involved in it, Ryan died. Along with his partner. But I think the problem for us is that the lord of the Imminent Domain has his eye on us now because of that."

But why was that? Lottecia was asking him with her eyes, but Orphen pretended not to notice. If he tried to explain, it would take far too long.

From the deal Winona had proposed to him in Urbanrama, the lord seemed to be tracking Azalie, who had left the continent. She'd said that Orphen would need him if he wanted a hint as to her whereabouts. For Orphen, who had no other way of searching for Azalie, the deal made sense. It was one he couldn't turn down.

Orphen went on, being purposely vague about that. "So we were taken to the Imminent Domain...and the lord proposed a deal with me. The deal was favorable to me, though it was also private. And you came with us. In order to meet Colgon."

"...Yes."

"Each individual occurrence was unexpected, but I assume to an extent everything that happened was according to the lord's plans. But even he couldn't predict everything. On our way, we ran into another party, and as a

result of that, the organization here in the Imminent Domain was destroyed.”

“Your sister?” Lottecia asked.

Orphen shook his head. “Not Tish. There was another woman, right? You didn’t meet them, but she had two other people with her. I told you about the Thirteen Apostles, the court sorcerers, right?”

“Yes...”

“They’re top-ranked black sorcerers who work for the Union of Lords. Normally, the Union of Lords would be on the same side as the lord here, but they must have their own plans. They sent that group here to assassinate the lord.”

Orphen went quiet for a moment, then whispered to himself, “What did Tish come here for...? In the end, she never told me anything...” He was about to fall into thought again, but the gaze of his conversation partner brought him back to himself.

Orphen continued quickly, in part to play off his distraction. “At the same time, Doppel X entered the Imminent Domain. Their fighting strength diminished because of Colgon’s unknown whereabouts, the Imminent Domain lost almost all of their forces. The Thirteen Apostles sorcerers all died too... And that’s the current situation.” There were plenty of things he didn’t understand yet, too, of course.

Still, if he limited the information to what he did understand, that summed it all up. It was just some key aspects that they had next to no hints about.

“Umm...” She had caught on to that too.

Hearing the discontent in her voice, Orphen braced himself. He knew she was going to ask about what he’d purposely avoided bringing up.

At times like these alone, the young sword dojo master stared at him with an unassailable gaze, like a true swordsman.

“What about Claiomh...and Majic? Why aren’t they with you?” She glanced around almost like she was looking to see if they were hiding somewhere in the room. “We haven’t seen them since this morning.”

He couldn't answer, so she stepped closer to him. "Did something else happen that I don't know about?"

"No." The word left a bad taste in his mouth when he said it, and even he was annoyed at how noncommittal he sounded. Orphen rubbed his nose and hid his face with his hand. "Nothing... I haven't seen them since this morning when they came into the room with the lord either. And we haven't talked."

"Why?"

"You saw, didn't you? They came in and said hi and then just left with the lord like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. I don't like it."

Lottecia gave him a blank look. "You're mad because they didn't say much to you?"

"No." Orphen grimaced, looking for the right words. He looked up at the ceiling, but all that came to mind was a hole opening up at his feet. "I feel like we got caught up in some kind of big trap. All of us."

"But from what we've heard, this lord person doesn't intend to hurt us, right? He didn't look like a bad person either. And if he's a noble, isn't protecting citizens his job? It's those Doppel people who attack people, right?"

"The problem is Colgon."

Her breath caught when he said that name. Orphen folded his arms and watched her.

What she said made sense. For the time being, what the lord—and the people under him—was doing may have wrinkled their noses at times, but it was ultimately benefiting them. The white sorcerer Damian had saved his life twice now. All of the disasters that had befallen them on the way here had been irregular cases, and they'd all been caused by people other than the lord and his faction.

It could be said that Orphen's mistrust of the lord was misplaced.

However...

"It's Colgon," Orphen repeated. "He told me in Urbanrama that his lord was a good guy. He wanted me to work with him if I could."

“Ed did...?”

“That makes you not trust him, right?”

He wasn't joking, and Lottecia seemed to pick up on that as well. She looked faintly perturbed by what he'd said.

Orphen nodded and continued. “We need to be cautious of him. That's what I'm trying to say. But this is an opportunity too.”

“An opportunity?”

“He's been testing our patience up to this point. We're on a game board that's advantageous to him, and we've been forced to watch him take turns over and over again while we don't even have our own pieces. I feel like I'm finally able to grasp a piece that's close to his chest...and at the same time, I've sunk my teeth into it.”

“Which is it?” she asked him.

Orphen smirked. “Either way. You'll get it eventually.” He unfolded his arms and pushed off of the wall he'd been leaning against. “What I mean by ‘work together’ is this. There's too many things I don't understand for me to handle them all myself. And there's no one else here I can rely on but you.”

“What do you think I can do?”

“The thing I'm most nervous about is Claiomh and Majic. I want you to find out how they're doing. White sorcerers can use mental dominion to completely control a person. Even if you don't know anything about sorcery, you should be able to tell if they're in their right minds since you've spent a few weeks with them, right?”

“...But what if I get controlled like that too?”

“Then it'll be clear that Damian Rue's an enemy. There's not much difference between him brainwashing two people or three.”

Lottecia seemed shocked to hear that. She wrinkled her brow and pursed her lips. The expression looked not unlike one of Claiomh's; Orphen grinned wryly, finally registering that the two of them were both girls at the same age. He was slightly surprised by the realization.

“That’s awful,” Lottecia told him accusingly. “You call that working together?”

“If I don’t get the enemy out somewhere where I can reach him, there’s no way for me to fight him. There’s nothing else I can do, right? As soon as I can figure out if they’re actually our enemies, I’ll do something about them. Plus...” He stopped there.

Pretending he didn’t have anything else to say, Orphen smiled. *Plus...if he’s gonna go after one of us, he’d probably go after me first.*

“We don’t have enough people on our side. And we don’t know where to find more either. Sorry, but please work with me. You know how to use that sword now, right?” He pointed at the magic sword she was cradling.

Lottecia just gave him a vague nod. She by no means looked confident, but Orphen decided to be satisfied with that and added quietly, “Tish isn’t here either...”

“Umm,” Lottecia spoke up apologetically. “I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t say something like this, but...”

Orphen gave her a curious look and Lottecia took another breath before she continued.

“You’re very calm for having lost your sister.”

It took Orphen a moment to figure out what she was trying to say.

He must have been lost in thought for a bit. By the time he realized, she’d gotten closer to him, a look of concern on her face.

Orphen held a hand up to stop her and shook his head. “You’re right... It’s strange to me too. No...” He knew that wasn’t what it was. He kept talking as the words came to him. “That’s not it. I feel like I can tell. I just can’t believe that Tish is dead.”

“But...”

Orphen stopped her again and shook his head firmly. “No matter what you say, I won’t believe it.”

He clenched his fists in his combat gear and pressed them to the wall. He didn’t have to use much strength to get a creak out of the aged wall. That sound

silenced Lottecia better than his words could.

A voice filled with pain still ringing in his ears came to mind. It was Irgitte's final words. She'd called them a message.

In fourteen days—no, one day had passed so it was thirteen days now—the three members of his family would come together in the sanctuary.

He didn't know what those words meant. It might just be that she had lost her mind on the verge of death. But Orphen didn't think so.

That was a message. Irgitte's never lied to me. She said the three people in my family would come together. My family...

The people he considered his family... There was no way Leticia wasn't one of them.

He didn't know what state he or she would be in at that time, but...he didn't intend to believe she was dead until that day came to pass.

But who was that message from? Orphen brought his fists down and looked out the window from the now quiet room.

The sun was high in the sky now, indicating a time that no one could deny meant the start of a new day.

Chapter II: False Identity

Maybe it was only natural that he was thinking of ice-covered Masmaturia.

Dortin pondered to himself as he gazed out at the view before him.

The featureless plains spread out before him. He couldn't help likening the barren wasteland with its whitish sandstorms to Masmaturia's familiar fields of ice. In the haze created by those fine particles of sand, several huge shadows towered around him. He could only think of a couple of life forms on the surface of the planet this enormous, and they all fell under one broad category. Dragons. The dragons before him may have differed in type from the dragons dotting the landscape everywhere in Masmaturia, but they were equally as enormous.

The gigantic creatures still popping into view as he watched were, if you ignored their enormity, jet black wolves. As the gusting winds blew against the dragons' fur, there was a cacophonous sound—yet the wolves made not a single sound themselves as they moved. Though even movement was something they did little of. They had appeared on the featureless plains with no warning, dominating the space as if the subjects of a painting, then remained perfectly still there without even blinking.

These beings were widely known as Deep Dragons, and were rumored on the continent to cause terrible destruction on the same level as Mist Dragons.

There were already enough of them to fill the wasteland before Dortin. Far more than one or two hundred of them. If he looked around, everything in his vicinity was blocked off by black fur. Standing dazedly in the midst of this, Dortin succeeded in expressing every emotion he was feeling with one simple sentence.

"It's all over..."

Collapsing on the spot, Dortin grasped at the dry sand with both of his hands. There was nothing he could do. He'd gotten wrapped up in incomprehensible

danger plenty of times in the past, but not like this.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Dortin? Something bad happen?”

When he heard his brother’s voice, Dortin looked over to find Volkan on the ground, his arms crossed and his expression unperturbed.

“As you can see, I got stepped on by one of those big dogs that appeared out of nowhere and I can’t move at all, but I’m not particularly bothered.”

“...Wow, I was just really impressed by you from the bottom of my heart, brother,” Dortin murmured, pulling the fur cloak he wore close to himself. It wouldn’t do anything; he was just desperate for somewhere to hide.

His brother, still being stepped on by one of the Deep Dragons, continued in a surprisingly sanguine tone. “But, you know... Where’d these huge dogs even come from? They’re like, you know... If they’re dogs, they should bark or something before they show up like this.”

“They’re not dogs, brother. These are Deep Dragons. We’ve seen them before, remember?”

“Is that a type of dog? I was thinking of christening them Shiny Black Bigdogs. That sounds better, don’t you think?”

“That’s not... You don’t need to name them.” Dortin grasped his head and closed his eyes to stave off a sudden bout of dizziness. Finding the strength to stand again somewhere inside him, he continued, “They’re extremely dangerous... Seriously, really dangerous.”

“They’re dangerous, eh?”



His brother was acting like this had nothing to do with him. It took a moment to sink in, but then his eyes widened and he exclaimed, “Dangerous?! You mean Mr. Unparalleled of Masmaturia is in a dangerous situation right now?!”

“Yeah, I’d say so. There’s a good chance, at least.”

Dortin vaguely agreed and his brother was silent for a few seconds before this time gravely asking, “How dangerous are these dogs? More dangerous than a Spiked Bitey Cat, you think?”

“To answer that, I’d have to know what that is...”

“Hrm. This is why ignorance is such a problem. I never thought I would be in danger, though... I was truly about to be killed by running into someone.”

“Well, I don’t think you’ll need to worry for that long. As far as I know, once you run into a Deep Dragon, the rest of your life only lasts a few seconds or so...” Dortin vaguely indicated the gigantic wolves surrounding them, groaning with despair. He knew there was only a one in ten thousand or so chance of his brother understanding what he was saying, so he wasn’t counting on it.

As he expected, Volkan nodded as if he understood. Since he was on the ground, he was nodding sideways. “That’s definitely a problem. I think we should go complain at the health center later.”

“Sure. I guess I don’t see why not.” If they got the chance, that was.

Keeping that second part to himself, Dortin looked up at the dragon closest to him—the wolf stepping on his brother.

His life would only last a few more seconds, so he decided to spend it looking at the creature who would kill him. He felt tears welling up in his eyes. The more he looked at it, the more beautiful the creature seemed to him. Its pointed snout was aimed up at the sky. Its vibrant, green eyes were looking somewhere far in the distance. In fact, every dragon was looking in the same direction.

Why are they looking that way...? There’s nothing there. Or was there something? Something he couldn’t see?

Prepared as he was, he still had questions. For the simple reason that he

didn't want to die without any answers to those questions, Dortin hurriedly looked in the same direction as the dragons. If there was an answer to be found, he had to find it quickly. He didn't know how many seconds he had left to search.

Looking for his answer, he peered into the distance, but just as he thought, there was nothing in the plains that he could see through his glasses. No matter where he looked, all he saw was that same wasteland.

If there *were* anything different... *That direction... Is that where that debt collector and his group had headed?* Dortin wondered with little confidence.

While he was pondering, he realized that the dragons *weren't* all staring in the exact same direction. They hadn't all appeared randomly, looking in one direction. It was a single *point* they were looking at, in concentric circles around it.

They're... They're surrounding something.

Dortin didn't know what that something was, but he strained his eyes to find out. Nothing changed.

The change happened where he wasn't looking. The first thing he noticed was a cacophony of strange sounds coming from behind him.

"Urgh!"

A sound like screeching metal pierced his eardrums with no time for him to cover his ears. There was a sound like a thin sheet of glass shattering... Something like a dying scream... Endless, repeated impacts... This maelstrom of sound exploded in something as close to an instant as possible.

He turned around and, without a sound, the dragons around him had all disappeared. They'd either jumped or used some other method of transportation to move several meters away from their original positions. The eyes of the pack of wolves were now fixed on the location where that strange sound had occurred.

After the strange sound, the next thing to happen was a strange sight. He couldn't imagine any follow-up to this. He didn't think he could touch it. It had no smell and taste was out of the question. Instead it was a strange pattern, like

every single color he could think of compressed into a ball. It didn't look like it had any mass. It was just an ominous pattern floating in the air.

Needless to say, he'd never seen anything like it before. He imagined the dragons around them might have been surprised by it too, though he couldn't say for sure of course. The only thing he knew for sure was that his brother, who had been freed from the dragons after they leaped away, was now being squashed by that sphere instead.

No, it wasn't a sphere...

Spilling from the sphere was a pair of incredibly long legs. Legs clad in black leather. The next thing to appear was a waist, then arms, a back, and hair.

When the long black hair appeared, the ball disappeared. What was left in the space was a tall woman.

The woman fell to one knee—it probably wasn't on purpose, but her knee landed right on the face of Dortin's squashed brother. And before his brother could let out any sort of exclamation, the woman let out a pained groan.

"The...transfer took...so much time. How many...hours was that?"

She seemed to be complaining about something, but he didn't really know what it was.

"Ugh... You've always been...so sloppy..." the woman muttered, then suddenly looked up. Her black hair partially covered her face, giving her a rather monstrous impression. "Good... You two are...still here..."

She seemed injured. She was holding her stomach with both hands. The scent of fresh blood joined the slightly moldy smell of the sand around them. She looked to be in bad shape, but apparently, she wasn't ready to die yet.

"My things should be...somewhere around...here. Bring me...the bag... I'm too weak... I need nutrients..."



And just like that, she fainted.

He didn't remember the woman's name, but it was the same black-haired sorcerer who had brought them to this desolate wasteland.



A lord...

The mansion wasn't so incredibly vast that it seemed to justify a person with that title. It was around the same size as Leticia MacCready's home, which had a dozen or so rooms in it. Still, that was fairly large.

It wasn't big enough to get lost in. Orphen took it in, leaving marks on an aged silk rug with his boorish black leather boots. It had been night when he'd entered it the day before, so his only impressions had been of darkness and shadow. Looking at it in the daytime like this, there was no trace of the oppressive, murderous feeling he'd gotten from every bit of darkness the night before.

The height of the ceiling, the width of the hallways... It seemed like every measurement in the building might have been slightly larger than average. Maybe you couldn't have an athletic meet inside, but it was probably large enough for a school art festival. All the furnishings were of good quality and looked antique. Orphen brushed his hand against a large vase at the end of one hallway, then stared at his fingers. He had no idea what the vase was worth, and he didn't have the expertise to be able to determine when it was made either.

He observed the corners of the halls, the banisters of the staircases, the wear of the window frames. Clearly, everything was well used. This mansion hadn't been hastily prepared or anything like that.

It's old... It's a really old mansion. And there's sure as hell no one out here doing any development of this wasteland. Does that mean this Imminent Domain place has been here for a really long time?

If not for their feud with the sanctuary, there would be no reason to build a mansion like this out in the middle of nowhere.

“Would you believe that this mansion was originally built to pursue friendly relations with the sanctuary?” A deep, male voice spread through the aged halls.

The damaged walls weren’t reverberating the voice. Neither did the faintly dusty rugs.

No... Orphen corrected himself. It wasn’t a physical voice, so it couldn’t echo.

He looked up and found that a man had appeared at a corner of one of the halls. There was nothing particularly strange about the man. He could sense nothing odd about his bearing. One corner of his mouth was upturned in a smug grin.

“It was built to be a temporary residence for an ambassador,” the man continued. “On the edge of Fenrir’s Forest. Originally, that is. But the forest began to recede over time. It wasn’t all that long ago that the purpose of this mansion changed and this came to be called the Imminent Domain.”

“At least not for you.”

“You’re under the mistaken impression that I am some sort of immortal. I have not...lingered in this world for as long as you think.” The man stepped forward as he spoke. He languidly indicated his form and said, “It wasn’t even one hundred years ago that I discarded my body. Yet it also wasn’t just a few years ago. It was somewhere in the middle. If you’re interested, I could speak some on the subject.”

“I’m not,” Orphen stated quickly, turning to the man and taking a surreptitious step back as he did. Of course, since the man claimed that he could read Orphen’s mind, perhaps disguising his wariness was pointless.

“I’m feeling a lot better,” Orphen told the white sorcerer Damian. “Thanks.”

“Hmm? For healing you? I hope your gratitude doesn’t end there. My lord needs you, so I merely did what my role requires. I don’t want my lord’s goodwill to be in vain.”

Goodwill, eh? Orphen couldn’t help letting his irritation show in his voice. “I just came here because I was invited. But I’ve only gotten some quick greetings from the lord so far. He’s barely said anything to me.”

“I thought that was because you were avoiding him.”

“I’ll consider it a conversation when I can grab him by the shirt to have it.”

“...Shall I take that as hostility?”

Orphen shrugged. “As soon as I got here, I had to see a horrible slaughter. Makes sense I’d be a little cautious, doesn’t it?” He gave the man an aggressive look. “On top of that, your guys were completely wiped out. And Colgon’s not here either. Does your lord really still have the power to oppose the sanctuary? If he ever had it in the first place, that is.”

“They weren’t wiped out, though we did lose many talented people, so I won’t pretend it was a small loss.”

Damian didn’t seem particularly perturbed. Of course, he was a spirit who had given up his body, so a few words weren’t likely to get him to change the way he presented himself.

Keeping up his composed, gentlemanly manner, Damian continued, “Fortunately, my lord is safe. As long as that remains true, we can maintain the Imminent Domain. That’s all there is to it.”

Before Orphen could say anything in response, the white sorcerer asked, “Were you looking for something?” as if the question had just occurred to him. He fixed Orphen with a piercing look.

He could have been criticizing Orphen for wandering around the mansion, but Orphen decided to take it as a simple question. “Well, I was looking for bodies at first.”

“Oh?” Damian responded, not sounding particularly interested.

“Why did you erase the bodies?” Orphen asked before he could say anything else.

The white sorcerer silently stroked his chin. Maybe he was trying to gesture that he didn’t understand the nature of the question.

Watching him, Orphen continued lowly, “The bodies from last night. By the time I woke up this morning, everything was gone like there’d been no commotion at all. You cleaned everything up, right?”

“Should I have left them instead?”

“I didn’t think you were the type to care about that sort of thing at a time like this. Or maybe there was something about the bodies that you didn’t want me to see?”

Orphen held up two fingers and thrust them out at Damian. “I saw Seek and Irgitte’s bodies... But what about the other sorcerer and Tish?”

“All of the Thirteen Apostles sorcerers perished,” Damian told him coolly.

Orphen raised his voice. “And Tish?!”

“She...died too. She died the same way everyone else did. Wretchedly. It’s good fortune that you didn’t see her.”

“Tish isn’t dead,” Orphen said with certainty.

Damian just gave him a pitying look. “Why do you think that?”

“I didn’t think you’d argue with me. You’re basically just a big sixth sense, aren’t you?”

“I see. I suppose not accepting the death of a relative is a valid psychological defense.”

Dammit... Orphen cursed to himself. He didn’t voice his thoughts, but he didn’t hide them either. It was true that he had no evidence to support his belief. Leticia really *had* disappeared, and he couldn’t think of a reason why she would do that if she wasn’t dead.

Maybe Damian was right. Maybe he was just stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his sister’s death. He didn’t want to start seriously considering the idea, so he changed the subject.

“Where’s Winona?”

Damian answered immediately. “I moved her to the soldiers’ lodgings. She can’t stay in the lord’s mansion forever.”

“He was just almost assassinated. What reason could you have to separate his guard from him? She’s the only soldier here who survived, isn’t she?” Orphen asked suspiciously.

That man—the black-clad assassin who had killed dozens of people in one night—had said that if they wanted to, the sanctuary could send as many reinforcements as they wanted in an instant. Putting the veracity of his statement aside, Orphen had no proof that such a thing *wasn't* possible.

And Damian of all people wouldn't take such a threat lightly. So Orphen thought at least, but the white sorcerer seemed unexpectedly easygoing about the whole thing.

He smiled like Orphen had pointed out something trivial and held a hand up at him. "We have you to guard him. You could hold your own against even a dragon."

"I don't remember agreeing to that ever," Orphen said flatly, but Damian wouldn't back off so easily.

"Then agree to it now. If you speak with my lord, I'm sure you'll find it easy to."

So he's confident in the deal they're offering. Does that mean they have a different card to play than information on Azalie's whereabouts? He'd have to confront the lord and figure that out eventually.

But there were several other things he wanted to confirm first. Orphen waved his hand dismissively. "I'll keep that in mind. Where are the soldiers' lodgings?"

Damian answered him more readily than he thought he would. He jerked his chin over to the window in the hallway, a gesture that didn't match his usual gentlemanly demeanor. But there still wasn't any emotion in his eyes.

"Behind the mansion. It's hidden in the shade of the trees. It's one level, so you might not be able to see it from here." His expression changed to a triumphant smile. "You're headed for the soldiers' lodgings? That's convenient."

Orphen gave him a questioning look.

"I believe my lord is there now. You would not avoid greeting him if you went, would you?"

Orphen didn't answer and didn't thank him, heading for the mansion's

entrance hall instead.

The building Damian had called the soldiers' lodgings was behind the mansion as he'd said. Orphen didn't think he was lying, but he still clicked his tongue, feeling like his expectations had been betrayed somehow. *You should have stuck some little lie in there*, he grumbled to himself. If he'd done that, Orphen would at least be able to confirm that Damian was a liar.

No... It's clear that he's lying about something. He wasn't being too cautious. No, maybe he was. He knew that the man was lying about something, but he couldn't confirm what it was, so he was being suspicious. He couldn't believe the man about anything.

Before he could get his thoughts in order, he arrived at his destination, which just made him more irritated. The building had the space to house quite a few people. It was a much broader building than the lord's mansion. It was clearly newer than the mansion, but owing to its shoddy construction, it was showing a lot more wear.

Its entrance faced the mansion, likely so that in the event of an emergency, the people inside could rush toward the building.

Either it hadn't been a victim of last night's tragedy or Damian had cleaned it up like he'd cleaned up the garden, but there were no noticeable signs of destruction. At most, there were some cracked windows that had been sealed with tape and bug-eaten holes in the wall sealed with rags. The roof was filthy. The mansion's had been the same; there was likely no one cleaning them. That wasn't just because the workers had been killed yesterday; it seemed to be an area that had long been neglected.

Maybe the lord here didn't seek an overabundance of cleanliness. *That's not very lordly*, Orphen thought, but maybe that was just him assigning his own prejudices to nobles. Maybe pre-Noble Revolution nobles were different, but he wouldn't be surprised to find that modern nobles didn't live up to his expectations of them.

Considering that settled, Orphen approached the entrance of the lodgings. He didn't sense anyone inside the building. Winona had been gravely injured as

well, but as long as Damian didn't discriminate for some reason, she should be able to move now or soon like Orphen could.

He needed to talk to her. While avoiding the lord, if possible.

He didn't know what basis he himself had for his priorities, but Orphen put his hand on the door. It wasn't locked. He could just pull it and open it. Though there was an unpleasant sound, like a nail was caught in the door's hinges.

There was a bucket lying sideways in the hallway. A rag lay on top of it, hardened in the position it had dried in, so it must not have been moved in a while. A stick that may have been a mop was set against the wall next to them, but its tip was broken off, the most important part missing. There was nowhere to wipe his shoes and spots of sand in the shape of footprints led deeper into the building. Most of them looked like the cleats dispatch officers—specifically those in the anti-bandit force—wore, but there were some that differed as well.

He didn't know the layout of the building, but it didn't look particularly complicated. He moved down the hall to the first door, which was an office or guardroom as he expected. It was large enough for several people to do office work around one large table. There were a few chairs randomly placed around the room. There was one filing cabinet that wasn't very large and didn't look like it got much use. True, now that he considered it, he didn't see there being much paperwork to do in a place like this. There was a work schedule on the wall, but it was several months old—maybe even several years old. Police can only work in police-like places—Orphen recalled someone saying that to him once with a wry smile. Maybe they had to just maintain a vaguely police-like workplace for their peace of mind. Even Dragoons who worked for individual lords were still members of the dispatch police.

It seemed very likely that the Dragoons here in the Imminent Domain had all been pulled from the anti-bandit force. Dealing with armed bandits that lived outside of towns and cities was a top priority for the dispatch police, and there were all sorts of different kinds of armed bandits, ranging from politically-minded terrorists plotting revolution to groups of kid gangsters who attacked bread deliveries to farming villages. The anti-bandit force of the dispatch police was almost a military and could be incorporated into the knight army in emergencies.

The main difference between a police officer and a military officer was how they viewed their enemies. Unlike police officers, who would be tried for murder if they let criminals die, if military officers let their enemies live, it would create nothing but future problems. Dispatch officers in the anti-bandit force stood somewhere in the middle. Depending on their mission, they might face far more danger than the military, who never engaged in actual war. They were combat professionals.

Winona herself came to mind.

He couldn't imagine she was an especially talented police officer. From what she'd told him, she hadn't actually been in the profession for that long. Rather than being a pro with combat skills, it was more like she was a pro at combat itself. She specialized in subduing her opponent with force, nothing more and nothing less.

He walked through the office. A sturdy door caught his eye, a plate indicating it as an "equipment room." Then there was a locker room, a training room, and a cafeteria. There was also a changing room and a public bath, but it didn't seem like their water tank was very full.

Winona's a skilled fighter. In technique, at least, she's top-class. In that sense, she resembled Lottecia; the competitive swordswoman was surely skilled enough to win against anyone else in her particular field. Whether those skills could be of use in a real battle would depend on whether she could broaden her abilities past that field or not.

Lottecia might not understand that yet, but Winona definitely did, though whether you were aware of that didn't necessarily mean you could put it into practice. Orphen didn't have the confidence to say he could, in any case. No matter how well he thought he was doing, he knew that there were always blind spots outside of one's reach.

And if the enemy's hands reached you from those blind spots...you would lose.

Orphen rubbed his chest, feeling the pain from the night before anew. None of his wounds or the damage he'd taken remained, but he didn't feel relieved even after confirming that.

Obviously, the building was silent. No one was inside. From the building's structure, it seemed like it could house several dozen soldiers at once.

And all those soldiers had been killed.

Killed...and left dead, Orphen thought to himself.

It was a ridiculous thing to think. It didn't make any sense to think otherwise. Of course they were left dead after being killed.

But the lord was alive.

If Damian could bring the lord back to life...then he should have just revived the killed soldiers too. There's no reason not to. It doesn't add up. No matter how he thought about it, it was strange.

The deeper he got into the building, the worse the clutter got. Eventually finding the room he was looking for, Orphen stopped.

Someone's personal quarters.

Of course, each room had several beds in it; they reminded him of the dorms at the Tower of Fangs, but they were treated much worse. The three-tiered, pipe-framed beds were cramped as it was, but they were each stuffed with random personal belongings that filled over half of their space. Here and there were stacks of old magazines and newspapers, and since there wasn't much entertainment to be had out here, they weren't thrown out even after being read so many times the pages were practically crumbling away.

There was no one in the first room. He peeked into the second and third as well, and none of them were locked. Some doors were just left open, no sign that they were ever closed. He'd stopped counting rooms by the time he heard voices.

Orphen clicked his tongue and stopped. He couldn't hear what was being said, but he recognized the voices. One was the person he was looking for, Winona. The other was a man.

The lord.

He wanted to click his tongue again, but he didn't want to make any noise. He stepped silently into a nearby room, not closing the door behind him. He didn't

intend to make the same mistake he'd made in the mansion. He hid in the shadow of the door.

Should I listen to their conversation? he thought, straining his ears without meaning to.

He quickly gave up on the idea, however. If he got close enough to hear what they were talking about, the lord might not notice, but Winona definitely would.

They're probably not talking about anything important anyway. If they were, he would have called her to somewhere where they wouldn't have to worry about anyone overhearing them—the lord's study in the mansion or somewhere like that. They wouldn't talk in this building, where there were any number of places for someone to hide. He was probably just paying a visit to the injured Winona, Orphen guessed from what he could sense of the tenor of the conversation.

A lord who cares for his subordinates...and a touched subordinate. Something along those lines, Orphen thought, almost feeling like he would start to hear applause soon as he listened to Winona's voice.

A skilled fighter... Top-class. Orphen reaffirmed his assessment of Winona.

The thought came to him naturally as he listened to her speak, thankful to be blessed with a caring superior.

If she has the knack for it, I'm sure she'd be a skilled cop too. Not sure if that's a good thing or not, of course. It's not that she couldn't fit in anywhere else. I bet there are plenty of decent jobs she could have gotten. And I don't think she's particularly easy to fool either. So...

Why was she so devoted to this lord? The question he had no answer to served to pass the time as he waited. What he heard now was quiet—the silence had visited so suddenly that it almost seemed blaring to him. Orphen raised his face but lowered his body into the shadows.

The lord's visit with Winona seemed to be over. He felt the door closing through the vibrations in the floor. Then slow, modest steps. From Winona's physique, it was impossible that the footsteps belonged to her.

Letting just his eyes leave the shadows, Orphen looked down the hallway. There was a figure there.

The figure stepped lightly. There was no affectation; the movement was for proceeding forward and nothing more. He wasn't wearing anything special, just a light jacket and pants. What it immediately brought to mind was a forest ranger. In reality, it was probably just the standard outfit of a dispatch officer minus any armaments. If you weren't picky about how you looked, it was tough, it protected you almost completely from sand and bugs, and it was breathable enough that you could wear it without washing it for a few days. It was that sort of outfit.

He wasn't carrying anything. At the end of his arms, hanging at his side, were peculiarly pointed fingernails. The man didn't stop walking, so Orphen could only observe him for a second. And because he was looking up at him from a strange angle, it was hard to say he got a good look at his face. But Orphen felt strangely like what he was seeing was being burned into his memory. Nothing stood out about his appearance, but he left an impression. His features were fine, and compared to the horrifying death scream his face had been locked in when Orphen had seen him the night before, now his expression seemed particularly bland. His eyebrows drew gentle curves. There were no wrinkles in his brow. He looked like he might be in his forties, but from what Colgon had said, if they were old friends, maybe they were a bit closer in age.

When the lord passed by, it looked like he might have glanced Orphen's way, noticing him, but it also looked like he hadn't noticed at all. Maybe the reason his face had left such an impression was because he *had* looked Orphen's way. Maybe it was just his imagination, though. There was nothing he could be sure of...

When the man had passed him by and he couldn't hear footsteps anymore, Orphen stood up. He was sure the lord had left the building. He had heard the familiar sound of a door with a nail in its hinge. The door closed, and silence returned to the lodgings.

Orphen felt a strange sense of unease from the lack of sound Winona, who should have still been nearby, was making and smiled wryly. There was a chance he would find another corpse when he visited her room. In that case,

would the lord be an enemy? An ally?

I'm only thinking simple things, aren't I? That was the reason for his strained smile.

He left the room he was hiding in and went out into the hallway, looking down it. The reason he couldn't hear anything was even simpler. The room the lord had likely been in had its door shut. Even if Winona was humming in there, he probably wouldn't be able to hear it.

If the lord had closed the door, then Winona probably wouldn't open it, Orphen thought somewhat sarcastically. She might stay there until she starved to death. Or until the lord came and opened it again.

If he opened it, would she be mad at him? Not seriously worried about the possibility, Orphen stopped in front of the one closed door and gave it a knock. There was a *clunk* like someone slipping off whatever they were sitting on, or maybe like they had just relaxed after being tense and they were shocked out of their laid-back state. There wasn't much difference, but Orphen called out to her before she could panic any more.

"It's me. Winona, you there?"

He couldn't see through the door, but the change inside was obvious.

"What is it?" Her voice sounded dissatisfied, but maybe that was just because it was muffled through the door. Of course, maybe it was for a different reason.

Orphen decided not to let it bother him. "Can I open the door before I tell you what I'm here for?"

"Well, this isn't a particularly high-class room. You've probably got a lot better manners than the people who lived here."

Orphen took that as permission and opened the door. The inside of the room wasn't much different from the rest of them—three-tiered beds filled with personal effects. The effect larger than anything else was Winona, camped out in the center of the room.

It was probably because the room was so cramped. She looked even bigger than she usually did. His sisters were awfully tall too, but they were dainty

compared to Winona. Seeing her sitting there glumly, Orphen thought back to an older student at the Tower. If Forte Puckingham and she had a contest of strength, it would probably be close.

“How do you feel?” She probably would have asked him the same thing, but Orphen asked her first.

Winona smirked at him. “I’m a mess. But I can move. Enough, at least.”

It wasn’t friendly. It was the smile of a predator trying to be threatening. It had probably hurt her pride that she was still resting in bed but he had come and visited her on his own two feet.

“It’s impressive,” Orphen conceded. “You should have been more hurt than me.”

“Did you come all the way here to flatter me?” She saw through him.

Orphen played dumb and shook his head. “I was looking for you, since I had something I wanted to ask you.”

“Well, wait a second. I got somethin’ I don’t usually say to tell you too. Uhh...does ‘you did good’ work?”

“Hmm?” Orphen asked, not understanding.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose with embarrassment. “You protected my lord, right? From that guy in black.”

Should he deny it or affirm it? Would correcting her misunderstanding be good or bad for him? That was what immediately came to mind. But before he could make up his mind, Orphen found himself mumbling, “I think you’ve got the wrong idea. I didn’t do anything.”

But Winona stubbornly said, “My lord just came here. He went out of his way to come to a filthy place like this. And he said you were somebody we could trust.”

“I see. So you give me your trust, you give me kind words, and you expect me to work for you for free?” He had spoken in jest, but he saw Winona’s expression hardening in response.

That “trust” seemed to win out for the time being—Winona looked away as if

to wipe away something dirty and took a moment to collect herself before she turned back to him. “So?” She asked him what his business was.



Ignoring the fact that she was clenching her fists where he could barely see them, Orphen murmured, “I have no certainty. I came to see if you did.”

“Certainty?”

“About what happened last night. Everything yesterday, really... I might remember each individual thing that happened, but all of them are vague and I’m not certain about any of them.” He told her all that in one breath and waited for her reaction.

After a moment of silence, Orphen realized that what he’d said itself had been vague and unclear. He’d come to that conclusion not on his own but from looking at Winona’s face.

Clearing his throat, Orphen reworded his question. “Are you certain that was your lord?”

“What are you saying?”

She really didn’t understand. He knew he was just taking it out on her, but Orphen’s tone got a little harsher as he said, “Last night. You saw your lord dead in his room, didn’t you? You shouted and charged at the guy in black, which is why I thought that body was your lord.”

The dark office—the corpse on the ground—the moonlight in the window. And the silhouette of the man in black.

Turning those images over in his mind, Orphen lowered his eyelids. He asked her, “Can you still be sure that was the body of your lord?”

“I can’t,” she answered simply.

“...Why?” Orphen couldn’t hide his surprise at her matter-of-fact tone.

“Well, I can be sure of the opposite.”

“Again, why?”

“What do you mean, why?” This time, Winona was the one who looked at him like he was a complete idiot. Her eyes softened with pity and she even slowed down as she spoke. “My lord is alive. I probably just made a mistake.”

It was a logical argument. So logical that it felt ridiculous to argue with it. In

fact, Orphen had been thinking the same thing—that what he'd seen the night before had been some kind of trick.

Still somewhat dubious, Orphen asked her, "So you charged at an assassin because you made a mistake and got thrown out of a window as a result?"

"I misunderstood the situation; there's nothing I can do about that. I should have used my head a bit more. If I'd just thought about it a little, I should have realized that my lord would never die such a pathetic death."

She seemed completely confident in her reasoning. She swayed a bit on the stool she was sitting on—it rattled every time she moved—and said, "My training wasn't up to snuff... My lord forgave me for that, though."

Is she serious? Orphen frowned. *No, maybe she's the one who's got it right.*

There was something wrong with *him* since he was the one clamoring about how a dead person had come back to life. He didn't have any reason to be thinking that way.

He looked back at the dispatch officer staring into his eyes. There was no uncertainty in her eyes, no doubt or confusion. Just a single important conviction.

Maybe he was envious of that. Orphen scratched the back of his neck to try to cover up how awkward he was feeling as he asked the one question he still had about this situation. There was something about the lord's actions that he just couldn't comprehend.

"What meaning did it have?"

"What do you mean?" Winona asked again.

"If he has some trick to make people think he's dead, what reason did he have to hide back in the mansion? If he were killed first—if he pretended he'd been killed first—none of his men would have had to die in the first place."

She answered without hesitation again. "Are you an idiot? If he were out in the open so he could be killed before anyone else, they'd be suspicious, wouldn't they?"

"Well then, second from last or third from last. Why was he hiding

somewhere where every single one of his subordinates had to be killed before he was? It's like he went out of his way—" *To make sure there were as many sacrifices as possible, to make this incident as big as he could.* Before he could finish his thought, she interrupted him.

"It's divine will."

Orphen let the words he hadn't been able to say disperse into the air and asked what she meant with his eyes.

She shifted in her chair, dragging it noisily across the floor as she did, and said, "Anything my lord wills to happen is the will of the divine. If his knights didn't obey him, then how would he govern?"

That was no sort of answer. Orphen ground his teeth and groaned. "What does that have to do with Irgitte?"

"She was an assassin who snuck in here to kill my lord, wasn't she?"

"*She* wasn't," he told her.

But no matter what he said, Winona wouldn't relent. She shrugged her shoulders and indicated the room around them. Orphen wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean for a moment, but he eventually understood. The empty beds her comrades would have been using. It was clear what she meant. It wasn't just one person who died last night.

Glancing between the beds—they couldn't have been comfortable to sleep in—she said, "How are we supposed to tell them apart? Listen. That woman was without a doubt a member of the Thirteen Apostles, she was traveling with assassins, and she entered our domain without permission. And my lord told me it was that Doppel X in black who killed the Thirteen Apostles anyway."

Orphen didn't want to admit it, but everything she said was reasonable. He snorted and pointed at Winona. "You almost died too."

"It was really close. But my lord rewarded me."

"Rewarded you? With that extravagant courtesy visit he just paid you?"

"Don't make fun of me. If the worst possible situation is my lord dying and me remaining alive..." She put a hand on her heart and her eyes watered with deep

emotion. “I managed to survive and my lord is safe too. That’s the best I could hope for. I’ve been rewarded.”

“How many people had to die for—”

“Enough!” Winona kicked her chair aside as she stood, sweeping her arm out to the side. “We’re at war here! We’re prepared for some sacrifices!”

“Then you can die the next time that guy in black shows up, if that’s what your idea of war is. You’re like a kid picking a fight,” Orphen told her without giving her time to get a word in.

Freed from Winona’s weight, the stool fell to the floor with a clatter. The room fell into silence, like that sound had stolen everything out from under them.

Eventually, she glanced at him boldly and said quietly, “He won’t come.”

“Hmm?” It wasn’t what she’d said that he didn’t understand, it was that fearless gaze of hers. That expression said she wasn’t bullshitting and she wasn’t bluffing.

“Why would he come back? Think about it. They think my lord is dead. They won’t be back for a little while at least.”

“It won’t take that long. The sanctuary has a Network. Your ruse will probably only hold for a few days. Maybe a few hours,” Orphen told her quickly.

But Winona’s eyes just grew sharper, like she’d been waiting for him to say that. “Then I’ll just finish him when he comes back.”

Sensing that she was serious, Orphen simply left the room without saying anything more. It wasn’t out of frustration, but simply because he couldn’t come up with anything to say to her. He sped up his pace, feeling like he was running from her.

Days or hours, eh...?

He thought Winona would shout after him, but he didn’t hear anything from behind him as he left. Soon, he wasn’t thinking about her anymore either. As he proceeded down the hall, his thoughts turned to someone else.

Will it be him again...? The man in the priest’s robes...

His wounds should have completely healed at this point, but he felt the pain returning.

Chapter III: False Enemy

The man in black was right before his eyes. He stared back at Orphen with eyes like wet scales under the brim of his felt hat.

The moon was out. A blue light shone into the room through the window. The night sky was otherwise dark as if harboring storm clouds, but even if Orphen listened for the sound of rain, his ears remained stuffed with the cotton of silence. Prickly, cold air coiled around his fingers. He pushed them through the air like it was a frozen lake he was drowning in.

The man squared his large shoulders at Orphen and took a fighting stance. Orphen took the same stance, facing off against him. His opponent didn't move. He didn't move either. They caught their breath, each waiting for the other to act first.

Orphen shifted his feet inside his boots. He adjusted his weight distribution by millimeters, looking for just the right position. His stance naturally lowered. His muscles drew his bones like an archer drawing a bow.

He sucked a breath in and his eyes darted in search of the right timing to let it out.

He knew his enemy's tricks. The Demolishing Fist—that's what he'd called it. That striking technique used to release the most possible force with the smallest possible movement.

The *idea* of it was entirely commonplace. You could say it appeared in every theory of fistfighting. It was part fundamental and part ultimate technique. In its ideal form, someone could utilize fatal destructive power without moving at all. They would blow their enemy away and achieve victory without taking a single step or even touching their opponent. But that was the ultimate fantasy, a practical impossibility. So the realistic technique was completed a step before that fantasy—no, thousands of steps before it.

Orphen clenched his fists, picturing it in his mind. Point-blank strikes were a

part of the technique he practiced. He would get right up next to his enemy and strike from that distance. He channeled the power from his whole body into a movement of only a few centimeters, doing direct damage to his opponent's internal organs the same way a counter would. If such a strike hit, it could neutralize an enemy in one blow.

Right. He could take down an opponent with one blow from his fist.

However...

One question came to mind when Orphen focused on the man in front of him.

With just one blow, shattering someone's skull, blowing someone to pieces, severing someone's limbs... This man's destructive power is strange for a human being.

It was impossible. Even if his muscles and training made it possible, his human body shouldn't have allowed it. If you shatter a skull, your fist, which is softer than that, should shatter too.

There must be some secret to his strength... Is it sorcery? The sorcery of someone more than human.

It might have been impossible for human sorcery, but he could carry something with Celestial glyphs on him and keep it hidden easily enough. If the man was an assassin sent by the sanctuary, then it wouldn't be unnatural for him to be carrying some sort of sorcerous weapon. Ryan Spoon had been carrying a weapon powerful enough to destroy a city.

Orphen stepped forward, lurching as if he intended to use all his strength just to propel himself onward. He closed the distance to his opponent with one leap, and as his foot was sucked down toward the ground again after leaving it, he thrust his fist into one of his adversary's vital spots. The man didn't move. Without changing his expression, he disappeared from Orphen's imagination...

In the shadow of a tree behind the mansion, Orphen sighed, fist still thrust out. No matter how he tried to visualize fighting this man, without knowing the trick behind his technique, there was nothing he could really do to prepare.

He looked up and found that the sun was starting to sink a bit from its zenith. The wind out here was a bit chilly. The fall breeze cooled the sweat he'd worked

up.



Could Tish beat him? he asked himself, picturing the man again. With her skills and physical condition, would she be able to dodge the man's attacks? Probably not... He drew the conclusion quickly. Leticia couldn't do anything about a person whose skills and stamina surpassed hers. In a head-on fight, she wouldn't win.

What about Colgon? What strategy would he use? He wasn't the type for a straightforward fistfight. He threw off his opponent's timing and went for fatal blows when his enemy didn't expect it. That would at least give him a chance, but...

That man would likely fight back with the same kind of surprise attacks... But they probably weren't on the same level. He recalled the man's stance and how he'd moved. The man was a martial artist who was completely focused on unarmed strikes. Orphen had to consider the possibility that he was a level above Colgon.

A level above... Another face came to mind when he considered that phrase. *What about Master... Childman Powderfield?*

Orphen shook his head. There *was* a way to win against the man in the priest's robes—he didn't even have to think about it. He had a way to win without expending any effort at all. If he used his sorcery, he could win. If he prepared a scenario in which he'd be able to use his sorcery, he could win.

The problem is he knows that too. Considering that an assassin from the Thirteen Apostles didn't even stand a chance against him, it wouldn't be that easy. But that was his best chance at victory.

There was one other option too... Orphen sighed, his fingers brushing against the gun in the holster on his thigh. Maybe he should take it apart to perform maintenance. He might need to, in fact.

A weapon to neutralize an enemy that sorcery and skills can't take down, eh...? He curled his fingers around the grip and pulled out the lightweight, metal weapon. The gun easily slipped from its leather holster with a light twist of his wrist.

"Hailstorm."

That was the name of this weapon. Maybe it was vanity on the part of its craftsman, or maybe it was just a bit of fun. The name was carved onto the weapon and could be clearly read. There was no mark displaying its place of origin. This was a weapon crafted in secret at the Tower of Fangs. A state-of-the-art creation that was in another league entirely from traditional guns.

He held it not in his left hand like a knight but in his right, with his left supporting the grip. It was better to keep as natural a hold on it as possible. It was a flaw of the human body that just holding the weapon with one arm wouldn't provide enough balance to aim accurately—balance could only be achieved with the support of both shoulders. In this stance, he could line up the gun's aim with his dominant eye.

The difference between the handguns that knights used and the Hailstorm was similar to the difference between a bow and a bowgun. In other words, it could hit targets at a greater distance. Its accuracy couldn't even be compared to an old-style gun. The bullets, which the barrel granted a high rate of spin during their flight, traveled in a nearly perfect straight line, and the spin of the projectiles provided improved piercing strength and lethality as well. That meant that this weapon could be used to bring down an enemy from a distance without giving them a chance to resist.

Guns didn't come close to sorcery when it came to accuracy or power, but with sorcery, you needed to be extremely focused to execute the complex steps of weaving a spell and releasing it. With proper training, you could aim and fire a gun in less than a second's time. The reason guns were considered dangerous and made top secret at the Tower of Fangs was because if shooting became a commonplace skill, there would be no way to counter it.

Of course, there were still problems with guns. This cutting-edge killing machine's mechanisms were simply too complex. Manufacturing one was incredibly difficult and extremely costly as well. Naturally, a machine so complex was prone to failure, and it was by no means easy to maintain. If you shot it repeatedly, the continual strain would warp the internal mechanisms, degrading its accuracy. And no matter how much you trained someone to shoot, it was hard to say anyone could actually master the art. The more distance between the shooter and the target, the lower the accuracy of the

gun. Trying to hit a moving target made it even more difficult to shoot accurately. And there were no targets who stayed completely still.

Those are probably the only weaknesses an engineer would say they have. Orphen returned the gun to its holster. Firearms possessed one other flaw, however, that their inventors likely hadn't considered. *You can't hold back with them. It's all up to chance whether you can leave your opponent alive.*

He looked up, making a guess as to the direction of Fenrir's Forest—and the dragons' sanctuary.

And much closer than that location, pretty much right before his eyes, was a girl. She had probably just left the mansion, headed toward him. When he looked in her direction, she stopped.

"Claiomh." Orphen muttered the name of the blonde girl. He had intended to call out to her, but he wasn't confident that his voice had reached her.

The girl pointed in the direction of the mansion and opened her mouth. "Food. The lord says it's ready." That was all she said before turning her back to him and leaving.



“...All right. I’m coming.” He didn’t respond until the girl was far enough away that she couldn’t hear him, but it wasn’t on purpose.

A midday meal was set in the dining room. It was just something simple, corn soup and bread, but he could tell from the aroma wafting above the tablecloth that it wasn’t just ready-made food. He hadn’t noticed while he was wandering the mansion, but it must have been properly prepared in a kitchen. At the table were a number of chairs that surpassed the amount of people still living within this domain. But there was only enough food for the people present.

There were even flowers in a vase on the long table. And at the farthest seat, in the host’s position, was the lord. He was sitting still, a faint smile pasted on his face, not looking at Orphen. On both sides of him were Orphen’s two companions in brand-new clothes, Claiomh and Majic. They wore solemn looks on their faces that he could interpret nothing from, sitting still and staring in no particular direction just like the lord.

A few seats away from them was Lottecia.

There were no places set for Damian or Winona.

“...Who made this?” Orphen asked, heading for the place opposite the lord, closest to the entrance, with the last meal, though Orphen didn’t know who’d arranged it like that. There shouldn’t have been any servants left in the mansion and he couldn’t imagine the lord had baked the bread himself.

The reason he asked was because he suspected Majic might have made it, but no one answered him. Lottecia shot him an anxious look, and one other person turned to face him as well: the lord.

The moment he thought the lord was going to answer his question, a voice came from a different direction.

“Would you be surprised if I said it was me?”

Orphen turned and found Damian Rue entering the room soundlessly. He sat down disinterestedly in his chair. “Looks like you forgot to make your own.”

“Mine? I require sustenance of a different sort,” Damian said with a smirk,

standing one step in from the door. Behind Orphen, in other words. Apparently, he intended to watch the meal from there.

“You made it?” Orphen asked incredulously, turning to face him.

“You seemed knowledgeable about the ghost phenomenon,” Damian said blithely.

“What, you used ghosts of dead servants to make it?”

“Exactly. The food’s done nothing wrong. I hope you’ll eat it without being too put off.”

There was probably no point in arguing with him, and he *was* hungry. Orphen dutifully faced his meal and looked around at the dining party once more.

Everyone was looking at him. Why did the eyes of the lord, Claiomh, and Majic all seem like the same thing to him? Orphen threw a twisted, cynical smile at the lord.

Lottecia, uncomfortable in her lonesome place at the table, was rolling and unrolling the edge of the tablecloth anxiously. He glanced down at her feet to discover that she’d brought her sword even to this place—though he was no one to talk, still being in his combat gear himself. Damian was still.

The lord started the conversation. “I don’t know what you all believe in.” He moved his hands in a praying gesture and gently added, “This meal is for what I believe in. This meal is for what you believe in. We give thanks equally and eat according to our own customs.”

Orphen finally realized that the lord was reciting a premeal prayer. While he was sitting there dumbfounded, something happened to make him even more dumbstruck.

“We give thanks,” Claiomh and Majic said quietly, in unison.

What’s going on here?

After that, they just ate in silence. Orphen put two pieces of soup-soaked bread in his stomach before standing while the rest were still eating.

Lottecia was the only one who was surprised by his breach of conduct. Neither the lord nor his two companions raised their heads from their meals.

But when he turned around, Damian was still standing there in the same place. As if to block his path.

“So hasty.” There was no blame in the white sorcerer’s voice.

Orphen looked right into Damian’s round eyes and lied to him. “I was just about to have a breakthrough. You’ll be in trouble if I can’t beat that man in the priest’s robes too, won’t you?”

“Jack Frisbee. People call him an ‘evil spirit.’” The voice came not from Damian but from behind Orphen. It was a clear voice that carried well, a voice from an actual human throat. There was no exaggerated intonation and he didn’t sound husky either.

Orphen looked over his shoulder, focusing his gaze on the person sitting farthest away from him at the table.

The lord continued like he was talking about the weather, “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, but he’s an assassin by trade. His first appearance for Doppel X was yesterday.”

“You say that very confidently. I doubt the guy named himself or anything.”

“It’s not information I found myself, of course. Damian finds things out so quickly. And he always lets me have the credit.”

The lord was finished with his meal, but he made no move to leave his seat. He was looking back at Orphen, that serene smile still on his face.

“Jack Frisbee is a powerful assassin. I was almost killed by him myself. I’ll never stop regretting how many sacrifices were made because of my ineptitude.”

“Claiomh.” Orphen ignored who he was talking to and turned instead to the girl next to him. He had no idea if she was listening or not; she was just silently tearing off pieces of bread and eating them. “What happened to Leki? Lottecia said she saw him pretty far away from here. It seemed like he was headed for Fenrir’s Forest.”

She faced him and opened her mouth—but then closed it again and looked away.

He wasn't expecting an answer in the first place. Orphen then turned to Majic. "Majic. Where were you yesterday?"

The blond boy didn't touch his bread or his soup, just hanging his head. He had his hands between his legs and wasn't moving.

Orphen sighed. "Right, you can't answer. Not if you're under mental dominion."

Lottecia stood, her chair clattering. She backed away from her chair, dragging her sword with her. She was giving Orphen a cautious look, like she wanted to say something to him, but Orphen ignored her and kept going.

"It's clear to me now. You people are my enemy." He was facing the lord, but directing all of his ire at Damian behind him. He was sure Damian would be a formidable foe. He didn't know who the lord in front of him was, but from his appearance he didn't think the man was a trained combatant, so Orphen was in a sense taking him hostage.

That's if he isn't a body double or a standin or a fake, that is... Orphen added to himself as he formed a composition in the back of his mind so that he could cast a spell whenever he needed to.

"Orphen..."

He held his hand up to Lottecia to stop her so that he could concentrate on his enemies' reactions.

Orphen hardened his gaze as he glared at the lord. "What are you thinking? Everything you people do is suspicious. Can you not meet someone without all these hidden implications? Just what—"

"Mental dominion?" the lord muttered. There was no trace of sarcasm on his face. With that same innocent smile, the man asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"What do you think I—"

"Orphen!" Lottecia raised her voice. Orphen shot her an annoyed look and Lottecia continued with a grim look on her face. "I talked to the two of them, like you told me to, and..." She faced Claiomh and shook her head. "It's

different.”

“Yeah, they’re different than usual. Anyone could see that.” Orphen was annoyed that she was repeating the obvious, but Lottecia shook her head even harder this time.

“No, it’s different!”

Claiomh stood as if in response to Lottecia’s shout.

Orphen met her gaze, though he didn’t want to—it shook him more than he thought it would to see a close friend of his under mental dominion, but he couldn’t just ignore her.

She put a hand to her chest and said weakly, “Listen, Orphen... I’m sorry, but...it’s hard for me to talk...”

“Enough with the cheap tricks!” Orphen shouted not at Claiomh but at Damian. The white sorcerer was no longer behind him. He’d been trying to pay attention, but the spirit had disappeared at some point.

Soundlessly, Damian appeared at his lord’s side with no sort of warning. He must have moved toward the man he was supposed to protect, anticipating a showdown.

Fine with me... Orphen changed the composition he was holding in the back of his mind—if he used too powerful a spell, he could hurt Claiomh too. Since he was under Damian’s control too, Orphen had to take into account the possibility that he’d have to fight Majic. The boy wouldn’t be a huge threat to him, but adding an enemy he couldn’t hurt to an already annoying foe would be nothing but trouble.

How much could he rely on Lottecia? As soon as he had the thought, he dismissed it. She was the same as Claiomh in that he had no idea what she’d do next, but for Lottecia, he felt like that could only lead to bad things. Plus, he had no idea if that magic sword of hers would help or hurt.

The silence while he thought didn’t last all that long. There was another scrape of a chair as Majic stood as well.

“Orphen, calm down—”

Orphen? Majic didn't call him that. He threw the boy a suspicious look and Majic rushed to correct himself.

"Ah, no, I mean... Master..."

If that was an effect of the mental dominion, it was pretty pathetic, especially for a white sorcerer like Damian. Something was strange here. Realizing that, Orphen looked at Claiomh again. She still had that same anxious look. She looked more worried than Orphen had ever seen before, like she was concerned for him from the bottom of her heart.

What...? Am I wrong...?

Claiomh opened her mouth, her blonde hair swaying as her shoulders drooped. "Orphen... I talked with the lord."

"And?" Orphen frowned, an indescribable anxiety spreading through his chest.

Claiomh sighed feebly, miserably. "The lord wanted to make a deal with me."

"A deal..." Orphen repeated stupidly, glaring at the lord. The man was sitting there with a cool, unbothered look on his face, like he had nothing to hide. He just sat politely at his place at the table as if he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Claiomh had stopped like she wasn't sure how to proceed, but she eventually started back up again, her voice hoarse. "He corrected my...misunderstanding?"

"Misunderstanding? Corrected?" This time, he was repeating her words on purpose.

Claiomh nodded. "Umm... To be more precise, the lord made a deal with Leki. That's why Leki's not here."

"What was the deal?" Orphen urged her. Not getting to the point was nothing new for Claiomh, but she was being a lot more unclear than usual. His unease had expanded out of his chest and seemed to fill the room now, pressing in around him.

In that heavy air, the girl's voice was so quiet he almost couldn't hear her. "He said he'd make it...so that Ryan never died."

"...Huh?" Orphen scoffed before the silence could become prolonged. "He's

gonna bring him back to life?” He turned his scorn to the lord instead of Claiomh again. His unease had instantly become overwhelming irritation.

But the lord denied it, his affect unchanged. “Of course not. I merely told her I’d give her an opportunity to atone.”

“Atone?”

“We can’t leave the people who provoked Ryan Killmarked to such evil deeds alone, can we?”

There was another scrape of a chair, but the lord, who was the last one still sitting, hadn’t stood. Orphen’s breath caught as Claiomh collapsed against the back of her chair.

Digging her nails into the wood of the chair, she raised her voice shrilly. “I...! I don’t want to rely on Leki anymore... I don’t want to make Leki do anything that hurts him anymore. But Leki left... I tried to stop him, but he left. He probably sensed that I wanted him to, on the inside!”

“Claiomh—” Orphen was about to take a step forward, but Lottecia beat him to it, running over to Claiomh and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Before Orphen had a chance to get closer to her, Claiomh wrapped her own hands around Lottecia’s, clinging to her. Lottecia shot Orphen an accusing look.

Swallowing his words guiltily, Orphen glanced at Majic instead. He hadn’t lost his composure, but there was a dark shadow in his eyes that looked out of place for him.

“Even if I practice more, I won’t ever improve under you, will I, Master?”

“What?” Orphen was flabbergasted by his student’s totally unexpected words.

Majic continued, “You said you’d trained me enough, right? But I’m still useless—”

“Majic.”

“He seems like a very talented sorcerer to me,” the lord interrupted calmly. “He has talent. With time, he could train to be a master, like Yuis.”

“He couldn’t!” Orphen shouted.

Colgon was a very particular type of sorcerer. He had power that a little bit of talent could never hope to achieve and a decisive strength that no one else could possibly reach no matter how they tried. No one knew his secret. But there was one thing that Orphen just barely understood.

His strength is a matter of priority, obtained by throwing something away to achieve something necessary. The kind you get by killing other people so that you can survive. Majic could never achieve something like that...

He couldn’t find the words to express that, though. While he was hesitating, his eyes met Majic’s. When he saw the look in his student’s eyes, Orphen realized his mistake. He’d screwed up big time. It was the kind of mistake where once you’ve noticed it, it’s already too late.

Disappointment clear in his eyes, Majic said, “I don’t think the things you taught me were pointless, Master. But I can’t be like you...”

“So what are you gonna be? This lord’s soldier?” Orphen shouted, pointing at the man in front of him. “He’s gonna be dead soon! The sanctuary will—”

“If it’s Jack Frisbee you’re referring to, you’re going to stop him, aren’t you?” Damian asked, sounding amused.

“I’m not doing it to protect you people,” Orphen responded lightning-quick, without even time to be sarcastic about it. “And even if I stop him, so what?!”

Orphen kicked the table and raised his voice even more. “You guys are just taking cheap shots! You know you wouldn’t be able to do a thing against the dragons if they got serious, but you hide here and provoke them anyway! You’re picking a fight you won’t win, so stop trying to get other people caught up in it!”

“What sort of deal do you think I made with that Deep Dragon?”

“Let me guess, a fair one? You’ll have to excuse me for being skeptical,” Orphen told him.

The lord ignored his biting remark and spared one glance at Claiomh, who was clinging to Lottecia and crying, before he said, “Maybe we are taking cheap

shots, as you said, but I intend to win this war. And we can't avoid sacrifices. I'll admit that too."

He narrowed his eyes as if he was looking into the distance. "We must win. What the sanctuary is planning right now... What will start when the catastrophic change comes after three hundred years of unstable peace... I've foreseen it, which is why I have fought all this time."

"So what, you're a prophet?"

"A predictor at best. But as you know, there are humans among Doppel X. Some of them harbored traitorous feelings for the sanctuary. I made contact with those people. And I was able to surmise the sanctuary's strategy for the coming destruction of the continent."

The lord continued without pause. "You seem unable to accept my choosing who must be sacrificed, but I have my reasons. The whole of humanity must not come to conflict with the sanctuary...*that* would lead to the potential destruction of the human race. That is why I was given the Imminent Domain, so as to produce the smallest possible number of sacrifices in our fight. Under order of the Union of Lords."

Orphen belatedly realized that when he'd kicked the table earlier, he'd spilled all the soup on the table, the lord's included. The man pushed his bowl away from him and suddenly spoke a very unexpected name.

"Childman Powderfield also trained you in order to fight against the sanctuary. Isn't that right? If only I could have fought alongside him..."

Orphen didn't respond, just catching his breath instead. He'd lost the will to fight with his sorcery by now—he knew it wouldn't work. He understood that very well. It didn't matter that Damian Rue was ready at the lord's side. It didn't matter whether the lord had the skill to fight against a sorcerer or not.

His enemies were determined. Their will would carry on as long as they wanted it to, and they would do anything to carry it out. Orphen doubted that will was what had brought the lord back to life the other night, but...

"What is it you believe in?" Orphen asked after a long pause, eyes narrowed. "Lord of the Imminent Domain?" No matter how heated his emotions were

getting, his heart remained cold.

What he'd remembered was the lord's prayer. What he'd recited before their meal: *This meal is for what I believe in. This meal is for what you believe in.*

The lord answered boldly, "Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? Almagest. You might think it's a pompous name, but it belongs to me. As for what I believe in..." He gestured around him, his voice resounding. "Humanity and their friends... I would give my life for them."

"That's a pretty good joke," Orphen muttered, remembering the face of the man he was talking to as it had been in death.

There was just silence after that. Claiomh's low sobs had subsided and she was being quiet like a child who'd exhausted herself crying. Majic was just standing there, hanging his head. Damian didn't have the physicality to produce noise in the first place. Orphen was too busy staring intently at the lord to come up with anything to say.

Then there was an explosion that shook the mansion, and the silence extended only half a second more.

Chapter IV: False Garden

The explosion was by no means small—the shaking and noise were so severe, Orphen thought half of the mansion might have been blown away. Struggling to recover his balance, he attempted to figure out where the explosion had occurred.

“That’s not the main building.”

He didn’t want to agree with the lord, but the man seemed to be right. The explosion hadn’t destroyed the building they were in. It had happened outside. And very close to them.

What’s near this building that it would make sense to destroy? Orphen didn’t even have to think about it. *The soldiers’ lodgings!*

Winona should have still been there. If she didn’t cause the explosion herself, then an intruder had decided to begin by first targeting any remaining soldiers.

Orphen glanced in the lord’s direction, and Damian had already disappeared. The lord was taking a cautious look out a window. He looked almost concerned for his subordinates.

Before the man could say anything to him—if he asked for Orphen’s help, he’d have to say no—Orphen ran out of the dining room. Sensing that it’d be quicker to leave from the kitchen rather than the entrance, he headed in that direction. Beyond a copse of trees, he could see a dust cloud. It didn’t look like the lodgings were on fire, but they had taken pretty extensive damage.

Doppel X... They’re already here? Orphen gulped, trying to sense if anyone was nearby. His skin prickled as he remembered the pressure the man in black had exuded. This wasn’t his style.

Is this sorcery? It’s like someone made a big commotion to draw us out. The destruction was too great if someone was targeting just Winona. If a sorcerer had done this, they should have had some more efficient options.

There was a possibility this was a diversion. Hitting upon that idea, Orphen

turned back in the direction of the mansion. He didn't care about the lord, but there was no one to protect Claiomh and Majic. He'd have to rely on Lottecia for that. Really, he should have left the intruder to Damian and protected them himself, but his instincts told him not to. He had no intention of trusting the white sorcerer.

It was simple to slip through the grove. When the lodgings entered his field of view, he saw the state of destruction they were in. The building had been destroyed from somewhere close by.

He looked and saw a figure with its arms crossed gazing up at the destroyed lodgings. It was Damian Rue.

"...You're here." He said it like it was unexpected. Without looking at him, the white sorcerer asked, "What do you think?"

"The simple answer is this is Doppel X's second attack."

"There's a low chance of that." Orphen shot him a questioning look and Damian quickly continued, "But I won't say it's impossible. They don't know yet that my lord is safe. I've sealed the Network. Of course, malfunctions can still occur."

"Which is it?"

"A new incursion from the Thirteen Apostles? I sense traces of black sorcery from the wreckage of this explosion."

"I'd say the chance of *that* is low. Pluto's not an idiot. Not as much as the sanctuary where we've got no clue what they're thinking, anyway."

Orphen frowned. *Then...who is it, really?* He looked at the white sorcerer.

Damian said quietly, "You go back. This is a diversion."

What? This felt strange to Orphen too.

"Why don't *you* go back? Protecting your lord is your job, isn't it?"

"I'm more suited to investigating."

There was nothing unnatural about what Damian was saying or how he was acting, but something else was causing Orphen to feel distrustful. He tried to

argue once more.

“You were useless yesterday.”

“So were you.”

Orphen was silent in response, in part because Damian had a point, but there was something else too. He had no definite proof, but there was something inexplicable twisting in his gut.

What is it? He's acting a lot less composed now. What is he hiding?

Of course, there was no change in Damian's outward appearance. Orphen stared at him, unable to find any basis for his gut feeling. Damian was trying to get him to leave.

“If it isn't Doppel X or the Thirteen Apostles, then who is it?” Orphen asked, and the white sorcerer answered right away.

“There's a good chance it's one of the two.”

“You're contradicting yourself.”

“...Even I change my opinion sometimes.”

“Bullshit. You can't tell with your little Network?” Orphen advanced a step.

“I'm focused on suppressing information from the sanctuary right now. I have even less strength of will to spare than yesterday.”

As Orphen listened to the white sorcerer's answer, he kept expecting physical tells like averting his eyes, sweating, or changing the way he was breathing, but he knew at the same time that it was pointless to expect things like that from the man. Orphen groaned, irritated that things weren't going his way.

Before he could throw more questions at Damian, the white sorcerer said, “You go back. This is an extremely dangerous situation. I'll find Winona and deal with the intruder.”

Orphen considered how valid the man's suggestion was and ran off without responding to him. He wasn't headed for the mansion. He went around the destroyed lodgings and ran for the garden to search it.

Leaving Damian behind, who made no move to stop him, Orphen began to

search for something, though even he didn't know what.



Watching the black sorcerer run off, Damian Rue held up a hand in his direction. Even as he disappeared from Damian's sight, it wasn't as if he ceased to exist or anything like that. He smiled wryly, recalling that he didn't even have a sense of sight in the first place. The illusion of human senses was only a remnant from back when he'd resided in a physical body.

He felt unease rising in his chest and quashed it with his will. It was troublesome. It was all just a trivial miscalculation caused by the irregularity last night. But frayed seams like these were very unfavorable. It wasn't the right time now.

She was that injured and she's already recovered...the Chaos Witch... No, the witches... Those monsters... He was absolutely sure of it. Those women were here.

If she had already healed Leticia MacCready's considerable wounds, then the Chaos Witch really might have enough power to oppose him. A white sorcerer with no formal training—an amateur whose ability was wild and self-taught.

This explosion was to draw her little brother out. The Razor-Sharp Successor was not particularly important to anything, but he was still an undetermined variable. Especially if the Chaos Witch was making her way back to Ayrmarkar under her own power. The Witch's little brother served no purpose other than as a piece with which to negotiate with the Witch. Now that the Witch had displayed clear hostility to them, the Razor-Sharp Successor had lost his value.

Still, he couldn't let them meet.

Since we lost Yuis to the sanctuary, Krylancelo is the only one who can take his place...

The frustration from the night before when he'd let the Witch slip through his grasp revived in him and he clenched his fist. His lord's plan had to be revised every time they encountered an irregularity. At times, the revisions outpaced the passage of time itself. All he had to do was go along with them. There were things only his lord could do and things only he could do. And if the Chaos Witch

interrupted them before they were complete, the destruction could be absolute.

Destruction in the form of Damian Rue's obliteration.

I can't use the Network... The sanctuary still believes they were successful in assassinating my lord. At the very least, they're confused about how something they never thought possible could be achieved. If I loosen my hold on the Network, there's a chance they'll recover from their confusion sooner than I'd like.

In a situation where he couldn't use the Network and he had no surefire pawns in place, he had to enter the fray as a mere lone sorcerer.

If this assault was the work of the Chaos Witch, then his lord was in no danger. His lord would not blame him for dismissing the idea of defense and going all out.

This will be hard... But I won't lose. Not to some girl who became a spirit out of sheer luck.

He clenched his fists. The black sorcerer was no longer in sight. Damian vanished and began his search so that he would find the enemy before the Razor-Sharp Successor.



The garden was quiet—no sounds reached his ears other than the burning flames of the destroyed building. No voices either. Orphen ran, not sure what he was looking for but looking all the same.

Doppel X...? That would be the most natural conclusion to draw. There was nothing strange about assassins from the sanctuary sneaking in and destroying a building in the Imminent Domain.

But then they would have no reason to flee. They'd head straight for their target, the lord.

They've attacked once already, so they know what sort of fighting strength is left here. They don't need to wait and see. Yesterday, the man in the priest's robes went straight for the lord.

He couldn't completely rule out the attacker as Doppel X, but there was enough cause for reasonable doubt.

The Thirteen Apostles...? This also wasn't impossible. Irgitte had told him that Pluto the Demon had been sending scouts here periodically.

But they had lost Seek Marrisk. There wasn't a limitless supply of court sorcerers. Seek had undoubtedly been a top-class sorcerer—they couldn't easily find another assassin on his level.

It was supposed to be bad if the Union of Lords found out they were sending assassins here, right? It's probably not something they can just keep doing. And anyway, it'd be strange for people in the capital to know that Seek had failed already.

That was as far as his musings brought him. If the attacker wasn't one of those two, then who was it?

Did Damian Rue not want me to meet whoever it is...? Their earlier conversation had left that impression.

He didn't have any hard evidence, though. He couldn't confidently declare Damian ordering him to return to his lord suspicious.

Still, this was the first stumble in the stage play Damian and his lord had been performing. This was his first opportunity to go against their orders and potentially outwit them. He had to meet this attacker.

If it meant shaking Damian up, then he had to.

He didn't know what would happen as a result, but it might be a clue toward escaping this rigged game.

But where are they? Who are they? Orphen slowed down his impatient feelings and sped up his feet. Each time he found a hiding place, he stepped into it, expanding his search through the garden.

Eventually, he ran right into a tall figure.

"Whoa!" It must have been a surprise for them too—there was an angry shout when it happened. They even pointed the gun in their left hand at him.

"Winona, it's you." Orphen raised his hands to show that he wasn't hostile

and identified the person he'd run into with her name.

She took an exaggerated breath in response. "Just you... That attack better not have been you."

"The explosion at the lodgings? No, I ran out here after I heard it too. So you're okay?"

Winona gave him a suspicious look, but eventually looked away and shrugged. She glanced cautiously around them. "I got a bad feeling. And right when I left the building, I heard something like a spell and my room got blown away, roof and all. I chased after the presence I sensed, but I lost track of 'em a while ago. My injuries must be dulling my senses."

"A spell... It was a sorcerer, then. And not a dragon one." Orphen confirmed the facts.

Winona nodded. "Yeah, probably. It sounded like a familiar voice, but... I was kinda out of it, so I wasn't listening super well."

She must have been really frustrated by that. She tightened her grip on her gun. She wasn't carrying anything else that could be used as a weapon. And she was dressed the same way she had been when Orphen went to visit her earlier. Of course, it wasn't that different from what she'd been wearing the first time they'd met.

Orphen pretended not to notice how nervous she was and asked her another question. "Anything else you figured out?"

"Nothing. Just that whoever did it is powerful."

"Apparently, Damian can't be counted on," Orphen told her.

She scoffed. "He never can. Especially if it's important."

"He can't use his Network, I guess... Like you said, he's devoting most of his strength to hiding the fact that the lord survived from the sanctuary. There's one more thing too."

"Hmm?" Winona was looking around like she wasn't paying attention to him.

Orphen lowered his voice and told her, "I can't be sure, but Damian's hiding something. I think there's something he doesn't want me to know about this

attacker.”

“...”

“You said you wanted to get rid of him yesterday, right?” He watched Winona’s face carefully, like he was stacking coins on top of one another. You had to think carefully before you placed a bet.

He was waiting for her to respond, but she just turned to leave instead. But just as it seemed like she was about to walk away, she stopped and turned around, whispering hoarsely, “This isn’t a good time. The situation changed. Right now, I’m the only one who can protect my lord. He needs Damian right now.”

“For the time being, you mean.”

“It’s complicated. All this happened in just one night...”

“Don’t you think you should prepare before the situation changes again?” Orphen asked her since she was being vague.

Winona asked him slowly—truly slowly, “What is it that you’re trying to say?”

“I don’t even know that. But it might be really important. And it might be completely insignificant.”

“What do you want me to do?” The hesitation was already gone from her voice.

Orphen nodded. “If Damian were to give you an order right now, what do you think he’d tell you to do?”

“...Find and eliminate the intruder?”

“I’m not telling you to disobey him, but I want you to wait for a second before you carry it out. Think before you pounce. Who is the intruder and what are they here to do?”

“And what will that do?”

“I told you I don’t know. If the attacker really is just trying to kill the lord—though I can’t imagine that’s true from their methods—then you can do what you want. But if they’ve got another plan, I want you to figure out what it is.

They might have something that's making Damian nervous, after all."

"You're like an agitator," Winona said with a wry smile before speeding away. She disappeared between the trees in search of the attacker.

Orphen wasn't sure if she'd dodged the question because she was being wary of Damian or because she was just exasperated with him. *No*, Orphen thought to himself. *She listened to me.*

He was never hoping for Winona to fully join his side. That would never happen as long as he couldn't decide how he felt about the lord. Considering that, Winona's answer had been the best that Orphen could hope for. He decided to take what he could get.

Orphen looked around and began to search the silent garden as well, though it hardly seemed like it would offer up any clues. An agitator was an apt thing to call him. He hadn't given Winona anything. Still, he was trying to make use of her in a way that was convenient to him.

First, I have to drag the enemy out in front of me. Then I can fight them. Of course, there was no such thing as a clear enemy in this world. In Winona's case, he was an enemy, but she couldn't oppose him. All of the people around her were making that the case. The lord, Damian, Colgon, and Orphen himself.

But if you really thought about it, the same could be said for anyone else.

If you still wanted to fight someone, you had to decide they were an enemy even if it wasn't completely clear. You had to drag a falsehood that wasn't even an enemy out in front of yourself.

That's karma, I guess.

Orphen mocked himself for wasting time on pointless philosophizing and ran off once again.



The lord needed Damian.

Those were her own words, but they twisted her stomach. It wasn't pride—nothing so petty—it was her own powerlessness.

Ugh... People with too much power are nothing but trouble for my lord!

Winona cursed and stopped. She flipped her shirt up to let the autumn breeze hit her skin as she caught her breath. It was comfortable temporarily, but she knew it was bad for her, since there wasn't much fat on her body.

Holding up Deedee, her gun, she brought up a mental map of the garden. She knew every tree here by heart. After destroying her lodgings, the intruder had completely vanished. That was only possible for someone familiar with the area.

Either that, or someone who could make themselves disappear. Since she was fighting against dragons, she had to take such things into consideration. Winona let out an annoyed breath. She believed she was doing everything she possibly could to serve her lord. She didn't ask for much, but she thought she deserved at least the ability to round up all her enemies at times like these.

This isn't good. I'm getting all fainthearted, she thought to herself, shaking off her delusions. *I'm not like those gutless sorcerers who were born with power that surpasses human understanding... Those guys can't be like me. That's right. I don't want results to come easy.*

She trained every morning. She always walked on her toes to foster a sense of balance. She filed the skin from her fists to toughen them enough that she could snap a wooden board without bleeding. Naturally, she was still keeping up with all this training, and she was used to fighting battles and being in mortal peril.

This was normal. Everyone who wasn't here was corrupt—she smiled, recalling the training motto of the dispatch police. How many times had she wanted to kill those sadistic instructors? And when she suddenly realized one day that she did have the strength and technique to end one's life, she found herself clinging to them and crying instead. Those sadists she was indebted to had cried in just the same way, and after thanking them from the bottom of her heart for the first time, she became a dispatch officer. And a year later, her position and background were erased when she became a Dragoon. As she'd drawn up her own death certificate, her heart had been full of a sense of accomplishment. That was the moment a no-good ruffian with nothing but a dog to her name had become a true knight in service to the lord of the Imminent Domain.

She didn't want an easy life. Sorcerers may have been born with superhuman abilities, but in exchange, they were also marked by depravity from the day they were born. They must not be envied. To envy them would be to deny the power of humanity.

Since her lord desired a world fully governed by humans, what he needed most was the power of those humans.

Sorcery was nothing more than a herald for that power.

I'm sure...my lord understands that. She would believe that no matter what happened. She'd never doubted it before.

Winona traced routes on the map in her mind, finding the most efficient escape routes if the attacker was human—that is, a human sorcerer. The mansion was right in the middle of the garden. The garden wasn't any sort of fortress. The Imminent Domain had been feuding with Doppel X for ten years without letting the sanctuary discern its location. Most of its stealth came from Damian's manipulation of the Network to camouflage it. The Imminent Domain was right on the edge of the knight army's territory, but the area went officially unnamed, of course. The Imminent Domain's existence wasn't public knowledge and it had never been directly attacked by the sanctuary. They probably only found out about it from what happened in Urbanrama. She didn't know how the information had leaked, but the second it did, their organization had been destroyed.

Winona had to admit that black sorcerers had something going for them. They were hopelessly lacking in fighting power. Both in numbers and in quality. Winona confirmed the heft of the gun in her hand. This weapon couldn't kill dragons.

Well...no point thinking about it. For now, she had to concentrate on the enemy right in front of her.

As she pondered, she hit upon the enemy's escape route. When the lodgings had been destroyed, the enemy had been within range to cast their sorcery. This must have been true. When she'd realized what was happening, she had run outside and started searching for the enemy. But they'd already fled by then. It was pretty pathetic as attacks went. They had launched a surprise

attack and hadn't actually accomplished anything.

Why were they so quick to flee? Or is this a trap, to lure us out?

She peered into the bushes in front of her, confirming that no one was hiding in them. If this was a trap, then they should pounce the moment she gave them an opportunity. As long as they didn't attack with some kind of beam that instantly vaporized her, it was a bet she was willing to take.

But do I have to bet?

She ran her tongue over her lips. The taste was salty. No matter how much she steeled her will, her body was still nervous. She relaxed her shoulders and lowered her gun. Holstering Deedee on her hip, she thrust her hands between the pointy garden trees to push into the bushes. While she pretended to search the bushes, she paid careful attention to what was behind her.

He's not coming... I'm ahead of that black sorcerer. I'm closer to the enemy. I'm confident about that.

She put her imagination to work, trying to figure out what the enemy was thinking. Winona traced the thoughts of the attacker. In enemy territory, chased by enemies. What would she do in that situation...

Take them all out, of course, she thought with conviction.

Come on, I'm alone. And I'm just a powerless soldier, an easy target for you. I look just like a musclebound idiot who's only good for running errands, right? I'm not one of the continent's most powerful Stabbers, and I'm not some incomprehensible monster either. I think it's about time for you to sneak up behind me, isn't it?

There were no sneak attacks when it came to sorcery. She had to believe that. The power of sorcery was immense, but vocal sorcery couldn't take effect without sound. And they wouldn't risk tipping off their enemies to their location when they were taking out their first target.

You're a chicken. Hurry up and come at me. Help me prove that even if you're a sorcerer, my fists that I've trained for ten years can still kill you...

Certain death in one blow. Planning her assault on the enemy, she suddenly

recalled the words of the black sorcerer. Observe the enemy before striking?

Ridiculous. Just the kind of reckless remark I'd expect from a carefree sorcerer. Does he understand what it means for people like us to hesitate before a sorcerer?

Still, if her adversary had some sort of trump card against Damian Rue, then it was worth considering.

It'll depend on what happens, she thought to herself as she stuck her arms deeper into the bushes. She touched the ground, closing her fingers around soft sand.

An instant later...

"Hrgh!" It was less of a scream and more of a snort—she had no time and no ability to scream. She turned around in a split second, throwing the sand at the presence behind her. She'd just been taken by surprise like this yesterday. It was just throwing sand randomly, but if it made her opponent falter, then she'd have an opportunity to strike.

At the same time, she pulled back, lowering her hips and drawing her gun with her left hand. The presence behind her hadn't actually gotten as close as she'd hoped. She saw an afterimage slightly farther back than where she'd thrown the sand as the figure hid behind some trees.

I rushed it! I'm chickening out too! Winona cut her scolding short and ran after them. She hadn't gotten a good look at her enemy, but a vague impression remained in her retinas. Their whole body had been covered in black—not an unusual look for a sorcerer. They'd had long black hair. And they'd had nimble reactions, almost inhumanly so.

She didn't doubt they were a first-rate Stabber. The enemy had failed to take her by surprise, but she'd made the same mistake. They might try to settle things with sorcery a moment later. Winona fired and charged forward in an attempt to preempt that. Two shots. She fired into the trees where her enemy had disappeared even though she knew she wouldn't hit.



Even if she got around to the other side of the tree, the enemy would be gone—they'd probably already vanished again. Winona stepped toward the place where the figure had disappeared, impossibly anxious. Yesterday she'd allowed a Doppel X to head straight to her lord. She didn't intend to fail like that again.

She stopped, her shoes sliding against the ground. She held her breath. She only needed to observe her enemy for a moment.

There they were. And...

"How?!" she screamed in surprise after her observation took more than a moment.

She felt a sensation like floating into the air. Winona felt an impact with her whole body and lost consciousness. Forever.

Chapter V: False Voice

“These are gunshot wounds.” Damian’s voice was calm as he looked down at Winona on a bed in the mansion.

It was ridiculous that he felt the need to say something so obvious out loud, but Orphen acknowledged the meaning of the statement with a grimace. If he hadn’t said it, it wouldn’t have drawn his attention to the fact.

“Two shots to the abdomen,” Damian continued emotionlessly. “The wounds are deep. She won’t last long. An hour at most, even with her constitution.”

“But you can heal her, can’t you?” Orphen asked, looking around the room. This was the place where Orphen had woken up, revived after being wounded last night. Winona had returned to the same bed she’d been on the day before, unconscious with bandages wrapped around her wounded abdomen.

No one else was in the room. Was Lottecia still with Claiomh? Probably, decided Orphen. Majic must be with them too, then. Along with the lord.

Damian faced him as if to draw his attention. Without any particular emphasis, he said, “I told you I don’t have the focus... Right, in other words, you shouldn’t be getting hurt and counting on my power to heal you either.”

Orphen didn’t answer, just looking down at Winona instead. Gunshot wounds. Bullets had ruptured several of her internal organs and she was dying a slow death. The bleeding should have stopped, but every time he looked down at her bandages, the dark red stain on them seemed to spread. Her face already looked like it was the color of damp earth instead of the skin of a warm-blooded living being.

She was fatally wounded. There was no doubt about that. There wasn’t anything his sorcery could do at this point—he’d actually found her just after the gunshots and immediately tried treating her, but it had had no effect. Even his sorcery could seal up a wound. Orphen ground his teeth. What he couldn’t do was repair her damaged organs and replenish the blood she’d lost.

But Damian Rue should have been able to heal this fatal injury. He'd healed her from an even more dire state the night before, after all.

Glaring at him out of the corner of his eye, Orphen remarked, "You're awfully stingy with your power all of a sudden."

"It's not as if I have an inexhaustible supply." Damian held out his hand to change the subject—in it was a small firearm. Holding it not by the grip but by the barrel, the white sorcerer said, "This is her gun. There weren't any bullets left in it."

"Well, it wasn't just one gunshot. So the enemy stole her gun and shot her with it?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't be able to tell without thoroughly inspecting the area. But if you'd like my personal opinion, I don't think she's that foolish."

That was what Damian said, though Orphen wasn't sure if he believed him. Winona was breathing so quietly it almost seemed like she had no objection.

Orphen took the gun from the white sorcerer and stared at it. There wasn't anything he could figure out from looking at it—just that it was well used—but the light weight of the killing tool almost made it seem like a corpse that had lost its soul. Maybe that wasn't too far off the mark. Its lack of weight was because its cylinder was empty.

Winona's revolver held five shots. Orphen counted as he thought back. Winona would probably be able to fire off all five shots even at the brink of death. No, he was sure that was exactly what she'd done. She'd shot all five bullets herself.

"Then did the intruder also have a gun?" he asked, and Damian seemed hesitant to answer. He didn't know what was going on in the white sorcerer's head, but his tone was courteous as he responded.

"Where did you obtain your gun?"

Orphen looked at the white sorcerer and blinked, not expecting the question. He put a hand on the gun at his hip and muttered, "Tish brought it from the Tower. Do you think I shot Winona? Unfortunately, I can't shoot this gun. I haven't done any maintenance on it yet."

“Did you only bring the one gun in?”

“What, do you think I shot her and then hid the weapon somewhere—” Orphen raised his voice, annoyed that the white sorcerer was suspecting him, but he stopped before finishing the thought.

The white sorcerer seemed to have something in mind. He wasn’t even paying attention to Orphen. He showed no signs of pressing him about the gun either. Orphen felt more of that strange feeling he’d felt earlier. *He’s not suspecting me*, he thought. *What is he hiding?*

By the time Damian looked up at him again, all the hesitation was gone from his face. “Well, the Tower of Fangs has enough guns that any old sorcerer can take one, doesn’t it?” he asked, his tone light. “And it’s possible another party sent by the Thirteen Apostles would be armed with guns too, isn’t it?”

“These are the weapons of the knight army. Does the Union of Lords ever loan them out?”

“I’m of the opinion that the intruder was sent by the Thirteen Apostles. That makes the most sense.”

“What would make the most sense is reviving Winona,” Orphen stated, pointing at the woman on the bed. Lying down like this, she seemed smaller.

Orphen glared at the white sorcerer who wouldn’t even look at him and lowered his voice. “It’s almost like you don’t *want* to heal her.” He stepped forward threateningly, but Damian didn’t move back. Maybe he was the only one feeling the pressure from the lack of space between them now.

He cursed himself for getting timid. Tightening his grip on Winona’s gun in his hand, Orphen growled, “We can find out right away who the attacker is if you revive Winona. Or is there some reason you don’t want to do that?”

Damian said nothing in response. Maintaining his silence, he turned his face to the window.

The early afternoon sun glittered against the windowpane. It was still early, but the autumn sun was already low in the sky.

“I would like you to guard the lord. I’m sure it’s not a job you’d like to do, but I

don't think you can exactly refuse it. After all, you have to protect that girl and your student, don't you?"

"Don't change the subject, white sorcerer."

"It's just for one night. I'll eliminate the intruder by tomorrow morning. It should be possible to do so without using too much power if I make skillful use of ghosts. I'll be able to take care of things in a safer way than you could."

"Hey—"

"Let me speak frankly. How much power do you think it would take for me to revive a mere grunt like Winona? The same goes for you if you happen to be injured. But the lord thinks that we'll need you. Personally, I think it's less risky for me to take care of this."

Damian was suddenly very talkative. While Orphen was trying to figure out how to argue with him, he continued to cut Orphen off. Vanishing as if melting into the air, Damian went on, "Tomorrow morning. The lord only needs until tomorrow morning. By then, the balance of power between the Imminent Domain and the sanctuary will have reversed. All you need to do is keep quiet and keep the lord safe until then." Damian disappeared and his voice cut off.

Watching him go, Orphen groaned. And Winona just kept breathing deeply, like she had no objection.



It was a surprise to find fresh milk—it *seemed* fresh, at least—in such a remote place. Lottecia removed the seal on the brand-new bottle and transferred its contents to a nearby pot. The stove was old, but it seemed perfectly usable. She struck a match and started a fire, then set the pot on top of it. That done with, she turned around. Claiomh had stopped crying and was sitting hunched in a chair like she was ashamed.

The kitchen only had a simple table and chairs and was surprisingly sparse otherwise. In the drawers were silverware and cooking tools, but there was nothing fancy like the lord of a mansion would be using. So this was probably where the servants ate. Lottecia put a hand on her hip, wondering how to spend the time it would take for the milk to warm up. She could talk to Claiomh.

But she'd been speaking one-sidedly to her for half an hour now and she was running out of things to say.

She turned her thoughts to the magic sword standing against the wall and recalled the words she vaguely remembered hearing under the wind. Do not let go of the sword. She smiled wryly. He couldn't have meant that she had to keep her guard up around that stupid lord for even the short time it took to heat up some milk. There seemed to have been a commotion in the garden, but it was quiet inside the mansion.

Maybe it's better if there's a commotion, she thought. Lottecia snuck a glance at the other girl in the room. The silence was incredibly awkward to her, but she couldn't think of a way to break it. It was hard just seeing Claiomh so downhearted—it was too big of a change from her first impression of the girl.

Did she feel guilty for picking up on a change in another person? Lottecia analyzed herself as she sniffed the fragrant steam coming off of the hot milk now. If she put some sugar in it and gave it to Claiomh, maybe she'd get back some of her energy. No emotion could resist the replenishment of sweetness in the system.

“Was Orphen...”

Lottecia reacted exaggeratedly when Claiomh suddenly spoke. She hurriedly turned around and blinked several times. She hadn't been expecting Claiomh to start a conversation. But no matter how long she waited for her to continue, Claiomh just stared absentmindedly at her, her mouth closed.

“...What is it?” Lottecia asked her, and Claiomh's eyes dropped to her feet once more. She was practically leaning over the table.

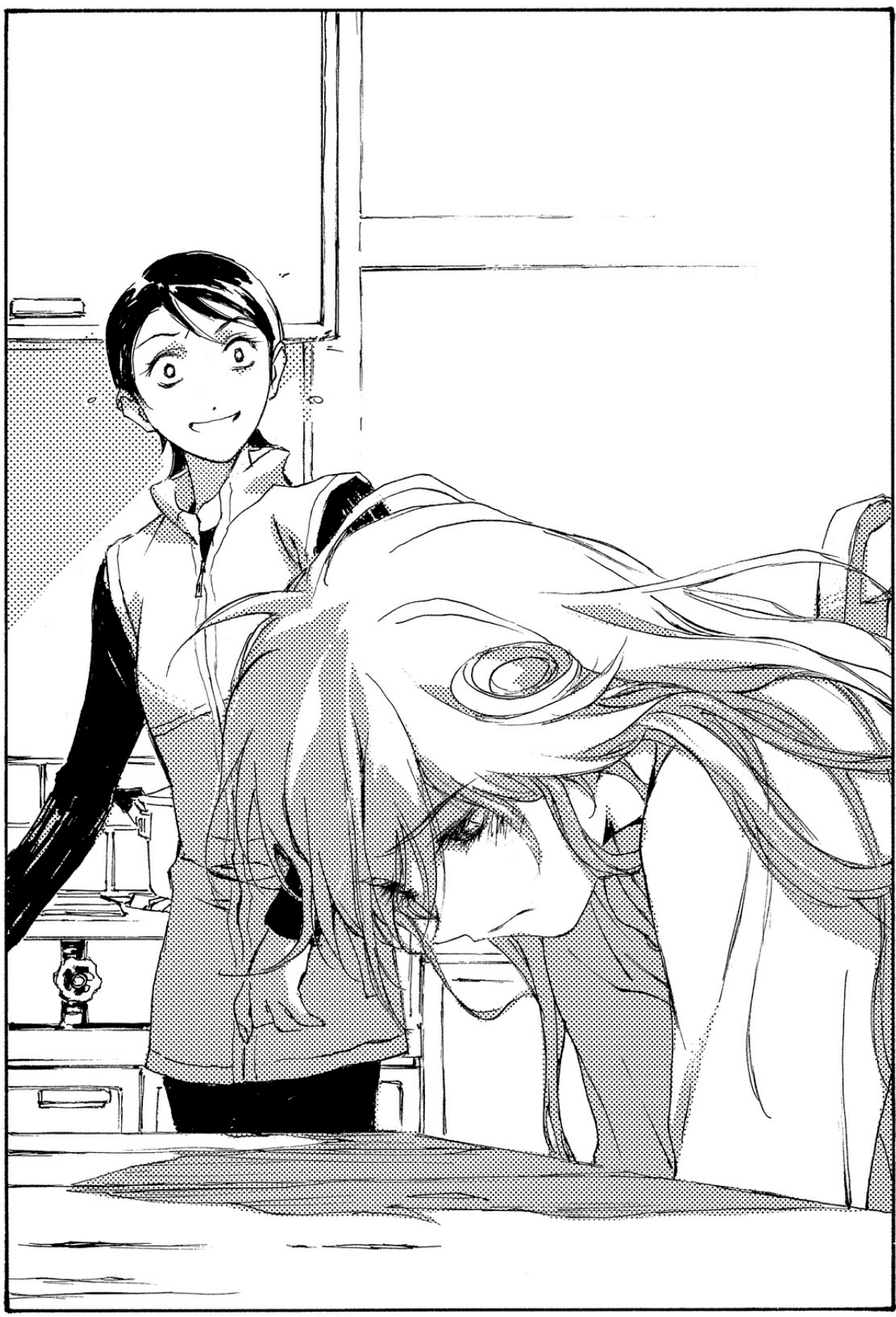
In a tiny voice that was hard to pick up, she asked, “Was Orphen mad?”

“I don't think he was mad. Umm...at least, not at you.” Lottecia cleared her throat, remembering the black sorcerer who had very clearly been mad with rage. That man was nothing but trouble! “It's just, well, it seems like a lot happened yesterday... I don't know much about it myself. But it sounds like it was really horrible. I think that's why he was so upset. You didn't do anything wrong.”

Should she tell her about his sister dying and everything else? Lottecia wasn't sure, but she opted to not mention it. She really didn't know much about the details, and she didn't want to make Claiomh worry even more.

"I see..." Claiomh muttered, voice strained. Then she suddenly raised her head. She didn't look like she had her energy back, though. Her face was still clouded. "I'm just so worried about Leki."

"He'll be fine, won't he?" Lottecia reassured her even as she herself thought the comment was irresponsible. Still, that rude black sorcerer would surely do something about all this without anyone having to worry about him. Lottecia was also more worried about the little black dog.



Remembering Leki sitting all alone out in the wasteland, she told Claiomh, “Come to think of it, I saw Leki. Yesterday. I’m not sure about where, exactly, but...it was pretty far from here.”

Claiomh turned to her and opened her mouth, but didn’t say anything. She must have *wanted* to say something. Lottecia saw her lips move fruitlessly once, twice, three times. It seemed less like she was hesitant to say what she wanted and more like she wasn’t sure what to say.

Lottecia took the warmed pot off of the stove, lining up two mugs she’d brought with her next to the sink. Being careful not to spill any of the drink as she poured it into the mugs, she said, “I don’t know where, but it seemed like he was headed somewhere.”

“He went back to the forest,” Claiomh muttered. Lottecia didn’t hear her very well, so she turned her ear in that direction and Claiomh spoke up again, louder this time. “He might not come back.” Her voice was shaking slightly.

She couldn’t think of any grounds for doing so, but she decided to deny that. Lottecia shook her head. “It’ll be all right.”

Just then, there were footsteps, as if perfectly timed to interrupt them. The grating sound of boorish boots on the wooden floor. They approached the door and then it opened.

Who should appear from the other side of the door but the black sorcerer himself.

“...Orphen,” Claiomh murmured. She sounded less surprised and more taken aback.

The black sorcerer turned to her and nodded. “Yeah.”

“What happened?” Lottecia asked him.

Orphen was looking around the kitchen absentmindedly. He seemed to be in a big hurry about something.

He sighed and said, “I’m looking for Damian.”

He was talking about that ghostlike man—remembering him, Lottecia frowned. Orphen had called him a white sorcerer, but she’d been able to tell he

was a sorcerer of some kind from how he seemed to look down on people as if it were completely natural.

Sheesh... Are all sorcerers like them? Lottecia scowled, including the black sorcerer who wasn't saying a thing to Claiomh in her criticism.

"Well, he's not here," she told him, glancing at Claiomh.

She was looking up at Orphen, but she also seemed relieved that the conversation didn't require her input at all. Lottecia couldn't understand everything going through her mind, but she thought she could read the girl's emotions relatively well.

For the time being, Lottecia decided to put the pot back and put out the fire. There was a little milk left that hadn't fit in the two mugs.

There was no response from the black sorcerer while she searched for a sugar bowl. Eventually, he said, "Right. I'll try to persuade him to revive Winona again..."

"Revive?" Lottecia asked, taken aback. She knew there had been some commotion, but she hadn't heard that that unpleasant woman had gotten caught up in it.

The black sorcerer had been about to flee the kitchen, but he stopped and crossed his arms, nodding. "She got really hurt in that attack. Damian's the only one who'd be able to heal her."

Claiomh's chair clattered as she stood. But once again, she just closed her mouth instead of saying anything. This time, Lottecia could guess what she wanted to say. She probably wanted to say that Leki could do the same thing. Lottecia still remembered the black dog reviving her in Nashwater.

Orphen seemed to have come to the same conclusion. He waved his hand as if to tell her "don't worry about it," but Lottecia had a different question in mind.

"She's the enemy, isn't she?"

The black sorcerer looked exasperated by her question. He must not have expected her to ask something like that. "What's the point of dividing us like

that? There's no need to let someone die when they don't have to. Plus, she should have some important information."

"Information?"

"Isn't it obvious? She saw who attacked her, right?"

"That's important?" Lottecia asked.

Orphen shrugged. "I dunno. I'm more curious about why Damian seems so insistent on hiding that information."

"Orphen, I'm gonna go look for Leki after all." Claiomh ran for the back door, but Orphen yelled after her.

"No, you don't need to."

"But—"

"No. Please don't leave the mansion. There's an attacker out there, and they killed Winona without hesitating." He seemed to realize his mistake after making it and hung his head, continuing glumly, "Winona won't last much longer, so even if you find Leki, it'll be too late. Dammit... I can still try to persuade Damian. That's all I can do for now..."

"Orphen." Lottecia called his name but he held up a hand to stop her.

He was thinking while he spoke. Haltingly, he said, "First, what we can't forget is...that danger is approaching. The enemy is already nearby and we don't know anything about them. An assassin from the sanctuary like the man in the priest's robes last night is bound to show up again at some point. Damian's trying to pretend it won't happen, but it's just a matter of time. If we have time before then, we need to at least create a situation that's advantageous to us."

"But the lord says it's safe here—" Claiomh started before the black sorcerer shot her an obviously complicated look.

It brought to mind Lottecia's late father—though obviously he would have worn the expression she was thinking of in much more mundane situations. In times of hardship, her father had had to let go of some of his treasured swords. It was the same sort of regretful expression he'd worn at those times, one of the pain of losing something important to him.

She looked back at him and found that the black sorcerer's expression didn't resemble her late father's as much as she'd thought. It certainly reminded her of it, but there was a fundamental difference between the two. Lottecia sensed intuitively where the difference lay: the black sorcerer had no idea what it was he was losing.

"There's one thing I can say for sure. I can't trust that lord. Even more than Damian." There was an ominous tone in Orphen's voice. His words almost sounded like a threat. "He talks like he's fighting, but he hasn't had to lose anything—"

"But he let us escape!" Claiomh raised her voice. She put a hand to her chest and chided Orphen. "Yesterday, when that assassin came into the mansion...he let just me and Majic escape through a secret passage. He told us we didn't need to worry about him. That if the intruder killed him, then they would leave."

"But in reality, the lord didn't die."

"You can't blame him for that!" Claiomh protested, and the black sorcerer's face tensed.

Being calm herself, Lottecia could tell that he was about to say something he couldn't take back. She made up her mind and stepped forward to interrupt their conversation, but she was too late.

Orphen finally started shouting. "Irgitte was killed! And I don't know where Tish is either..." Without waiting for Claiomh to respond, the black sorcerer left the room.

His footsteps faded in the same ominous way they'd approached. The black sorcerer hadn't waited one second, but even if he'd stayed there, he still wouldn't have gotten a response from Claiomh. She just silently returned the chair she'd kicked to the table and sank down onto it. She hung her head and, after a long silence, muttered quietly, "He *is* mad..."

"He was just taking it out on you." After she said it, Lottecia realized she didn't want it to come off as overly critical and added, "You don't need to beat yourself up over it. He told me earlier he's just trying to figure out who his enemies are."

“If I side with the lord, will I be his enemy?” Claiomh murmured.

Lottecia smiled at her, though she knew it was forced. Because of all the time that had passed, their milk was almost cold, but she put sugar in it and brought their mugs over to the table anyway.

Offering one to Claiomh, who was still hanging her head, Lottecia finally came up with the words she wanted to say. “He was really worried about you, you know. And he was feeling a lot of responsibility for letting his guard down. Then when you were safe, it was a little anticlimactic for him. Things are a little awkward between you two right now, but as soon as something happens to turn things around, everything will be fixed, just like that. I’m sure.”

Claiomh wrapped her hands around her mug, shifting it as if to savor its warmth. “Why do you talk like you know more about Orphen than I do?” It was more just a question than a complaint. She was cocking her head curiously.

Lottecia blinked and said with a sigh, “Well, he seems like Ed.”

“They’re not anything alike.” This time, there was a clear complaint as Claiomh pursed her lips. “I’ll never forget what that Ed guy did. I was in real trouble too... He’s pretty much responsible for your dojo closing, isn’t he?”

It’s not really closed... Though she wasn’t too far off.

Lottecia didn’t argue, sitting down in her own chair to fill the time. *She’s right. I can’t forget it either...*

What he’d done. What she’d done. She couldn’t forget any of it.

The fear of the sword rushing toward her, as if it would suck up everything around her. She got goosebumps just remembering it. The hot milk helped to chase the feeling away. She took a sip of it, letting its sweetness wet her tongue, then took a breath.

“Say... I don’t know much about you from before you came to Nashwater, but...” Lottecia looked up at the beams on the ceiling. “Say it was Ed who was traveling with you and Orphen who was living with me. What do you think would have happened?”

She looked at Claiomh, who was returning her gaze somewhat dubiously.

When she saw the look in the other girl's eyes, Lottecia realized what it was she had said and waved her hand, quickly setting the mug down on the table with a loud clunk.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that in a weird way. It was just a hypothetical... They just seem similar to me. I'm sorry."

"...It's nothing you need to apologize about, Lottecia." Still, Claiomh's tone was somewhat ambiguous as she brought her mug to her lips. It didn't look like she drank that much. Maybe she didn't want any but she was pretending to drink for Lottecia. Then, as if she'd just remembered, she asked, "Tish is missing?"

"That woman with the long hair? She disappeared on our way here. But Damian says she died."

Claiomh's mug started to shake in her hands. She turned visibly pale. "Tish is Orphen's sister. She helped me out too. She died...? That can't be..."

"Orphen says he doesn't believe Damian. He said something about him is suspicious, so he can't believe what he says."

"I'm gonna go apologize to Orphen after all. I feel like I said something really terrible to him..." Claiomh said, setting her mug down and leaving the kitchen. Her footfalls were much quieter than the sound of the black sorcerer's boots as they faded into the distance.

Left behind by herself, Lottecia let out a long sigh. Something wasn't right here. Each time events moved forward, the cogs in this machine seemed to shift further out of place. But no one actually involved seemed to realize this.

I wonder if that means I'm not involved, since I've noticed... That might be the case.

With an empty feeling, she glanced at the magic sword up against the wall—her father's memento—and thought, *After all, my goal has nothing to do with anything they're doing...*

Just then, there was a quiet noise. She thought it might have just been the old mansion settling, but then she heard it again.

She turned around curiously. The sound had come from the one window in the kitchen. There was another noise, like someone was throwing pebbles at the window from outside. Like they were trying to signal whoever was inside the room.

Lottecia stood, feeling her heart beating faster. She ran to the window, grabbing her sword and holding it to her. She knew how to use the sword—at least, in theory. She wasn't sure yet whether she'd really be able to use it when it counted. The black sorcerer's words revived in her mind. It was dangerous here. It was just a matter of time...

She knew it wasn't logical, but the first thing that came to mind was a burglar. Someone who would knock to find out if anyone was home and carefully infiltrate the premises.

There's no way it could be something like that...not here. It wasn't a burglar. If something was coming here, it would be something far more dangerous.

Lottecia took up her sword. The blade was still hidden in its sheath, but this sword had never been one that could be unsheathed normally. At the very least, the sword would protect her. If she was in danger, it should keep her safe. As long as she believed that, the magic sword would work. Beedo Crewbstar's magic sword.

The signal was still continuing. Small stones continued hitting the glass at regular intervals.

Lottecia silently padded over to the back door. Should she go and get the black sorcerer's help? Even as the thought occurred to her, her pride wouldn't allow her to do so. Plus, something about this was strange.

She put her hand on the back door. If she turned the knob and pushed it open, she could leave the building. The window was close by. As soon as she stepped outside, she would see who was throwing stones at it. A hot sweat that cooled quickly dripped down her forehead. With her sword in one hand, Lottecia tensed her other hand on the doorknob and leaped outside.

Even in her shock, she was able to ready herself for battle quickly due to all her combat training. When she rushed out of the building, there was no one there.

There's no one...? That can't be...

It was several meters from the mansion's back door to the nearest copse of trees to hide in. Enough distance that it wouldn't be easy to aim at the window from there, but it wouldn't necessarily be hard either. Still, hitting the exact same spot every time would be pretty difficult from there. In that case, the person had to be closer but invisible to her.

Human beings couldn't be invisible.

Which means... Lottecia ran her eyes over the area, somewhat surprised by how calm she was. The enemy was in her blind spot. Concealing themselves.

She spun around, operating on pure instinct, raising her sheathed sword to intimidate her foe.

She saw something. Long black hair like a brush painting something in the air. Black clothes covering the entire body. But it wasn't anything she saw clearly, just a momentary figure that left that sort of impression on her. There was one more figure too...

Lottecia held her breath for a moment before letting out a "Huh?" that sounded stupid even to her ears. The other figure was just standing there, not moving. Staring calmly at her.

It was Damian Rue.

"...The enemy has fled," was all he said.

He must have appeared here at the same time as her—he'd heard the signal on the window glass like she had, from wherever he was. And the one who had been sending the signal had fled.

Damian looked around regretfully for a moment and then disappeared himself.

Once again left behind on her own, Lottecia lowered her sword. She closed her eyes and searched for the dark figure she thought might still be in her retina.

But she couldn't remember what she'd seen. With a huff of disappointment, she went back into the mansion from the back door.



The main part of a gun was really the bullets, one could say. The gun itself was nothing more than a sheath.

If that were true, then this gun might as well be unusable at this point. Orphen looked down at the disassembled parts of the gun on the table in front of him and sighed. There wasn't much he could actually do when it came to maintenance. He didn't need to worry about the gun's components being warped—since no one had actually shot it before—so all he really had to do was clean the dust from it. It wasn't missing any parts. He dry fired it a few times and didn't notice any mechanical problems.

When it came to the bullets, however, it was a different story. There might be rust in places where he couldn't see, and there was no way for him to tell by looking whether the gunpowder was functional or not. He had no idea how the weapon had been stored at the Tower. In the first place, it was supposed to be a prototype, not for use in the field. That was one of the reasons it had been left in storage for so many years.

The majority of a gun's function was decided by its bullets.

How many accurate bullets could be mass-produced? That was the question the gun craftsmen at the Tower had been concerned with. No matter how skilled the shooter was, if their bullets didn't fly straight, then they couldn't aim at their target. Unexploded shells would render a gun completely useless. In a worst-case scenario, an accidental discharge could take the life of the shooter.

The best thing for him to do would be to change all the bullets out for new ones. He was well aware of that. But there was no chance he'd find any spare bullets here. In the end, what he'd have to do was just pray none of the bullets he had would misfire in any way.

He didn't need to hurry as he put the gun back together; he finished quickly at a normal pace. Orphen used what he remembered vaguely to reassemble the gun and finished by sliding the magazine back in. It was ironic that the least trustworthy part of this machine made the most satisfying sound as it slid into place. There were eight bullets in the magazine. The first one, with the most contact with the outside air, was the least trustworthy, then. And if that first

shot misfired, he likely wouldn't have much opportunity to make use of this gun again.

Orphen set the gun down on the table and then looked up at the ceiling, away from it. He blinked and his dry eyes teared up a bit. He was the only one in the dining room where they'd had lunch now—the dishes had all been put away and the flowers in the vase seemed to have lost some of the vitality they'd had earlier.

He'd noticed someone else entering, but he'd kept focusing on his work. Now that he'd finished, however, the other person seemed to take it as a sign and spoke up.

"Master..." It was Majic.

Still seated, Orphen turned and observed his pupil as he stood in the door. His small frame made him seem somewhat undependable. His dejected expression didn't help either.

The blond boy didn't wait for Orphen to answer. "Do you have a minute?"

"For what?"

"I want to talk..."

"Sure." Orphen nodded and turned his whole chair around. He urged Majic to continue. "What is it?"

"Are you against it?" Majic took a step forward, spreading his arms. "Well...me learning from someone else."

"No. If you want me to, I'll introduce you to Forte or Tish. It's hard to say either of them look after their students all that well, but they should be better instructors than me."

"But you can't go back to the Tower, can you, Master?"

"I can't, but I highly doubt the leadership at the Tower remembers who you are," Orphen told him with a shrug. He sighed, almost feeling like his strength had run out.

Majic was still just waiting for him to continue, but he didn't have much else to say. He'd just end up betraying his own student again. Orphen felt his

shoulders sagging with the thought. He put his hands on his knees and then noticed he was almost bowing in his current position.

Raising just his eyes, he said quietly, “Majic. I might never have asked you this before. What kind of sorcerer is it that you want to be?”

“Huh?”

Seeing Majic’s confused expression, Orphen continued, “Well...what kind of sorcerer were you thinking you’d become, spending half a year with me?”

“I don’t really know,” Majic admitted. “I just wanted to be able to hold my own.” The boy’s brow furrowed uncharacteristically.

“What sort of person do you think can ‘hold his own’?”

“Someone who’s not useless,” Majic explained, showing no hesitation—as if the answer were rehearsed. “I wanted to become a sorcerer like you, Master.”

“I’ve never been of any use to anyone,” Orphen muttered. He stood from his chair, stretching and looking off into the distance. Since there wasn’t a window in the room, all he saw was the wall. A pure white wall. A cold, featureless wall.

He found himself sighing. “I wonder what kind of sorcerer I wanted to be too...”

“Master?”

“Listen, Majic. I told you I had no problem with your control anymore, right?”

“Yes...” Majic nodded, his expression faintly grim like he was remembering something unpleasant.

Orphen turned back to his student and asked quietly, “What did you sense?”

“My sorcery wasn’t good for anything. Whether or not you said there were no problems with it, I haven’t been of any use to anyone.”

“Your talent is impressive. I’ll give you that. It’s rare to naturally pick up control of sorcery like that in just a few months. Plus, you haven’t lost the strength of sorcery that you had in the beginning. Not even Tish can utilize her full strength with perfect control.”

Majic just gave him a dubious look.

Orphen laughed. “I’m not trying to butter you up at this point. I’m saying this is all just your natural ability. It’s only natural that you can do it because it’s something you were born with.”

“But...”

“Well, just listen. You said you wanted to be like me, right? What sort of sorcerer do you think I am, that you’d say that?” Even after asking the question, Orphen continued without waiting for his answer. “What did you think I had? My power doesn’t compare to Forte’s or Tish’s. I’m not confident I could beat Colgon in a contest of control. If we’re not talking about just humans, I’m not anywhere near Leki’s level. Damian Rue’s probably one of the strongest sorcerers on the continent. When it comes to hand-to-hand, Winona’s pretty impressive. You could learn swordplay from Lottecia. What do I have?”

“But...” Majic repeated the same denial and then closed his mouth. Maybe he was hesitating to say what he wanted to say. Maybe he didn’t know what he wanted to say.

Orphen shook his head. What did he have? There was no way he could know. Whatever Majic said right now, he’d be wrong.

“Still... What does Tish have, for that matter? Or Forte? Or Leki? Or Damian? Do you seriously think they have some special fate that no one else does?” He listed off names and at the end, quietly added, “Does the lord of the Imminent Domain have the right to shoulder the fate of the whole continent himself?”

“Then who should I learn from...?”

“You don’t know? No one’s got anything special going for them. They’re all just mundane individuals. Uncommon talent? Impressive ability? Those won’t change anything. You should just do what you can. If having power is the fate of a sorcerer, then you should just do what that allows you to do.”

He took a breath and continued, “But you can’t actually do anything that impressive. Those who don’t understand that just rush to their deaths. And I don’t intend to let that happen anymore. I decided in Urbanrama. I finally remembered there. This was something I was supposed to have decided a long time ago. I never want one person to sacrifice themselves to avert destruction ever again...”

Several scenes came to mind.

The forest that consumed and destroyed Urbanrama and the Deep Dragon—no, the girl who'd borrowed the Deep Dragon's body—who had stood against it.

His sister, who had suddenly appeared on the plains, saying irresponsible things and starting fights on her own.

A goddess of destruction peering into the world from a fissure. The heavily wounded Death Instructor laughing loudly before her. Trying to atone with his death, inviting the goddess into the world in order to correct it.

There was also someone who disappeared into the fissure to push the goddess back into it.

Several other scenes overlapped with these.

There were things he'd only seen in visions too. A green-haired woman. The short conversation she'd had with a man. The silver shortsword the man had tried to stab the woman with was in Orphen's possession now. It rested, nameless, in its steel sheath.

Before he knew it, he was clenching his fists. He opened them and let his body relax.

The things he was saying were probably meaningless to Majic right now. Admitting that sadly, Orphen began to speak again.

"As just one of many mundane individuals, you should learn equally from anyone. You don't have to pick one person to be your master. You'll always be half-baked—just like me. When you find someone you can learn from, learn from them. That's all it comes down to. But you can't learn from the lord here. He'll stop you from learning from anyone else."

There was no response from Majic. He was just staring at Orphen blankly.

"Orphen." A voice came from outside of the dining room.

He looked to the entrance and found a girl who looked a lot like Majic peeking over from the wall.

Sounding concerned, Claiomh continued, "Listen..."

“Did you hear all that?” Orphen asked her casually.

She must have been ashamed to have been eavesdropping. Claiomh nodded awkwardly.

Orphen shrugged, not wanting her to feel bad about it, and told her, “Well, it’s just like you heard. I’m sure you’ve got things you’re worried about too, but you don’t have to bear them alone. I shouldn’t either.”

He looked at Claiomh and she was biting her lip. Still, he went on, “I’m concerned about Lekki too, but there’s nothing we can do about that for the time being. We’ll handle that later. I won’t say to leave it all to me... That wouldn’t solve anything. There’s a limit to what I can do on my own. I want you guys to help me, and I’ll do what I can too.”

“So what do we do?” Majic asked.

Before turning back to him, Orphen picked up the gun from the table. Holstering it, he replied, “I’m honestly relieved that you guys are in your right minds. I thought this was gonna be a lot more trouble. I want you to be wary of Damian. I’m not sure what he’s up to and it bothers me. He’s hiding something...or at least he’s trying to.”

“Something?”

“Something. I don’t know what it is, but I’m hoping it’s something damning for him. I can’t think of any other ways to stand against him.”

He glanced around, but not because he was worried Damian was listening—he figured it wasn’t a lie that he couldn’t use the Network right now. Still, a white sorcerer probably had any number of ways to listen in on a conversation without making his presence known. That meant it was pointless for him to even bother being cautious.

What he was looking for was a clock. There was a plain, square clock hanging on the wall. It was early evening now.

Getting an idea, Orphen asked, “Can you wander around the mansion and gather up anything we could eat? If there isn’t much, just one or two meals’ worth would be fine. Make sure to get enough for me and Lottecia too.”

“Huh?” Claiomh said.

Orphen indicated the clock. “From how Damian seemed, I don’t think he’s got the energy to use those servant ghosts any more. I dunno about Mr. Incorporeal, but we need to eat. We might be on our feet until morning, after all.”

“Until morning...?” Majic asked absentmindedly. He was probably counting the hours.

Orphen nodded. “The limit Damian set was tomorrow morning. Apparently, something about the situation is going to change then. At least until then, the Imminent Domain is gonna be pretty close to undefended. If we don’t trust him, then we need to keep our strength up until morning, when that supposed change will occur.”

“You don’t trust them, Master? Damian and...the lord here.” Majic asked as if getting his final confirmation. Claiomh was giving him the same sort of questioning look.

It was a strange sort of ultimatum. The lord himself had no input on this conversation. Depending on how he answered, whatever they decided could change later.

Still, he got the feeling that they had to make up their minds about it now. Orphen hesitated a bit before finally answering, “I don’t. He’s trying to use me as a pawn in his games. But that’s not me. My role... I just decided it now. It’s what I said before.”

“Me too... But not because of what you said, Orphen.” Claiomh was nervous like she was trying to make excuses for herself, but she was firm in what she said. Putting a hand to her chest, she furrowed her brow and hardened her will. “I don’t know about the lord here. But I get the feeling that what he asked Leki was wrong. I was wrong too. I want to save Leki.”

With a snort, she shook her head so hard her hair swayed around her and slapped her cheeks to pump herself up, then ran off, leaving the dining room behind her. She seemed to be headed for the kitchen.

“I don’t really know how I feel.” There was a tremble in Majic’s voice, but he

didn't seem overly upset. He planted his feet as if squaring off against something and continued, "But it sounds like what you're saying is really self-centered, Master. I mean, you can only talk like this because you do have the sort of power that lets you influence all sorts of events."

"Do you believe sorcerers are superheroes? Do you believe they have the duty of superheroes, Majic?"

"I don't know. I don't know... But is it wrong to seek meaning in having power?" The boy's faint eyes watered with emotion. As he stepped toward Orphen, Orphen waved his hand to stop him.

"I'm not qualified to judge what's right and wrong, Majic. If you choose the fate of a superhero, I won't stop you. I'll only stop you if you start rushing to your death."



“Master...”

“I can’t say much as a parting gift. You’re gonna go, but you can come back anytime. Got it?”

“...Yes.” His student nodded and turned around, heading after Claiomh with much less energy.

It didn’t take Orphen long to watch him leave. But he kept standing there for some time after he couldn’t see the boy any longer.

I’ve acknowledged him as someone who can hold his own... It’s only natural for a student to become independent, he thought to himself.

There was a stirring in his heart, but it wasn’t sadness or anger or happiness.

It wasn’t relief either. The boy hadn’t been his student long enough for this moment to feel hard-earned.

It was shame—Orphen pulled the word from the depths of his mind with a bitter smile. He was feeling utter shame. He was sure he’d felt the exact same way Majic did now when he’d left the Tower five years ago. He’d believed that he was a superhero, the only person in the world who could save Azalie.

When he’d returned to Tefurem five years later, the place he belonged still awaited him at the Tower. His friends at the Tower had left him a place to come back to. If that place hadn’t still been there...then he really might have become a superhero. He was sure he would have sacrificed himself for some singular cause without a second thought.

That’s why...this time, I have to protect that place for him. For Azalie, for Tish, for Colgon, for Leki and Majic. And probably a lot more too. I have to overturn this stupid game so that all the superheroes who ran out ahead of me have a place to come back to.

Maybe even Irgitte. He’d let her die, but he still had to make sure she had a place to come back to.

Tapping the steel sheath with the silver shortsword inside it, Orphen muttered the final bit out loud, “You too.”

You granted me power for that purpose, right?

Orphen looked at the clock once more. Not much time had passed while they were talking.

He was sure there would be at least one more uproar before morning. He took a deep breath, preparing himself for it.



The lord appeared soundlessly inside the quiet room.

It wasn't any sort of magic trick—he simply opened the door and entered normally. He did not knock, however. He knew from the start that there was no one inside the room. At least, no one who would respond to a knock.

There were several beds inside the quiet room. A large woman lay atop one of them. Bandages were wrapped tightly around her abdomen, but it was obvious at a single glance of the patient's complexion that they served no purpose. Her clothes were wrinkled from all the sweat they'd absorbed, but they had long since dried. Her eyes were closed in a deep sleep. Dreamless and deep as an abyss.

The lord, again soundlessly, approached the bed. She wouldn't notice no matter how loud his footsteps were, but the lord still didn't doubt that she recognized his presence. He leaned down over the pillow where she slept and whispered, "Winona. My knight..."

He saw her eyelashes quiver when he called her name. Her lips trembled too. The lips almost seemed to move in wanting of something, but all that emerged from them was a quiet murmur: "My...lord..."

"Who was it?" the lord demanded without a moment's delay.

Winona's voice was hard to understand, like there was something caught in her throat. Her breath hitched a few times before she muttered once again, "My lord..."

"Winona. Are you listening to me?" Determined, the lord explained to her, "If you were a sorcerer—if you were weak-willed like them—I'm sure you would complain. But you're not. You're a knight. If you have one breath left to you at the end of your life, you must use that breath to give me useful information."

“Yes...my lord...”

The lord nodded in satisfaction at his knight’s obedient answer. He didn’t need to press her anymore. She would answer him. She would give him the answer he needed.

She feebly voiced a name. “Yuis...shot me...”

The lord rose without responding to her. There was no emotion on his face. This was not something he was certain would happen, but it was not completely unexpected. It was nothing that would necessitate a major change in his plans.

The lord turned around wordlessly.

Where he was now facing, Damian Rue was waiting expressionlessly in the darkness.

The white sorcerer vanished without saying a word.

Almagest Betisletha watched him depart without a change in expression.

Chapter VI: False Illusion

Winona was dead by sunset.

Her face was peaceful in death. She seemed satisfied, like she'd accomplished some great task in the end.

There was a white cloth ready, either as someone's idea of a joke or as a genuine gesture. Orphen thought it was in poor taste, but he couldn't dispute it being customary, so he laid the cloth over Winona's face.

She seemed peaceful. She looked satisfied. In part, he placed the cloth over her face solely to hide that content expression.

He'd told her to die this morning. He didn't believe in curses—that it was possible for his words to lead to her death—but there was still a hard, heavy feeling in his heart. It felt like self-reproach. And if it felt like it, that may as well be what it was.

She died satisfied. He didn't want to deny that. Still, Orphen thought to himself, *What satisfaction could you possibly feel in death?*

He stayed there for only a short while and then, with a sigh, Orphen left the room.



“Do you think we need butter?”

“Well, we can't eat it as is...but I guess we should take it just in case?” Lottecia said, accepting the round package Claiomh handed her. It was dented slightly, showing that it had been partially used. Either that or a rat had gotten to it. She decided not to think about that.

Watching as Claiomh dove deep into the shelves once again, she tossed the package into a cardboard box on the table. It had been nearly an hour since Claiomh had returned to the kitchen and started gathering up food. The box was almost full by now. It was stuffed with dried and smoked meat and bottles

of cheap alcohol with no sort of organization.

“There’s some canned stuff back here.” The blond boy who resembled Claiomh—Majic—spoke up. He walked out with five or six unlabeled cans in both hands and dumped them onto the table.

Claiomh turned around, looking displeased. “What are you even doing here?” she spat at Majic.

“Why can’t I be?” Majic was surprised by her enmity but Claiomh wasn’t backing down.

“You’re siding with the lord, aren’t you? You’re our enemy.”

“And what, you’re against him? You’re going to fight him now?”

“Well, he saved my life, so I *am* thankful to him.” Claiomh puffed her chest out. Lotteicia wasn’t sure where exactly she stood on the matter.

Majic didn’t seem very enthusiastic about his position either. He left the cans on the table and pulled back from it. “Anyway, were you listening to that whole thing, Claiomh?”

“I was,” Claiomh said boldly.

Majic just opened and closed his mouth as if he had no idea what to say in response.

Before he could come up with anything, Claiomh berated him again. “Why are you even here hunting for canned food anyway?”

“Why...? Why shouldn’t I help? And I don’t want to be your enemy or anything...”

“But you’re going to work for the lord, aren’t you?”

“No! I’m not gonna do that...” Majic spluttered. “Master and I just have a difference of opinion right now. And there aren’t any allies or enemies at this point anyway.”

“The sides are pretty clear. There’s an assassin here, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, after the lord... But we don’t know who the enemy is yet, right?”

“I mean, I guess so...” Claiomh finally relented, the wind taken out of her sails.

Still disgruntled, she began stuffing the cans into the box.

As she watched them, Lottecia was thinking about something completely unrelated. She wasn't particularly bothered by their searching for food in the kitchen, but... *This is stealing, isn't it?* She knew there would be no point in saying so, so she kept the thought to herself. Still, she couldn't help feeling timid, like she alone was committing a crime. The guilt didn't excuse her actions, she knew.

Lottecia indicated the rapidly filling box and asked the two of them, "That's probably enough, isn't it? Some of these won't keep, but this should be around a week's worth, right?"

"I'd like twice that, really," Claiomh said simply, going back to rooting through the shelves.

"...Master said we only needed enough to last until tomorrow morning," Majic pointed out to no one in particular.

"I'm not just doing this because Orphen told me to." Claiomh looked over her shoulder, her face scrunched up. She wasn't hiding her anxiety and her voice was shaking too. "I have to go look for Leki. Who knows how many days it'll take to search that huge, empty wasteland..."

"You wouldn't find him if you searched for weeks," Majic said matter-of-factly.

Claiomh just frowned harder like she had something to say. Eventually, she squeezed her voice from her throat. "I won't know that until I try."

"Hey..." Lottecia interrupted, unable to stay quiet any longer. Once she was sure she'd gotten Claiomh's attention, she continued, "You mentioned earlier... Leki, err...made a deal with the lord? Was that right? Wouldn't the lord know where he went, then?"

"I think so, but it feels unethical to ask something like that of someone I'm planning on betraying."

"It's unethical to betray him in the first place..." Majic stated the obvious again, but luckily Claiomh didn't seem to hear him.

She must have decided there was nothing worth taking on the shelves anymore. She shut the doors of the pantry and said, “Plus, I asked where he went a couple times when we first talked about Leki. The lord just said he wasn’t that far away, but he never told me anything more.”

“Not that far?”

“Yeah. He said he might be really close by and we might be able to see him soon, but it would depend... Something like that.”

“Then we’ll see him soon, won’t we?” Majic piped up again.

Claiomh sighed loudly. “I feel like if we just wait, we’ll be too late, which is why I want to go look for him myself.”

“Too late for what?” Lottecia asked.

Claiomh turned around quickly to face her. “Doesn’t making a deal sound bad somehow? You might get something, but...you might have to pay something too. If you aren’t going to tell them the price, isn’t that just fraud?”

Finding a new place to search, Claiomh’s eyes sparkled. “This is suspicious, isn’t it?” She was pointing at the floor. More specifically, at something under a trap door in the floor—there was a small dent where you could hook your finger to pull the door open.

“Maybe it’s a storeroom,” Lottecia muttered.

“There’s not gonna be any food in there,” Majic grumbled, uninterested. “You can’t even open it like this.”

He was referring to how half of the pantry was on top of the door. It wasn’t fully blocked, but the pantry did partially block the door. There weren’t any signs that the pantry had been moved, so the door clearly hadn’t been opened in a long time.

“They might have emergency food stores in there.” Claiomh pursed her lips in a pout.

“Somewhere where they can’t get it out when they need it?” Majic asked skeptically.

“Just hold that side. We’re moving the pantry.”

It took them some time to move the heavy, still-stocked pantry. Lottecia ended up helping as well, and they eventually cleared all the obstacles from on top of the door.

“I’m opening it.” They were all tired, but Claiomh alone still retained her usual energy as she opened the door. They were immediately met with the scent of damp earth and mold.

Lottecia peered in from beside Claiomh and found that she couldn’t see anything. It was pitch black inside the room. And it seemed deep. She expected to see a ladder or something, but there didn’t appear to be anything of the sort.

“Hmm?” Claiomh stuck her upper body into the hole, having noticed something. Then...

“Aaah!” With a scream, Claiomh vanished. She disappeared in a second, like she’d been pulled in. They could hear a racket of footsteps and shouts from below, Claiomh’s screams included.

For a moment, the two who had been left behind simply exchanged stunned glances.

Then Lottecia shouted, “Claiomh!”

She ran to the hole, but she couldn’t say she wanted to peer into it blindly. Her grip tightened on the sword she’d been carrying this entire time as she fought the urge to jump down after the girl—she had no idea how deep the hole was. For the time being, she crouched down next to it and tried to observe the inside, but the sun was already setting, so the light from the window wasn’t much help. She didn’t have a gas lamp either. She then heard Majic’s voice as the boy ran up behind her.

“I call upon thee... Tiny Spirits!”

It must have been sorcery, not that she would know if it was. He flung his hands out and small lights like will-o’-the-wisps lit up at his fingertips. The bright white lights sped down into the underground room, illuminating it.

Except it wasn’t a room, it was a passageway. Lottecia looked left and right—it was a long passageway and she could no longer see anyone in it. Claiomh was gone.

“Claiomh!” Lottecia raised her voice and shouted down into the passageway, though she wasn’t sure which direction to shout in. Her voice reverberated off the stone walls, fading away like they had absorbed it. There was a chill coming up from the underground hall. It looked wet too.

“Is this...a waterway?” she finally realized.

It made sense, since the door was in the kitchen. The channel appeared to be dry now, but it must have once carried water. It was questionable whether there were any water sources out here in this wasteland, but...when the mansion had been built, there must have been.

There was no answer. Lottecia held her breath and listened carefully. She could faintly hear footsteps in the distance, but she couldn’t tell which direction they were coming from.

Lottecia stepped away from the opening, kicking down a nearby chair. She held it down with her foot and broke its legs off one by one. Majic was just staring at her, dumbfounded, so she told him, “You go right. I’ll go left. Got it?”

“Huh?”

Lottecia huffed in irritation as the boy failed to process what she was telling him. She held the broken chair legs and tore down the curtains on the window next. They were open and didn’t look like they’d been closed in a long time. Dust flew into the air as she pulled them down.

She found a knife nearby and cut the curtains into four pieces, wrapping them around the chair legs. Lastly, she looked around for a bottle of oil.

Majic was still standing there dumbly, so she angrily shouted at him, “You go right!”

“Huh? Oh...right.” Finally snapping out of his stupor, he leaped down into the passageway with his will-o’-the-wisps. She heard his footsteps fading, so she knew he’d headed down the hall.

She snatched up a matchbook and checked its contents. Luckily, over half of the matches still remained. Plucking out one, she took her oil-soaked chair legs—impromptu torches—and headed for the entrance to the underground herself.

She saw the boy's figure lit by his sorcerous light moving away from her. Facing the opposite direction, she struck the match in the darkness, lighting her torch.

Lottecia ran into the darkness, holding the lit torch in her left hand and the rest of her torches and her sword in her right.

As she ran down the stone corridor, a question suddenly came to mind. *Why did I run off like that?* She'd decided to chase after Claiomh with no hesitation, her body practically moving on its own.

Compassion? Because she's my friend? No... It's nothing like that. That wasn't the sort of person she was. She had more important things to worry about, and she'd sworn not to involve herself in other dangers. She'd known Claiomh and Majic had been in danger last night, yet she hadn't entered the garden where she knew assassins lurked.

I'm not that naive. Is it because... I thought something was down here? She couldn't understand her own actions. But she instinctively felt that this would benefit her in some way. So she proceeded.

What is this...? A premonition? If such convenient things really existed, it would have been nice if they had occurred earlier for her.

Lottecia bit her lip under the torchlight, lost in her sardonic thoughts.

When she'd met Ed, for instance, it would have been nice if she'd sensed even a hint of who he really was.

The regular sound of her footsteps snapped her out of her thoughts. She stopped pondering and simply ran forward instead.



The mansion was unnaturally quiet when Orphen came down the stairs. He didn't sense anyone inside.

"What's going on...?" he asked no one in particular. He felt uneasy. He peeked into a nearby room and then circled around to the kitchen and stopped.

There was no one inside, but on the table was a box filled with food—they were either in the middle of gathering it or they'd already finished. He quickly

realized what was different about the room. The pantry had been moved to a different location and there was a passageway that had revealed itself from under the floor.

“Is something wrong?” Without warning, the lord of the mansion appeared in the doorway.

He was looking into the room calmly, self-assured like there was nowhere in the mansion he didn’t belong.

“Ah, that passage.” The lord noticed the subterranean hallway before Orphen could say anything. He continued, “We used that waterway when there was still a water source nearby... Before Fenrir’s Forest degenerated to where it is today. It was a long time ago.”

“So why’s it open now?”

“Well, someone must have opened it.”

The lord’s cool response rubbed Orphen the wrong way. He prodded the open trap door with his foot and asked, “Who opened it?”

“Well, it wasn’t locked. Anyone could open it. If it was opened from the bottom, however, it would have required a great deal of strength... That pantry hasn’t been moved in years.”

Orphen didn’t understand. He looked at the shifted pantry and asked, “Then, Claiomh and the rest of them moved it?”

“They seem to have been turning the room upside down anyway. I wouldn’t be surprised if this door caught their interest.”

“Then why aren’t they here?” Orphen asked, crossing his arms. He shot a look at the lord and waited cautiously for his response. The man had very obviously brought Claiomh and Majic here to limit Orphen’s choices. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t use the same tactics twice.

The lord looked upward, appearing to think—no, maybe he really was thinking. Still, his tone was light as he held up a finger childishly, like he’d just had a great idea. “What do you think about this? This passageway is undefended, so the intruder tried to get into the mansion through it. Then they

just happened to run into the girl and her friends, who opened the door out of curiosity...”

“They ‘just happened to’? What kind of a coincidence would that be? And it doesn’t explain why they’re missing.”

“Maybe they injured the intruder and then chased after them...?”

“You think *they* could injure anyone?” Orphen scoffed at the lord, who kept making senseless suggestions. “Especially someone who could kill Winona. Yeah, in case you hadn’t heard, Winona’s dead. Just happened. I assume you know Damian refused to revive her? You are his lord, after all.” Orphen put all the hostility he could muster into his voice, but the lord just shrugged his shoulders.

“She was a brilliant subordinate. Do you still think that I haven’t lost anything?” The lord paused, then added, “Or should I apologize for eavesdropping first?”

“Well, it’s your mansion. You can listen in on whatever you want,” Orphen said sarcastically. He found himself wondering something, so he decided to just ask. “You seem awfully calm. The intruder’s after *your* life, aren’t they?”

“I’m here with you because I sensed danger to myself. It’s safest for me to be with you, isn’t it?”

“I have no intention of protecting you,” Orphen told him plainly.

Still, the lord smiled at him, his conviction not shaken in the least. He entered the room with Orphen and gracefully indicated himself, saying quietly, “But you won’t just stand by and let me die, will you? Besides...the intruder’s movements are awfully strange.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“Not just now. Ever since earlier today. They’ve had plenty of chances to attack me, but they seem to be simply wasting hours of their time instead. I only say this because I have some idea of who they might be.”

The lord stalked closer to Orphen without hesitation. For some reason, Orphen felt it was best to let him pass—he found himself leaving the way open

for him. The lord stopped at the door to the underground passageway and peered down it, saying, “The attacker waited for their chance here. An opportunity they sought. They probably intended to sneak into the mansion. This attacker is a very patient person...”

“And someone who could murder Winona in a short time.”

“Hmm. That’s true as well. Additionally, the intruder’s goal does not seem to be my life. What do you suppose his aim is, then?”

“Did you just say ‘his’?” Orphen demanded.

The lord just crossed his arms and shrugged once more. “Should I apologize for being sexist now?”

“No...”

“The designation was correct. I did say ‘his.’ I have an idea about the intruder, remember?”

An idea? Orphen questioned, returning the lord’s calm gaze. Orphen didn’t have an idea but rather a gut feeling—the lord knew exactly who the intruder was and was concealing that information.

“Just tell me your idea, then. You’re wasting time,” Orphen reminded the lord and he nodded.

Apparently, he had no intention of tipping his hand, however. Orphen had expected that. As long as they remained only circumstantial allies, he’d figured the lord wouldn’t hand over information easily.

Ever confident, the lord said, “He’s trying to lead us into something, wouldn’t you say? It seems to me like he wishes to draw one specific person out. I would say he has business with one person in the mansion and doesn’t want anyone else to see his face... And so, I would like to propose a deal.”

The lord suddenly faced him, giving him a courteous, reserved look. “I would like you to fight this intruder off. If possible, I’d like you to eliminate him.”

“Well, I’d like to say no, but I suppose I’ll at least hear the terms of this so-called deal.”

“I’ll give you all the information you want. If you protect me, you’ll have

unlimited access to the information I and Damian have, your sister's whereabouts included. The Chaos Witch, I mean."

"So I'll be in the same position as Colgon," Orphen muttered, surprising himself with how hoarse his voice was. He hadn't been paying much attention to it, but he was aware now of the open disgust on his face. Steeling his will, Orphen asked, "You want me to fight Doppel X?"

"In exchange, you would receive the power to manipulate the Network with Damian's assistance."

"And at the same time, I'd be under his surveillance."

"You're overthinking it. Damian is but a single individual. As you know, we were not perfectly aware of Yuis's every move. As such, we have no knowledge of his current whereabouts."

The lord made his excuses, but even if there was some truth in what he said, Orphen didn't intend to believe him.

"No thanks," Orphen declared with a sweeping motion of his hand. "If that's all you wanted to say, get out of my way. If they really left through here, then I'm going after them. I don't want to waste any time."

"You don't even know whether to go left or right. It would be more logical to accept my assistance, wouldn't it?"

"I'd say it's not logical at all to let the enemy hear our footsteps right at the worst possible moment," Orphen told the lord bluntly, shoving him aside.

The lord moved aside without much resistance and Orphen pushed past him, crouching in order to jump down into the passageway. But before he did, he said, "You really sound like Damian when you talk, you know."

The lord didn't respond. As Orphen watched him from the corner of his eye, he just smiled self-assuredly.

There can't just be nothing to him. A guy like this commanded Colgon and Winona...? Orphen looked away from the man, unable to shake his suspicions about him. Just before he jumped down, he heard the man utter one last thing.

"Head right if you'd like to go after Claiomh Everlasting."

Orphen jumped down without responding. When his boots hit the cold stone floor, he bent his knees to disperse the impact. It was pretty deep. Not deep enough to make the opening above him seem small, but fairly deep. Orphen shook his head, smiling wryly to himself in the darkness.

There was nothing to him.

No... He was rejecting what the man was saying, but he was using him when it was convenient all the same. It wasn't that he trusted the man's information. Still, Orphen ran to the right after materializing his sorcerous lights.

He didn't believe the lord. He'd just determined that the man would surely tell the truth if he wanted to make use of Orphen right now.



The air in the passageway seemed drier now, possibly because she was near an exit.

Lottecia sensed as much, transferring the flame from her second torch to her third. She'd been traveling down this featureless, dried-up waterway for some time now. And it wasn't just time she was losing. She was running out of stamina as well. Running for so long in the stagnant air left her lungs feeling choked with mud.

She wiped the sweat wetting her hair with the back of her hand, sighing. *Maybe this was the wrong way...* Now that she thought about it, if someone had abducted Claiomh, that would mean they were carrying someone as they escaped. It would be odd for Lottecia to have run this far and not caught up with them.

Should I turn back? She'd used half of her torches. If she didn't turn back now, there was a chance she would be left alone in darkness. *Or should I keep going so I make it outside?*

She looked between the way she'd come and the way she was headed. Nothing she could see helped her make the decision. If this was a waterway, it should come out where the water source used to be—or a drainage outlet. Since she'd come so far, she couldn't imagine it was much farther. Instead of going back, worrying about her remaining torches, it seemed safer to her to

head outside where she could rely on moonlight.

I'm questioning myself now, she realized. *Before, I acted so quickly, without even thinking. I must have just imagined it...* She felt a little calmer after having that thought. The pressure of the darkness was still there, but she accepted it along with the relief. *Yeah... There's nothing strange about me.*

She didn't have the stamina to run anymore, so she walked, catching her breath.

Eventually, she saw a light ahead of her.

It wasn't a large or particularly bright light. She probably wouldn't have noticed it if the light of her torch were any brighter. It was the light of the sky, shining down at an angle. Lottecia hurried forward toward the moonlight.

I made it... The passageway connected directly to an exit. She headed outside and found that the sun had fully set. This side was apparently the water source—it was almost dry, but there was still a small spring, little more than a pit of mud at this point. It was just a small water source in the wasteland. She had no idea where exactly she was, but it must have been somewhere in the wastes she'd walked all around the day before.

She held her torch up to get a better look around, and...

She heard something *pop*. At the same time, a strong impact hit the torch in her left hand and it went flying out of her grasp. The flame didn't go out, but the torch fell to the ground far away from her, so the area it illuminated shrank dramatically.

Something had clearly happened, though she didn't know what. There was another *pop, pop*, like something rupturing. She almost felt like she understood what had just happened to her, but she also felt like she didn't. All she felt was a strong sense of unease. She needed to flee.

But where? The underground waterway behind her? That was the closest place she could hide.

Lottecia spun around and ran back into the passageway. She still had one torch. She had matches too, so she could light it. But if she did so, she would also be illuminated by the light.

She strained her eyes, trying to acclimate them to the moonlight. Her field of vision didn't extend very far from the passageway. Just the mud swamp a short distance from the exit, really. It was the center of a basin now. The terrain was complex, with a lot of large rocks piled up here and there. Plenty of places for a person to hide.

Were those gunshots? Did they aim at my torch?

She didn't hear the gunshots anymore. The attacker was hiding somewhere nearby and had shot at her. They might have just been warning shots—they couldn't have expected to hit her from the distance they'd fired from.

No.

Lottecia remembered what she'd seen in Urbanrama. Ed had been carrying a gun. He'd shot precisely at her feet from several meters away.

"Ed?!" she shouted. Her voice repeated, echoing off of the basin around her, but there was no response.

He didn't shoot the torch... He was still shooting afterward. He shot at me, and just happened to hit the torch... Lottecia ground her teeth and tightened her grip on the hilt of her sword.

"Ed..." she muttered the name like a curse. Her fingertips trembled against the metal of the sword. She was alone right now—and Ed likely was too. She could use her magic sword. No one would get in their way.

This is the perfect opportunity. I can't waste it.

Her heart filled with joy. Soon, impatience and anger and fear bubbled up as well, pushing the joy away and restoring balance to her emotions.

If she jumped out, he'd shoot her. She knew that. Still, Lottecia stretched her legs out, holding her sword.

She leaped out under the moonlight.

Gunshots rang out right away. Lottecia remained calm. She was aware of exactly how calm she was.

There was no need to command her sword. As long as she knew she was using it, it was fine. After all, it was already working—as long as she wasn't

wrong about that, she knew she could use it.

There was a buzz like the wings of a swarm of insects around her. The sword's blade shined white as it came out of its sheath. That harsh buzzing surrounded her. Another gunshot pierced through it. At the same time, there was a very specific sound of something hard impacting something soft.

The sound burst in what should have been empty space. The bullet must have hit her barrier. Lottecia immediately determined where it had hit. Was that another effect of the sword? Or just instinct? She didn't know, but she used the angle at which the bullet had hit the barrier to guess where her enemy was hiding.

She wheeled to face that spot and howled, "Eeed!" Feeling confident now that her sword was displaying its full functionality, she continued, "Come out! There's no point in running! Not with the range of my sword!"

"Fifty meters, I'd say. True, there's no point in running." A tall man revealed himself from behind a rock, speaking matter-of-factly. His clothes were black and dreary, and his eyes were cold. He was a seasoned killer, clad in the night itself. There was a gun in his hand. He walked forward as he loaded a new magazine into it. But he didn't hold it up, knowing that the weapon wouldn't have any effect on her. It just hung limply at his side with his right arm.

His black hair seemed to melt into his cloak, making the cloak look like it was all part of the same living creature. Lottecia felt her swollen sense of will deflating somewhat. In the darkness, her white sword was pointed at his chest, the point of its tip aimed right at his heart. He was five meters away, or maybe a little more.

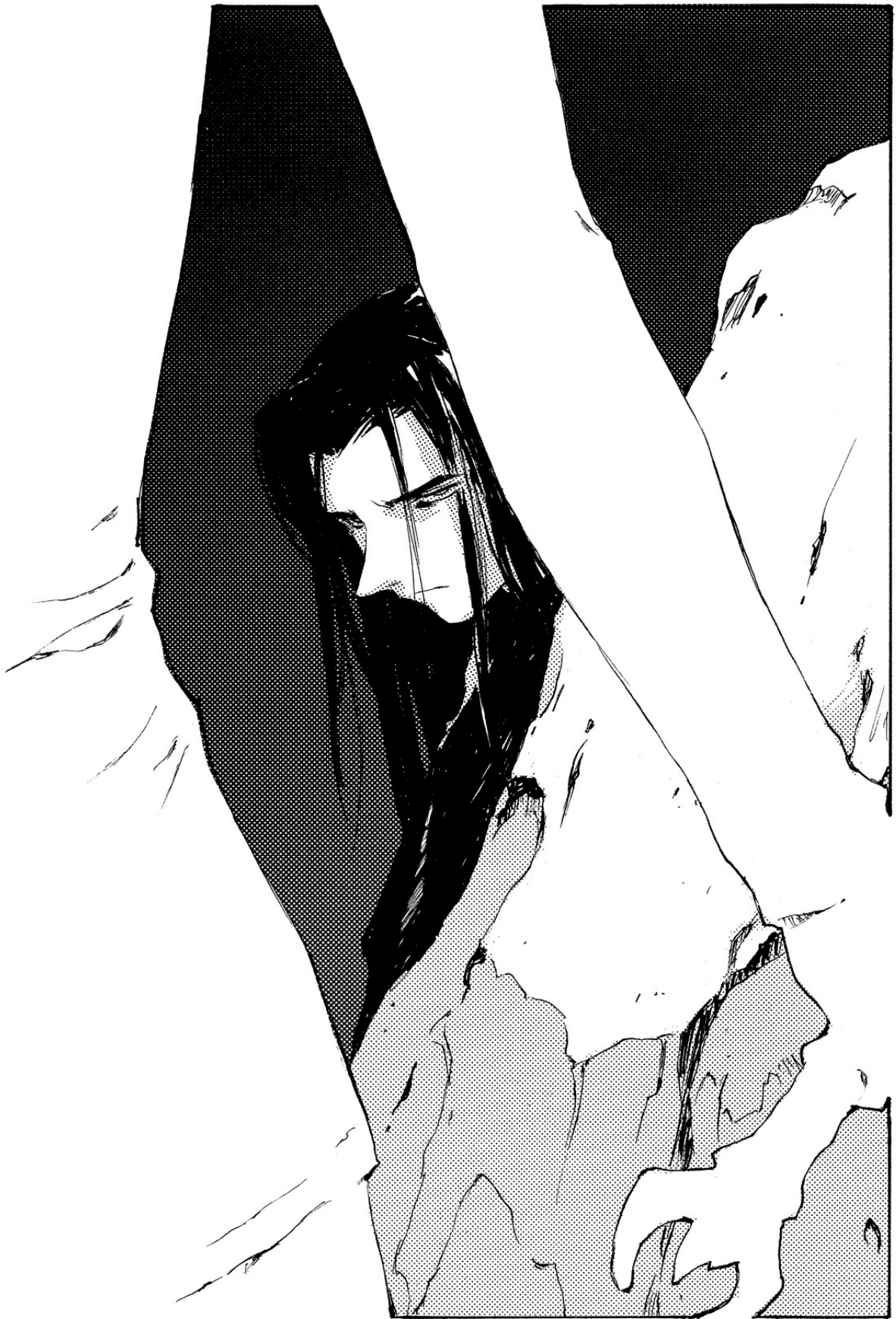
Considering her weapon's range and her enemy's, the distance was advantageous to her.

Facing off against him at that distance, Lottecia let out a breath that he wouldn't hear. "Ed..."

"The Sword of Korkt is also known as the Sword of the Insect Crest. This name comes from its function," he recited as if reading from a manual. "The blade is the sword's sheath—and the sheath, its blade. The sword is always functioning.

Its sheath is made up of 'insects' so small that the human eye cannot distinguish them, which spread out around the wielder when the sword is active. The blade functions as a focal point to control them. The insects interact to form linear barriers between them. Two insects form one barrier, three form three. Four form six. Five form ten... Incidentally, no one actually knows how many insects make up that sheath."

Lottecia glared at her enemy as he recited these facts emotionlessly and prepared to take a step toward him. If she got closer to him, Ed wouldn't be able to remain so aloof. So she thought as she moved forward...



But she didn't move. Something unseen was cautioning her. If she got closer to him, she would lose.

Why...? I should have an overwhelming advantage. But she'd lose. That certainty was unwavering.

She started breathing faster, sweating more—Ed wasn't budging, but she couldn't take her eyes off of him. All she could do was listen as he spoke.

He went on, emotionless as always, "The closer the insects are to one another, the stronger the barrier between them. The wielder in the center will be protected by the blade, so they can move even inside a barrier strong enough to repel sorcery. They can also freely control the barrier to an extent, extending it out to a distance under a hundred meters."

Ed stopped his recitation and muttered, "That's all that sword is."

"And you'll lose to it." Lottecia sneered at him. She was able to move her immobilized limbs slightly now. They were still trembling, but it was better than nothing.

The more she spoke, the more she could move, it seemed, so she continued, "You were doing something ridiculous here, huh? Everyone in your Imminent Domain or whatever is dead now. You came back after it was all over to see your lord? But you wanted to avoid seeing me, I guess. You've been trying to lure someone out all day."

"Maybe it doesn't matter what I say to someone who's gloating even though they don't have any of the facts, but you're wrong. You don't know what's really going on."

"I know. I know that I'll beat you here."

Her knees weren't shaking anymore. She steeled herself and got ready to step forward. This time, she could move...

If not for the next cold words out of Ed's mouth.

"I came to see you."



“—which is why I, the Hero of Masma—”

“—what I’m asking is—”

Orphen felt his face twitching at the sound of the voices coming from up ahead. They were still a fair distance away, and the reverberation was making it hard for him to pick out exactly what was being said... But he definitely recognized the voices.

How do I say this... Orphen thought to himself with despair. That’s never what I want to hear... In any situation, it’s bad...

He decided to stop running and just walked at a regular pace instead. He’d sent his lights far forward so that he could run, but he pulled them back to himself now.

“Why is this even happening anyway?!” He heard a shrill scream once again—this was Claiomh’s voice.

And... “There was no helping it! I’m at no fault here!” This voice was one even more familiar to him, though he hadn’t heard it in a while. “In other words, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan, is innocent! Innocent as a highwayman! Innocent as a grave robber!”

“What does that mean, brother...?”

“And since I am the Supergalactic King of Innocence and you tried to pin a crime on me, I sentence you to the saw blade after running three days to attend a relative’s wedding as punishment! If you understand, then go ahead and die by panda-striping!” His voice cut off there, probably because he was punched.

“Huh? What’s that light...? You see?” he heard Claiomh ask. She must have noticed Orphen’s lights. He heard footsteps running his way next.

“Orphen!” A blonde girl rushed into the area illuminated by his lights. He didn’t know why, but she was carrying Majic on her back. Majic appeared to be unconscious, unmoving with his face pressed against Claiomh’s shoulder. And then there were...

“Oh?! Who are you?!” The next shout came from a dwarf with a sword. Before Orphen could decide how to answer, the dwarf—Volkan—turned

around and proudly addressed the other dwarf behind him. “What do you think, Dartin? I always thought about trying this but I’ve just achieved it! I forgot about that guy.”

“Yeah, the forgetting has been pretty one-sided thus far.”

“Uhh...” For now, Orphen turned to Claiomh and asked her, “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on? What are *you* doing here, Orphen?” she asked him right back.

All of a sudden, Orphen felt like he was doing something extremely foolish. “Well, you guys were missing, so I’m looking for you...”

“Oh, really? We’re right here.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s a dead end this way. There’s a grate,” Claiomh said, indicating the area behind her—in other words, where Orphen had been headed. Moving her arm must have shifted Majic on her back. Adjusting his position, she grumbled, “This whole thing really sucked.”

For now, they could probably head back, Orphen decided. He turned around and let Claiomh get ahead of him before he asked, “So, what happened?”

“Well, we were looking for food in the kitchen. And there was this door in the floor.”

“Uh huh.” He’d guessed that much already. Orphen nodded and waited for Claiomh to continue her explanation.

She continued nonchalantly, “I thought there might be something down there, so we opened it. Lotte and Majic were into the idea too. It was pitch black inside, so I was looking down, and...” Claiomh looked puzzled at this point in the story. She continued haltingly, like she was telling a story she only vaguely remembered, “Then... Something grabbed me from below, and pulled me down... I don’t really know what happened next, but I think they hit me. I lost consciousness...and when I woke up, these two were carrying me and running.”

Since Claiomh paused, he must have thought she was turning the story over to him, and Volkan piped up. “Mm. It was a full-speed dash. I can see in the dark, after all.”

“...Really?” Orphen asked.

Dortin answered. “No, but ever since someone asked him, ‘you dwarves can see in the dark, right?’ my brother’s decided that he can. But it’s pretty impressive to have run all this way just from pretending he can see in the dark, don’t you think?”

“Uh, I dunno about that...” Orphen groaned.

“So they crashed right into the grate,” Claiomh continued. “Wham! We were knocked out for a bit after that.”

“...What about Majic?”

“He came running after us and crashed right into the same grate. He stepped on me! See? There’s a footprint. And since Majic passed out, his lights went out too.”

“I see.” Orphen rubbed his temple after hearing the whole story. There was really no point in listening to all of that. All of the lord’s warnings and *that* was what had really happened.

Orphen realized something then and raised his head. “Someone pulled you down into the hole?” he muttered, looking up at the ceiling. His sorcerous lights floated high above them, grazing the ceiling. The passageway was the same height as that hole the whole way through.

He turned around and looked at the dwarves. No matter how he measured them, it didn’t add up.

Claiomh seemed to be thinking the same thing. She frowned. “Right? What was it that grabbed me?”

With the dwarves’ height, there was no way they could reach the ceiling.

Dortin piped up, “Oh, that’d be—”

“Wait a second.” Orphen cut him off, a question forming in his mind. It was so obvious, he hadn’t even thought of it at first. His confusion increasing by the

second, he blurted out, “What are you two even doing here in the first place?!”

“Like I was saying...” Dorton began to explain.

After hearing it all, Orphen took off at full speed, the sound of him shouting obscenities trailing behind him.



How long had they been glaring at each other?

Her senses had been dull for some time now. When she noticed that the shadows underneath the man were different, she realized that the position of the moon had changed. But she could also just be imagining it. Or maybe Ed had just changed positions. Since he’d changed positions, he would launch an attack in the next moment...

Calm down, Lottecia told herself, attempting to dispel the doubts that came with her unease. Not that much time has passed. I was holding my breath... I wasn’t breathing. I can’t hold my breath forever. I bet it hasn’t even been a minute yet...

At the very least, they had only been staring at each other in silence for a short time like that. She was fairly certain, at least.

It was Ed who broke the silence. “Beedo Crewbstar... You know of him?”

“He’s my father. Of course I know about him.” Her tone was scathing. How dare Ed mock her?

But his voice was grave as he continued, “How much do you know about his identity?”

“His identity?”

The legendary swordsman Beedo Crewbstar. Her father. What more to him was there? He had fallen ill and died...

She didn’t say the words out loud, but Ed still seemed to have heard her somehow. He slowly shook his head. “Beedo Crewbstar’s magic sword. Where did he take it from? Have you ever thought about that? It was forged by the Celestials. He didn’t just find it somewhere.”

He answered his own question. “The sanctuary. He’s from the sanctuary. Naturally, we made contact with him, fearing he might be Doppel X. The assassin my lord chose to send was me. But, to make a long story short, he wasn’t Doppel X.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, feeling a lot less nervous now. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Ed was quiet for a time before finally restating, “Beedo Crewbstar was born in the dragons’ sanctuary. And he left for the outside world.”

Maybe he was just lying.

There was a chance the man in front of her was just lying to further confuse her. This situation was advantageous to her. It made sense that he’d spout whatever lies he could to turn the tables on her.

“That doesn’t make sense!” She raised her voice. “Father... He never said anything about that to me—”

But Ed just continued like he hadn’t heard her. “He was a fugitive. He fled the sanctuary with a child. No... That’s not accurate. Before he died, he told me. Beedo was really trying to escape that child.”

“Huh?”

“But he couldn’t. Apparently, he tried to kill the child as well. But he couldn’t do that either. On the verge of death, he told me. It wasn’t love, but some other power that had stopped him.”

Lottecia felt anger flaring up in her. Her body temperature rose with each word that she heard. The heat finally burst through her skin in the form of sweat, leaving behind a chilly sensation afterward.

She wasn’t sure if she was hot or cold.

“What are you saying...?”

As she suspected he would, Ed ignored her question. He went on coldly, the same way he’d spoken about the sword earlier, “The child controlled him for its protection. He couldn’t oppose the child. It drove him mad after a few years and he died. He thought it might be the curse of the sword—”

“What are you saying?!”

“He died, and the child sought a new protector. But I managed to escape. I sought to find out just what the child’s power was from a distance. Maybe Beedo was just insane. Maybe his imminent death was so devastating to him that it caused him to fear an ordinary girl.”

She stopped asking him what he was talking about. She still had no idea, but she was listening as if she could guess the words he would say next.

“When Beedo, who we expected might be Doppel X, died, my job was finished. I didn’t even report to my lord about the daughter he’d left behind. I kept her hidden from everyone else in the Imminent Domain as well. Those who found out later that Beedo Crewbstar had a daughter were awfully angry with me, to say nothing of the fact that I was married to that daughter. I was even suspected of being a spy from the sanctuary. But enough about that.”

Ed calmly lowered his hands and continued, “I kept her existence a secret and investigated as much as I could. I had to find out what that girl really was. But I never found much. It was clear that the girl herself knew nothing of her true nature. Finally, I asked my master at the Tower of Fangs, and he told me that what I described to him sounded similar to something he knew of. He said that I should be very familiar with the same thing.”

There was a dark glint in his right eye. His eyes held no emotion, and she almost felt like they were the empty sockets of the reaper as he announced her death.

His voice seemed to come not from his throat but from those empty eyes. “He said that she was the lord of the Imminent Domain.”

“Are you insane?!” Lottecia spat.

Ed nodded, though it didn’t seem to be an affirmation. “My master was the one who was insane. That’s what I thought, at least. His beloved students had scattered and he’d lost his mind in his grief. For the time being, I decided to suspect the sword, as Beedo had warned me with his dying words. I hunted Doppel X for information and what I found was that the sword was merely forged for protection by the Celestials. The things they make have a habit of producing ridiculous side effects, though. I figured the next step in my

investigation was to obtain the sword, and in attempting to do so, I killed the girl.”

For the first time, she thought she could see human emotion in Ed’s eyes. Simple confusion clouded his expression for a moment before he continued, “I don’t really understand this either. There was no reason to kill her. But before I knew it, she was lying at my feet, under my sword...”

“You don’t understand?!” Her rage pushed aside the indescribable pressure she was feeling—with the shout, Lottecia swung her sword at the man before her. Ed dodged her swing.

She swung her sword another two times, cutting the air. Ed easily dodged each swipe. It was only after making the attempt that she realized she shouldn’t be attacking him with the blade but with the sword barrier extended around her.

But before she could put that thought into practice, Ed opened his mouth again and his words stopped her in her tracks. “That was when I realized. At the time, I was being controlled by the girl. Just like Beedo was.”

What he was saying was as incomprehensible as ever, but his words had reached new heights of insanity.

Her head had cooled, but she found the blood rushing to it again as she screamed, “You’re saying I controlled you and made you kill me?!”

“That’s right. All so that I could understand you.”

She trembled at the accusation. She bit her tongue before it could get tangled and choked out, “This is ludicrous...! You would even make the reason you killed me my fault?!”

“You’re not dead,” he swiftly responded.

Lottecia threw her response back at him. “Because someone saved me!”

“No. If you were killed again here, you still wouldn’t die. I know that now. I know everything now that I’ve been to the sanctuary.” He suddenly looked away as he said this. Staring up at the night sky to his left for some reason, he continued, “In short, my master was right. You’re the same sort of existence as

the lord of the Imminent Domain. But unlike the lord, you're not aware of it, and your power is unstable... But by understanding you, I now understand the lord as well." Because he wasn't looking at her, it was almost like he was talking to himself.

"What will you...do with me?" she asked, though she had never intended to do so no matter what he said.

Still looking up at the sky, Ed said quietly, "Bring you back to the sanctuary. Even if I have to kill you. You'll come back to life anyway."

"Eeeeeedd!" Lottecia cried shrilly.

She slashed at him with all her strength. There was no pressure, no emotions, nothing. Her head was empty but for the desire to bury her blade into the body of the man in front of her, her former husband. It didn't have to be the blade. It could have been her nails, her teeth, her fingers, her fists. As long as it could get an anguished scream out of him, she didn't care what it was.

Ed didn't even try to dodge. He was still just looking up at the sky. It was like he'd forgotten that she was there. But no matter how strange she found that, it wasn't a reason for her to stop her charge. Lottecia charged forward, pure murderous rage driving her. And...

"From all places, come. To your home, where the wind carves your presence..."

She heard a strange phrase and her body was whipped to the side like she'd been thrown. She was picked up, sword barrier and all, and slid through the air. Even after losing her sense of equilibrium, Lottecia continued looking for Ed. He wasn't where he had been a second ago. As soon as she realized that, she was thrown against the ground.

She yelped at the impact, the air leaving her lungs. It was lucky she hadn't landed on any particularly sharp rocks. She stood and the magic sword was no longer in her hands.

I dropped it...? She looked around. She'd been thrown quite a distance. She was a considerable ways away from the entrance to the underground waterway now. If the sword hadn't been protecting her, she would have died instantly.

In the darkness, she couldn't easily find where the sword had gone. She needed it. Without it, she couldn't kill Ed. She shouted again and again, searching the area around her. Ed was sure to come kill her while she was looking...

No.

She found Ed and he still wasn't even looking at her. He had changed locations—sent flying the same way she had been?—and was still looking up at the sky. He held his gun up like he was waiting for something to arrive. But he wasn't pointing it upward, where he was looking. He held it, crouched, and waited. Until...

“Ha ha ha ha!” Loud laughter rang out.

At the same time, something like a shining human figure plummeted from the sky in a completely different place from where Ed was watching. That was the thing that was laughing. It shot toward Ed like a silver arrow trying to impale him...

But Ed quickly spun around like he'd been waiting for this to happen. He lifted his gun and produced several more of the bursting sounds she'd heard before. The weapon shook in Ed's hands and spewed white smoke and sparks.

The arrow stopped as if it had hit an invisible wall. It bounced backward in time with the sounds coming from Ed's gun. Eventually, Ed's weapon quieted. At the same time, the human figure regained its momentum. But by the time it pierced the spot where Ed had been standing, he'd backed off several steps and now stood somewhere else.

It was indeed a light shaped like a person that had fallen to the earth, and when it lost that light, it looked like a human being at a glance. The man slowly stood from the ground. He should have been shot several times with a gun, but he wasn't wounded at all. It was Damian Rue.

Ed was already reloading his weapon. He silently pointed it at Damian once more, but before it could activate, something strange occurred. Ed's gun suddenly fell to pieces like a prop used in a magic trick. Large and small components of the machine fell powerlessly at its wielder's feet. Damian's laughter grew louder.

Not looking particularly bothered by this turn of events, Ed dropped the remaining parts of the gun in his hand and pulled a sword out from under his cloak instead. The sword vanished before he could even raise it in a fighting stance. She was too far away to hear it, but she could tell from his expression and movements that Ed had clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“That’s pointless.” Damian laughed even louder.

And in a voice no different from his echoing laughter, he shouted, “Yuis! Yuis! Yuis—you really threw me for a loop. The attacker was you, Yuis!”

“I have no business with you at the moment.”

Ed’s voice was quiet, but Lottecia could hear it all the same. She was out of the loop all of a sudden, groaning in pain and unable to move.

It was pathetic. The feeling overwhelmed her with nausea. That monster who had butted in on them and Ed both seemed to have forgotten she was even there.

Why do I fail even at times like this?! She scolded herself, forcing herself to get up again. Enduring her dizziness, she searched for her sword.

In the meantime, their conversation continued.

“How foolish of you to chat for so long in my domain!” Damian raised his voice. “I could hear you even without the Network. What were you talking about?! What does it mean? Why did you betray us? Who is that girl?! If she’s something special, why couldn’t the lord sense it?!”

“I’m not answering. I’ll finish you off here anyway.” To her eyes, it seemed like nothing was happening, but Ed appeared to be dodging something as he answered. Like he was carefully adjusting his position to avoid some weapon she couldn’t see.

Ed wasn’t holding anything, but he had his hands up underneath his cloak. Maybe it was some sorcery pose—she didn’t know. Lottecia realized she was watching their little bout and shook her head. She had to find her sword.

Ed’s voice began again, like he’d been waiting for her to look away once more. “I doubt you’ve forgotten. You took all of my equipment, including the

Tempest. Why did it return to me?"

"That won't work on me."

"Your foolishness is pathetic, Damian."

Lottecia crawled around on the ground, listening to their conversation. When she finally stumbled upon it, her sword was lying so close by that she almost found it funny.

She picked it up and rose to her feet. Her sense of balance was still unsteady, but she could hear the conversation between the two men and she could tell that they weren't too far away from her. They were definitely in the range of the sword. She wrapped both of her hands around it and wished for the blade to be exposed.

The conversation was just background noise. Annoyed, she ignored it as it continued.

"Just so you know, the sanctuary is aware that they failed to assassinate the lord."

"Oh?"

"Actually, your little tricks have them even more convinced about the lord's existence. The sanctuary actually made good use of the time you thought you were buying. Wait until morning and it'll be the Imminent Domain that falls."

"So you've joined them instead, Yuis? That's not like you."

She didn't need to concentrate particularly hard, but if she didn't stay calm, there was no way she'd win. Lottecia caught her breath, trying not to concentrate on their conversation. She counted. One, two...

"I thought the lord was the only one who could stand against the sanctuary," she heard Ed say. "But that's not true. There's something else of the same nature."

There he goes again! Lottecia felt her eyes narrowing almost painfully. She felt a flame lighting up in the darkness of her consciousness, and at the same time, the sword bared its blade. The sound of insects buzzed around her as the magic sword activated.

Go! Kill them! Lottecia put everything she had into the feeling and wished for the death of the two absurd men. She spoke to her father's sword. *No matter how gruesome it is, I'll see it through. Father, father...*

Ed and Damian both noticed the sound of the sword starting up, but she paid no mind to them, continuing to wish instead. *If I kill him, everything he did and said will become lies!* The sword's barrier should have killed both of them, but...

The ground at Ed's feet suddenly swelled up. He leaped off of it, dodging, and before the ground where he'd landed erupted, he jumped again. He did that again and again, retreating. Eventually, he reached the rock he'd been hiding behind originally and disappeared.

She was going to pursue him. She was relying on the might of the sword to finish everything. But as she stepped forward, Lottecia realized that the other man was still there.

Damian was standing there, completely unharmed. She hadn't ordered the sword to go after him, but the power it was displaying should have blown him to bits and he was just standing there without a hair out of place instead. Lottecia's breath caught.

She heard the man mutter wearily, "Return home. Scarred beast's cage. A large ripple, a small cry." Again, something sent her flying.

This time, the force to her diaphragm was enough to prevent her from breathing completely, and Lottecia unconsciously understood—it wasn't force slamming into her. If it was, the sword would have protected her. He was making her believe in the existence of that power with some other method. There was no actual damage being done to her, but her body was refusing to listen to her.

Lottecia fell to the ground, barely managing to lift her head. Once again, the sword had left her hands. Air was leaking from her throat with a whistling noise. She couldn't move. *Why... Why does everything I do fail?*

She just wanted to take back what was stolen from her. She coughed, choking on the phlegm in her throat. She alone was unfairly rejected. That was what it felt like to her. All she wanted was to be loved a perfectly average amount. But such things weren't a part of the system of this world. *Why... Why does the*

world have so little love?

She knew she was confused, but she didn't have the self control to think rationally. She had lost the same amount of self control as she'd lost stamina. All the rational thought she'd fostered for her revenge was gone. She could barely think at all anymore, let alone think rationally.

If you were guaranteed to be rewarded for your love in this world...then she was guaranteed her revenge.

Where was there a reason not to take revenge? It was like the world's very purpose was to drive people to despair. It gave them hope, disappointed them, and then replaced that hope with despair. Who wanted this? Who was responsible for this? She grabbed at the dirt, the air around her throbbing with her anger. If she couldn't stand, she'd crawl. She pulled herself forward, barely thinking at all. Which way was she going? She didn't even care. Anywhere was fine as long as there was a victim there for her to take her anger out on.

Still, one bit of logic remained in her, forcing her to seek out her sword. It was lying in her path as she pulled herself forward. Eventually, she was close enough for her fingers to reach it when the magic sword was picked up by someone else's hand.

Once he'd picked up the sword, Damian turned away like he had no further use for her. He picked up the conversation they'd been having as he headed toward the rock where Ed was hiding. Nonchalantly, he asked, "After betraying us, will you betray the sanctuary next, Yuis?"

Lottecia wondered if Ed had already made his escape from his hiding place. She felt like she'd been writhing in pain on the ground for so long that it seemed odd for Ed to still be in the same place.

But he was still there. She heard him quietly answer, "The situation is even simpler. The sanctuary has already betrayed itself. What do you think the name Doppel X exists for?"

Damian was moving farther away from her. He wasn't facing her, so Lottecia couldn't see his expression, but she guessed that he had a smile on his face. In fact, she was sure he was smiling, mocking his enemy with it. *She* wasn't rewarded, but this monster could overwhelm his enemies and experience all

the pleasure that came with that. Lottecia naturally found herself smiling at that fact. It was ridiculous. There was no point in pushing yourself to live in a world like this.

What sort of misunderstanding is everyone laboring under? Do they think happiness really exists or something? Rather than believing in some stupid misunderstanding, there was a much easier way...something that could be expressed with a single clear word. As long as you recognized it, everything was easier.

Eventually, Damian stopped in front of the rock where Ed was hiding. Less than three steps away from the other man, he said, "You're awfully talkative today, Yuis... I've cornered you."

The silence only lasted for a heartbeat. But there *was* a beat of silence before Ed muttered back, "If I keep talking, you'll keep listening. You'll follow me all the way out to a place you can no longer return from. Do you even know what it means to no longer be able to use the Network after being so reliant on it for so long? You're the only one who *doesn't* know."

"You're overconfident—you have no way to destroy me here."

Maybe he was trying to pull Ed into the open. Damian reached his hand behind the rock, but his arm stopped there.

Lottecia felt a cool breeze brush her skin. Something had changed. Something fundamental.

"Are you sure about that?" The voice that addressed Damian from behind the rock didn't belong to Ed.

Damian stepped back. His hand was grabbing something. As he retreated, the hand he was gripping came with him. A woman's hand.

Damian let out a wordless scream of confusion. Maybe it was a prayer. Following him, a woman emerged from behind the rock. A tall woman wearing a shredded combat uniform that was covered in blood. Her long black hair, which Lottecia had thought was awfully beautiful the first time she'd seen it in the wasteland the day before, was disheveled, tossed about by the rough winds of the wastes.

She'd thought the woman was dead—she'd been told that the woman was dead. It was that black sorcerer's sister.

A fierce smile on her mud-covered face, the woman asked, "Afraid of me again, are you?"

Damian screamed. A full-blown scream he couldn't possibly pretend was anything else. After letting the fear spill from his throat, the first thing the monster did was shake the woman's hand off—she let him do so without resistance.

Freed from his contact with her, Damian tossed the sword aside and leaped up into the air, no longer concerned with appearances. He became a line of light and vanished into the night sky in the opposite of the way he'd appeared.

The woman didn't follow him—well, obviously, she couldn't chase him into the sky, but her eyes didn't even follow him as he made his escape. As she staggered forward on unstable legs, there was no trace of the demonic expression she'd worn on her face a moment before. The only thing there was a tired woman. A tired, wounded woman.

Just the same as her.

Lottecia finally remembered her name. As the memories returned to her, they seemed to replace the sense of hopelessness she was feeling. It disappeared without a trace, replaced by that name: Leticia. Lottecia cried watching her. She didn't know why, but she cried all the same.

Leticia took a few steps forward and stopped. Ed followed her a moment later. Leticia turned around, sensing his approach. They just stared at each other for a time, not exchanging any words.

Eventually, Ed broke the silence. "Are you going to fight me, Leticia?"

"I'd win, Colgon. I won't lose to you."

She *did* intend to fight him—at least, that's what Lottecia thought, looking at her expression. She could tell at a glance that the woman was furious, though she didn't know what it was she was mad about.

No... She did know. Lottecia looked at Leticia with desperate understanding.

She sympathized with her. She was mad about Ed's villainy.

Maybe she'll help me... Help me...

But Leticia shook her head powerlessly instead. "No. You should go. It's over here. I appreciate your assistance."

"I got some equipment out of this. It was a fair trade," muttered Ed. He looked down at the scrap metal scattered on the ground in front of him. "I can't use the Tempest anymore, but...my other equipment still has its uses."

"I see," Leticia replied bluntly.

"I was surprised when you appeared behind me like that," Ed said comfortably.

Leticia's tone was much colder. "I need a few tricks of my own up my sleeve to get by these days."

Ed lowered his voice, all the emotion leaving it. "I suppose we'll meet next at the sanctuary."

"Shouldn't be too long now," she responded, stepping aside.

She's stepping aside...? Why had Lottecia thought that? She suddenly realized their positions. The woman was the only thing in between her and Ed. If she stepped aside...

Ed paced slowly toward her, picking up her magic sword on the way.

You're not...? Still on the ground, Lottecia looked up desperately at the woman. She wasn't helping her? Her husband was abusing her. She needed help.

It seemed the woman wasn't completely oblivious to her pleas. She pursed her lips, frowning at Lottecia for a moment before telling her with a sigh, "Go with him... You'll be safe with him. For now, that is."

"I don't want to go. I don't want to go with him," Lottecia groaned feebly. She had almost forgotten the feeling, but it revived inside her now—an overwhelming emptiness seemed to fill her chest to bursting.

Ed was approaching at his own pace, oblivious to their exchange.

Watching him pass by, the woman nodded. “I think I’d say the same thing if I were you. But I don’t have the strength to fight for you right now...” She hunched over. It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but it looked like the blood was rapidly draining from her face. Slowly...very slowly, Leticia murmured, “I don’t have the kind of power to heal a fatal wound yet. All I can do is stop it from progressing. I can only ever do things halfway... Hurry... Azalie... You have to hurry or...I’ll die...”

The woman collapsed on the spot, holding her stomach.



“You’re late,” said the man who suddenly appeared in the darkness.

Orphen sat in a chair with his chin in his hand, only his eyes pointed toward the man. “Well, I didn’t know where I was supposed to be going. I figured if I waited here, you’d come back eventually. Didn’t think I’d make it in time if I ran back to where Colgon was.”

“How much do you know?”

“You’re direct when you’re asking the questions. That’s rather selfish of you, don’t you think?” Orphen leaned back in the chair as he taunted the man, standing when he was finished. He may have called it darkness, but there was moonlight streaking into the room from the window, same as the day before. Into the office of the lord of the Imminent Domain.

Everything looked the same as it had the night before. The mansion was dead silent. Of course it was, since it was empty of anyone but the man who had just entered the room and Orphen. There was a smell like dry flour, but faintly sweet. It was bloodlust. A violent premonition that cut through the quiet night. The office wasn’t trashed. It was actually tidy. That was the only thing different from the day before.

The lord was, once again, collapsed on the floor.

The man who’d entered the room, without opening either the door or the windows—the white sorcerer, Damian Rue—asked as if to confirm with Orphen, “Did you kill him?”

“Of course not. I felt bad about it, but he kinda baited me into getting back at

him, so I just knocked him out for a bit.” Orphen measured the space between him and the white sorcerer as he spoke.

Damian hadn’t moved since entering the room. He looked uncharacteristically haggard, like he was no longer able to put on that sickeningly smug attitude. He even looked slightly out of breath, as ridiculous as that thought was. Damian was a spirit—he didn’t breathe.

Watching Damian, Orphen asked, “So, why doesn’t he disappear?”

Damian didn’t answer. Orphen thought maybe he was just going to ignore him, but after a few seconds of deliberating, he seemed to give in. “Normally, the influence ghost information has is very susceptible to physical interference. Damage them and they disappear. He is a special case, and continues to exist, ignoring even death... His existence surpasses simple substance. The ideal form, in other words.”

“I never said he was a ghost,” Orphen pointed out. He hadn’t so much tricked Damian into revealing anything so much as the man had just started to confess. Stopping him from going into the technical details, Orphen simply waited for the man to continue.

The white sorcerer turned his clouded eyes to Orphen, though the movement was pointless for a spirit like him. “Where are the others?”

Orphen frowned, unsure of what he was referring to. Claiomh and the rest, he assumed. “I dunno. I figure they’ll be back soon enough.” No matter how much they hurried, it would still take them some time to follow Orphen all the way back here. There was plenty of time for the conversation he wanted to have.

“That’s right,” Damian said, a note of desperation in his voice. “The lord of the Imminent Domain is a ghost.” He began to gesture as he spoke, unable to conceal his agitation. “He’s not a manifestation of a dead person, though—he’s a constructed personality, one that never naturally existed. An artificial existence born of the Network, with roots in the Network, his existence permeating the Network itself. As you experienced a few days ago, the ghost phenomenon can replicate information perfectly. That process is what produces the lord of the Imminent Domain. I input information into the Network, which analyzes it and outputs solutions. Its processing speed surpasses the speed of

reality sometimes, which allows it to glimpse the future. This means his plans are always the right ones, as if reality itself adapts to his will.”

“So that’s how you’re cheating. Your power was behind it all.” Orphen leaped over the fallen lord and moved forward, his feet once again hitting the floor. He thought his feet would make a sound, but they didn’t.

Damian didn’t move. He didn’t flee. Instead, he stated plainly, “That’s right... It is the culmination of my power.” He indicated his chest, his voice prideful. The white sorcerer’s voice wasn’t mere audio and Orphen felt it with both his eardrums and his skin. It wasn’t just his voice shaking the air, but something else too—only something like anger could do that.

“What’s most wonderful is the influence on reality the lord’s existence has... He can control people without using mental dominion. The energy I would consume trying to do the same thing...”

“I see.” Orphen acknowledged that fact quietly. As soon as he absorbed the words, they seemed to boil the emotions inside him—a bitter anguish bubbled up in him, shriveling up his tongue. The white sorcerer had just said something incredibly easy to understand. So easy it almost made him burst out laughing. Orphen’s face cracked into a sly grin.

The thing Damian Rue had been so concerned about was his energy usage. The thought twisted his stomach up.

“Worthless... Worthless!” he shouted. “Irgitte and Seek died for something like that?! Winona too—”

“A falsehood made manifest in perfect form. You think that’s worth nothing? You yourself have long interacted with a very similar existence.”

“What?” Orphen asked him.

Damian continued, his words coming more rapidly now. “It’s odd for a man like him to really exist... An all-powerful man, a man who can do anything, the ideal human being. Something is strange about it. You must have thought something similar before. Studying under such a man, those thoughts must have occurred to you.”

Orphen froze when he understood what the white sorcerer was implying. He

was one step from removing the man's head from his body, but he could no longer move forward.

Understanding that his words were keeping Orphen at bay, Damian continued to shout, "Maybe he wasn't a complete falsehood—at the very least, he was a living human being two hundred years ago. But the process of losing his body and being reconstructed by the Network is not so different. No, since his flesh-and-blood body was reconstructed by the Network as well, Childman Powderfield's existence was inferior to that of a ghost. Because of that, he died as a mere mortal. Isn't that right?" He paused. "Well? Do you still think the lord's existence is worthless?"

Seizing a moment's opportunity, Damian vanished into thin air, leaving behind only one more shout. "If you think it so worthless, then try defeating this!"

In the place where the white sorcerer had vanished, another figure appeared. A tall, middle-aged man, just like Orphen had been expecting.

No, he was still a young adult, and with a face all too familiar to Orphen, directing a harsh gaze his way. His hair was left to grow out, tied back behind his head. His facial hair, however, was always tidily shaved. He was a strange man, considered eccentric even by his fellows at the Tower.

Master Childman Powderfield stood there in his athletic gear. He was posed naturally, not adopting any exaggerated combat stance. But this natural position *was* his combat stance. He was the strongest, most powerful sorcerer on the continent. An invincible caster, who would never lose.

Or at least his ghost.

Orphen leaped forward, attacking the inner arms of his master as the man moved to intercept him. He placed his fist at the man's side and planted his feet as he shouted with the blow. When his fist thrust forward, he felt more than enough the sensation of the man's organs rupturing from his attack.

"You can't win." His master's ghost had disappeared by the time he spoke. "From the beginning to the end, Master was just an imperfect human being. He wasn't a ghost. We were the ones who treated him like he was perfect—now, I know the limits of Master's strength. That's why I'm his successor. Damian Rue. You rely on the past as your weapon, and it's no match for me."

He was no longer in the room, but Orphen knew his enemy was still listening, so he whispered to him, “Let me rephrase myself. It’s not my master or your lord who are worthless. It’s you.”

He couldn’t see the man, but he could feel his presence. Damian hadn’t fled the mansion. Orphen turned to the door and kicked it open with no hesitation.

He leaped out into the hallway and searched for his enemy. *An enemy I can’t defeat? Tish was wrong.* Orphen drew his shortsword from its steel sheath. The silver blade seemed to melt into the darkness, its luster lightless, almost wet. *I’m the only one who can defeat him!*

“You have no way to defeat me!” His voice alone echoed through the mansion, the rest of him still unseen.

Several soldiers awaited Orphen when he emerged in the hallway. Three of them. They rushed him with knives small enough to utilize indoors. Orphen picked out the fastest one and sank down, his heel sliding across the floor. When he was low enough that he was almost lying down, he brought his blade up.

There was a scream and one of the ghosts disappeared. Orphen escaped through the gap he left and got behind the other two, turning around with his back against the wall. The remaining pair turned around to face him as well. Orphen swiftly threw the shortsword in his right hand and a throwing knife he’d unsheathed with his left at the same time—both blades pierced their targets’ throats and embedded themselves in the wall behind them. The ghosts faded into the darkness and vanished.

“I suppose that’s true. But I don’t need a way to defeat you.” He retrieved the blades in the wall and, holding them, addressed the darkness. “You can’t escape me. You can’t remove me. You can’t even get in my way. Even trying wears you down. As a spirit, the moment you become worthless, you’re destroyed! Only living beings can keep going for no reason beyond having been born!”

“I...am not weak!” the voice argued.

Orphen sneered, not hearing it. “But you will weaken. Rapidly.”

He sensed a presence and turned. Down a hall, a large soldier was barreling at

him, feet stomping on the floor. He sensed another soldier approaching soundlessly at the same time from the opposite direction.

Normally, this would be a dangerous situation, but Orphen just thrust his arms out and shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

He released his spell and a line of pure white light ripped through the darkness of the hallway. The large soldier might have been Winona’s ghost, but he let it disappear in a whirl of impact without confirming that.

Turning his back to the destroyed hallway, he took out the young man coming at him with one throwing knife.

He was prepared for another enemy to come at him, but all he was met with was silence. Orphen held up his shortsword and said, “Your attacks are too simple. Even your ghosts are sloppy. The anti-bandit force of the dispatch police shouldn’t go down so fast. At least, the real ones I fought in the past didn’t!”

“Shut up. You’re nothing but a pawn—”

“Yeah, that’s right. But even a pawn still has a presence on the board.” He felt his mind sharpening with each word, so he kept talking, keeping the momentum going. He could viscerally feel their power dynamics flipping. Damian was getting weaker. “Do you have any pieces left to contest me? Winona’s dead. Colgon left. You have nothing.”

“I do...” There was no fear in Damian’s voice.

Orphen stopped. He’d been expecting this. He knew this was one of the plays Damian had left to make.

He had no tricks. No element of surprise. The ghost simply appeared suddenly at the end of the hall. Deep in the darkness, standing darker than his surroundings. A man in jet black clothes, round hat hiding half of his face. His eyes looking up toward Orphen from under the rim of his hat were strangely round.

It was the man in the priest’s robes.

Jack Frisbee...? Orphen recalled the name that the lord had told him.

The huge man took a heavy but soundless step forward.

This distance... Orphen got into a stance without waiting. He weaved a spell and released it. There was more than enough distance between them. He could defeat the man easily using his sorcery.

Or so he thought.

“I can’t directly harm you, no.” He heard Damian’s voice behind him. Felt something touch his back. Nothing actually touched him, he assumed, but the feeling of Damian’s mental dominion seemed to freeze his spine. “But I can definitely get in your way!”



Orphen's composition fizzled. The white sorcerer's mental dominion began to encroach further into his mind, but Orphen struggled against it with all his might. He threw off his enemy's will and maintained control over his mind.

It took only a moment, but that was enough time for the man in the priest's robes to close the distance between them. He had no time to concentrate on his sorcery anymore. Orphen jumped back—the man was already right before his eyes. He had an extremely subtle stance. His destructive punches required only a tiny step forward. The man called it the Demolishing Fist, if Orphen recalled correctly.

The hallway was too narrow to dodge to the side. But if he dodged backward, he knew he wouldn't escape the man with the speed at which he advanced. The man in the priest's robes, however, was late to pursue him. He hesitated for only the span of a blink, but when Orphen leaped back, he saw the man's fist graze his shortsword, which he'd left behind when he fled.

Orphen drew his gun.

He drew the slide back and cocked the hammer. He didn't have time to stand still, to hold it with both hands, or to align his aim, and he didn't know if the bullet would actually fire when he pulled the trigger. Even if everything went well, there wasn't a high chance that the bullet would actually hit its target. The opportunity Jack Frisbee had given him was only a slim one.

Still...

There's no need to actually use this thing.

With a wordless shout, Orphen slammed the gun down as the man charged toward him once again. Jack didn't dodge—there was nothing to dodge, since Orphen had thrown the gun at the floor.

The gun hit the wooden floor and bounced with a dull sound, and just like he'd expected it to, it went off.

Where would the misfired bullet go? No one could predict something like that. He wasn't just hoping he'd get lucky and it would hit his opponent—as long as the man in the priest's robes stopped, that was good enough for Orphen.

...Yet it seemed luck was with him. Jack Frisbee's ghost was destroyed. The bullet must have hit him.

Of course, it was only a ghost that he'd vanquished.

There'll be another one... How will I get through that?

Orphen took out the rest of his hidden throwing knives and looked cautiously to his left and right. He was assuming Damian would produce his next ghost—likely a ghost of the same man in the priest's robes—immediately.

The more he endured, the more he dodged his adversaries' attacks, the weaker Damian should be getting. It probably wouldn't actually be that rapid, but as a spirit, Damian was destined for destruction one day. The only reason Damian had remained for so long without fading away was because of the immense amount of power he had. But as soon as his stores ran dry, he would return to the natural state of a spirit—nothingness.

I don't know how long it will take, but... I can do this. My enemies are all ghosts. They're not the real thing.

His gun was still on the floor. Miraculously, it hadn't broken from the accidental discharge. Of course, he still didn't exactly want to pick it up and try to fire it again. Still holding the knives in his hands, Orphen waited and felt time pass by and the bloodlust fade as it did.

Eventually, he heard footsteps and turned around. There was a scream.

"Aaah!" Claiomh had come up the stairs. Her eyes were wide and her hand was covering her mouth. She must have been surprised by the destroyed hallway and the knives in Orphen's hands. He didn't know where she'd found it, but she was carrying a lit candlestick.

In the swaying light of the flame, she asked, "Wh-What's going on? What happened?"

Is she a ghost...? Considering Damian's personality, there was a good chance he would use a trick like that. Orphen pretended he was putting his knives away and kept them concealed in his hands instead as he relaxed his stance.

Claiomh ran over to him. He realized now that he could sense other presences

in the mansion. All the stomping around was probably the two dwarves. They seemed to be running through the halls. He guessed they'd decided the mansion was deserted so they were rummaging through it.

Claiomh arrived right in front of him and held out her light. "Orphen...?"

"Yeah..." Orphen muttered, confused. Claiomh was definitely not a ghost.

Did Damian flee?

The next moment, he heard a scream.



Why why why why why?! Why can't I beat him?!

On top of the mansion in the Imminent Domain, Damian Rue struggled to accept the baffling reality he found himself faced with. Even if he couldn't use the Network, his vision didn't require light and he had a grasp on the entire interior of the mansion.

He should have finished the boy off. It should have been a sure thing. That black sorcerer couldn't win against Jack Frisbee. Even before that, he shouldn't have been able to win against the personification of his own ideals, the ghost of Childman Powderfield. Not as long as that wily little brat's will didn't supersede his ideals.

There's no way... No one could have willpower like that. Not unless they're a child who doesn't know anything. He should have had setbacks. He should know failure. He should have acceptance of his own limits. He should know despair...

If he knew despair, he would have no hope.

Because there's nothing past despair.

There should be no power that compares to that of despair for living beings.

They were nothing but meat that would one day rot. Warm fluids and squirming tendons. Just an amalgamation of those things. Things with limits, things that *should* have limits.

For something like that to move forward without giving up... It's impossible!

They were destined for destruction.

They were destined for death.

The fate of the world isn't in the hands of something like that. That's why the gods given flesh were destroyed by the Demon King. The world doesn't exist for living things. Living things are a mistake! Flesh should be destroyed before the end of the world! Leaving only spirit behind—just precious spirit.

Maybe ghosts wouldn't work on that black sorcerer anymore, Damian admitted with a shiver. But directly controlling him with mental dominion might be even more difficult than using ghosts. There was nothing he could do as a spirit that could affect physical matter. He had no weapons to use against the supreme physical being.

Under the moon.

In the bright moonlight.

One thought popped into his mind.

Am I...powerless?

There was a voice that answered him too.

"You've gotten awfully weak, haven't you?"

Of course, it wasn't a natural voice. Though Damian was standing in the cold wind, he didn't feel it against his skin, but this voice, which he heard from deep inside him, somewhere he couldn't possibly escape from, made him shiver. A panic he absolutely could not feel as the supreme spirit being shook him to his core.

"There's no time. I'll be taking it all now."

He felt something strange. With a gasp, he held his hands up at the moon.

This, too, was a meaningless action. His sight did not require light. He didn't have the presence of mind to remember that, however, as he screamed. The shape of his arms had changed. He felt an absurd chill in his right arm. A piercing cold. He couldn't feel anything from that arm. He was going numb right where that unpleasant woman had grabbed him. The arm was already no longer his own. Damian understood at that moment. His right arm alone was now that of a woman's.

“My...!” The cold he’d felt in his arm was spreading through the rest of his body now.

He felt a fierce sense of loss; his existence was being eroded away. He screamed. His dying scream resounded through the Imminent Domain.

“You intend to...steal all the power...I possess?! Not erase me?!” That was the end.

She was standing there quietly. Looking up at the moon.

“I’m all ready now...” Azalie murmured, looking down at herself. Not her physical body. Her spirit form. She hadn’t done it on purpose, but she was wearing the combat gear she’d had on when she exited the barrier in Kimluck. Of course, there was no real meaning in what form her appearance took.

She moved her head from side to side, listing off the things she had to do next. Her time was limited, but she should have more than enough of it. First, she had to help Leticia, who was now powerless without her assistance. She shouldn’t be dead yet.

Then...

She looked in that direction. Far in the distance was Fenrir’s Forest.

Krylancelo... Will you come? Will you take my message seriously and come to see me?

If he came...what reason would he come for? If she waited here, maybe her brother would come up into the sky to tell her...

With that pointless thought, Azalie left the Imminent Domain behind her now that she no longer had any use for it.

It was still far from dawn.

She could see the innumerable enormous black bodies with all their shining green eyes moving soundlessly in the darkness, surrounding the mansion that was wrapped in the veil of night. In time, they had tightened their circle around the mansion. While the foolish Damian had sealed the Network away himself.

Taking no further action, she simply passed them by.

Epilogue

It was a beautiful memory.

She had never remembered clearly where the scenery was from, but she did now. She now knew exactly how certain her own memories were and hung her head with the knowledge. Had she wanted to come back here? Is that why she had held on to the memory so strongly?

There was a lake. She knew that. It was deep inside a forest, and the trees blocked any wind from getting through. The sunlight was faint too, giving the chilly surface of the lake a clear, transparent shine.

She had left there for the outside world.

Leaving that pure realm for the filthy outside world.

It was undoubtedly a foolish choice. Even if she hadn't made that choice herself—no, *had* she made it? The evil man who'd brought her back here had said so. The man was next to her now, but he might as well not exist in this scenery. Since it was her memory...the man wasn't there.

The place inside her memories was quiet. She could hear her ears ringing, it was so silent.

The quiet was absolute. No filthy words would ever pass someone's lips here.

There were no thoughts in her head.

Instead, pure emotion filled her heart, transparent as the lake water's surface.

It was a beautiful memory, but...

The scenery didn't quite match up with her memory.

In fact, most of it was changed brutally, beyond recognition.

The lake was buried by sand. Even in Nashwater, sometimes the sand would blow down from Kimluck. But this was the first time she'd seen so much of it at

once. The sand of destruction, said to bring death to those who breathed in too much of it. It whirled in the air, threatening to bury even her memories in ruin.

In that whirling sand was a woman. Floating in the air, still.

The floating woman had her hands clasped in front of her as if in prayer.

Her thin fingers were interlaced.

Her eyes were closed. Her black hair was raised because it was being pulled from above her. Pulled by the hole in the sky above her.

She was like a butterfly trapped in a spider's web—or like the spider itself encamped in its web.

She was beautiful, but not beautiful like a living being. She was just so pure, glossy, cold. Like a snow sculpture, naturally formed. Not something formed by human hands. But not something simple nature could form either.

The sand blew with her at its center. The woman was perfectly still, as if having her hair caught by the void prevented her from moving.

This was the sanctuary. The center of everything.

Lottecia looked up at it and tears spilled from her eyes.

For some reason, she knew. It was destruction.

Afterword

Ahh.

Slithering.

I want to live slithering. How wonderful would it be to have no arms and legs and slither around soundlessly through gaps in things.

So, this is the afterword where I make the sort of fanciful wish everyone finds themselves making on the regular. It'll come true even if you don't see a shooting star! How optimistic... Akita here.

It's volume 18. Volume 18. Finally volume 18. Seems kind of like a good stopping point but also kind of a random number.

This has nothing to do with anything, but I bought some lottery tickets. It was the first time in my life I ever bought any. One entry was 200 yen and you can get a sheet of five entries, so I bought 1,000 yen worth of 'em, sir.

I'll choose numbers at random. That's what I did. Didn't win a thing doing that, though...

I thought I was choosing at random, but I found when I looked at it afterward that I picked 8 and 16 and 24 a lot. And now that I've written this much, it really doesn't have anything to do with volume 18, does it? Well, it doesn't really matter. Eight is a lucky number, so it's fine. Feels like this afterword is a little hyper, but I'm sick with a cold right now, so I don't care. Sorry.

I really think health is important. I mean, there's no way to cure a cold other than rest, right? It's such a pain. Can't you do something about this, Gregory? Who's Gregory? I don't know anyone like that.

...Yeah, I really don't have the confidence to keep this up the whole time, so let me start over again.

We're at the end of volume 18 now. First, let me thank all the readers who

have stuck with me all this time. I realized this while proofreading, but the serial number of this book is 40-35. That means it's the 35th book of the 40th author (is that right?) at Fujimi Fantasia. Guess I snuck 35 books out, huh? Snuck? If it's just Orphen books, this is number 30 exactly. Well, there's not really anything for making it to that number, but I just thought I'd mention that.

When was it that I started the series... Eight years ago? Ack.

I've done this calculation before, but 30 books in eight years means just under four books a year. Guess that's not very impressive. If I consider the books in my other series, it'd be a little more than four books a year. I really haven't written as much as I thought.

But eight years have passed, huh? It hasn't happened yet while I'm writing this afterword, but by the time the book comes out, I'll be twenty-nine.

No wonder I'm getting old... I really feel it lately.

Wait, have I done this before already? Ugh...

Eight years means, you know... Kids who were in elementary school eight years ago are already adults now, tying ropes to their legs and leaping off watchtowers and going to hunt lions with their bare hands. So many things happened in the last eight years, right? Painful things, sad things, meetings, partings, meetings again.

Then parting again. Once again meeting. Finally parting. Yet again meeting. How to say this...sick-of-it parting. But then meeting again. If it happens this many times, that's stalking, man. No, I will not elaborate.

I forgot what I was talking about, but it's fine. Having the flu and a cold at the same time is the worst. It brings to mind all sorts of technical terms I normally never think about. Like speculative precomputation. I don't think I'll ever use that again, honestly.

Now that I think about it, eight years (oh, we're back on topic) really passed in a flash... I'd like to say so, anyway. In reality, I still feel like it's a long time.

I wonder which it is. It sort of feels like not much has actually changed in the world even though eight years have passed.

How much have individuals changed in eight years? How much will they change?

Have I changed at all?

Even if I want to figure it out now, it's not like I've kept something so convenient as a diary or anything like that.

Maybe eight years ago today I was sick with a cold just like I am now. Maybe I was groaning and moaning as I wrote an afterword... Well, probably not.

I have no memories of the time.

So instead, I took out something I wrote eight years ago.

In other words, the first volume of this series.

I fearfully opened it up and peered into it.

And I realized.

...Maybe I'm not really improving at all...

Well, it's fine. It's fine, right? People don't grow in just eight years. Hee hee.

Well, it's getting a little bleak now, so I think I'll stop teasing myself and consider something a little happier.

Is there something, though...

Lately, my life's been work, work, and more work, so I don't really have anything to talk about.

But it's at a time like this that my editor this time has specified that my afterword be eight pages.

"We've got plenty of space, so you can write fifteen pages if you want to."

Uuugh... Sob, sob.

Oh, that's right. I've got something.

This is a really strange story.

Sometimes, you know, I'll search through my manuscript. For certain words or whatever.

Most of the time, I have a pretty good idea about what I wrote and where without searching, so it doesn't happen all that often, but.

Sometimes, I do it.

So when I did it this time.

In the field where I was searching, it had the history from my last search there too.

And it said "Michael."

...I mean, I don't *remember* searching for that.

I don't remember ever writing "Michael" in my manuscript either.

I think it must be the curse of the Knight Foundation, right? What do you think?

Anyway, it's getting to be that time, huh? By the time the book's out, the Olympics will be over, so it'll be the World Cup, I guess.

I don't really know that much about soccer, though. But I don't hate it or anything, so I'll watch the World Cup. There's something I'm curious about before it starts, though.

A while ago, on the news, I saw this thing about "training to combat hooliganism." It wasn't in Japan. This anti-hooligan force. There was this shot of a bunch of guys wearing black like special forces coming out of a helicopter with machine guns.

...

You're gonna shoot them?!

Not quite sure what to say about that... Are hooligans really that scary?

That shot had quite an impact on me. I'm not really sure if I *should* be looking forward to the World Cup anymore. Maybe they should call it the Day of Tragedy or something. I mean, I had a dream about it the other night. Am I worrying too much? The mystery only deepens.

Maybe that news footage was just an illusion I saw in my youth. Tell me,

Maetel. Speaking of Maetel, what's this white Maetel toy I got in a snack? I really think it's too white... I've seen the 999 TV show and movies and I don't remember ever seeing a white Maetel like this. I watched them when I was a kid though, so maybe I just don't remember. Anyway, this is a mystery too. Makes me think of Shiroi Koibito Black. I like the black ones better, personally.

Anyway. I combined a bloody tragedy with a snack from Hokkaido for my last conversation topic, and I think that about does it for this book. Not really a competent subject change at all, was it?

Well, let's meet again at the end of the next book!

Yoshinobu Akita, February 2002











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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 18

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