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5. ERASE MY PAST, ASSASSIN!

Dortin glanced at his brother, then gave a deep, drawn out sigh before launching into a long explanation.

“Once a year I try to live a bit large, you know? Because I know I’m about to get real hungry over the next few months, and I’m ready for it, so I ordered some of the sugar cake. While I was in the bathroom, two pieces of it were already gone and devoured! Devoured all the way down to all the sugar in the sugar pot that was so thoughtfully provided on the table! And moreover, at one of the other tables there was a brawl that wasn’t even over yet, and over half of the damn shop was already a mess! That other guy at the other table is a complete stranger.”

“Whaaat do you mean, a complete stranger?! Blood ties are different, ain’t they? Listen, little brother, joy and sorrow is just that! Joy, and sorrow! So I took it on myself to lessen the pain, the sorrow that was both coming to us just a bit, and by doing that, I have doubled our joy!”

“Don’t you mean, you multiplied our sorrow and then pushed all of it on me?”

“Don’t think that way, don’t think so meanly! Me, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan, is telling you that things could be far worse, and there are people far more miserable in the world than you, little brother!”

The dwarf hanging from the waiter’s fist, Volkan, flapped his arms in big, sweeping motions, causing a scene, and shouted his words thus. Had he been any closer to his younger brother, Dortin would’ve punched him twice, or three times. But the waiter’s grip on his brother’s neck was strong, and he wouldn’t let go.

The waiter’s expression hadn’t shifted, hadn’t changed in the least. Dortin would’ve loved to commit this moment to stone, sculpt it into a scene where his older brother was being held dangling in midair by his neck by the waiter, but as he thought this, Dortin started to grumble.

“Little brother, little brother. Stop emphasizing that. We’re strangers, after all.”

“Little brother, little brother, little brother. I thought you’d say that, but I am indeed your older brother.”

“Didn’t I just tell you to knock it off with the emphasis?!”

“Well, anyway.”

And with that, suddenly, the waiter opened his mouth. Volkan and Dortin shut their own with a slap. They could both see the waiter’s white polo shirt move as his pecs twitched under his shirt. To the end, he was cheerful about things, and spoke.

“I don’t care if he’s a stranger or not. I need both of you to help me clean up this shop, you idiots.”

“Sure...”

Limply, Dortin bowed his head. And—

Clang...

With the ringing of a small bell attached, the door opened. When they turned around, the white-painted wooden door swung wide, and who stepped into the wrecked store but a sole young boy.

“Huuuh?” screamed the boy with pulled-back black hair.

He had long hair that spilled down his back, and because of that, he looked a bit like a girl. As if life were playing a joke on him, he had a delicate, feminine face. The only way Dortin figured out he was a boy was by how he was dressed and his distressingly skinny frame.

He seemed to be in his teens, perhaps about 15 years old. He was dressed in black from head to toe, and the aura about him matched his clothing. It seemed to be someone that Dortin knew by association.

“A *black sorcerer...*” Dortin screamed inside of his own mind. In reality, most of the people around town were black sorcerers. However, there were few as unabashed about it as this young boy. There weren’t really many around that were as blatant about their association with sorcery as this boy was.

The boy looked toward the waiter and said, as if quite startled, “What in the world happened here, Phillip?”

“Oh, it’s just you, Tiffes? I couldn’t tell it was you with that getup you have on.”

Phillip and Tiffes, Dortin's brain helpfully supplied after digging for more information. He kept glancing between them, observing them.

To a certain degree, one needed to be fit to be a sorcerer, but with how thin the boy was, Dortin wondered if he was doing okay. Another thing was, incidentally, most black sorcerers had short hair. Dortin finally concluded that this boy, Tiffes, was just a student playing dress-up, dressing as if he were a black sorcerer.

Though that may not be the case... He added, in his head.

Dortin was insecure about himself, about how he looked. It might be better to say that as a black sorcerer, he was pretty malnourished. Regardless, that would've been Tiffes's line in this argument, had they been speaking aloud. The proof was right in front of him.

Tiffes stroked his black clothes. As if embarrassed, he said, "I had a bit of an errand to do that took me to the Tower of Fangs. So I had to dress the part, which would be this whole outfit."

"An errand?" Phillip asked in reply.

Tiffes shrugged, and replied thus, "It's no big deal, really. I went as my teacher's proxy. She went to go pick up an old friend that's in town to see her, so I was just running errands in her place."

"Teacher... Ah, you mean Tish, huh? An old friend, you say?" Phillip's tone had a strange feeling to it, and when Dortin looked up, and looked at Phillip's face, he saw the man's smile disappear.

Phillip raised a brow quizzically, and continued muttering to himself.

"Just wish this wasn't so questionable..."

"What?" Tiffes replied.

Phillip smiled and laughed, waving his concern off.

"No, it's just me talking to myself and being concerned for her. She's a big shot now, isn't she?"

"My teacher, you mean? I don't particularly think so. We're in a crisis and here she is pulling out old photos and sighing over them dramatically," Tiffes

said.

After that comment, Tiffes stopped himself from saying anything further. As if just realizing the store was wrecked all over again, he looked around and said, “So you didn’t tell me, just what in the world happened here?”

“Those two over there trashed the place,” Phillip said with a deep sigh.

“When you say those two, it’s not like I really did anyth—” Dortin said timidly, but it seemed like the other two weren’t listening. But Volkan seemed to agree, humming and nodding his head in approval.

“That’s right, that’s right. The cold, unfeeling little brother who betrayed his big brother is the one at fault. The only one at fault.”

Whether Phillip was listening at all, or possibly, was just mumbling to himself, he ended up ignoring them both and tossed a mat from the floor at Volkan. It fell with a splat on Volkan’s face, and slid to the floor.

“Now then, time to clean things up,” Phillip said, massaging his stomach.

Tiffes said, “I’ll help you out.”

Phillip laughed as if in a good mood and replied, “You sure about that? Well, if you had some aptitude for sorcery, it would save us here.”

“Think you could whip up some lunch in return? Teach asked me to bring her home some lunch.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Easy to make.” Phillip agreed, taking on the task. Phillip’s tone became gentler, kinder, and Dortin was reassured by this change in his attitude towards things as he listened to their banter.

“In that case, what should I do?” Dortin asked.

Phillip replied with a smile, “You all should take that 200kg shelf over there and return it to how it was before, you little slimy little octopus.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

Sometimes it be like that, I guess... Dortin thought to himself in reply.



The highway seemed to continue on forever.

It began in the dwarf territory of Masmaturia, then went all the way down to the Kimluck mountains.

Summer came to greet them via the highway. The forest hugged every curve of it, seemingly suppressing the wildlife within it, pushing the verdant scene out towards the road. The foliage was rich and vibrantly colored, and as the sun climbed higher in the sky towards noon, it only grew brighter, almost a painful, blinding white that dominated everything in its path.

A westerly wind blew across the arid earth, painting everything with a faint haze from the sandstorms being kicked up. And...

“Ahhhhh!”

The shriek let loose in the distance floated through the air and into Orphen’s ears. He went back to work soon thereafter. The reins for his carriage had snapped, and he was trying to repair them.

The reins had originally belonged to the Everlasting family, and there was no shame in trying to get further use out of them. They were made from high-quality leather and a very soft black pelt, which he attempted to strengthen with some oil. After slathering some on, he further reinforced it with a coat of lacquer. This way he could fix the reins, though it was absolutely a pain to do so.

“What in the world...”

As the new foundation of the snapped reins, he used hemp cord, which he eventually sewed to the hide and pelt before laying on the oil and lacquer.

Orphen grumbled throughout the entire process.

From the seat on his stopped carriage that lay to the side of the highway, Orphen felt right at home, sitting on the horse’s behind.

“If that guy comes around, things are about to get a lot more troublesome.”

He looked to the dams, head tilted as if in question, then went back to work, not seeing the dams shake their heads as if in warning.

Orphen was about twenty, with black hair and eyes, a seemingly ordinary plebian guy with a forgettable, plain appearance. The look in his eyes made him seem a bit villainous, but in reality, his eyes were shadowed because he was

troubled by the idea of someone asking him what side he was on now.

He was dressed in black from head to toe, in a style of clothing that seemed generally easy to work in. On his breast lay a silver pendant with the crest of a dragon entwining itself around a sword. With the way his shirt wrinkled, it looked as if the dragon was drunk, sinking underneath the lapel of Orphen's shirt.

Once again, a scream rang out in the distance.

"Uwaaaaah!"

Next, the ground seemed to hollow out as it disappeared with a thunderous roar — and this time, Orphen still did not raise his head. Even as the earth rained around him, he just muttered to himself.

"I did have a hunch about this. Thought it was a bit weird, you see."

"Save m — AAHHHH!"

Another scream. An explosion, which was lost in yet another high-pitched yell that could be heard.

"Orrrrphennnn!"

With a gentle puff, the tepid breeze from the explosion floated Orphen's way, ruffling his black hair.

Or it would have, had he decided to raise his head. Instead, he continued to ignore it all. The small dust cloud that was kicked up by the explosion he just blinked away and continued to mumble to himself.

"Oh, I remember alright. I remember the time you secretly tossed that lovely breakfast that Claiomh made you. And then you stood, and then tragedy befell us. You fell right off that huge crag, landed in some unknown, godforsaken area, and made a hole in the ground where you landed. And by the way, no one should've been able to see you throw that breakfast away."

Ka-pow!

The sounds of things exploding continued. As if the explosion was coming from the ground itself, the earth shook. Orphen, who still sat on the saddle, held the reins in his hands, in case the horses started to get upset. His needle,

ready to continue sewing together the cord and the pelt, sank itself into his thumb, five centimeters deep.

“Ow.” Orphen swore to himself bitterly. He suckled at his now-bleeding finger.

With a glance, he looked at the highway (now repairing itself and spreading back out again) along with the forest. It was one of the last unexplored places on the continent, the so-called Fenrir’s Forest. With the exception of the highway and a small area where people lived, it was otherwise all woodland.

The forest itself disappeared a bit further north, turning into the place that all inhabitants of the continent knew as the Drylands. The Kimluck Church controlled the area, that so-called promised land, which they called Gate Lock.

Either way, from what Orphen could see, the forest was still quiet. He glimpsed a flash out of the corner of his eye. Somewhere out deep in the forest, there was a red flash and glow, he thought, but...

“And...” he said, finger still in his mouth, continuing his mumbled monologue, “Ever since then, I started to think it was a bit weird. Well, maybe it’s better to say that I always thought his existence itself was a bit odd, you know?”

He finally gave up trying to fix the reins — he could fix them with a spell later. He let his back rest against the seat of the carriage. He closed his eyes and laid there, an uninvited guest, as he stretched his body.

“I give up,” he said. “Completely. It’s all about cutting something with the whatever knife, or however the old saying goes...”

And...

“Masterrrr!”

The voice came from the forest, and Orphen opened his eyes and saw the blonde haired young man flying towards him.

“You idiot, Majic...”

“Please, saaave meee!”

The boy, Majic, and his black cloak fluttered as he landed on the driver’s seat of the carriage next to Orphen and clung to it for dear life.

He had clean-cut, handsome features, though it was beyond any doubt that he was absolutely terrified as he said, “That monster!”

“Shut up! And how many times have I told you, if you’re gonna run from something, run away from me, not at me, you stupid little twerp.”

“But it’s an emergency, Master...!”

As he cried out to the older man and tried to adjust the seat to go higher, Orphen kicked at him in a panic, as if he too were afraid of what was happening in the forest. He looked at Majic, who had come flying at him, and said, “Stop depending on me for every little damn thing, would you? We’re both students, after all. You need to look after yourself here!”

“I mean, you’re telling me to protect myself here, but what about that really evil monster in the woods? What do I do about that thing, huh?”

Majic was determinedly continuing to cling to Orphen’s side, questioning him. Orphen kicked at him with the flat of his foot, but then Majic gave him a desperate, angry look as he resisted. It was absolutely a waste of time, and Orphen couldn’t take it anymore. The next voice that was raised was his own.

“How the hell would I know? We’re both novices here so think for yourself! We have a lot of different factors going on here, so think carefully, and do an about-face. Turn around, and make a sacrifice with that black sorcery of yours! Or just go and kill yourself, I really don’t care! Just leave me alone!”

“Won’t we both die, though?!”

“Again, how the hell would I know? Don’t you dare get me involved with this!”

The horses breathed heavily through their noses, neighhh, rearing their front legs and stamping the earth with their hooves. Whether the angry voices from the driver’s seat spooked them, or it was something else —

Orphen thought as he shuddered, *It seems like the horses are scared by something here, something that seems like it might be getting closer to where we are...*

“Anyway, Master! Please, for the love of everything, just save me!”

“Shut up and stop crying! You know I’m not immortal either, right? We all have stuff we’re able to do and stuff we can’t do —”

“Hic... W-Wait, Master, what’s with that hand? Please, take it ea —”

And in an instant...

Rustle, rustle...

With a sound like the wind moving through grass, the shouting match stopped.

“...”

Orphen gently and slowly eased his fingers off of Majic’s throat.

“Am I too late...?”

And in a trembling voice, Majic replied, “Probably. Let’s die together, shall we, Master?”

“Excuse me, who’s dying?!”

Orphen sent the other student flying in the air with a hard shove to the ground. He could hear the impact the other boy’s body made as it entered his line of sight in an arc. And there stood...

At the entrance to the forest sat a small dog with pitch black fur. No, it wasn’t a dog — its shape was a bit similar but with a few differences. The little pseudo-dog’s features were crisp and clear against the rich, jewel green of the backdrop of the forest.

On the Kiesalhima continent, there was a race of creatures called Dragons. They were a race of immense sorcery, and a particular subspecies of Dragon was known for their jet-black fur. They were the protectors of the holy ground where only the Deep Dragons, who dealt in such sorcery, dwelled.

The pseudo-dog that sat before them was probably only still a baby Deep Dragon.

But that little pseudo-dog was no match for a black sorcerer like Orphen, even if he was looking like a fool and doing a handstand to look at it. It couldn’t have won against Orphen, regardless of whatever methods of sorcery it used.

And within the last few days, his head had been full of things like demons and evil beasts and black monsters. Take your pick, and he would've been thinking about it.

Orphen looked at the baby Dragon and pointed his finger in a stabbing motion at it.

"Listen up!" He all but screamed at the baby Dragon, as he was truly in the mood to yell. "I've had enough of all of you! I'm not sure if it's because I've built up bad karma or what, but I'm sick and tired of all of you dogpiling me..."

He continued, "It's getting really annoying. Here all of you are, getting me involved in some truly bothersome business, and with annoying people... I'm sick of it!"

Majic muttered from his place beneath the carriage, interjecting even though this was absolutely someone else's problem, saying, "We've definitely been forced into a corner with our backs against the walls as of late..."

"Shut your face!" Orphen screamed at him and then continued, "Whatever the hell it is? I'm tired of it! Maybe I should make like a bandit and take someone's money and buy a nice house and just retire! And maybe I'll keep some cats too so they'll make sure no one will get near my damn house!!"

The baby Dragon did not answer him. It moved its little legs back and forth, and as if searching for something, head cocked towards Orphen's pointed finger.

It was probably waiting for an order from him.

Whether or not the little creature would get that order, though, remained to be seen.

Orphen continued his tirade, as if drunk. "Anyway, I'm really fed up..."

"But we're cornered here, man..."

"I told you to shut your damn mou-"

Orphen's mouth had started to shape the rest of that word, but then his entire body froze.

"Huh? Is that you, Majic?"

Orphen searched for his disciple, but he'd already disappeared. He'd taken one look at the pseudo-dog and ran for the hills.

"So if that's the case... who was that just now?"

He looked around from side to side. Aside from the little Dragon, there was no one else near the carriage. But he remembered the voice of whoever had just spoken.

"Tish?" He muttered.

At that moment came another sound, like wind rustling through the grass, though this time it was louder. The person who now flew toward him was even louder than Majic had been.

"Orpheeennnnn!"

She had long blonde hair down to her lower back and looked to be about seventeen years old. As she shouted at him, she flew out of the forest. She landed, her blouse coming undone button by button, and in an occurrence that was rare for her, her skirt was dirty from running through the forest.

She hugged the little Dragon there on the ground of the forest while she still annoyingly shouted, "Ahhh! I can't believe it!"

"C-Claiomh," Orphen breathed as he shivered in disgust. She — Claiomh — sobbed while stamping at the ground with her sneakers.

"I can't believe you, you absolute fool! If I were to say that, who would you think of? I mean, it's about Majic, but..."

"Well... uh... yeah, that's right," Orphen muttered in reply, interjecting sounds every so often to make it seem like he was paying attention. He hid in the shadow of the banister up on the driver's seat and adopted a defensive pose, a knife appearing in his hands.

Whether Claiomh was paying attention to what was happening around them was the next question, but regardless, she continued speaking. Perhaps it was because she was looking back and forth excitedly, bouncing around, but her hair seemed like a very understated pale blonde, along with her vivid blue eyes, which were the color of tears.

“What do you think that brat was doing just now? I can’t believe it, I just can’t believe it...!”

“Oh, really?”

Orphen had gotten the larger picture of whatever had happened, more or less, but with bored eyes, looked in the direction she’d been searching in. Claiomh continued to speak.

“I found a river over in that direction there, right? So I stopped and so I thought I might go ahead and wash off, you know? And that guy decided to hide himself in the shade of one of the rocks near the river and he was secretly watching me the whole time! Can you believe that?!”

“Oh? Really... I can’t believe that either...” Orphen mumbled while trying to secretly run away. This wasn’t the first time this had happened, nor was it the first offense. But he thought to keep that to himself and just let it lie. He tried to climb down from the driver’s seat and towards the direction where Claiomh wasn’t.

Suddenly, Claiomh let out a grumble, raising her voice, “Hey, Orphen, try being at least a *little* mad on my behalf, won’t you?!”

“Huh? Oh... How terrible! That asshole!” Orphen started, turning around, but eventually he stayed up in the driver’s seat, hamming it up by hitting the floor of the carriage with his fist.

“What an absolutely unbelievable crime! Just violating your personal space, your territory, making my best friend cry like that! You villain, you can never escape from heaven’s vengeance, nor from the hands that hold the ropes of humanity! Anyway, I have things to do, so with that—”

“And just where do you think you’re going? Huh?!”

Orphen rushed to the side of the carriage, and nimbly jumped off the driver’s seat. While he was trying to run, she grabbed at the belt on his back, and while shaking it, yelled, “Don’t you think your line there was a bit forced?!”

“Uhhh, well... Okay, how about this: that lowly piece of shit! Next time I see him I’m going to break all of his fingers. But first I’ll tie both his pinkies together in a square knot. And with that, no, really, I have to go—”

“Why do you keep whining about how you have other stuff to do, huh? Orphen—” Claiomh said, in a cold voice. She continued, “Is it possibly because you really don’t care about the fact that he was peeping on me at all?”

“Nah, that isn’t true,” Orphen said, suddenly raising his voice. Though secretly he thought, *because I would be the one to take the blame for that one.*

The girl in front of him was too busy staring at the baby dragon who was staring blankly right back at her. She extended a hand, keeping her distance, and said, “Which reminds me, right as I got here, there was that sound of something exploding from within the forest...”

“Yep.”

With that Claiomh nodded her head in assent. She wiped at the tears in her eyes that had built up. While she did so, she said, “Anyway, before I do anything, I need to change my clothes. So in the meantime, I’m having Leki chase him down for me.”

While she spoke, she could feel warmth from within her chest, a feeling sent by the baby dragon. The pseudo-dog, whom Claiomh named Leki, was given another name by Majic and Orphen: “The Hellhound.” Though if one were to ask the baby dragon itself as to which name he preferred, he wouldn’t be able to as he did not seem to know the difference between the two. Leki’s self-awareness did not seem to extend that far.

That aside, Orphen continued, as if reprimanding Leki.

“Yes, yes. If you were to let Leki loose like that, letting him chase Majic, of course Majic would be scared! Pretty sure he’s reflecting on his choices, so maybe just let him off ea—”

“Who’s getting off easy?!” Claiomh all but bellowed at him. “Scared? Leki’s sorcery didn’t even hurt him! And he didn’t even chase Majic around the forest, like you said! It wasn’t that bad!”

“I was concerned he was pretty close to being scared to death with the Hellhound chasing him around like that, honestly...”

“Once again, who was scared? I’m not letting him off that easy, not in the least. He ran off, didn’t he? Do you know where he even ran off to?”

Truthfully, Orphen did not know. However, he did not have the strength to make her believe that.



Orphen just quit while he was ahead, though he did attempt to persuade her.

“Uh, welllll, if it were up to me, I’d rather you both not fight, but...”

Or maybe it would be better to say that he preferred not to get involved in their fight, but to Claiomh, that wasn’t the case.

“We’re not really fighting, you know,” She said.

“Oh?”

Orphen started making noises as if he were interested in what she was saying once more. Her expression sharpened, and her face alone could cut deeper than her words.

“I’ll execute you.”

“Whaaaat?”

Even as he screamed, Claiomh did not hear him. She quickly looked above and around the driver’s seat of the carriage, and said in a loud and booming voice, “Come out now, Majic! You’re probably just hiding around super close, aren’t you? You used your eyes to spy on me, so you’d best choose the one eye you like the least so I can pluck it out of your disgusting little face! Come out right now!”

“What, he likes both eyes? Will you pluck them both out?” Orphen asked her, mildly concerned now. Claiomh’s expression did not change, and she remained serious as she answered, “I’ll open another eye socket for him between his two eyes is what I’ll do.”

“You used to be such a nice young lady from such a nice family, once upon a time... What happened?”

“I never stopped being a nice young lady, you weasel. You have to be the worst of the worst to spy on someone! That should be obvious!”

“Yeah, but... It was an accident, right? Him spying on you. Surely he didn’t mean it. If he meant it, well, that’s a whole other story! I mean it’s not like he spied on you while you were doing something super embarrassing, like wearing your underwear on your head or anything, right?”

Silence.

“Oh, you were wearing them on your head, weren’t you?”

“She was not wearing them on her head!”

Then—

Majic spoke impulsively and then it hit him, his blunder. As if freezing in place, he became very still and did not move. Orphen and Claiomh both fell silent and looked toward the distance where Majic’s voice had come from. Somehow in the interim, whether Majic had hidden himself somewhere, or he’d run back into the forest, remained to be seen. But somehow he’d gotten himself stuck between two trees. His black cloak and the rest of his black costume had, too. Frankly, he looked suspicious, his cheeks the bright red of a beautiful young boy. He looked, quite frankly, terrified.

He paused a beat too late, before Leki, the baby dragon, entered his field of vision and he turned toward it slowly.

“Majic.” Claiomh’s voice was almost endlessly quiet. Or perhaps it was the reverse — not quiet enough.

“Y-yes...?” Majic answered, as if his tongue were stiff and stuck.

He was visibly shaking, and he could see Claiomh out of the corner of his eye, though her face was turned away from his own. He looked over, a plea for salvation written all over his face. Orphen shook his head silently, powerlessly. There was nothing to be done, after all. Claiomh petted Leki’s head, her soft laugh floating over to them both.

“Any last words?” She asked Majic.

“Um... Well...”

From Orphen’s position, he could see the holy crest on Majic’s chest get cut. If Majic were able, he would have prepared himself for death, or so he thought. Majic was furious, and it showed easily on his face.

“Didn’t you need padding for your bra?” He taunted her.

“You’re dead,” Claiomh snarled in rapid reply.

At the same time, she held out the baby dragon as if offering it to him. Seemingly responding to some sort of cue she'd mentally sent the pseudo-dog, Leki sharpened his gaze at Majic, his eyes turning green. Proof that he was indeed a dragon there in his gaze.

Deep Dragons were able to cast sorcery through line of sight. Suddenly, the space around them flashed with a spark of bright green, as if painting over everything else. Reality warped as if it was an optical illusion. But an illusion it was not.

The next moment, both Majic and the forest disappeared as a deafeningly loud explosive blast rang out.



“And there you have it.”

Clack, clack, clack...

The sound of the pen tapping on the desk was incredibly annoying.

The man tapping the pen was a middle-aged Ranger, half of his face covered in a beard. Or perhaps it would be better to say that since his beard was mostly white, he was closer to elderly. Either way, he was obviously over 40. As was the norm for forest Rangers, he wore a blue jacket with pockets. On his embroidered badge there was a sketched design of a bear, along with the words: “We shall not trespass”.

The butt of the Ranger’s pen tapped against the desk, and until now, all of the papers on his desk had been blank. After tapping his pen, only today’s date, the Ranger’s name who was filling out the paperwork, his badge number and classification appeared on it.

There was no particular meaning to inscribing the date on these documents, only entering today’s date to keep track. There was also no particular meaning to inscribing the Ranger’s name, either. In reality, the Ranger’s handwriting was normally neither very messy nor hard to read. The name here simply wasn’t intended to be read. Orphen, likewise, seemed to be spelled incorrectly on the documents.

The only thing that mattered that was inscribed upon the papers was the

Ranger's classification. In other words, the only reason why they were writing any of this down at all.

Because of the Ranger's lazy handwriting, the other fields of the form he filled out were just as illegible, but Orphen was able to make out the letters somehow anyway. He could make out "destruction of property" for sure, but what else could he salvage out of those fields?

Sigh. The Ranger let out a deep breath. Though his throat was worn and his voice rough, Orphen could still decipher what he was trying to say.

"So, what you're telling me is that you and the girl you brought along with you, someone was watching her as she bathed in the river, and so in response, she wrecked roughly 700 meters of protected forest, roots and all, and sent it all flying. That's what you're saying, is that correct?"

"Uh... y-yeah."

Orphen should have been repeating his story word for word to confirm it all for the Ranger, but for some reason, he grew somber and quiet. Instead he forced a smile, and scratched the back of his head.

"This was an extraordinary event, I assure you..." Orphen said.

"Extraordinary, huh..." The Ranger replied in a mutter, sounding truly quite vexed by the whole thing. He continued to tap his pen against the desk, as if in no hurry.

"Which means that you were spying on that young lady friend of yours? And that's why she set all of that protected forest and moor ablaze?"

"By and large, it was both parties at fault here, sir."

Orphen's reply did not prompt a verbal response from the Ranger, who merely nodded at him and said nothing. He found himself in a rather difficult position with the incident at hand as they sat together there in the guardroom. It was a narrow and bleak little room, with only a desk, a chair, a coat rack, and a filing cabinet for all of the paperwork.

Above the wooden filing cabinet, three bottles of liquor sat, of which two were empty.

Orphen quietly looked at that last remaining bottle, a question in his gaze as to whether or not it was empty or full. In reality, it made him want to ask the Ranger for advice. Who would've thought, in this day and (very peaceful) age, there would be anyone who would want to upend and overthrow the state by setting fire to that forest, drawing the ire of the royals, the nobles, and the Kimluck Church alike, who also claimed Fenrir's Forest as part of their protected territory? He'd been shocked to discover anyone out there that was stupid enough to do so.

Of course, there was always the odd poacher running around, so there were always efforts to suppress people like those. But this was different.

Originally, the Church resorted to making the Fenrir's Forest part of their protected area only a few hundred years ago. The Church at the time was barely established as an organization. Upon the declaration, Pope Ramonirok had claimed it was an order from the Goddess, and since then the nobles and the Church had always made sure to protect the area. There were two reasons why: one, the area hadn't been particularly fertile for development, and two, even if humans didn't protect the forest, the forest itself had far stronger protectors who would ensure things were just fine in the end. That is to say, the Dragons.

While thinking of all of this, Orphen closed his eyes, thoroughly exhausted by it all.

"So my buddies are checking out the scene right now, seeing how bad the damage is..." the Ranger said, scratching his beard. He continued, "There wasn't any fire damage, it seems. No one seems to know why, though. So we think that there won't be any further damage that needs to be reported at this point..."

Just my luck, Orphen thought. I must be the first person in hundreds of years, or ever, to be written up for obliterating a large amount of protected woodland in a matter of seconds.

The hapless sorcerer let out another long sigh.

With a glance, Orphen realized the Ranger was staring at his chest, at the dragon pendant.

"But, this area is under the jurisdiction of the Kimluck church. Usually I would

just hand you on over to them. But you're—"

Orphen nodded without a word. He held up his pendant and replied, "I'm a sorcerer."

The crest with the dragon curving around the sword. A crest only bestowed upon black sorcerers who were the best of the best. It was the highest honor that the Tower of Fangs could bestow upon one of its own and was proof that Orphen was one of its students.

"That's right. If I handed you over, you would be tortured and killed," the Ranger said.

"Probably," Orphen agreed, "The Church really seems to hate the fact that there are other humans who know sorcery walking around out there, though quite honestly, I'm not sure why."

The Ranger sighed loudly, seemingly quite vexed by the whole thing. When Orphen was a child, he got into a fight with some stray dogs and by the end of it, needed seven stitches. The doctor had been as similarly vexed as this Ranger before him was now.

At that time, the doctor had thought that a person had done that to him, though by then, Orphen had already concocted a better excuse to explain everything. At a loss to explain the mood that all of this had put him in, he answered with few words.

"It seems that my life isn't going too well at the moment."

Ker-chak.

"What do I do..."

Orphen sat in the jail cell, its iron bars framing his face, his eyes heavy-lidded. As soon as the arresting Ranger had put him in his cell and had rounded the corner there in the hallway, disappearing from view, he whispered to himself.

"Should you really be telling them all of that? You..."

As soon as Claiomh heard what he said, she suddenly jumped up with a start. Lekki, who had been cuddled close to her chest, rolled off of her lap and onto the floor.

“I’m not the bad guy here for telling them about what happened!”

“Then who’s at fault here, huh? Who?”

With Orphen’s foul mood only getting worse as he talked to her about all of this, Claiomh squeaked, swallowing her words.

Orphen sprawled out on his side there on the floor, rolling over. They both looked around at the gaol imprisoning them. It seemed that Claiomh didn’t understand the enormity of the situation that had befallen them, yet at the same time, she didn’t seem very optimistic about being able to flatter her way out of things, either...

“In that case, I feel bad for the Ranger who was on patrol when they found us. We’re about to get to know the inside of a cell real intimately and soon, on behalf of the Kimluck Church for destroying their stupid forest,” Orphen said.

Then he continued, “For me and Majic, we’re going to be sitting pretty on death row waiting to die. As for you... They’ll probably convert you or something. They’ll protect you until they don’t, and they’ll sell you off to some slave trader or something, I think, something to that effect.”

Of course, the gaol was empty, and nothing was in it. Except in the corner, there was a small tin pot, and a cup for water, along with a dirty blanket rolled into a ball. A beat-up looking Majic was lying down as well, wrapped in the blanket...

Even though it had been a bit of a dangerous situation, things had calmed down enough to where Majic felt comfortable enough to sleep. For now, he did so, shaking and muttering in his sleep all the while.

Regardless, having all three of them crammed in that one tiny, narrow cell felt claustrophobic.

Orphen heaved a sigh, then spoke again. He gently patted a dejected Claiomh’s hand.

“Well, anyway, the old Ranger is gonna let the Tower of Fangs know that they’re gonna turn us over to the Church, so that’s something, I suppose. Even though I never asked him to do that.”

“The Tower of Fangs...” Claiomh replied, watching Leki poke Majic’s cheek with a paw repeatedly. “That’s where you were raised, right?”

“Yeah,” Orphen said to her quietly. He looked at her from the floor. “...Hey, you know Heartia, right? The guy from back in Totokanta, and the other sorcerers from back then.”

Claiomh glanced at him, eyes shining, positively twinkling.

“What about them? Were you guys close?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Where are you going with this?” Claiomh asked him, smiling gently.

He raised his upper body, then got up and sat down next to her. With a snap of his fingers, the baby dragon looked at him. Orphen gathered him up by his legs and placed the pseudo-dog on his lap, and thought for a long moment. There was really only one answer he could give her.

“There was a sorcerer named Childman. He was our teacher.”

“You told me about this when we first met.”

“Did I? Anyway, he was considered the strongest black sorcerer on the continent, you know. I can’t really explain it any other way.”

“Even stronger than you?”

Claiomh was interested in his answer, and she leaned forward. Orphen gave a small nod.

“It wasn’t a fair fight, skills-wise. I’ll be honest, we were nowhere near equally matched. He was one of Childman’s students in every single way. He was close to being equally as powerful as Childman himself was, really. If you look at other powerful sorcerers throughout history, no one else matches up to the two of them, not even close. That’s the level of power we’re talking here.”

“Only those two? Why?”

Orphen was surprised by Claiomh’s answer and blinked in shock.

“You sure have been asking me some interesting things, you know that? He was just someone who carried power with him, is all. From birth forward.

There's no real reason as to why," he replied.

"Is that right?" she said, sounding doubtful. She looked up and into the empty space of the gaol around them. "Does that have anything to do with hard work and lots of training, by any chance?"

"Of course," Orphen said. "No matter what kind of innate talent you may have, you still need the keys to unlock it, right?"

He continued, "One needs to develop an appropriate amount of control over these things, not blow it all open all at once like some kind of madman. Majic is the perfect example of the latter, by the way."

As Orphen said that, he found a small pebble on the floor and flung it at Majic's face.

"Then again," he said, "It's really important to have inborn ability. If I would compare it to something... it's like one's height, I suppose. No matter how much you try, it won't matter unless you've got some kind of power already inside of you. To a certain degree, you can watch yourself grow, but..."

"You know, I've been wondering for a long time now—"

As Orphen listened to her, she took Leki off of his lap and put the baby dragon onto her own. Once he sat there, she held him closely and continued speaking.

"The Tower of Fangs... What kind of place is it?"

"...It's hard to just explain it in one word, honestly."

"It doesn't need to be one word. It's not like we have anywhere to be."

"And whose fault is that?" Orphen shot back at her, eyes half shut. Claiomh quickly shut her own eyes. Leki was tired too, eyes turned toward his mistress.

If I don't bully him every once in a while, he forgets how to act, she thought.

As she thought that, she sighed deeply while Orphen continued to speak.

"The Tower of Fangs is just the name of the place it's in. It's not like it's actually made out of fangs or anything. Well, maybe that's not quite right, there are fangs in there..."

"What exactly are you trying to tell me?" Claiomh asked him, looking at him

as if he were spouting gibberish. Orphen looked troubled by that, and corrected himself.

“Okay, so, the Tower of Fangs has a number of different reasons for being called that. One of them being, it’s a tower. Obviously.”

He continued, “About 200 years ago, around the same time that human sorcerers were born on this continent, that occurrence had a singular source — the Nornir, the Weird Dragons. The World-Seeing Tower was built for the sorcerers by the Nornir. Well, even if you were to enter it now, you wouldn’t really entirely understand that, I suppose, and entering that Tower itself now is strictly prohibited. How do I say this... It’s kinda cone-shaped, kinda twisted and curled, in a way that makes it look like a fang jutting out of the earth. Ever since then because of all of that, the World-Seeing Tower was renamed colloquially to The Tower of Fangs.”

“Yeah.” As Orphen saw Claiomh’s small nod, he spoke again.

“And yet another source for the name is just the name of the city that it’s in. That World-Seeing Tower was the basis for which that entire town was built, you know. So that’s another reason why its alias is the city of the Tower of Fangs. Officially, the city’s name is Taferem. It’s got a pretty big population too, even though as a city it really ain’t so great.”

“The same as Totokanta’s?”

“Don’t compare it to Totokanta. The whole scope of it is on an entirely different scale. At most, Totokanta is maybe a third of the size of Taferem. The final meaning to ‘Tower of Fangs’ is really kind of a common one. You see, a little bit away from Taferem proper, there’s a special installation and facilities for black sorcerers to use for training. And the greatest out of all of those facilities is the Tower of Fangs. So I guess in a way, calling it the Tower of Fangs isn’t really an alias but its real name, if you think about it.”

“Orphen, that’s where you studied, right?”

“Yeah.” Orphen put his arms behind his head and braced himself against the wall. He closed his eyes, and tried to recharge. He thought about the Tower of Fangs, and all of the meanings that name held—

“Regardless of which version of Tower of Fangs you think of, there’s always memories connected to it.”



“...Huh?” He asked, as if wanting the person to repeat it once more.

His back hit the bed there in the dreary room. It was the lower bed of the double bunk. It was made of steel piping, a very humble affair. Both sides of the room looked identical to each other, matching perfectly. The center of the room had a bit of an aisle running through it, and there were no other pieces of recognizable furniture there inside. There was one window. The window frame was made of steel, visibly rusting, the metal slowly warping...

The old man who stood in the doorway stared at him. On top of his robe being neatly gathered about him, the grey of it reflected his position in society. It meant he was towards the top of the food chain for the Tower of Fangs. It meant he was an elder.

From deep within his long beard, he spoke, a thin voice spooling out of it.

“It’s you.”

“Yes... It’s me...”

“Yes, it’s you. You’ve made progress, I see.” There was no sense of hesitation in the elder’s voice. Completely calm, he continued to speak. “You understand this puts everyone in the Tower in a difficult position, yes?”

He should have understood, but in truth, Orphen didn’t understand the situation he’d gotten himself into very well at all. He was only ten years old, and didn’t understand complex things like politics or anything of the like. However, the Tower wouldn’t let him off easy just because of that.

Orphen understood that well.

And so he nodded his head.

The elder didn’t say anything to that nod. Then he continued, “We need talented individuals. The Imperial Court’s Thirteen Apostles haven’t yet shown themselves to us, but we understand the situation. We need you.”

“...”

“I’ve found six young people so far, six special people like you, who will only rise in rank. In that specific classroom. Anyone who has talent and a ready wit is welcome there. You’re one of those people, Krylancelo.”

Whatever Orphen tried to say, he wasn’t able to continue saying it. It wasn’t like he had a clear picture of what he was going to say, nor did the words seem to want to come out of his mouth at all. Not even simple, stupid words would come out, either. It might even be better to say that he couldn’t say anything at all, period. It was so thorough he was shocked.

It could be the elder understood that. And yet he disregarded it.

“You’re still very young. However, this wouldn’t be a bad time for you to begin your education.”

“...”

“You must think on this matter. Just on this matter.”

The elder closed his eyes and continued.

“You must overcome the things we will teach you. That’s all you need to do.”



Yawn...

Orphen sprang up as his eyes flew open. He wasn’t exactly drenched in sweat nor was he having palpitations. It wasn’t that bad.

But it was quite apparent that he was shaken up as a result of the dream. Or maybe it was more correct to say that he was very uneasy.

“Hmph...” Orphen muttered, clicking his tongue. Scratching his temple, he looked around him — the pitch black of the gaol around him, the idle pool of moonlight that came in through the window, and Majic’s pale face there in the dark as he too slept. The only person not there was Claiomh. She was the only one who had requested to use the station’s nap room.

From the window he could see the strange, slanted moonlight. Orphen stared at it, without thinking.

They wouldn’t be picked up until the following morning.

Chapter II: A Sudden Assassin

The moon changed phases the next morning.

While looking at it, Orphen found himself growing drowsy before he knew it. But that was probably due to the fact that he'd been staring for nearly an hour. And softly, gently, his eyes started to close.

He'd never been particularly good at waking up. But that was not the case today, as he remembered why he was so anxious.

Of all times, things had to go down like this, he thought, muttering to himself, taking off the blanket that he'd had on top of his head. It left behind a big cowlick, standing straight up. Speaking of obvious things, Majic hadn't gotten up yet, and instead was dead asleep in the corner of their cell.

Orphen gently eased himself up and glanced at his surroundings. Nothing out of the ordinary, but he still had a feeling of something being off, of incongruity.

Great, thanks body, for getting all agitated for no real reason. Or am I having a premonition? he asked himself, shaking out his hair. *There's no point in doing this*, he decided. And though doing this wasn't particularly proof of his statement, he licked his lips.

His throat was so dry, though it usually was upon first waking up. But this morning, it felt different...

"Majic!" Orphen suddenly shouted, kicking at the rolled up ball that contained the other student within it.

"Wahaa!" Majic screamed as he woke up with a jump. He was flustered, panicked, and it showed in his trembling hands as he said, "I wasn't peeping on you, I swear I—"

"Shut your face hole! We already settled all that!" Orphen yelled at him, surely stiffening his features.

He felt his anxiety starting to get worse. He already believed—

Something happened while we were asleep.

But without putting those words in his mouth, he turned to Majic and asked him, “Were you asleep the whole time?”

“Hm? Well, yeah, mostly...” Majic replied, staring blankly at Orphen. He looked around aimlessly, looking for something to guide his eye. “Is this a jail cell? Why am I here?”

“You should ask our dear friend Claiomh, I’m sure she’d be happy to tell you,” Orphen muttered, his reply in a nasty, blunt tone. He ignored how Majic was looking over at him, instead shaking the iron grill in front of him.

He said in a loud chant, “I tread upon thee, Uninvited Gate!”

His power pooled and amassed in his hands, and with a clinking sound, the cell door unlocked itself. Orphen did not speak as he pushed open the door, and soon was free of the gaol. After waiting for Majic to follow him out, and after sneaking a quick peek at the table in the nap room, he continued to stare into the hallway.

“...”

As Orphen chased thoughts around his brain while staring blankly down the hallway, he realized that Majic had been staring at him. Majic had just been more or less kicked awake, his eyes suspicious and confused about what was going on around them. He wondered if there was something else going on inside of Orphen’s head, making him think this way.

Orphen was looking at him, concern written on his face. “What’s up?”

“Uh, nothing... Except, Master, where’s your pendant?”

“Hm? My—” Orphen replied, feeling around his chest. He should’ve remembered the feeling of the cool metal on his chest. He always had it on — it was the one thing he kept on his person that allowed people to verify his station as a black sorcerer, that dragon pendant. It was proof of what he was. But—

There was no feeling of cool metal on his chest this time. There was nothing there at all.

“Huh...?” Orphen said, starting to panic, shoving his hands in his pockets and pulling them inside out. Usually when he slept, he made sure to take his pendant off, but last night he didn’t do that.

However way you looked at it, it wasn’t in his pocket.

“Think you dropped it somewhere?”

“I don’t know... But I give up.”

However, regardless of his distressed voice, truth was, Orphen was still only half-paying attention.

What do I do without that proof from the Tower of Fangs? That’s my real problem at the moment—

But he had the feeling that the pendant would be the least of his problems.

“Tch,” he said, clicking his tongue and running his hands through his hair in frustration.

Without waiting for a response from his disciple, Orphen instead turned his gaze to the rust-filled hallway and entered it, starting to make his way through it. From the beginning the nap room wasn’t very large, and with only a few steps, one could cover the length of it and then make it out to the lobby.

Orphen grasped the doorknob to the door of the lobby, making sure not to touch the metal of it, and opened it with one push.

Drip...

The door hit his right hand. Even if one called it a lobby, it was really nothing more than a glorified vestibule with an extra room attached to it.

The waiting area for carriages was also the place where the Ranger made his initial report the day before. Right next to the vestibule was the hat rack, the knobby, wooden desk, the bottles of liquor, and the bench that looked as if it were sinking into the floor where the Ranger was currently sitting.

Across from where the Ranger was sitting, there was a door. Beyond that door was the nap room, where Claiomh had gone to sleep for the night.

Or where she should’ve gone to sleep.

With his heart squeezing in his chest, a sense of dread sliced through Orphen's chest. He sighed.

"The anxiety just hit me, square in the chest."

"...Hm?" Majic's voice didn't really answer him, and Orphen set foot into the lobby. He cautiously made his way to the middle of the room that way, one careful step after another.

The old Ranger was out cold, sleeping soundly there in his chair. He didn't know that Orphen was now in the room with him, his hands stretched over his belly, snoozing silently. No noise came from deep within that beard.

The old geezer said there would be three Rangers total within this station, right? The rest of them have houses nearby, so the old man is the only one who stays here overnight.

"Majic," Orphen said, calling for the other student who was now close behind him.

"Y-yes?" Majic's voice was startled as he answered Orphen. Orphen continued to speak, looking at the other boy over his shoulder.

"Claiomh is sleeping in that room over there. Mind getting her up and awake and taking her out to the carriage?" Orphen asked, pointing to the nap room's door.

Majic gulped audibly, pointing towards his own chest.

"M-Me? Is that a command, even though I just barely survived our last go-round? I'm seriously gonna get myself killed if I do that again."

"It's okay. I don't think Claiomh's still mad or anything. I think she's satisfied now that she's had a crack at you and settled her score."

"Uh-huh..." Majic muttered, not fully satisfied with Orphen's explanation. He looked at the other boy incredulously as he made his way to the door across the room, near the sleeping Ranger. Majic's boots echoed on the wood floor as he stepped cautiously but firmly across it. The floor seemed to be mocking him with the soft squeaks it let out every time his feet touched down upon it—

Majic opened the door to the nap room.

Whoops, he forgot to knock, Orphen thought to himself, and as he did so, he gently shook the sleeping Ranger with soft swaying movements and spoke to him.

“Wake up, gramps.”

He had to say, he felt like a bit of an ass, as if he were slitting the old man’s stomach, but it didn’t show in his features.

“It’s morning. A bit early. But wake up.”

And—

Suddenly, with a loud crash, the sound of a good piece of porcelain breaking as it fell to the floor rang out in the room. It sounded as if someone had taken a vase and thrown it at one of the walls. It was that kind of sound.

“Uwaaaa!” Majic screamed, and as if chasing after Majic’s yell, Claiomh’s screech could be heard soon after.

“What the hell? And you haven’t even been punished for a full twenty-four hours first! The fact that you can stand on your own two feet right now... How brazen are you?!”

“W-Whaat? No! You’re misunderstanding!”

“Leki! Sick ‘em! Get ‘em, boy!”

“Master, you liar!!” Majic’s wail sounded as if he really was crying. At the same time, the sound of an explosion reverberated around them. Even though he felt himself lifted and thrown across the room in the blast, he still continued to speak.

He soon found himself being chased by Claiomh, still in her nightclothes, and clutching the baby Deep Dragon to her chest in a round lump.

“Hey! I told you to wait a sec! As I thought, I won’t feel better until I punch you square in that smug mug of yours!” she yelled, her blonde hair still stuck up in places from being asleep. After they disappeared into the distance, Orphen found himself breathing a soft sigh of relief.

Sigh...

The Ranger's body swayed a bit, and Orphen let go of his hand. Even with all of this noise happening around them, it appeared that not even that much was going to wake the old man at all. His eyes were peacefully closed, and his body didn't move an inch...

Orphen glanced beneath the chair. The old man's weight was propped up by his old body, and beneath the chair he sat in now, bowing under that stress, there was a small puddle. A droplet of something seemed to ooze from the bottom of the chair down to the puddle.

It was blood.

If you looked at the volume of blood lost, it looked like it was about the same amount of blood one would lose if one cut their finger.

And the blood seeping from this wound was from a small cut in the old man's stomach.

The wound wasn't very large, perhaps the work of a small knife, or so Orphen thought. Usually there should be more blood, but the only force holding that in check was the fact that the old man's heart had already stopped beating.

In other words, this man had been murdered only a little bit before Orphen and Majic had come into the room. Orphen wondered if he had died from shock or fear, or perhaps...

"Maybe someone had used sorcery to destroy this man's insides," Orphen decided with a mutter to himself. In which case, it meant that whoever killed this man had used sorcery, then stabbed him, leaving the man to be found in a state like this by others.

Staring at the puddle of blood, Orphen sighed again. What had been bothering him had probably been this, he decided.

The scent of blood had certainly gotten his eyes wide open this morning.

"Shit," Orphen muttered. There wasn't any meaning to it, really, no, none, he repeated to himself deep within his own head.

There was no real meaning to this particular murder, was there? But if that's the case, why would someone do this? What's the motivation here?

This old man was stabbed in the stomach, and whoever killed him wrapped his hands around the wound to hide it. His gnarled hands were covered in blood, his unmoving body pinned down.

And anyway, motive aside, what was the means of this whole thing? You have me and Majic in this Ranger station, but we were left alone. Did this guy only have one person on his list to kill, or what?

If that was the case — that wasn't the killer's technique at all in play.

It was the Stabber himself. And if this is all the case, then that means he's a daring little shit.

"What is the meaning of this?" Orphen asked himself, rising from where he'd been crouching on the ground. It had been quiet, and after the battle of whatever had happened here, the fact that nothing concrete could be confirmed at this point in time was clear. Whether the Ranger had been nodding off on the job, or he'd simply been killed so quickly he couldn't even figure out what was going on... that was the next set of questions to answer.

But still, maybe the killer left something behind, Orphen thought to himself as his amateur eyes roved about the room. The inner workings of the Ranger's station hadn't really changed much since last night. The one full bottle of liquor that had been there last night had emptied itself by morning. If this had been a simple smash and grab, there might have been traces left behind on the cabinet where the bottles had been stored, but there was no real evidence left from that alone either.

At least, none that Orphen could find with the naked eye.

"Just what the hell happened here... And more importantly, why the hell hadn't I figured it out last night? Why am I just realizing that a man got murdered now? Shit."

He irritatedly rejected that idea. He turned around, looking around the room, looking for something, anything—

And suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"..."

There was a meaning to this whole thing. At least, a little bit of one, he thought to himself in that moment.

The Ranger's dead body was supposed to be distracting. He hadn't thought about it that way before, not until now...

In the wall where the old Ranger's eyes were still staring blankly, there was a dagger. It was buried in the wall, covered in blood, probably the actual murder weapon without any sort of doubt. Carefully hanging around the blade was Orphen's pendant, soaked in blood. Beneath it, pinned there by the dagger, was a scrap of paper.

Shuddering, Orphen murmured to himself, "A warning, hm...?"

In an elegant, flowing calligraphy that scrolled along the entire page, it read, "Beware the Tower of Fangs".





The Kiesalhima continent housed two races, the dragons and humans. Between them, the difference was that if you told them something, the meaning to each of them would probably be different.

In ancient times, if a human wanted power for sorcery, instead of going to the gods directly and performing a secret ritual, they turned to the Weird Dragons. Several hundred years ago, those that were mixed with the blood of the Weird Dragons, people with special abilities, started to appear in society.

And thus, the first human sorcerers were born.

The true details of this history as to why this happened are different than the ones inscribed into history books. The time period details were different, as was the meaning given to these details. The only thing that the books got right was the basis for the details themselves.

In the current era, despite humans being the race best poised to thrive on the continent, and perhaps because our definition of “power” comes from our all-encompassing relationship with these Weird Dragons, humans could not, in any way, shape, or form, compare to the Dragon race. We were no match for them. Period.

But even saying that, there are so many sorcerers out there in the world that would not admit that one fact.

Regardless, if Majic ever met any of them, he vowed would absolutely give them a piece of his mind. Preferably while they were burnt to a crisp.

Let there be no doubt that Dragons are monsters, he thought, grumbling to himself. He was right outside of the Ranger’s station, on a small side road for horses that eventually joined back onto the main highway. It was still early morning, so the sky was gloomy, as if hiding the towering forest in the background. The giant trees were dimly hidden by a blueish darkness.

Majic was face down there on the road, but managed to raise his eyes. In front of him, there stood a familiar set of sneakers.

A golden-haired girl, one who was still in her sleepwear, and who held a small

black beast to her chest that was gently nosing against her. Claiomh's face was solemn.

"Majic, I have something to ask you."

"Hhhhh..." He had a bad feeling about this. *Please, god...*

Claiomh continued, "Why the hell did you pull that stupid stunt?"

Even if she asked him something that difficult, he sure as hell couldn't really answer it, he thought to himself. Surely he'd just really fucked up by praying to god to spare him from this one, he resolved further after some thought.

"Even if you ask me..."

"W-h-y?" Claiomh pressed relentlessly.

Wonder if she's ever compromised on anything even once in her life, Majic wondered. As he thought that, he raised his upper body. Claiomh had trudged along a long way and approached him, probably by hearing the whinny of the horses on the road.

"Uh..." Majic trailed off, unconcernedly shifting his body into a defense position. "I was planning a little act of revenge on you, you know, some tit for tat..."

"Revenge?"

Claiomh glared at him.

He could feel her anger there. He scratched a cheek before continuing, "Well, I mean, I was getting pretty tired of you treating me like your errand boy, y'know, something like that."

"...Hm..." She replied, her gaze turning cooler, more skeptical, settling on him directly. Majic had a bad feeling, or perhaps it was better to say that the way Claiomh was looking at him now was like the quiet before the storm, the dread before an execution sentence was handed out. But...

"Hm..." Claiomh repeated, shifting the baby dragon's weight to her left shoulder, letting him ride upon it with a small thunk. The pseudo-dog was now just at eye level.

Huh...?

Just when Majic was making the decision to run away as fast as he could, he felt frozen with fear. He stared blankly at them both.

If this were business as usual, this was where Claiomh would've launched her attack.

But this was not business as usual.

As if declaring that they were done talking, Claiomh wouldn't even look at him. Instead she looked exhaustedly toward the Ranger's station. Furthermore, the air between them turned dark, and eerie. It was at that point that Majic decided to speak.

"Uh, hey..."

"..."

Claiomh didn't answer him. She didn't even show interest in replying to him at all.

Instead, as if speaking only to herself, she murmured, "Orphen—"

"Hm?"

"What is Orphen doing in there, I wonder?"

"..." Majic didn't think of replying to her, instead staring, stunned, at the back of her head. Currently holding a pose that was much like a cat grooming itself, the Deep Dragon was what Majic was staring at. He thought to himself, *Oh no, she's not really thinking of meeting up with Master and then launching an attack, is she—*

However, it didn't seem like that was the case. He muttered to himself, concerned now.

"Master... seemed out of sorts. I can't really put my finger on it, but... It was like he was hiding something."

"He's been like that for a while, you know. You just hadn't realized it, huh?" she replied to him, crankily muttering.

Majic could taste something bitter spreading across his tongue as his own

tone turned acrid. He added, “I just said that it seemed like he was out of sorts, not that he actually was. After all, Master probably should be hiding a few things from us, don’t you think?”

“...on’t kn—”

Majic couldn’t entirely hear her reply, as half of her face was turned away from him. All he could see was how her lips kept opening in a gasping motion, like a fish out of water.

“Huh?” Majic asked her, trying to get her to repeat what she said. Surely she’d turn her face back to him, or even shout at him, he thought, but instead, she just murmured quietly.

“...I don’t know, that’s what I was just saying.”

“Why are you so mad?”

“I’m not mad,” she muttered sullenly.

Majic’s body shifted somewhat, as if preparing to run away, but he groaned, “Yeah, you are.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not.”

“And I’m telling you, you really are...”

“No, really, I’m not—”

“Did you know that you have a tell when you get mad? Your lower earlobe twitches—”

At his repeated insistence that she was mad, her lower earlobe twitched and the space below her eye twitched—

“Just shut up, okay! I’m telling you I’m not mad, I have no reason to be mad, even though you peeped on me, and so what if Orphen is hiding a few things? He may be a bully but he’s our supreme commander and if you don’t like that, maybe you should go back to that room and change your clothes and get the hell out of here!”

“Ahhhh! Somehow I’m just so much more reassured than usual now!” He managed to shake off Claiomh’s hand, which was coming to strangle him. As he

did, he panted, and was about to continue along feverishly with his train of thought.

And—

That was the point where Majic snapped back to reality, coming to his senses. All of the blood that had been in his zonked out head rushed down his neck and back into his body, making him shudder with the feeling of it. His whole body shook with it. He looked around himself, for the reason why he'd suddenly come back to his senses.

Claiomh still continued to speak. "Why the hell won't Orphen bring my luggage to me? Won't even bring me my sundries! And— Wait, what's wrong?" She asked him with an astonished groan.

"Hm?" Majic had a faint, weird feeling it had been behind him, the source of that weird shudder, but that had been a shot in the dark.

However, as he turned his head and looked over his shoulder, Majic asked her again.

Claiomh, without removing her hand from his neck, muttered back as if befuddled, "Why'd you get so quiet all of a sudden?"

"Uh... How can I say it..." Majic replied, mumbling as if chewing on his words. He returned his gaze to Claiomh. This request from the noble girl in front of him who wore the same plainly puzzled expression as the baby Deep Dragon (who at some point had moved to sit on top of her head). It was as if her blank gaze was still possessing that pretty face of hers, and it was at that point that Majic started to waver. He couldn't really explain things after all. Because he didn't really get it himself.

He just knew that something felt off.

"Mh...!"

Suddenly it came to him, the shape of that "something" filling itself out in his head.

Danger.

It was danger. That was the thing he hadn't been fully able to express.

He found himself clinging to Claiomh, putting his arms around her.

“Wha-What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Claiomh all but screamed close to his ear, that shriek resounding in it.

But he ignored that, and instead tried to shout, “I spin thee—”

Along with the spell, in the same moment power began to knit itself into the air like a net. He drew on reserves within his own body in order to cast his spell, and could feel that, along with a self-awareness.

“I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!!”

Kiesalhima’s human sorcerers were defined by how much they used their voice. You could say that it was their primary medium for their craft, the source of their mana. If one’s voice couldn’t fully express their spell, that spell would have no effect. Because without a voice, that spell couldn’t exist.

Majic shored up his own mana before recasting the spell, and making sure his voice and his mana were in harmony was always a difficult task. The success rate of Majic’s spells was never really particularly that high, as it stood. Without being able to cast a successful spell, sorcery couldn’t happen as a process. That’s what it came down to.

In any case, this time, Majic’s spell succeeded, and he internally shouted in joy. As if trying to satisfy his scream, countless rings of light helped form a wall between them and everything else, concealing them. Within the walls of light, Majic fervently prayed.

Please, let my sorcery be able to protect us from the danger I felt...!

And at that moment—

As if piercing the walls of light, a red flash seemed to leap right into his eyes.

“Ahhh!”

“Gahhh!”

The walls of light couldn’t entirely keep out the explosion. Fire violently exploded around them. As if going berserk, the light throbbed harshly — but they were not at the epicenter of the explosion.

It was the Ranger's station. The Ranger's station had suddenly just exploded.

And the moment that sunk in, Majic found that he'd just run out of mana, as the walls of light suddenly faded around them. The aftermath of the blast had knocked him onto his face, which was not a surprise as he was of a petite build. Claiomh had been busy protecting the baby dragon, tumbling over to do so.

For a little while, they didn't speak, feeling like they'd lost all their words.

It was as if someone had wiped the Ranger's station from the earth entirely, leaving no trace behind.

"Wha—" Claiomh tried to say, absolutely speechless, eyes wide.

Majic rose to his feet, and while doing so, didn't say anything, but instead stood stock still. The Ranger's station (or what was left of it) looked like the kind of house that one might see on a cake decoration, right there by the oft-traveled road. It was gouged out and almost crushed and enfolded in gaudy flame.

Stores of oil had already caught fire, casting smoke that was darker than black up into the sky...

"Master—" Majic murmured to himself, and Claiomh found herself sent flying. The blast of wind that still hadn't stopped was blowing her golden hair back, and she got to her feet in a nimble move.

"Orphen!" In a voice that made it sound as if she were shuddering, Claiomh's scream could be heard resounding around them. In a similar mood, Majic groaned within his own head.

If Master was still in that small room... I don't think we can save him...

The Ranger's station was completely gone, and there was a blaze reaching up from what was left of the roof, its smoke blowing straight up into the air. Even Majic, who was a good ways away from the epicenter of the blast, who had finally been able to cast a spell well during such a hideous event... the injustice of that was not lost on him. If Orphen had been at the epicenter of the explosion, then—

Claiomh reacted faster. "We have to save him!" she shouted, running over to

where the small room had been going up in flames.

Majic grabbed her from behind, hands on her chest.

“Wait just a second!”

As if repelled in that moment, Claiomh looked at him.

“Why are you saying something so utterly daft?! We need to help him!” she spat at him, and then continued, “Do you want to get Orphen killed?!”

“N-No, not exactly...” Majic replied to her, as if troubled, but let go of her all the same.

“I’m pretty sure we can’t save him if he was caught in the blast’s epicenter. I mean...”

She turned toward him, glaring at him fiercely, looking upset. It was enough to make him revise his previous statement.

“Basically, we don’t know how Master is protecting himself, right? And he’s way better at doing that than we are. And if he isn’t really able to protect himself at the moment, what makes you think—”

However, that didn’t fully convince Claiomh. “You do realize that Orphen isn’t all-powerful and omnipotent, right?” As she spoke, she adjusted how she held Leki in her arms, then turned to face the Ranger’s station. Without looking back at Majic, she continued to speak.

“He may have lost consciousness in there. Aren’t you even just the smallest bit worried about that?”

“Of course I’m worried, but what I’m saying is that we may actually slow him down, not help him. That, and he’s made it through a lot so far, hasn’t he? Shouldn’t we trust that?” Majic explained. Claiomh tried to say something else, something that opposed that statement but suddenly—

Suddenly, there was another voice.

“That’s right. I hadn’t thought of it that way before but you two certainly do slow me down quite a bit.”

“Huh?!”

Claiomh and Majic turned to face where the sudden voice had come from, but there was no figure to match the voice. In fact, there was no one there at all.

“Who are you?!” Claoimh asked sharply, and carelessly spun around, looking for the owner of that voice. There was no one there, no one there at all, yet—

She knew he was there. Even though she hadn’t sensed anyone else there with them up until a few moments ago, now there was definitely someone else there with them. She could feel it, all the hair on her body standing up, her skin tingling, as if a tide were rising around them. Furthermore—

This feeling... I feel like I’ve met this person before... Huh?!

She also had the feeling she’d heard that voice before, too. Though where and from whom, she couldn’t quite nail down. Just as she was feeling quite puzzled over things, the voice spoke again.

“...Him. Just him alone.”

At that moment, Majic understood. He realized where the voice was coming from.

“Look up!”

As he shouted, he looked up at the sky. There was the owner of the voice.

The mystery man wore a mask, and there was no way to tell what his expression was. However... Majic had the feeling he was grinning.

The man was floating above their heads, about ten meters or so up in the air. He stood straight up, chest aloft. Even with making allowances for the difference in height, there was no doubt it was a man. He wasn’t very tall, from what Majic could tell. He was of medium build, though he was a bit too much on the skinny side, but still athletic. As if all of the weight on his body had been distributed evenly, with no sense of waste. He was dressed in black from head to toe, and his hair was black too. Even the mask that hid his face was black.



Claiomh shouted once more. “We’re asking you who you are! Are you deaf?!”

“My name is a bit too well-known,” the man said smugly.

From a small space between the man’s mask and his face, a silvery light shone down. He was young, Majic knew. There probably wasn’t too much of an age difference between them both. Though saying that, Majic wasn’t sure — after all, he himself hadn’t mastered any kind of spell that would allow him to float like this other man obviously had.

The man — no, he was a young boy — could be heard quietly chanting a spell.

As he chanted, he slowly floated down to the ground. With a gentle thump, his feet made contact with the earth. In the few seconds it took for Majic to fully open his senses, the mystery man had descended to the ground.

Majic reflexively screamed at him, “I release thee—”

However, the other boy didn’t move. From the space between the mask and the boy’s face, they could tell he was looking at them, but he didn’t blink. The boy decided to speak.

“The configuration of your spell is failing. That won’t work on me.”

“Sword of Light!” Majic screamed anyway, thrusting his right hand out into the air... but as the other boy had warned him, nothing happened.

Without causing more than a gentle breeze that was now buffeting his outstretched right hand, Majic found himself utterly speechless. He’d thought since his previous spell had worked he may as well try this one too, but as he was thinking it over, his opponent had already started to move.

“I release thee, Sword of Light.” The boy in black’s voice seemed to have been quelled for a moment, as if waiting for Majic to strike first. His voice was calm, regulated, and maybe that was the way that Majic was supposed to say things. At that moment, in the boy’s right hand, light blossomed—

And in the next moment, Majic’s field of vision was filled with white light. He could neither run from it nor defend himself from it, and the light was hot, so hot against his skin—

Did I just die?!

Without thinking, Majic let out a scream of resolution. And—

With a soft pfft, the light faded away. If he thought about it, having waves of light that strong to just disappear without a trace... And he was still alive.

“...”

The boy was quiet, looking at Majic. Or maybe not at Majic per se, but more like he was looking through him, straight through his back and staring fixedly at something else. And in that direction precisely was Claiomh, still in her bedclothes, holding the baby Deep Dragon to her chest.

“Be grateful that Leki just saved your ass,” Claiomh said. Majic just nodded with a nervous gulp.

Oh... So it was Leki who saved us, huh...

Majic was cold and dripping with sweat, now becoming aware of how he was soaked to the bone with it. Whereas Leki seemed exhausted but not nervous in the least as he hopped from Claiomh’s arms to on top of her head. If baby Leki was tired from dealing with all of this sorcery as a Deep Dragon, then a human would be even worse off. As Majic thought this, he felt a trickle of relief fill him.

He turned back to the other boy, who had been muttering something, in order to hear him.

The other boy said slowly, “Ah, okay. So it was true. There really were some humans that brought this Deep Dragon out of the Forest. I thought Asraliel had been lying about that, but it turns out he wasn’t after all. She toted him out on a whim, hm...”

The boy’s voice wasn’t particularly irritated, nor did he seem impatient.

However, the moment the name “Asraliel” came up, Leki’s ears twitched, his head moving to stare at the boy.

As if Leki were reacting to something, the baby dragon blinked in surprise.

Seeing this, Majic remembered something.

“Asraliel... You mean the Deep Dragon? We allowed him to go free...”

“That’s right, boy.”

Even though the boy's voice and age didn't seem very distant from their own, it was obvious that that wasn't the case, with the way he spoke.

"However, if I kill him, she'll probably hate me for it. Using a Deep Dragon to revive a human sorcerer right after they've died... I don't think it'll work. Even if they're just seriously injured it probably won't work, either. Speaking of which..."

From the gap between the mask and his face, one could see the boy narrowing his eyes. As if speaking to no one in particular, he continued, "I'd be more concerned if he wasn't dead, actually."

"Stop fucking around, brat."

A new voice came from above all of the chaos.

"Orphen!" Claiomh shouted with joy. Even Majic was lured in, and looked above them. Right next to where the other boy had been standing before, there was Orphen, in identical dress, floating above them.

Without a sound, covered in light burns and cuts, moving a bit unsteadily, he floated. Then, as if someone had cut his strings, he tumbled to the ground. And though it was a several meter fall, it didn't seem like a particularly hard landing for him. He landed in between the other boy and Majic, as if protecting Majic, then glared at the other boy.

"Master, you're okay!" Majic said, and Orphen turned to him with a nod.

"I thought I was gonna die... Speaking of which, here's the brat that cast the spell that nearly did me in."

"That's right," said the younger man. "I did it."

The boy listened to all of this, appearing to be amused. Majic couldn't see Orphen's expression from where he was, but he seemed to be rolling his shoulders as if puzzled.

At that moment, the boy moved. His eyes flashed beneath his mask.

"I dance through thee, Corridors of Heaven!"

If the boy only muttered it for a moment, then the result happened one moment later. With a poof, the boy's form changed, becoming hazy before

their eyes. The next moment, he moved before Orphen's eyes.

"Spatial Metastasis! Impossible!" Orphen shouted to himself.

The boy carelessly replied, "It's all fine and good you're so surprised, but a little hard work will give you results like this. You should take notes."

As soon as the boy said that, he flew in front of Orphen's forehead and flicked it with his forefinger. Perfectly aimed, too.

"Ugh!" Orphen groaned, flying a step or two behind him. Majic saw the light disappear from the masked boy's eyes in that moment, and it was visible to both him and Orphen. But it wasn't like he closed his eyes — Majic realized it was more like the masked boy had stopped "seeing" but started "targeting" instead. As if shifting the gears between the two.

The proof of that was that the masked boy was suddenly silent.

"I string thee thus, Glass Hail—"

With a flash, the sky seemed to pop around them.

For a second, not seeing Orphen, he found himself flying through the air.

"Wha—?!"

"Aaaghhhaaghhhh!"

Majic seemed to have a variety of screams in that moment, and was being blown sideways by several meters until he hit the ground. The boy sent Claiomh (who until that moment had been watching puzzledly) flying by being behind her back. She began to rise into the air.

"..."

The masked boy stared at his own palms, and muttered to himself.

"I guess that whole story about dragons blocking magical attacks was true, huh."

It seemed for a second there that Claiomh was about to be sent flying like Majic too, but Lekí's own sorcery had seemed to block the effects of the masked boy's spell. Giving a groan of anguish, Orphen managed to get up from where he'd landed and moved a bit behind Majic.

“Shiiit,” Orphen cursed.

With the pitter-patter of footsteps, Claiomh passed Majic’s side and settled right by Orphen. When she was able to see his face, she said, “Hey, Orphen, are you okay? You sure you don’t want Leki to help heal you up some? It might be a good idea.”

“Nah... These are just scratches, and I only got them because I took my eyes off of that guy for five seconds,” Orphen replied quietly, jerking his chin at the masked boy.

Majic looked at the masked boy and asked, “What do you mean?”

Orphen’s answer to him came quickly. “Right now, in this place, the one with the most power out of any one of us is this little fuzzy black cueball right here.” He was outspoken as he gently petted Leki’s head. Leki tilted his head up, sniffing the air in response.

“...Huh.”

“In second place is that guy,” Orphen added, dropping his lower back into a fighting pose. Claiomh looked at him incredulously, and spoke.

“What are you saying, Orphen?!”

“I said what I said. Majic, you probably don’t understand this yet. For some reason, the masked asshole’s power level is far greater than mine.”

Generally, though imperfect, people who help give spells and sorcery their names have the issue of other sorcerers and their mana lingering in that same space and interfering with the composition and organization of that process as well as the accuracy of things. To a certain degree, that other sorcerer’s power level and ability can only be guessed.

To Majic, with this other sorcerer that Orphen was dealing with and his mana and spells, it was hard to focus and figure out how organized everything was, especially when Orphen’s mana was still lingering in the air around them. It was hard to tell who was more powerful precisely because of all of that lingering mana and spellwork.

Well... If it’s Orphen himself saying it... He would know better than I would, I

guess... Majic thought, looking between his master and the masked boy.

However—

“That doesn’t seem right, somehow...” The boy murmured calmly to himself.

“You’re weaker than I am. If we get that wrong off the bat, we’re gonna have some trouble.”

“...?”

Majic frowned with a squint, not understanding Orphen’s meaning.

Before long, Orphen just stood up. He was still covered in burns and bruises, and it must’ve been quite painful for him. If anyone had touched his flank his voice would have gone higher because of the pain.

“Spatial Metastasis spells... Why are you even using those?” Orphen asked the masked boy slowly. The masked boy did not answer. His gaze was murky, the mask hiding his expression, and the boy just quietly looked at them all in response.

Orphen shouted at him, “You have to use a certain sort of array for that! My teacher invented a special organizational array just for spells like this! A kind of sorcery that regular sorcerers wouldn’t be able to practice by themselves. Even the Thirteen Apostles use it! Any other garden variety sorcerer wouldn’t be able to do that!”

“That’s right. Even the Court Sorcerers have hidden this information within the Tower of Fangs as Highly Classified. However, you can’t get any more Highly Classified information with spells than this, though. This one is pretty high-level,” the boy said, rolling his shoulders lightly.

“I use that array. I use it even better than you do. No, that’s not quite right... My mistake. You’re far lesser in every sense compared to me, is what I wanted to say.”

“Don’t talk about shit you don—”

“Yeah. This is a real boring hangup you have here, buddy. But there’s something far more important at stake.”

The boy quickly pointed a finger at Orphen. Then at each of the rest of them

in turn.

“I was just thinking about things. Just as you previously thought, I sent you the warning order you got this morning. I was just going to stop there, you see. But it seems you have another more important thing for me to destroy.”

“The warning... So it was you after all!” Orphen roared with rage, suddenly remembering the paper on that wall. As if he’d forgotten it in the first place.

Majic took a step forward. He didn’t really understand their conversation in the least. He couldn’t figure out why Orphen was so angry, nor could he quite get the masked boy’s cryptic response.

“Well, of course it was me,” the masked boy declared proudly. “You can’t function alone without me. You need me. I was thinking I should just get rid of your little fan club here once and for all. You know, some old stabbing action and the like.”

Stabbing... Majic didn’t know that term. But when he saw Orphen’s face after the masked man said that, he had the feeling that it didn’t have any good connotations at all.

“But why? That’s what I want to know.”

Orphen was covered in a cold sweat. It was visible on his forehead. He was dropping down further into what was definitely a fighting pose, Majic thought.

Master... He’s really out here trying to fight this masked guy, isn’t he... Majic thought, feeling a bit scared for all of them, and he took a step back. He completely stood in front of Claiomh, and she watched from behind his back.

While Majic moved, the masked boy answered Orphen.

“Because she ordered me to. She wants you to return to how you were before. Anyway, you can’t resist her orders on this one. Just better you give in now, you know?” The boy said to him briskly.

Orphen didn’t reply, instead completely looking like he was going to go toe-to-toe with the kid.

“Don’t let go of Leki! Claiomh, just keep hugging him close to your chest!” he said, a few beats later.

Facing the boy, Orphen started to run towards him at an incredible speed. The Stabber (or so Orphen started to call him, otherwise it would become a hindrance) obviously wanted to dance with him, and why deny him that chance to do so? He aimed for the boy's midsection, trying to contain and direct his own mana. He shot, and then—

The Stabber's movements were very subtle and small. All Orphen could track was how he'd loosened his shoulders, adding more power to his fist, and then through those shoulders, gently pushed his fist against Orphen's chest.

That's all Orphen was able to see.

But, as soon as he thought that, Orphen fell as if he'd been doing a somersault on the ground. Suddenly being on the receiving end of supergravity sorcery made him want to faint. Instead of vomiting blood, he merely had a severe coughing fit. He rolled around on the ground and retreated away from where the Stabber was standing.

"I'm surprised. I didn't think your mana had such variation to it. It seems so painful to me, as someone younger than you," the Stabber said, as he watched Orphen's retreat.

"You little shit...!"

Even though Orphen had only retreated a few steps back, he got back up on his feet. Then Claiomh spoke from her place hiding behind Majic's back.

"Leki! Come on, boy, help us out here. Something, anything would help—"

Even though Claiomh's order was hazy and indistinct, Leki managed to extrapolate the "help us out" part from her speech—

Boom!

For an unsatisfyingly short period of time, the Stabber's body was enveloped by pure white flame. The flames were five, nearly six meters in height, as dense as pillars, and for about half a second at least, completely obscured the Stabber from their sight.

But.

From the fire that still enveloped the Ranger's station, and now these new

pillars of white flame, a voice very resolutely still spoke.

“How stupid. You really think that I wasn’t waiting for this opportunity you so stupidly just handed to me? Even if it is a Dragon’s—”

With that, an arm reached out from the flames and aimed.

“I can’t do two things at once. In this case, it’s both defense and offense, but...”

“DOOOON’T—”

The one who screamed hadn’t been Majic, nor Claiomh, but it had been Orphen.

But the assassin went ahead and did it anyway.

“I release thee—” Claiomh started to scream. “Leki, shield me!”

Majic didn’t think that her order to Leki would’ve given the baby dragon enough time to react.

Even just for oneself alone, defense sorcery took time to craft. It wasn’t something one could instantly throw out there.

Oh no— Majic screamed in his own head, starting to tip over into despair. He looked toward the pillars of flame and the assassin that was hidden within them. Without moving the rest of his body, he stretched out his arm, which was straight at Orphen’s back—

Even if we both do this, we’re still going to hinder him! That one thought managed to slip its way through Majic’s brain, which was so wrapped up in despair as he stared at his half-formed spell. One couldn’t work with overflowing mana; it needed tight control. And because of that, Majic couldn’t spare the energy to protect himself.

Master...

A meaningless scream. Majic squeezed his eyes shut, unable to watch.

And with that, the assassin’s stabbing was complete.

“—Sword of Light.”

Fwooosh!

Because he'd kept his eyes closed, Majic couldn't see the light that had poured forth from the Stabber's spell. He could only feel the heat of that completed spell against his skin. That was the only way he knew that the Stabber's spell had succeeded. The spell which the Stabber had created to stab him.

...

Huh?

He opened his eyes once more.

Majic had no sense of self-awareness whatsoever. At some point he'd dropped to his knees. He was shivering visibly, and he had no sense of that either. He'd stiffened his spine in fear, he thought to himself, and as he did so, he raised his face.

Leki's white flames had disappeared, probably because the flames had absorbed the Stabber's attack in a defensive move. Orphen was in front of Majic, and in a similar position, crouched on the ground. Majic wasn't sure what kind of face Claiomh was making, but from behind his back he could hear her weeping softly.

They were horizontal, close enough to be burned by the light's heat, a straight line on the earth from the intensity of the attack.

One more meter forward and they would've been burned to a crisp for sure from the assassin's attack.

The Stabber's attack had missed his mark.

"That's right. In other words—" As if the Stabber could read their minds, he answered them. He continued, "You can't both guard offensively and attack people."

"...?!"

Perhaps because of Leki's previous attack, the assassin's mask was burnt and had fallen off. A black-haired boy whose sulk was cold peered out at them. At the same time, a boy who was very pure and true to his ideals stood before them.

Leki's attack had also burnt away his clothing, leaving him nude and visibly exhausted before them.

Seeing his nakedness, Claiomh gulped audibly. Leki's defense move hadn't left a single scratch on the boy, which meant...

Even though he hasn't been hurt, and Leki's magic missed its mark... Majic thought to himself, not quite believing it, and he looked at the assassin. The boy's attack had completely seemingly overpowered that of his master's, and somehow, he was grateful that Leki's attack had missed if his master had been concentrating and focusing his mana that much.

Seeing that, he looked to the assassin's right shoulder and saw that it had been badly stabbed. Perhaps due to that injury, the assassin's attack had missed its mark...

But who stabbed him? Majic wondered, looking around them. But what he found was the assassin standing in front of him. The Stabber had been quietly but intensely staring at Majic's back.

"Didn't think someone would chase me this far, honestly," the assassin said in an accusing tone.

The answer to the assassin's accusation came from behind Majic.

"...It's not like I chased you, really. I came to pick him up."

Hearing that answer, Claiomh was startled and looked in the direction of the new voice.

Before them stood a tall, quiet woman.

She had long black hair, which Claiomh was quite envious of as she'd told Majic repeatedly on many occasions, but — it was smooth, straight, dark hair that danced in the breeze. She was twenty-four, perhaps twenty-five years old. She had long sleeves even though summer was near, and wore thin beige slacks with slightly visible red socks underneath. Her expression was sleepy yet sharp, and the assassin's eyes were fixed on it.

"That's one of Childman's two students for you, I suppose. Puts me at a disadvantage," the assassin said.

Childman's classes?

Majic hadn't heard those words before. But, the woman's words had a sense of warmth and familiarity to them. No one really reacted to what she said, and she stepped forward. She approached him, looking up, and soon she was face to face with his knee. Her hand was on Majic's head, though that didn't seem to have any particular meaning ascribed to it.

"Leave, you disgusting little worm. Krylancelo is under my care and protection. Disappear," she said. As if timing things to the rhythm of her own speech, she patted Majic's head.

With a glance to her wrist, Majic saw that she was wearing a thin silver watch, though it seemed that it was an ordinary one.

And—

Oh! Majic shouted within his own head.

She suddenly grasped her own shirt's front collar in her fist, revealing a chain beneath it. She drew it out, and what hung at the end of it was—

It's the Dragon crest! She's one of the sorcerers from the Tower of Fangs!

A pendant with the crest of a Dragon twined around a sword.

It was the exact same one that Orphen always wore. Her fist tightened around it as she spoke.

"I am Leticia MacCreedy, student of Childman, sorcerer of the Tower of Fangs. This is the first time you've gotten a good look at my face, hm?"

"More like I'm getting a look at the blade that just stabbed me. 'A good look' doesn't quite cover it," the assassin shot back, shouting as he pulled the knife from his shoulder, which healed completely. Not even a scar was left. "And from the sounds of it, looks like you've known about me for quite some time," he continued, rubbing his naked chest as he spoke.

She had no reply for that. He rubbed medicine into his shoulder.

"Don't come after me," he said softly. He looked over his shoulder as he turned away from her. "You know that I'll kill you if you do."

Claiomh looked as if she was about to sick Leki on him once more but instead the woman — Leticia, her name was? — reined Claiomh in.

“Look after Krylancelo for me,” Leticia said to her. “That’s more important right now.”

“Kry-lan-celo?” Claiomh said, looking at her in confusion for a long moment before it came to her. “Oh, Orphen? You mean Orphen, right?”

“Ah!”

Hearing that, it seemed that Claiomh remembered something. It had become quiet amongst them to the point where Claiomh wondered if she were hallucinating or if he’d really just left them all.

“Master!” Majic shouted, going over to him. Orphen was still crouched on the ground so still that there was no sense of movement on his part at all, and Majic sat next to him. Majic briefly wondered if his master was in some sort of swoon, and looked around in front of them.

“Are you okay?” Majic asked him earnestly, as his master did not seem okay in the very least.

Orphen was staring into the distance, mouth hanging open as he looked at the empty sky. It seemed like he was in shock. His hands were on the ground as he seemed to be looking at nothing at all. Even though he was sitting, his entire body had started to shake, as Majic just noticed.

“Orphen, are you cold?” Claiomh asked rather stupidly. Leki gently sniffed his temple, pushing his nose against Orphen’s face.

Though Orphen continued to not answer any of them, soft sounds started to issue from his throat.

“Can’...t... be...”

“Huh?” Majic asked him, but after listening in a bit closer, it seemed that Orphen was just repeating those words over and over again...

“It can’t be. It’s impossible. His face... He’s...”

“That’s right. He has your face, Krylancelo,” Leticia said to him. At some point she’d come up behind him. At her words, Orphen felt a violent shiver wrack his

body.

He quickly turned to meet Leticia's face.

This is the first time I've really seen Master so scared of something before, Majic thought, feeling a bit shaken. He could hear Leticia continuing to speak to Orphen quietly, expressionlessly.

"Welcome home, Krylancelo. Even though I wish it were under better circumstances, it's good to have you back."

Once more, Orphen looked toward where the assassin had been. But the assassin had already disappeared.

Chapter III: Homecoming Melancholy

“Whoa...”

After taking some time to attend to their needs, Claiomh was still in her sleeping clothes as she murmured her amazement. Leki rode on top of her head, as if he were a strangely shaped furry hat. She pressed her face to the window of the carriage, and said, “This is a pretty big city, isn’t it, Orphen?”

“Yeah,” Orphen said, raising his face with a small smile.

“Capital city Mebenrest, mercantile city Totokanta, ancient capital Alenhatam, and the autonomous city of Urbanrama... These four cities make up the four corners of this continent. Initially it might’ve been five cities and not four, that fifth city being Tefurem. The Tower of Fangs’ Tefurem, you know.” Orphen said. His pattern of speech, the rhythm of it seemed to sway along with the carriage itself, and together with Claiomh he looked out the window. It was a bit dirty with dust, but beyond the window the city walls came into view. It seemed partially buried into the forest, but the white walls soon stretched from left to right, continuing for as far as the eye could see.

They were in a carriage that belonged to the Continental Sorcerers’ Association, a room that was nearly six heads high on wheels. It was very large inside, though the inner upholstery didn’t change much from the usual.

Its outer circumference was so large that a sofa could fit inside. Its gentle swaying came from springs built into the bottom of the sofa and the carriage. The sofa cushions were quite soft as well. A gas lamp that hung from a hook lit the inside of the carriage, but it wasn’t lit at the moment. The door was on the right side, but the rest of the inside was all sofa, and a table in the middle and between both sides. But the table itself wasn’t so stable you could place a coffee cup upon it without it spilling, since the carriage swayed so much. It became such an annoyance that it wasn’t really worth it to bring drinks with them.

Majic was sitting behind them, and it seemed he was concerned about the

last person in their party, who was sitting with him.

Sitting a bit apart from Orphen was an elegant Leticia.

No, it's Tish, right? Orphen thought, correcting himself. She wasn't looking at anyone, and her gaze had dropped to the floor as she quietly stared at it. The black shirt and pale beige slacks she wore seemed to fit her vibe, quiet and composed. However, she wasn't wearing her Tower robes, and that concerned Orphen a bit.

She suddenly looked up and said, "You know, within the city, there are people who think that way."

"...?" Orphen was quite puzzled at her words for a moment, until he realized this was her adding onto his previous thought.

He shrugged. "Didn't know we were calling out Phillip here."

Claiomh looked over, as if quietly looking down on herself for comparing herself to Leticia when Orphen spoke. She couldn't meet Leticia's eyes, but—

When Leticia forced a laugh, she understood why.

"Wouldn't hurt you to show your face around town now that you're home, Krylancelo. That club sandwich you like so much is still on his menu, you know," Leticia said.

"Tish," Orphen said. It was a quiet warning to back off. She had been taking dark curls of hair that spilled down her shoulders and twining them around her fingers... and he realized that she'd been requesting him to visit Phillip, in a gentle way.

"Oh, sorry. Your name is Orphen now, right?"

"..."

As if being chopped up into chunks, their conversation came to a screeching halt. A nauseatingly bad silence filled the inside of the carriage.

"For the love of god!" Claiomh was the first to break that silence, absolutely fed up with it.

She brought Leki back into her arms from up on top of her head and held him

close to her chest. She patted his head and said, “Just cut it out! I’m so sick of this! First we had someone trying to kill us, then everything in the Ranger’s station including our own carriage got blown away. All of our belongings are gone, and we don’t even have one change of clothes with us now! That assassin also got naked and made us look at that, and now Orphen is hurt, and on top of all of that is my sword! It’s gone! We’ve been rushing around so much—”



Claiomh said all of that in one breath, and she paused to suck in another before continuing. It seemed that she finally had met her limit with regard to the atmosphere in that carriage and how dark it had gotten. She sluggishly dropped her gaze, and with a deceptive lamenting sigh said, “In other words, I’m extremely depressed right now.”

“...”

Unfortunately, no one could really dispel the dark and gloomy vibe of the carriage, but—

There was a meaty thud that resounded through the carriage. Startled, everyone looked for the source until they saw Leticia’s fist resting against the wall. It was clear she’d just thrown in the towel, as if letting them see she’d been acting before.

“Ah, yeah, I give up. Let’s just forget this whole thing, shall we? The vibes in here are downright unhealthy with how dark they are,” Leticia said seriously, closing her eyes and raising her voice.

“Krylancelo, you really did return home at the worst possible time.”

“The worst?” Claiomh asked, in place of Orphen. But instead of looking at her, Leticia continued to look at Orphen and speak.

“If only you’d come back a week later. If that had been the case, surely Tefurem’s current issues would’ve been solved by then.

“Issues?” This time, Majic asked Leticia. But Leticia just continued to look at Orphen, as if talking only to him. She said harshly, “Speaking of which, Krylancelo, you haven’t properly introduced me to your little friends yet, have you? And of course, I haven’t done the same, either.”

“Got it,” Orphen said with a sigh, and put his hand on Claiomh’s head.

“This is Claiomh. She took care of me while I was in Totokanta. That guy over there is Majic. He’s my student. I’m thinking of trying to get him in as a student for the Tower of Fangs.”

“Majic gets two explanations of how you met and I only get one?!” Claiomh hissed from underneath his hand in a hostile tone.

Orphen just sighed again and said, “You want more explanations? Claiomh is a shrew, selfish, ignorant of worldly affairs, a bizarre woman who will hide a blade in your bed. That’s what you meant, right?”

“Just what do you think of me...” she asked him, muttering as if chewing her words.

Orphen opened his mouth without thinking.

“...Finally, the little creature in Claiomh’s arms. That’s her wild beast.”

“His name is Leki, thank you very much. He’s our friend.”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“What do you mean, ‘something like that’?!”

“And... That’s that.” Orphen ignored Claiomh, who was pulling his ear, and instead looked at Leticia.

“This is Tish... Leticia. She’s my senior, of sorts, from the Tower of Fangs. I’m not sure how both of us are in this world, but she has more power than I do. Think that about covers it?”

“Yes, that’s about right.”

“No, it isn’t,” Claiomh said, raising her voice above Leticia’s and moving in front of her all while still holding Orphen’s ear.

“Don’t you think there’s something else you should share with the rest of the class?” she challenged. “Don’t you think you need to introduce yourself, Krylancelo? Never heard of you before.”

With that, a second silence swiftly fell over everyone in the carriage. Majic felt ill at ease, casting his gaze up at the roof of the carriage nervously. Claiomh had frozen, not moving an inch.

After a significant amount of time, Leticia spoke. Orphen looked at Claiomh askance, trying to think of something admirable he could tell her.

“Got it,” Leticia said.

“Tish!” Orphen yelled at her reply. Leticia continued regardless.

“Krylancelo was the class rep for the grade below mine while in class at the

Tower of Fangs—”

“Tish! Stop!”

Claiomh was shocked by how seriously troubled Orphen was about Leticia talking about his past. Regardless, Leticia stopped talking. Orphen looked at her and said, “I’ll talk to you about this later.”

“I think it would be more prudent if we talked about this now, but...”

“For better or for worse, it’s my choice. And this is what I choose, to talk about it later,” Orphen said, though Leticia didn’t seem bothered, as was apparent by her shrug.

From the side, Majic asked timidly, “Um... Is that a problem?”

“It was, yes,” Leticia answered him, making it clear she absolutely hadn’t forgotten what happened, though the other two did. At least, that’s what Orphen thought.

Leticia stared fixedly and earnestly at Orphen, and said, “You know, we’re having a bit of a problem with serial killings here in Tefurem.”

Serial killings? Orphen wondered, and then asked her, “You mean, of sorcerers? That doesn’t ha—”

“I thought the same thing, that it was impossible, that it couldn’t happen with us sorcerers. Anyone who’s anyone would’ve thought the same about people in the Tower, I suppose,” Leticia said, resting her chin in her hand, looking earnestly at Orphen. “But we can’t really say that we’ve got a dead body problem in the Tower, can we? We can’t admit that.”

“Who’s been murdered?” Orphen asked, and Leticia quickly answered him.

“When you say who... Well, it isn’t just one person that’s been killed. I told you, it’s become a very frequent occurrence for us.”

“Wait... Then what type of people have been murdered?”

“All of them have been Elders from the Tower, without exception.”

“...What?” Leticia had just answered him quickly, yet again, but Orphen couldn’t help responding in a dumbfounded manner. Claiomh, who was next to

him, just stared, confused.

“Elders?” She asked him.

He faced her and answered, “The Elders’ Council isn’t quite how you’d usually picture it, I think, but... It’s because it’s different. It’s like being pierced with nails, being around them. The Elders, in other words, the ones who have been there for a long time that have been assigned to office duty, of sorts. And of course, you do have a lot of very elderly people in those positions, but it’s not all of them.”

“But—” This time it was Majic who spoke up from his other side. “Are people from the Tower being killed within Tefurem? Otherwise why else would the killer leave the city and kill people outside of it? Don’t any of the people from the Tower have bodyguards or whatever?”

“I used to live in the Tower,” Orphen said, looking at Leticia.

“And people who usually live in the Tower have the right to live legally within Tefurem’s city limits. It’s not like they absolutely have to exercise that right, but many live in the city because it’s more convenient for them to do so. Most of the Elders have houses within the city and live in them,” Leticia added. “To clarify, Elders who have houses and live in the city... that has an added status value for them, materially. Even us teachers have a house, though many of us don’t really get a chance to return home much...”

“Why doesn’t Orphen have one?” Claiomh asked, truly wondering why.

Orphen answered her quickly but thoroughly.

“I was 15 when I left the Tower. You really think they’re going to give a house to a teenager?”

“You see, everyone in the Tower envies the people who have gained the right to have homes in the city. Like, they wanted to be a teacher, or a part of the Elders’ Council. They wanted nothing more than that. But now, everyone who has a house is probably an Elder, and that’s enough to get you killed,” Leticia said smoothly. She looked at all three of them one by one for a little while, then continued.

“Three people have died in three weeks. This week alone we’ve had two

more. If the killer is smart, he'll take a break. The Kimluck Church's rather spicy take is that it's the Apostles at work, after one of their priests got caught up in the murder spree. Forte Puckingham seems to know the answer to all of this, and he told me. He thinks that thanks to his little network he's been able to get a glimpse at the killer's face."

"The Childman Network, huh..." Orphen said in a fearful tone. Forte had taken over Childman's classes and added his own personal flair to things, creating a top-secret network of spies. But the truth of it lay in the fact that truly no one but Childman and Forte knew how many people were in their network... Or so it was said...

Leticia nodded and said expressionlessly, "That's right. All of a sudden, the senseless murder spree came to a screeching halt thanks to those two. To that end, Forte said that only I can help stop this guy for good."

"But why? You've taken fighting class intensives before, but in order to stop a sorcerer who's also a serial killer, you're going to need a lot more than tha—"

"I don't need any kind of specialized training. No one can stop this guy, after all. It would be wasted energy, good thrown after bad," Leticia said, her face still expressionless save for a small sarcastic smile floating there on her lips.

"On the outside, it seems like with the type and frequency of the killings, he's specifically targeting you by making it seem like it was your work, Krylancelo. The Ranger's station incident... I got a call about how a sorcerer from the Tower was there and in custody, Orphen. Your name came up in Heartia's information sweep..."

She shook her head.

"There were concerns I'd take you and run off somewhere, otherwise I'd have to kill you. So I just went to go pick you up instead."

Probably—

The carriage rolled over a rock and swayed. It's as if the silence in the carriage had made it drunk.

The carriage that they'd borrowed by the Continental Sorcerer's Association continued on, getting closer to the city of Tefurem.

As with most cities on the continent, aside from those with status, no one was allowed to enter the city in their carriage. To that end it became a bit of a walk for whoever wanted to go into the city, but many looked upon that walk favorably, not minding that walk at all. Usually Claiomh was one of those people, however...

Orphen was wrapped up in his cloak as if it were a blanket. When he looked over at her, he saw she was not pleased, not in the least.

“At least you get your cloak. You’re not like me, looking like I’m about ready to risk it all still in my pajamas and then be sent home for it...” She muttered to herself darkly, kicking the road as she walked. Leki still rode on top of her head, wearing a similar expression.

Tish, who had somehow miraculously taken a liking to her, spoke to her. “Well, when we get to my house I’ll lend you something for the short term.”

Claiomh side-eyed her for a moment, looking at how tall she was in comparison, even not while wearing heels.

“I don’t think you’ll have my size,” she grumbled reproachfully.

Leticia sighed, hearing that Claiomh was just past her limit. “Fine. I’ll buy some for you.”

“Yay~”

Instead of warning her to behave herself, Orphen ignored her as they walked through town. Tefurem—

Whatever city you went to, usually the place where the most ostentatious people gathered was near the city gates. Tefurem was no exception, as it had been rebuilt throughout history multiple times. Pass through Tefurem’s gates, and from there the roads radiated outward as if seen through a distorted lens.

The buildings weren’t particularly tall, and they were made of brick. Most of the houses were actually apartments, proof they were fully equipped with running water and toilets. If one looked below the platform these homes were on, they would see the road below them. It wasn’t like Alenhatam, where they relied on public water fountains, and the streets were wide. Even though there were quite a lot of people, you still had the feeling that there was more than

enough room to go around. It might be better to say that the roads were big enough to be town squares in of themselves.

Near the city center, the great white walls soared into the sky. They were slanted, shaped like fangs. Finally, the world map was there as well.

As they walked through the city, there were lots of people around, as to be expected. There was a street vendor selling vegetables roasted on spits, and next to it there was a mini-stage where a youth was singing opera.

Of course, one could also see prospective Tower students wandering around as well. There were also volunteers cleaning up the roads, police doing their usual patrols, people with their shopping baskets doing errands, mothers with their baby strollers, various sellers at the roadside with flowers and other wares, and some young women having storytime with some babies all around them. As Tefurem didn't have any particular system for registration for marriage, no one was really "married" in that sense of the term. There were all sorts of couples everywhere, so perhaps it was babysitters on the job?

"Nostalgic much?" Leticia asked Orphen, who had become speechless.

Orphen didn't turn to face her but replied, "Of course I am."

"Hey, hey!" Claiomh interrupted Leticia, all but dancing in front of her. Grasping the collar of her cloak, she continued, "This is where Orphen used to live, right? In the old days? Whereabouts did he live, do you know?"

"I told you before. I didn't live here. I lived in the Tower," Orphen grunted at her discontentedly.

"Whaaat? So you can't show me around, is what you're saying?"

"If you want to go sightseeing, I can help you out with that," Leticia said, butting in from behind.

Claiomh was the type of girl who, when in a new place, liked to take a look around.

"This place is really wide open for a town, even if it is out in the boonies. Oh, did I make things worse, Tish?"

Claiomh wasn't sure when but she'd switched to using Orphen's nickname for

Leticia when talking to her. Leticia signaled she wasn't offended by dropping her shoulders some, and tried to put a happier expression on her face as she looked up and petted Leki on his back.

"Rather than wide open, there's just a lot of people here. Though... who are those guys wearing the buckets on their heads? Oh, they're selling fish and chips. I love those. Let's get some later. Oh, there's a billboard for a theater! I'm going to go do some recon—"

She said it quickly, setting out to start going down the road to explore. He saw her off, astonished at her behavior, and gave a pained sigh.

"Pretty sure she's overheated or something right now."

"You might be right," Leticia agreed. She heard an odd sound behind her.

"Ughhhh..."

The patter of exhausted feet being dragged across the ground followed the groan, then the groan came again.

"Maaaasterrrr."

"Oh, you're late," Orphen replied shortly but did not turn to face him.

In his place, Leticia spoke to him in a startled voice, while gently tapping her fist on his chin.

"Hey, Krylancelo, pretty sure he couldn't handle the luggage of four people after all."

"What are you saying? Claiomh lost most of her stuff anyway, and you barely had anything at all with you, Tish. So he only had to handle two peoples' worth of luggage—"

"I thought things were a bit heavy so I checked out your bag, Master, and there was a big stone inside of it! The guards at the city gate asked me what it was, and I thought I was going to die, you know!"

Majic spoke, tugging along their luggage, drenched in sweat and panting audibly. Finally, Orphen looked at him, knitting his eyebrows.

"What, you're fine, you big baby. You could handle it," Orphen said, taking his

luggage from Majic. He opened it and pulled out a stone about the size of a human head. “Besides, this rock is important. I need it.”

“You do...?” Majic replied doubtfully. Well, from what he saw, it just looked like an ordinary stone.

Orphen held it at the end of a finger and said, “See, it’s like this. You can tell by its edges, it kinda looks like an old dead cat.”

“Why would you be carrying something that genuinely creepy around with you?! Don’t do that!”

With that, the stone fell to the asphalt with a thunk, and Majic yelled, startled. He stood like that, staring at Orphen, then cautiously approached.

“Are you harassing me? This is harassment. You’re harassing me, aren’t you?”

“Don’t say that. Innocent before proven guilty, right?”

“You’re just saying that because you have to, aren’t you?!”

“Hey Tish, did you know that because Claiomh caught him peeking at her while she was bathing in a river, she nearly killed him? True story—”

“Oh my.”

“Don’t tell everyone about that, please!” Majic bleated a wail, and Orphen waved a hand dismissively.

“Calm down. Check this out instead,” Orphen said, pointing to Claiomh. Across the road, Claiomh was getting into an argument with some rough-looking men. Majic gasped in horror, whereas Orphen looked on calmly, and said, “I’m not really sure how she’s thinking this is going to go, but if we don’t save her right now she’s going to be pissed, probably—”

“Ahhhh!” Majic screamed in fear, and came jumping out at Claiomh. It wasn’t like he was afraid of her getting hurt, it was more that he was afraid of her venting getting her into a bad situation.

As Orphen watched his apprentice hold his head and running over to Claiomh, he had a nagging feeling he was missing something.

“By the way, fighting in this town is absolutely banned. It’s a taboo. Just

because a guy hits you and he hits you back... Guess what? If you fight, you're both going to jail."

"I hate you, Masterrrr!" Majic shouted as he moved closer to Claiomh and further away from Orphen.

In a warm, loving voice, looking on from the sidelines but with a wry smile, Leticia murmured, "My, but what a cruel teacher you are."

"I can't do things like Childman did. You should know that."

"I don't really think that's what the issue at hand is, though..."

"No, to me it is. It absolutely is the issue at hand. When you get a teacher that's absolutely better than you in every way, shape, or form, of course you'd develop a complex, right? In another sense, perhaps it's a good thing to have that complex... Because it keeps you on your toes. Gives you something to really strive toward, you know?"

"..." Leticia was quiet for a few moments, but then said, "So you're doing it on purpose, then? All of this ridiculous acting of yours."

"Not really. I do it because it's fun to torment them."

"Oh, really..."

At her tiredly murmured reply, Orphen turned toward her. Their gazes met, and though they didn't exactly spend enough time to call it "staring" at each other, they did look at one another.

Orphen was the one who looked away first, but Leticia opened her mouth first. She sighed in relief, and said, "But I'm relieved. I was starting to worry based on how you'd been acting up until now. It wasn't like you."

"Not like me?"

"I don't know how to explain it. But it seemed like you were really depressed on the way here, and that really isn't like you at all."

Hearing that, Orphen snorted a laugh. Across the road, the man in leather who had shot hobnails at Claiomh now was being held by Majic by the lapels. He saw that and said, "So what exactly should I do about that? Be my usual, carefree self? Even though I'd just almost nearly been murdered?"

“We’ll talk more in detail about Dark Krylancelo later. For now, let it go and don’t think about it. I’d rather you keep an open mind about this until we can really talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Probably because... I want you to really understand who he is. Because probably only you could do that, I think.”

“...”

Leticia returned Orphen’s serious stare, and Orphen murmured, “So, how’s my cat?”

“...Huh?” Leticia asked him, confused at the sudden change of topic.

Orphen continued, “You were taking care of it after I left the Tower, right? I know it was still a kitten at that time, so I was wondering if it had finally grown up by now or not.”

“Your cat is doing fine, and I’m not giving it back. I’m attached to it now. It likes me more anyway.”

“Same goes for me.”

“...?”

“I have something I need to return to you. Stop calling me Krylancelo.”

She looked at Orphen quietly, her gaze slightly troubled. It was an expression he was used to seeing on her face. From long ago, whenever he’d done something selfish, she made that face, Orphen remembered.

She sighed, the sound as if it were leaking from small holes in her overinflated lungs. She closed one eye, and said, “Got it.”

On the other side of the road, Majic had clearly hit his limit with regard to how frustrated he was with the punk opponents who hadn’t necessarily won that fight. Claiomh gave a shout of joy, pushing him from behind.

The city guard should’ve been out to help break everything up, but Orphen couldn’t help but feel fiercely nostalgic for this city that he loved so much, he thought while looking up at the hazy sky above them.

While he could see that sky anywhere, it seemed to matter so much more that he was looking at it from the city of Tefurem.

There wasn't a sign outside that advertised the MacCreedy Seminar, so the place that housed it looked like a regular mansion.

It was a building that had been remodeled by the looks of it, with a wide garden. It had tall, wide walls around it to keep out the riff raff as well. As they stood outside the front gate, they couldn't really peek inside to take a look at things too well because of that. When one went inside, one found that much of the grounds were surrounded by shrubbery.

The property itself could be found right near Tefurem's bustling shopping district, though it was a good enough ways away to be in a quiet area. There were hills nearby, providing a bit of a windbreak for the property itself. Near the hills were some terraced farms, a place for those interested in starting a kitchen garden. The owner of the terraced fields was someone from the Tower, though Leiticia couldn't quite remember whom.

"Ah, that reminds me," Orphen said, suddenly remembering something.

"You said before that it was your dream to finally own a home, Tish," Orphen said to her, as she led a tired Claiomh by the hand. However, she was listening to what he said.

With a slight smile, she said, "That's right. But it wasn't really about owning a house so much as it was having a family."

"This may be a little rude to ask you, but..." Majic started from behind Claiomh.

"Yeeees?"

"Miss Leticia, do you have any family?"

At his question, Leticia loosened her shoulders and answered, "I don't have any blood family left, no. But I have friends in the Tower with whom I share the same fate. And that's really close enough for me."

"Fate?"

"The sorcerers who are in the Tower of Fangs... most of them are orphans,

you see. And I'm one of them."

"I don't have any family either," Orphen said.

Majic, who wasn't exhausted because of the previous brawl but because of something else, asked in return, "Master, you certainly seem to be a non-standard product of the Tower in many regards, including this one..."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing particularly..."

"Enough," Leticia said, getting between them.

"Anyway, the training that the Tower provides is pretty specialized, so the student death rate remains high. And if you think about it that way, what sane parent would let their kid enroll in the Tower's classes? That's how it is."

Hearing that, Majic's expression turned anxious and uncertain, as if a cloud had come over his face and was hovering there.

"...Master, you said I should enroll, didn't you?"

"If you only enroll, you should be fine. It's not like you're instantly cursed if you do."

"With me, it's like I'm already cursed, so..." Majic bemoaned, holding his head in his hands, and right then—

Bam!

Orphen felt his field of vision swing and move violently. Everything was blurry, and in that moment, he couldn't see anything at all. One moment later, it wasn't just his field of vision moving, it felt like his entire head was, too, as if he'd hit his head on a rock.

"Wha—?!"

He didn't quite scream in fright, but it was closer to a shout of puzzlement. He looked behind his shoulder.

Leticia and Majic were shocked as they watched. Because of the shock of pain that had gone through him, his head was hazy as he pushed through it, scowling —

A small child was behind him with a large stone in one hand, staring at him. She looked to be about ten years old, with thin dry hair in a braid. It wasn't like she was hateful toward him, but more like it was if she had a sense of purpose about her, a devoted vocation in her eyes.

Then she opened her mouth and screamed.

"Second round against the enemy locked and loaded! Ready! Fiiiiiireeee!"

At the same time, the hand holding the stone launched itself in the air.

He didn't look particularly serious about launching a counterattack against her, but he stood stock still and carefully looked at the little girl behind him before doing anything else.

The girl got a bit flustered as he watched her, and she shouted, as if not knowing what she was doing anymore, "The enemy has avoided my second attack! What do I do?!"

Leticia looked at the little girl and shouted just as loudly, "Pat!"

"She a friend of yours?" Orphen asked Leticia, side-eyeing her.

Leticia gave a quick nod and replied, "Yeah. She's one of my students. Still an apprentice, though."

"One of your students? This little thing?" Claiomh asked incredulously.

Claiomh was shocked at how young this girl was. Surely she couldn't be a sorcerer's apprentice at this age! But she was, and it was fairly common to take them in this early. But whether or not Claiomh knew that was the million dollar question.

The girl Pat was slowly but steadily drawing back from all of them.

"From data gathered from the target, it seems he's desperate to launch a counterattack! Agent Pat will hereby withdraw from the field. Well, then, bye now—"

"Wait just a moment young lady!" Leticia yelled at Pat's back. The little girl had been getting ready to make a run for it. As if she were an insect pinned to a display, Pat found herself completely unable to move, hands and feet unresponsive.

While Orphen was dumbfounded by everything going on in front of him, Leticia struggled to keep her anger in check. She did, but just barely, and spoke.

“Pat— Do you think that hitting one of my friends with a rock is good manners? Please, enlighten me.”

“Um... no... Teacher. I mean, Pat was trying...” When faced with her teacher’s wrath so plainly, fear shone openly on Pat’s young face. She said, “Pat is being used.”

“Used?” Leticia asked, her brows twitching.

She looked at Orphen, still smarting with the pain of being hit in the head with a stone, and then at Majic, who’d crept up behind him. Majic picked up something that was at his feet.

“I got hit with this.”

The thing Majic had been holding was a rock, the width as big as the span of his palm. There were no riverbeds within the city limits, so it was definitely a rock used to line flower beds in gardens. Orphen laughed painfully, and took it from him.

“It takes a little more than this to kill me,” he said to Majic.

While he said that, the conversation taking place along the way had evolved.

“‘Used?’” Leticia asked Pat, who was pattering away from her teacher. Leticia got close to her, and Pat’s voice got softer as Leticia got closer.

“Well, um... Nora’s holding me hostage right now... Um...”

“Nora? What does that cat have to do with anything?”

“While you were away, my brother brought something weird into the house!”

As the young girl answered Leticia’s line of inquiry, her voice grew louder, startling the others—

“Who’s ‘something weird’? Forget asking you any questions, when you say something like that, you’re making me sound like I’m some gross dirty blanket or something! I’ll roll you up in that blanket and kill you!”

“...”

Orphen didn't even ask what was going on, and instead held his head in his hands.

"Master..."

"By the way, it's over there."

Orphen looked where Majic and Claiomh were pointing — it was above the mansion's roof. It was on top of the second-story roof, a room in the back, in its window. Above the dark red roof, there was a tall, standing shadow of someone near the two Deva Kings.

Or more precisely, one of the shadows was one of the two Deva Kings, and one more was someone who was in that room standing near the windowsill, seemingly shivering with cold.

He had a blanket as a cloak and wore a sword — a dwarf man. The other man beside him was also a dwarf, but he had no sword. Instead he had glasses, and both had black, prickly hair on their heads.

These were visages that Orphen knew well.

"Oh, t-h-e-m..." Just as he commented on their miserable states, the gate suddenly opened behind them.

"Just when I thought they weren't there! This is what they were getting up to?!" The boy said, looking up at the roof and shouting. Their hair was long and black, and they were perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old.

At the same time, Pat shouted, "Big brother!"

"Why are they causing such a ruckus here, in my home?"

"E-Even if you ask me..."

"You better start explaining how this happened. Right now—"

Tiffes hemmed and hawed, hesitant to speak but drew closer regardless. Orphen stopped right by his shoulders, which loosened.

"Nevermind. It's fine, Tiffes."

"...What's fine?"

"It shouldn't matter if it's here at home or out at Phillip's cafe... You shouldn't

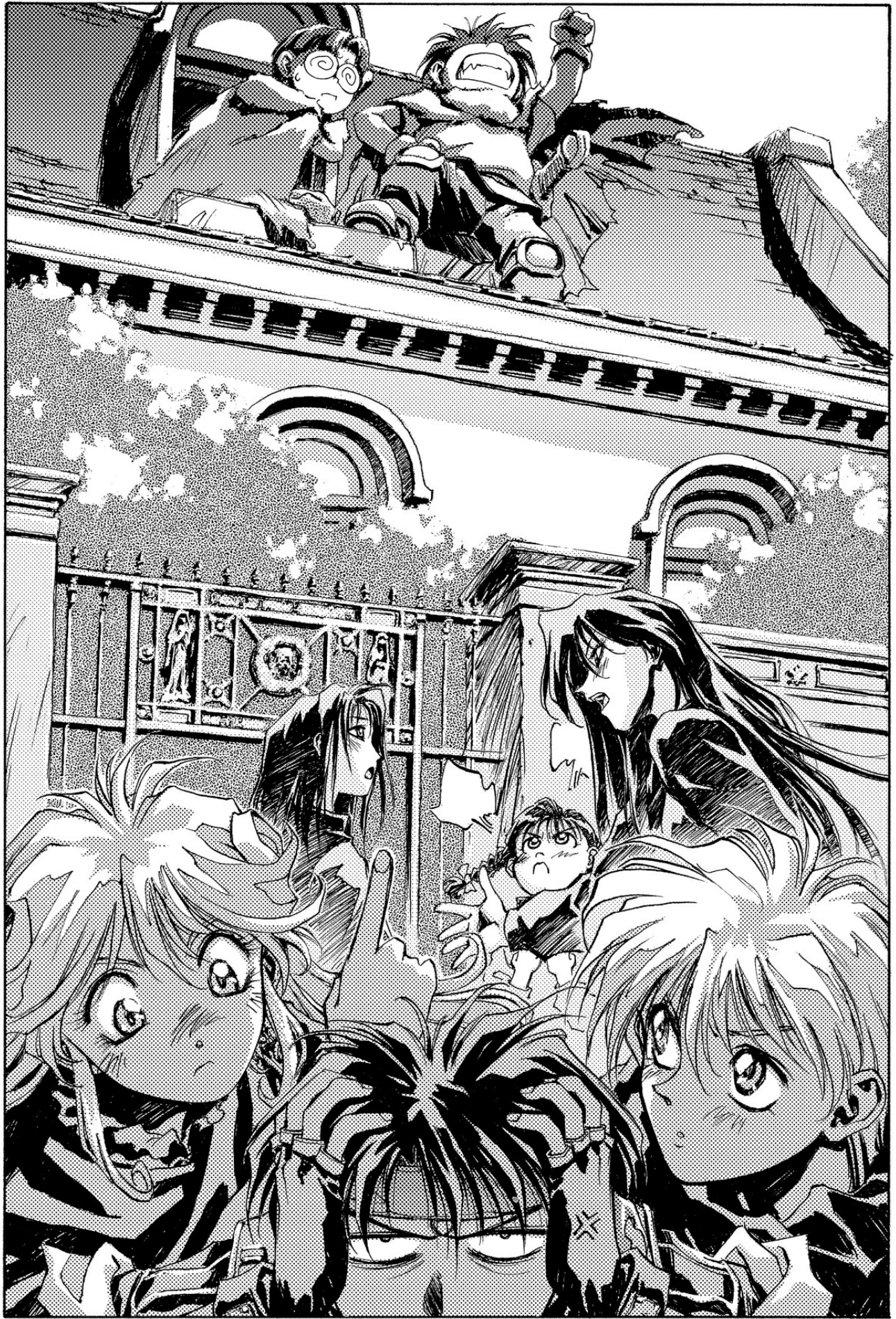
be causing trouble like this anywhere...”

Majic commented from behind him, “If you point things out impartially, it casts a spur into whatever uproar Master is complaining about.”

“Plus Orphen tends to be a trigger for chaos wherever he goes, honestly,” Claiomh added.

“The way you’re both painting me into a corner here...” Orphen muttered, his tone dark, almost dangerous.

Then Tiffes asked, “W-Wait a moment. Do they know you?”



“I don’t really want to admit this or anything, but getting to know them isn’t a failing of mine or anything...” Orphen said darkly into his hand.

The shadow on top of the roof that had the sword — Volkan, yelled.

“If you don’t like us that much you don’t need to get to know us any further!”

“Oh, I definitely agree with that,” Dordin yelled, clinging to the windowsill.

Orphen took a deep breath and shouted, “So is that what we’re going with, Mr. Wandering Tanuki? You’re just going to keep digging yourself deeper like you do at every opportunity anyway, you morons, you absolute fools!”

“Hmph! If we’re morons, you’re King Moron! Overlooking his kingdom of morons!”

“Wow, you really are dumb. Is this a tanuki custom, to do shit this stupid?”

“Before those efforts finally blossom, those with high aspirations have to climb to the top of the world to look down on everything below, don’t you know that?!”

“What do you mean, ‘high aspirations,’ you lucky tanuki! I hope you slip and fall off that roof, so you can create one splat of a blossom that’s as high as your hopes!”

“W-Wait a second there, Orphen,” Leticia said, raising her voice. Orphen rolled his shoulders and looked at her, then said, “What? I’ve almost won this argument. Save what you need to say for after.”

“Are you trying to talk them down? What’s with those dwarves?”

“I mean, even if you ask me... See, I was in Totokanta, and they were being taken advantage of by some unlicensed moneylenders... But to this day they haven’t paid me back for anything I lent them.”

Hearing that, Leticia muttered as if already fed up, “Moneylenders... Is that what you really get up to in your spare time now, Orphen?”

“At first it didn’t seem to be such a bad deal, you know?”

“Haa... Hahahaa!” Volkan laughed forcedly.

He put his hands on his hips, as if this were all part of a secret plan, and

shouted loudly, “This is as far as you go, you impudent moneylending sorcerer! If you take me as your hostage then that only proves you’re trying to hide something!”

Dortin continued, “Though I’m probably sure you do stuff like this every day.”

“Oh, that’s just because you have no ambition! Bring out the hostages, Dortin!”

“Yup.”

With that, Dortin surrendered a black cat.

He held it by the scruff of the neck but supported its torso. It splayed itself out in his arms.

Volkan flaunted it, and gave a big laugh. “Hahaha! Feast your eyes on this evil spirit we caught! This demon! If you go against me, its fate will be on all of you!”

The cat yawned as if bored.

“Nora looks good, doesn’t she?” Leticia muttered to Orphen, who was quiet and nodded in response.

The only one excited about what was happening with the cat was Pat. She’d bought into the dwarves’ threats hook, line, and sinker.

“The targets have taken a prisoner of war! They plan to make her a sacrifice, and they want to use Pat as their puppet! How unjust! How horrible!”

“Yeah, it is a bit unjust now that you mention it,” Tiffes muttered, stroking Pat’s head.

“More importantly, Teacher, they’ve all but laid waste to your study, you know. They pried open the lock and everything.”

“They’ve messed up my study too? Oh, for the love of—” Leticia said, pulling her hair up with a sense of regret. Orphen imagined Leticia’s old room, thought of whatever tools the dwarves had used to pry open that lock, thought of the differences in their efforts and of the dwarves themselves with how they acted.

Though he couldn’t really say it.

“Hey, Orphen,” Claiomh started, turning to him. Leki still rode on top of her head, and he turned with her.

“What?”

“They keep talking about a hostage but all I see is a cat, just what are they going to do with it? They’re not going to kill it, right?”

“I don’t think they’ll go that far,” Orphen said carelessly.

“Man, they get into some wild things, don’t they?” Majic muttered bitterly.

Volkan probably heard that, and he twitched. His bitter smile vanished. He looked at his hand, which was frozen and buried in the scruff of the cat’s neck, and he seemed quite lost as to what to do.

He said, “What happens to this cat depends on all of you. It may come home, it may decide to play outside for a long time. It also may just never come home ever again. Or possibly, because this cat is so cute, I might just kidnap it and you may never see it ever again. So...”

With that he returned the cat to Dortin. He looked over at the rest of them defiantly, and continued, “Strategy number two!”

“Okay, that’s enough. Can’t believe you were going to go there...” Orphen spoke, hefting the stone that had just hit him in his hand.

“Ugh! Anyway, the hostage’s human rights have not been violated, thanks be to god!” Pat screamed to the heavens.

“Which means you were only going to go so far as to fool a child, right?” Dortin said to his brother, stroking the cat’s back.

As if he were going to beat some sense into them all with his sword, Volkan raised his voice and said, “I told you, this was strategy number two! Dortin, stop letting them defeat you and hand over that thing you’re carrying!”

“But you were the one that got hit for this one...” Dortin muttered darkly, and then went to pull another thing out of his cloak. He handed Volkan a book, one volume.

An album...? Orphen thought to himself, trying to figure out what their next play was. They did break into Leticia’s study, after all, so maybe this is what

they stole from it—

Volkan held it triumphantly above his head, laughing with a wide grin. “Moneylender sorcerer! I’ve found out some rather important classified information that is related to your future!”

“Classified, huh...” Orphen muttered, one eye closed, hefting the stone from one hand to the other.

Volkan looked elated as he opened the album and took out one photo.

“You had no front teeth as a child!”

Orphen said nothing, and instead threw the rock at Volkan, right into his triumphant face. Right into the middle of it.

“Ahhhhh!”

Volkan had no choice but to fall off the roof.

Watching all of this happen from the sidelines, Leticia muttered to herself. She pushed her hair back with her left hand.

“Is that the thing he couldn’t return?”

“Probably,” Orphen said, with a long sigh of grief mingled with exhaustion.

Chapter IV: A Pesky Visitor

“Oh, you really don’t have any teeth. It was true,” Claiomh exclaimed as she paged through the album that the dwarves had threatened Orphen with. She wore a short-sleeved blouse and a flared skirt that she’d borrowed from Leticia.

They were in one of the spacious mansion’s spare living rooms. The living room had a fireplace that wouldn’t stay lit (not like it mattered as it didn’t have a chimney to funnel smoke into in the first place), and that was the first thing they noticed. There was also a very strange looking coat hanger (someone had designed it with great passion, it seemed), as well as odd-looking ornaments. There was furniture that had been bought but someone had decided not to use after the fact littered around the room as well as a fake tiger’s pelt laid out above the table that held the albums.

Claiomh sat lightly on the sofa, cooing over the adorable younger Orphen in the albums. Orphen sat with her, and replied to her every now and again. Majic was across the table, and seemed to have the same interest in the old album as Claiomh did. Leki sat at Claiomh’s feet along with the freed hostage cat from before. Nora the cat was maybe half of Leki’s size and was already an adult cat, and kept patrolling about the room, as if troubled by the intrusion of so many strangers.

Orphen watched Claiomh from the side of his eye, and was desperately trying not to take revenge on her by telling her how horrible her new clothes looked.

“I was seven, if I recall the date correctly.”

“Huh... And that’s when your adult teeth grew in?”

That boy in the photos resembled a middle-aged old man, owing to the black clothes and the unsmiling face. He had more of an ambiguous expression. The boy in the middle of those photos had his face cropped out by the frame of the picture so only his mouth was visible. Orphen looked at the photos and remembered.

“I think so. I think I lost those teeth during combat training at the Tower, if I’m remembering that right.”

“Combat—?!” Claiomh exclaimed, speechless.

With a surprised expression she continued, “At that age, they’re really out there teaching you guys that kind of obscene stuff?!”

“Not sure you could go so far as to call it obscene, but... yeah, combat training is pretty normal at that age. It’s the basic of basics. If both of your hands are bound behind your back, you can’t really hit someone, right? So you need to learn how to get out of that rope in order to do so. Just like if something is flying at your face, you need to know when to close your eyes and dodge.”

“T-that sort of stuff is considered basic?” She asked, astounded.

“You mean like that little girl Pat... she’s training to be a black sorcerer and do stuff like that at her age right now?” Majic asked with a serious face.

He’d only become a student two months ago, so of course he’d be curious.

Orphen shrugged his shoulders before answering.

“They do a lot of specialized training there at the Tower. The teachers do seem to enjoy teaching young kids these essentials. And it’s not like there’s tons of kids born within the Tower’s grounds, after all...”

“What do you mean by that?” Claiomh asked him.

“Just that; that these kids are literally born to do this job. The Tower hires people in order to do that. And the reward for that job is you have talented sorcerer children born for the Tower to groom and use. After all, genetically speaking, if you have even one single sorcerer parent having a kid? They’re probably going to be pretty talented in terms of sorcery and craft.”

“Wha— What the hell...” Claiomh asked in a voice that almost felt like it was squeezing Orphen. Orphen just laughed.

“Well, it’s been at least ten years since that happened. The organization’s gotten more morally upright about these things. And in return, that possible percentage of genetically talented kids has dropped dramatically.”

“What...” Claiomh breathed, amazed.

That made Orphen smile. “That’s why we’re thinking in terms of numbers and percentages here now.”

“Ugh...”

Claiomh’s answer reflected how nauseous she looked. Because of that, Orphen reined in his good mood a bit.

“It’s nothing you really need to worry about. They’re not going to do anything terrible to these kids. As I said before, the leaders of the Tower are considering things from a more moral perspective these days. The Tower’s orphanage is largely controlled by public civilian interests at this point, and I’m pretty sure if anything happened to those kids they’d pull them out from the Tower. The Continental Sorcerers’ Association has interests in this too, so if any misconduct happened, they’d also have a hand in things. Every year they come and bring some of their own kids with them, after all. I’m with them, so I watch things too.”

“That reminds me, Master. You don’t have any family, right?”

“Not really, no. Ever since I can remember I was in the care of a babysitter, and my two parents were sorcerers. But that’s about the extent of what I can remember.”

“Huh...”

With that, their conversation came to a screeching halt.

Claiomh flipped over the album and smiled brightly at them. “But Orphen, I was wondering about something... why are there pictures of you in Tish’s album?”

Orphen let himself sink deeply into the sofa, scratching his head.

“Hm? Ah... Well, she’s like family to me, I guess.”

“Because she was in the same class as you?”

“Nah. I was only ten when I entered Childman’s seminar. That old fart was my first teacher, and he dragged me into the Tower, you know.”

Orphen tapped the man not properly able to be seen in the photograph and continued, “I was six when this was taken. But this is when the three of us were

all in the same orphanage.”

“The three of us?” Claiomh asked, and Orphen wordlessly flipped through the pages of the album. Time marched on throughout the pages, and the people in the album grew older bit by bit. Orphen’s photos from ages four and five, and Orphen’s hand stopped flipping the pages.

“Here,” he said, and drew out one picture. Claiomh and Majic followed the movement, their gazes meeting upon it.

The picture was set amongst some roadside trees, three people shown in it. One was in the center, and that was Orphen. It was around the time he’d earned his first black robe, probably this picture was to commemorate that.

His little face was nervous, staring at the camera seriously, as if he’d been lost in thought and had shut up unexpectedly. Another man had his hands lightly resting on Orphen’s shoulders. The person to his left, standing a bit to the side, was Leticia. The Orphen in the picture was young. His hair at the time had been long, and he’d maybe just turned twenty. At his feet was a kitten.

“This was you, right?” Claiomh asked in a breezy voice just as Leki flew off the couch to pounce on the black cat.

The final person in the picture was a bit removed, or perhaps it was better to say that they were slightly out of the frame. This person was also in a black robe with black hair, with brown eyes in which a challenge glimmered, as if something were amusing to them. Their arms were around their middle. They were a bit taller than Leticia. The boy’s attitude in the picture was a bit different from Orphen’s.

Orphen watched Claiomh look at the picture and hazily explained things. “This is Tish and Azalie. Strangely, we all seem to be linked somehow. At the orphanage, the ones who took care of me were these two. They’re both distant relatives of each other, and they’re both sorcerers, even though they have no especially close blood ties. But it was us three in the Tower, always. We were even in the same class together—”

And that’s where he stopped. Claiomh and Majic had stopped listening at some point, looking at something else in that picture. At the bottom of the picture, beneath the kitten, was a caption that had been recorded at the time.

Imperial Year 42, Spring Day 37. The three of us; me, Azalie, and Krylancelo.

Maybe it would be better to take that page out of it before closing the album. But they thought better of it, and didn't act on that impulse. They were shaking with excitement, but didn't take the page out of the album. If asked, they wouldn't be able to explain that excitement. Orphen shook his head, and said softly,

"That's right. I just can't seem to quit them. We're bound by fate, after all."

In the mansion, the layout of rooms wasn't difficult to discern. While Majic and Claiomh were in the spare living room, Orphen was dealing with a heavy heart, wandering about in the halls downstairs. Majic and Claiomh felt a bit tricked by it all. It wasn't that Orphen lied necessarily, but he didn't exactly tell the truth, either.

In reality, he'd gone to talk to Leticia, just the two of them.

I have so much to talk to her about, about me, and about her...

He hadn't seen her for nearly five years, and while he'd reported some stuff to her, the rest he hadn't talked about at all.

About Azalie and Childman, about Heartia too. I have to tell her everything. I have so much to ask her about the Tower alone, and about her students... How did she become a teacher? And when? As if she's a cat and she's been soaked in water, it's like she's lost about two kilos.

As Orphen thought about all of this, he remembered things.

He looked up at the ceiling, the walls that surrounded them, the wallpaper on those walls, and the gas lamps that hung from them. In the hallway, the paper had blue ink leaves printed upon them. A silver-edged, white ceramic flower pot. The closer you got, it looked as if the pot had been wiped every day, clean from dust and dirt.

She's always been like that, a clean freak. I never really was into that, but regardless of whatever she was doing, if something wasn't clean she lost her mind over it. And it wasn't just cleanliness, it was anything about discipline in general when it came to me. Like if I came home after curfew was in effect,

she'd light into me the next day...

Orphen thought with a bitter smile.

Now that I think about it... now all I want to talk with her about is stuff from the past... He continued in his own head. On the back of his instinctively closed eyelids, he saw the past. He saw everything from five years ago. Only five years ago, he was Krylancelo and not Orphen—

He wasn't an "orphan." He had a family, even though it wasn't one connected by blood. He had two sisters he loved more than anything else. And now—

One of them is already gone, he thought in self-reproach. It wasn't something he should think about twice... not ever again. *All of that is over and done now, as of two months ago.*

But not even two full months had gone by.

"...Tish," He murmured to himself, resting his hand on the head of the tall, strangely-shaped flower pot.

"Don't cry. Or rather, don't get angry, because it'll just make you crazy. More importantly—" He said to himself, reaching for the most tenacious parts of his heart. He lowered his head, as if trying to find the strength to keep going, and forced himself to keep a cool head.

Childman had taught him a type of mind control that would allow him to keep a cool head during battle, something he called "mindsetting." And mindsetting was something that Orphen had practiced and trained with a great deal under his teacher.

According to Childman, in order to negate a feeling of being shaken or discomposure, one didn't need to necessarily confront that harsh situation in order to regain a sense of composure.



"If you have enough flexibility with composure in your brain, you should be able to regain enough calm to function. And if that situation doesn't need that sort of composure, that's a different matter altogether. Regardless, if you use that flexibility, you have nothing to worry about for anything that might come

afterward.”

It was a crazy theory, or perhaps it was better to say that it wasn’t even really a theory at all, but instead—

“You see, emotions aren’t something that physically exist. It’s a name we try to put to a bunch of things that exist in our heads. I want you to show white sorcerers that you can control your emotions. And to do that, you don’t need a silly theory.”

—According to Childman, at least.

“In this situation, it seems like once again I do have that flexibility needed to do mindsetting. In your face, Childman,” he thought to himself, though that sense of unease didn’t vanish. He’d intended it to confirm it to himself in thought only, but he found himself speaking instead.

“But more importantly... me talking with Tish. It seems like she really knows stuff about the Stabber.”

Orphen started to make his way through the hallway almost lazily.

He continued to walk all the way through to the courtyard. A little bit off of the center of it was a small passageway, which stretched out into the courtyard proper. There was a man-made pond, with a white bench. He marvelled at it silently. Well, of course someone that was an elite in the Tower would have something like this...

“Leticia had... No, her sister had wanted a house like this, and finally, Leticia had gotten it for her—”

In a deep voice, Orphen murmured to himself.

“If I wanted something like this, I could probably get it. Or something close to this.”

“However, there’d be conditions attached to that.”

“—?!”

Orphen jumped, looking around to see who’d answered him. It wasn’t an especially teasing voice, but instead something like a serious advisor would have. That voice continued to speak.

“First off, you’d have to return home to the Tower, and you’d have to have the same amount of power as before. The elders aren’t stupid, and if they found out you don’t have that same amount of power, they wouldn’t need you. Even if you had that same level of power as before—”

Finally the source of the voice revealed themselves. He stood across from the passage.

Even while he erased his own presence, his shadow appeared. His appearance was very ordinary, like one of the people you’d see around town. Though he hid his face as if he were a guy that played an all-star game once a year, and he wore a red hat as if it were a logo mark from a sponsor. Even if the guy had wanted to temporarily hide his face, Orphen didn’t think he would. There was no point.

Because Orphen knew that boy’s face well.

As if speaking to himself, the boy continued.

“Even if you did get that amount of power back, you can’t erase the way you fled from the Tower five years ago. That kind of stain won’t wash out. Well... May as well try to butter up those elders, because otherwise it might take years for you to curry favor with the people of this town once more.”

“Why are you here?” Orphen asked him quietly. He zeroed in on the other boy, dropped his hips, pushed his left shoulder forward. His mood grew serious, and he moved back a bit as if saving his energy. His foot slipped forward. Anyone could tell he was falling into a battle position.

But the boy continued to give off the same easygoing vibe, taking off his hat. As if he didn’t have a care in the world, he spread his arms wide and continued.

“Why, you wonder? Because I’m here. Here in this city. I’m this city’s assassin. There’s no one else like me here.”

Orphen finally was in the mood to move, and he shouted in rage. The boy in front of him really seemed to be the him that was in the album he’d just seen. And that made him—

Five years ago, his name was Krylancelo, and the assassin boy in front of him certainly did look like the boy he used to be.

“You’re the Tower’s Krylancelo. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yeah. It is.”

The boy — Krylancelo nodded, readily agreeing with Orphen’s words.

Orphen quickly pointed to himself, and said, “I’m here! Me! This is me! Who the fuck are you?!”

“I’m Krylancelo, my dear boy. Who else do you think I’d be?”

“You think I know? I don’t plan to play around with words alone, here—”

“Great, because neither am I. But look at me,” Krylancelo said, pointing at himself. Orphen looked at him, coldly appraising the self he was five years ago. Unbeknownst to himself, he swallowed his own spit.

No matter how you cut it, it seemed that the other boy was indeed Krylancelo. That was unmistakably true. The current Orphen didn’t look much like his previous self. How strange that was, he thought to himself. He wasn’t sure if it was because it was the look in the other boy’s eyes, or perhaps his physique had changed—

The boy named Krylancelo was only that — a boy. His outward appearance wasn’t anything to really write home about. Only that he was someone who belonged to the Tower, a genius sorcerer with a cunning as sharp as his wit. He was the best black sorcerer on the continent, now the best assassin on the continent as well. He’d been Childman’s best student in fight training and assassination techniques, and it showed. He’d also been the apple of Childman’s eye, his favorite student.

And that fact echoed far and wide throughout the continent, all the way to the other side of it, to Mebenrest. Mebenrest was the capitol, where the Thirteen Apostles plied their craft at the Imperial Court. He’d even been scouted by them. It had been like being thrown into a boiling pot at the tender age of fifteen years old—

If you ask anyone who has had a look at this guy who the real Krylancelo is, they’d definitely say it’s the other guy...

I’ve changed so much. And I’m so much weaker than before—

“That’s right,” the boy grinned widely.

“I am Krylancelo. You’re Orphen. Because you left this city, you split off from me and became someone else.”

“Are you saying that you’re the ghost of Christmas past, here?” Orphen at some point had slipped out of his defense pose, his body slumping forward. His back was hitting the handrail of the passageway quite hard, yet he clung to it.

And as if realizing something, the boy raised his face and looked at Orphen.



“That’s right. That would be close to what I am. Yet that’s not very realistic...”

“Realistic?” Orphen asked, rolling the word around in his mouth before continuing. “Realistic?! So if I poke you, that kind of word comes out of you, huh? So what if a guy that is basically you from five years ago shows up, then tries to kill you — And that’s not all, he’s trying to kill people unrelated to you entirely! How would you react? You didn’t need to kill that Ranger!”

“He realized I was there and that’s why I had to kill him. I just came to warn you about something, and he saw my face,” Krylancelo said carelessly. He continued, “Besides, you’d been so deeply, almost sickly asleep — to the point where I was able to go to your bedside and grab the pendant right off of your body. I mean, I’d also erased my presence to keep you from waking up, so that helped too. But that old man realized I was there. Even though he’d been asleep, he woke up and saw that I was there. Of course I had to kill him. You really think I’d do that for fun?”

His gaze turned piteous, and he continued. “I wonder if you can understand that. I hadn’t realized it, myself. After I’ve said all of this... the Ranger is the only one I’ve had bad feelings about killing.”

“...!” Orphen’s throat closed, and his body stiffened up. But he still opened his mouth and spoke in a small, weak voice. “You’re not Krylancelo. Even the me of five years ago wouldn’t have killed people. I couldn’t have.”

“You mean you could probably do it now? Otherwise... Maybe you shouldn’t phrase it like that. People will misunderstand you, you know.”

“Who would I say that to?” Orphen muttered, grinding his teeth.

Krylancelo sighed in disappointment, and continued, “Haven’t you realized it yet? Well, whatever. Back to the subject at hand. What you’re telling me is that I’m not the you of five years ago. And to that I would say, sure, okay, because I have no idea if that is correct or not. That isn’t what I am. I’m just Krylancelo. That’s it.”

“I was named Krylancelo five years ago!”

“But you weren’t Krylancelo because someone wanted you to be, right?”

At that heart-wrenching statement, Orphen could feel himself stiffening further. Within his own head he was screaming and crying the opposite of what Krylancelo was saying, and he'd done this several hundred times as they'd spoken together. He couldn't look at the other boy's face.

As if carping over satisfaction, like old school nobles used to do, the boy laughed, thoroughly amused by their back and forth.

"I am here because she wished it to be so. I exist because she wants me to..."

"Her...?" Orphen asked him suspiciously.

As he answered, Krylancelo had been laughing with a wide cat's grin, but it soon froze stiffly on his face.

"She's her. That's all she has. You of all people should understand that."

"..."

"Anyway, see you around. If I linger any longer Tish will figure out that I'm here, so—"

"!! Wait!" Orphen suddenly jumped over to him, as if he were about to hop on the other boy's back and ride him around like a horse. But, the moment Orphen brushed against him, Krylancelo's body disappeared with a soft poof.

"Space Metastasis?!" Orphen blurted in shock.

But the moment right before Krylancelo disappeared, there was no spell chanted to start that piece of sorcery.

"It wasn't... vocal sorcery?" He knit his eyebrows together in confusion and looked at the space where the boy had disappeared. What was left behind was a butterfly of light, white light that was almost miraculously left behind. It was a scar in the space around them, about the width of a finger in size. The scar was like a small twinkle, and with the sound of a lamp's wick flickering, it went out.

Orphen did have a memory of the small scar that the light had left behind.

Were those... Runes...?

Runes were a type of glyph, or lettering, that the Nornir Dragons on the continent used.

The Nornir, basically the dragons and their magic that should've disappeared from the planet at the same time the Celestial Beings did, but they didn't. One could see their influence in the ancient ruins from that time more or less anywhere all over the continent. It was hard to get one's hands on that magic, too.

If one deciphered their Runes, one might be able to gain the power with which to use them... though it would be several varying levels beneath what it would be like in the hands of the Nornir at full power.

Could it be... Maybe this morning when Leki basically absorbed his power and didn't get hurt at all... could it be that when that happened, the boy used some other spell to ensure that he could disappear without a trace now? If it were abyssal sorcery, there would be no way to guard against that...

Orphen dropped his shoulders and sighed.

"Anyway—"

He raised his face and continued talking to himself.

"It looks like up until now, all of our enemies have been downright convenient to deal with. This guy? Not so much..."



It seemed that Orphen hadn't realized it, but the roof above the passageway had a huge blind spot to it. If nothing could be done, then nothing could be done about it.

But...

Even though she said it in her own head, he stopped halfway.

She'd been listening to them talk the whole time. She didn't remember anything, but instead let their words flow through his ears.

It wasn't like she wasn't interested in this. On the contrary, this was fascinating to him, to the point where he wanted to participate, too. When Orphen asked Krylancelo why he'd been there, the answer was obvious; "Because I'd wanted to talk to you, Orphen, and so I searched for you."

Or perhaps, the wind gently fluffing up her hair as she sat by her window had

been too wonderful to ignore, and she'd fallen into a trance thinking about it. Perhaps it had happened like that. She wasn't sure.

Leki, who was still riding around on her head, got a pat on his back.

He gurgled down deep in his throat something like a purr in response. Orphen had sworn up and down that Deep Dragons couldn't really make noise, much less howl or purr or anything like that, but Leki had disproven that already. When it was just Leki and Claiomh, he let himself purr.

"..."

As if lost in thought, he tried to add to the conversation, mouthing at one of her fingers—

"Good boy. It's decided then."

As if she'd made up her mind, she whispered to herself, and quietly closed the window.



"You little shits, locking yourselves in here like this, you're just a bunch of mommy's sissy boys, aint' cha?"

Once you got away from the jeers, you could hear it.

With a sigh and a change of facial expression, he looked over there, scratching his head as if to say, "There's just no helping you, is there?" and for a little while, Orphen stood stock still right underneath the passageway, though he started to walk a little ways away from it.

There was a little detached house, something that Leticia had built after she'd taken custody of the mansion. The white walls that had barely any dirt on them attested to that fact. Orphen got closer to the entryway as he walked away from the passageway, and casually looked into one of the windows.

And from one of those open windows, the angry jeers came forth once more.

"Even if you try to tie me down with all of your warnings, you'll never make me lose my fighting spirit! Since the day they started calling me The Hellhound of Masmaturia, I am Volkan, the man that has never been defeated—"

“Shut the fuck uuuup!”

The person that had shouted had not been Orphen.

The noise was coming from three rooms over, where Orphen was peeking in through one of the windows. The window showed the entryway and the main hallway and the entrance to the first bedroom. The door to that room had been left open, and that’s how Orphen was able to see everything, but about half of the rest of that room was completely in a blind spot.

From what Orphen could see, that room was like a small study for children. Various book spines on the bookshelf were probably from books that belonged to Tiffes. It was Tiffes, Pat, and Volkan, who had been pushed into one of the big vases which now covered him from head to toe, as well as Dortin.

Anyway, Tiffes had been the one to shout the profanity at Volkan. The boy shoved his long black hair over one shoulder and continued, clearly miffed.

“I don’t know what you mean by all of that, but thanks to everything you all did, I don’t think you understand what kind of position you all have put me in!”

“It’s as my older brother says,” Pat said, chewing a mouthful of a candy bar that was in her fist.

Volkan rolled around, trying to get free of the pot, but failed to do so. He said with a straight face, “Are you really trying to place the blame of your failure on me, young lad? You’d best not, as I am a grand figure carved into the history books—”

“What history, big brother?” Dortin asked.

Volkan looked over with his neck only and replied, “You little shit! You’re my little brother, so how about lending me some support here? You know I’m carved into this town’s history books but by another name! Or did you forget that?!”

“Wait, don’t tell me. Are you saying that you were the one to carve a likeness of your own face in Rengokin’s stone wall in his backyard?”

“That is only one of my major achievements, I’ll have you know.”

“I’m still not sure how you managed to do that all in one night. You know

everyone in the village was really worried about that for weeks, and it turns out that the culprit was here all along...”

“Ahhhh!” Tiffes screamed again, holding his head in his hands.

“You haven’t even reflected on that behavior at all, have you?! You tell me this now, after I bring you home because I feel sorry for you guys and how you had nowhere to stay?! It’s not like I’m going to demand that you all pay me back for this favor I’m doing you, but still...”

“You don’t need to demand a favor out of us, but I was hoping you’d ask us to be your friend at the very least, you know...”

“That’s completely wrong! Ugh, I’m afraid that Teacher’s gonna come after me. I wonder what kind of punishment she has ready for me,” Tiffes muttered to himself darkly, looking over at the brothers with a sigh.

“Huh What are yo— Ah,” he breathed when he saw Orphen coming over to them.

Orphen raised a hand towards them and spoke.

“Is it okay if I come in?” Orphen called up to him.

“Ah... Yeah, come on in,” Tiffes said, making his way down the stairs to the entryway with soft steps.

It wasn’t as if the door was locked, but Tiffes still went ahead and opened it anyway, allowing Orphen in.

Pat was sucking on a piece of hard candy, looking at Orphen and Tiffes curiously. The two dwarves managed to get Volkan unstuck from the pot and they lumbered over, their bristly heads bobbing with their steps as they spoke.

“Ah, and here he is, that rascally moneylending sorcerer. Have you come to settle the score with me?”

“...I mean, I thought you already had settled that score, big brother, but I could be wrong...”

Volkan and Dortin narrowed their eyes and squinted at the rest of them. Orphen gave a tired sigh.

“Okay, guys, I have a favor to ask.”

Volkan stared blankly at him. While Orphen seemed to be stuck in thought for a moment, he replied, “Us and Tish have been in negotiations, if you know what I mean. We’ve just been currying her favor so she’ll let us stay around. She’s let us do what we want more or less, and in return she wants us to do some work for her... Something to that effect.”

“...”

It was completely unexpected to Dortin that Orphen would ask anything of them at all, he thought. So he asked in return, “A favor? From us?”

“That’s right,” Orphen said. He side-eyed Tiffes and continued, “You don’t mind, right?”

“N-Not really, no...” Tiffes’s face belied nervousness as he looked to Orphen, who looked to the dwarves.

“At night, what do you two get up to?” Orphen asked them.

“Huh?”

“When you ask that... When we’re out sleeping on the roof, it gets hard for us to look for money after it’s gotten dark out. So we usually just go right to bed.”

Dortin answered them, and Orphen took over from there.

“Do you think I could trust you two to look for someone for me at night?”

“Looking for someone...? Isn’t it harder to do that at night? Besides that, wouldn’t we need specialized knowledge of the city we’re looking around in as well?”

“Nah. We’d totally stand out—”

Orphen exhaled a long breath.

“There’s a murderer out there on the loose, and I want you to tell me where he is.”

Chapter V: An Evening Walk

“You sent the dwarves out on a search for someone?”

“Because their eyes catch glimpses of things we don’t. Also, they won’t charge me anything for this little field trip they’re about to take,” Orphen said, kicking the empty pail near his foot suddenly. It had been brought out to do some cleaning, but when that was to take place was anyone’s guess, including the bucket’s. Instead it had been abandoned where it lay. Even though the bucket wasn’t alive, from Orphen’s point of view, the way it was face up made him think it was a creature full of pride, head held high.

Orphen raised his face.

Leticia’s study should’ve been huge, but aside from the bookshelf that was crammed with various heavy documents, the box of papers that had to be destroyed, the bundle of ink that had been forcibly crammed into letters... The quantity of miscellaneous items that occupied the study and bundles of papers everywhere that had yet to be stashed in other places was truly approaching oppressive levels and reminding everyone of how narrow the room was, piling up and blocking the light, creating a gloomy atmosphere.

In the mostly darkened room, little motes danced in the shafts of light that were there, a small whirlpool, a vortex of them seemingly engraved into those bits of light.

There was only one window in the whole room, and next to that window stood a tree-like pillar that looked like a windbreak. The sunlight rarely penetrated that place, near that pillar.

She stood in front of that window.

Orphen watched the dust motes in front of his face dance a little more, and somehow he found it in himself to ask her.

“Why is it that even though you’re absolutely a neat freak and clean obsessively that your house and all of your papers are in this ridiculous state?”

“It’s not like I can trust the janitors at the Tower with these documents, right? There’s a whole lot of top secret stuff in those documents. I can’t exactly go around showing them off or allowing everyone access to them,” Leticia said, her eyes on the hazy moon floating in the sky outside the window.

“Those papers you’re trampling on right now were obtained for me by some of the elders’ connections, you know. They’re highly classified.”

“Wha—?” Orphen yelped, moving his foot in a near panic.

“If that’s the case, then why the hell are these highly classified and important documents on the floor?”

“Oh, that’s because they already expired years ago,” she said quickly, and turned to face him. Her long hair framed her quiet, thoughtful face, but it was already facing Orphen. Her gaze seemed as if it were a sleepy one, a languid one—

“Now then, Krylancelo. Let’s return to the subject at hand, shall we? It seems you sent those dwarves out on a wild goose chase for you out in the city. Just what the hell are you trying to achieve with that?”

“I don’t have to say it. It should be blatantly obvious by now.”

“I told you, didn’t I? Don’t think, don’t waste any energy worrying about the Stabber.”

“Don’t think... Don’t think about him?! He tried to murder me, you know. And on top of that, he’s using my name to do all of that shit!”

“And that’s exactly why you need to refrain from thinking about him!”

Leticia pounded her fist against one of the filing cabinets there in the small room. As a result, one of the corners of the bound documents crumbled entirely, falling to the floor.

Orphen’s face was contorted with rage, and she returned a glare of equal intensity. Even if the room was very small and cramped, it was a wider room before. Even if it was just the two of them in the room, it wasn’t like they were very near each other. In the middle of the scent of dust and fungus that was in Orphen’s nose, she could smell less of it than he could.

Though their expressions made it impossible to tell who noticed first, Leticia stiffened briefly, before letting the tension drain from her muscles.

“Well, I’ve got some alcohol if you want some. I sure would love to have a nightcap—”

“How do you have time to sleep? I don’t have time to do that. We have an assassin to catch. You’ve gotten orders to do that, right?”

“Yes...” Leticia said, her hair hiding her face as if she were hanging her head. “I’ll explain the situation to you. He— ‘Krylancelo’ as he’s calling himself, so let’s use that for convenience’s sake. As of at least two weeks ago, anyways. This morning, he decided to reveal himself to you with the attack on the Ranger’s station, and it seems he’s been going in and out of town for a little while now. He only acts at night. But the elders of the executive branch of the Tower seem to be this guy’s main target. And suddenly these elders are urging that we act very, very cautiously. Yet five of them have been murdered so far. Any questions?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking me that? You have some questions for me, don’t you?” Orphen muttered in retort. Her face twitched in annoyance, but all the same she nodded.

“Okay, then. Here’s a question for you. Ever since you told me what happened, I’ve had some doubts about something, but you’re under no obligation to answer me. First, what do you think Krylancelo’s motive is?”

Orphen folded his arms and answered her quickly.

“If he’s just targeting the elders, I can think of a lot of motives. One of which is crushing the executive branch of the Tower altogether. Another is that he may just want to send the executive branch into chaos, or even just paralyze it for a bit. But let’s be real here, the only ones in the Tower actually doing anything and going after Krylancelo are those from Childman’s classes, right?”

It was pure conjecture on Orphen’s part. But, as he looked at her, he realized it wasn’t entirely a shot in the dark, if Leticia’s pained laughs were anything to go by.

“Well, yes. It’s just me and Forte, if I’m going to be correct about things.

Comicron died in an accident two months ago, Heartia's in Totokanta, we don't know what Corgon is thinking of doing, and Azalie, well—" She shook her head in denial, carelessly spreading her arms.

"More importantly, more than anything else, we don't know what Childman is doing! Professor Childman Powderfield! It's been a little more than two months since he disappeared... Even Forte doesn't know what's going on with him. Well, I guess we..." The rest of her sentence got lost as she murmured to herself weakly.

"I should've known before that we wouldn't have been able to do anything about Childman. If he does what I think he's gonna do, by hiding and then catching someone's leg in order to bring them down... Whether it's two months or twenty years, I don't think we'd be able to find him if he didn't want to be found."

"..." Orphen was silent as he listened to her complaints. Most likely because he felt the same way she did, or perhaps because he didn't care at all. Leticia raised her face above the bookshelf.

"One of the first thoughts I had was that this Krylancelo was trying really hard to get all of the Tower's operations to come to a screeching halt. As soon as he started aiming for their heads, things started to atrophy, to the point where it was like the Tower couldn't get anything done. No matter how stable the Tower's ops looked on the outside, that's what's really been going on in the inside. Even in compliments, it isn't exactly like people are praising the Tower for being the strongest organization around at the moment."

"...Wait, what?" Orphen asked her, not understanding what she was saying. She was taking stacks of documents off of the shelf, and in the palm of her hands was a tiny bottle. She remembered that the label had "distilled spirits" written upon it. Instead of unstopping the cork and opening the bottle, she merely rolled the bottle around in her palm as she spoke to him.

"Even the newbie apprentices know that the elders aren't the ones truly in control of the Tower."

She continued, "Childman's classes had the most powerful black sorcerer teaching them, and yet after Childman's disappearance, the Tower's

contingency plan was basically lost along with him, and quite rapidly at that. Forte has already changed from the class's longer robes to shorter robes now given to teachers and professors. You didn't know that, right? Other classes, especially those composed of younger grade sorcerers, you can tell they know something's wrong. And they're letting us see that reaction in them. In Forte's teacup, there were small pieces of glass mixed in. Of course, it was glass soaked in a lethal dose of poison. It seems like Forte knows who did it, but he didn't even bother letting the brass know. He just dealt with it himself and was able to take control of leadership that way. Just like Childman would do!"

As she spat vitriol, her words reminded Orphen of how five years ago, she'd heavily suspected Forte of having other motives. Leticia continued, her face reddening with anger as she spoke.

"I'm not kidding around here! What's the point in giving these impertinent kids the power to try you in some kind of kangaroo court? What kind of leadership is that?! I'm scared of that sort of scenario coming to pass. At this point, aside from those with regular professional duties, there's no one else that can harness power like the elders of the Tower can. They're even making it so that you don't need to wear the robes. All of this posturing has gotten dangerous. Within the Tower, everyone is at each other's throats; the kids, leadership, Krylancelo. This is a mess."

"...If that's the case, then Krylancelo's motives may be something different altogether and that's now starting to come to the forefront of things."

"Yeah. The impact of Childman going missing is starting to trickle down throughout the ranks in the Tower, and it could be that for the sake of making things even more messy, someone has a plan to use that to their own ends."

"It also could be that the elders fear the coming of a 'second Childman' as it were, and because of that, someone is taking advantage of that fear by murdering people unilaterally. And if that's the case, well, it's a pretty sketchy plan... It's different from an opera choosing its latest primadonna. For someone to gain power at the Tower, it doesn't matter what kind of career or methods they held in the past, none of that matters in the least. Childman, who used to be an assassin, definitely set the precedent there."

“As for me personally... I don’t need power. What I want is a place where I can live normally, and in peace. So, in exchange for handing Forte the reins, giving him the job of being an elder in the executive department, even if I did just get this house and a chunk of leadership...” As Leticia finished her sentence in a mutter, the tone of her voice dropped greatly.

She put a bottle of liquor on top of the desk, and in a more relaxed tone of voice, continued, “Secondly, regardless of motive, the means? Even if they had advance warning, they should’ve had a good, strong guard that followed them around even during normal circumstances. If that is indeed the case, how did so many of them get cut down so quickly? When morning came and there was no sign of life, and those bodies were found... Even Childman’s Network only got a brief glimpse at the assassin’s face! The places where all of these crimes took place were found to be ill-suited for ease of capture, too.

“Well it all happened, right? I’d hoped they’d find a way to capture him regardless of how hard it would be to do so. However, I’d be willing to bet there really aren’t that many on the continent that can dodge the Network’s ‘eyes.’ Here in the west alone, I can only really think of maybe two people.”

“Whom are you thinking of?”

“Krylancelo and Childman.”

Leticia’s expression warped into something sarcastic.

“My little brother and my teacher... Just who the hell do you think did this? Huh, Mr. Orphen?”

Orphen gave her sarcasm right back. “Your little brother dropped out from Tower school. Do you think I’d just come back here to Tefurem and think to myself, ‘Gee, a little more murder is what this town really needs, so let me go ahead and help with that?’”

“Then, are you really saying that my teacher had something to do with this, then?”

“Hell no, Childman is out of the question. If that were the case, he’d never be able to return here or back to the Tower ever again.”

“You definitely seem like you’ve got some confidence saying stuff like this,

though. Do you know something about what's been happening? Do you know anything about what happened with my teacher disappearing so suddenly?"

"No, I don't know anything," Orphen lied. While he said that, her eyes narrowed and she watched him closely, looking for a tell. And it was clear she'd realized that he was lying, but she didn't say anything in response.

Or it could be that Tish really does know that something happened to Childman, and is just slightly realizing it now? Orphen thought to himself.

Leticia asked, "Then that means it wasn't either of you, then. What about those from the Eastern part of the continent? Could it be that they've invaded this city? If you're serious about this, that means they'd have to be as good as the Thirteen Apostles to be even remotely considered a threat, you know."

"If that's the case, then Forte would be making a huge ass deal out of that, wouldn't he? Because it seems that he has all of the capitol in surveillance. Even if The Apostles' apprentices went outside of the capitol and some flowers fell on them from a tree, I guarantee you Forte would know within seconds of it happening through his little network."

"Hey, Krylancelo..." Leticia started tiredly, a faint, bittersweet smile hazily appearing on her lips.

"You know, we can see who the Stabber is now, right? Thanks to the fact that he got attacked by a Deep Dragon, he can't hide anymore. Even if he disguised himself, he can't hide the fact that he got burned pretty well. He was, without a doubt, Krylancelo. Right?"

"Uh huh," Orphen admitted.

Leticia breathed, and it looked painful, before continuing. "That's for sure. However, I'm not saying this seriously, you hear me? Got it? I thought about this after you were attacked by him this morning."

She continued, "Like, 'oh, my Krylancelo is trying to kill someone I don't know. Someone I don't know with black hair... Who is that man?'"

"I think that he's probably the Krylancelo that someone wished into existence."

“...?” At her quizzically raised eyebrow, he hollowed out his own emotions before continuing.

“He’s not me. He’s basically an idealized version of the child that Childman helped raise. Whoever helped create him heard Krylancelo’s name, and this was the picture that name painted. Someone could look at him and think he was the Successor of the Razor’s Edge.”

“Krylancelo! That’s not what I meant when—” She said, moving as if she was about to kick the shelf, but he took her hand to steady her. In reality, it seemed that she regained her balance by using sorcery, her movement stopping entirely.

Orphen said to her quietly, “Ask me the third question.”

“And this is where I tell you that he’s definitely not Krylancelo, but rather, just some regular assassin. And if that’s the case, who’s his sponsor?”

“And that would be someone whose motive rides on using someone named Krylancelo to do their dirty work in order to kill off the elders. Which would be...”

Orphen sighed disappointedly. “Forte honestly seems to be the most likely candidate there, as much as I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Yeah... He’s a part of the family, for better or for worse. Now for the fourth question.”

“Go for it,” Orphen muttered. Leticia looked at him so long it must’ve hurt her eyes.

“Have you come to hate me, in the time you’ve been away?”

“...What? I don’t understand.” Orphen answered her question with his own, blinking at her in a confused stupor.

Even though she’d just got done warning him, more or less, she nevertheless pressed for an answer.

“Even though I’m single, I bought this big stupid house to live alone in. Do you think that was stupid of me? I’ve been waiting for you to come home for five years.”

She pointed to herself, her study, and then outside the study's window before continuing, "Because I always thought you'd come home one day, I thought, wouldn't it be nice if we all lived together? And maybe I should get a place big enough to hold us all? I even prepared a room for Azalie, too. She hated stuff like that so much, but... If you ever get to a point where you find a girl and you want to live with her, just let me know and I'll build her a house here. Speaking of which, you probably think I've gone mad for even asking you something like that, but I don't think I'd mind that role at all, in all honesty."

"The way you're trying to curry favor with me, Tish—"

"I'm not 'currying' anything!"

Slam! Even though no one was shaking the walls around them, the sound of a door slamming still bounced off of those walls regardless. For as long as he'd known her, whenever Tish had gotten heated about something, she'd unconsciously started doing sorcery.

Of course, the power that she summoned was always fairly weak, but still. The wave of power she'd summoned unconsciously hit the shelf.

Not many knew of the origins behind her secondary, secret name, Banshee. But it was precisely because she used her power unconsciously while angry that she was secretly called that.

Her eyes looked furious, burning brightly as she lifted him by the collar.

"And let's talk about what you just mentioned — an idealized Krylancelo?! If you think someone is going to hear that without getting slightly sick, you've got another thing coming. You said it five years earlier — that you believe that all names have meaning! I think so too, but not like this. Not the way you think they do. You don't imbue something with power by simply taking that name. It's when you call it by that name, when you willingly give it that name does it get that power, that mana. And regardless of what name you take, you're still my little brother, my Krylancelo!"

Her grip was unbelievable for her size, wringing his shirt tightly in her fist.

She dropped her voice slightly before continuing.

"And Chloe — or whoever that girl is? To that girl, the self you've shown her is

someone else, it's Orphen."

"..." Orphen was astounded. He wasn't even fifteen centimeters away from her, but he looked into her eyes. Without knowing it, his voice shook slightly as he spoke.

"Is this you lecturing me, Tish?"

"Of course I am," she said, allowing more mana to flow to her fingertips before continuing.

"I have to say my piece. This is where I've been mentally for so long, I have to say something! For the last five years I've had no word from you at all, and two months ago, in the report that Heartia took home, it said that Azalie was dead quite clearly, and that you were about to throw in your lot with the Association and start a rebellion, or something like that, I don't know! In the end it didn't happen, do you know how much time I spent thinking about that?! And then there's the fact that Childman's gone missing, and do you know how weird the vibe in the Tower has become because of that? Thinking about that seems dangerous too, and then two weeks ago I get the news that a Krylancelo has assassinated a whole bunch of people!"

She took a breath then continued. "You know how we were just talking about motive? I didn't say this, but I was also thinking that maybe you'd come home because you'd heard about Azalie's murder and you'd want to get revenge on her behalf!"

It was obvious that she wasn't even filtering what she was saying anymore. When Orphen heard her say that, he felt a thought flash in the back of his mind.

However, she kept on talking. "Forte told me that he'd give me the order to take in Krylancelo, dead or alive. And I took that on, because I thought it was really you doing these things. I thought I would have a chance to stop the violence, just this one chance. I thought that if I had to kill you that I'd kill myself after. Night after night, I had that thought in my head as I tried to find you. I was so tired, and getting to my limit, and when I finally got there, it was last night. I'd stumbled on the Ranger's station there a little outside of the city, and then I got a call that someone was trying to send a communique from there to the brass at the Tower."

She continued, “I didn’t get it, hadn’t put two and two together yet, but headed over there as soon as I could. And there I was met with the same boy I’d last seen five years ago, fighting with a grown man who looked so very ordinary. I figured we could return home together, but when we did, we ran into those dwarves that took the damn cat hostage. And they’d already destroyed that nice flower bed I’d just completed too, with Pat! Then you wandered in here and started messing with my documents, and on top of that you reek of booze, too?! I can drink too, you know! You think I’m annoying now, sober, screaming at you like this? Well, it’s about to get a lot worse, pal, because I haven’t nearly talked enough yet!” She finished with a scream.

The louder she yelled, the closer she brought his face to her own. The power she’d transferred into her fists had only grown. Orphen had a coughing fit as his body continued to petrify, and only his eyes could move as he tried to nod in agreement.

She pouted, but continued speaking anyway. Behind her back, the mountain of documents exploded visibly with a bang and no warning.

“If that’s so unlike me... well, think for a second. Don’t I have a duty to tell people about this? About a guy like that, even just muttering about him... anyone would be worried about a guy like that running around! Five years ago you went against Childman and you ran away from the Tower. I’m pretty sure you’re absolutely not the right person to criticize me over something like this.”

Hearing her say that, Orphen felt the sudden bout of paralysis wear off.

“Did you... Were you watching me just now? He came here, to this mansion, and he met with me—”

“This is my house! Of course I would notice if someone got in and started causing trouble!”

Orphen couldn’t help but laugh at her outburst. “I didn’t realize it was him until he showed himself...”

“That’s what I mean when I say don’t think about him! Or did you want to become a master of hide and seek?!”

Orphen backed up, getting ready to run, until he slipped on a bit of floor that

had bits of light still shining across it.

Like a small storm, the motes danced within those bits of light. Leticia, who still had Orphen by the lapels, found herself being dragged to the floor as he slipped. Her knees hit the floor with a quiet thud.

Orphen whispered weakly, “But if this were five years ago, I would’ve realized he was here—”

“Ah, yes! I know you don’t want to be called by the name you had five years ago, yet you want to be pampered and have the same amount of power that you did five years ago. Astounding.”

Regardless, she continued.

“Are you even understanding what I’m saying? Compared to that Krylancelo, you think you’re inferior to him, don’t you? Why do you think that? Was your little ego injured by the fact that you couldn’t kill him faster than he could hurt you? Or is it because you can’t talk as pretty as he can?”

“I—”

“Yeah, you may be right. The guy you say may indeed be the kid that Childman helped raise. He might have been able to stab the monster that messed up Azalie so badly. He might’ve been fast enough to do that. But truly if he is that ‘ideal’ version of Krylancelo that Childman helped raise, that can’t be right. Because there’s only one of you. That ideal version of Krylancelo is you, the one that ran away from Childman all those years ago.”

As she spoke, Leticia’s words slowed in speed. As Orphen was still knocked on his butt, he looked up at her as she knelt there on the floor with him. Within the light and its motes, her dark hair turned white and seemed to sparkle, like a waterfall. Sparkles dripped from her hair to her shoulders.

Her eyes seemed different from before. That’s right, she’d implied that she’d had a few drinks before coming to see him—

“You’ve changed from how you used to be five years ago. You’ve earned so many new things. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that because of the time that’s passed, you’ve exchanged experience for loss and pain, but the rest of you is still there and is still the same. You haven’t disappeared from this town

after all. I'm still here, too. Can't you think of it that way instead?"

"I..."

Her mood had become something dreamy and tender, and Orphen wanted to return that feeling to her. He couldn't really put it into words — or rather, he could, but he couldn't trust them to carry the weight they needed to. He felt pinned down and impotent, and his body couldn't move.

At some point, Leticia had let go of his lapels, and he could feel her gently stroking his cheek with a cool hand.

"Of course, I'm probably just looking at all of this favorably..."

He realized what was happening with surprise and too late to stop her coming closer to him, closer than she really needed to—

Hold on a second.

And at that exact moment—

"Maaasteeeeer!"

SLAM!

Between the door being thrown open and the voice, perhaps four and a half seconds had elapsed.

Orphen found himself flying about two meters backwards within a moment while still on the floor. The uncompleted boxful of transferred documents from the shelf hit him squarely in the head.

"Majic, you little shiiiiit!" Orphen shouted at his student, leaning up with his torso that was covered with various documents. "What the hell are you thinking doing something like that?!"

"Ah, um, well..." The blonde-haired boy mumbled as he stood at the door, looking sheepish, but continued, "Sorry for not knocking, Master, but you don't need to get that mad. You're so red you look like you're about to explode."

"God, you're annoying! Who's red here? Not me!"

"Who, you say..."

"What's wrong, Majic?" Leticia cut into Majic's thoughts with a cool voice.

When he looked back at her, he saw that she was gracefully kneeling near the shelf.

In this sort of situation, it's probably better that she looks calm and composed... Orphen thought to himself in a cold sweat.

Anyway, it's probably because we're both used to keeping up appearances on the outside while fighting heavily together away from everyone else... He added after a moment more of disquieting thought.

Majic continued to speak, shaking his arms, rattling on and on. "It's an emergency! The city is probably less safe because we have an assassin on the loose and all, right? Especially at night."

"I mean, yeah..." Orphen said with a nod, heart pounding and unable to settle.

Majic nodded with an "Ahhh" and continued, "Claiomh is gone. I can't find her. I think she might've gone outside looking for this guy."



"...So I'm gonna go look for this guy too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, whatever. It's fine by me," Dortin said, looking at how Leki rode on Claiomh's head.

She looked down at them, expression heated and index finger pointing outward.

"For better or for worse, Orphen is being an idiot. He needs a good partner to save his sorry butt, you know?" She said.

They weren't sure if it was a borrowed shirt, but the size of it was huge, along with a pair of jeans and a dyed shredded jacket. She didn't carry her usual sword with her, but they couldn't really have one around in town, as it was considered too outlandish to do so.

Instead, Dortin brought his brother with them, since he was known around the continent as one guy you didn't want to mess with.

“Going on a manhunt without a weapon is even more outlandish than wearing a weapon if you ask me,” Volkan said bluntly.

She looked over at him and objected flatly. “Buuuuut you know I lost my sword, right? It was from my dad’s collection. It was one of his favorite ones.”

“You lost it, huh. You lost... A vital part of a warrior’s soul... After all, the Bulldog of Masmaturia would never do something like that. Not like you, you stupid girl.”

“I don’t need this crap right now!”

“Ahhhhhh!” Claiomh ground her fist against Volkan’s temple.

Dortin said simply, “Okay but what I’m concerned about is that you don’t have any way to defend yourself if you need to do so. Isn’t that a bit dangerous?”

“Neither do either of you.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but... No one is stupid enough to go ahead and try to kill us, so we don’t really have that problem...”

“I mean if you’re asking me, seems like them coming after you would be a favor they’d be doing me,” Claiomh sniped back at Volkan, with one eye closed. She pointed at the baby dragon whose eyes were closed as he rode on top of her head, and continued, “I have Lekı. I should be fine. Even Orphen knows that since Lekı’s come with us, this baby dragon can be asleep but still defend us just fine.”

“You’re like a fox that’s borrowed a tiger’s authority. How arrogant—” Volkan started under his breath, but Claiomh trampled him, shutting him up.

Dortin sighed deeply and looked around them. The city at night—

The night sky reflected the lights coming from the surface, light seemingly oozing from the ground to the dark sky above, a soft white light. There was the moon and the stars, and the clouds, which sucked the light from them into themselves to reflect it back to the earth below. The townscape of Tefurem was mostly organized, but people still unceasingly moved around it.

Perhaps it was because they went down the wrong street, but the soft, short

sound of a drum being struck along with people singing in unison, as if chanting sutras, made its way to their ears...

When Claiomh realized that, she raised her face.

“What is that sound?”

Dortin scratched his cheek, right below his glasses, and said, “I think it’s called *Auditris Temporis Acti*.”

“Audi— what?” Claiomh asked, blinking blankly at him. Even though she’d stopped trampling on Volkan, her foot still remained on his back.

Dortin spread his hands and said, “It’s a dragon-worshipping cult. Though in our language that isn’t quite as precise a meaning as the original...”

At hearing that, Claiomh was clearly taken aback. Her body tensed as if she was actively trying to be on her guard as she looked to the direction where the music came from.

“A dragon cult, did you say? They have one of those here in this town?! Of all things...”

Well, if there’s anyone who would know about facing off against dragon cults, it would be Claiomh... though it would also be accurate to say that she helped start things in the first place when facing off with them.

But this town was different. It should have been different.

“The Nornir have buildings devoted to them in this city, right?”

Dortin explained it to her simply.

“The World-Seeing Tower is an idolic offering, if you will. Anyway, you could say that it’s the last thing on the continent that was built and devoted to the Nornir. And if you think about it, black sorcerers are spread out far and wide, you know? So they have about the same amount of stuff that’s devoted to them because of that. Even city law enforcement has acknowledged them under the religious freedom rule. The city doesn’t really care who you worship here, whether it’s the dragons or the Demon King Swedenborge or the Fates. I mean, they even allow the Kimluck Church to exist here. That should say everything.”

“Wow...” She said, expression clearly surprised.

Beneath her foot, Volkan huffed happily, boasting as if he’d won a particularly hard battle.

“Hm, it shouldn’t surprise me that this little girl that we have with us knows absolutely nothing and is shocked at learning something new. We shouldn’t laugh at her, Dortin.”

“You didn’t know that either, asshole!”

“Agggh! Stop grinding your foot against my spine!”

Because this happened a lot, Dortin was spacing out. Then with a crazy sparkle in her eye, Claiomh suddenly spoke.

“Hey, let’s go see it!”

“Huh?” Dortin asked, his voice almost hysterical.

Not caring whether or not they wanted to go with her, Claiomh had already taken her foot off of Volkan’s spine and started to walk towards the ceremony.

“I said, let’s go see that Audi or whatever it’s called.”

“Ah, um—” Dortin started, plodding after her. He tugged her shredded sleeve and continued, “Um, well, I’m not exactly saying that it would be dangerous to intrude on that event but the idea of disturbing cultists at one of their ceremonies makes me uncomfortable, if I’m being honest.”

“Why?! If we don’t check them out while we can, we’ll regret it later.”

“In your case, you mean. But in my case, I would regret it if we got involved with this, like I have for a lot of other stuff...”

“Leave me alone, Dortin!”

Volkan suddenly popped up from his place where he’d been kicked and rolling down on the dirt of the road. He made his pelt cloak wave in the wind, hamming it up as he spoke.

“All of this in addition to being inattentive and lazy... What a capricious, pug-faced brat of a girl. So unprepared, and so unwilling to believe in me, Volkan, the Bulldog of Masmaturia! You should be bowing before us, thanking us for

spoiling you in place of that grubby moneylending black sorcerer! Inviting us to a place where we might be attacked so that you can finally settle your score against us! It's a trap! What a plot, what a scheme!"

"Uh, you're telling me all of this, but... What do you want me to do about that...?" Claiomh asked.

Silence. Volkan thought for a few moments, chewing lightly at his fingers while he did so. Then, "Ah." As if he'd remembered something, he spoke. "Which reminds me, you're always with him, aren't you? That moneylending bastard. And now you're holding him back from doing what he needs to do. I completely forgot you were one of his allies."

"I feel like I can't quite object to that, and yet..." Claiomh muttered. "But you know, you... Why are you just standing there with no plan in place?! I'd love to see you actually do some searching for Orphen instead of standing there looking like a furry potato."

"Hmph. Defend my honor, Dortin. I have nothing left to say to this little brat."

"You say something!" Claiomh's hair was sticking up everywhere as she screamed back at Volkan.

The elder brother just laughed disgustedly at her, ohohoho, and continued.

"You dumb bitch! As if I'm going to throw in my lot with a dirty moneygrubbing sorcerer and his friends. Me, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Volkan Volcano! Do you really think I'm going to curry favor with you, little girl, in order to help him?"

"...Dumb bitch?"

"Yes, that's what I said..."

Finally, Dortin could see how they were grappling with each other with a tired, thousand mile stare. He massaged his forehead and sighed, exhausted with them.

Of course they'd be doing this when we need to actually do some searching. Well, from the start, it would've been hard to carry out a manhunt in this big city for one person...

Thump, thump, thump.

Dortin belatedly realized that the sound of the drums was getting closer to them. Across the road, it seemed like they were having something like a funeral procession.

And it was getting closer to them with each passing second.

The mass of people's shadows across the highway seemed creepy, otherworldly, especially since this was happening at night. It was as if the group was starting to surround them, albeit from a distance. All of them wore white hoods low over their eyes, a distinguishing feature of the dragon cultists in Tefurem.

In other words, it was as if you had to cover your face to be able to participate.

There was one person in front of the vanguard that was playing the drums. The drums were simple things, like the kind one could find at any toy shop. The chanting was done by people who were clearly out of their minds, as well as other noises and sounds that made no sense when all mixed together. It was a jumble of unintelligible sounds and words all together.

In a sense it was like the curses that vocal sorcerers would cast, but Dortin still thought it was different from that.

In other words, Dortin thought that there was no meaning to the cacophony coming from the cultists.

If people from all over the place gathered with other people from all over the place, then they weren't anything but people from all over the place. It was as simple as that.

That's what it was like to be oppressed under a religion. If one followed the rules, then one could earn the right to survive and live long term within that religion or cult. But eternal oppression was something else entirely (and depending on time and place, ability to make good on one's words varied), and just because one didn't see it didn't mean that it wasn't there. Originally, from time immemorial, the only match for the cults was the Kimluck Church, which was less objectionable and problematic than the cults. If it was a new cult, the

only real oppression those faced were garden variety things like privation.

For something as minor as spying on that cult during its times of hardship, no one would notice, so no one would complain.

Well, regardless of the type of oppression, one generally had to talk about it in the end. Throughout the world, why wasn't that a rule of thumb?

Huh...? Dortin thought. He'd been mulling over such strange things that when he came to, they'd come very close to the procession. *Even though we're this far from the World-Seeing Tower, why are they having their little procession in a place like this...?*

At this point, it seemed the other two had finally settled their differences behind him.

"Did you finally figure it out?" Claiomh asked, standing up straight.

Volkan, who was beaten up and had been taking a cat nap there in the street, suddenly pointed at her and shouted, "That's not something a monkey bitch like you should be saying to a tanuki like me! I can't stand you!"

"Is it really a question of that, now?" Dortin asked tiredly.

Claiomh turned to face Volkan with a glare.

"It's important. One must face slander with a firm resolve to defeat it, after all."

She continued, "When I told Orphen to fix his violent ways, I was really truly a bit angry with him, all things considered."

"I've heard of people who can't seem to quit smoking, one tactic they take is to form a club with other smokers, and then appeal to each other's sense of reason with regard to smoke pollution. They tell each other, 'don't smoke, so you can save other people's lungs.' Apparently it works pretty well as a type of therapy, or so I've heard..."

"What are you trying to say? Just say it and go."

"Uh, no, I'm not really trying to say anything..." Dortin mumbled, turning away from her. The procession seemed to mostly stay at their current place across the road from them. The white-hooded procession, their voices still a

mess of groans, shouts, and moans in unison as they drew closer bit by bit. They were chanting, pleading for the traditional rulers of the continent, the dragons, to come back to them—

...? Dortin blinked, lost in thought.

The vanguard of the procession had been playing the drums up until now. Suddenly, they stopped playing them. The sound of the drums stopped momentarily, while the head of the vanguard passed the drums to someone directly behind them. Then, straightening up, they turned back around to face them.

And then, removed their hood.

“Ahhh!” Claiomh gave a short shriek. Because underneath that white hood sat someone with black hair, black eyes, a boy with a plain face—

He whispered something. They could see his lips moving. It seemed it was more of him chanting in unison, though they couldn’t hear him.



And in that moment, the boy's figure disappeared from before them.

Whaaat...? Dörtin thought reflexively, then as he looked to Claiomh, she started to scream at the same time. She was clutching her head, her golden hair falling around her face, and she crouched on the ground. In a thin, constricting voice, Claiomh screamed.

"Lekiiiiii!"

Dörtin couldn't understand why she was screaming, because Lekí, the baby dragon, was still peacefully sitting on her head just like before. He hadn't moved at all.

But then, the boy reappeared in front of her and suddenly snatched Lekí from off of her head. He swung from the boy's hand, back and forth, and a long needle had been pointed at his back. Calling it a needle, the metal was the length of the spoke on a bike, and it appeared it had been slid right through the baby dragon's belly.

The boy cradled the unmoving dragon, then slipped a hood on its head.

"First, we have to get the most dangerous piece off of our chessboard, here. Don't think ill of me for doing so," the boy whispered to her, then returned to the procession.

"Ah..." Claiomh whimpered, hugging her own trembling shoulders, then stood. Biting her pale lip, she continued, "S-Stop right there! Just what the hell do you plan on doing with Lekí?!"

The procession and the boy leading suddenly broke into a dead run, advancing several meters away fast. The boy didn't bother turning around to face her again, he just separated from the herd of dragon cultists and instead went into a side alley. Claiomh was hot on his heels, disappearing into the alley after him.

"Wh-What the hell is going on?" Dörtin groaned, almost vacantly. The procession kept advancing towards them like nothing had happened. The night sky was clear, as if the weather had not changed, and the city did not wake, seeming like nothing had happened worth waking for.

But— something had begun.

Claiomh chased him. Anyway, there was nothing they could—

Dortin made his decision on what to do a bit too late. He turned his heel and started to run, only to trip over his older brother, who'd started sleeping there on the road.

"Just what the hell are you doing, Volkan!"

"Nah, just thinking about how the damage from that little girl's Avalanche Hold is all..."

"Oh, for the love of god!" Dortin yelled desperately, picking up his big brother and hefting his body onto his shoulder, then started running at top speed.

"Oh, Dortin, you know you don't have to run to a doctor right now, right? Your big brother is just fine. Don't even need anyone to check me over. Nothing's broken."

"I wasn't going to do that!" Dortin spat back, flatly rejecting Volkan's words. Somewhat sated by his words, Volkan spoke.

"If that's the case, then why are you running so fast?"

"Let me answer a question with a question. Why do you think we're out here running around town tonight? It's obvious. We need to go after the guy that just appeared in front of us — he's our killer! We need to report in to Orphen that he's appeared!"

Behind Dortin, the person at the vanguard of the procession who'd taken over for the boy with the drums continued to play them, a monotonous, almost ominous sound that echoed into the night and town around them.

Chapter VI: Confronting the Investigator

He stared. Quietly, and from behind.

Orphen was silent. He didn't think that anyone knew that he was there, and if they did, they were ignoring him completely. In the room that Leticia allowed him to borrow temporarily, he sat on the bed, looking at the state of his shoes. He looked at the tips of where one's toes would go, wondering if he'd put on the wrong pair.

Or perhaps it was better to say that he was fixated by the few centimeters of space where there had been space, fixing his gaze to it.

"You're going alone?" Majic asked Orphen, having just entered the room. Orphen didn't allow him to see how he reacted, but instead side-eyed him a bit.

"Yeah," Orphen nodded. "She asked me to help protect the manor. So at least you guys should be safe."

Majic somehow didn't react, and while thinking, he said, "The guy you're going after is the assassin, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. The Stabber, as we're calling him now," Orphen replied, raising his face, correcting him slightly. "The Stabber. A Stabber is a black sorcerer who has undergone assassination training at the Tower. If you're good at it, that's the name they give you. It's different from the assassins who use drugs and other poisons — Stabbers are those that physically train to kill, and have a pure love of it."

"Can you take someone on like that and win, Master?"

"You've heard the story of the lucky tanuki, right? Claiomh was walking around town, not watching after herself like an idiot, and encountered the enemy while she was there. Are you telling me to abandon her?"

Majic's expression became uneasy in that moment. "I remember what you said before about it, at the haunted mansion in Kink Hall, that someone had murdered Claiomh!"

With that, his breath stopped. Orphen looked at him with no change in expression.

Majic continued, “Do you think that Claiomh is going to die out there, Master?”

“No,” Orphen said flatly, shaking his head. “I don’t think she will. This guy is after elders from the Tower. That’s the feeling I have. And she’s not one of those, so I think she’ll be safe.”

“B-But... This morning, he tried to stab us... Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

“But—”

“Majic,” Orphen said, “Claiomh won’t die. I won’t let her die. She’s an idiot, but she’s our idiot, and she won’t go down that easily without a fight. And—” As he spoke, he got up on top of the bed and stood before continuing, “That Krylancelo... Do you remember what he also said? That he wanted me, which is why he tried to stab you both earlier today. He’s going to do whatever he can to draw me out, and in this case, trying to kill either of you would be an instrument to do that. If it doesn’t serve their purposes that way, Stabbers don’t kill otherwise.”

“But Master...” Majic said, digesting his words carefully, “Who is Krylancelo? Or what is he, maybe is the better question to ask? He’s a past you, right? Krylancelo is what you used to be called in the past. Then why is he coming around n—”

Orphen didn’t answer him. Or it was more accurate to say that he didn’t answer Majic right away. It wasn’t like he couldn’t answer, but by looking at his master’s expression, Majic more or less figured out what he wanted to say.

But he couldn’t tell him. Not really.

As if sensing how the mood in the room had gone south, Orphen quickly walked over to him. But he didn’t stop at Majic, he kept going until he left the room.

The sound of his careful footsteps onto the floor of the hallway echoed across

the walls.

He gave chase to Orphen, following at a close interval of pace, and then shouted at him.

“If you don’t tell us anything, and if we don’t know anything, how are we anything but hindrances to you?!”

Orphen stopped walking.

But he didn’t look at Majic. Majic’s eyes were fixed on his back as he continued to speak.

“Why won’t you tell us anything? Don’t you trust us?!”

Silence. Majic wasn’t finished, but he couldn’t continue. He’d said the jist of everything he’d needed to say.

Orphen raised his face and looked over his shoulder at Majic.

“Just as you said, I’m telling you now because you need to know now.”

Majic didn’t react, but instead stared fixedly at Orphen.

As usual, his eyes were sarcastic, and a strict expression floated on his face.

“He’s appeared now. Tish is complaining about that now. I’ve come back to this town now. And now I’ve lost my way...”

“Lost?” Majic asked, puzzled.

Orphen nodded and said, “Yeah. This guy appeared out of nowhere, and I’m starting to lose track of which one of us is the real me. I think he’s probably the true Krylancelo out of the two of us.”

“Master...?”

“I’m the fake one between us, I’m Orphen. I’m an unlicensed moneylender from Totokanta, and I’m on a mission, going around the continent to take down all the shitty little tanuki that borrow money from me and never return it. I’m one of the dregs out of all of the black sorcerers out there.

“...”

“I’m okay,” Orphen said, laughing at himself.

That was the face that Majic knew of his master the most, a laughing, grinning one.

Orphen continued, still smiling. “We’re going to bring Claiomh home. And then I’m going to sit you brats down and tell you about all the stuff you don’t know about me.”

After Orphen left the hallway and disappeared from the grounds of the mansion, Majic waited for him, standing stock still. He spent a while there, loitering in a different direction than the hallway, as if waiting for people to pass him. There was an air of aimless wandering to him as he roamed that corridor back and forth, as if he, in turn, were waiting for something to truly begin.

He could hear footsteps. When he looked up to see who it was, there stood a thin, black-haired boy. A boy who was probably his own age. Oh, right, he was Leticia’s apprentice—

His name was Tiffes, or something... Majic thought, and it looked like Tiffes was doing the same thing he was, trying to remember Majic’s name.

Majic nodded.

“That’s right, but...”

“You’re not going with them? With... Master Krylancelo?”

Majic’s eyebrow twitched, and he raised it, slightly taken aback.

“You know about my master and his past?!”

But Tiffes had estimated this would happen and sidestepped Majic’s barrage of words. He sighed, long and loud in response.

“I thought things seemed a bit off between you three. So I was right, huh? You don’t know about what happened to him.”

“Why—”

“If that’s the case, that’s awfully strange. I thought everyone on the continent knew about the Successor of the Edge, Krylancelo, and his professor.”

“What are you trying to tell me?!” Majic unconsciously raised his voice, but

Tiffes didn't seem particularly perturbed by his reaction. Instead, he continued to speak.

"Shall I tell you about the legend of your master? After that, you should make your own decision on what to do next, for your own sake and objectivity."

Majic absorbed his words like a sponge, and just looked at him expectantly in reply...



Is there any point at all to having a lookout right now? Leticia thought to herself, incredibly bored. As she thought that, she became even more bored. *I mean, I know we do need a lookout, especially with the amount of enemies I've made over the years...* she added, revising her thoughts.

She looked around the hallway. She'd hired a janitor to help clean things up, and as expected, there wasn't a single speck of dirt or fallen dust around that hallway. For all of the fixtures and the janitor it hadn't cost a whole lot, but it definitely did ease her mind some.

While it did have some useless furniture, she hadn't added anything that would've unnecessarily stuck out and been awful to look at. Just when they were putting in the planters, they made sure that those planters would be put in places where they'd always get some sun, and those places only. The latter was a problem of having a hobby that included raising plants. There were plants that thrived in the shade, but those seemed very pathetic and sad-looking, she thought.

Just like me.

That thought felt like a maggot wiggling around in the earth to her, slimy and cold, but as soon as she spoke, she drove that feeling away as fast as she could.

If she's like a shade-blooming plant, miserable and cold, then the night must be as similarly miserable and cold, she reasoned. A tree with its limbs blooming, spreading outwards in both directions under a night sky must be similarly strange—

Seems like I'm still a bit drunk. Even though I usually don't get drunk too easily...

She sighed, and went back to walking down that corridor.

And then—

She realized the door was half open and stopped cold in her tracks.

She could hear Tiffes and Krylancelo's... No, Orphen's, she reminded herself. Anyway, Orphen's student.

I wonder when they became so cozy with each other, to be speaking together like this... she wondered, though she wasn't worried. But—

She stopped walking.

What she heard was Tiffes, in a voice that wasn't malicious in the least, speaking of what happened with Krylancelo.

"Once upon a time, five years ago, Krylancelo murdered someone.

"No, that's not quite right. He didn't murder someone, but he did have someone killed. Another sorcerer in the Tower, you see."

Through the crack in the door, Leticia stood, frozen to the spot, as she listened to the two students speaking of the past. However, it seemed like they were speaking more about the pictures from that album that were taken two or three years ago. But, now, as if she were hearing about this for the first time, she felt as if she were under attack and unable to run or defend herself.

"Master did what...?" Majic replied with a question, though he seemed like he couldn't quite believe what Tiffes was saying. "I mean, it's not uncommon for Master to half murder someone, but still..."

"..."

That brought the conversation to a bit of a halt.

For a little bit, Tiffes cleared his throat before correcting what he'd just said.

"I-It seems I should give you a bit of context, hm? Anyway, Krylancelo was a grade before ours, a model student and a stellar black sorcerer. He was the top student in the class, so amazing that the Thirteen Apostles were considering taking him in as one of their own."

"I've heard that before, but... it always seemed like Master was lying about

that.”

“Lying? No, definitely not. It was the truth. Had he thrown in his lot with the Apostles, I’m positive there’s absolutely no doubt he would’ve become the youngest top Imperial Sorcerer of all time.”

He’s probably right, Leticia thought to herself. But he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t become what they wanted him to be.

“But he couldn’t become what they wanted him to be,” Tiffes said, as if able to read her thoughts. His voice continued, “The Tower couldn’t allow him to do that. It was absolutely outrageous to even consider the thought of Krylancelo joining up with the Apostles.”

“But why? I don’t know much about the Tower, but weren’t a lot of past Apostles ejected from there?”

A few, maybe. But we really don’t know the actual number, Leticia thought.

“Not just a few — perhaps several hundred, according to scholars,” Tiffes snickered. “It seems like such a stupid story, doesn’t it? Basically, the Tower got in trouble for ejecting a few too many sorcerers in order to send them to the Imperial Court. Every year, many excellent and clearly superior sorcerers were taken by the Court, and it was thought that with each person, the Court would increase its power. While this happened, the Tower started to wither as a result. Now, this was a pretty long time ago, to be sure.”

He continued, “There was a guy named Pluto that was an absolute monster. You’ve heard of him, right? The head of the Imperial Sorcerers, Pluto the Demon.”

“I’ve never heard of him, actually...”

“Well, whatever. When that guy appeared on the scene, to the elders of the Tower at the time, it was an absolute shock.”

“And Pluto... was he from the Tower in the first place?” Majic asked, and it was exactly the same thing Tiffes had asked when he’d learned about it. He gave a bit of a laugh as he remembered.

“Oh, no. And therein lies the greatest rub. Pluto was born and raised in and by

the Court. He became an Apostle because someone who'd been raised by the Tower had been bragging about how they'd managed to educate him or whatever."

He continued, "Apparently he had lots of talent, coupled with an absurd amount of strength and stamina for a black sorcerer. The elders of the Tower scrambled, and you can see why, right? If they were unlucky, the Tower's *raison d'être* would be wiped out, along with the Tower itself."

Before, when she met and talked to the elders, she said something stupid, Leticia remembered vividly. But now, the Tower's elders faced the problem of them as an organization losing its power and influence, and she now understood how afraid they were of that, of the pure fear they felt. It was the same as having one's reason for existence taken away—

And she could understand that. She'd lost Azalie and Krylancelo, her family, and had shut herself away in her big manor house to cope. And anyone could see that without her family, she had no real reason for existing. And she'd realized that fairly recently.

It seemed that Tiffes hadn't put two and two together there, and so he continued to speak.

"Then, what would you think the elders did? In order to go up against the Apostles, who had just gotten a power-up, they offered up a single black sorcerer. Who was for some reason, it's worth mentioning, about the same level in power as our buddy Pluto. Childman and the assassin who carries Krylancelo's name. The Tower scouted him. And then the Tower's talented child took an apprentice of their own, a young sorcerer who would hopefully be just as talented, if not more so, than his teacher. And so started a plan to mass produce black sorcerers just as talented—"

"And that one person was Master...?"

"That's right. And that little factory they wanted to produce black sorcerers in was Childman's classes. However, the miscalculation that the elders made was in Childman himself, and underestimating the power he had."

Tiffes's explanation was going swimmingly so far. He continued smoothly. Leticia listened carefully, clenching her fists.

“Which means that?”

“Childman’s classes were too perfectly created. The students couldn’t come close to their teacher. But at least all of the students had different skills, which they set to cultivating.”

He continued, “Since it was impossible for them to succeed at everything, Childman’s classes produced seven sorcerers with seven different finely honed skills. For example, the eldest of the bunch, Forte Puckingham, created his own set of classes, which became the Childman Network. The Network is a specially designed surveillance web of spies who gather information for Puckingham and the Tower. The advisor for the Network was named Heartia, while another student named Comicon is someone who specialized in medicine and technology. In that vein, you have others like the Nightknocker, Corgon, and then Azalie, who was called the Chaos Witch within her own classes because the mana she held was the most powerful in the world. Then there’s my own teacher, Leticia MacCreedy, followed by the Successor of the Razor’s Edge, Krylancelo.”

“Successor?”

“Yeah. Successor of the Razor’s Edge, Krylancelo. Just like the two names he had, he was Childman’s student who specialized in fighting techniques and assassination. And the elders were quite loathe to possibly turn him over to the Apostles, let me tell you. Now you can see why, right?”

“...Well, yeah, I can...”

Maybe soon they’ll let me quit, she mused, thinking of Krylancelo. Leticia lost herself in that train of thought for a moment, before continuing.

“From here on in, this is pure conjecture, but I think the elders were hiding something relating to all of this. I think that Krylancelo wanted to go and become one of the Apostles. But I think the elders were quite firmly against it. In order to become an Apostle, one had to go to a hearing in the capitol. I think they sent him to do double duty, as both an envoy and as an assassin. He ended up half killing someone as a result, and as that became public knowledge, the hearing was canceled. And so Krylancelo returned to the Tower.”

She could feel how Tiffes loosened his shoulders, rather than see it.

“Krylancelo, for whatever reason, left the Tower for five years after that... And I think the reason is because he became estranged from the elders due to this incident. My teacher’s words about this time are a bit muddy in nature, so I don’t really know what happened. After five years, he’s come home back to this city, but honestly, I think that him returning to his master would be quite difficult to do. The elders of the Tower are quite noisy about their right to exist, and they would fuss over all of that. And if there’s one stain on all of this, let’s just say that it wouldn’t be the Tower trying to remove that stain if it means they keep their integrity, you know?”

“...”

“The vacuum of five years ago can’t be erased, either. What I want to say, at this rate I really don’t think there are going to be a whole lot of opportunities for you in the near future if you remain as that guy’s student, you know?”

He continued, “Eventually, you’ll have to take on learning how to fight and assassinate since you’re learning from Childman’s expert on that, and you’ll have to specialize in that. Which is all fine and dandy, from what I hear, but on the other side of that coin, I think you’ll find that you won’t learn anything else that might be beneficial to you in the future—”

Suddenly there was a loud clatter, the sound of a chair hitting the floor as Majic suddenly stood, no doubt.

“Master... He’s... He’s not like that!”

“I mean, you’d know him best as a person, right? I’m not saying that you don’t,” Tiffes hastily corrected himself. “However, as its own discipline, assassination is quickly becoming an archaic study because there’s not much need for it anymore. The way the Tower is continuing to develop stronger—”

—She was at her limit.

“Tiffes!” Leticia was surprised at how loud her voice came out as she yelled at her student. At the same time, in the room, there was the sound of something clattering loudly as it fell. She wondered if Tiffes had gotten freaked out and had fallen or something...

More importantly, the door had already started to open from the inside.

Majic's face showed he was clearly fed up with Tiffes's little story, and that was more or less proven as he came flying out of the room.

"...!"

In that one moment, she met his gaze. His green eyes were pinning her down, and Leticia's voice died in her throat.

As for Majic, he seemed startled. He opened his mouth nimbly, but it sounded like he was chewing on his words as he muttered. She couldn't really hear him, so she wondered if he'd been chanting a spell, but it hadn't been that, either.

He had been asking a question.

"Where are those dwarves?"

There was only one meaning to that question. But Leticia asked anyway.

"...What do you intend to do if I tell you?"

"I'm asking you where Master went! Isn't that obvious?"

Leticia quickly narrowed her eyes.

"If you go to him, you're just going to slow him down."

"So what?! If I don't go, there's no way of knowing if Master will be okay or not! Or do you think Master can win against the assassin all by himself?!" Majic snarled at her, looking her straight in the eye.

"There's no way he can win. The only one who can win against Krylancelo on this continent is his teacher, Childman himself..."

"Up until now, there was only one opponent that Master couldn't beat, and that was the Deep Dragons that he went up against! But..." Majic trailed off, biting his lip.

"But he's never fought alone before," he finished.

"..." Leticia lost every single last word she was going to say. She looked at Majic as he steadily and resolutely continued to speak to her.

"I'll go. And if you won't tell me where he is, I'll go looking for him myself—" Majic said, turning his back on her and starting to leave.

“And if you could stop talking about Master as if he were some kind of depraved monster, I would really appreciate that. If he really is family to you like you keep saying, then shouldn’t you be on his side of things?”

“He’s—” She started, then stopped speaking entirely. *Just what should I tell him?* she asked herself.

Unwittingly she’d started to question herself. It could’ve been true that she herself was a monster back then? But now she was different? And... even if he wanted to, there was just no way for her to turn him back to the way he was before? There was no way for him to go back to who he was before...

There’s the legend... of the three goddesses. Urd, Verthandi, and Skuld. The past, the present, and the future. Even though they were all goddesses, there was no way for them to meet with each other, because how could one do that if each one of them was in a different time period? The past doesn’t know about the present, and the present doesn’t know about the future. And the future? After the future, time stops entirely. Only the present knows the past and believes in the future. And the future is stuck in her own little cage. That’s Kimluck dogma right there. As if they don’t understand what they’re even talking about...

But they were their own different things, in the end. And there was nothing she could really do about that.

So Leticia’s voice was quiet as she scratched her head. “I think he went to Childman’s manor.”

Hearing that, Majic turned around to face her. He nodded and bowed to her, then went on his way with soft steps down the hall.

Finally, when she could no longer see his back, Tiffes crept out from the room, as if greatly afraid.

“Ah, um, Teacher...” As if fearing punishment, his bangs hid his eyes. After Leticia had sent Majic on his way, her expression hadn’t changed, and he spoke, not trying to argue about things.

“As punishment, go make your regular one month report on my behalf to the Tower,” she said quietly.

“Hhhhh...” That job was not only boring but also a pain in the ass, and to have it shoved onto him like that felt pretty awful. Tiffes was starting to regret his impromptu lecture a bit now from the bottom of his heart. A report right about now didn’t really matter when other bigger things like this were going on.

“Yeah...” Leticia said to herself, unconsciously smiling bitterly.

“Even though I was a bit drunk I’ve sobered up enough to where I feel like I can let my precious kids handle this one. Even though all I’ve been doing about it since I sent them on their way has been sighing sadly to myself. And I can’t put a good face on that, I can’t make that look good, officially, as Banshee from Childman’s classes.”

“...Huh?”

She leaned on the door heavily, and he looked at her, confused.

But Tiffes had hardened his heart and strengthened his resolve.



Come to think of it, this had been the first time he’d walked the city of Tefurem alone.

Or perhaps it would be better to say that it wasn’t something he’d considered worthy of thinking about before. As for the Tower, he’d never really been alone there, as the Successor of the Razor’s Edge, Krylancelo.

As he walked the streets of the city at night, Orphen thought.

I’d only been fifteen when I was considered to be at my most powerful. I’d worn the coronet of a Stabber, an assassin — And the only thing second to that was the fact that I didn’t need to kill anyone at all at that moment in time.

Though now that he thought about it, everyone in the class probably had a similar feeling of something being in second place while they were studying with Childman.

It wasn’t really worth thinking about this much in detail, he knew — everyone had that feeling of something in second place, after all. For Forte, that thing had been self-control.

The Childman Network possessed and gained so much new information every

day that one needed cold logic in order to properly deal with it all.

And he didn't have that.

Sure, on the outside, he looked cool as a cucumber. But on the inside, he was like a child that had been given a piece of cake and told to wait. He didn't have that sort of patience.

Leticia had studied some battle techniques under Childman — though it was different than what Childman had specialized in, and definitely wasn't the same as learning assassination techniques. It was something closer to what ordinary soldiers went through, like bootcamp.

But even Childman hadn't seen the fact that she was just about to be sent out onto a battlefield coming, most likely, and how much grit that took on her behalf. But at least Orphen had realized some time ago she'd had that sort of courage in her.

And then there was Heartia. Since they'd been the same age, they more or less had been contractually obligated to become best friends from the jump. Even he'd had a strong manifestation of his avarice, but Heartia was something different entirely. In the end, it was like as an advisor, she couldn't be trusted—

The other four were the same. While every single one of them were the best of their generation, what they couldn't catch up to each other in they'd called something being in second place. And all of them had at least one thing that made the cut as to be considered "second place."

Orphen had, over the years, finally figured out what the secret of Childman's classes was.

He had nothing, no single part of him that could be considered as something coming in second place. It never existed with him at all. Every bit of his power was perfectly allocated with no weaknesses whatsoever. He ran on nothing but full throttle all day every day.

But.

But it's like from the beginning, Childman knew what our "second places" were, what our weaknesses were, and then purposely engineered his teachings to develop those places to make them stronger. He intentionally taught things

counter to our weaknesses over the years, in direct conflict with them...

The commandant with no patience, the soldier with no courage, the close advisor whom no one could trust, the assassin who couldn't kill—

The little birds who couldn't fly, Orphen thought to himself. It could be said, then, that the Tower was a collection of suspended iron scraps, becoming a cage, and that Childman's students had been trapped in it. A flock of little birds who couldn't fly—

"When you're fighting with someone, you shouldn't think of how you want to surpass them. Because when you do that, each stronger enemy you face off against, you won't have a chance against them. No, instead you should think of finding your enemy's weak spots."

Those were words that Childman had said to him a lot over the years, and now they came to his mind as he thought about things.

"Once you find their weak spots, next, don't get anxious over the execution of things. Even if you find only one weak spot, you still have an unlimited amount of methods with which to bring them down."

We're— Orphen thought, then he stopped moving. Instead, as he thought scandalously, he looked up at the night sky.

We never may be any match for you, but... Had I been raised the way you wanted me to, I would've ended up like that Krylancelo, as someone with no weak spots, no "second places." And that's someone I have to fight. And what I'm afraid of is that one simple truth, that if I fight him, I'll be shown as someone who's defective, and if I lose, that it'll be proof of that...

Tefurem quieted down as the night wore on.

The night sky twinkled beautifully above him. There was not a single cloud, and starlight was smeared across the entirety of the sky; as if that light was a waterfall cascading down upon him. The moon was waning, and the breeze was fresh and cool. Down in the town below, the town that had been completely destroyed three times before in the past, all was still.

In a neighborhood that was really just a series of manor annexes of the Tower where the upper level black sorcerers gathered, Childman's mansion awaited.

The alleyway where Krylancelo had disappeared along with Claiomh was nearby, or so Dortin had heard.

Tish did say that this version of Krylancelo tended to come and go as he pleased like a phantom, and that he'd been damn good at finding places to conceal himself in. Dortin had to find some places to do the same. If I think about it, the only places in this city where Krylancelo could truly conceal himself would be Tish's mansion and Childman's manor. No one else but me knows that Childman is dead, so it's possible that if he knows too—

He would probably make that place his stronghold. It was perfect because no one in town knew where it was, and no one particularly wanted to search it. Even Tish hadn't gotten near it.

Dortin could hear the dragon cultists' drums from where he was.

Orphen made a fist, and murmured to himself, as if it was something he wanted to hear someone say to him.

"I may be defective goods, but I'm also unfinished goods. This is his challenge towards your ideal, Childman."

And so he walked on.

Orphen wondered when Childman had stopped going to his own residence.

He wasn't sure when, but by his count, it had at least been several months. Childman died two or so months ago, so perhaps five or more months earlier, he stopped coming home and instead started to wander around the continent.

However, it hadn't declined so much that it was visible, though that was perhaps due to the fact that he didn't have a single flower bed in his garden.

Orphen stood in front of the main gate, and he took a look at the latticework that surrounded the main garden. From the trees in the garden to the porch, there was no other main road to tie the two together. Instead there was smooth sand that was spread all along the ground. Originally, the garden had been quite wide, but the vastness of the space made it seem kind of like using that space had all been in vain. Nothingness spread out in its wake.

The moonlight seemed to splash many beams of light down into the garden,

giving it a sense of floating with all of that nothingness and unused space. Orphen's hands shook as they explored the metal latticework of the gate, and he spoke softly to himself.

"I tread upon thee—"

Chanting a spell to open that gate, he then stopped. Instead he adjusted the corner of the gate slightly, and then withdrew his right hand from the other part of the gate. He then held his right arm aloft and cried, "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

As he screamed, he swung that arm down hard.

At that moment, as if striking the gate and then cutting it down, shockwaves of light along with a violent explosion shoved the gate to the ground. The sound roared across the empty space of the garden, and reverberated against the earth beneath it.

"Man, just when I get my showdown—"

The sudden shockwave had woken up the neighborhood, it seemed.

But Orphen didn't care. Instead, he just stepped over the downed gate and took his first step into Childman's manor.

"Man, I just had to put on a show, huh?"

Cutting straight across the garden to the porch was roughly five meters. Orphen was in no hurry as he made his way across that five meters of wide, blank space.

As he walked, he mentally calculated.

It should take Tefurem city police about five minutes to figure out that there was an explosion here. They'll contact the executive branch of the Tower, figure out which big shot owns this property, and then it should take them another fifteen minutes or so to obtain an emergency search warrant. Or thereabouts.

He carefully set his eyes on the entryway of the house, and made his way over there, all the while still doing more mental math.

After that, it should take about five more minutes for a squad of policemen to get here. They'd have to get ready to go in, and they'd also have to decide who

would be the agent in charge before going in. That would take another five minutes. So now we're up to roughly thirty minutes. If I can just survive for thirty minutes, I don't need to die. It's not really a good backup plan, but I don't particularly want to die today.

"Anyway, it's not like Childman is here right now," he said to himself aloud, "So why don't we have a little fun and fuck this place up a bit?"

Orphen found himself standing before the entryway, and raised his right arm once more.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

Boom!

Once more, hot waves of light lit up the night sky, and opened up the entryway, piercing the roof itself, nearly blowing the damn thing off.

Next, he shouted, "I dash across thee, Snowtipped Mountain!"

The moment he shouted that, the gravity that had kept him bound to the earth shattered for one second, and in that time, Orphen kicked off the ground and flew to the roof. While he could control his hold over the spell for long periods, and he could kind of float in the air, if he didn't use caution, he'd lose his equilibrium and tumble down to the earth below. So he didn't do this often.

Anyhow, in one moment, Orphen had already found his way up to the hole in the roof he'd just blown into it a few minutes before with the spell.

He hadn't planned on going in via the entryway anyway. There was too much of a risk that there might've been a trap there. Of course, it might've been safe anyway, but the risk of a trap there had seemed far larger.

"In any event, time to go," Orphen said, lowering himself into the hole. It was dark and he couldn't see much, so he relied on sound to guide him.

It's a shame I had to do things this way. There was no reason for me to have to do this otherwise. May as well make some noise, buy some time, and search for Claiomh.

He stepped lightly onto the floor as he landed—

A single answer awaited him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to hang out with you for as long as I have.”

“...?!”

He put himself on guard instantly.

He raised his face. He was in a storage room of sorts, it seemed. There wasn’t a whole lot of stuff in there, and in that mostly empty room, the boy’s black robe just blended in with the rest of the darkness inside of it.

There he stood.

On his chest was the dragon pendant. The symbol of ultimate and unbreakable power, the dragon crested pendant—

Krylancelo. The black-haired boy laughed, and stared at Orphen intently.

A coincidence? No, that’s not right...

Orphen stood in confusion.

Did he read my mind when I decided to enter through the roof like this?

“Well, yes and no. Once I know what you’re thinking it only takes me one second to use Space Metastasis to get here...”

“You... You can read my mind?!”

“Yeah, duh. Of course I can. I thought you would’ve understood what my true form looks like by now, Orphen! Or should I say, Original Krylancelo!” his counterpart shouted at him, and then faster than Orphen could blink, the assassin came flying.

Don’t fight! Orphen ordered himself, and instead raised his right arm.

I still haven’t found one of his weak spots yet—

Then he directed his raised right arm to his feet, as if to punch the floor beneath him.

He shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The wave of light that swelled at his command did so at his feet, and pierced through the floor with a thunderous roar.

As if chasing him, he could hear Krylancelo’s voice in the distance.

“Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!”

The place that Orphen had been standing up until a moment ago was exposed to power so great that several waves of power converged.

The runner that was at least a hundred years old had a huge hole blown through it, and embers started to dance in the air around them.

The room they fell in seemed to be a bedroom. It was a room that was filled with useless tchotchkes, things of the highest value and price positively drowning the space in the room. There was one bed, a closet that was embedded into the wall, and the only things on the end table were a pitcher of water along with a book.

Orphen forced himself to calm down and instead looked at the hole in the ceiling he'd just fallen through, and raised both arms.

“I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!”

At full power, his mana started to knit itself in front of him, then released itself.

The space on the other side of the ceiling warped and danced before them to an accompaniment they couldn't hear or see. The power made that whole space go crazy as it ruptured.

Orphen's ears rang with the blast.

With the amount of power I have right here, I could blow at least half the roof clear off—

He carefully shifted his posture, and sought direction on his next move from the air around him.

He centered his breathing, and waited for a few seconds—

“...Hm, well, looks like you've certainly calmed down a bit. I'll call her over. We're not at the end yet.”

At the same time Orphen heard his voice, the boy dropped down from the hole in the ceiling with a slight whoosh. He was standing, arms crossed but with a smile on his face.

It didn't touch him at all...?!

Orphen shuddered, taking a half step back in shock.

Krylancelo quietly extinguished his grin—

“If you aimed at me directly instead of the roof, you might just hit me. But still, I don’t think you can do that.”

“...”

“If you don’t kill me, you can’t beat me. You should know that by now.”

“I—” Orphen started to mutter, but swallowed his words.

Krylancelo continued speaking coolly.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. The reason you have to fight me is—”

“...” Orphen stayed quiet, and looked at Krylancelo. His opponent was relaxed, but on his guard, standing opposite of him.

“She wants it this way. She spoke this into creation because you need it. The person you were, not Orphen, but the assassin Krylancelo, that is. She thinks if we fight you can return to your past self again, and become me.”

“Her... huh,” Orphen muttered bitterly. Krylancelo nodded.

“But you know, I have my own reason for fighting you.”

The boy waved his right hand as if trying to shoo away bugs, while chanting a spell and thereby making a dagger appear in his grip. He lifted it into a comfortable stance and spoke.

“You must return to your past self. Because that will hurt her. And of course she knows that, but she’s also made a bet, and she wants to win it. And if you lose, well, it’s no big deal — she has me still, after all. So let me go ahead and stab you!”

His voice was even and calm until the end, and then Krylancelo grasped the dagger in his hand and flew towards him—

“I call upon thee—” Orphen started, shoving his hand in his pocket, “Tiny Spirits!”

Along with the spell, the room burst with the blue fires of the will-o'-wisp. They floated among them in the air, lighting up the darkness of the bedroom, making it glow.

In the glow, Krylancelo's dagger flashed. Then—

Orphen's knife repelled him in the air.

Orphen had sewn a knife into his jacket, along with its sheath. He'd slid it right out of its sheath and pointed it at Krylancelo.

Silence expanded between them.

"There's only one thing I want to ask you. Is Claiomh alright?"

"Of course she is. But I can't let you save her, or that little Deep Dragon of hers."

"My, that's some self-confidence there, my good dude. You had me fooled up until that point, you know?"

"I'm hurting you because I'm scared of you, and because you're afraid of me. Now shut up and let me stab you already!"

Once again, Krylancelo thrust his dagger at him. And once again, they flew to the back of the room, exchanging blows. Orphen tried to mow him down with the knife from the side. Krylancelo tried to land a second blow, but kept himself in check and instead chanted, "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

"Embrace my surroundings, Dancing Bronco!"

With a puff of air, the sorcery swelled and then dispersed from the side. But Orphen didn't let that phase him. He quickly feinted a punch, then instead tackled Krylancelo to the ground. He pushed on the boy's shoulder, rolling him down. But his light body didn't seem to do that, instead he bounced back up and was back in the air, or so it seemed—

He was blown back by a few centimeters, but it didn't mess up his posture. He flew to the back of the room by his own will.

—!!

Orphen reflexively chanted, "I dance through thee, Corridors of Heaven!"

Once the Space Metastasis sorcery activated, his line of sight warped, and he nearly blacked out—

One second after, Orphen found himself materializing one meter behind where he'd been before. But—

“—What?!”

It seemed that Krylancelo read his moves. He too materialized in the same place at the same moment, and thrust his dagger outward at Orphen.

Clang!

He barely managed to fend off the attack. Sparks bloomed between the blades.

Fight him dirty! He's sure as hell not gonna fight clean! Orphen reminded himself once more.

Think. Think like a Stabber, and bet your life like one!

“Ah, you finally said it!” Krylancelo screamed. As if pulling a tail of light, he drew the locus of the light towards him, rotating it, aiming at Orphen's temple. The attack landed in a dead spot, but Orphen still beat it back. But that broke his stance. If he couldn't dodge the next hit, he'd be toast—

In order to protect his head, Orphen brought in his mid-back, re-aligning his body with it. Krylancelo used his knife as a shield this time, having to fly from the side in order to dodge the next blow.

He didn't have time for this.

Slice—

It wasn't a sound quite like that, but along with his parry, Krylancelo sank his dagger into Orphen's shoulder. Fighting off the intense pain, Orphen desperately beat back the assassin with his right arm.

Krylancelo watched from above, not quite afraid, but with an expression close to that visible on his face.

Without hesitation, Orphen lunged, the blade of his knife scraping Krylancelo from his upper right arm to his wrist. The dagger fell from Krylancelo's hand,

the wound stretching from the middle of his arm to his neck. Blood gushed out of the wound—

“What the—?!” Krylancelo gasped, surprised. He suddenly flew over to Orphen, kicking him hard and with prejudice in the solar plexus. Orphen felt like he was about to throw up, gasping for air.

“Hhhh—”

Smiling all the while, Orphen pushed hard on the gushing wound on Krylancelo’s shoulder. Being blown back, Krylancelo fell on his behind, but dragged himself up from the floor as soon as he could. Looking down at Krylancelo who was clutching at his wound, Orphen spoke.

“How pathetic, how careless of you. You could probably heal it with a spell, though you probably couldn’t replenish the blood you lost too easily. Either way, it looks like you won’t be gripping anything with that hand for a while. No more revenging for you, sir—”

“You’re right,” Krylancelo muttered in an anguished voice. He chanted something, and the wound on his wrist disappeared.

But Orphen just put himself on his guard. His left shoulder was still a bit numb, but he dusted it off with his right hand regardless.

Even though the blade only hit Orphen once, he wasn’t bleeding. Krylancelo laughed bitterly.

“What are you wearing under your shirt?”

“Oh, this old thing? I borrowed a whole bunch of weapons from Tish and stuck them under there. I basically made some super strong uncuttable underwear. It’s held up pretty well so far, don’t you think?”

There’s a difference between uncuttable clothing and bulletproof clothing. Bulletproof clothing tended to use chains (like chainmail) and other materials that were highly repellent and resistant to attack. Whereas uncuttable clothing tended to use materials heavily fibrous and hard to cut in origin, making any cut made ineffective. Basically, any material that stood up well to strong amounts of friction would make any cut just slide right off of it. And a knife that couldn’t seem to stay on its target without slipping off, well, the only use it had was as a

show of power and nothing more.

Compare that with bulletproof clothing, which was far thinner and lighter of make, uncuttable clothing was heavier, and slightly harder to move around in. While bulletproof clothing was convenient, it couldn't flex and bend easily and move with you after taking a blow. It made it hard for the wearer to breathe that way, and in that way, it was slightly inferior as a method of defense in situations like these.

While it seemed that Krylancelo initially held some interest in this explanation, he soon groaned loudly.

"So it wouldn't be worth fighting you with that on... Ah, now I see what you mean."

"Man, you whine a lot. Has anyone ever told you that? While you've been standing there bitching, it's given me some time to think — in terms of a way to get you out of my face and out of my life. It finally came to me. And now, the first—"

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me..."

"I know. I get it. I told you, I've actually thought of a few different ways to do this. The second is—"

As he spoke, Orphen waved his knife around, finally pointing it at Krylancelo. He pressed the switch on the hilt, and—

Kla-klink!

The sound that the spring made echoed in the room and surprised him. The blade came flying out of the hilt and straight at Krylancelo.

Krylancelo twisted his body, trying to evade it—



Orphen quickly started running, tossing away the bladeless hilt of his knife, and instead going for the dagger that Krylancelo had dropped to the floor. He picked it up, and while Krylancelo had fallen out of his fighting stance, aimed it at his temple.

“Bet you can’t defend yourself against a concussion!” Orphen shrieked, sinking towards Krylancelo, then hit him again with the hilt of the blade.

The boy seemed to swoon, falling towards the floor.

“This is the end, Krylancelo.”

But—

“Underestimate me at your peril.”

At that moment, white light exploded in front of Orphen’s eyes— With the strangest sensation that his body was springing upward, Orphen lost consciousness.



“...So from the first report, it’s been about thirty minutes, huh?”

Inside of the Childman residence, out of all of the police officers that had assembled there, one was talking to Majic. The rest of the neighborhood had come to see what was going on, and they were assembled at a slight distance from the manor. The horses were on standby at a different location that was slightly removed from the manor, ready to go if needed.

Leticia too had shown up, and thanks to her smooth talking with the police, it became more of a rescue mission and not a pursuit instead.

...If you think about it, if she hadn’t chased after him, and had she not told Majic where the mansion was, Majic’s punishment would’ve been far worse.

A bit removed from the scene, Leticia was quietly talking to the agent in charge from the police.

“But even if you’re telling me—” The agent started, clearly looking put out.

Leticia said patiently, “I could pull rank on you and remind you of how this incident falls under my jurisdiction as someone from the Tower, but I do

understand that you have your own position to uphold here.”

She wore her black robe. It didn’t seem very comfortable to move around in, but at least her feet weren’t bound and were free to move whenever they needed to. It also had a slit up the side, Majic realized belatedly. At her breast was the dragon pendant, and in her left hand, was the scabbard to her sword.

Her long black hair was gathered at her shoulder, and she was otherwise completely armed.

She continued, “You see, the fight that happened in that house? It was two sorcerers who were fighting. To put it bluntly, you wouldn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell if you were to go up against either one of them. And I’m sure you don’t want to die a meaningless death, hm? If you could entrust this matter to me, I’m sure it would take a lot off of your plate that you aren’t ready to deal with.”

“...” The agent in charge fell silent.

Man, it really is just a matter of time until she talks him into this, huh?

As Majic thought that, his muscles tensed nervously. The roof had a huge hole blown through it, and the whole thing was nearly half gone. At some point, it had gone entirely silent.

It could be the fight is already over...

And if that’s the case, who won?

If Master lost, then that means he’s dead. It also means Claiomh and Leki are gone now, too.

That was only “if,” but—

Which means I only have one option left: revenge. Revenge for Master, Claiomh, and Leki.

He’d had this thought a few days ago when Majic thought he was about to get murdered. At that time, he’d pointed a handgun at the enemy in absolute rage. At the same time, he found himself not ready to be murdered by his opponent.

He found himself desperately not wanting to die.

Am I a coward?

The question tormented Majic as he gloomily looked up at the night sky.

I don't know anything, and I'm just a useless apprentice sorcerer... Even though I was running around trying to save everyone, the truth is that I was terrified of that assassin. I was so, so scared.

Master has cultivated his skills, and is clearly not afraid of a stronger opponent like me—

Even though Claiomh hadn't cultivated any skills at all, she was still doing her own thing. *And that may make her even more incredible than Master is, to have the strength to do that.*

I really am just a hindrance to both of them, aren't I...?

And—

Suddenly from behind, someone touched Majic's shoulder, startling him and making him turn around.

There stood Leticia, trying to be reassuring and completely transparent with a gentle smile on her face.

"I got clearance to take care of this myself. Come on, we're going in."

At her words, Majic just nodded in response.

For now, this is what courage meant to Majic. It meant suiting up and going to fight if necessary.

For now, it was enough, he thought.

Chapter VII: A Steely Successor

“You ended up turning out pretty good, you know that? We raised you well. One day, if I get around to naming a successor, it’ll probably be you.”

Childman hadn’t said that. Instead, it had been Leticia—

Whether that had been her talking in her sleep, or her blurting out something she hadn’t meant to, either way, it was the soundtrack to which Orphen found himself waking up listening to.

In that still darkness, one person was down.

A voice rang out in the room around him, and it was a voice he felt he knew well—

“Look me in the face, Krylancelo. Awaken.”

It was a natural voice, one soft but still enough to hit him square in the chest. It was that sort of piercing voice.

“Awaken, Krylancelo—”

Something came to him, a memory, gently.

They stood together, the two of them. He couldn’t summon the strength in his body to stand, so he was shaking. He wasn’t cold, it was dead in the dog days of summer. However, he shivered as if he were frozen.

Orphen muttered to himself, “You keep using that name purposely, huh? Krylancelo this, Krylancelo that. That’s the guy who’s gone around killing Tower elders. You’re the strongest now. You’ve supported me since the beginning, right? At the end of the day, ignoring you was at the behest of the Tower’s elders...”

There was no answer. The darkness held him quietly.

Orphen briefly threw out his right arm to his side, and shrieked.

“You told me once to never show my face around you again! Azalie!”

No answer, still no answer...

But Orphen continued to speak at a rapidfire pace, facing the darkness.

“You always kept an eye on me, didn’t you? Even when Claiomh nearly got her dumb ass roasted in the Forest, I heard your voice. I thought, oh, that’s probably Tish’s voice. But it was yours instead. White sorcery allows for remote surveillance like that, even when I’m being blown up in forests.”

After screaming that, Orphen turned, and faced a new piece of darkness.

He continued, “Maybe the reason why you calling me by that name bothers me so much is because you know everything about me and what I’ve done. Basically, you’ve kept eyes on me since Totokanta, and you’ve been watching me ever since!”

“It’s because you’re dangerous to her. Really dangerous. It’s because without a single doubt, you’re the Steely Successor, you know...”

With a flash, the darkness suddenly brightened.

As if there had been an explosion, white light swelled. However, there was no heat, or a shockwave after, like there usually would be. There was only light. As if someone were in control of it, the brightness suddenly turned up in power, and Orphen lost his sight entirely for a moment.

His eyes gradually got used to the brightness, and he found he was floating.

“Is this the room I’m waking up in?”

“...Yeah,” Orphen confirmed to himself.

It was one of the lower rooms of the Childman residence. It was pretty big, a room with stone walls. The space within it was rectangular, with a ladder in the corner. Other than that nothing was in that room.

The room was lit with multiple gaslit lamps hung throughout it.

No, wait. That wasn’t it. Only some of the light came from the lamps. A round ball of light floated in the center of the room.

It was as big as an armful of things, and in the center of the ball it seemed like there were lightning bugs trapped inside of it, dancing. But, they weren’t bugs

—

“Wyrđ... Glyphs, huh?”

In the middle of the ball of light, in a straight line, Runes that no one but one of the Nornir, the Weird Dragons, could have prepared were visible and floated quietly.

Across from the ball, Krylancelo stood.

“Of course, you haven’t forgotten that she was one of Childman’s students and had become one of his successors, did you?”

He said it so lightly, as if just tossing it out there.

Orphen groaned. “Ancient sorcerers, the Weird Dragons and their wyrdology... Childman went to some ruins and dug up some artifacts. He found long-hidden Nornir artifacts. Imagine, finding the Nornir’s lost treasures like that.”

“In those ruins, you know they found Nornir anti-personnel ordinance? Some of their finest work, too. They even found a complete Killing Doll. Does that surprise you any?”

“...!”

Even though Orphen’s eyes were wide open, it felt like a dream. Somehow the Krylancelo before him had attained enlightenment—

He continued, “She had you under surveillance. When you were in Alenhatam as well, of course. But let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, she saw a fully-functioning Killing Doll. She had all of the knowledge that Childman had passed onto her, though she couldn’t really make the Doll work, she somehow understood why that was the case. She figured it out. And so, she activated the Doll—”

Krylancelo took one step forward.

“She dominated that. However, she’s different from you. You, who destroy everything you touch. But back to the story. From the mouth of the Doll, a Dragon who had gotten so desperate trying to find a place to hide, spoke of secrets. Secrets like where their holy land is, how things are for them right now

on this continent... Everything. And then—”

He took another step forward, and as if mirroring him in reverse, Orphen took a step back. The Doll’s walking speed hastened.

“And within the Doll, there lay many things not yet discovered that had been lost to the sands of time and man. And within those secrets, something like this lay hidden.”

Krylancelo took another step forward, then flung out his arm. With a puff, as if little sparks of fire were scattering, a glyph made of light fired outward.

Suddenly, a sword popped out of thin air.

“The Mooncrest Sword! It still existed—”

That sword was identical to the Sword of Baldanders, the Mooncrest Sword, that had been lost in Alenhatam. It was the reason why he and Azalie had left the Tower in the first place, the Sword of the Celestials...

It was the sword that Azalie had killed for. She’d murdered Childman over that sword.

Krylancelo nodded. “Yes. Because of that sword, she took the Killing Doll, by which I mean me, and sculpted it to fit her ideals. She sculpted the perfect assassin, changed me into one. And because of that, I can use all of the techniques you so carefully cultivated over the years, to the level of power you’d boasted about. In other words, I am made from her memories, and of your techniques.”

Ignoring the Mooncrest Sword, he continued to speak.

“I wouldn’t retreat so much if I were you. And look behind your back. I’ll be magnanimous and give you ten full seconds.”

“...?!”

Orphen looked reflexively behind his back.

On the floor lay Claiomh, Leki sitting on her belly. They seemed exhausted, and wouldn’t move—

But they weren’t dead, and that was the most important part. They were

breathing — slowly, but they were breathing.

It seemed that there was a pin, or a needle of sorts sticking out of her chest.

It should've been a fatal wound. However, the closer he looked, it wasn't quite a needle — Instead, it was a tiny wyrd made of light, sticking out vertically from her chest.

It was a rune, one that was written with the intent of paralysis.

“Okay, it's been ten seconds,” Krylancelo said, and Orphen turned back to face him.

The assassin pointed the sword at Claiomh, who was behind his back. He moved quickly.

“You won't ditch her and run, will you? Though you probably will, at the end of the day. I'm not exactly planning to kill her, but what do you think would happen if I cut her with this sword, hm? Do you remember? Do you remember what it feels like to get cut with this? Whatever shape your body is twisted into, you tend to remember things like this emotionally, right? It's that traumatic connection your brain makes. I wonder if you'll cry, if you get changed into a snake or a frog. I wonder if you'll actually be able to cry?”

Orphen didn't answer him.

And even though he didn't answer Krylancelo, he dropped his hips.

He froze his heart, and cleared his mind. He could feel it.

He spoke slowly.

“There's one more way to outsmart you, isn't there?”

“...?” Krylancelo looked at him, clearly puzzled. His brows drew together.

And in that next moment—

Orphen made a fist, and thrust it right at his center.

Krylancelo parried with his own thrust, striking at his wrist with his sword. Orphen saw that, and drew back his fist. The Sword of Baldanders missed him, and drew back—

In that short interval of time, close enough to touch his face, Krylancelo drew

near. Within his eyes, in that one moment, was a glint of hesitation. This time, when he approached, he did not use his weapon, but instead wanted to use his emotions, and wondered if he could do that.

It was the hesitation that came with using weapons that Orphen saw in his eyes. Even in humans that fought regularly, that problem tended to arise.

Orphen pushed his left fist towards his opponent's flank. There was no real strength behind it. Instead he just merely touched his flank.

In that instant, Krylancelo tried to run behind him. Then—

The moment his opponent's back was turned, there was an explosion that rang throughout the room at Orphen's feet that sounded like he'd used gunpowder. Using all of his might, using his body like a spring, he ground his fist into Krylancelo's body.

Krylancelo had flown behind him, but now with the force that Orphen used, he fell, tumbling down.

Using the momentum from his opponent running away, Orphen used his own power to blow him back further. Perhaps in the moment that Orphen's fist made contact with his flank, had Krylancelo tried to force him back directly in front of him, he would have been able to crush Orphen's ribs to dust.

For close-quarters combat, Childman had a finishing technique, a trump card of sorts that he called the "Small Strike." But there was no one left on the continent who could actually execute the move.

In any case, the fallen and upset Krylancelo attacked with nary a delay. He rushed up and over to Orphen, who wasn't really standing up too straight himself, and with all of his strength punched his jaw. One could hear the sound of Orphen's jaw shattering, and while he was down, Krylancelo took his sword, treading closer, and thrust it towards his throat—

Krylancelo's face was illuminated by the white of his eyes, and how widely he'd opened his mouth shouting. One could see his palate, clouded by the blood overflowing in his mouth.

"The only way to outwit you is—"

While looking down at his corpse, Orphen raised his voice and spoke.

“If you have the time to be such a damn shrew about things, you should’ve had the time to finally grow some balls and kill someone. Hadn’t thought my opponent would be a Doll, though.”

Krylancelo wanted to reply, but instead blood overflowed in great and audible blurts from his throat.

While retreating in blood-soaked boots, Orphen said, “Oh, I get it. Because I cut your wrist, most of your blood is draining out of you. I thought it was a bit weird, but then again, you’re a Doll. Well, come to think of it, the way that asshole Doll that was in Alenhatam spoke was slow and dull. Be that as it may, if you were transformed into me, that would mean that you would have blood running in your veins. And if that’s the case, no wonder! That would be a vital place on you, too. Just like a human.”

“No... Who would’ve thought that your final option would...”

“—?!”

As Krylancelo spoke from a throat that should’ve been crushed, Orphen slipped back into a battle stance.

Krylancelo’s crushed throat seemed to be working just fine, though his voice was anguished. He slowly rose, raising his upper body, and said, “The one thing we can take away from this is we’re... finally... finally... Even in ability...”

“You really think that?” Orphen asked him honestly, stepping back, staring at him. Krylancelo smiled, and it was ghoulish with his face half smashed in as it was.

“Of course... I do... And I’ll win... For her...”

Orphen swallowed his saliva.

“For her, for her, for her! It’s all about her!” Orphen laughed in reply. Krylancelo stood—

“Yeah! I exist because of her! Because of her, I’m her ideal assassin! Come at me!”

“I release thee, Sword of Light!” Krylancelo chanted loudly. The space around

them filled with heat and light straightaway.

“I erect thee, Spiral of the Sun!” Orphen countered in a scream, coming at him from the side.

Boom! With that, Krylancelo’s body was wreathed in flames. He didn’t even try to dodge Orphen’s spell, and from within the flames, he laughed loudly.

“How foolish! With this Doll’s body of mine, I can even defend myself against the spells of Deep Dragons!”

“...! Oh shi—” Orphen’s tutting was too late. Because he’d managed to dodge the waves of light and heat from before, he threw himself down on the floor. If Krylancelo could have just hesitated at the right moment while casting his spell, he would’ve been able to get up—

But before he could think of standing, he instead launched his next spell into the flames.

“Guide my song, Deathsong Starling!”

There was no way to dodge the shockwaves from that spell. For defense, there was only one option—

In desperation, Orphen screamed.

“I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!”

The space before him warped and jumped—

The shockwaves from this spell completely nullified the ones from the last spell. The blast spread around them, without prejudice. Because of how completely the shockwaves knocked everything out, it should’ve been easy for Krylancelo to firm up plans for a counterattack. But the problem was that at the center of the blast, there was no guarantee that he was going to be okay—

And that’s what he’s counting on!

After that attack, it wasn’t the pain so much as it was the urge to vomit that was the problem. Jumping around in an explosion wasn’t exactly helping that, either.

He bounced around like a rubber ball, and sank like a stone. It was the feeling

of there being no up nor down, no left nor right, a space where anything went. From within that space came a scream.

“You think I’m really going to lose to the likes of you, moron?!”

While he rolled about, he pointed his hand towards the floor (he hoped it was the floor, it was hard to tell while he still had no sense of equilibrium), he managed to hang on, clinging to dear life.

“You’re a Doll taking the form of the me from five years ago. I have a heap of things I want to do to you, and I wouldn’t even be finished with the last one! You fucking blockhead, you little shit! You exist for her, do you? You’re just throwing your life away for that one pretense, and you’re not even sure it’s true!”

As he screamed, the space that was warped because of the explosion continued to ring in his ears, his body hurt everywhere, but he had to continue yelling.

“There are so many more people that need you! Look at Tish! In these five years, she’s become a mere shell of herself! In order to make things right and return Azalie and Teacher to where they belonged... Your goal is the complete opposite of that! It doesn’t make sense! Make it make sense to me! Even the elders, you ended up driving them mad with how many of them you absconded with! You could’ve just killed one or two, you know! But noooo...”

With the blast that had been aimed at his head, his bandana had gotten shredded as a result, and gone flying. At the same time, he was covered in lacerations, and had blood in his mouth.

“The only technique you know is stabbing someone in the back, you little shit! Just what the fuck are you planning? Even when you were scouted by the Apostles, the only thing worth more than that is the fact that you were one of Childman’s students!”

In the warped space between them, all of Orphen’s senses, his vision, his hearing... none of it was working properly. It was a feeling like being very drunk, and Orphen stood on what he thought was the floor.

“You exist for her, right?! That’s a lie. You were just a stupid kid that didn’t

know any better, so all you could do was cling to her for dear life!”

Finally, the spell’s effects wore off, and the pulsating space returned to normal, as if nothing had happened at all.

Silence fell over the scene.

Orphen was the only one standing in the underground stone room. But even saying that, he was up on one knee, looking thrashed to hell and back—

Krylancelo — no, the Doll — was beaten so badly that he fell. He was beaten so badly it was hard to tell where one injury stopped and another began. He was sinking in a sea of his own red blood.

As the Doll had said before, no one can both guard defensively and lead an offensive at the same time. The moment he cast his spell, the shockwaves from the blast had gotten right in front of him, and took him down.

The broken Doll had a look in his eyes, not like he was looking down at you but rather as if his gaze was cast on something far away. “Poor me... I look so terrible,” Orphen murmured softly.

He wasn’t sure when he’d started crying. He wiped his eyes on his gauntlets. Then he turned his back on the ruins of the Doll.

The needle-like glyph that had been paralyzing Leki and Claiomh (who had rolled into the corner of the room) disappeared.

Crunch...

There came the sound of someone stepping on sand.

Crunch...

The sound of footsteps, as if teasing him, rang out in the underground room.

Orphen had the hallucinatory feeling of his innards spasming, as if he were in a nightmare. But he ignored that, went to Claiomh, and held her close. Leki, who had been on her stomach, rolled off of her and onto the floor. His eyes opened with a pop.

“Nnnn...” Claiomh groaned, her blue eyes starting to open. Her face looked as if she were talking in her sleep, and then she looked at Orphen—

She looked at the remains of the Doll over her shoulder, seeming as if she were about to start swooning exhaustedly.

It might've been out of concern for his human that the baby Dragon came plodding back over with soft little steps to her side. Orphen looked down at Lekki, who was looking at Claiomh, and knelt at her side on one knee, and without looking back, said, "She'll come, won't she? Azalie."

"Krylancelo!"

That voice rang in his ears, shaking them.

Azalie...

Orphen's hands shook, and in the next moment, he realized something. His eyesight had taken a turn for the worse, and the only thing he could hear was her voice.

Control yourself! Orphen screamed at himself. He clung to the mindset that Childman had taught him long ago. And in doing so, he shouted.

"Stop!"

He looked behind him. The voice came again, threaded with tension.

"Stop trying to control me! Get out of my head!"

"Didn't think that would work on you. Well, if you think about it, this white sorcery mind control spell is pretty shabby with the kind of array set-up I have going on here..."

The voice was light, cheerful.

He turned around, and found a woman standing in front of him.

"Azalie..." Orphen groaned, in a trembling voice. His expression spasmed.

Before him stood Azalie, looking as she had two months prior when he'd seen her last.



Her soft brown eyes peeked out of her slightly curly black hair. Her eyes were slightly slanted, as if teasing him. Her head was tilted, as if listening to him closely.

In the Tower, even though she'd teased him mercilessly, he looked up to her so much— She glared at him, as if they were back in battle training—

He'd known her for so long—

She no longer wore the robes of the Tower. Instead, she wore robes made for use in battle. Aside from her dragon crest pendant, she wore nothing else.

She went missing from the Tower five years ago, but...

Orphen was shaking, and he was terrified. He pushed out his left hand.

"Why..." He groaned, and Azalie snickered.

"Did you see me just appear in front of you? I used the ladder, though."

"You think that matters right now? Why did you do that?!" Orphen shouted.

Because of the effects of the shockwaves from the spells, his fuzzy sense of things started to calm. Azalie did not seem particularly perturbed by that.

"It's like you said before. I had a score to settle."

"A score...?"

Red filled his field of vision.

"You killed how many elders to justify that? All of this started because of what happened with you five years ago!"

"I was the cause of all of this... Funny. They're the ones who erased me, denied me."

She brushed her hair out of her face, and continued to speak.

"More importantly, I've got some work to do—"

"Some work...?!" Orphen parroted back to her. She ignored him and instead went to where the ruins of the Killing Doll lay. She picked up the Sword of Baldanders where it lay in the puddle of blood. She pointed it at the ruins of the Doll, which stood with a sudden thump.

She muttered some sort of spell, he thought, but he couldn't properly hear her.

With a soft puff, the ruins of the Doll along with most of the blood melted away into sand.

"I didn't want to turn you into a murderer," she murmured, holding the Sword of Baldanders, all the while smiling bitterly.

"Don't make it one of your allies when it really was one of your tools. You tried to use it to kill me..." Orphen said, raising his arms as if to block the fallen Claiomh behind him. Though he'd broken his ribs, his body wasn't leaning or tilting in the least.

He very quietly started knitting together an organizational array for a spell.

He knew he couldn't win, but—

He saw her open her mouth. Her voice gushed forth.

Even if her bitter smile was for appearances' sake only, there was something so very sad about it.

"...I'm scared of you."

"Sc...ared?"

Without thinking about it, he repeated her words back to her stupidly. At his feet he could see Leki, hair completely standing up on end, opposite of Azalie.

Even though she hadn't realized it.

"I have my own reason to be scared of you," she said.

"You're... scared of me?" He asked.

*In Childman's classes, you were always the one who had the most mana.
You're scared of me?*

Orphen had these thoughts running through his mind, ruminating. He smiled without realizing it.

"Really?"

His smile seemed self-depreciating.

“If I’m so scary to you,” he said, “Kill me. Get it over with. Kill me like you’ve killed everything else that’s been in your way so far.”

“Krylancelo...” Azalie replied, her face serious.

She continued, “I couldn’t kill you. Because you’re his Successor.”

And then she started to laugh sadly.

Don’t look at me with those eyes, he screamed in his head. No, not screamed. Begged. Pleaded.

The photosphere that shone in the center of that underground room showered them both in light. As if supporting herself, Azalie raised her left arm, and spoke to him.

“Krylancelo, I know this is a bit of a blast from the past, but do you remember when you went to the Court?”

“To see the Apostles? Yeah, I do. Why?” He asked her, clearly still on his guard.

She nodded at him. “Ah, well. You murdered the elders’ errand boy. So I was thinking... I wondered if you knew who he was...”

“That was—” He instantly averted his eyes. “He tried to stop me, mumbling nonsense the whole time.”

“He did, hm? Do you know why the Tower needed you so badly to go to the Court? Did they ever talk to you about that...?”

“...”

Orphen’s heart jumped with alarm, and he was wracked with agony. Her question hurt far more than his ribs, more than the rest of his body combined.

“Azalie, do you really want me to take that question seriously? You’re just taking the piss with me. Even though Childman did some bad shit, he wouldn’t go *that* far...”

“He was thorough when it came to training for mindsetting. He sowed those seeds slowly and deliberately. He did it in this very room. Did you know that? Just for you. You were so special to him that way.”

“...”

She continued, speaking simply. “To be fair, mindsetting became a required course within the Tower’s curriculum for battle training. But he truly took his time with you, and used such care... Almost no one else can say that. I wonder why? Because you, Krylancelo, have a truly special, no, a *blessed* role to play. He taught you mindsetting. In other words, the perfect training to go up against white sorcerers with—”

“Azalie, stop!”

“Don’t you see? Childman *wants* you to go up against the white sorcerers. He raised you to do it. He is the master of techniques that can bring them down, and the only person that has had the possibility of surpassing him there is me. He raised you to keep me in check. Don’t you see that? Krylancelo—”

Azalie continued. “You were raised to kill me. The only one in this whole world that could do it is you, and that is the role you need to play. You are the assassin raised to bring me down.”

“Please, please shut up! Stop talking! Don’t say anything more!” Orphen screamed like he was on fire, raising his voice.

He continued, “Do you really think he thought that far ahead of things? Even if he did, I won’t play ball. I am not an assassin. I love you. I respected you. I’ve managed to live my own life after washing my hands of you! I... I...”

Suddenly, he drooped, feeling weak. He sighed limply. Staring at the floor, he continued to speak.

“Azalie, at the very least I want you to be able to find a place to settle down and live your life peacefully.”

“...It will never happen.”

“Please, big sister!”

The words came out of his mouth reflexively, and Azalie seemed like she was the most surprised out of the two of them that he’d said that.

She barked a laugh in puzzlement.

“It’s been what, ten years since you last called me that?”

“Tish told me, you know. That she’s still waiting for you to come home to her, to us. She even has a room ready for you. You’re not alone. So please...”

“I told you. It will never happen. I have plans of my own, you know.”

“Plans?”

“Childman... I want to know what he was thinking when he was still alive,” she said, caressing her own arms that were crossed across her chest softly. “Stay here with me, Krylancelo. If you truly are the only assassin that can kill me... I am the only person that can truly completely understand you, and can support you. Do you understand that?”

“I...” Orphen started in a whisper, losing his words. Of course, he couldn’t tell her yes.

But he also couldn’t tell her no.

The silence that bloomed between them might’ve been the best way to answer her, all things considered. For a little while, Azalie allowed him to see her expression. It wasn’t a bitter smile that she wore, but she was indeed smiling.

“You’ll think about it, won’t you? And you’ll have an answer ready for me the next time we meet...?”

“I thought I told you. We will never meet again, after this,” Orphen told her in a shaky lament. He stopped understanding his own feelings on the matter, and he seemed like he was about to burst into tears.

Her smile remained bright, as if everything were fine. The only clue that something was wrong was the increasingly unhinged glint in her eyes.

Her voice was kind as she spoke to him.

“First of all, you need to know how to speak to girls, Krylancelo...”

“...”

Gulp. He swallowed his saliva and stayed silent.

As he stayed silent, she loosened her shoulders, and spoke cleverly.

“Now, then. I should be on my way. Tish and your student should be on their

way in here soon. As much as I want to see Tish, I think it's better if she thinks I'm dead, so let's just leave it at that, shall we? Just as Heartia told her in her report."

"Azalie, just what are you thinking?"

He didn't think she was actually going to answer him. But then—

She batted her long eyelashes at him, and answered him. "You know, the real reason I went after the elders wasn't just because I had a score to settle. It was also because of how they concealed information from people. Did you know that? Around the same time Childman was a freelance assassin, he went after the High Priest of the Kimluck Church and tried to stab him."

"...?!"

"Weird, right? He was focused on the Church out of all places. I think I'll pay them a visit—"

"Wa—"

In that instant, before he could ask her anything more, she took out a small black box from her breast. With one word, the box came alive, glowing with Wyrddglyphs— Just like Krylancelo had performed Space Metastasis and had disappeared into thin air earlier that afternoon, Azalie too disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a few small glyphs behind her.

At the same time, the practitioner, in other words, because the Doll had been so thoroughly destroyed and had used up all of its power, it also disappeared along with the ball of light that had been in the center of the underground room, though it lagged a bit behind.

Darkness fell.

Orphen stood still, once again, losing consciousness in a swoon.

The only source of sound in the room was Leki, who was running around in circles, and whose paws were hitting the stone floor loudly in the silence of the room. Orphen laughed as if in a dream. His nervousness lifted, and he laughed until he cried.



Majic did not know the name Childman Powderfield.

He was the strongest black sorcerer in the history of the continent, the one with the most knowledge and the ability to get it all done. And Majic did not know his name.

But for the first time, Majic now truly understood who raised his master, more or less.

He followed behind Tish through the mansion, their way lit by the will-o'-wisps that she'd summoned with a spell. As if remembering something, he thought— *I wonder what kind of person he is, if he could help make someone like Master.*

Someone whose personality was bad, but behavior was worse. Someone whose ability to make a living was practically non-existent, who got involved with the mob, and eventually was the same as broke.

But he was someone who was also the strongest black sorcerer.

Orphen was the strongest sorcerer, and also someone who excelled at protecting himself. He could take care of himself.

Majic was so jealous of those traits alone he could barely stand it.

Master's been saving me, looking after me all this time. And I'm only now realizing that...

The Childman residence was huge, but the layout was simple. There was only one main hallway, and as long as they walked through it and opened every door, the search for Orphen would end sooner rather than later.

But whether they would find Orphen or Krylancelo? That was the next question.

Majic didn't want to think about that.

As far as he could tell, there were no loud sounds of an ongoing battle as they made their way throughout the mansion. And so they passed the time.

Perhaps the battle was already over. And there was no way to find out how it ended until they found either one or both of them.

Things that Master has that I don't... A sorcerer's arms? No... Not that. That's not quite right.

As they made their way down the hallway and Leticia opened up doors one by one, looking inside, Majic sighed.

If I became someone whom Master could use... No, if I became someone he could depend on. No, that's not right either—

Majic aimlessly stopped and stood still. Leticia didn't seem to realize that, and continued on ahead. He wasn't sure if it was because she was so worried for Orphen that she was going as fast as she could, or if it was him who was the one who suddenly had this feeling that no one would search that way for him.

That thought depressed him even more.

Somehow, he was able to see through the closest open door—

It seemed like it was an empty room.

There was nothing inside of it, nothing at all.

Had Leticia given this room a cursory onceover and then moved on?

Majic easily found one book sitting in the corner of the room — which was quite odd, seeing as it was the only thing in it. The book lay there, as if it had fallen from somewhere.

There was no title printed on its cover.

Majic picked it up and flipped through it. Inside was filled with words too difficult to understand. From what he could tell it seemed to be a book of ancient province-related records of geographical features and cultural records. It was stuffed with words he'd never heard of.

He just couldn't make neither heads nor tails of the content of the book.

"A great beating heart... A dragon... A false dragon? You, who are glory on high... Huh?"

From the open book fell a single page.

It looked as if it had been being used as a bookmark, but Majic wasn't sure what page it had marked, and he wasn't sure where to put it.

But, regardless, he picked up the page and looked at it. It was just one page, and it looked like someone had scribbled some notes on it and then decided to use it as a bookmark.

There was only one sentence inscribed on that page.

“Who is the Successor?”

“...”

“At the Tower I’ve finally become an adult. Just like Master and Leticia.”

Without thinking, he touched it, and felt his chest squeeze, but of course, he didn’t have a dragon pendant on or anything.

“Majic! Where are you?!” Suddenly, a voice echoed in the room. Leticia was calling for him.

He raised his face. It seemed she’d found something deeper into the mansion.

“There’s an entrance to an underground room! I’m going in, so watch my back for me!”

“Y-Yeah! Coming!” Majic replied in a loud voice, running out of the room. The book was still clutched to his chest, though he’d dropped the memoed bookmark.

“Who is the Successor?”

The page continued to ask that question to the empty room, repeating without end.

Epilogue

The wind blew through Tefurem.

In the wild gusts, on top of the roof, stood two squat figures. They looked down at the town.

“Hmm...” Raising the sword above their heads, as if putting feeling into something, one of the figures groaned. Pulling his fur pelt cloak around him, he said, “Sure is peaceful.”

“It sure is...” answered the other of the two figures, and right behind them was something wandering around, like a cat. It might also be correct to say that he was nodding off.

As if not realizing that, the first figure continued to heft his sword, and continued to speak.

“This town ain’t too shabby, in all honesty. When we came here at first there was a bit of a ruckus, but it seems like it worked itself out in the meanwhile.”

“It sure did...”

“Even that thieving, moneylending bastard healed up completely in two weeks, so I guess we sure got our asses handed to us, didn’t we?”

“We sure did...”

“That avalanche girl had her hands full with getting him all healed up, so it’s been even more peaceful the busier she’s been kept, you know?”

“It sure has...”

“This wind is so nice. And that moneylending bastard... I always thought he’d be the type to shoot first and ask questions later, but we sure were proven wrong, huh?”

“We sure were...”

And—

“Oh, for the love of...”

Looking up at the roof was Leticia, who hefted a broom in one hand, and said in a sinister voice, “Just why the hell are you two settling down in my house?”

“You know what they say about feeding strays once...” Tiffes said, setting out bottles of water to repel cats and dogs there in the garden. “According to Pat’s theory, when you do that, you’re as good as adopting them, and you can’t get rid of them too easy at all. It’s like a stigma.”

As soon as Tiffes spoke her name, Pat popped up behind him, holding a stuffed bear in her arms.

However, the two on the roof ignored the conversation below, and laughed boomingly.

“Hahaha! We’re truly peerless!”

“We sure are...”

The dog days of summer were soon to be upon the city of Tefurem.



“...I’m of the firm belief that people should heal themselves.”

I mean, you’re not wrong. I think so too.

“So I thought I should take it upon myself to cook you something nutritious~♥”

Well... Okay, maybe you’re not so terrible after all.

“That being said, I am proud to present to you the Only Half-Compulsory Health Restoration Menu~♪ At least, that’s what I was thinking of calling it.”

Nope. Nope, nope, nope, nope. I was wrong. You really are the worst! Orphen screamed, but no sound came out.

In his hospital bed, Orphen was leaning up, his hands shaking. Under the stiff, scratchy hospital gown, he was covered in bandages and plasters, and it was hard to move in general.

But perhaps the worst of which was the cast on his neck, which was covered in a poultice.

No, no, I can think of something even worse. The fact that everything that happened caused damage to my vocal cords is worse. I can't even talk right now. Orphen thought, incredibly annoyed.

It was to be expected, right? To be fair, it would've been odd for him not to have heavy damage to at least one part of his body after being caught in that last wave of fire with the Killing Doll. The fact that he hadn't shared the same fate as the Doll (broken, and in some areas, literally pulverized to dust) was a miracle. He'd positively gotten off light with the wounds he did have.

But another issue with not having a voice meant that he couldn't use sorcery to heal up faster. If he'd just been injured on the outside, it still would've been difficult for someone to heal him, but he would've been able to swing it.

The other main problem is that now that he was forced to lie in bed and heal, he was bored to tears.

Which meant that him being (and staying) entertained depended on his environment. Tragic.

The hospital room itself wasn't too shabby. It was probably a result of Leticia yelling until he got only the best of the best, he was sure. They gave him a single room, and he supposed that was proof enough of his theory.

Claiomh had set up camp by his bedside, which meant he had no real idea of what to expect in terms of things brought in to cheer him up. Today, too, a completely random assortment of items had been brought to him.

Across the room, Majic sat in a chair, doing his own thing by reading a book. It was a book with a pitch-black cover with no title on it, and it seemed very old.

That being said, it wasn't necessarily the worst of places to recuperate in—

While side-eyeing Claiomh (who'd brought a number of big and round strange-looking foods for him today and placed them on his bedside table with the pride of a cat who brought their human a dead mouse), Orphen felt glad that even though he knew it was a lot of stress on her that Leticia was taking care of him.

"This time I'm really pleased with how it came out~ ♥ I call it the 'One Punch Knockout Death Stew!'"

This has nothing but garlic chives in it...!

Whether Claiomh could feel his response by his gaze or not was unclear. She took his hand. Leki wore the same expression he did as he sat on top of Claiomh's head, waving a forepaw.

"Oh, even though I named it that it's not that it's going to kill you! It's going to kill that nasty sickness of yours!" She added hastily.

I'm not sick, I'm just injured...

"Anyway, Nora seemed like she was feeling better after I gave her some of it! She even ran around in a two hundred meter length circle. It worked perfectly!"

Don't you mean she was trying to run away from you?

"After she ran around she brought me the dead mouse she captured. Surely that was her sign of gratitude that she loved my stew so much."

Nah, I'm pretty sure that was her sign of surrender...

"You're not going home until you eat every last bite."

Noooo... Orphen cried out in his head. For some reason there was a red shell in the stew, and he stirred it around with the spoon.

Only in times like this did a nurse show up, telling them that they were too noisy, instead of giving Orphen different food.

"I'm so happy that my soup is so good it's making you cry~ ♥ Be sure to eat the shell, too."

She's doing this on purpose. She has to be.

He side-eyed Claiomh, who was grinning without maliciousness. He then started to feed himself the disgusting soup, just like he would've cast a spell to heal himself.

"That was amazing, right? Master, you were in that room for twenty weeks."

"What's... amazing... 'bout... that?" Orphen groaned at him. He wasn't sure whether the overwhelming soup had been good or bad for him, whether it had any power to heal him at all, but he just knew his voice had started to come back after eating it. His voice was rattly and husky, but it was there.

“G-Gleaomh... Did she run off? That bitch...”

“Uhh...”

Claiomh had been sitting at his bedside up until just now, and Majic sat in her chair, slowly shaking his head, looking troubled.

“Master, when you started having convulsions in bed, they were saying that you might need to stay a little longer. They were blue in the face, you know.”

“Sh-it, even though she could’ve made something normal and that would’ve been just as good, she had to make something crazy like that for me...?”

“She let you eat soap before, right...?”

“You ate that too, for the record,” Orphen spat back at him, in the middle of a coughing fit.

Majic looked puzzled and said, “Anyway, it seems tomorrow is going to be the Hundred Wins, Hundred Losses Meatloaf, so...”

“Who the hell needs something like that!” Orphen shrieked, correcting his posture in bed.

He smoothed out the thoroughly wrinkled sheets, and then shot his student a glance.

Majic stayed silent and looked at his teacher in response. His eyes had always been honest, and right now he was hiding what he was feeling. That much he could tell. Orphen’s expression had the sense that he was waiting for something.

Orphen heaved a tired sigh as he peeled off the troublesome poultice on his neck, his expression embarrassed.

“You seem like you want to ask me something,” he said.

“No... I just have something I’d like to say. Um, well, something I want to ask you a favor about. No, that’s not right either... I want you to listen. I made a decision about something.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening,” Orphen said, gently urging Majic, who was obviously still hesitant yet wanting to speak his piece.

Majic opened his mouth.

“I was thinking... I want to enter the Tower. I don’t just want to register there. I want to...”



“That’s so strange. I wonder if he didn’t like it?” Claiomh murmured to herself as she stood on the roof of the hospital, leaning against the handrail. Leki, as usual, rode along on top of her head. While she gently stroked him, she continued, “I wonder if me testing things on the cat was a bad idea. Tish should have a crocodile for a pet, not a cat. If a crocodile were to start running, I don’t think that Orphen would eat whatever I was testing it with.”

Leki looked away from his human, but because he was on top of Claiomh’s head, she couldn’t see it.

And—

“I wonder what was so bad about it...”

“...?”

Leaning a little ways away from her was another woman, murmuring to herself.

Was she up here on the rooftop with me a minute ago?

She looked at the woman.

Wow, she’s so pretty...

One could say the woman was tall. She wore her hair to the nape of her neck, and she looked to be about twenty. She had eyes like a cat, sultry and provocative. She was looking down at the city below them, leaning on the handrail like Claiomh was.

She looked so familiar—

Claiomh approached her, feeling awkward.

Embarrassed, she spoke to the woman.

“Did you mess something up too?”

“Hm?” The woman was startled, and she swung around to look at Claiomh. Then she smiled and said, “Yes, well, you could say that all of my failures have been fairly boring.”

“Mine too. I tried my hand at making some food for my sick friend and... well, you know how when you’re getting well you need nutrients? I thought he’d need some of that, so I made some, but the flavor was... not great.”

“Is that so? I don’t know anything about cooking, but that strangely doesn’t surprise me somehow. A lot of the healthiest foods for you taste terrible.”

The mystery woman said that, and then turned around, her back resting against the handrail. She reached out towards Claiomh’s head.

Before her hand sat Leki, who responded by reaching back with his front legs. She laughed in delight as she teased the baby dragon, waving her fingers right beyond his reach.

“Is this your puppy? He’s so well-trained.”

“...Yeah...”

“Ah, I have to go—”

Claiomh lifted her body from against the guardrail in a jump, and gave a slight bow to the woman.

“Thank you. It’s good to know that I’m not the only one on the continent that constantly screws things up. At least that’s how I’m feeling right now. Everyone screws things up in different times of their lives, right?”

“That’s true,” the woman chuckled. “But think of it this way; success and failure can be the same thing. What matters is how you stand and face it. In that way, success can become meaningless, and failure can become success. I have to remind myself about this all the time, too, because I’m trying to turn my failures into success right now.”

“My father said something similar when he was still alive. Well then. Um, well, hang in there...”

“I shall...”

Hearing that, Claiomh raced back to the staircase.

If there was something whimsical that awaited her under those stairs, she would've regretted not going back downstairs.

The curtains were still just opening on everything that was about to befall the city of Tefurem.

Afterword

“Hell yeah! To everyone reading this afterword, this is a challenge. You’re all on notice! I hope you remember me, your good old buddy Pat, aka Patricia! I’m looking forward to being with you throughout future volumes, too!”

Author: “Oh. Speaking of which, that sure was a trip we went on, wasn’t it? I was going to send you along with them, you know. But this time you kind of steal the show. And we could only have one heroine this time around...”

“What kind of nonsense is that, only having room for one heroine?! That’s some bullshit! Even I can see that, Mr. I Love Aging Down Characters!”

Author: “There she goes again. Ignore her for a second. Hi, it’s me, the author.”

“And it’s your fault this book is behind schedule, Can’t Make My Deadline Man. You get that, right?”

Author: “...”

“On top of that, you don’t seem to understand how time works! You’re always just slipping in your manuscript right under the wire every month... Don’t you feel bad for Dragon Magazine and how they have to deal with this? Then your phone and fax were out because a lightning strike took out your phone line, and of course the warranty didn’t cover it. Your editor’s been pulling a lot of all nighters because of that.”

Author: “....”

“You know, the fact that we don’t know whether this book will be late by a month is causing me a lot of anxiety. Up until now you’ve done one book every four months, and if you wait one more month for this book that’ll make one book per half year. I know, you usually moan about how you can’t work on something like that for too long without having it make you crazy, because you’re not just writing one story, etc, etc—”

Author: “...”

“And add to that, this volume in particular is a bit on the hefty side, wouldn’t you say?”

Author: “My sincere apologies.” *Low bow*

“Oh, I think you actually meant it that time...”

Author: “No, this time there were a few other extenuating circumstances to blame as well. I got a left hook and a fallen body with lots of fancy footwork. But I’m going to finish it off by using my legs for a triangle choke, cancel my unauthorized video recording, and skip using a bookmark in the book I’ve been reading. I’ll also get back at myself by spreading mean rumors about how I’ve left the neighborhood and how I’m a terrible person.”

“You’d go that far, huh...”

Author: “I mean, that’s mostly the truth, so I can’t really refute it.”

“‘Mostly?’”

Author: “The lightning wasn’t my fault.”

“And that’s where you’re choosing to refute things...? Really?”

Author: “The rest, beyond a doubt, is the truth after all. Ahem.”

“Don’t put on airs, you blockhead.”

Author: “Well, I’ll reflect on it and try to lead a happier tomorrow, then.”

“Well, Pat thinks you really should reflect on those bad habits of yours, mister.”

Author: “The main part of our story is still on its way, and it’s about to get a lot more dark and serious. So I thought some levity was in order.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

Author: “[*Ignores her*] The next volume in this series gets pretty heavy with subject matter. I wonder what will happen. Anyway, no one gets to die yet, and I have my hands full making sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Amazing. This guy over here...”

Author: “Think about it, though. We do have an awful lot of unnamed

characters dying, don't we? This volume's body count was fairly light, so that was kinda nice. But still. I'm an author that can't even kill insects in real life. What am I even doing?"

"Are you apologizing for those deaths? I don't even understand why you kill them and it upsets me! You should be apologizing to me about that, not our readers!"

Author: "The main story is serious, but our friends at Dragon Magazine at least warn people about that and divulge that much. Well, whatever. The next collected volume of Orphen will be out early next year. Fantasia Bunko is the real MVP here, on the regular♪."

"[Whispers] That was an ad, by the way."

Author: "...*[Stops moving]*."

"...? Why's he acting so weird?"

Author: "The left hook, combined with a body drop and the triangle strangle!"

"You meanie! That's it, I'm out of here. Th-That's all, folks!"

Author: "Get back here, you little shiiiiit! You took my videotape with you!"

Yoshinobu Akita, September 1995



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 5

by Yoshinobu Akita

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