

THE WITCH'S SPEARHEAD

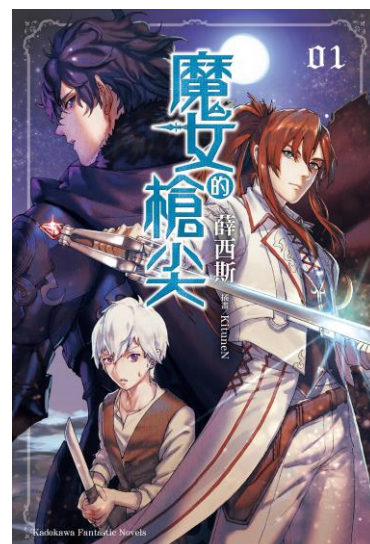
魔女的槍尖（一）

Eurydice and his fellow villagers have lived their whole lives in fear of the “shadow city”, a glittering white tower that feeds on the villagers’ life force. Although the villagers await a prophesied savior, only greater disaster comes their way. After his world goes up in flames, Eurydice sets out to find revenge; yet we discover he is no more than an aberrant character in an online game, and human players are his only possible advocates.

Eurydice and his fellow villagers live in constant fear of the “shadow city” – a glittering castle that stands, barely visible in the mist, many miles away. Every once in a while, the castle drains the life force out of a villager at random. Eurydice and his community have no way to stop it, or predict its occurrence. Instead, the village waits on a prophesied savior – a traveling warrior known as “The Witch’s Spearhead” who will defeat the “shadow city” and liberate the people.

Yet when conflict comes in the figure of a Black Knight, it is the village that finds itself in flames. Only Eurydice is left alive. He runs from the village he has known all his life to find himself lost in a vast wilderness. He sets off in search of the Black Knight who destroyed his home, completely unaware that his world is, in fact, an online game environment, and he is simply a bugged non-player character. Real human players represent his only hope for vengeance, but will the troubled minds behind the avatars – the agoraphobic boy, the repressed high school girl, the paraplegic old man – really step forward to help an accidental victim like himself?

This latest work by the sci-fi/fantasy novelist Xerses tells a gripping story of humanity *ex machina* as the growing world of online gaming interpenetrates traditional reality. Complicated characters interact amid a fast-paced, flashing storyline that makes us reconsider the integrity of consciousness and the inherent meaning of “alive.”



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Xerses 薛西斯

Xerses is one of the most exciting young novelists in Taiwan's science fiction/mystery community. Deeply inspired by Soji Shimada's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerses is dedicated to incorporating the finest logical intrigue into her stories. Her novel *Lotus Reborn* won a Bronze Medal in the 2013 Kadokawa Fiction Awards.

THE WITCH'S SPEARHEAD

By Xerses

Translated by Mary Bradley

Chapter 1: Spring Zither

Eurydice was born in spring to the sound of zither music.

It was said that when his mother was pregnant with him, she could hear the zither's sweet sound every time she went to the lake to draw water.

"It seems someone is waiting for you to be born!" said his mother. "Your birth is blessed by the lakeside zither, so I will call you Eurydice."

Despite its lovely origin, Eurydice didn't like his name. It sounded too much like a girl's, and his friends frequently mocked him because of it. He was also more slightly built than the other boys his age. Perhaps his name had brought this curse with it.

After Eurydice was a bit older, he often went to the lake. A lonesome mirror in a sea of black sand, the lake didn't look at all like it could entice anyone to come play the zither there. Eurydice liked climbing the sand dunes on the lake's shore. Standing there staring into the far distance, he could make out the white tower amid sand and mist.

That was their "shadow city."

Eurydice couldn't easily explain what the shadow city was. It had always been there, was built with the village, and would be destroyed with the village.

Monsters.

Eurydice usually chose to go early in the morning, stay on the dunes a short while, then hurry away, since he was less likely to meet other villagers at that hour.

That day, however, Eurydice felt something was different about the white tower and couldn't help taking a longer look at it. When he realized how long he had stayed, it was already too late. The boys playing by the lake saw him and waved.

"Hey! Isn't that Eurydice, the boy who was born in spring to the sound of the zither?"

"Are you here to look for that person who was waiting for you to be born?"

Enduring their mockery was Eurydice's only choice. Any retort he made would just provoke even more mean-spirited jeers. If he couldn't take it and started a fight...

Eurydice didn't like feeling at odds with people.

They don't mean any harm, he kept telling himself. They're just kidding. They don't know I don't like this sort of joke.

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

"Made him angry, didn't we?"

"Woah! So petty!"

Eurydice felt tears ready to fall, but he lacked the courage to say anything. Just then, a girl's voice came from behind him.

"I told him to come here!"

A beautiful girl strode out from behind the dune. Eurydice recognized her.

Her name was Dian. She was the same age as Eurydice.

"Oh, it's Dian."

"So I guess the two of you are extra close?"

"That's right. I made him come to the dunes with me!"

The boys left quickly, probably feeling a bit ashamed of themselves. They didn't even ask why Dian was there. Dian winked at Eurydice. Embarrassed, Eurydice ducked his head.

Dian had long, pale blonde hair and big eyes that were the ice-blue of the lake. Her skin was very pale, which gave people the impression she was always ill. Although the village had many girls who were far more beautiful, Eurydice had always paid secret attention to Dian.

She had qualities the other girls didn't.

"Thank you."

"What are you doing here?" Dian asked him with a big smile. "This is the first time I've run into anyone who climbs the dunes, like me."

"Were you watching me?"

"Yes. You were sitting on the dune looking at the shadow city this whole time, weren't you?"

Eurydice didn't say anything. Dian took his hand and said, "If that's how it was, I have something to show you!"

The two of them climbed to the top of the dune, where Dian handed him a long tube made of brass.

"What's this?"

"Hold it like this and look through it."

Dian held the long tube to his eye. The view in front of him suddenly contracted and at the same time became extraordinarily clear.

After a bit, Eurydice finally realized he was looking at the outer wall of the white tower.

"That's—!"

"It's called a telescope. I dug it out of my father's storage room so I could look at places from far off. I was lucky to find this spot today. The view of the shadow city is clearest from here. Do you see that pattern of black squares on the wall?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Windows."

"The shadow city has windows?" Eurydice stared, wide-eyed.

"Most of the time there aren't any. Just today."

"Oh." Doubtful, Eurydice asked, "Why are the windows only there today?"

"I'm guessing tonight is the new moon."

Eurydice didn't understand what she meant, but Dian had already clambered down the dune. "If you don't believe me, let's make a bet!"

Naturally, Eurydice didn't make a bet with Dian. That night, however, Eurydice looked up at the sky. It was pitch black, the metallic moon invisible.

She was right. Tonight really was the new moon. There wasn't any pattern to the moon's phases, so how could Dian have sounded so sure? Did it have something to do with the windows in the white tower?

The next day, Eurydice set out earlier than usual for the dune by the lake, but sure enough, Dian was already sitting there. Their wordless rapport made Eurydice secretly happy, but he had no illusions. He knew Dian was there to look at the shadow city, not to wait for him.

"Oh, Eurydice. You're here?"

She knows my name is Eurydice.

"There really was a new moon last night!"

"Yes."

"So, will there be a new moon tonight, too?"

"I don't know, but so far the shortest amount of time a new moon has lasted is two days, so there should be."

Eurydice sat down next to her.

"Is there a connection between the windows in the wall and the moon?"

"Yes! I've been watching for a long time. The brighter the moon gets, the tighter the shadow city's defenses are. There's never even the tiniest opening. But once the moon disappears, the shadow city's doors and windows open wide."

Eurydice nodded, but wondered what good knowing such a thing did.

Dian smiled as she said, "You must be thinking, 'what's the use of noticing something like that,' right? I think it's very useful. Think about it. If the shadow city is vulnerable when there's no moon, doesn't that mean we have a chance to destroy it?"

"De...stroy?"

Eurydice couldn't wrap his mind around the word's meaning.

"Yes!"

"Isn't that impossible?" Eurydice's voice rose. "Destroy the shadow city... How would you do such a thing? What gave you such a horrible, ridiculous idea? For us to... there's absolutely no way. The only thing in the world that can end the shadow city is the Witch's Spearhead!"

The person capable of destroying the shadow city was called the Witch's Spearhead.

"I know." Dian's smile was bitter. "But how long can we wait? How long is it going to take the Witch's Spearhead to show up?"

Eurydice was speechless.

Their whole lives, they had put their faith in the Witch's Spearhead, a magic-wielding hero who could use that magic to destroy the shadow city. One day the Witch's Spearhead would arrive in the village and allow them to overthrow the shadow city, releasing the villagers from the fear that bound them.

But year after year villagers died, and the Witch's Spearhead had yet to appear.

"It looks like it's my father's turn to be 'eaten' this year."

Dian's voice was suddenly very quiet.

"Oh."

Eurydice knew what she meant.

From the shadow city's point of view, villagers were nothing more than food.

Each year, a random handful of villagers – male, female, young and old alike – would gradually weaken and die. The villagers called it “being eaten by the city.” People could only sit and wait like penned animals until they were turned into the shadow city's meal. The moment the city chose you was the beginning of the end.

When will it be my turn to be eaten? That fearsome question followed the villagers everywhere, but they had no way to fight against the shadow city. If the Witch's Spearhead never arrived, surely the day would come when the village was eaten up entirely?

“My father is getting weaker. He knows he's been chosen by the shadow city this year. He wants me to sort out his things, sell as much as possible.”

Dian held the brass telescope and said in a low voice, “So, lately I keep thinking, this whole business just doesn't make any sense! And then I thought, instead of believing in a person called the Witch's Spearhead who will destroy the shadow city, maybe whoever destroys the shadow city will be called the Witch's Spearhead. Thinking about it like that filled me with courage I never expected. Maybe I can become the Witch's Spearhead! Don't you think so?”

“How could something like that happen...”

Eurydice thought grief over her father's approaching death must have made Dian insane, but he looked at her sad eyes and didn't argue.

“You want to save your father?”

Dian shook her head.

“It's already too late to save him.”

“Then why are you still watching the shadow city?”

“Who'll be next? Me? Or maybe you, Eurydice? Or your mother or father? That's all I think about, and it scares me. I think it's better to come up with a solution to destroy the shadow city ourselves instead of waiting until who knows when for the Witch's Spearhead.”

“So you started watching the shadow city, looking for a weak spot?”

“Yes. Then I'll go investigate the area around it.”

“Isn't that dangerous? There could be horrible monsters.”

“But if I don't, we'll never know what's inside!”

Eurydice didn't know what to say. Dian's way of thinking made no sense at all to him.

“You really are a strange girl.”

He could think of nothing else to say. That was Eurydice's first encounter with Dian.