



MAITO
AYAMINE

ILLUST.
CIERRA

Death
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

VII
FINALE



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Characters

Kingdom of Fernest



**Claudia
Jung**

A proud knight who accompanies Olivia as her aide. Uses Heaven's Sight.



**Ashton
Senefelder**

Making a name for himself after Paul praised his peerless tactical mind.



**Olivia
Valedstorm**

A girl raised by a god of death. Descended from the Deep Folk.



**Lise
Prussie**

Blood's aide. Highly intelligent, she graduated top of her class at the Royal Military Academy in the same year as Claudia.



**Blood
Enfield**

The general at the head of the Second Legion. Though his rough manner sticks out, he is an adroit tactician and a first-rate swordsman.



**Ellis
Crawford**

A female soldier who adores Olivia, calling her "Big Sister."

**Lambert
von Garcia**

Also known as Lambert the Bold. Second-in-command of the First Legion.

**Cornelius
vim Gruening**

Renowned as the Invincible General. Supreme Commander of the First Legion.

**Alfonse
sem Galmond**

The king of Fernest.

**Otto
Steiner**

Paul's aide. Often ends up the victim of Olivia's whims.

**Paul
von Baltza**

The old general at the head of the Seventh Legion. Though known as the God of the Battlefield, he has a soft spot for Olivia.

**Neinhardt
Blanche**

Aide in the First Legion and Claudia's cousin. Cool-headed and quick-witted.

Asvelt Empire



**Felix
von Sieger**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
He commands the Azure Knights.
Descendent of the Asura,
the enemy of the Deep Folk.



**Rosenmarie
von Berlietta**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
She commands the Crimson Knights
and has sworn revenge against Olivia.

**Darmés
Guski**

Imperial Chancellor.
Using the power of a God of Death
to manipulate the emperor.

Holy Land of Mekia



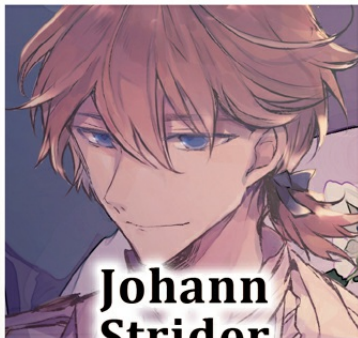
**Sofitia
Hell Mekia**

Seventh in the line of Seraphs,
she rules Mekia with
irresistible charisma.



**Lara
Mira Crystal**

Commander-in-chief and
Blessed Wing of the Winged Crusaders.
Her loyalty to Sofitia is absolute.



**Johann
Strider**

A Senior Thousand-Wing
in the Winged Crusaders.
Flippant and brazen.



**Amelia
Stolast**

A Thousand-Wing
in the Winged Crusaders.
Both merciless and cruel.

Others

Z

The god of death that took in Olivia and raised her.
Disappeared one day without warning.

Xenia

A second god of death.
Using Darmés for his power to achieve some unknown end.



Death's Daughter
and the Ebony Blade

VII

FINALE

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Chapter Six: A Veil of Rain

I

Torrential rain pelted the ground, sending up clouds of white mist that spread through an abandoned village where even time seemed to have ground to a halt.

In the cellar of a falling-down chapel in that same village, seated around a timeworn round table, were gathered the members of that unparalleled league of assassins who had since time immemorial plied their trade with darkness as their companion—the Asura.

“...and that is what happened. The Deep Folk girl’s powers are nothing short of extraordinary. A monster like that cannot be killed.”

Krishna Siren was not exaggerating. The fact that she could no longer walk without the aid of a cane was incontrovertible proof of that. No one had a ready response. Only the flames of the candles on the round table flickered—naught else in the room moved.

The sound of the rain is soothing, thought Nefer Quan, who sat diagonally opposite Krishna. He stared absently at the black stain covering the ceiling, listening to the downpour.

It was veteran assassin Palacio Jinn who broke the silence.

“Two were unsuccessful, but it should be no trouble for four. They say that it was four Asura who defeated Garcia, the mightiest of the Deep Folk. Of course, I doubt she is as strong as Garcia, but consider it a gesture of respect for Krishna, who has to live with this dishonor.” His voice dripped with sarcasm and contempt, but when Krishna only laughed quietly, he added, “You find your sorry plight amusing?”

“I do apologize if I gave you the wrong idea. I laughed because you are so wildly off the mark, that is all. Or perhaps age has addled your mind so badly

that you did not understand me. People give the name ‘monster’ to that against which human strength cannot prevail. We Asura are no exception. Send two assassins or four, it matters not; you might as well try and put out a wildfire with a glass of water. You never met Garcia, so comparisons only waste our time.”

“You seem to have formed a very high opinion of the Deep Folk girl. But at the end of the day, all that means is that she was stronger than the two of you, doesn’t it?”

Krishna’s lips curved. “If that’s what you think, then why are we still talking? Go kill her yourself.”

“Bold words from a woman more dead than alive. How about I perform last rites for you before I move on to the Deep Folk girl?”

“Old Palacio! *You*, kill *me*? I wonder if you have it in you...”

Faced with relentless provocation from Krishna, Palacio’s unmasked fury threatened to boil over.

“May I speak?” Just when it seemed the pair would come to blows, a cheerful voice cut between them. It came from a young man whose black mask bore a white snake motif. His name was Kamuy Troa, the youngest of the Asura, who had a well-established reputation for totally refusing to read the room.

“The plan itself wasn’t sloppy, was it?” he inquired.

Krishna fixed him with a cold-eyed stare. “Would you still be saying that if I told you it was Mirage who planned the whole thing, boy?”

“I mean, you botched the kill, didn’t you? You and Mirage are both so weak. Just like my master.” Kamuy, who had been Safiss’s apprentice, doubled over, hooting with laughter.

Unlike the master, the apprentice is a nightmare, Krishna thought. *He’s well and truly cracked.*

Weak or not, everyone knew that Mirage had possessed an uncannily tactical mind. Not only that, but he had been religiously cautious. He would not have been sloppy when facing one of the Deep Folk—the fact that he had lost

anyway only served to underscore the truth of what Krishna had said.

“Oh, that’s right. The monster told me this: the next time an Asura attacks her, she’ll kill them on the spot. And just so you know, I’m not going near her ever again. I am out, and not a moment too soon.”

“I have been listening for a while now,” a new voice chimed, “and I must say, you are very yappy after getting beaten like a dog. I never heard of an Asura who feared death.”

Rosalina Bastche sounded incredulous from behind the four-clawed scorpion that adorned her black mask. Krishna met her eyes steadily.

“I am not afraid of death. What chills my blood is the thought of that monster smiling as she plays with me, like a cat with a mouse.”

“It amounts to the same thing, doesn’t it?” Rosalina scoffed, but she looked away from Krishna.

“In any event,” Krishna went on, “after the state she left me in, I couldn’t care less about our mission. I have informed and warned you of the danger. If any of you still want to carry out your noble calling, far be it from me to stop you. She’s all yours.”

For a moment, the cellar went still. Then, one by one, the room filled with voices railing against Krishna.

The candles were half burned down. The elder, whose gaze had been cast down since the start of the council, opened his eyes.

“Together as one, we shall wipe the Deep Folk girl off the face of the earth. After all that has passed, and what Krishna has told us, I believe she warrants it.”

“May I take that to mean that you will join us, Elder?” Nefer asked immediately.

“Naturally.” The elder’s commanding nod was met with a succession of spirited voices.

“With the elder at our side, we have nothing to fear!”

“Let us bring death to the Deep Folk girl, for the honor of the Asura!”

The elder attended to them without a word before finally turning his scintillating gaze on Nefer.

“You are not pleased, Nefer?”

“How could I not be pleased with your decision? It’s only that the situation has become, well, complicated.”

“In what way?”

Nefer had an underling he had raised from infancy who was undercover in the Azure Knights. He now revealed to the others one part of the report this underling had sent him. The reaction was more or less as he had expected.

“Felix fought the Deep Folk girl?!”

“For all his disapproval of us, it seems the noble Asura blood runs true in him after all,” said Schew Heinz, folding his arms and nodding with a knowing expression. It was the blind Asura’s first contribution to the council. He was a man of few words, and inscrutable at the best of times.

“Why the hell didn’t you raise this first?!” Palacio demanded loudly.

“Everything in its proper order,” said Nefer with a glance at Krishna, whose eyes had gone wide.

“And who won?” The elder’s voice was calm. Nefer answered that the battle had ended in a draw. It was as though he had dropped a boulder into a pond. Everyone began to talk over each other in a state of agitation. Only the elder remained perfectly still.

“There is no such thing as an absolute victory, any more than an absolute defeat. But a draw with Felix—now that is absolutely impossible.” He spoke, it could be inferred, from a deep understanding of Felix’s nature. Felix was known for his gentle manner, but he gave no quarter in battle.

“Strictly speaking, the battle was interrupted before a victor could emerge...” Nefer paused to cast a sweeping look around the others seated at the round table, then said, “By an undead army in thrall to Darmés Guski, the newly crowned emperor of Asvelt.”

“Darmés Guski? Isn’t he the empire’s chancellor? You’re saying he’s emperor

now?”

“An army of the dead? Is that some kind of figure of speech?”

Reactions were varied, but they all clearly showed the same confusion. Nefer had felt the same way when he’d first read the report, but he trusted the underling who had sent it, and it did not take him long to accept it as fact. He now laid out in full the parts of the report he had deliberately withheld, concluding with Felix’s decision to join forces with the Deep Folk girl.

“If Darmés can puppet corpses, is he a mage?” Kamuy asked, giving voice to the obvious question.

Palacio banged his fist down on the round table. “Who gives a damn about that now? Felix has betrayed us and allied himself with the Deep Folk! This must not be allowed to stand!”

“From what I hear, the alliance is a temporary one to deal with the corpses. Under the circumstances, it cannot categorically be called a betrayal.”

“You defend him, Nefer?!”

Nefer let Palacio’s fury wash over him, then said, “I do no such thing.”

“No matter how temporary the circumstances, an alliance between Asura and Deep Folk is not to be borne. The elder has always defended Felix at every turn, but after this, the boy must be purged!”

“If nothing else, no one’s going to accept him as the elder now, are they?”

“Personally, I don’t care who the elder is so long as they’re stronger than me.”

There was a pause, then Palacio cried, “Elder!”

All eyes were drawn to the elder, who held the right to the final decision. He stroked his luxurious white beard, then at last let out a leaden sigh.

“I will judge it with my own eyes. Everything will wait until then.” With that, he rose from his chair and began to ascend the stairs with an air that defied all protest.

The others exchanged meaningful looks before following him out. Even behind their black masks, it was clear that many of them were angry. But the

elder had made his decision. No one voiced any objection.

Well, well, well. What will become of the Asura now? Nefer wondered, as though the question had nothing to do with him. He looked over at Krishna, who alone was still seated.

“If you can’t get up, I’ll lend you a hand,” he offered.

“Spare me. But I would like to know one thing. If the battle between Felix and that monster had continued to the end, which do you think would have won?”

“I can hardly answer when I wasn’t there myself,” Nefer replied. “Although...”

“Yes?”

“Just something from the end of the report. It said that their battle was so beyond belief it felt like being trapped in a long nightmare.” As Nefer smirked behind his mask, he heard Krishna’s intake of breath.

“Are you...*enjoying* this?” she asked. Nefer turned away from her.

“Couldn’t say. Even I don’t rightly understand parts of it,” he said vaguely. Just as he mounted the staircase, the cellar was rocked by an earth-shattering roar. The rain came down harder still.

II

It must have been drawn to the smell of blood on us... As he stepped out of the chapel, Elder Zebulla found himself looking through the haze at a creature approaching with footfalls like battering rams. It was the class two dangerous beast that people dubbed “ruler of the land”—a unicorn. He immediately took note of another at its side that had to be its young.

The other Asura who filed out after Zebulla all froze in horror at the sight of the unicorns. But only for a second.

“For us, it would be a simple thing to let them pass.”

“It would. And yet...” Zebulla stripped down to the waist to reveal a torso bound in muscle like a suit of armor. He faced the incoming unicorns, then took a powerful step forward. Panic blossomed on the face of his underlings.

Then, from behind him, an incredulous voice said, “You’re going to duke it out with that?!”

“Did you want to do it?”

“Very funny. I only wondered at the necessity of exposing yourself to danger for such a fight. It is, well, the obvious question.”

Zebulla regarded Nefer. Given that Nefer had a taste for danger that was notable even for an Asura, Zebulla thought he was one to talk. Even so, his lips twitched rebelliously into a smile.

“Those things are just what I need to scrape off the rust that’s built up on these old bones. No matter what happens next, no one is to interfere in any way. Is that clear?”

“Who could have imagined we had such a madman in our midst...” Nefer quipped as he leaped up onto the roof of the chapel. The others followed his lead, each moving to a high place and settling in to watch and wait.

The adult unicorn attacked first. It gradually closed in on Zebulla, then reared up as though to show off the difference in their sizes. Zebulla was a giant by human standards, but the unicorn dwarfed him. He had no choice but to look up at it.

“Showing the young one how to hunt, is it? Really, though...” He sounded disappointed. “Am I supposed to be threatened by that?”

As though in answer, the unicorn came down on him with a slash of its vicious claws. No ordinary strong warrior could have evaded it, but Zebulla’s eyes perceived the whole thing with unbroken clarity. As that first blow came at him with a rush of air, he shifted out of its path merely by tracing a semicircle with his right foot. But the unicorn was not surprised. As though it had expected this, it followed up with a raking slash. Zebulla curved his body like a bow to avoid it then, letting the momentum carry him as he planted both his hands on the earth, bent his elbows, and threw himself skyward. He soared in a long arc back to the ground.

The unicorn had no pride, no weaknesses—only hunger. Which was why it made for such good training.

But at the end of the day, it was still only a beast.

“And so it is all too easy to see what it will do next.”

The unicorn roared as though to give itself courage, then brought its forelegs down to the ground. With a sudden burst of speed, it pounded the earth toward Zebulla once more. The moment before the single horn for which the beast was named impaled him, Zebulla dropped low, slipping under the attack. Then, grazing the ground as he rose, he threw the whole of his strength into a blow that caught the unicorn square beneath its jaw.

“Grrroaaagh!” The beast’s deafening scream rent the air along with the shattered remnants of its twin fangs. As it staggered, Zebulla leaped up on its back. Then he wrapped his arms around its neck and squeezed with all his strength. Zebulla felt the crack of its bones through his entire body just as the beast’s head lolled at an unnatural angle. As the unicorn sank to the ground, Zebulla leaped lightly down from its back. Then he looked at the young unicorn that was ready to fight, every strand of its fur standing on end.

“If you want to avenge your mother, I’m right here.” They stared at one another. But before long, the young unicorn, knifelike fangs bared, took one step back from Zebulla, then another. When it had put enough distance between them, it turned and ran, vanishing immediately into the mist.

“Wise decision,” Zebulla murmured. Then his ears caught Nefer’s voice.

“Well? Did you get the rust off?”

Zebulla straightened his collar, then snorted. “That wasn’t even a warm-up. In order to slay the Deep Folk girl, I must seclude myself in the mountains for a time.” Leaving his underlings staring after him in consternation, Zebulla left the abandoned village behind him.

Chapter Seven: On the Walls

I

The walking dead in thrall to Darmés Guski, the newly crowned emperor of the Asvelt, put an end to Twin Lions at Dawn, the military operation upon which the Kingdom of Fernest had pinned its hopes. Despite the suppression order in force in the army, they could not conceal the deaths of Cornelius and Paul—the Invincible General and the God of the Battlefield—forever. Before long, the news had spread throughout the general populace. It was inevitable that the common folk would despair at the loss of the heroes they had counted on, but things did not end there. Driven to desperation, some formed a mob in the capital city of Fis that the city guard was unable to handle. It took several days for the Sixth Legion stationed in the city to quell the rioters, and by that stage, all of Fernest had been swept up in the storm of violence. The confused state of the Royal Army meant it was in no position to put down all the unrest, and several towns and villages were overrun by mobs.

Every man, woman, and child of the common folk wished that a new hero would appear.

The Commander's Room in the Military District of the Emaleid Citadel

Blood Enfield had scarcely had a moment's rest in days when, shortly after lunch, he received an unexpected visitor.

“What's this I hear about you not even bringing a proper escort?”

“Things are quiet for now, but sparks are flying everywhere, ready to ignite whatever kindling they can catch. It would not be right to take soldiers for myself.”

Blood moved from his worktable to the sofa, then gestured for commander of the Sixth Legion and Fourth Princess of Fernest Sara son Rivier to join him.

She sat down gracefully, observing the state of the table with an air of

exasperation, and said, “It looks as though you are trying to see how high you can stack your paperwork.”

“Yes, thanks to a certain aide who’s been loading me up with a good deal more work than I can handle, it’s all but certain that my death will be the result of asphyxiation,” Blood replied, not missing the chance to be sarcastic. From behind him, Lise gave a restrained cough, followed by a sense of pressure that was palpable even over his shoulder.

“As you can see, that certain aide is scary as hell.”

“My lord.” The icy voice seemed to crawl up from his feet. Blood drew his head in as close to his shoulders as he could while Sara giggled.

“I hear it is your efforts we have to thank for the peaceful state of the citadel, General Blood. You never fail to impress.”

“We have a threat bearing down on us the likes of which you wouldn’t even put in a fairy tale to scare children. I, for one, do not have the energy to spare on petty quarrels.” His tone was joking, but Sara was serious as she nodded in reply.

“So, Princess,” he went on, “to what do I owe the honor?”

From the moment he had heard from Lise that she meant to visit, he had guessed that she was not coming in her capacity as commander of the Sixth Legion. If it was a military matter, a runner could have done the job. There was no need for her to come in person, nor was she in a position where she could be allowed to do as she liked in these unpredictable times. Just as Sara herself had said.

Which pretty much guarantees it’s going to mean trouble, he thought.

Sara set her tea down on the table, then, glancing around them, she lowered her voice and said, “Only a few people know what I am about to tell you. Please bear that in mind as you listen.”

Ooh, getting straight to it, then, Blood thought, stopping himself from sticking out his tongue.

“I will leave,” Lise said, quickly moving to get up, but Blood ordered her to

stay and listen.

“My memory’s like a sieve. Not a problem is it, Princess?”

Sara gave a small nod, then began to speak. She told him of how Alfonse had taken leave of his senses after learning of Cornelius’s death, and how for that reason, Prince Selvia had temporarily taken on the role of regent. Finally, she raised the matter of supreme authority over the military, which had been in limbo ever since Cornelius’s death, and transferred it to Blood.

“I trust I have your consent?” Sara said, looking at him pleadingly. She probably knew how much Blood hated trouble.

Blood leaned back into the sofa, then let out a loud sigh. “Can’t General Lambert take it?”

With the deaths of not only Cornelius but also Paul, whom Blood had convinced himself would never die in battle, the highest rank in the army was now held by a senior general. Blood or Paul’s brother-in-arms Lambert were the only two eligible for the role. But while they might have held the same rank, Lambert had spent many years as second-in-command for the First Legion. Blood could not hope to match him in battle experience, achievement, or fame. It was obvious that Sara had come to him with the offer despite being well aware of this, and Blood asked in full knowledge of it too.

“General Lambert’s wounds were more severe than we imagined. He is in no state to take command. General Lambert, by the way, wishes very much for you to accept the post.”

It was by and large the answer Blood had expected, and it meant his escape route had been cut off.

Life rarely goes the way we’d like. Didn’t old Paul say something like that? Then he said that’s what makes it interesting, but there’s not a damn thing that’s interesting about this mess, he thought, taken back to a memory from his school days. Knowing it was futile, he tried out one last avenue of resistance.

“Just so I have this straight, is that an order?”

“It is the royal decree of His Highness the Prince Regent,” Sara said at once. Blood could sense the strength of her will. He scratched the back of his head.

“Well, I’m just a common soldier. I can’t argue with a royal decree,” he said. “But this prince—he is trustworthy, is he?”

“My lord!” Lise cut in hurriedly. Blood raised a hand to quiet her.

“ I’m aware I’m being discourteous, but the fate of this nation is at stake.”

He was being given supreme authority over the army. That was not something he could accept with a smile and a nod. In Blood’s view, it was thanks to Cornelius that Alfonse had been able to keep outbursts of unrest at bay. If he were to go through hell and high water to move things along only for Prince Selvia to butt in at the last moment, it could all go up in smoke. The prince never appeared in public and so all Blood knew about him was that he was often bedridden due to illness. Though he scarcely deemed King Alfonse worthy of trust either, a son who had never taken part in affairs of state was another thing altogether. Had he stood up himself out of fear for Fernest’s future? Or had he reluctantly taken on the duty because of the influence of those around him? Blood had no way of knowing, but it wasn’t uncommon for those who suddenly acquired power to get funny ideas—especially inexperienced youths.

As though she’d read his mind, Sara gave him a half smile. “His Highness would very much like an audience with you, General.”

“Would he, now...?”

“He appreciates your concerns. I think that is why he wants to talk to you in person.”

“An audience, eh...?” Blood found himself craving a cigarette. He pulled one out, then lit it, enjoying the familiar aroma as he turned his thoughts to Prince Selvia.

He might only be regent, but he’s still the most important man in the kingdom. He doesn’t need to ask what I think. He sounds a fair bit better than his father, but I can’t just take her word for it.

Blood’s eyes fell on two birds visible through the open window. Based on their size, they looked like parent and child. They pecked at each other’s beaks, occasionally letting out pleasant chirps of song.

“His Highness would also like an audience with Lieutenant General Olivia, by

the way,” Sara said.

“Her too?”

“Yes, His Highness has taken a great deal of interest in her.” Sara looked guilty, which puzzled Blood. Olivia had built up a record of military achievements beyond counting. It wasn’t strange that Prince Selvia would be interested in her. In any case, short of some impending crisis, he couldn’t refuse the audience. Blood decided to treat it as a valuable opportunity to judge whether the sickly prince had the stuff it would take to get through these trying times, one he was unlikely to get again. He told Sara he accepted.

“I am very grateful.”

Seeing the way her shoulders relaxed with relief, Blood smiled wearily and said encouragingly, “It seems the life of a princess of Fernest comes with more hardship than I expected. I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes.”

Sara coolly brushed off the lighthearted words. “This hardly merits being called ‘hardship,’” she replied flatly and without a hint of modesty.

As a princess, Blood thought Sara was deserving of praise, but he thought little of her as a soldier. She hadn’t gone through the military academy, nor had she fought her way up from the bottom like the late Lieutenant General Hermann Hack. Everyone, including Sara herself, knew that she was only there to show that the royal family was out on the battlefield too—a mere token. She wasn’t bad with a blade, for a princess, but as far as Blood was concerned, that was little more than an extension of a child’s games. He knew that despite this, she understood her position and did everything in her power to fulfill the duty she had been given. It was entirely down to Sara’s virtues that the Sixth Legion’s morale had not taken a greater dive despite their repeated defeats. Thanks in part to Alfonse, Blood did not have a high opinion of royalty, but Sara was the exception. Order or not, Blood couldn’t turn down a plea from her.

“On that note, is Olivia well?” Sara asked, as though to signal that they were done with formal matters. Between the omission of rank and the softness that entered her voice, her fondness for the other girl was plain.

“Sounds like you know Liv well, Princess.”

“Why, of course. She is my friend.” A look of pride came over Sara’s face. The word “friend” was so unexpected that Blood and Lise couldn’t help but exchange a look. Sara leaned forward. “Is it so strange that Olivia should be my friend?” she demanded. “Are princesses not supposed to have friends?”

Blood quickly raised both hands to signal his surrender. “If I offended you, I apologize. Now that I think about it, it’s not all that unexpected.”

Olivia had a personality that drew people to her without regard for rank or class. The fact that she held no bias toward anyone was another key factor. It showed in how Paul, whom Blood had never seen as anything other than terrifying, turned into a sweet old man around her—and of course, Blood himself was fond of her as a person rather than an officer. Sara was clearly another who had been taken in by her charms.

Sara nodded repeatedly. “That’s right. Nothing to be surprised at. Now, is Olivia well?”

“Liv is...” Blood hesitated. “I guess you could say she’s well. But you could also say she isn’t,” he mumbled, getting hopelessly tongue-tied. Sara blinked her long, thick eyelashes.

“So what does that mean?”

“It, well, it means...” He wasn’t sure if it was his place to say, but if he tried to conceal it, she would only grill him about it, and so he made up his mind to tell Sara frankly what had befallen Olivia of late.

“I see,” she said when he was done. “So that young man died...”

“You knew Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?”

“Yes, though I never met him.”

“Then how?”

“Olivia mentioned his name often in her stories...” Sara said, then she leaped to her feet. “I’m so sorry, but I just remembered I have urgent business to attend to. You’ll forgive me if we leave things here for now.” With that, she hurried from the room.

Blood waited until he was sure the door was closed, then said, “I don’t need

to go after her, do I?”

“Princess Sara is an intelligent young woman. She won’t intrude on Lieutenant General Olivia’s privacy, which is far more than I can say for a certain *other* general.”

Lise spoke with such matter-of-fact bitterness that Blood started. “You’re talking about me, aren’t you?”

“Just some general.”

“You’re not holding a grudge over last time, are you?”

“I don’t know what you mean, ser,” Lise replied, cocking her head sweetly. Then, in a tone of transparently false innocence, she added, “It really does look like you might suffocate.” Staring at the piles of papers, she dramatically clasped her hands over her mouth. She might as well have told him that he’d better get a move on with all the paperwork he’d let build up if he was going to go to the capital.

Maybe I will suffocate. That’d show her. Blood dragged himself back to the table, then let out a deep sigh at the pile of documents that towered in front of him. Under the close watch of his aide, Blood reached for his pen.

II

“Was General Blood amenable to the idea?” At this question, Sara was silent. “Princess Sara?”

“I am going to call on Lieutenant General Olivia now.”

“Sorry? Then... Then I will accompany you.” Sara’s aide, Warrant Officer Roland, started to follow her a few steps behind.

“No need for that,” Sara said without breaking stride.

“Don’t be ridiculous. My duty is to protect you, Your Highness.”

Even in the confines of the military district, Roland wouldn’t readily acquiesce. Sara had nothing but gratitude for his loyalty, but right now, she wanted him out of the way.

"I wish to speak to the lieutenant general *alone*," she said. Still, Roland followed close at her heels.

"Very good, Princess. I will not impose upon the two of you. I only ask permission to keep Your Highness within my sights."

"No."

"'No'...?" Sara heard his sigh of exasperation. She stopped and whirled around, then, as Roland skidded to a halt, she jabbed her index finger into his chest.

"No means no. That's an order." She glared at him until he hung his head.

"I forgot how stubborn you are once you make up your mind, Princess. I will await your return in your chambers." Looking dour, Roland saluted, then walked away in the opposite direction. Something about his retreating figure struck her as awfully lonely.

I'm sorry. Sara set off once more without delay, but after turning a few corners in the corridors she stopped again. *I didn't ask where Olivia is...*

She was about to rush back to the commander's room, but she only took one step before giving up on the idea. *I can just ask someone who is likely to know.*

Trying to find a single person in the vast military district was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but with the way she looked, Olivia attracted attention. Sara began by approaching an officer walking down the corridor, who looked painfully nervous but told Sara that Olivia had been outside.

I should have guessed, she thought. She went out and began making inquiries as to Olivia's whereabouts until a young officer with an intelligent face told her where she would find Olivia at this time of day. The location was an outdoor training ground that had long since fallen into disuse.

The shortcut the officer shared with Sara was devoid of other passersby and full of complicated twists and turns. On more than one occasion, she ended up wasting time retracing her steps. By the time the southern walls that marked her destination came into view, she'd gotten more than a little sweaty, her uniform darkened with the damp of it.

At last, I've found her.

The stonework of the training ground was grown over here and there with moss. Olivia stood there quietly, dressed not in her military uniform, but in an ebony black set of armor. There was no sign of the bright, sunny girl Sara knew so well. She emanated a powerful aura that made Sara's hair stand on end just looking at her. The atmosphere was so beyond the ordinary that Sara hesitated to call out to her, when—

What...?!

A silver glow was slowly spreading out around Olivia. Sara strained her eyes but what she saw didn't change. Wondering if it was a trick of the light, she moved to stand somewhere else, but there was still no change.

Am I dreaming? Oh my... Olivia appeared to her then just like a painting she had seen long ago, of the Goddess Strecia descending to the mortal realm.

As she stood there, struck dumb by the impossible sight, she was jerked back to reality by an earsplitting *bang* emanating from Olivia, accompanied by a shock wave that rocked the ground beneath her feet.

"Eek!!!" Sara lost her footing and fell backward onto the ground.

"Sara?" At the sound of her name, she looked up. Olivia was peering at her curiously.

"N-No, um, I wasn't spying on you," Sara babbled, speaking much faster than usual. "I just happened to be here! Yes, a coincidence, that's all this is!" Even she wasn't sure what she was talking about. She blushed. Olivia, head cocked to one side, held out a hand and helped her to her feet.

"Th-Thank you," Sara said, then realized there was mud on her hand. "I'm sorry. I got your hand dirty."

"Huh? Oh, that's nothing. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I had something to tell General Blood. And I wanted to see you..." Sara hesitated. "But you seem to be in the middle of something. I'm so sorry to have interrupted."

Olivia laughed. "I get to see you for the first time in ages and all you do is

apologize. I'm glad you came to see me—you're not interrupting. Hey, have you had lunch?"

"L-Lunch? Now that you mention it, I haven't."

"Well, I brought my own. How about we share it?" Olivia looked over at a basket sitting atop an old stump. It was inordinately large for one person.

"But that's yours. I can't just take your lunch..."

"Don't worry about that!" Olivia picked up the basket in one hand then, for some reason, she wrapped the other around Sara's waist.

"Um...?"

Olivia's grin was almost simultaneous with Sara's second scream of the day. The next thing she knew—

"What just happened...?" Inexplicably, Sara was standing atop the wall. She peered nervously over the edge, then gulped. "Maybe I *am* dreaming." She gave her cheek an experimental pinch. That was definitely painful.

Then Olivia took her by the hand and, without further ado, marched them both away. Before she had a moment to ask any further questions, she found herself in front of a conical watchtower that jutted out from the wall. With Olivia still leading her by the hand, she climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the tower. Her eyes were met by the vast sweep of the Emaleid Citadel.

"What a beautiful view..."

"You like it? I have been eating lunch here every day lately." Olivia took slices of bread white as snow from the basket, then briskly spread them with jam. It smelled sweet and fresh.

"Here you go." Olivia held out a slice of bread. Sara hesitated, but then, it wasn't every day that a chance like this came along. She decided to accept Olivia's generosity with good grace.

"Well, then. Don't mind if I do."

"Mm-hmm, eat up!" Olivia rested both arms on the top of the wall, leaned against it, then opened her mouth wide and chomped down her bread. Sara took up the same pose as she bit into her own slice. She couldn't help but smile

as she imagined how the ladies-in-waiting who attended to her at the palace would react if they could see her now.

“That’s better,” Olivia said suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“I dunno, you seemed down.” Olivia ran her fingers through her hair, not looking at Sara, and with that, Sara realized why the other girl had practically forced her into having lunch together.

I’m so ashamed. I was supposed to cheer her up, but instead I’ve made her worry about me. She stared at the half-eaten bread in her hands, then stuffed the rest into her mouth. She chewed, forced herself to swallow, then let out a breath.



“Y-You okay?” Olivia held out her water canteen with an anxious look.

Sara, summoning up her courage, gripped Olivia by the shoulders, then stared directly into those ebony black eyes that made her feel like she could drown in them.

“Olivia.”

“Um. Yes?”

“As of this moment, we are not just friends, but the best of friends.”

“W-We are???”

“Yes. And when you are the best of friends, you open up your heart. It’s compulsory.”

Olivia blinked a few times. “I’m not sure what you mean, but I’m pretty sure that’d hurt.”

Sara gave this unexpected remark exactly zero attention. She plowed straight on.

“*The point is,*” she said, emphasizing every word, “we keep nothing from each other. Now, you’d best get ready because I’m going to tell you *everything.*”

“O-Okay.” Olivia’s head bobbed up and down like a nodding doll.

After that, the two of them talked on and on until the sun went down. What sorts of things did they talk about? That was for them alone to know.

Chapter Eight: A Shining Roar

I

I have a mysterious power.

This realization came to Heaven Mercury when she was nine years old. Like all children with new toys, she of course wanted to show it off to her friends, especially as it was a toy that no one else had. Heaven enthusiastically gathered her friends together to show off her strange power, and was met with amazement and applause. She became an overnight sensation.

But this power of hers was far more dangerous than any toy. A few days after her display, Heaven didn't have a single friend left who would play with her. The village folk who had up until then been kind to her began to keep their distance, as did her own parents, in the end. It was a set of circumstances to make any ordinary child despair, but Heaven was of a slightly eccentric disposition. It thrilled her to have a power that made adults afraid. And for better or for worse, it was this that would determine her fate.

She was thirteen when she learned that the power she possessed was the supernatural art known as "magecraft." By that point, the villagers feared her as a witch. She spent her days in a house on the outskirts of the village, absorbed in her research into magecraft, occasionally letting off a little steam by sprinkling random leaves into a cauldron of water and cackling to scare the children and adults who came to get a glimpse of the scary witch. As the years went by, the strength of her fascination with magecraft grew until it wasn't unusual for her to go for days without sleep or even food. Submerging herself in her research became as second nature as breathing for Heaven, until on one such day she noticed, while peering through her dust-coated window, a grand carriage the likes she had never seen before pulled up outside her house. The driver opened the door respectfully, and out stepped a young man easily as impressive as the carriage itself, dressed in finery and with golden hair that fluttered in the breeze. He was so handsome that even Heaven, who usually

took no interest in anything but magecraft, wanted to shout, “Hey, the fairy tales want their prince back!”

II

“—ke up.”

Feeling a strange sensation in her face, she forced her eyelids open. The sight of Lion tugging on her cheeks with a serious expression swam into view.

“Wha’ah you ’oing?”

“Oh, I was just curious as to how far they would stretch.”

“Guh! Bwuh! Bleh!” She threw off his hands, which flailed uselessly in midair. The next thing she saw was Julius, standing a little behind Lion and smiling awkwardly. Apparently, she’d fallen asleep without realizing it. Not that this was unusual.

“Leo baby, I know I look like an angel when I sleep, but you can’t go pulling on people’s cheeks without asking in this day and age.” She wiped away a string of drool with the sleeve of her white coat. Lion quickly drew back as though he’d seen something dangerous.

“Heaven, we apologize for forcing you to wake up when you are exhausted.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Lord Julius. I’m not the least bit angry. Getting up to mischief is more or less the job of *children*.”

“It is gracious of you to say so.”

“That’s enough mouthing off from the both of you. What I want to know is, is it finished?” Lion arranged his face into a scowl as he looked over at the enormous tank behind them. Heaven promptly spun around in her chair to face the container full to the brim with yellow-green liquid, then gave a self-congratulatory nod. She was too young for this to be called the culmination of her life’s work, but it was still undeniably the fruit of her forays into magecraft’s deepest mysteries.

“I’ll take that look on your face as a yes,” Lion said. Even Heaven couldn’t fail to hear the relief in his voice.

“What about your part? Is the container ready?”

“If you’re worried, you can come and see for yourself.”

Heaven wasn’t about to turn down that invitation. She followed Lion out of her dungeon laboratory and up above ground. This brought back sensations she had not had cause to remember for a long time, and she turned to glare at Lion.

“The light, it burns! Leo baby! You set me up!”

“I did nothing of the sort. It won’t kill you to get some sun every once in a while and clear away that moldy smell hanging around you.”

“Excuse me...?! I am adorable, perky, and drop-dead gorgeous, and you look me in the face and tell me I’m *moldy*?! Lord Julius, are we really going to let such discourtesy stand? No, I thought not. Reprimand him! I wish to see him weep!” Heaven jabbed a finger into Lion’s chest as she ranted.

Julius replied with a perfectly straight face. “He was indeed unspeakably rude. If you will be so kind as to be patient, I promise to scold him until he weeps later.” He spread his cloak around her to keep her out of the sun. Heaven shot Lion a look and snorted.

“You could learn a thing or two about how to treat a lady from Lord Julius, Leo baby.”

Lion gave Julius a murderous look and said, “It’s because you spoil her that her head’s so swollen.”

“Haven’t you heard the saying that women are meant to be pampered?” Julius replied with an awkward smile.

“Never. Anyway, we’re here.” They had arrived at their destination. The guards heaved open the massive doors until there was a gap wide enough for one person to pass through. They stepped into a workshop redolent with silence and the smell of iron. An enormous tube-shaped object loomed in the center.

The Armored Mage Cannon. Heaven had named it herself. She smiled to herself as she regarded it. She clambered up onto a workbench beside the cannon and gave it a light tap with her fist, producing a heavy *clang*. The power

unit, the product of much painstaking work, was also built in according to specifications.

“Mm, uh-huh, power unit looks good. This should be tough enough to withstand the kickback at discharge. Though it’s way bigger than what I asked for.”

She didn’t mean anything by the comment; it just slipped out of her. But Julius, who had been entrusted with supervising the construction, interpreted it as a complaint.

“I’m sorry, but given the power we expect it to wield, we had no choice but to make it larger,” he said, looking up at her apologetically.

How much power would be produced by mana accumulated over three long years? Heaven’s numerous experiments had led her to make predictions up to a point, but in the end they were just that—predictions. Uncertainty was always lurking around the corner. As such, she wouldn’t have dreamed of blaming or criticizing Julius.

“It seems we made it in time,” Julius said.

“Yeah, though barely.” Lion gazed up at the Mage Cannon. Heaven looked at him sidelong. When Lion had come to her with plans to build a weapon that would make even the gods tremble, even Heaven, who generally took a dismissive attitude to anything unrelated to magecraft, had been absolutely horrified. *What corner of hell did he crawl out of?!* she’d wondered. She remembered it like it was yesterday.

Because the Armored Mage Cannon relied on magecraft, it followed that as a mage, she was the only one who could use it. Even another mage would be unable to use the cannon—she would have to pull the trigger herself. The weapon was originally intended as a threat. Lion had made it clear that pointing it at other people was a last resort. Put another way, however, this meant that should threats prove ineffective, he wouldn’t hesitate to use it. She did have enough of a moral compass to hesitate at the idea of committing mass slaughter on an unprecedented scale, but by happy coincidence, their targets on this occasion were only *former* people.

“So when do we bring this baby out?” she asked, rapping the cannon again.

The other two didn't answer, but a savage glint came into their eyes.

Soon, then, huh. Heaven punched her fist into her palm to fire herself up.

III

The Lough Mountains rose along the border between the Third City of Bay Grand and the Sixth City of Rue Shalla that had fallen to the horde of ghouls. The Sutherland Army chose the swampland at the southern end of the range as its battleground.

Lion, the supreme commander, looked down on the large-scale defensive fortifications that were taking shape day by day in preparation for the coming battle. At the center, the Armored Mage Cannon rested on a stone platform.

"How's the work going?"

"Well enough," Julius answered dutifully from his place at Lion's side. He had ordered the house arrest of the leaders of four cities who had opposed war with the empire, resulting in a reduced total force of two hundred twenty thousand troops. Half of that number were deployed as a reserve force at Skyberg Fortress to the south—the largest fortress in Bay Grand.

"What are the ghouls doing?"

"Still nothing."

Lion snorted, then said disparagingly, "Still not taking us seriously, eh?"

It had been a month since the emissary had arrived from the Asvelt Empire with a new letter from the emperor. Its message had been very simple: the march of the ghouls currently halted in Rue Shalla would resume at midnight fifty days hence.

"Lord Leisenheimer still suspects a trap, and we have reports that he has mobilized his own troops to scout out the surrounding area without seeking leave from the supreme commander. How do you wish to deal with him?"

Lion had made his taking the supreme commander's role conditional on all of them following his orders. Leisenheimer's conduct was in flagrant violation of those orders.

“So long as it doesn’t slow down the work, I don’t care. We have ten days until battle. I don’t see any of them backing out at this point, but there’s no guarantee.”

A number of the city leaders, with Leisenheimer chief among them, had expressed suspicions that Darmés’s unilateral declaration was a trap. But put in extreme terms, what was war if not the ultimate game of deception? Victory went to the side that pulled it off successfully. It was all very well to fear a trap, but Lion, for good reason, had dismissed it as a possibility from the start. Heaven’s research had shown that the ghouls did not need to eat or sleep in order to function. Her final conclusion was that they ate humans not to sate their hunger, but to satisfy a vestigial impulse from back when they were human. One could cut their arms off or smash their skulls in, but unless the right side of their chest, where the source of their energy resided, was pierced, they would go on fighting without any sign that it bothered them.

Lion couldn’t imagine better weapons. The best way to use them was simple brute force, relying on the strength of numbers. There was no need to mess about with petty deceptions. He believed that Darmés planned to crush them so badly that they lost all will to fight, then when he had achieved that, to demand another unconditional surrender. After all, a nation could not exist without people, and Lion didn’t think for a second that even Darmés desired a ruined land overrun by ghouls.

“Then I shall overlook the incident with Lord Leisenheimer. Darmés seems rather confident in his ghouls.”

“Of course he is. That army is a strategic-level weapon.”

“Even so.”

Lion gave a fearsome grin. “What he doesn’t know is that we have strategic-level weapons too.”

Their gazes converged on the Armored Mage Cannon that sat gleaming in the sunlight. At that very moment, Heaven too would be hard at work preparing for the oncoming battle. All of a sudden, Julius gave a wry chuckle.

“What?” Lion asked.

“I forgot to mention. Lord Cassanoah seems quite enamored with the cannon.”

“Does he, now...” Lion snorted, then pushed his hair back. “I never know what the Bat is thinking.”

When he had first unveiled the cannon, the city leaders had taken a much greater interest in Heaven, whom he had introduced at the same time. This stood to reason—it was their first time seeing a rare mage—but Cassanoah had spared her no more than a passing glance. For the rest of the time he had gazed at the cannon with a disturbing smile playing about his lips.

“I think it’s safe to say that Lord Cassanoah at least understands what the cannon was built for.”

“Of course he does. That’s why I can’t stand him.”

“He is clever, but not all-powerful.”

“By which you mean, when I pulled out something that went beyond his expectations, all he could do was smile?”

“It looked that way to me.” Julius had hit the nail on the head, but neither of them could have known that yet.

“Whatever the Bat is scheming, he’s still the lord we need to keep the closest eye on. I doubt he’ll try anything with all this going on, but make sure you stay on your guard.”

“Not to worry, my lord. I have already placed several of the Wolfpack within his camp.”

“That’s not enough. Make up some excuse to put a guard on him.”

“Won’t that let him know we suspect him?”

“I don’t care if he knows. That’ll be a deterrent in and of itself.”

“In that case, I shall see to it right away.” Julius departed, the perfectly rhythmical sound of his footsteps fading behind Lion as Julius glared over at the left flank, where the army of Crimson Liber was camped.

Main Command of the Army of Crimson Liber

Cassanoah bell Steintz, lord of the Seventh City, wrapped his hand around a cup of steaming tea and took a slurping gulp as he listened to the report of Black General Lytton Belmondo, who commanded his army.

“The supreme commander is obviously trying to keep an eye on us. I will come up with some reason to refuse.”

“No need. He is deliberately making sure we know what he is doing. Leave him to it.”

“If Your Grace says so...”

“He doesn’t look it, but he is ruthless. If it weren’t for the ghouls, that weapon could well have been aimed at us.”

“Assuming this ‘Armored Mage Cannon’ can really do what the supreme commander claims, then by using it on us, he would turn all the other cities against him. Would he really do something so foolish?”

“At present, I have significant doubts that it would turn out as you say, General. It is already fifty years since the founding of the United City-States of Sutherland. By ostensibly remaining neutral and refusing to take part in any war, we have enjoyed peace, but a peace that goes on too long leads to slackened vigilance and dulled judgment. You only have to look at what became of Northern Perscilla when they were lulled into complacency by the comfort of knowing that they were one of the Three Great Nations, and so, based on mere superficialities, went to war with the Kingdom of Fernest. I wonder how many are left in Sutherland with the mettle to defy that cannon if it were pointed at them.”

War was the most unproductive act possible. Cassanoah was relatively fond of Sutherland for its continued neutrality—even if only on the surface. But Lion was different. It was no secret that he had a rare talent for the arts of war. A man like that would never have been satisfied being lord of a Sutherland city. As such, Cassanoah had been plotting behind the scenes to curb the other man’s ambitions, but the appearance of Darmés’s ghouls had rendered his efforts meaningless.

Lytton made an extremely sour face. “So things are just as you feared, then, Your Grace?”

“Oh, worse. I have no idea how things will go from here. All I know for certain is that if we lose this battle, not only Crimson Liber, but the whole of Sutherland will be snuffed out.”

“We know the monsters’ weak point. That will not happen,” Lytton said, the look of a warrior in his eyes. But his words left no impression on Cassanoah.

Now as ever, when we face something against which human strength cannot prevail, we call it a “monster.” He looked down at the cup in his hand. The warmth of the tea he had drank earlier was gone, leaving only a bitter taste in his mouth.

IV

“Reporting, ser. The ghouls will arrive in the marshlands in approximately seven hours.”

The news arrived as Heaven and Lion were performing their final checks. The sky above was coated with a thick layer of clouds.

The ghouls began to march exactly at the hour Darmés had declared, down to the minute. With a discordant cacophony that none who heard it could dislodge from their ears, the horde made its way south, walking ever on at the same pace without distinction between day and night.

Finally, a messenger arrived, face rigid with nerves, to announce that the fated moment had arrived.

“The monsters have reached the marshland!”

The tension inside the tent strained to a breaking point. Lion, who sat perfectly still with his arms folded, opened his eyes.

“Here we are at last...” he said. Before any of the others, he got up and left the tent. Julius handed him a spyglass, which he pointed straight ahead to see ghouls spilling into the expanse of the marshlands like a wave of sludge. It was impossible to call them an army, not when they moved independently and mindlessly—but this only made it clearer that this enemy was not human.

Though the others had seen a ghoul back at the Council of the Thirteen Stars,

as they filed out of the tent, their eyes were locked on the marshlands. It wasn't hard to imagine the alarm and fear of the soldiers seeing the creatures for the first time. All the soldiers knew the enemy they would be facing, of course. But hearing about something shocking was entirely different from seeing it with one's own eyes, and the gap only widened the further that something was from what could be explained by common sense.

"Those are the ghouls..."

"That's what we've got to fight...?"

"Forget it. We can't beat those things."

Anxiety and frustration abounded. Their fear germinated, then it took root in their bodies. From somewhere, they heard the sound of rattling metal, and it wasn't long before the sound spread through the entire army.

"Lord Lion..." Shaola, clad in his warlord period armor, looked at Lion with an uncommonly grave expression. Lion didn't have to ask. He knew what Shaola was trying to tell him as well as if the other man had spoken.

"I'll go." Leisenheimer squared his shoulders and made to stride off, but Lion called him back. "What?" he demanded. "At this rate, the ranks will collapse before the fighting even begins."

"It isn't a bad thing for them to be afraid."

It was rash to dismiss fear as a vice. In battle, fear was a vital element for protecting oneself. Without it, it was impossible to perceive danger. Some hero had once said that fear was there to be conquered, but Lion's view was somewhat at odds with this. He believed that fear ought not to be conquered, but rather cautiously tamed. Maintaining a healthy relationship with it was the best way to survive.

Leisenheimer didn't bother to hide his irritation. "You don't need to tell me that. What I'm worried about is the terror overwhelming them completely."

"Ah. And is that something a pep talk from you will help with?"

"Then what, we just sit here and watch?!"

"No one is saying that. If fear has taken hold of them, all we need to do is

show them hope powerful enough to blot it out. What do you think this is for?" With the air of someone knocking on a door, Lion rapped on the Armored Mage Cannon. He then called up to the woman who stood imperiously atop an unnaturally stacked pile of wooden boxes. "We're ready, right, Heaven?"

Heaven snickered. "I was born ready!" she said, rubbing her nose with her palm for some reason, before jumping into her seat in the firing platform mounted on the cannon. "Here I go!"

In front of her was an orderly array of protruding shapes. Heaven rubbed her hands together, licked her lips, then began to move her fingers like an organist. In response, the cannon began to vibrate with a faint hum. She then gripped the two operation rods similarly mounted in front of her, then slowly stepped onto a plate at her feet. Gradually, with a massive, almost grandiose noise, the cannon began to spin. The fear-filled eyes of the soldiers were drawn to it as it whirled to life.

"The ghouls' course is drifting a little to the left!"

"Roger that. Correcting bearing by three degrees. Mana connection circuit, all normal. Commencing mana injection." Heaven pushed the operation rod back. The patterns drawn on the weapon's enormous barrel began to glow with faint light. In the meantime, Heaven's hands kept on moving, her expression so serene she looked like a different person.

"Internal levels for the power unit holding at nominal. Mana flow pressure thirty...fifty...seventy...ninety... Mana flow pressure has reached its critical point. Now releasing final safeties. We are ready to fire."

The patterns on the barrel now blazed with golden light, and a dull drone filled the air. Heaven's eyes, just like those of all the others, were fixed on Lion and Lion alone. From somewhere, a leaf fluttered down to brush against the barrel—only to evaporate without a trace.

"Fire!"

There was a roar that seemed to tear into Lion's gut, and a torrent of light that surged forward in a perfectly straight line.

His mouth twisted in a smile devoid of emotion.



V

The ground shook violently with the sound of impact. With every blink the shining hemisphere only grew, eclipsing not only the monsters but a whole swathe of the marshland. It seemed that something like lightning was occurring within the hemisphere, with intermittent bolts of purple light emanating out from its center. It was enough to render one speechless.

“Incredible...” Cassanoah said under his breath. The word spread out like a ripple through the Sutherland camp. Morale had hit rock bottom, but now there was a sudden surge of excitement. Lion, aware he was laying it on thick, thrust his first up high toward the heavens and was met by an earthshaking cheer.

“Lord Lion, you’ve done it!” Shaola, still giddy with excitement, came bounding forward with his hand outstretched to shake Lion’s. Lion replied with a short word of thanks. Next, Leisenheimer, still refusing to face Lion, awkwardly extended his hand. Lion let out a soft snort, then shook it without another word. Heaven gave him a thumbs-up, beaming with pride, and he nodded back at her with a smile. The flood of praise continued, but Julius alone kept his eyes fixed on the battlefield, his face grave.

Lion went over to him, feeling the continued buzz of excitement from behind him. Julius’s expression did not lighten.

“At a rough estimate, I’d say we got twenty thousand.”

“Twenty thousand? That’s a terrific amount of power.” But Lion was not as satisfied by the result as his words suggested—likely for the same reason that kept the grim look on Julius’s face.

The Armored Mage Cannon had slaughtered twenty thousand ghouls in a single blast. At that moment, it was indisputably the most powerful weapon mankind possessed—powerful enough to fundamentally change the very nature of war. But that only held true against humans, who could be deterred. The ghouls, on the other hand, were mindless, and without minds, they could not feel fear. Those that survived continued to advance as though nothing had happened.

Still, we're off to a flying start. I'll settle for that for now. Lion immediately issued orders for all forces to go into battle. The soldiers, their morale restored by the cannon's strike, let out a stirring cheer that rang through the battlefield.

VI

The defensive fortifications were made up of three main blocks. There was no difference in the construction of each. Earthwork ramparts stood in a grid pattern, connected by rudimentary bridges that allowed soldiers to move between them. Between each block there was a high, long defensive wall and a deep moat to turn back the ghouls.

The battle naturally began in the section of the fortifications closest to the marshlands—the first block.

“If I had any doubts, the sight of you lot has put them to rest! None can withstand the combined might of Sutherland's armies, not even monsters! Darmés the fool, they will call him, after we have shown him our power!”

So proclaimed Leisenheimer, who was in command of the first block. His soldiers bravely raised their longspear in response. Though twice the length of a standard longspear, these ones were light and easy to handle, and had been designed especially for fighting the ghouls. It was easy to stab with these spears even from the top of the high ramparts, and because the soldiers had spent the bulk of their training on mastering the technique, they could use the longspear to accurately strike the ghouls' weak point on the right side of the chest.

A human opponent would have responded with archers, but all their intelligence on the ghouls made it clear that the creatures did not use weapons.

“We can do this! We've got 'em!”

“Yeah! Take that, you bastards!”

The avalanche of ghouls that swarmed against the ramparts met a rain of newly forged steel and fell, unable to mount a counterattack. The morale of Sutherland's armies had never been higher. But though it seemed they would overpower the ghouls...

“This is bad...”

“Julius? What are you talking about?” Lady Diana Christine of the Eighth City of Rune Barrés reacted first to Julius’s muttered comment. She was the only city ruler, apart from military men like Shaola and Leisenheimer, who had voluntarily come to the battlefield.

“Lady Diana, you ought not to be on the front line,” Julius said, but the only ones who looked reticent at his direct reproof were her guards. Diana didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“I’m already on the battlefield—if I die, I die,” she said, still looking from left to right through her spyglass. “Anyway, *what* is bad? Even to my civilian eyes, it looks like things are going rather well.”

Diana was too shrewd to accept a throwaway explanation. Julius was cursing himself for having let the words slip out, but there was a silver lining to Diana being the one who’d overheard him.

“The supreme commander’s plan is to keep all the fighting long-distance. It was the correct call, and as you say, Lady Diana, it is going well. The problem is...” Julius pointed to one of the earthwork ramparts. Fallen ghouls lay piled on top of each other. There wasn’t a single one of their soldiers in sight—indeed, the same was true for the other ramparts. The Sutherland Army’s defense had so far played out perfectly.

“All I see is a steadily growing mountain of corpses...” Diana said, the question plain in her voice.

“Exactly. The more ghouls we kill, the taller the mountain becomes. If left unchecked, the others will eventually climb over them to tear out our soldiers’ throats.”

Diana could tell that this was not the result they had intended—indeed, it was entirely outside anything Julius had predicted. A shadow came over her face.

“That certainly is not good. It isn’t as if we can skip down there and pull the mountain down either,” she said. “Does the supreme commander know about this?”

“I haven’t told him yet, but considering I noticed it, well...” Julius replied. “He won’t be looking happy right now, you can be sure of that.”

“Hmm...” Diana moved closer to Julius, then, starting at his face, her eyes ran over him right down to the tips of his boots. Julius, whose experience of being this close to someone of the opposite sex was limited to the ballroom, stiffened.

“Can I do something for you?” he asked.

“I’ve always been curious,” Diana said. “For a man with so many excellent qualities, you have an excessively low opinion of yourself. Why is that?”

This was not at all where Julius had been expecting the conversation to go. He let the tension go out of his shoulders.

“I hardly know what to say...” From a purely objective perspective, Julius thought of himself as a thoroughly ordinary individual. If he really possessed the “excellent qualities” that Diana spoke of, surely Lion’s plans for domination would be far, far ahead of where they were.

“Any of that which you see in me is only a pale reflection of Lord Lion,” he replied.

“You mean I give you too much credit?”

Julius conveyed with a wordless look that she was right. But Diana’s clear jade eyes stayed fixed on him.

“You could aim for higher things if you wished. And yet you are satisfied with your lot. You are *content*,” she said, making it sound like something unfortunate. “It is my belief that everyone has a place that accords with their ability, and to my eyes, your present ‘place’ is entirely unfit for you. The sight of it is repugnant.”

“Well, given I am a senior general at barely twenty-three, I can’t deny what you say about my place.” Their eyes met. Diana gave a relenting smile.

“I’m getting nowhere, aren’t I?”

Julius made a conscious effort to smile. “I have to wonder what led you to say this now of all times,” he remarked. “I’m sure it couldn’t be that you wish to drive a wedge between Lord Lion and myself.”

“I would never dream of such a thing.” Diana hastily waved both her hands in

adamant denial. “It seems like a waste, was all I meant to say.”

“Then I shall keep this between us.”

“Yes, by all means. I would be mortified to be thought to have hostile intent.” With that, she twirled on the spot, then shot him a mischievous smile.

Julius gave a small sigh. “I understand. One other thi—”

“I won’t breathe a word of what we spoke of. I’m not about to interfere in military matters. I haven’t any authority there.” Diana turned and walked lightly away, her hair the same shade of pale blue as her armor swishing behind her. Her guards trailed after her, bowing repeatedly to Julius as they went.

“Bold as brass...” Julius muttered to himself.

Five days later, Julius’s fears came to pass. Lion made the soldiers fighting in the first block retreat back to the second block, then ordered Heaven to fire a second time. By the time they had fully evacuated the first block, the Sutherland army had lost less than a hundred soldiers. In contrast, they had sent more than forty thousand ghouls back to the land of the dead.

Sutherland continued to fight back the ghouls with historic success. But there was no sign of complacency on the face of Supreme Commander Lion.

The living and the lifeless—the twain that never should meet—collided in a clash that distorted the world around it. The world simply accepted it and watched on.

Chapter Nine: Holy War

I

The Caylus Plateau, the Holy Land of Mekia

The dead marched on the Holy City of Elsphere. Under the command of Sofitia Hell Mekia, the Winged Crusaders formed up to meet them in the network of small hills that covered the Caylus Plateau. The Winged Crusaders fielded forty-five thousand soldiers. The horde of the dead numbered a hundred thousand. Though the Winged Crusaders had the advantage of terrain, they were vastly outnumbered. Blessed Wing Lara Mira Crystal gave the order for Senior Thousand-Wing Amelia Stolast to strike the first blow against their enemy. She set off on her horse, then, with the Caylus Plateau at her back, she dismounted on a deserted plain.

It is an honor as a warrior to lead the charge. Thank you, Blessed Wing, for granting me another opportunity.

Fifteen minutes passed. Amelia stood tall and regal, waiting for the oncoming dead, then her eyes caught human shapes. They welled up quick as blinking, and from them wafted a stench of decay that no living person ever emitted. An aura of evil hung about them, marking them as neither man nor beast.

With the vicious, clinging howls of the dead in her ears, Amelia licked her lips.

First of all, let's see what you're made of. She raised her left hand toward the group of dead shambling toward her at the head of the pack and cast Bonds of Immovability. Magecraft such as this spell that forcibly held her enemy in place was Amelia's specialty, but she felt none of the response she should have. And indeed, her target showed no change. The dead continued their lumbering advance.

So that spell doesn't work on undead creatures. That means their hearts aren't beating, if nothing else. If they even have such a thing. She realized that, without meaning to, she had put her right hand on the pommel of her sword.

Apparently, her body was eager to cut the corpses to pieces. A gleeful smile came over her face. Keeping an eye on her opponents' movements, she moved on to her next method. Amelia tended to prefer fighting with a sword at close quarters over magecraft, but no amount of slashing would have any effect on a horde like this—even a child could see that. Her task was to quickly close the discrepancy in their numbers, and the only way to achieve that was through large-scale use of magecraft. Though she felt an urge to hack and slash until her soul was singing and see up close how the dead responded, she knew well that now was not the time.

Oh dear. Despite her hesitation, her feet were running, carrying her toward the dead. *I really just can't help myself.*

In a burst of elation, she threw herself into the horde. A chaotic mass of hands grasped at her from all directions. Amelia struck them down with godlike speed. If they had been people, the creatures would have been shrieking in unbearable agony, but the dead felt no pain. No matter how long she fought, that soothing melody did not fill her ears.

"Ngh!" A corpse missing both its arms bared yellowed teeth coated in mucus and lurched forward, snapping at her. It was such inhuman behavior that Amelia felt a shiver go down her spine in spite of herself.

Were these really human once? They're just too hideous.

The clattering in her ears made her anger flare, and she jumped back. At the same time, she slashed out to cast Thin Ice with her blade, sending three heads flying in a flash of light. Amelia continued her slaughter of the dead without pause until she had taken down more than thirty. Then she moved far back away from them. She beat her sword on the ground to dislodge a chunk of something that could not be called flesh, then took a deep breath.

They don't see me. This was the conclusion she had arrived at. Of course they had some awareness of her, or they would not have attacked her, but the majority of the dead passed her by. Amelia still had more than a few questions, but at that moment, they weren't important.

"In the end, you're only puppets," she said. "I suppose I was a fool to hope for more. It's time to end this." In her mind's eye, she pictured a deep darkness

from which nothing could drag itself out. The dead were slow but moved unmistakably forward. Facing them, Amelia held out her left hand, now glowing blue, and swept it across in front of her. A line of light shot out along the ground, bringing with it a violent tremor. The earth was torn asunder, rising up and dropping away so that it yawned open like the jaws of some enormous beast.

This was high-level binding magecraft: Hellbound.



Even faced with the gaping jaws, the dead did not stop walking. Instead, as though it were a matter of course, they tumbled down into it without showing the faintest hint of emotion. A heavy sigh escaped Amelia's lips. *Boring*, she thought, watching blankly as the dead went on repeating exactly the same act. *That should do it for now*. The maw in the earth, now glutted with corpses, had done its job. It slowly closed, grinding them to mush as it did so.

Amelia created three more sets of jaws, then she cast another high-level binding spell: the Verdantwyne Myriad. Great vines burst from the ground to seize the dead that had slipped through the gaps in the jaws before tearing them to shreds.

"I can't believe how boring this is," Amelia muttered to herself. Her forehead was slick with sweat.

II

Main Command of the Winged Crusaders

"Ser, the dead are helpless before Senior Thousand-Wing Amelia's magecraft."

At the owl agent's good news, the tension that had up 'til then been suffocating them all was replaced by a burst of excitement from the guardians. Lara listened to them singing Amelia's praises from atop her horse when her eyes fell on Historia von Stampede—leader of the Twelve Angels and Lara's aide.

Am I seeing things? Without thinking, she rubbed her eyes, then laughed at her own ridiculousness. Historia was gifted with many talents, but she thrived on indolence and wasn't the sort to hide it, not even on the battlefield. But not now. Historia sat tall astride her horse, looking so gallant that no one could help but admire her. Her silver eyes that were her most striking feature were not half-hidden under drooping lids like usual, but rather staring straight ahead at Amelia fighting on the battlefield.

"Not napping today?" said Lara dryly. She got next to no reaction from Historia.

“Will Lady Amelia be all right?” Historia’s question was ambiguous, but Lara understood perfectly what she meant. Her tone was the same as ever, but it was obvious that she was worried about Amelia.

“She’ll be just fine,” Lara replied with confidence. At this, Historia finally met her gaze. There was a faint shadow of doubt in her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“I would not lie to a friend. Fear not. Amelia is the last person who would make a mistake that would drain her mana.”

Mana drain meant death. It was a fate that always awaited mages. The possibility of death as a result of misjudging the amount of mana one had spent was not a small one. Indeed, there were said to be mages who really had died in the past. But as a rule, mages like that were of second-or third-rate ability. Magecraft, in its essence, was the art of accurately assessing one’s mana reserves. Amelia, whatever else she might be, was a first-rate mage. She would never misjudge.

Historia regarded Lara for a while, then looked straight ahead again. “This is a nasty enemy we’re up against,” she muttered.

The simple assessment painted a clear picture of what was on Historia’s mind. She already understood the nature of the undead.

What ultimately made a person a person was their mind, and the mind and the body were tightly intertwined. Both were roused by bravery and cowed by fear. On the battlefield, therefore, it was necessary to make a companion of death and fight with it at one’s side. In the ultimate army of Lara’s ambitions, all her guardians would have death as their companion. Now, an enemy that had halfway achieved this—albeit on a whole other level—was marching on the Holy City of Elsphere.

Their enemy was twisted to the core, but that was precisely why she couldn’t afford to underestimate it. It wouldn’t be long until Amelia reached the limits of her mana.

It was a little after the first flash of light.

It's time. Historia, knowing what Lara wanted, skillfully urged her horse forward then galloped off to the first line of defense.

Upon her arrival, she called out in a voice both loud and bold. "Prepare for the second battle!"

The senior hundred-wing in command on the first line took up the call. "Prepare for the second battle!" they echoed.

With the moment they had been waiting for upon them, the guardians sprang into action. None of them looked like they wanted to run. Fifty multistage ballistae, the newest weapons borne out of the cumulation of Mekian technology, stood along the first defensive line ready to intercept the dead horde. The guardians' morale remained high, even with their first battle with their undead foe almost upon them. This was not thanks to their new weapons, nor was it because they had mages on their side. The reason was simple: the almighty being that watched over them at their side.

No matter what enemy may come, I will not allow them to lay a finger on the seraph. As though in answer to Lara's resolve, a flash of blue light streaked up into the sky.

III

The banners of the Winged Crusaders fluttered against the winter sky. Sofitia sat in the six-wheeled chariot listening as one of the owls reported that the battle was going well.

"Amelia never disappoints," said Angelica of the Twelve Angels, standing up straighter with pride. The knights of the Seraphic Guard looked on with expressions torn between amusement and exasperation as she hummed a made-up tune to herself.

Senior Hundred-Wing Dolf Ballenstein, who stood at Sofitia's side, waited until the owl was completely out of sight before he solemnly said, "We can only hope it continues to go this well..."

"I am told that the dead laid waste to an entire city in the United City-States of the Sutherland. This will not be easy."

Dolf's brow furrowed deeply. "I heard as much too. But if I may speak freely, the nation in question is only a collection of minor states. They do not hold a candle to Mekia's might." Dolf was the leader of the senior hundred-wings, and his face sported a variety of scars both large and small. Added to his naturally ferocious appearance, he had no trouble cowing anyone who laid eyes on him.

"That may be so, but it is no reason to underestimate our opponent," Sofitia admonished. "Every nation has its share of talented people."

Dolf bowed his head. "My remark was ill-considered."

It was now common knowledge that the empire had been conspiring with the United City-States to manufacture a food shortage in Fernest. Sofitia had thought that, even if the empire did eventually turn on Sutherland, it would not be until after it had destroyed Fernest. In reality, however, the empire had simply cast them aside before Fernest met its doom. It was presumably a decision borne out of confidence in the undead army, but all the same, it struck Sofitia as ever so slightly premature. If the decision was based on arrogance, then Darmés had shown the limits of his ability and she need not fear him, no matter how many corpses he could control. At the same time, Darmés had a proven record serving as chancellor for many years under Ramza the Good himself. More than likely, he had a scheme brewing that she could not foresee.

The sound of running footsteps pulled Sofitia from her thoughts. The news was not good.

"My Seraph..." Dolf's face twisted with anguish, but Sofitia answered with a cool smile.

"It is as I foresaw. We shall wait and have faith."

IV

The Walls of the Holy City of Elsphere

"Well, that figures..." grumbled Senior Thousand-Wing Johann Strider as he stared absently down at the wilderness that lay to the west of the city. He had been left in charge of the city's defenses.

The news that the undead had suddenly appeared in that wilderness and

were marching on Elsphere was largely responsible for worsening Johann's already-gloomy mood.

"We saw neither hide nor hair of them until yesterday. Where in the world did they come from?" Johann had good reason to be perplexed. Besides strengthening the guard in the holy city, he had also ordered Senior Hundred-Wing Zephyr Ballschmiede, the head of the owls, to cast a wide security net. This had, of course, included the area of wilderness that now had his attention. It was unthinkable that the owls, who understood the threat of the undead better than anyone, could have missed it.

"We are fighting the *dead*. You can't expect to use logic with them, so there's no point worrying about it."

"Well, yes, but..." Johann paused. "Wait, what are you doing here anyway?" He turned to look suspiciously at Jean Alexia of the Twelve Angels who stood casually at this side.

"Blessed Wing Lara ordered me to defend the holy city—what else?" Jean replied, sounding indignant. "You were there at the war council, Senior Thousand-Wing."

"Uh-huh. Say, you're oddly cheerful, given the circumstances."

They currently knew there were seven thousand undead marching upon them. If that number were to change at all, it would only go up. With all the misfortune that had befallen them, Johann couldn't understand facing down the revolting ranks of the dead and being *cheerful*.

"M-Me? Cheerful? Don't be silly," said Jean, not meeting his eyes.

"Oh? Because to me you look like someone who's gotten rid of a yearslong pain in the neck."

"I-It's not because Senior Thousand-Wing Amelia is away or anything like that."

That was all that Johann needed to hear. "It is far too easy to read you."

"I told you, you've got it wrong!" Jean repeated her denials several times more, wiping away sweat that beaded on her forehead as she did so.

Johann returned his gaze to the awful scene before them and quietly folded his arms.

No one's going to be laughing if they come home to find the holy city overrun by the dead. You could sacrifice your life to atone, and it wouldn't even begin to cover it. And worst of all— Angelica's bright and sunny smile appeared in his mind's eye, and he physically cringed.

"My lady love would never forgive me," he muttered. Jean abruptly stopped repeating excuses and looked at him with moist eyes.

"Even at a time like this, you're thinking about a woman..."

Johann put his arm around her neck and grinned. "Menfolk can't get by without women. In this world of lies and fabrications, that's the one truth you can count on."

Jean looked totally uncomprehending. "And what does that mean?"

Johann glanced at the cross spear in Jean's hand and said, "I mean that polishing your martial skills isn't everything. An understanding of a woman's heart is just as important. In other words, if you're afraid of dear Amelia, it's only because you don't know anything about her."

"I've served at her side for almost two years now. I obviously know *some* things..." Jean's voice got smaller and smaller as she tried to deny it.

"People are instinctively wary of things that no one understands. And a lack of understanding leads to fear. Did you know, for example, that Amelia makes a hobby of collecting pretty clothes?"

Jean's eyes snapped wide open. There was a pause, then her face turned surly. "No, stop it, that's not even a tiny bit funny." Apparently, she thought he was joking. Johann deliberately let the silence draw out. "Wait. You *are* joking, right?"

"What do I have to gain by joking?"

"But no, come on, not *Senior Thousand-Wing Amelia*, of all people..."

"You don't think it sounds like her?"

Jean said nothing for a long moment, then nodded reluctantly.

“Well, it’s the truth. Without even meaning to, you now know something about the woman who was a mystery to you. How does it feel?”

“I don’t know...” Jean said. “It’s so unexpected I don’t think I can put my feelings into words.”

“The point is, if you make an effort to get close to her, even dear Amelia can come to seem endearing.”

Jean glanced around nervously, then shivered. “I can’t see that ever happening. Though I see why you find her endearing now.” When Johann didn’t reply, she added, “Lord Johann?”

“Right, I’m going out for a bit,” he said. “Hold down the fort for me.” No sooner had he started walking than he heard footsteps coming after him. With a cold flick of his hand, he wordlessly signaled for her not to follow him.

“But—”

“It’s no good having both of us away from the city. Don’t forget the duty of the Twelve Angels.”

“Yes, ser,” Jean replied at length. “I will protect the city.”

“I’m counting on you,” Johann said, then he stopped, remembering something. “Oh, right. Don’t go dropping what I just told you into conversation with Amelia. She’d probably kill you.”

“Huh...?!” Jean froze as though she’d been turned to stone. Johann left her there and headed down the stairs. By the time he reached the heavily barred outer gate, Zephyr and another five owls stood around him like a guard.

“I don’t remember calling for you,” he said.

“It is the order of the seraph.”

Johann shrugged, then looked around at the owls. They were dressed like common folk, but anyone who knew what to look for could sense that these people did not make an honest living.

“You’re being dramatic again.”

“This is not a joking matter.” Zephyr’s expression was deadly serious.

The others with him were some of the most skilled warriors among the owls. They were known as the Five Ring Band. Johann left the holy city with them, urging his horse westward toward the wilderness. It wasn't long, however, before a problem arose. As they approached the wilderness, their horses slackened their pace and wouldn't stop whinnying. At last, they stopped and refused to take another step. Sweat drenched their flanks even though they had not yet covered half the distance to the wilderness.

They scare the horses this badly...? Johann didn't hesitate; he dismounted, then ordered the Five Ring Band, who were trying to force their horses to stay put, to dismount.

"We'll run from here," he said.

"Yes, ser!" The released horses shot off back the way they had come, and, in mere moments, they were out of sight.

They ran on for a little over two hours.

"—like the face of hell itself down there." Johann and the others were standing at the edge of a cliff that looked out over the army of the undead. It was redolent with a stench worse than any battlefield Johann had known.

What sort of screwed-up magecraft lets you revive the dead? he wondered. With the thought of the abnormal magecraft, a certain girl appeared in his mind's eye. *No, surely not...*

While the Five Ring Band kept close watch on their surroundings, Zephyr said, "Human reason doesn't get through to the undead. It makes dealing with them extremely frustrating."

"By which you mean simply burning them isn't going to faze them, I suppose?"

Zephyr lowered his head. "With all due respect, ser."

He was right. Johann's magecraft was focused on fire, which made it effective against humans and animals, but not necessarily against the undead. If they were as the reports suggested, they wouldn't stop walking even if their whole bodies were on fire.

“Then I’ll just have to keep going until no scrap of flesh remains,” Johann replied. He gripped his left wrist with his right hand, then concentrated his mana in his Blazelight mage circle. It began to flicker. Then a surge of crimson light shot up into the sky.

My Seraph... he thought. If he wanted to stay at her side, he had to prove himself worthy of her trust. Johann’s greatest fear was that Sofitia, his ruler in all things, would look at him with disappointment in her eyes. *Anything but that.*

He cast flame magecraft’s highest-level spell: Blazing Host of Heaven.

A vast mage circle floated above the marching undead. This was magecraft of the same class as the Blazelight Vortex, but it consumed an order of magnitude more mana. Because of this, Johann had deliberately sealed it off—it was his last resort.

“So long as I’m still standing, you putrid wretches will never set foot in the holy city!” He made sure of his target, then released the power sealed in the mage circle. At once, a huge pillar of light shot out from its center. The circle expanded, instantly reducing every walking corpse it touched to black ash. The dust was carried up on the wind that howled within the circle, then scattered without a trace.

The Blazelight mage circle shone with a fierce glow, as though reveling in Johann’s supremacy.

Chapter Ten: A Black Sea of Trees

I

Felix von Sieger, traitor to the empire and formerly one of its Three Generals, decided that he and the Azure Knights would take refuge in Fernest. In order to ascertain what the imperial army was up to, he selected soldiers with excellent scouting skills, then spent several days gathering information. Using what they brought him, he worked out their escape route and the ideal timing. He had finally decided that they would set forth on the morrow when news arrived that upset the whole operation.

It was midday when Lieutenant General Violet von Anastasia came to Felix, but thunderclouds that filled the sky left Fort Zaxxon in darkness.

The Azure Knights, Fort Zaxxon

“Dead...”

A bolt of lightning split the heavens, filling the workroom with white light. When it was gone, all that remained to illuminate the room was the faint glow of the fireplace.

Upon hearing that Paul was dead, Felix found himself at a loss for words.

“Should we delay our departure?” Violet asked hesitantly.

Felix, reeling from the unexpected loss of his intermediary, felt like his lips had turned to lead as he opened his mouth.

“I doubt we will have another chance like this one. We leave tomorrow, as planned. Convey as much to Major General Balboa.”

“Understood. And, ser, I...” Violet struggled to find words. Her gaze trembled like a leaf on the water’s edge. Seeing that she was concerned for him, Felix, with some effort, assumed a lighter expression.

“I’m fine,” he said. Violet shut her mouth on the question she was about to

ask, then saluted. Just as she was about to put her hand on the doorknob to leave, she cast a look around the room as though searching for something.

“Something wrong?”

“Oh, no...” she muttered. “Excuse me.”

Against the sound of her reluctant footsteps, Lassara Merlin dispelled her concealment magecraft, then used a spell to draw up a chair in which she sat down. Silky Breeze the fairy, who was hiding inside an old jar, stuck her tongue out at the door.

“She’s sharp, that one,” Lassara observed. “Shows a lot more promise than you, youngster.”

“I suppose so.”

“Hmph. Mind elsewhere, I see. Say, I’m a bit chilly.”

Felix got up heavily from his chair, picked up the wood that lay in a neat pile in a corner of the room, then moved it in front of the fireplace. He gazed at the flames as they reared up cheerfully without really seeing them as Lassara spoke again.

“What are you going to do?” When Felix was silent, she persisted. “No answer, eh? How about swearing anew your loyalty to Darmés in exchange for the emperor’s life, then? I think it’s a rather ingenious plan if I do say so myself.”

“You can’t—?!” Felix spun around to find Lassara regarding him with an evil smile. “You are a bad person,” he said.

“Sorry, sorry. You were just so gloomy. That girl was mighty worried about you, even if she didn’t say it.”

“I’m well aware. I...” Felix paused. “I need to think a little.” He leaned back on the worn old sofa, staring up at the dingy ceiling and thinking that nothing ever went as planned. He was just thinking back on the words he and Paul had exchanged back at Kier Fortress when Silky alighted on his shoulder.

“How about I kick her butt as payback for teasing you?” she asked. Lassara’s eyebrows twitched, and she glowered at Silky.

“You want to go back in your cage, do you?”

“Just you try it!” Silky stuck up her middle finger defiantly.

“Lady Lassara was only trying to cheer me up. Let’s hold off from kicking anything.”

“Lassara’s a sly one. But me, I’m always on your side, Felix.”

“I’m always in a pitiful state around you, aren’t I, Silky?” he said with a self-deprecating smile. But Silky, looking serious, shook her head.

“You aren’t pitiful at all. I don’t think for one minute that you’d give up hope after a thing like this. Besides...” Silky combed her fingers nervously through her hair as her cheeks went pink. “Besides, I’m the only one who can make you feel better.”

Felix hesitated, then said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!”

Lassara let out an impatient sigh and rolled her eyes at Felix. “You’re too soft on her, youngster.”

“I certainly don’t mean to be...” Felix scratched the end of his nose.

“Yeah, you heard him! You butt out, Lassara!” Silky threw a furious kick at Lassara’s head. Lassara flicked her away with an air of annoyance. Watching the familiar scene, Felix felt a little of the weight in his heart lift. Gradually, his mind began to work, looking for a way out.

There aren’t many who could step into the shoes of a man like that, he thought. And to make things worse, Lord Gruening, the Invincible General, was killed in battle as well...

Death came to all equally. It was a truth from which not even heroes could escape, something that Felix was powerfully reminded of now. After losing two great warriors at the same time, the Royal Army would be facing unprecedented turmoil. If the Azure Knights were to barge into the middle of all that, even if they made it clear that they had no wish to fight, the situation could easily break down to the point where violence became the only option.

My first priority must be the survival of the Azure Knights. No more spur-of-

the-moment decisions. I have to proceed with caution.

Felix went back to the desk, his thoughts rapidly taking clearer shape. Before long dusk came, then a night passed. The eastern sky was beginning to brighten as Felix came to his decision.

“Looks like you’ve made up your mind,” Lassara said, bleary-eyed. She rubbed her eyes, a sight that brought up fond memories for Felix of his sister when she was a child. It was the Heavenly Orb mage circle tattooed on her little hand that brought him back to reality.

“I am going to reach out to the commander of the Second Legion.”

Lassara glanced over at Silky, who was sound asleep on top of the firewood. “And here I was sure you were going to bring up a certain girl.”

“Much as I like her, she isn’t one for political discussion.”

“But she’s a lieutenant general, isn’t she? They wouldn’t promote her so highly if she were a moron, no matter how good a warrior she is. I don’t see the need for being condescending.”

“I’m not looking down on her, not at all. It’s just a question of strengths and weaknesses. In any case, I know better than to rely on her except as a last resort.”

Lassara covered her mouth as she gave a wide yawn, then stretched lazily. “Well, far be it from me to interfere with your decisions, youngster. But don’t go thinking I’ll bail you out just like that when danger comes calling. I want no part in any war.”

“Of course not. This is my problem.”

“Hmm. Well, so long as we’re clear.” Lassara strolled from the room, saying she was going to wash her face.

The late Marshal Gladden had had a high opinion of the Second Legion’s commander, who had long held the central front against him without any support. Felix had no reason to disagree, but he did not know the man’s character. He knew that this would be a risky gamble.

It was with a solemn air that the Azure Knights set off from Fort Zaxxon into a

chill winter mist that rendered the early morning landscape blank and empty. They marched on without a trace of their former splendor.

II

The Azure Knights continued on, slipping through the gaps in the guard the imperial army had laid over the region. Twelve days after leaving Fort Zaxxon, they at last arrived at the border with the Kingdom of Fernest. Even then, however, the soldiers showed no sign of relief. The sense of tension only mounted.

“So we’re stuck going through here after all.” The major general looked up at the towering forest giants that seemed to touch the sky and gulped.

There was no other forest like it—a mass of trees like a black shroud that had led people to speak of it in fearful whispers as the Black Sea. It was a breeding ground for the dangerous beasts that were humanity’s natural enemy. There, from the moment of their birth, death’s fingers were never far away. Human norms carried as much weight there as a single withered leaf fluttering down to the forest floor. This was one of the three great unexplored territories, along with the Forest of No Return and the White Forest.

“Looking at this forest really drives home how puny we humans are,” Violet said frankly. Felix keenly felt the truth of what she said. He gathered together the main group who would be venturing into the Black Sea.

“If you encounter any dangerous beasts, do not engage them unless you see signs they mean to attack. The smell of blood holds a powerful attraction to other dangerous beasts.” With this out of the way, Felix next said, “However, while this contradicts what I just said, you have leave to attack first when it comes to beasts that hunt in packs. There are, for example, beasts called galds that are always seeking offerings to show off their strength to the rest of the pack. If they mark us as an offering, they will not back down, even if only one is left standing. For them, defeat means being torn apart by their own kind.”

“Either way, dangerous beasts are a given, then,” said Lieutenant Teresa, her face pale. Felix nodded.

“In addition, make sure your soldiers touch as little in the forest as possible. Pay particular attention to plants. They are likely to be poisonous.”

Toxic plants were easy to spot when they were brightly colored, but there were many others that appeared to be no more than common weeds at a glance. Felix stressed that as they were going outside the realm of human knowledge, that a moment of carelessness could be fatal—even plants posed a threat.

While they all exchanged meaningful looks, Matthew, the captain of Felix’s personal guard, said, “Even if I see a sweet and juicy fruit dangling right in front of me?”

“Assume that any fruit that dangles in front of your face is the lure for a large carnivorous plant. Even unicorns, if caught by such a plant, are helpless to resist being melted down, bones and all.”

“I-I see. Understood, ser.” Matthew took a step back, his face twitching. Felix patiently answered the questions that followed, then, when they died away, he turned to Teresa.

“Get the soldiers ready, as we discussed.”

“Yes, ser.”

Following Teresa’s instructions, the soldiers each took out a small glass bottle, then began to smear the contents around their necks.

Balboa dabbed the liquid onto his wrists, looking troubled. “Will this really make the beasts avoid us?”

“I’m sorry. The truth is, I don’t know how well it works.”

“Hmm.” Balboa looked dubiously at the little bottle. But there was no time to test the efficacy, so though Felix didn’t like it, there was no other answer he could give.

“At the very least, it should be better than nothing.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he felt something whack him in the backside, as though he’d been kicked.

“Huh? Is something wrong, ser?”

“Oh, no...” Felix scratched his cheek and said a silent apology to Lassara behind him.

As they had no choice but to pass through the Black Sea, he had instructed the soldiers to gather snow safflowers, which were commonly thought to deter beasts. Lassara had scoffed at this as pointless, before at last handing him a scrap of paper on which she had written ingredients and how to mix them.

“Everything seems to be ready,” Teresa said, unable to keep the unease out of her voice. With that, ahead of all the others, Felix took the first step into the trees.

III

Felix, flanked by his personal guard, led the way with Teresa, Violet, and the rest of the Azure Knights following behind in two columns. Balboa brought up the rear, keeping a close watch on their backs along with the best of their soldiers. It was a clear winter day, but beneath the boughs of the Black Sea, it felt like nightfall. The world that took form out of the constant interweaving of roars of life and murmurs of death felt unreal.

Scarcely any time had passed since they’d entered the forest, but even highly trained soldiers had sweat beading on their foreheads. The sight would have shocked the Crimson and Helios Knights. Their experience fighting the undead probably had a lot to do with why they were still in control of themselves.

“—being watched.” Violet heard Teresa whisper from beside her as they walked. The other woman’s face was tense. Violet didn’t have to ask what she meant. Following Teresa’s gaze told her everything.

Atop an unnaturally contorted branch, melting into the darkness, *something* was staring at them.

A monkey? Violet wondered. *Ugh. Or not.* The only part of it that resembled a monkey was the head. It had the body of a lizard grown to the size of an adult human, and skin that looked like swords would bounce off it. Nothing like this had lived in the forests Violet knew.

“I don’t sense any hostility from it. You can leave it be.” Felix’s voice was soft

but clear. They had been in the Black Sea for some time now, but he was still his regular self, and though he trod cautiously, Violet could tell that he was more preoccupied with the safety of the Azure Knights than his own well-being. Perhaps that was normal for a person in his position, but they were not in the world of normal. Being there was like being forced to spend every moment on a tightrope where a missed step meant death.

“I wonder if Lord Felix has been here before,” Teresa wondered aloud. Violet had already been wondering the same thing. All the warnings he had given them before they went in had been new to her—even a hunter who knew the forest like the back of his hand wouldn’t have known most of it. His descriptions had been too real to be only book learning—it made sense to think they were based on experience. Why it was necessary for them to brave realms unexplored by humans, however, remained a mystery.

“He hasn’t told you anything, Lieutenant Teresa?” Violet said, then privately chided herself for asking a stupid question. Teresa wouldn’t have asked in the first place if she’d known anything. Violet had to admit it was probably the petty jealousy she harbored toward Teresa that had made her say it. And as expected, Teresa just shook her head, looking troubled.

“Well, let’s not dwell on it. Right now, our mission is to make it out of this ocean of trees alive.”

Teresa’s expression turned hard. “Agreed. We mustn’t put any further strain on Lord Felix,” she said. Her gaze was fixed on the man walking directly ahead of them. Violet found herself slightly envious.

On and on they walked. Here beyond the realm of civilization, there was no place for humans to linger. The Azure Knights walked day and night, stopping only for rests that could hardly be called rests, until at last, they arrived at the far side of the Black Sea. Along the way, they encountered many dangerous beasts, and more than a hundred of their number were injured, but not one of them had died. Violet called it a miracle. Felix had to agree that the numbers seemed that way, but miracles were slippery things—nothing more than a series of fortunate events.

Felix knew the truth behind what Violet called a miracle. It was the result of

the beast repellent Lassara had taught him, which had worked even better than he had expected, and above all else, the assistance of Lassara and Silky helping them from the shadows.

Yes, I know, he thought as he felt the familiar impact on his backside. He nodded to silently signal that he understood.

Felix called over Violet, who looked relieved. “Continuing this way will take us out of the Black Sea. Can I leave you in the lead?”

Violet’s expression shifted back to one of unease. “Yes, ser, of course. But...”

“Thank you, Lieutenant General,” Felix said, then walked away from the path.

“Ser!” Violet called after him, startled. “Where are you going?!”

“I’ll be right back. I’m counting on you.” Felix melted away into the darkness.

Soon, night would fall for the third time since the Azure Knights had entered the forest.

IV

The Black Sea at night was brought to glorious life by a multitude of noises. Felix waited until the moment was right, then stopped and let his Odh radiate outward.

Closer than I thought...and more than I thought...?! With a sigh, he turned around to see Silky. Instead of her usual outfit, she was wearing flashy light armor that appeared handmade. Further examination revealed a sword strapped to her waist.

Fidgeting with embarrassment, she looked up at Felix through her lashes and said, “Does it suit me?”

“Yes, very mu— Wait, no. What are you doing here?”

Silky puffed her chest out with pride. “I’m here to fight at your side, of course!”

“I don’t remember asking you,” Felix replied with deliberate coldness to try and make her go away. But Silky’s eyes slowly widened, then her cheeks puffed

out. It seemed his words had had the opposite effect.

Oh, no... Felix did his best to soften his expression as he looked into Silky's eyes. "You don't think I'll be safe on my own?"

"I didn't say that! That's not what I meant!"

"Then please, go on protecting the Azure Knights from the shadows, just like you have been. You're the only one I can ask, Silky."

"No fair, Felix." They held each other's gaze in silence for a long moment, then Silky kicked the air and tore dramatically at her hair. "If I sense the tiniest bit of danger, I don't care if you get mad—I'm coming to rescue you!"

She zoomed off, leaving a trail of stardust. Felix waited until she was out of sensory range, then pulled his blade Elhazard, also known as "the Godslayer," from its scabbard at his belt.

Kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah...

The uncanny sound came at sharp, regular intervals, gradually growing louder. Claws came gliding out from a gap between the trees until they reached a tree trunk in front of Felix, and the source of the sound emerged from the shadows. Reddish-black fur, faces split from jowl to jowl by a mouth from which two tusks curved up to the top of the skull, and bodies almost impervious to blades and capable of walking on two legs like a human—these were none other than Norfess, the legendary beasts that were known for acting with their mates. Based on the length of the tusks on these ones, the one on the left was a female and the one on the right male.

"I cannot allow you to attack the Azure Knights." Felix held Elhazard out in front of him. In response, the two Norfess growled low and bared their teeth, splitting off one to either side. Felix saw the caution in their gait and knew; they saw him not as prey, but as a rival that had to be eliminated.

The Norfess closed on him to a point, then as one, they struck. They moved with unbelievable speed for their bulk, but Felix did not move. He focused all his attention on watching.

Left. Felix saw that the female was a fraction of a second faster. He used Swift Step of Gales to slip around behind them. His sword seemed to flow like water

as he made a sideways slash, but before the blade made contact, the female threw herself at the ground in a dive roll. All he managed to do was shave a few hairs off her back. He spun around at once to follow through with another strike, but the male came at him from the right and headed him off. The fist that flew at his face with a rush of air made it clear he wasn't going to be making any counterattacks. Felix leaped to the left so that the blow missed him by a hair, only to find the female waiting for him.

With the Norfess, what one had to watch out for was not the powerful arms that could rip a man limb from limb or the claws that could slice through solid rock. What really made the Norfess dangerous was their skill in working together. The coordination between the Norfess that lived in the Black Sea was enough to make Felix's blood run cold.

With a fist coming at him at incredible speed, Felix only had one option—get out of the way. He leaped up and twisted to dodge the fist. Adjusting his balance in midair, he put distance between himself and the Norfess. Before he could get his breath back, they were on him again. Constantly swapping positions, they launched a furious coordinated attack. Felix avoided every blow. He observed them, then deliberately left himself exposed to lure the Norfess's fists where he wanted them. He took two solid hits, one to his left shoulder and one to his right side, but by elevating his Odh in just those spots, he successfully protected himself. Neither knocked him out.

A total of eight eyes roved around wildly as the Norfess, faced with this abnormal enemy, tried to work out what was going on. It lasted only a few seconds, but for Felix, that was enough. He set his sights on the female and thrust up with Elhazard, then swung through as though he was drawing a circle. With the creature's fetid dying breath on his back, he pointed his sword at the male. After witnessing the death of his mate, the male let out a fell roar, then scrambled up a nearby tree to attack him from above. It was not remotely cautious anymore. This Norfess might have survived in the Black Sea, but it was not exempt from the madness that had overcome the others of its kind he had slain in the past upon losing their other half.

Felix swapped Elhazard to his other hand, ready to put an end to things. He shifted his weight to his left foot while concentrating his Odh in his right arm.

Without pausing, he flexed his arm like a whip. The furious roar produced by his blade resounded through the Black Sea and blasted through the male's skull. The remaining chunks of flesh fell in unresisting obedience to gravity to at last hit the ground with dull thumps.

That's over. Felix went to retrieve Elhazard, then his ears caught a strange noise, like something being dragged. Looking over, he saw the enormous corpse of the Norfess being pulled away into the darkness. Its leg was gripped by many long, spindly fingers like withered branches.

At that very moment, the wild revels of the Black Sea were approaching their climax.

Chapter Eleven: The Zero Boundary

I

No matter how much of the world was overrun by war, the colors of the seasons never altered. They were simply there, at the side of all things that lived between heaven and earth.

It was the Brume Star Moon of Tempus Fugit 1001. People saw their breath grow whiter with every passing day, heralding that winter had arrived in earnest. In answer to Prince Regent Selvia's request, Olivia and Blood set off from the Emaleid Citadel and rode for the royal capital, accompanied by a retinue of guards.

A moment after the first black droplet came down onto the sunset-red earth, the world was transfigured into a cold and forbidding place. But for Olivia, it was no more than the everyday scenery she had known for as long as she could remember. She was enjoying the evening breeze when Blood, who rode alongside her, spoke.

"Nothing seems to go to plan. It looks like we'll be sleeping rough tonight."

By now, they should have reached the town where they had intended to spend the night. But thanks to a landslide that completely blocked the road, they had been forced to take a detour. Now, they were taking an unplanned gallop through a forest.

Olivia considered this for a moment, then said, "If we're going to camp, I think we should go a bit further on."

"Why's that?"

"Dusksight wolves get really hungry around this time of year."

"What, so they'll attack us?"

"Yep. Given how stinky we are, I'd say there's quite a few hanging around nearby."

Blood snorted and gave a small shake of his head.

A short while later, they heard a harsh and full-throated howl, followed a few seconds later by more howls in a chorus. The wolves really were close. And judging from the timbre of their howls, they weren't young dusksight wolves like Patches, Spot, and Pooch, but old dogs hardened by years. Even unicorns avoided facing down a tightly organized pack of dusksight wolves, they were such a menace—something Olivia knew from experience.

"This is just me, but I'd say we get out of here ASAP. If we go now, we can still shake them off."

"I sure don't want to end up as wolf food." With a flick of his reins, Blood urged his horse on. The guards followed after on high alert.

Just in case, Olivia reached for the miniature ballista strapped to her back. Not long after—

"They're still there!" shouted one of the guards. "Still on our tail!"

A pack of more than twenty dusksight wolves gained on them from behind. Meanwhile, two smaller packs were in hot pursuit, one either side of them, weaving through the dense forest with ease.

As Olivia took aim at one of the approaching wolves, she wondered aloud, "That's weird. Dusksight wolves never run with other packs. Maybe there isn't enough to eat in the forest? Hey, Blood? What do you think?"

"Hell if I know! Does this look like the time for logical analysis?"

Olivia laughed. "Okay, fair point." She waited until the exact moment that the wolf sprang, then loosed. The bolt stopped the attack before it began. She then went on doing the same thing over and over.

If we've gotten this far, we should be all right. About fifteen minutes later, Olivia, confident that they had escaped the dusksight wolves' pursuit, picked out a rocky cave nestled in the darkness.

II

Firelight illuminated the cramped inside of the cave in red. After finishing a

late dinner, there was nothing much else to do. Olivia sat hugging her knees and staring up at the cave roof until Blood pulled his coat toward him.

“Aren’t you cold?” he said.

“Nope. Actually, I like it. It firms me up.”

“Sure wish it was like that for me. I’ve got a special hatred for the cold. If I could, I’d curl up like a turtle and sleep until spring.”

Olivia imagined Blood hiding himself away inside a turtle shell and allowed herself a tiny smile. Blood tilted his head in a way that could have meant anything, then tossed another of the dead branches the guards had gathered on the fire. There was a popping and crackling, and the flames shivered. Sparks danced through the air then vanished, quick as blinking.

“You know, I can’t believe you agreed to come to the capital,” he said at length. “You seemed dead against it at the start.”

“I’m still not wild about it. But I couldn’t not go after one of my best friends asked me to.”

When Blood had told her about the audience, she’d turned him down flat, saying she’d had enough of the hassle. But in the end, she couldn’t hold out against Sara’s desperate pleas. Now here she was.

Blood regarded Olivia. “‘Best friend,’ huh? Never thought I’d see the day when those words came out of your mouth, Liv,” he said softly. “I’ll tell you now—when we first met, it honestly felt a bit like talking to a really well-made doll. You’ve gotten a good sight more human since then.”

“Huh? I was always human.”

“There’s the old Liv still coming out,” Blood said with a small smile. As Olivia watched him, she remembered that Z had said something similar when they were reunited. But it was only a memory—she didn’t understand what Z had meant then any more than she understood Blood now.

Maybe if I asked what they meant instead of leaving things vague... After thinking about it, Olivia decided that rather than ask for the answer, she would come up with it herself. For some reason, it felt like that was what she ought to

do.

Her and Blood's conversation naturally died away. For a while, she let the wavering light of the fire wash over her. The cave rang with the calls of achlys birds as they gloried in the night.

Not long after, the new captain of Olivia's personal guard who had taken over for Gile came up to her.

"My guards will take watch duty. General Blood, General Olivia, I would suggest you get some rest."

"Don't mind if I do." Blood lay down there on the ground, then neatly wrapped himself in his coat and pulled his knees into his chest to stave off the cold before falling asleep.

"Lady Olivia, you ought to sleep too."

"Will do. Keep an eye on things, 'kay?"

"Ser."

Olivia leaned up against the cave wall, propping up the ebony blade beside her. Then she put her face on her knees and drifted off to sleep...

—Where am I?

There were no sounds, no smells, no light. Olivia stood alone in a darkness that was not of night.

—Seriously, what is this place?

She walked and kept walking. But no matter how far she went, the view around her didn't change. Then, just when she had lost all sense of direction and couldn't see the point in walking any further, it appeared.

—What's this?

A single, softly glowing bubble was floating through the air. She reached out without thinking. When her fingers brushed the bubble, it burst. A strong wind buffeted her, and the world around her transformed.

—Oh, wow...

Limpid, shimmering blue and orange melted together at random, always in

flux. It was too beautiful to describe in words. Motes of light came down in a ceaseless shower, making the scene feel all the more fantastic.

Olivia collected herself, then looked around. There were so many bubbles floating around her it was a wonder she hadn't noticed them before.

—Oh.

She felt herself strongly drawn to one of the bubbles. Without knowing why, she found herself running toward it, passing through the drifting bubbles before coming to a stop.

—Weird. I feel all warm just looking at it.

She reached out both hands as though to scoop the bubble up, but it flew away, evading her.

—Hey, wait.

The harder she tried to grab it, the further away it got, until at last it flew far away, up into the sky.

—Why... Ngh?!

There was a sudden, clenching pain in her chest. Olivia crumpled to the ground. At almost the same moment, a strong gust of wind rushed past her and the darkness from before filled her vision, the fantastic scenery disappearing as though it had never been...

Olivia opened her eyes. She saw Blood, his face unshaven.

"Morning," she said blearily.

"You were dead to the world." Warm sunlight filtered into the cave. The guards were moving about in a flurry of activity.

Hrmmm. I feel like I had a really weird dream... When she tried to remember, she felt a prickling in her chest. She looked down, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Not feeling so good?" Blood asked.

"No, I'm fine." Olivia stood up, stretched, then smiled.

The Royal Capital of Fis welcomed Blood and the others with scenes of decay. Everyone they passed on the streets wore the same somber expression and walked so as to avoid one another. The market still showed the barest signs of life, but the shopkeepers and their customers kept their interactions as short as possible. Sain Jerim Square, a popular meeting place, was deserted. Only the statue of Julius zu Fernest, the first king of Fernest, stood as it always had.

“This place is dark,” Blood muttered, sighing.

“Dark?” Olivia asked at once. “But there’s not a cloud in the sky.”

“No, not like that...” Blood swallowed what he was going to say next, settling for a quiet snort instead. On the way, they passed in front of where he had spent his school days: the Royal Military Academy. As they did so, he noticed out of the corner of his eye an instructor gesticulating dramatically at a row of cadets.

Something about that voice sounds familiar... Blood peered through the fence and found himself looking at a face he knew very well. *Agh! That old codger’s still alive?*

The instructor, who had left a powerful impression on Blood, was called Lacan Talisman. He was tall as an oak, lacked any affectation, and was direct as a spear thrust. As such, the word “reserved” had not been a part of his vocabulary. He was up there with Paul as one of the two instructors Blood had liked least.

“What’s up?” said Olivia.

“We’re getting out of here, now.”

“How come?”

“Just because.” Blood pulled up the collar of his coat to hide his face, but he had only taken one step away when—

“Well, if it isn’t young Master Blood!” boomed a cheerful voice from behind him. Blood’s shoulders twitched.

He spotted me. He could always tell, Blood thought. Pretending he hadn’t

heard, he kept walking at a brisk pace. But then someone grabbed his arm and forced him to stop. It was none other than Olivia.

“That was your name.”

“What was?” he said, playing dumb. He tried to free himself from her grip, but Olivia did not let go.

“Blood, that giant grandpa called your name,” she insisted.

He turned, following her gaze. With the agility of a much younger man, Lacan vaulted the fence. He approached with a guileless smile on his face, waving enthusiastically. It was like being run down by a giant grizzly. At last, Blood gave up all hope of escape.

He must be ancient. How can he still be built like that?

Lacan loomed formidably over him. Blood felt a sense of despair, but he still managed a commendable salute.

“Sorry I haven’t kept in touch, Master Lacan.”

Lacan roared with laughter. “Aye, not since you graduated, I think. But see here, what’s a great general like you doing being so damn skinny? Are you getting enough to eat?” Lacan slapped Blood on the back with a monstrously large hand, making him cough violently.

Anyone would look skinny compared to you! he thought resentfully. Then, thinking he might as well take the opportunity, he said, “I didn’t think you’d still be teaching at the academy.”

“Indeed, I’d long since settled down to enjoy a comfortable retirement. Then two years after this war with the empire began, they called me back!” Lacan said with a chuckle. Blood felt a rush of sympathy for him. The timing of Lacan’s return to duty coincided with the fall of the impregnable Kier Fortress and the precipitous decline of Fernest’s fortunes.

“Now, m’boy,” Lacan went on, “what brings you to these parts? A man in your position doesn’t just take a pleasant stroll around the capital.”

“I’ve got some business to clear up,” Blood said, his eyes wandering to where Leticia Castle stood in the distance.

“At the castle?” Lacan said with a curious look, but it seemed he knew better than to press the matter any further. His gaze moved to beside Blood where Olivia stood, then he wrapped an arm as thick as a tree trunk around Blood’s neck. Blood was quite sure that this did not bode well.

“Yes...?” he asked reluctantly. Lacan grinned, grinding his rock-hard fist against Blood’s head.

“Hey now, don’t you be coy with me. Where’d you find an angel like that, eh? You sly dog.”

Just as he’d thought, Lacan had gotten the wrong idea. With a loud sigh, Blood set him straight.

“Much as I hate to disappoint, Master Lacan, this isn’t what you think.”

“Come now, you’re too old to be shy.” Lacan’s knuckles ground harder into Blood’s skull.

Blood, struggling to breathe and growing irritated, snapped, “You must have at least heard stories. You know, about the girl the imperial army is calling the Death God?”

“No...?!” Lacan exclaimed. “*This* is the girl?”

His surprise only lasted a moment. He tossed Blood aside, releasing him, then moved in front of Olivia. His genial manner evaporated, and he looked down at Olivia with a glint in his eyes like that of a predatory beast. Olivia, meanwhile, looked up at him, mystified.

“This is the girl...” Lacan suddenly reached out and grabbed Olivia by the shoulders. Before Blood could stop him, he lifted her up high into the air. Olivia was unfazed.

“Ooh, it’s fun being up here!” she said cheerfully.

We’re standing out and not in a good way, so if you could cut that out... The sight of a giant old man in military uniform lifting up a beautiful young woman also in military uniform couldn’t help but draw attention. Perhaps Lacan realized that a crowd of onlookers was not what they wanted, because he gently lowered Olivia back down, then shook his head sadly.

“Oh, Blood.”

“Yes?”

Lacan hesitated. “It’s nothing. You must be in a hurry. I’m sorry to keep you.”

Blood, who had an idea of what was on Lacan’s mind, excused himself quickly.

“We’ll be off, then.”

“Aye. If ever you feel yourself getting rusty, come to me and I’ll go a round with you,” said Lacan, throwing his chest out.

Blood glanced at the straining buttons that looked like they might fly off at any moment, then he looked away and muttered, “I’ll let my sword arm rust right off before I take you up on that.”

He took Olivia smartly by the arm and fled.

IV

With every passing day, the rumors flying around about King Alfonse multiplied. Silvia summoned the high nobles who made up the core of the kingdom’s governance and made the king’s condition public. At the same time, he declared that he would serve as regent. In the whole of his life Silvia had hardly ever set foot outside the castle. Given that he did not have the backing of any of the influential high nobles, was sickly, and had never involved himself in matters of state, he was prepared for an outpouring of protest. In reality, however, despite a few unhappy voices, his installation as regent had been accepted so readily it felt anticlimactic. It was universally true of the high nobility that they were always trying to carve out a place at the center of power, whether great or small. Silvia might have been the son of the king, but as he had not officially been named heir to the throne, there was no reason for them to let him do as he pleased. If anything, it was the perfect opportunity for the high nobles who coveted the throne to usurp it. Silvia was able to assume his role as regent despite this only because they all understood that the Kingdom of Fernest was a sinking ship. No one wanted to captain a vessel that was headed straight to the bottom. When a nation fell, it was the king’s head that was first on the block. It was largely the product of an instinct to value self-

preservation above all else, and in that sense, the high nobles' way of thinking was entirely reasonable.

It was Blood, who had had supreme military authority thrust upon him in total disregard for his own wishes, who made this point, adding a healthy dollop of sarcasm.

Selvia's Private Quarters, Leticia Castle, Fis

"General Blood and Lieutenant General Olivia have just arrived, Your Royal Highness."

"Sara, it's just the two of us. Just talk how you usually do," Selvia said, grimacing slightly. But Sara's stiff expression did not relax for a second.

"I do not mean to presume, my prince, but no one forced you into this position—you sought it out. I humbly suggest that you set aside such excessively naive ideas."

"True," Selvia admitted at length. "You're right."

"I am glad you understand. Now, how is your health today?"

Selvia felt deeply grateful to his older sister who, despite her strict attitude, was concerned about him.

"I'm in top form today," he said, raising his arms and flexing. "I think I could even run."

"You certainly must not," Sara replied at once, looking stern.

"I wouldn't do anything so silly, of course," Selvia added hastily. "We can't have the prince regent embarrassing himself in front of Generals Blood and Olivia."

He pulled on the king's cloak which he still looked extremely uncomfortable to be wearing. Sara silently made a number of small adjustments, her manner every bit that of an older sister worried after her little brother.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Blood suddenly realized that they were moving away from the audience chamber.

The royal guard who walked ahead of them replied, "I am instructed to

conduct you not to the audience chamber, but to the prince regent's personal chambers."

His personal chambers? Blood wondered what the prince regent meant by this, to no avail. They continued down the corridor, then up two flights of stairs. He noticed affectionately how Olivia's attention was drawn by the view out over the city through the windows as they came to a door at the end of the corridor. The guard stopped.

"General Blood and Lieutenant General Olivia for His Highness."

"Show them in." Sara's voice answered. They entered to see a nervous-looking young man standing there.

So this is the guy... Blood thought. The prince had the face of a man who had never known violence and was so slight he looked like a breath would blow him away. His skin was so pale that his veins showed through. It was said that the prince was prone to illness; here was the proof.

"I thank you for coming at such short notice." One would never have guessed he was speaking to his inferiors from the deference in his tone—for a moment, Blood was at a loss for how to respond. He realized belatedly that he had done something unbelievably stupid and tried to drop to one knee, but Selvia raised a hand to stop him.

"Here, at any rate, there is no need for formalities. Lieutenant General Olivia, the same goes..." Selvia trailed off. Olivia hadn't even tried to kneel. Instead, she strode boldly toward him. "Wh-What...er..."

"You sort of remind me of Ashton."

"I... Ash...? Eh...?" Selvia's voice rose to a squeak as he processed Olivia's unusual behavior. Next, Olivia took his cheeks in both hands, then pulled his face so close to hers that their noses almost touched.

"Ah, yep. When I do this, you go red just like him too."

"Uwhhh..."

"L-Lieutenant General, that's enough." Sara, apparently unable to endure any more of this, laboriously detached Olivia from Selvia. Blood couldn't help but

feel renewed admiration for Claudia.

Once they were all settled on the sofa, Selvia straightened his collar, then said, “Now, I believe you are already aware of how I came to be regent.”

Blood only nodded.

“I have been sickly since birth,” the prince continued, “so my father never considered me as his successor. I have never tried to involve myself in politics. The only reason I became regent is because I fear for the fate of the kingdom. However, I am not foolish enough to think this sentiment alone will be enough to lead a nation.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but I’m not sure I understand your point.” Blood was indirect but still let a little bite creep into his voice. Selvia folded his hands in his lap, then, looking down, went on haltingly.

“I am aware of my own inadequacy, just as I am aware that my father’s leadership brought about our current situation. My point, if you like, is that I will not get involved in military matters, nor will I impose any restrictions. I arranged for this audience so that you might have the chance to look me over directly.”

For a long moment, Blood stared at Selvia in silence. “Holding the audience in your personal chambers is part of that, then?”

“By all means, laugh at my foolishness. I thought this the best way to demonstrate to you my true character.”

Blood took another look around the room. It was spacious enough, but there were no decorative furnishings to speak of. A faint herbal aroma hung about not only Selvia, but the whole space. A painting of a gallant knight on horseback raising a sword spoke volumes to Selvia’s feelings. Nine people out of ten, if told without prior knowledge that this room belonged to the prince regent, would have dismissed it out of hand as a bad joke.

“It seems you’ve got more sense than your fool of a father,” Blood said, laying his life on the line to try and draw the prince out. If Selvia flew into a rage and ordered his execution, that would mean everything he had said thus far was no more than empty rhetoric and he was unworthy of trust. Sara must have

perceived his intent, for she made no attempt to reprimand him. Instead, she turned anxiously to her younger brother.

Selvia, for his part, smiled courteously. "Your anger is justified, General Blood. On behalf of my fool of a father, I would like to apologize." And without hesitation, he bowed to his subject.

Blood kept back a whistle of admiration, even as he thought to himself, *Who'd have thought the world liked irony this much?*

He knelt once more, giving the gesture of respect due to one's liege. "I hope you will excuse my rudeness."

"I can expect your full cooperation, then?"

"I'll do everything with what little power I have not to disappoint you, Your Highness." Blood looked up and saw relief on Selvia's face.

"If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to ask."

"I very much appreciate that. Getting straight to business, then..." Blood ran through what he immediately required while Selvia wrote down each item in a notebook. In the process, the prince seemed to ease up a little, and he at last noticed that Olivia had been watching him the whole time. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Lieutenant General Olivia, I know it's late to mention this, but I wanted to thank you for rescuing my elder sister, Princess Sara, back at Fort Peshitta."

"Huh, so you're her little brother? I guess you do look alike."

"Do we really...?"

Sara watched as her little brother scratched his nose, looking at the floor. That, she knew, was what he did when he was embarrassed. It made her think of how very dear he was to her.

Back when she first discovered what he intended, she had been surprised. It also made her eager to support her brother who, unable to fly free from the confines of the castle that caged him, had never been able to choose his own path in life. Of course, she was still worried, and all the more so because she knew that she, his unworthy sister, was the one who had motivated him. The

future of the Kingdom of Fernest did not look bright, and her brother had many struggles awaiting him. But seeing him begin to act according to his own will filled her with vicarious pride.

“Even here in the palace, your valor is legendary, Lieutenant General,” Selvia said. “I trust that you and General Blood will continue to lend us your strength.” He looked Olivia straight in the eyes, then bowed.

When did he learn how to look like that? Sara wondered. She felt happy, but also somehow sad.

“Course we will,” Olivia replied. “After all, there’s something I’ve got to see through.”

“Is there? Whatever could it be?” Sara asked, but no sooner was the question out of her mouth than they heard running footsteps from the corridor.

“I’ll go see what’s going on,” Blood said, then ducked out of the room. He returned shortly afterward, a look of extreme consternation on his face.

“What is it?” Selvia asked.

Blood scratched the back of his head. “You’ve heard of the Azure Knights, Your Highness?”

“Yes, of course. Rumors say they are the empire’s greatest army. But I’d heard they defected.”

“Well, it would seem that those defectors are asking for my protection.”

Chapter Twelve: Light and Darkness

I

Soft afternoon light poured in through the window. Blood had returned to Galia Fortress and was lying on the sofa in his workroom. He was so preoccupied that he didn't notice himself letting out a massive sigh.

How am I supposed to respond to a request like that...? Still lying down, he reached for a cup of tea left on the table. But he couldn't reach it. He kept trying, stretching as hard as he could without getting up, when—

"*What* are you doing?" said a cool voice. Blood craned his neck around to look behind him and met Lise's exasperated gaze.

"How long have you been watching?"

"Oh, not long. Now, what are you doing, ser?"

Blood hesitated, then said honestly, "Trying to drink my cold tea."

Lise's voice grew several degrees chillier. "I can see that much, ser. What I wanted to know was why you wouldn't just sit up."

Blood had to think about this. *Good question.* Though he felt like a mouse staring down a hungry snake, he arrived at an answer. "Because, um, if I get up, I lose?"

Lise made an unintelligible noise that did not sound like an appropriate way to address a superior officer. He knew he ought to reprimand her, but his body, instead of listening to him, jumped up stock straight.

Was I always the sort of guy who did everything a woman told him? As he entertained such pointless thoughts, a cup of tea came sliding into view. His own tea cup was still on the table. The one in front of him was steaming.

As he stared blankly at it, Lise said, "It's getting cold."

"R-Right..." Blood muttered, scratching his nose and avoiding her gaze to hide

his mounting embarrassment.

Lise cleared away the cup on the table. As she did so, she asked, in the tone of one making small talk, “So, are you going to say yes to the Azure Knights?”

A week had passed since the shocking message had arrived. The decision of what to do about it had been left to him, but it wasn’t like choosing what to have for lunch.

“Well, whatever I think, it seems like you’re against it, Captain.”

“Huh?!”

He had vaguely suspected as much from the way she was talking, but her reaction confirmed it.

Lise looked at a patch of floor to his side and said reluctantly, “The might of the Azure Knights is legendary across the continent, and given how many commanders we’ve lost—first among them Marshal Cornelius—it’s no exaggeration to say they could be the Royal Army’s salvation. So I’m not against it, exactly...”

Blood waited for her to continue.

“The thing is,” Lise said, lowering her voice and speaking more cautiously, “until a week ago, we were enemies. Even if one fully understands our circumstances, it isn’t easy to set aside emotion. Chances are, many would not be happy about it if we were to accept their plea for aid.”

She was probably right. It would be a tall order to get the troops to accept the Azure Knights. Having lost many of his soldiers and friends to them, he understood how they would feel.

“Even so, we can’t just say no to them,” he replied. “Even if it brings the wrath of our fallen comrades down on our heads.” Lise nodded, her mouth tight. “Any movement from the Azure Knights?”

“No, ser. They are standing by at the location we designated. I still can’t believe they came through the Black Sea...”

Blood agreed wholeheartedly. The Black Sea, one of the realm’s three most perilous forests, was so dangerous that even the most seasoned hunters would

not go near it. It was common knowledge that none who set foot inside ever returned alive. For the Royal Army, it served as a sort of natural fortification. As such, they had never entertained the possibility of an invading imperial force coming through it, nor the Royal Army invading by way of the shadows beneath its boughs.

“Just goes to show how desperate the Azure Knights must have been. You don’t turn your back on your country unless you’re fully committed.”

Blood had been on the verge of betraying his country more than a few times for the sake of the Second Legion. He couldn’t help but understand.

“We are going to take them in, then?”

Blood, finding himself pushed into a decision by Lise, nodded to her to continue. As he did so, he observed wryly to himself that he *was* that sort of guy.

“Where should we meet with them?”

“Here at Galia Fortress should work.”

“I agree, ser.”

“One thing, though,” Blood added. “They only get a retinue of a hundred soldiers. That’s nonnegotiable.”

He knew that the imperial army had limited Paul to a hundred soldiers when he went to Kier Fortress for the prisoner exchange. This was his idea of irony.

It won’t give me a measure of their commander. On the other hand, though, if he won’t even tolerate this, he’s not worth allying with. Even if the Azure Knights were supposed to be the empire’s mightiest.

He and Lise went on talking through taking in the Azure Knights until they had most of it nailed down. Then, Lise opened her mouth as though remembering something.

“I forgot the most important point. I think we’ll have to send an emissary so that no unnecessary confusion arises along the road.”

“Of course. But the question is, who...”

The Azure Knights' commander was young, a sort of hero of the age. He might have come to them for help, but it would show lack of courtesy for Fernest to not send someone worthy. The first person who came to mind was Olivia, who was acquainted with Felix, but Blood immediately eliminated her as a candidate. For the sake of etiquette, this would demand formal behavior, and it seemed unfair to put the onus of that on Olivia. Even if he did ask her, this time she'd probably run as fast as her legs could carry her.

If only the Man in the Iron Mask were here, I could've just off-loaded it onto him... he thought, picturing Brigadier General Otto back when he was still alive. *Hmm. I guess he'd be up to the job.*

"Do you have someone in mind, ser?" Lise asked.

"Yeah, I'll have Major General Neinhardt go."

Lise was only too happy to agree to this.

"Felix von Sieger's supposed to be quite dashing, and Major General Neinhardt is too handsome by half. They should get along well enough."

"Ser, please don't tell me you chose him for his *looks*." The chill in Lise's voice was back. Who knew what terrifying scolding would await him if he admitted she was right?

"Pfft. Like I'd do that," Blood said emphatically. "I recognize Major General Neinhardt's mediation skills, that's all. Their looks are just a coincidence."

"I don't know..." The doubt did not fade from Lise's eyes.

The day came. Tensions within Galia Fortress were at an all-time high. As the Azure Knights came in through the gates, the soldiers of the Royal Army stood straight and immobile, watching them with eyes that were cold and grim.

"It's the reaction we expected. If they'd wanted to, they could have killed us three times over," Matthew said, sounding amused as his eyes flicked back and forth. He probably really was having fun. He had always had a certain liking for danger.

Felix let out a small sigh. "We came here to negotiate, not fight. Be sure not

to incite violence.”

“I’m sure none of the Azure Knights would ever act against your wishes, my lord...” Matthew said. “Does that hold true even if the other side provokes us?”

“Naturally. I ask for moderation,” Felix said sternly. Matthew shrugged and said no more.

In the short distance after he passed through the gate, Felix sensed an unusually powerful murderous intent from three soldiers in particular. Matthew had said what he did because he’d felt it too. It was a sign of the absolute discipline maintained by Blood Enfield—the man with whom they were to negotiate—that the soldiers were not pointing their spears at them. Felix walked on pretending to be oblivious while maintaining a minimum level of caution.

That looks like... He picked out Captain Katerina Reinas, the aide of Major General Neinhardt, who had guided them to the fortress. As she saluted with her left hand he saw the gleam of a brand-new ring that definitely hadn’t been there before.

“I have brought Lord Sieger.”

“Show him in.”

He followed Katerina into the room. On the other side of a round table in the center, a man saluted him. Felix, going off what he had heard of Blood’s appearance, knew that this was he—the man he would be negotiating with.

Felix walked up to the table, then returned the salute.

“Thank you for granting me an audience despite the unreasonable nature of my request. I am Felix von Sieger, formerly a general in the imperial army.”

“I’m General Blood Enfield of the Royal Army.”

After they introduced themselves, Katerina made her farewells and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Blood invited Felix to sit down opposite him before settling into his own chair.

“I’m not one to mince words, so I’ll cut straight to the point. What exactly is

your purpose here, General?"

The last thing Felix wanted was to dance around the point. He answered honestly.

"Darmés usurped the throne. I mean to settle things with him."

"Get rid of him, you mean?"

"Precisely."

Blood folded his arms, clearly troubled. "From what my sources tell me, Emperor Ramza willingly conducted the coronation ceremony. I find it hard to believe that the commander of the Azure Knights would incite a rebellion just because the new emperor isn't to his taste. Add to that the matter of the undead, and I have to wonder—just what is going on in the empire?"

Felix took a few moments before he replied. "You'll have to excuse me. It's a long story."

Blood replied with a nod, which Felix returned. Then he began to relate what happened since he and Olivia had parted ways at Listelein Palace. He recounted how, when he broke into Ramza's quarters to rescue him, Darmés had been lying in wait for him, and the terrible truth Darmés had revealed to him. He had tried to cut the man down, but Darmés had used some mysterious art to thwart him. He finished his story there. The look on Blood's face had turned bitter.

"There's a lot I'll have to ask you about in more detail, but you're saying that ultimately, Emperor Ramza had nothing to do with this war and it was Darmés pulling strings from the shadows all along?"

"I am."

"Right..." Blood mused. "Well, I'll be damned." A stretch of silence followed this. Felix looked down at the cup of tea in his hand.

"If I had only noticed there was something wrong with His Imperial Majesty sooner, I might have been able to prevent a pointless war..."

"No point in worrying about what-ifs now."

Blood was absolutely correct. Regrets over the past would never change the future.

“Excuse me. I was being foolish.”

Felix lowered his head, but Blood waved him off, saying, “The other thing I don’t understand is why you’re seeking protection from Fernest. You couldn’t call us a great nation these days, not even to be nice. If you wanted the protection of a great nation, you could have turned to Sutherland. Wouldn’t asking me for leave to pass through our lands have been the best option for the Azure Knights?”

Felix had had the question posed to him by Balboa, so he had an answer ready.

“A nation of united city-states functions well enough as a political entity in peacetime, but this conceals the great possibility of dysfunction in the event of war as each city maneuvers to secure the greatest advantage. This element of uncertainty makes matters like who has the most troops seem trivial. Given I could not have expected a partnership to arise organically, it would only have ended up hindering the Azure Knights. That is why I turned to Fernest for refuge.”

Unbeknownst to both Felix and Blood, the city-states of Sutherland had already come together in an alliance that transcended advantage in order to stand against the unprecedented threat of the undead. More than a few historians would later argue that if Felix had had this information, it would have changed the course of history.

“That makes sense to me,” Blood said. “There’s a lot I don’t know about that country, but I believe your fears are justified. All the same, we in Fernest have our own share of uncertainties. For one thing, the Royal Army lost two key commanders at once in a recent battle with the undead. Given you requested an audience with me, you must know that. I’ll make no secret of it—the Kingdom of Fernest has one foot in the grave. Despite that, you didn’t go to the United City-States of Sutherland, you came to us. Why?” Blood paused meaningfully, then said, “Because we have Olivia Valedstorm. Right?”

“What makes you think that?”

Blood grinned. “Let’s call it life experience.”

Not one for stiff formality, is he? Felix thought, feeling a certain liking for

Blood.

“I don’t deny it,” he admitted. “By the way, I mentioned earlier that Darmés has some shadowy power, but he isn’t a mage. That was my principal reason.”

Blood, who was in the middle of raising his cup to his mouth, stopped. His eyes rose to regard Felix.

“You don’t say? I don’t know of anyone except mages who’d be able to control the dead. But what does that have to do with Olivia?”

“I can’t say for sure as I haven’t asked her, but I think it highly likely that she understands the nature of Darmés’s powers.”

Blood crossed his legs and refolded his arms, then made a low noise in his throat. “A man of your caliber wouldn’t make such a crucial decision based only on chance. You must have solid grounds to believe it.”

Felix nodded, then explained his reasoning. Blood did not look especially happy to hear it.

“In order to defeat Darmés,” Felix concluded, “I need her knowledge.”

“Knowledge, huh...” Blood muttered. “Well, I’ll have both of you tell me more about that later. The important thing now is whether you’re prepared to fight with us against the imperial army. Though you’re no fool, General, so I don’t expect you to say you want protection but won’t fight against your former home.”

“I am prepared for that, of course,” Felix said at once, giving Blood a sharp look.

Blood bowed his head low. “It was a stupid question.”

“Please, raise your head. By your leave, however, I would like to conduct negotiations so that we may avoid pointless bloodshed. I am not the only one whose loyalties remain with Emperor Ramza. If they learn the truth, they may join us.”

“The more allies we have, the better,” Blood said. “I’ll leave that to you.”

“I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to hear me out so quickly.” Even as he spoke, Felix’s mind was already racing ahead to the next stage.

In the early stages of the battle, Sutherland's armies met with great success. But as the days went by, the shadows crept ever closer. In addition to the unforeseen problem posed by the mountain of corpses, the ghouls had unlimited reserves of physical strength—an advantage Sutherland's armies could not match. While they had known that going in, the reality of fighting day and night without rest was taking a greater toll than expected. On top of that, the soldiers the ghouls killed turned into monsters themselves. The experience of being attacked by their former comrades put extraordinary mental strain on the troops.

Main Command of the Sutherland Army

"Things are not looking good," Lion said as he sat down. Half of those present frowned, while the other half raised their eyebrows.

Leisenheimer, who had shown impressive leadership in the first block, spoke up for the latter group.

"It's true we still don't have a solution for our problem, but intelligence tells me we've exterminated more than half the ghouls. The soldiers on the front lines have gotten their 'experience' too. As far as I can tell, it's fair to say things are going well."

By "experience," Leisenheimer meant actually trying out their spears on the ghouls. Observing the monsters from afar and actually fighting them were two very different things. Lion wanted to strengthen his forces by having all the soldiers go head-to-head with them.

"For now, we still have enough forces to allow them to rest, but it won't necessarily stay that way. While we waste more strength with every action, our foe has no such concerns. Fatigue—it's not noticeable so long as we have the upper hand, but as soon as things begin to go against us, we won't be able to ignore it. If the battle drags on for too long, a small advantage in numbers can easily flip the other way. I need you to understand that this is the enemy we face."

Apparently, Leisenheimer was unsatisfied with Lion's explanation. His mouth

twisted. “I see your point, but as I just said, we’ve taken out more than half of them—and in only *ten days* of fighting. By my reckoning, even taking fatigue into the equation, we’ll have exterminated all of them within a month. The responsibility of being supreme commander must be weighing on you, Lord Lion. You’re getting cautious.” There was a hint of a smile on Leisenheimer’s face. The lord of the Fifth City took the opportunity to voice his agreement. Both, it seemed, were too cocksure to bother with the uncertainties that, by rights, demanded consideration.

Or maybe those haven’t even occurred to them, Lion mused. *That would explain the idiotically sunny outlook.*

Julius, who stood at his side, gave a tiny shake of his head. Lion suppressed a sigh, then turned to Shaola, who had been quiet since the start of the war council. They ought to listen if it came from one who was their elder.

“Do you agree, Lord Shaola?”

Shaola, without raising his eyes from the table, said ponderously, “You are forgetting something important, Lord Leisenheimer.”

“And what might that be?” There was a dangerous note in Leisenheimer’s voice. Shaola fixed him with a piercing gaze.

“Reinforcements.”

Leisenheimer let out an inarticulate groan and drew back as though shrinking away from Shaola. Despite his advanced years, Shaola was still the true warrior who had built a nation by dint of his spear. He was in a league apart from the others.

“Even setting that aside, this is an enemy that defies all common sense. There is no telling whether what we see now is all there is. I have no idea how Darmés raised his army, nor have I seen the land of the dead, but I do know this: the dead far outnumber the living.”

With this, Shaola hit at the heart of the matter. Leisenheimer and the others who shared his sunny outlook were all left speechless.

“You think there will be reinforcements, my lord?” asked the general from the Thirteenth City of Leddeheim, the blood draining from his face. Shaola gave a

firm nod of affirmation, then looked at Julius.

“What is the death toll?”

Julius looked down at the documents in his hands. “Approximately two thousand as of yesterday.”

“How many of those came back?”

“Perhaps a third.”

“So we have around six hundred new enemies baying for our blood. And undead or not, these are soldiers who had been fighting alongside us. Imagine the anguish of the survivors who must now turn their spears on their former comrades. Though I assume all of this factors into the supreme commander’s concerns.”

“B-But we made sure the troops knew the dead would come back,” Leisenheimer spluttered, still refusing to back down. Shaola gave him a stern look.

“The mind may understand while the heart does not. Have you already forgotten the confusion that ensued before the battle began, Lord Leisenheimer?”

Leisenheimer gave a sort of grunt and then, like a different man entirely, he fell silent. Even the lord of the Fifth City, who had overtly supported Leisenheimer, proceeded to fold his arms tightly, turn his eyes down, and act like this had nothing to do with him.

Lion thanked Shaola, then coughed once. “The plan remains the same. Assume reinforcements will come and act accordingly. In addition—”

He was about to begin an explanation of how they would use the armored mage cannon when a soldier interrupted them, tripping over his own feet as he burst into the room. Naturally, all eyes turned to look at him.

“What happened?” Lion asked, but the soldier seemed unable to speak. He only pointed frantically outside the tent.

“Someone—” Before Lion could finish, Julius offered the soldier a canteen of water. He drank it down in a single gulp.

“Th...Thank...you...”

“Can you speak?” Julius asked. The soldier’s breath was ragged, but he nodded.

“Y-Yes, ser. I...the ghouls...” He was positively incoherent. A harsh note came into Lion’s voice as he questioned the man again.

“What are you trying to say?” Just then, the commotion from outside suddenly grew louder. Lion didn’t bother with further questions; he rushed out of the tent. Outside, the soldiers were shouting and crying out, all their gazes fixed on a single point. Lion immediately understood why. The sight rendered him speechless.

The bulk of the creature before them was many times greater than any human. It was covered in golden fur and from its forehead protruded a single, vicious white horn. Roaring in every direction with a voice as black as thunder, it easily scaled the earthen fortifications that were supposed to be their line between life and death, and was now on an unopposed killing spree.

“I believe that is the class two dangerous beast known as a unicorn,” Julius said calmly.

“It is, is it...?”

It wasn’t every day that one encountered a dangerous beast—especially not one of the higher-class ones. Most of them lived deep in forests and mountains, while humans made their settlements on open plains. It wasn’t that they had arranged things that way; both simply inhabited the environment best suited to their survival.

The unicorn lashed out in all directions with its powerful claws, tearing through the soldiers’ flesh like paper. It trampled those who tried to flee, ripping heads from their bodies with its teeth then serenading them with the sound of crunching bones as it chewed. Brain matter trickled from between its chipped fangs. The soldiers embroiled in the chaos ran in every direction, all discipline abandoned. Almost all of the soldiers posted to the ramparts tumbled from the fortifications to become food for the ghouls waiting below.

As Lion cursed, Julius, spyglass in one hand, said casually, “That unicorn

appears to be akin to the ghouls.”

“It’s *what?!* ” Lion stared at Julius, who kept his spyglass pointed at the unicorn.

“Its neck should not be bent at that angle. It is probably broken, and as far as I am aware, beasts, like humans, cannot survive with a broken neck.”

Lion pointed his spyglass in the same direction. “It is definitely broken,” he said at length. “So Darmés can raise dangerous beasts from the dead as well as humans.”

The whole of Lion’s strategy was predicated on the assumption that they would only be fighting *human* corpses. Dangerous beasts had not entered into his calculations.

Still, I might have guessed. A mistake on my part...

The others who had followed him out of the tent just stood there, stunned.

“Get Heaven here. *Now.*” A short while later, Heaven appeared. Lion showed her the situation, then asked, “Can the armored mage cannon stop that?”

Heaven shook her head. “No way. The armored mage cannon is an area weapon. Even if I could reduce its power, it’s not made for precision shooting. And even if I *could*—” Heaven looked directly at the center of the carnage. “Well, when it moves like that...” She gave a shrug of defeat. The unicorn was leaping from fortification to fortification to attack the soldiers. Every now and then there was a scream as it threw something that had once been part of a person into the air. The positions from which they could mount a counterattack were severely limited, and a step out of place meant one of two fates—a gruesome death, or being denied even that by being transformed into a ghoul.

“Abandon the second block,” Lion said. No one made any objections.

Stepping forward, Julius said, “Supreme Commander, do I have your leave to order supporting volleys from the longbows in order to expedite the retreat?”

“Permission granted.”

“Ser!”

Lion turned back to Heaven. “Blast the second block to hell as soon as the

retreat is complete.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You got it!”

All of them jumped into action to carry out Lion’s orders. Soon after, the sound of a horn rang out across the battlefield for the second time. That was the signal to retreat.

“Fall back to the third block!”

“Move it, move it!”

The commanders’ shouts could be heard from all directions. In contrast to the retreat from the first block, the retreat from the second—now a hunting ground for the ghouls—was a desperate struggle. The bridges that connected the fortifications were sturdy, but it was only natural that they would collapse when forced to bear a greater load than what they had been built for. Bridges all over the place snapped, sending crowds of soldiers plummeting down.

“Aaaaaagh!”

“H-Heeelp...!” There was no one there to hear their cries as they were dragged into the abyss.

The retreat to the third block was far from smooth, but the reason they had any hope at all was thanks in large part to Leisenheimer’s courageous efforts.

“You’re the last ones! Move it!”

“Y-Yes, ser!”

Leisenheimer had seen the last group off toward the gate and was about to follow when he became aware of a great shadow that filled the sky above him. By the time he realized, it was too late.

“There I go, screwing things up at the last...” He looked down to assess the situation. His right leg had been completely crushed by the unicorn’s forepaw. The spasm of pain that racked his body followed close behind.

“Lord Leisenheimer!”

“Get the damn gate shut!”

“But ser!”

“Do it!!!” He felt them hesitate, but then came the sound of the gate closing.

Shilly-shallying fools... he thought. Anyway.

He turned to the unicorn as it looked down at him, then roared, “I’ve had enough of you fouling this place up with your damn stink! You died once, so stay dead!”

The only response he got was a mouthful of dirty yellow drool that dripped from the unicorn’s mouth to ooze all over him as numbness washed over his body.

“Urgh! That’s disgusting!” He finally remembered the longspear in his right hand. Still in a disadvantageous position, he stabbed out hard, but found himself hit by a rush of wind as, for a moment, his vision went black. The next thing he saw was his arm flying through the air, still gripping the spear.

That’s my part over. The rest is up to you, you infuriating bastard.

The shadow over his eyes grew darker. Leisenheimer’s booming laughter continued right up to the moment he was crushed in the unicorn’s jaws.

“The retreat from the second block is complete. Lord Leisenheimer, who was commanding from the front line, has failed to return,” Julius said, his face grave.

“That idiot. He could have commanded from the rear, but no...”

“I’m sure Lord Leisenheimer had his own reasons for taking the lead.”

“Doesn’t make him any less of an idiot,” Lion said dismissively. He then dispatched orders for Heaven to fire. The light that surged out of the mage cannon engulfed the second block, reducing even the so-called ruler of the land to dust. It, along with the ghouls, was annihilated.

That should buy us time to regroup. Lion had just let out a sigh of relief when the next piece of bad news arrived.

“The armored mage cannon has sustained major damage! Lady Heaven is badly wounded!”

Lion, unable to so much as respond, let his folded arms drop to hang limp at his sides.

III

Main Command of the Winged Crusaders

Amelia returned slumped over her horse’s back, her face drawn with exhaustion. Lara had never seen her so drained. With a mirthless smile, she thought, *She really overdid it.*

“I’m sorry, Blessed Wing. A tenth was all I could manage...” Amelia said as, still mounted, she passed Lara at a walk.

Lara did not shift her gaze from directly ahead, but said, “You did well.” Amelia acknowledged this with a small nod, then drew back behind the front line, flanked by guardians. Amelia’s withdrawal meant the battle was moving to the second stage—to the first line of defense.

The Winged Crusaders’ First Line of Defense

The horde of the undead came into view of the first line of defense, raising a dreadful clamor as they shambled forward in a chaotic mockery of military ranks.

“Prepare for the first engagement!”

“Disengage fail-safes!”

Commanders rattled off orders at lightning speed. Historia, who was in command on the first line, raised the banner of the Winged Crusaders in her hand then kicked her horse to gallop up and down the ranks of guardians.

“Now is the hour!” she cried in a ringing voice as she held the banner high. “Those untouched by the light of wisdom shall face our holy wrath! The empire, after turning to heresy in their pursuit for domination, have proved themselves no better than barbarians, and I, Historia Stampede, do swear—no barbarian shall ever best the mighty Winged Crusaders!”

The guardians responded with a roar that shook the heavens.

The owls who observed the battlefield confirmed that the undead horde had penetrated the first defensive line.

“The undead have arrived at the first line!” cried a hundred-wing, walking up to Historia. “Everything is ready.”

Historia nodded, then drew her sword and held it out toward the advancing corpses. “Loose!”

At her command, the multistage ballistae all came to life to release a volley of iron bolts made from bundles of thin rods. The corpses caught in their path were sent flying, colliding messily with the others behind them. The battle ended in a sweeping victory for the Winged Crusaders.

“We’re off to a good start.”

“Indeed, ser! It seems this horde of the undead isn’t all that after all,” replied the commander flippantly.

Historia leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Well, if they’re not *all that*, you’d better not lose.”

“Y-Yes, ser!”

Soon after, Historia moved to higher ground where she had a view of the whole battle. *Gotta say, I never thought I’d find myself fighting dead people...*

The scene before her defied belief, and that was putting it mildly. It was too absurd to even pass as the stuff of fairy tales. Yet there could be no doubt. This was reality.

The horde of the undead, like a dog that only knew one trick, marched relentlessly forward. Now, they were nothing more than a target. There were so many it wasn’t even necessary to aim. Historia came up with a theory. Unless the undead came within a certain distance—in other words, unless she and the Winged Crusaders approached them—they would not attack. *But no, that’d be way too convenient...*

Even with the level of intelligence gathered by the owls, what the undead actually were remained shrouded in mystery. Coming up with a plan based on

what she *wanted* to read into her observations could be fatal. The surest method would be to get it from the mouth of Darmés himself, as the person they believed to be controlling the undead, but of course if that were possible none of this would have been necessary in the first place.

Historia's attention fixed on one of the multistage ballistae. *Lara really thought of everything, as usual.*

It had been decided that, due to the size of the ballistae, each was to be operated by five guardians. All of them carried out their assigned roles with attention to every detail, cutting out all possible inefficiencies to move as quickly and as little as possible. They had the refinement of a work of art.

Having thwarted the undead's advance, the Winged Crusaders overran them. But to continue the attack, they needed the iron bolts, of which their supply was limited—not least because they had been specially made. Two hours after the fighting commenced, Historia got word that they were out of bolts, and so as planned, she gave the order to fall back to the second line of defense. So far, they had sustained no losses. She too kicked her horse to gallop back—but then she yanked on her reins.

I'm being watched. The sense of the gaze on her made her skin crawl. She looked over at a twisted outcrop of rock and glimpsed what appeared to be a person. Her spyglass revealed a woman in black armor standing there without any apparent purpose.

Who is that...? After a while, the woman turned and disappeared out of sight. *I've got a bad feeling about this.* Historia galloped away as though she could leave her fears behind her. The third stage of the battle had arrived already. At long last, the fighting would move to the second line of defense, where the Winged Crusaders' main force waited...

The hunger of life and the echoes of death reverberated across the second line of defense. There, in the twisted world of the front line, the Winged Crusaders fought back against the vastly superior number of undead with equally vast reserves of spirit. Lara, with a raiding unit of a thousand elite soldiers behind her, joined the battle there together with Historia.

“Lara, you’re getting too far ahead!” Historia scolded. She wielded Azulune, the twin blades bequeathed to her by Sofitia, as though they were extensions of her own arms. Lara, keeping the advancing undead in front of her at bay, raised her left hand toward Historia. The Holy Adders mage circle tattooed there shone green, then loosed an invisible blade of wind. It raced through the air and sliced a corpse which was leaping at Historia out of her blind spot clean in half down the middle. It crumpled to the ground.

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“I didn’t!” Without a trace of fear, Historia moved right into close combat with the undead, stabbing, dodging, then stabbing again. It would have been imperceptible to an amateur, but her simple movements concealed incredible skill. Where Historia passed, she left corpses strewn in her wake, all of them stabbed precisely through their right chests. Fueled by her ferocious talent, the movement of her blades only grew keener the more undead she cut down.

“Impressive as ever, Twin Blade Historia.”

Historia, slashing off a hand that came grasping at her side, shouted, “Come on! I told you to *stop calling me that!*” She twisted halfway around and thrust out to land a fatal blow on an approaching corpse. The battle between the living and the dead raged on unabated...

“Carlo! For the love of Strecia, come to your senses!” A guardian scrambled back on his backside, pleading uselessly with what had once also been a guardian before its throat had been ripped out. Lara quickly kicked the corpse aside, then yanked the guardian, whose teeth were chattering, to his feet.

“Are you a Winged Crusader or not? Get a hold of yourself!” she snapped. But the man only shook his head. With one eye on the dead guardian that was shuffling toward them, she asked, “Someone you know?”

“Y-Yes, Blessed Wing. A friend...”

Lara released him, then picked up his fallen sword and forced it into his hand. “Then let it be your blade that ends him. Your friend did not want this fate—this is how you show him mercy.”

“I-I understand...” Tears streamed down the guardian’s cheeks, but with Lara watching on, he put his friend to rest. Even though he had needed her support, he had done the deed himself, and Lara would never have taken that away from him.

“Good. You did well.” She laid her hand on the guardian’s head as he wiped away his tears and smiled.

“Ahh, classic Lara,” Historia said cheerfully from behind her. Lara plunged forward into the new wave of undead before her.

IV

The job of the raiding unit was to draw the attention of the undead. They actively intervened with the units where the undead focused their attacks to break up their targets. The plan was based on Amelia and Historia’s theory about the undead, and so far, nothing had happened to contradict them.

It was the middle of the night. The raiding unit had fallen back to take a momentary respite from their grueling work on the front line. As lightning flashed in the distance and ominous dark clouds began to roll across the battlefield, a new report arrived.

“Senior Hundred-Wing Edinburgh’s camp is being overwhelmed by a large contingent of undead.”

“Another place we don’t want them...” Lara looked down at the deployment map and cursed under her breath. Edinburgh’s location served as a relay point between the various camps. They could not afford to lose it.

“Your orders, ser?”

“What else? We go and break them up.” Lara gave her orders, and the raiding unit sprang into action. But they had scarcely set off when something prickled at Lara’s senses. She pulled her horse around.

“What’s up?” Historia called after her. Instead of answering, Lara said, “Can you handle things here?” Historia frowned. She looked over at what Lara was staring at, then choked.

“Um, are you sure about this?”

“This is hardly the first time. It’ll be fine.”

“You could show a bit more concern...”

Historia looked grave, but Lara only said brightly, “I’m counting on you!”

Historia let out a sigh so heavy it seemed to drop like a stone, then turned to the soldiers who had been watching their exchange with bemusement and said sharply, “Blessed Wing Lara will be leaving us temporarily! I am in command in her absence! Are we clear? Then follow me!”

Without waiting for the hesitating guardians to reply, Historia galloped off as fast as her horse would carry her. Lara, left alone, turned away from the thunder of retreating hoofbeats, then dismounted and drew her sword. A bolt of lightning shredded the air between the earth and the dark clouds, illuminating a hulking shape in front of her. It was an insectoid dangerous beast. The appearance of any dangerous beast on a battlefield was unprecedented—for it to be an insectoid beggared belief. If any creature like this had ever shown itself in the human world before, no records of it existed. This was extremely abnormal.

Lara readied her wind blade so that she could release it at any moment and observed the creature. It was reminiscent of an ant in shape, though not at all in size. Its abdomen alone was the size of a small house and covered in spines like a porcupine. Three long legs protruded from each side of its thorax, which was black with red and yellow spots. Each ended in a claw that brought to mind a death god’s scythe. But there was something wrong with it. One of the pair of antennae that grew from its head was missing, and a white liquid that seemed to be its blood dripped from one of its great, many-faceted eyes. Lara’s gaze finally came to rest on the black blade that protruded from that eye.

Could it be...? She remembered what Historia had told her about the woman she had seen, but there was no time to consider how that pertained to the creature in front of her. The insectoid roved about with its remaining antenna as it slowly opened and closed its enormous mandibles. Every time, there was a scraping sound like a sword being sharpened.

Lara didn’t relax her fighting stance, but instead of treating her as prey as she

had expected, the insectoid passed right by her. It was as though it hadn't even seen her. Instead, it continued along exactly the same course as the raiding unit.

"No, you don't!" Lara, wreathed in a gust of her own making, leaped in front of the creature. Not even pausing to breathe, she released a storm of wind blades at it. Lara's invisible blades could cut through steel, but the insectoid only paused, momentarily confused, before setting off again as though nothing had happened.

Tough, huh? In that case... Lara swung around to the insectoid's left side, then, without hesitation, she dived beneath it. She cloaked her sword in wind, then slashed at where the creature's legs met its body. There was a high sound like a shriek, and the blade shattered. The insectoid paid her attack no attention.

Lara's eyes turned cold, and her breathing stilled. She tossed aside her broken blade, then poured a great flood of mana into her Holy Adders mage circle. In her mind, she envisioned a sphere of wind. She filled it with countless wind blades shaped like threads, then, even as those threads raged within it, she compressed the sphere down to the size of a fist and sealed it. Now, she had a completed Wind Orb.

It shredded through the unprotected base of the insectoid's leg. Lara did the same to all three right legs—then she felt an oppressive sense of death from behind her. In an instant, she was running, creating a gust of wind at her back that accelerated her forward. By keeping her body close to the ground, she was able to avoid the scythe by a hair's breadth. Or so she thought.

I wasn't quite fast enough... She looked down to find a gaping tear in her right side. When she touched it, her fingers came away bloody. *Just how hardy is this thing?*

Even after a direct hit from her Wind Orbs, the creature's legs were still connected. Lara couldn't help but be amazed. Even so, the white blood that bubbled up from its myriad wounds every time it moved proved she had definitely left a mark.

But it's a far cry from a killing blow. Lara licked the blood from her fingertips.

The insectoid's compound eye finally turned on her, and it gnashed its mandibles.

“Finally deigned to look at me, huh?” Now that it had noticed her, she wouldn't find it so easy to get close to it. Lara released the clasp on her scabbard, then drew forth her immaculately shining sacred blade. This blade was handed down from one head of the Crystal family to the next. It was said that a god of war had bestowed it upon her ancestor in an age remembered only in myth, but Lara believed that was no more than an old wives' tale. Of her sacred blade, she knew one thing and one thing only. When she attuned her mana to it, it could cut through black glass—the hardest material known to man—as easily as paper.

But I wish I didn't have to use it on a bug. The insectoid charged at her with a speed that belied its wounds, leaving deep gouges in the earth behind it. As soon as it noticed her, Lara quietly placed a pressure-sensitive Wind Orb on the ground. Her previous attacks had shown that it would do some degree of damage. But the insectoid suddenly slowed down, then began to circle around to the left to avoid her, spraying white blood everywhere as it went.

It's obviously wary of a trap. Can it see? Or did it sense it? Either way, there was no reason to be surprised. Human knowledge of dangerous beasts was paltry at best—let alone this thing...

Lara set off the Wind Orbs she'd set up in sequence. The insectoid, which had stopped, turned its antenna toward the wind blades that tore through the ground. Its attention was off her. Lara saw the chance and struck. She leaped up on a gust of wind, rising higher and higher. Then, just as she reached a state of weightlessness, the sky lit up with an eerily purple flash of lightning, and great drops of rain began to fall.

The insectoid, losing sight of her, waved its antenna around, then set off again, following the path of the raiding unit.

I'm not letting you go. Lara shifted her sacred blade to her other hand, then plummeted back to earth with the torrential rain pelting her back. The blade seared with divine light, leaving behind a trail of wind as it sliced through the insectoid's carapace before sliding easily into the depths of its thorax. A few

moments later, small cracks appeared around the sacred blade. The whole creature seemed to ripple for a moment. Then it burst into pieces.

Lara landed back on the ground, then, turning away from the carcass, said calmly, “May the blessings of Strecia be upon you.”

V

The latest report from the owls was more than enough to shock Sofitia’s seraphic guard. The captain stepped forward to kneel before her.

“My Seraph, I ask permission to expand the range of our scouts.”

“As you see fit,” Sofitia said with a nod.

“Thank you!” The captain issued orders to the seraphic guard, who galloped off each in a different direction.

Sofitia turned back to the owl, then said, “How severe were Blessed Wing Lara’s injuries?”

“She says they will not impede her ability to command.”

“Did she appear to *you* to be unimpeded?”

It was very possible that Lara, unwilling to fall back, was downplaying the extent of her injuries—all the more so because the fate of Mekia rested on this battle.

The owl seemed to think for a moment before replying. “She appeared fine to me.” Nothing in their tone or words suggested any uneasiness. Sofitia let out a private breath of relief.

“Tell Blessed Wing Lara that she is to take care of herself.”

“Yes, My Seraph!” the owl said, then set off at a run. All that remained was a piece of the dangerous beast that had been brought as evidence. Dolf knelt before it, ran his fingertips over it, then made a face.

“Undead dangerous beasts, is it...?” he muttered. “More trouble keeps showing up.”

“I believe this was the dangerous beast known as a crustaceasect.”

“You know what it is, My Seraph?!”

“Only what little I have read, but yes. If my memory serves, insectoid dangerous beasts have never before been seen in inhabited lands, and therefore the threat they pose is undetermined. But if Blessed Wing Lara was forced to draw her sacred blade, it must be a class two dangerous beast, at a conservative estimate. Of course, that is not the pertinent issue.”

Dolf nodded, his face hard. From the woman in black armor Historia had seen, to the undead crustaceasect that had suddenly appeared in human lands, to the black sword embedded deep in its eye—Darmés was the key that linked them all together.

It appears that I continue to underestimate him. This time, there had only been one, and it had been quickly dispatched by Lara, so the damage had been minimal. But what if two appeared at once, or three? Sofitia wracked her brain, but was unable to come up with anything better than the most haphazard response. This frustrated her immensely.

“I can think of no effective way to counter them at this time,” she said. “Truly, I am unfit to stand before you as your seraph.”

“We all know how things stand,” Dolf protested heatedly. “No one would dream of thinking you unfit, My Seraph.” The seraphic guard all nodded in agreement.

“So long as I’m at your side, O Holy Seraph, no one’s gonna lay a finger on you! All that’ll be left is blood on my blade by the time I’m through with them!” This inappropriately cheery outburst came from Angelica.

Dolf frowned disapprovingly. “It’s a given that we will protect the seraph. We are talking about the bigger picture at present.”

“Big picture, little picture—either way, I’ve got one job and one job only,” Angelica drawled, putting her hands behind her head. Sofitia couldn’t help but smile. It was times like this that she felt grateful for Angelica’s bright spirits.

After fifteen days of battle, the Winged Crusaders exterminated the last of the undead. Despite Sofitia’s fears, no further dangerous beasts appeared, and

she received word that while another undead force had attempted to lay siege to Elsphere, it had been tidily dispatched thanks to the efforts of Johann and the garrison.

“Move out!” At Lara’s command, the Winged Crusaders set off marching back to the holy city. Pride was written plain upon the faces of all the guardians. Three days later, their triumphant return was greeted by a storm of cheers from the common folk. And yet Sofitia, it was said, did not smile once.

Chapter Thirteen: The Triple Alliance

I

Imperial Army, Oscar's Workroom at Kier Fortress

Major General Oscar Remnand was troubled—in fact, he was positively anguished. His troubles, large and small, were many, but the one that plagued him now was the worst of the lot.

What am I to do...?

The source of this particular trouble was a freshly arrived letter that lay in front of him. It was addressed to his immediate superior, Rosenmarie von Berlietta, and the sender was none other than an open traitor to the empire who had once been counted among the Three Generals—Felix von Sieger. The well-formed hand on the outside was unmistakably Felix's own, and a soldier had come in secret on his orders to deliver it. Oscar didn't need to open it to guess at the contents.

He and his ilk are rebels. No one could blame me if I threw it on the fire. And even if word did get back to Her Ladyship, I could come up with some explanation.

His eyes drifted to the red flames flickering in the hearth. A junior officer came in bearing tea, eyeing Oscar dubiously as he paced between his desk and the fireplace. But Oscar was so caught up in the letter that he did not even notice. In the end, Oscar did not destroy the letter. The main reason was that he still did not fully understand the string of events that had begun with the sudden change of emperor, but he also observed with a touch of masochism that deep down he felt that something wasn't right about the current state of things.

Her Ladyship is clear-minded. She will know what to do. With that, he set off from his workroom, but his steps were as heavy as if he had iron shackles around his legs.

Rosenmarie's Workroom

The first thing Oscar saw when he opened the door was Rosenmarie in a very un-commander-like posture. Her expression was lazy, and she leaned back in her chair with both legs thrown up on her desk. He glanced at both ends of her desk and saw that the stacks of papers were untouched from two days earlier.

Rosenmarie didn't look at him as she said, "Even my chief of staff has more time on his hands than he knows what to do with, huh? You have my permission to sleep on the sofa there—just this once, mind."

"We march the day after tomorrow. I am not at liberty to nap."

They had an imperial order to exterminate the Azure Knights. In order to carry it out as quickly as possible, the Crimson and Helios Knights were rushing to prepare to march. As chief of staff, Oscar had a mountain of things to attend to.

"Now that you mention it, so we do," Rosenmarie said. She sounded completely disinterested. Oscar hesitated over whether to give her the letter, but then he steeled himself. He placed it on an empty patch of desk.

"For you, my lady." He did not say who it was from—perhaps an unconscious sign of his desire to avoid the subject.

Rosenmarie didn't even glance at the letter as she said animatedly, "What timing! It's like he can read our every move."

"I haven't yet told you who it is from..."

"Yes, but I figure there's only person it can be who'd make you sweat like that, Oscar." Rosenmarie tipped back in her chair far enough that it looked like she would topple over, then brought her legs off the desk and crossed them. She cut a strangely striking figure.

"Did you anticipate something like this, my lady?"

Rosenmarie, picking up the letter, said, "Well, you know. I thought there'd be some attempt at a liaison. He's not the sort to just walk away after kicking up a huge stink like this. I mean, he's so sincere it's painful." She hummed to herself as she broke the seal. Oscar watched, feeling like a prisoner being led to the gallows. Before his eyes, her expression grew sharp.

“May I ask what it says?” he asked, unable to contain himself. Rosenmarie thrust half of the letter out for him to see for himself.

Oscar took the letter, and read through it hungrily. When he finished, he spluttered, “Wh-What does—?!”

Rosenmarie’s face snapped up. There was a bewitching gleam in her eyes. “It means that His Imperial Highness Emperor Darmés has had us dancing to his tune this whole time. Did you ever hear of such a pack of idiots? You can’t even laugh.”

“My lady, do you seriously lend credence to this cock-and-bull story about Emperor Ramza being manipulated by Emperor Darmés?!”

Rosenmarie gave him a curious look. “Let me ask you: what reason do you have not to believe it?”

“Reason? I don’t...” Oscar spluttered. “It’s so removed from reality.”

“You think so, do you? What about those imperial soldiers who interfered with my fun then? Did they fit right in with reality?”

“Well...”

“It defies all common sense, but there’s truth in there. So I, for one, believe it,” Rosenmarie said with a look of absolute confidence. But Oscar was not so easily convinced.

“How can you be so sure of its truth?”

“He doesn’t lie.”

Oscar gaped at her. But everyone who knew Felix knew him to be a man of integrity and so, unable to argue, Oscar settled for avoiding the question by turning back to the letter.

“Why did Lord Felix choose Fernest of all places to seek refuge?” he found himself asking. “They are our greatest enemy...”

Rosenmarie obliged him by answering. “He went to them *because* they’re our greatest enemy. They suit his needs a damn sight better than any no-name nation.”

“I suppose there’s a certain logic to that, but to go to Fernest for that reason alone...” Oscar shook his head. “A foot out of place, and he would find himself in a very sticky situation.”

“Felix will have decided it was worth doing anyway,” Rosenmarie said, adding a little derisively, “He’s got nerves of *steel*, that one.”

Oscar, disconcerted by the sultry smile on Rosenmarie’s lips, nonetheless went on, “Lord Felix appears to want to reinstate Emperor Ramza, but I can’t imagine Fernest allowing that.”

“The addition of Emperor Darmés’s assistance has finally driven the Royal Army into a corner. Once they learn that Emperor Ramza never wanted this war in the first place, who’s to say they won’t cooperate with Felix?” Rosenmarie rested her cheek in her hand then, looking away from Oscar, added a touch sarcastically, “Of course, we cannot ignore the harsh nature of reality. No matter how much aid the Azure Knights may offer them.”

Oscar studiously avoided making any comment. He remembered the monstrous horde that had swarmed the Royal Army and feasted upon the flesh of the soldiers. Even now, the image was seared into his mind, fouler and more repulsive than any other battle he had known. Death to those creatures seemed like no more than a game. The Azure Knights might have been the empire’s mightiest but the idea that even they would meet the same fate seemed less foolish than inevitable.

“He also seems to be asking *you* for your support, my lady. How do you mean to answer him?” Oscar endeavored to keep his expression neutral, but privately, he felt like he was opening a forbidden door. Felix’s request to Rosenmarie had been the only item in a letter full of surprises that he had expected. Depending on how she responded, they could well end up repeating Felix’s mistake.

Rosenmarie went over to the window and flung it open. A cool breeze gently flowed into the room, sweeping a few documents off her desk into the air.

“...must have...”

Her voice was so quiet he couldn’t catch what she’d said. “What was that?”

Rosenmarie turned around. Instead of answering, she held out the second page of the letter with an unusually grave look on her face. Oscar took it dubiously, read through it, then gasped.

“It seems your instincts were right, Oscar,” Rosenmarie said. She said it comfortingly, but Oscar barely heard her. He had never expected to learn the truth like this. He began to shake.

Lord Gladden... He remembered the last time he had seen the marshal. He had known something was wrong, even then. Ever since, he had regretted not following him, no matter how badly he might have been reprimanded for it.

“What drove Emperor Darmés to do such a thing to Lord Gladden...?”

“He probably uncovered a secret about Darmés or something of that nature. It’s all beyond what I can imagine, though.”

“Here I am, blithely going on with my life without even realizing that my superior officer was murdered. This is insanity.” Yet somehow, no anger rose in him toward Darmés, who had done the deed. He only felt a bottomless expanse of self-loathing.

“Neither of us expected it, but now we know the truth,” Rosenmarie said. “But that’s all in the past. We won’t get anywhere by looking back. There’s nothing new to be found there. Oscar, what do *you* want to do?”

Revenge for Gladden. The words rose to his lips, but he choked them back. The one against whom he wanted revenge was the ruler of the empire, so far above him that in a sense, he was even more detached from the reality Oscar inhabited than the ghouls. And more importantly even than that—he had his pride as an imperial soldier.

Oscar knelt before Rosenmarie, then said, “I am your chief of staff. My duty is to serve you, my lady, and to show my loyalty to the empire. My own interests do not enter into it.”

Rosenmarie smiled at this. “That was a model answer,” she said, then ordered him to summon her main commanders.

“My lady...”

“Oscar, you know me. I’m as far from the model answer as a person can get.” Clenching her fist tight, she looked down, a ruthless smile on her lips. Oscar could feel in his bones that the situation was about to go from bad to far, far worse.

II

The Royal Army, Galia Fortress

Olivia called everyone important to gather in the meeting room. From what Claudia had heard beforehand, there would be five people aside from herself: Blood, Lise, Luke, Evanson, and Ellis. When she entered the room, however, she came face-to-face with the imperial traitor Felix, and Clarice, the librarian who had helped them find a book about the Valedstorms at the Royal Library. She also spotted a few other Azure Knights. Olivia was the last to arrive. From the way she cocked her head at the sight of Clarice and Felix, she knew as little about the situation as Claudia.

The Fernest party sat along the left side of the table, while the Azure Knights sat down on the right. Olivia took the seat at the head, then bowed low to them all.

“Thanks for coming today. I know you’ve all got a lot going on.”

Everyone who knew Olivia well was visibly nonplussed—Claudia among them. Olivia looked curiously around the table. “Did I say something weird?”

Blood gave a few forced coughs. “I think they’re probably surprised to learn you know how to start a meeting properly, Liv,” he said, then added, barely audibly, “I know I am.”

“Really?” Olivia turned to the three Crawford siblings. They looked away in perfect unison. “Um, anyway,” she went on, “to get straight to the point, I’m here to take down Darmés and Xenia, who’s controlling him. That’ll end the war.”

Silence fell over the meeting room at this.

“Lieutenant General,” Luke eventually said, “this is all so abrupt that I’m not really sure what you’re talking about...” At this, everyone apart from Olivia

automatically turned to look at Felix. Blood had already made it publicly known the circumstances that had led Felix to seek refuge with Fernest. They all understood that Darmés was the true instigator of the war, but Claudia had never heard of this “Xenia” who was supposed to be controlling him.

Does she have information she hasn’t revealed to us yet? She stared at Olivia, imploring her to continue.

“Huh? But I’m pretty sure I used all the right words,” Olivia said. “Maybe the way I said it was off...” She folded her arms and began to make thoughtful noises. Claudia took it upon herself to ask the question they all had.

“Could you start by telling us who Xenia is?”

“Huh? Xenia’s a god of death,” Olivia replied, looking incredulous that she even had to ask. It made Claudia feel as though she had somehow erred in bringing it up. The others in the same position as herself exchanged inquisitive glances. Claudia noted with suspicion that for some reason Felix was nodding to the empty chair beside him.

“General,” she went on, “you’ve spoken of the god of death Z, who raised you. Is this Xenia somehow connected with that?”

Olivia put a finger to her cheek, then said vaguely, “Hmmm. I mean, I guess they’re not *not* connected. Z did say they used to be allies.”

Olivia was known and feared by the imperial army as the “Death God,” but what she was talking about now was something completely different. Claudia thought it was probably some sort of code word. Olivia often used such words to obscure information, like “rats” and “flies.” Claudia knew very well that Olivia meant no harm by it, but after being burned more than a few times in the past, she saw it as necessary to dispel all ambiguity.

“Is ‘god of death’ one of your, ah, code words, General?” she asked.

Apparently her choice of words was not to Olivia’s liking—her cheeks visibly puffed up as she said indignantly, “It’s not a *code word*.”

Claudia, determined to get answers, said, “Do you mean then, General, that you were raised by a *real* god of death? And that this Xenia you say is controlling Darmés is *also* a real god of death?”

“Well, yeah,” Olivia replied without missing a beat. The room erupted in a babble of voices, but Claudia didn’t join them. She leaned back in her chair and stared blankly into space.

“Lady Olivia,” came a clear voice that cut through the hubbub. It was Felix. “I have something I wish to ask you, if I may.” The room quieted at once. Evanson and Ellis were glaring at Felix with open hostility. They knew that Felix had had no direct involvement in Ashton’s death, but the human heart did not obey such simple logic. Claudia, who understood their feelings with painful immediacy, pretended not to see them.

“I guess you may,” Olivia replied. “But Felix, what are you even doing here?”

Before Felix could explain, Blood cut in in exasperation. “Look, Liv, a lot happened after you hid yourself away. Then just as you come skipping back, innocent as you please, we end up here. Explanations will have to wait.”

Olivia tried to laugh him off, but then her eyes met Claudia’s. Mouth still open, she blinked a few times, then turned away with the slow, jerky motion of a rusty gear.

After Olivia and Blood had returned to Galia Fortress following their meeting with the prince regent, Olivia had proceeded to vanish. Unlike if just any soldier had disappeared, this had resulted in a fair uproar, but Claudia had waited for Olivia to return without adding her voice to the commotion. Then, a few hours previously, Olivia had popped up again. Claudia had given her a lengthy telling-off, but that was all she had managed before ending up here.

“Oh, hey. Did you end up rescuing the emperor?” Olivia asked suddenly.

Felix answered with the height of deference. “Yes, thanks to you. Only...” He paused. “This leads back into what we were speaking of, but I met Darmés again in Listelein Palace. I ended up drawing my blade on him.”

“You what? But then...” Olivia was plainly confused. Felix seemed to understand what was behind it.

“He prevented me from dealing a killing blow by means of some art that I know not. It was not magecraft. I wondered if you, Lady Olivia, might not have some idea as to its nature.” There was a hint of desperation in his eyes as he

spoke.

“He wasn’t corporealizing his Odh?”

“No, that I can deny with confidence. Darmés’s Odh is decidedly ordinary.”

Claudia thought that there couldn’t be anyone else in the room apart from her who had any idea what the two of them were talking about. Seeing the others looking at one another and shaking their heads confirmed this.

“Hmmm...” Olivia, staring up at the ceiling, mused, “If it wasn’t magecraft, and it wasn’t Odh, I guess magic is the only thing—”

Felix jumped up so fast he sent his chair clattering to the ground. “Magic?!” he cried. “What is *that*?!”

Felix’s question sounded like the beginning of an interrogation. Claudia, unable to let this stand, opened her mouth to speak, but then she met Blood’s eyes.

That look said, “*Shut up and leave them to it...*” Claudia stopped halfway through standing up and sat down again.

Olivia, leaning away from Felix, said, “Um, magic is, like...”

“*What is magic?!*”

“I-I’m getting there. Magic is—” Olivia began, then she stuck out her left hand. “Actually, it’s faster to show you.” No sooner had she spoken than a tiny ball of fire flared into life at the tip of her middle finger.

Ellis, bursting with elation, shrieked, “Olivia, you’re a *mage*?!”

“I’m not a mage—and this isn’t magecraft. It’s magic.” While Ellis looked on hungrily, Olivia made flames appear at the tips of all her fingers. And she wasn’t done. The flames left her fingers to dance around the meeting room as though they had minds of their own before finally coalescing into the shape of a butterfly often seen in spring.

“Incredible...” whispered Lise. Her face was shining with awe and wonder. The Azure Knights looked up, mouths hanging half open, to where the flame-wreathed butterfly fluttered about scattering sparks.

“It certainly is,” Evanson said, though without as much feeling as his words suggested.

“Evanson, have you seen magic before?” Claudia asked.

“Of course not,” he replied, looking up at the butterfly. “How could I have?”

“You’re very calm, considering.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about hearing that from you, Colonel. I suppose I’ve just seen so many shocking things now that they don’t faze me anymore...” He considered, then added, “Though the biggest reason is probably that it’s General Olivia.”

Blood and Luke nodded in agreement.

Claudia had seen Olivia’s preternatural powers up close on many occasions and, under her instruction, had even learned to use some of those powers herself. This “magic” ought to have filled her with awe, but she found herself accepting it without question as yet another of Olivia’s many abilities.

“*That’s magic,*” said Olivia. She clicked her fingers and the butterfly vanished as though it had never been.

“Thank you, Lady Olivia.” Felix could scarcely contain his excitement. “I see it is quite different from magecraft, just as you say.” He dropped into his chair as though it pulled him down.

The existence of magecraft was known to the Royal Army, but that knowledge was based on stories from the likes of Cornelius and Paul, who had fought against mages during the warlord period. In other words, their understanding was scarcely better than the common folk who regarded magecraft as the stuff of fantasy. Grasping the difference between magecraft and the magic Olivia referred to was beyond them.

There’s far more to him than meets the eye—his vast reserves of Odh are just the beginning. Claudia unconsciously gulped.

“So anyway, here’s my idea,” Olivia said. “We’ve got an alliance with Mekia, right? What if we added Sutherland into the mix?”

At this, the light of intelligence returned to the glazed-over eyes of the others.

Blood was the first to respond.

“That’s another idea out of nowhere.”

“I mean, they do say to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“I didn’t know we were in such a hurry. Also, as I’m pretty sure you know, an alliance has to offer something to both parties.”

Sutherland’s collusion with the empire was common knowledge. They had nothing whatsoever to gain from reneging on this secret agreement to ally with Fernest. And with the failure of Twin Lions at Dawn, it seemed only a matter of time before word arrived from Mekia to dissolve that alliance too.

Presented with this sensible point, however, Olivia said smugly, “The alliance between Sutherland and the empire is broken.”

“Say *what*?!”

Olivia proceeded to give an explanation, every detail of which strained belief. The empire had torn up their treaty with Sutherland, then sent an army of undead against one of the city-states, which had been destroyed. In response, Sutherland had mustered all its armies and was, as they spoke, in the midst of battling the undead.

“Personally, I don’t like the Sutherland army’s chances,” Olivia finished. The way she spoke made it sound as though she’d actually been there.

“General, did you see this battle?” Claudia asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“So when we couldn’t find you anywhere...”

“Yep, you’ve worked it out.”

“You could have told me beforehand...” Claudia was hurt to learn only now that Olivia had gone off by herself without even confiding in Claudia, her aide.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia said. “It was just that this time, I wanted to see how things stood for myself.” She turned to look at Blood. “Anyway, that’s the situation. I feel like right now we could work out a pretty good deal. Even just getting them to resume sending us food would be a massive weight off.”

Fernest's food shortage was gradually improving thanks to their victories on the southern and northern fronts, but there still was not enough to go around. This was unsurprising given that close to three-quarters of the kingdom's imported food had come from Sutherland before the embargo. Claudia held checkered feelings toward the nation that had, though indirectly, run Fernest into the ground, but if an alliance could be achieved, their food problem would be all but solved. All the same...

"You're not wrong that knowing the lay of the land will help carry the negotiations," Blood said. "But Liv, my point still stands. Alliances are built on mutual benefit. If Sutherland's war is going badly, I'll bet the only benefit they'll want is a large army, and we can't satisfy them on that front. Or to put it plainly, we can't spare them a single man."

Exactly. Claudia agreed without a second thought. In exchange for an alliance, Sutherland would want ten thousand soldiers, at *least*. Negotiations were a nonstarter.

But Olivia said, "Don't worry about that. The magic that I showed you before will work against the undead, so instead of sending them reinforcements, I'll just deal with their problem."

"What, with that trick?" Blood said derisively. Olivia shook her head.

"That was just to give you an idea of what magic's like."

"Ser, they will likely want tens of thousands of soldiers, if not more." When Claudia cut in, Olivia's gaze grew cold and far away.

"The numbers don't matter," she said. Claudia, looking into Olivia's eyes, felt as though darkness itself was staring back at her. She fought back the urge to get far away from Olivia. Lise, beside Claudia, seemed to feel the same way. She hugged her arms protectively.

"When you say magic will work against the undead, does that mean it doesn't work on people?" asked Evanson. Beads of sweat shone on his forehead.

"No, it does," Olivia said. "But Z told me to never use it on humans."

"Why is that?" Claudia said for all of them.

“Z says it’d upset”—Olivia considered—“I guess you’d say the balance of the world?”

The reactions to this proclamation, which she delivered with the gravity of a comment on the weather, were varied. What they shared was a look that went beyond simple terror into something else. One of the Azure Knights whispered in a quavering voice, “She wields the power of a god...”

“I can’t transport myself with magic, though,” Olivia went on, “so we need to limit it to one battlefield.”

“This is all going over my head,” Blood said, “but are you saying you want to gather all our allies and our enemies in one place for a final battle?”

“Yeah, exactly!”

Blood scratched the back of his head. “I feel like that ain’t going to work.”

“How come?”

“Well, because it’s all about what suits us best and totally ignores what the empire wants.”

There was a pause, then someone said, “I’m not so sure about that.” Everyone swiveled around to see Clarice pushing up her red-rimmed glasses.

“What are you doing here anyway, Clarice?” Olivia asked.

“It’s been too long, Comrade Olivia. I am here because I begged General Blood for the honor of an invitation.”

“Oh, okay.” Olivia took this in stride, but it *was* odd for Clarice, who was not in the military, to be sitting in on an off-the-record military council. They all naturally turned to Blood for answers.

“It’s fine—I made her an acting special officer. With the Royal Army so short-handed lately, we need all the help we can get.”

This was no explanation at all. Lise, looking irritated, said, “I know her. She’s a librarian at the Royal Library. I would be ever so grateful, ser, if you would enlighten us as to why it was necessary to give her such privileges?”

“Now isn’t the time to get into the details. If you’ve got questions, you can ask

her yourself later,” he retorted, leaving Lise no option but to give up. Turning back to Clarice, he said, “What do you mean, you’re not sure?”

“Our intelligence, as well as what Comrade Olivia has told us, has convinced me that Darmés has absolute confidence in his undead armies,” Clarice said.

This enigmatic explanation clearly annoyed Blood. “Enough waffling. What’s your point?”

“In short, we send Darmés a letter pledging that, should he defeat us on the field of our choosing, we will offer him our unconditional surrender. Of course, such a letter must be signed by all three nations. We thus provide Darmés with a perfect opportunity to conquer Fernest, Sutherland, and Mekia in one fell swoop. His overconfidence in his undead army will only make it harder for him to pass it up.” Clarice then added, “I’m sure if Ashton Senefelder were here, he would have suggested a similar plan.”

The unexpected invocation of Ashton’s name cast a pall over the room.

“Well, the kid *did* have a knack for plans that seemed outrageous on the face of them,” Blood said with a crooked smile.

“Thinking back, those plans of his always did put us through the wringer,” added Evanson.

“Did they ever!” agreed Ellis. “The guy had a face like he wouldn’t hurt a fly, and then just like that, he’d whip out some unhinged scheme. I don’t know how we survived.” Both of them smiled tearfully.

“Huh, yeah. It does sound like Ashton.” Olivia held a hand to her breast and smiled a clear and open smile. Even now, the traces of Ashton lived on among his friends, and no one could say differently.

Even after death, you’re a lucky man, Ashton, Claudia thought, but her eyes didn’t fill with tears like they once had. She had already shed the last of her tears for him—that much, she had promised herself.

III

It was decided that they would go with Clarice’s plan. Olivia dismissed

everyone except Felix, pretending not to notice that Claudia was looking at her like she wanted to stay behind too. She then looked at the chair beside Felix.

“You know what ‘dismissed’ means, right?” she said to the gray child who hadn’t gotten up to leave.

“I knew it. You can see me.” As soon as the child spoke, color returned to her.

She threw out her red cloak with a flourish, then, drawing herself up impressively, exclaimed, “Behold! I am Great Mage Lassara Merlin!” A pause followed.

“So, um, if I give you a cookie, then will you leave? I’ve got to talk to Felix about something important.”

“D-Do not treat me like a child! I am 277 years old!”

Children were not 277 years old. Even Olivia, who enjoyed an ignominious reputation for cluelessness, knew *that* much.

“You’re not going to win any joke contests with material like that,” she said, then patted Lassara on the head. The little girl’s face turned red as a tomato, and she stamped her foot repeatedly.

“You insolent, ill-bred little...!” Lassara raged. “Even that rat-bitten fairy has never spoken to me thus, let alone a *human*! And what are you smirking at, youngster?! Tell this muttonhead who I am!”

Felix filled Olivia in on the details. Lassara put her hands on her hips and stuck her chin out. Olivia stared at her with interest.



“So you can use magecraft to extend your lifespan? Wow.” If there was magic that could do that, Z had never told her about it. But then, she’d never been interested enough to ask either.

“Now don’t go getting the wrong idea. Not just anyone can do this. I can because I am a *great mage*,” Lassara said, sticking her nose in the air. A moment later, however, her expression turned peevish. “Magic, eh...?” she muttered. “I wonder if you couldn’t show me that trick from earlier again?”

“Sure.” Last time, Olivia had gone through the steps to make sure everyone understood her explanation of magic, but that didn’t seem necessary anymore. She raised her left index finger and created a butterfly out of flame. It rested on her fingertip, flapping its wings. Lassara’s eyes bored into it.

“It just gets stranger the longer I look at it. It is such a delicate creation, and yet I only sense a speck of your mana within it...” she said. “If I had to guess, I’d say that’s at the heart of whatever sets magic apart from magecraft. I suppose you know what the real difference is, eh?”

Olivia thought hard, trying to remember. “Okay, so magecraft uses mana in your body, and when your mana is completely drained, you die. And you have to use that mark on your left hand as a catalyst. Am I right so far?”

“That’s correct. The mage circle is what makes one a mage.” Lassara held up her left hand proudly so that Olivia could see the mark on the back.

“It sounds like it’s basically the same as magic. The big difference is that magic doesn’t need a catalyst.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s true, I don’t see a mage circle on your hand...” Lassara said dubiously.

Olivia looked at the butterfly. “Also, you’re right that there’s basically no mana in here. That’s because it’s mostly made of magical essence. Oh, yeah, magical essence is...” She raised her other index finger and drew pure magical essence to converge on her fingertip. “These particles of light drawn to my finger are magical essence. It’s the same thing as mana. There’s loads of magical essence floating around in the air, so you only have to use a bare minimum of your own mana. I guess in that sense you could call mana my catalyst. Of

course, high-level magic still burns a fair bit of mana, though.”

Incidentally, Olivia decided to keep to herself that Z had called magecraft a “cheap trick.” There was a simple reason for that—she remembered the look of despair Johann had given her after their bout. At the time, she hadn’t understood the meaning behind that look, but she’d learned a lot since then. Now, she understood that Johann must have taken pride in being a mage. Humans carried around a lot of pride, and as little as a careless word from someone was enough to wound it. Z had taught her that to live was to learn. She hadn’t understood that either at first—actually, she still didn’t really understand, but some sense of it was starting to take shape inside her.

“So in other words, there are effectively no limits on the use of magic,” said Lassara. “Well, well. I see your comment about upsetting the balance of the world was apt.” Lassara’s usual cool detachment was gone. Her tiny fists were quietly trembling.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise. Just the ability to draw mana from the air makes magic far superior to magecraft. If Olivia had used it in our duel... Felix considered this grimly. No wonder she didn’t seem worried. I would never have imagined that she was hiding this much power.

Olivia looked up at him inquiringly. “So, um, I asked you to stay because I’ve got a favor to ask you. Can we talk about that now?”

“Oh, er, yes.”

“When I go to take down Darmés and Xenia, I was wondering if you’d help...” Olivia hesitated. “Will you?”

It was a request perfectly aligned with his own goals. There was no reason not to agree.

“Of course. I will do everything in my power to assist you.”

Olivia let out a sigh of relief. “Great. Xenia’s *seriously* tough.”

“When you say that...” Felix said tentatively. “Have you already fought Xenia?”

“Yeah. I got beaten to a pulp too.” Olivia scratched the back of her head and laughed. Felix could not find it in himself to join her.

“Just to be clear—you used magic in this battle?”

“Yeah, of course. Xenia’s a god of death, so I wasn’t breaking my promise to Z.”

“So you fought with everything you had, and still you lost.”

“Uh-huh. In the end, it was all I could do to run away.”

Felix let out a long breath. “I’m not sure if I will be much assistance against such an opponent.” This Xenia called itself a god of death. Felix had no intention of turning into a coward now, but he was conscious that for the first time, he was throwing himself into a battle where he could see no hope of victory.

“Oh, yeah, if we just charged in without a plan I’m sure we’d lose,” said Olivia. “I’ve been training to make sure that doesn’t happen, and your help will give a massive boost to our chances of winning.”

“Training...?” Felix repeated. “Does that mean you found your Z?”

“Yep!”

“I see. I’m glad for you.”

Olivia laughed and gave him a smile like the sun coming out. “Thanks.”

For a moment, Felix was entranced. Then he pulled himself together and sat up straight. “The truth is, Lady Olivia, I have a request for you as well.”

“No problem, so long as it’s something I can do. One thing, though—could you stop calling me ‘lady’?”

“That would not be proper, not in my position after seeking refuge with the Royal Army for the Azure Knights and myself.”

“C’mon, it’s fine. With my authority, I can bend the rules a bit. Not that I’m not used to people calling me ‘ser’ and ‘lady’ by now, but something about *you* doing it feels weird, like I’m itchy.” She scratched at her back. Something about it was so comical that Felix couldn’t help it; he snorted with laughter.

“Very well, then. Let us agree that there shall be no formalities between us.”

“Sounds good!” Olivia smiled at him, and Felix returned it.

Just then, a weary voice broke in. “Sounds as though you’ve wrapped things up.”

“Lady Lassara...” Felix turned to her. “Is it all right with you?”

“Hmph. I’m hardly going to sit around sulking all day.” Lassara turned her nose up away from Felix. He gave her a wry look.

“So you *were* sulking, then.”

“I-Insolence! Now, if you’re quite done here, let’s hurry up and go get the emperor!” With that, Lassara marched haughtily from the room.

“The emperor?” Olivia cocked her head to one side. Felix filled her in on the situation, then the two of them followed Lassara out of the meeting room.

In one of the rooms in the barrack tower that had been given over to the Azure Knights, Felix, Olivia, and Lassara stood around the prone figure of Ramza. Olivia, her eyes gleaming, held in her hand a certain hapless fairy whose attempt at a surprise attack had ended in her capture.

“Lemme go, you stupid cow!”

“It’s Comet! Comet the fairy!”

“What’d you call me?! I might be a fairy, but I don’t have a stupid name like ‘Comet’!”

“Ooooh, I’ve just got to show Claudia!”

“Hey! What d’you think I am, some kinda circus act? Agh! Don’t you go squishing my cheeks.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“That’s it—this broad isn’t listening to a thing I say. Lassara! Don’t just sit there, do something!”

Silky, wriggling and kicking violently, implored Lassara for help. Lassara, with a profoundly nasty smile, said, “Isn’t it nice that you’re getting on so well?”

“In what universe do you call this ‘getting on well’?!”

“Olivia,” Felix broke in, “please let Silky go. I’ll see to it that you have time to get to know each other later.”

“All right. We’ll play more later, ’kay?” Olivia released Silky, who sped off in a trail of stardust to hide behind Felix.

Poking her head out above his shoulder, Silky roared like a wild animal. “You just try and play with me!!!”

“Olivia, would you?” At Felix’s prompting, Olivia gave Silky a smile and a wave, then turned to look down at Ramza. Almost at once, Felix asked, “Can you cure him?”

“The girl only just started to examine him,” Lassara said, exasperated. “Don’t rush her.”

Olivia didn’t lay a hand on Ramza. Only her eyes moved, taking in everything. Felix sat by patiently, waiting and watching, until he caught Olivia’s tiny nod.

“There’s a regular pattern of disturbance in his Odh,” she said. “That’s probably the problem.”

“You *can* fix him?!” Felix gripped Olivia by both shoulders, leaning in urgently toward her. He consciously ignored Silky, who laid into his head with her fists, muttering something unintelligible.

“Yeah,” Olivia said, drawing away from him and nodding quickly.

He’ll be cured... Felix thought, dazed.

In his place, Lassara sighed, then said to Olivia, “Well then, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“R-Right.” Olivia hesitantly moved away from Felix, then laid her hand directly on Ramza.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, Olivia said, “There. He should be better now. That was some pretty strange magic.” She had barely finished speaking when Ramza’s eyelids slowly opened. His eyes were vacant, but the gleam of intelligence was visible in their depths.

“Emperor Ramza!” Felix cried. In response, Ramza raised a quivering hand. Felix took it in his own.

“I see it in your face...” said the emperor slowly. “Great have been your troubles on my account.”

“No, Your Majesty, not at all...” Silent tears streamed down Felix’s cheeks. The clouds that had concealed the sun rolled away, and before their eyes, warmth washed over the barracks.

IV

The Courtyard at La Chaim Palace, Holy City of Elsphere

The glacia flowers that heralded the coming of winter were in full bloom. Sofitia, together with Lara, welcomed an unexpected visitor.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“M thowwy we thow’dup tho thuhnwy.” Across from Sofitia, not giving so much as a glance to her host, Olivia sat shoveling into her mouth at alarming speed the baked goods Sofitia had ordered. Her cheeks were stuffed to bursting like a gray squirrel’s.

“You are as boorish as ever!” Lara snarled. She tried to snatch the sweets away from Olivia, but Sofitia stopped her, laughing.

“My dearest Olivia, you will always be welcome here. But what is this I hear about you coming alone? I don’t suppose you have come around to the idea of joining the Winged Crusaders?”

She did not seriously believe that Olivia would turn her back on the Royal Army, of course. This was Sofitia’s idea of a joke.

Olivia cleared her throat loudly. “I already found Z, so I won’t be joining your army,” she said, beaming. Sofitia smiled softly back at her.

“That is our loss. But you were reunited, were you? Is Z with you now?” Sofitia asked smoothly. Olivia gave a small shake of her head. There was a hint of loneliness in her face, but from her demeanor, it did not seem as though her parting from Z had been a final one.

It didn’t sound as though a reunion would be possible before. But with this, perhaps I can use Olivia as an intermediary to make contact with Z, Sofitia

thought. Just then, Olivia slipped a letter bearing the royal seal of Fernest onto the table.

“I came here to give you this,” Olivia explained. She had the vague feeling Sofitia was about to say something tiresome, so she decided to wrap up her task there quickly.

Sofitia looked down at the official letter and frowned. “Has something befallen King Alfonse?”

“They said he’s sick,” Olivia replied shortly.

“Sick? But he seemed very well when we met at the banquet...”

Sofitia could ask all she liked, but Olivia really didn’t have anything else she could tell her. She genuinely knew nothing other than that he was sick, and besides, in her mind he was just the man who’d given her an enormous, towering cake. In other words, she wasn’t interested.

“Since when have I cared about kings, right?”

“Don’t say that like we know anything about it,” Lara snapped, exasperated.

Sofitia laughed softly. “In any case, let us see what it says.”

In the time it took for her to finish reading the letter, Olivia asked for three fresh cups of tea. Each time, she received a clear *tsk* from Lara.

Sofitia laid the finished letter down on the table with a grave expression. “It is a very bold plan you have come up with. Was this your idea, Olivia? Or was it Ashton’s?”

Words caught in Olivia’s throat for a moment. “It wasn’t either of us,” she managed eventually. “But seeing as a drawn-out battle with the undead puts them at an advantage, I think it makes sense. I know Twin Lions at Dawn flopped, but we’ve still got an alliance, right?”

“I cannot see any reason to continue with our alliance after the failure of that operation,” Sofitia said. Lara nodded fervently in agreement.

“So you’re breaking it off? Is that really what you want? Or is this a tactical thing?”

A sharp gleam entered Sofitia's eyes at this. "Whatever makes you think it might be?"

"Well, I saw the Winged Crusaders fighting the undead. I thought you had to know I was there. Didn't you?"

Sofitia broke out in an open smile. "My dear Olivia, how very wicked of you. If you were watching, whyever didn't you say so from the start? But if that is how it is, then I should be glad to continue our alliance."

"My Seraph?!" Lara cried, just as Olivia said, "Then it's a deal."

She shook hands with Sofitia, then realized Lara was looking at her murderously and let out a little groan.

"Did you just groan? Who do you think you are? As a messenger, it behooves you to behave with the utmost courtesy, yet from the start, your behavior toward the seraph has been more than I can bear. You are *entirely* out of line."

"But we're friends..." Olivia pointed out tentatively. "Friends don't have to be polite..."

In response to this, Lara's face turned scarlet, her eyes bulged, and her eyebrows turned down in the most dramatic scowl Olivia had ever seen. It reminded her of Claudia when she turned into a yaksha.

"Y-You dare call the holy seraph your *friend*?! Insolent cur!"

"Um..." Olivia, getting the sense that Lara was inches away from drawing her sword, looked to Sofitia for assistance. A smile played around Sofitia's lips as she nodded.

"It is certainly true that Olivia and I are friends. Olivia, you need not worry about how you speak to me."

Olivia turned to Lara with an enormous smirk. "See?"

Lara's whole body quivered with fury, but at last, the tension went out of her, and she let out a deep sigh. "My Seraph, I can't even tell whose side you're on..."

"Why, that's obvious," Sofitia said, clearly enjoying herself. "I am on your side, Lara, but I am also on Olivia's side."

“My Seraph...”

Olivia, having gotten her confirmation that the alliance would continue, stood up. “I’ll head off home, then.”

“You’re leaving so soon?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is rather a predicament. My chefs have been cooking up a storm in the kitchens ever since they learned of your arrival.”

“No! Really?”

“Oh, yes. They say cooking for someone who takes as much pleasure in food as you do is a reward in and of itself.”

Visions of all sorts of dishes flashed through Olivia’s mind. It was such a tempting proposal that for a moment she thought it might be all right to stay a *little*—

No! Stop it! Olivia slammed the lid down on the creeping tendrils of her desires. “I-I’m actually really busy...” she said, hearing her voice cracking.

“You are? Well, that’s too bad. Another time, then,” Sofitia replied, backing down at once.

Olivia stared hard at her. “Next time, for sure,” she said. She was just feeling proud of herself for resisting such a sweet temptation when she remembered she hadn’t told Sofitia the most important part.

“Keep an eye out for a messenger from us soon.”

“You mean you’re not the messenger?!” Lara’s shout echoed emptily around the courtyard.

Lara glared at the corridor Olivia had left by for a while, then she turned to Sofitia, who was daintily sipping her tea.

“Why are we continuing with the alliance?”

“Why, because the situation has changed,” Sofitia replied, then added, “Dramatically so.”

“Even so, promising an unconditional surrender after one defeat is insanity.” She might have been able to understand if it had only been Mekia in question, but the thought of tying their fate to that of Fernest, now indisputably on its last legs after the loss of the Invincible General and the God of the Battlefield, and Sutherland, lost in dreams of sloth and indolence, filled Lara with despair. As commander of the Winged Crusaders, it was intolerable.

Sofitia returned her teacup to its saucer, smiling softly. “The undead have risen, in defiance of all reason. This world has already gone mad. Perhaps Fernest’s plan is reckless, but don’t you think it is well worth trying?”

“Even if it could mean the ruin of our nation?”

“If we fail here, all it means is that no matter what path we chose, this was always our time. No one can live forever,” Sofitia answered without hesitation. As Lara watched her, an ominous thought passed through her mind.

“My Seraph, do you doubt the strength of the Winged Crusaders?”

“I have never entertained so much as a shadow of such a doubt. Do not ask me that again.” Sofitia’s face was calm, but there was an intensity in her lilac eyes that brooked no argument.

“Understood, My Seraph. I shall make sure I do not,” said Lara. “In that case —” She was about to continue, but what Sofitia said next made her words die in her throat.

“That being said, I am anticipating the worst.”

“The worst...?” An image of crustaceasects assaulting the holy city rose to the front of Lara’s mind. “You think that is possible?”

“One would struggle to find a reason to rule it out. Olivia knows that too. I imagine that is why she was so confident in negotiating.”

“That was my fault. But even if the worst should come to pass, with the combined might of the Winged Crusaders, it shouldn’t be impossible to repel...”

Her own voice betrayed her, growing weaker and weaker as she spoke, making her words seem uncertain.

“You have more than demonstrated your resolve, Lara. But it is not always a

bad thing to surrender to where fate takes you.” Sofitia spoke comfortingly, and Lara felt her ears grow hot. “At any rate, Olivia would not go into battle unless she had a plan. I wish to see with my own eyes what it is that she intends to do.”

“To be honest, she doesn’t appear to me to think about anything other than her stomach. She is skilled, though, I admit.”

“That is because you only see her through your own biases. If you change your point of view, your way of thinking, that which once was hidden to you will become visible.”

“If I may speak plainly—I don’t *want* to understand her.”

“You are determined to remain stubborn. But then, you always were, Lara.” Sofitia smiled a little hopelessly. But a moment later, the smile was gone. In its place was Sofitia the warrior.

“The Holy Land of Mekia is about to plunge into a maelstrom. Blessed Wing Lara, ready the Winged Crusaders to march at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, My Seraph!” Lara dropped fluidly to her knees. She had her orders. As a servant of the seraph, all that was left was for her to obey to the best of her ability. She could voice no more doubts now. Except—

“Would you tell me one thing, My Seraph? What *do* you see in Olivia?” Lara asked as Sofitia and her guards rose to leave.

Sofitia stopped. “I see a will that does not bend,” she said, then walked from the courtyard, her staff ringing as she went.

V

The Sutherland Army, Skyberg Fortress

The Sutherland army quickly abandoned the third block and fell back to Skyberg Fortress. Their defensive formation had been constructed under the assumption that they would be fighting ghouls; it was all but useless against an undead unicorn. The armored mage cannon had been their best chance, but now that it had sustained severe damage, they had to revise their entire battle

plan. Then, just over twenty days after they retreated to Skyberg Fortress, Lion received some bizarre news.

He stared down at the deployment map set up on the enormous, long table, so transfixed that he did not even seem to notice as Julius and Diana came into the room.

“You didn’t sleep then, my lord,” Julius said. “Even after all the times I told you to...”

“I’ll sleep for as long as you like just as soon as we have the time. More importantly, how is Heaven?”

At once, Julius’s face turned grave. “Her condition is critical.”

“I see...” Lion said slowly. “Anyway, has something happened?”

“A messenger has arrived from the Kingdom of Fernest. According to the soldier who spoke to them, they carry a letter from the prince regent.”

“Prince regent? Not that idiot king?”

Julius’s mouth twisted. “Yes, it was definitely ‘prince regent.’ Apparently, his name is Selvia sem Galmond.”

“The idiot king’s son, then...” said Lion. “Though it’s not a name I’ve ever heard.” He looked at Julius for confirmation. Julius gave a small shake of his head, indicating that this was the first he had heard of this son as well.

“Should I look into the story?” Julius asked.

Lion thought for a moment. “No, no need. The fact that he’s *this* unknown probably means he takes after his father. Still, a messenger from Fernest is interesting...” Turning to Julius, he asked, “What do you make of all this?”

Julius must have expected the question because he answered without pausing to think. “I imagine they learned of our predicament and came to sound out a potential alliance.”

“Do you agree, Lady Diana?”

“I do. Fernest has won back its territory from the empire, but food isn’t going to just pop out of the ground. There’s no doubt that they hate us enough that

they'd go to war given the chance, but one cannot live on pride alone."

Lion moved the logistics unit token in his hand to the left of the map. "So basically, the alliance is a way to get us to resume food exports." Julius and Diana nodded. "But," he went on, "how did news reach them so fast? The timing is so perfect it feels planned." Lion's lips curved in a cruel smile.

The Sutherland army was currently mainly fighting in the grasslands between the wetlands and Skyberg Fortress. With nothing standing between them, the living and the dead clashed head-on. Under the brilliant command of a veteran general like Shaola, they were holding their own against the ghouls, but if another unicorn or some other undead beast appeared, the damage would be devastating. With the armored mage cannon out of commission and Heaven seriously wounded, they needed all the soldiers they could get. Lion guessed that the Kingdom of Fernest was well aware of all this. But from another angle, it meant they naively thought Sutherland would be an easy negotiating partner in their current position.

"What do the others think?" Lion asked.

"The majority are of the opinion that we should turn the messenger away without hearing a word they say."

"The majority, is it?" Lion looked from Julius to Diana, both of whom were presumably part of this majority, then sighed heavily. "I can't deny I'm a tad curious about what bait this messenger planned to dangle in front of us. But this time, I find that the majority and I are in agreement."

"Personally, I was less interested in the sweetness of the bait than the messenger herself," said Julius.

After deciding so quickly to send the messenger packing, Lion couldn't let this comment slip by. His interest was piqued. "I didn't think there was anyone in that country who could interest *you*, Julius," he said. "Who is this messenger?"

"Olivia Valedstorm."

"The Death God herself..." It was the girl who had run rings around the elites of the imperial army and toyed with the army of Northern Perscilla. Lion understood Julius's interest, but something bothered him. He turned to look at

Diana.

“I wouldn’t have thought you would be interested in the Death God, Lady Diana.”

“What a strange notion. Her military accomplishments as reported thus far are such that, if I were in their shoes, I would think it no exaggeration to call her a hero. I would question the sanity of anyone who *wasn’t* interested.”

“Do you want me to turn her away, my lord?” Julius asked blandly. Lion narrowed his eyes at him.

“Damnit, Julius...”

Julius lowered his head deferentially. “I beg your pardon, my lord.”

With a snort, Lion said, “At least make it an audience worthy of a death god.”

Olivia and Claudia were shown not to an audience chamber, but the parade grounds. Battle-scarred soldiers stood around the perimeter of the grounds. In front of them, a man and a woman sat in unadorned chairs.

This is hardly a place to entertain messengers, Claudia thought. She and Olivia bowed to the seated pair.

“I am Lieutenant General Olivia Valedstorm of the Royal Army of Fernest. On behalf of the kingdom, I thank you for granting us an audience despite the sudden nature of our visit.”

The pair nodded graciously. Then the man, who wore a dark-green military uniform, spoke.

“I’d like to say I’m honored that you came all this way, but as you are aware, I have a lot on my plate right now. You have to understand that I am not at leisure to enjoy a pleasant chat.”

“Duly noted,” said Olivia. “Colonel Claudia?”

“Ser!” Claudia handed the letter over to the redheaded man who approached them. He took it, then passed it respectfully over to the seated man. There was a pause, then—

“This is insanity. You can’t seriously think Darmés will accept these terms.” The man handed the letter over to the woman with a look of utter derision.

“We think it likely that he will,” Olivia replied. “The proposal contains significant advantages for Darmés too. To that end, your nation’s assistance will be indispensable.”

The woman looked over the letter, then said, “Assuming we did agree to an alliance, what would the advantage be for Sutherland?”

Olivia smiled sweetly. “At the very least, you can escape your impending doom.” This had the sound of an insult, and the reactions of the soldiers standing around the parade ground were all as Claudia had expected.

“Those hardly sound like the words of someone asking for an alliance.” Unlike the furious soldiers, the seated woman smiled brightly at them. It was clear, however, that she did not mean it to be friendly.

“Our country is facing the same doom,” said Olivia. “The undead are tricky opponents. Time doesn’t matter to them, so the longer this goes on, the worse things will get for the human side.”

The man raised his head a fraction and indicated for her to continue.

“Even if you drive them off, it will only be temporary. It won’t solve the root of the problem. We can only free ourselves from the threat of the undead by defeating their master, Darmés.”

“So that’s why you want an alliance, and a quick end to the war. I see the logic of it, and yet...”

The woman picked up where the man left off. “Defeating Darmés sounds very simple when you put it like that, but how exactly do you mean to do it? He is an emperor. You don’t expect him to ride into battle, do you?”

It was a natural question to have. The problem was this: only Olivia knew the means of getting close to Darmés. An unsatisfactory answer here risked ruining everything.

“I will kill Darmés,” Olivia said softly. “No matter where he might be.”

Watching her, the seated man and woman went so still they might have been

paralyzed.

Lion had the two messengers leave so that he could weigh the merits of the proposal. Once they were gone, he heaved a sigh so heavy that it pushed all the air from his lungs. His heart was still pounding, and his uniform was so drenched in sweat that it clung to his skin.

“Daunting” doesn’t even begin to do her justice. Is she even really human? he thought, noting that Diana was pale and trembling.

Julius, who looked haggard, said, “There isn’t a shred of evidence to back up what she said. If we enter into an alliance, there will be backlash.”

Lion pushed back his damp hair. “And what do you think, Julius?”

“I’m not sure what to think. Except that...” Julius trailed off significantly.

Lion, with terrible certainty, said, “Except that you felt a power in those unnerving eyes that made you believe her. I’m right, aren’t I?” With a crooked smile, Julius nodded. Lion remembered the smile Olivia had given him as she left. It had been so chilling that he felt for a moment as though death’s scythe was hanging over his neck. *Who’d have thought the day would come that I’d be afraid of a little girl?*

A stream of hissed mutterings made him look over at Diana, who was slumped over with her head in her hands. “Did you say something?”

“Why are we debating this? We obviously ought to join her.”

“What? Why?”

“You need a reason after what we just saw? The girl has the face of a goddess, but behind that, she’s a monster that makes the ghouls outside look sweet. No wonder the imperial army were all terrified of her. We have more food than we know what to do with—why shouldn’t we be generous with it? It’s a small price to pay for that monster’s goodwill.”

Diana’s speech did not clinch the decision, but the plan took shape naturally after that. Lion called Olivia and Claudia back to the parade grounds.

“I’m willing to form an alliance with you,” he said. “However, our current

situation is too dire for us to simply take you at your word. We must have some proof with which to win over those not in attendance today.”

Olivia nodded. “Very well. In that case, I will show you something to that effect. Could I trouble you to accompany me to the wilderness to the south of here?”

“South of here? Is there something there?”

“No, but I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

Lion and the others, still not knowing why they went along with it, followed Olivia to the southern wilds. There, they learned firsthand just how right Diana had been.

On a day when thunder rang out over Galia Fortress to augur the coming of a winter storm, the Kingdom of Fernest, the Holy Land of Mekia, and the United City-States of Sutherland forged a military alliance.

VI

Listelein Palace, Imperial Capital of Olsted

Marquess Schwarz von Hermit, Darmés’s minister of the interior, called on the emperor in his workroom. He found Darmés standing at the window, his hands clasped behind his back. He was clad all in black, just as he had been back when they had called him Chancellor Black-Robe. There was a proper way for the emperor to dress that had to be carefully observed in order to carry on the traditions and maintain the prestige of the Asvelt Empire. Schwartz, in response to the mutterings Darmés inspired, had twice advised him to change his attire. The first time, Darmés had dismissed the matter as trivial. The second, he had looked at Schwarz as though he was a worm. Schwarz, fearing for his life, had not tried a third time.

“I am here, Your Imperial Majesty,” he said, announcing himself. He bowed low to Darmés’s back, then asked, “Is this concerning the official letter?”

“Aren’t you quick on the uptake?” Darmés said without turning around. “It is there on the desk.”

Schwarz walked over to the desk and picked up the letter that lay right in the middle. "Excuse me," he said, then started to read with an assured air.

Diplomatic letters of all kinds tended to be couched in ambiguous language that required one to read between the lines. But the letter in his hand was so straightforward it was almost disappointing, requiring no particular reading ability whatsoever. Schwarz nevertheless read it through several more times.

"A most delightful idea, don't you think, Marquess?"

"Delightful, you say..." He couldn't see Darmés's face to read his expression, but he was sure that the emperor was smiling.

With a swish of his robes, Darmés left the window to come over to the desk. Schwarz moved to do the same. Darmés settled languorously into his chair.

"Why, yes," he said, as casually as if they were talking about the weather. "Oh, word arrived last night from Lieutenant General Flora to say that the Dawn Knights we sent into Mekia have been defeated."

Schwarz found himself briefly at a loss for words. What Darmés styled as the "Dawn Knights" was in fact no more than a pack of monsters. The mere sight of the things was enough to make Schwarz tremble. He had never dreamed they could be defeated.

He dabbed at the sweat already beading on his forehead with his handkerchief. "I can't believe that the Dawn Knights could be defeated by an army of only fifty thousand soldiers."

"Can you not? Mekia has three experienced mages. I always considered defeat a possibility."

Schwarz was so taken aback he almost dropped his handkerchief. "They have mages? *Three* of them, no less?!"

"Why, yes. Is that really so surprising?"

"They call mages messengers of the gods, as I am sure you know, Your Imperial Majesty. The existence of three of them is bound to be cause for surprise," Schwarz said honestly.

Darmés's cracked lips twisted in an ominous smile. "The gods do not have

messengers. They have no need of them. Gods are the highest of all in existence, perfect in and of themselves.” The way he spoke as though he had firsthand experience with the gods made Schwarz deeply uneasy.

Darmés gave a strangled laugh. “It seems we have become very sidetracked. The Dawn Knights we sent to Sutherland are still engaged in combat. The city-states, it seems, developed a strategic weapon and are putting up a much stronger fight than I expected.”

“A strategic weapon, you say...” Schwarz was no soldier, as he himself would happily have admitted. The words held no meaning for him. But assuming their intelligence was accurate, that meant that the only ghouls that had won them any victories were the ones sent against Rosenmarie. He’d also heard that, while they might have routed the Royal Army, around three quarters of the creatures had been lost in the process.

Are the ghouls not as great a threat as I thought...? he wondered. But he quickly dismissed the idea as the image rose in his mind of the ranks of horrifying ghouls in such numbers that they blanketed the wilderness around them.

“I suppose,” Darmés mused, “that it means they weren’t as lost to indolence as I supposed. Oh well. They are more diverting than I expected. I’d planned on readying for a second act in Mekia after they fought off the Dawn Knights, but this wonderful invitation got here first. It would be rude not to accept it, don’t you think?”

“You’re going to accept it?!” Schwarz exclaimed.

The Royal Army had lost the living legend Cornelius as well as Paul, the God of the Battlefield, but they still had strength enough to mount a resistance. Nor would it do to ignore Death God Olivia, whose name he heard so often these days. He would have rather died than say so to Darmés, but Schwarz thought that breaking off their secret agreement with Sutherland and going to war had been a mistake in every respect. Whatever Darmés had hoped to achieve, the real result was that two great nations had allied together, and now, the Holy Land of Mekia and its three mages had joined them. The Illuminus Church, given their intimate ties with Mekia, would not hesitate to mobilize their prized

Knights of the Sanctuary. Schwarz knew it was futile to dwell on what-ifs, but he was sure that things would never have gotten to this point if Ramza had still been emperor. A man might have been accused of incompetence for less, and yet Darmés, as he replied, looked completely mystified.

“Let me ask you—do you know of some reason why I ought to reject such a favorable offer, Marquess Schwarz?”

Schwarz forced himself to swallow, then said, “If you will pardon my saying so, Your Imperial Majesty, I cannot call this offer favorable. The late Lord Osvannes told me once that simply concentrating all of one’s forces constitutes a threat. Knowing as little of soldiering as I do, learning that they also have three mages only makes me more worried.” He mopped the sweat on his face as he spoke.

Darmés stared at him as though dumbstruck. It was only a few seconds, but Schwarz waited with his heart in his mouth, wondering if he had made a fatal mistake.

“Ohhh. Yes, I see what you mean.” Darmés immediately started laughing as though amused. Schwarz was entirely lost. Finally, Darmés let out a final chuckle and said, “It’s an issue of perspective, isn’t it? I don’t feel remotely threatened by their united front. They may attack us a hundred times if they like—my armies are mighty enough to crush them every time they try.”

It was clear that Darmés was not talking about the Crimson or Helios Knights. At that moment, Schwarz also realized that he had been naive. The ranks of ghouls he had seen were not all of them.

Darmés picked up some papers on his desk and said, “As such, I would like you to draw up a written pledge. It would be a terrible nuisance if they denied any agreement as soon as the fighting was over.”

“I shall prepare the documents at once, Your Imperial Majesty.”

After he left the room, Schwarz slumped against the nearest wall and breathed deeply, trying to relax his wound-up nerves. *Don’t overthink it*, he told himself. *You just do the job the emperor has given you, no more and no less.*

Even if that emperor might be something other than human.

Chapter Fourteen: The Final Battle

I

An official response from Darmés arrived accepting their proposal. At this, the united forces of Fernest, Mekia, and Sutherland marched for the wilderness that extended over the western reaches of the Principality of Stonia.

The Royal Army fronted one hundred and ten thousand soldiers, the Winged Crusaders forty thousand, and the Sutherland army one hundred and fifty thousand. In all, they formed a mighty host three hundred thousand strong.

Olivia and Felix set out from Galia Fortress with the Royal Army's vanguard—a force of fifty thousand soldiers that included the Azure Knights—and made their way down the Canalia Highway.

"We should be able to see Canalia soon," Claudia said wistfully.

A distant, nostalgic expression came over Olivia's face, and she murmured, "Oh wow, Canalia..."

"You have some history with the town of Canalia?" Felix, who rode alongside them, inquired.

"I mean, I wouldn't call it 'history,'" Olivia said with an equivocal smile. Claudia knew exactly what was going through her mind.

"All right..." Felix did not press the matter any further, and soon after, the vanguard arrived in Canalia.

It looks completely different, Claudia thought. The differences were good, of course. The speed of the town's recovery had outpaced Claudia's expectations, and its old beauty was beginning to return. In particular, Claudia noted the animated faces of the people in the streets—a world away from the last time she had been here.

People really are incredible, she thought in wonder.

Beside her, Ellis looked around, then said, “Looks like this place escaped the unrest.”

“Well, it lies on a road of great importance. Lord Otto arranged for a decent garrison of guards to be stationed here, so that may have something to do with it.”

The riots that had spread out from the royal capital had distressed Fernest’s leaders greatly. But they had gradually subsided after Selvia’s timely announcement of the Triple Alliance and the declaration that they would unite against the empire’s undead army.

“There’s that, but the hope the prince regent gave the common folk really helped too. If I may speak on behalf of my fellow commoners, we’re people who’ll turn around and decry yesterday’s virtue as evil itself the moment we feel our livelihoods are threatened. We’re not afraid to change our tune when the wind blows another way.”

Claudia could only smile weakly at Ellis’s biting sarcasm.

They continued down the road for a time until, slipping through the crowd that had gathered to watch the army’s progress, three children approached them. Evanson rushed to stop them, but Olivia raised a hand for him to desist.

“Hey, miss, remember us?” The first to run up to Olivia was Emil, the eldest of the three. Claudia remembered the girl with a doll in her arms and the boy with a wooden sword thrust into his belt.

Olivia sprang down from Comet’s back. “Course I remember you. You’ve all grown.” Grinning, she ruffled their hair. Emil blushed, embarrassed, while the other two looked ready to jump up and down in delight.

Emil threw his chest out and jabbed his thumb at the sword on his back. “Lemme join up to the Royal Army, miss. I wanna go with you to wallop them diabolical imperials.”

“Ehhh, I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

“How come? I’m tougher than I look!” Emil protested, breathing heavily. Olivia crouched down to look him directly in the eyes.

“But if you die, think of how sad your mom and dad will be. Don’t you care about that?”

When Claudia saw the dead serious look on Olivia’s face as she admonished Emil, a certain memory rose up vividly in her mind. Olivia had taken Claudia to visit the merchant house of Ashton’s parents, saying that this was something she had to do herself...

“Welcome!” The moment they entered, a woman arranging goods on the shelves greeted them in a friendly voice. Gradually, however, her smile faded as she stared wide-eyed at the two of them.

“I, erm...”

“Are you Olivia and Claudia, by any chance?”

Surprised to have been identified, the two of them exchanged a glance.

“How did you know?” Claudia asked.

“Oh dear. Whatever am I saying?” the woman said, flustered. “I am sorry. My son wrote ever so much about you in every one of his letters, you see. Not to mention that it’s not every day one sees ladies as pretty as the two of you, even in Fis, so I couldn’t help but wonder...”

“You must be Ashton’s mother, then.” Now that she looked closer, Claudia saw the woman and Ashton had the same eyes.

“Customers?” A man of medium height and build with a kind face poked his head out from the back of the shop. Ashton’s mother beckoned insistently to him.

“Dear, look, the girls from Ashton’s letters.”

“Hm?” The man looked at them. “Well, I never! We’re most grateful for all you’ve done for our son.” He hurried to take off his hat, then bowed low.

Claudia and Olivia introduced themselves properly, but now, facing Ashton’s parents, the words refused to come. Time went by and they got nowhere.

Amid the uncomfortable silence that followed, Ashton’s father broached the subject.

“Something happened to him, didn’t it?” he said.

Words rose in Claudia’s throat, only to scatter like clouds before taking form.

Ashton’s father’s gaze on them was comforting. “I only had to see the pain in your faces to know.”

“My goodness, whatever are you rambling about now? I’m sure he only stopped off at the bakery across the road. He always did love Martha’s honey bread. That boy, I don’t know. One would think after so long away, he’d come and see his parents first...”

Ashton’s mother kept on babbling away, but she knew her son wasn’t coming. She knew, but was pretending not to know, stubbornly refusing to accept reality. Claudia knew with painful clarity just how she was feeling—it was the same folly that she had gone through herself.

With considerable effort, Olivia assumed a stern expression, clicked the heels of her military boots together, and raised a hand in a proper salute. “I am here today to inform you that Lieutenant Colonel Ashton Senefelder was killed in action.”

“Deary me, that sort of joke is not the thing I thought to hear from such an angelic—” She broke off as Olivia continued to stare at her in silence, her expression unchanged. “He... My Ashton...is dead...?”

Ashton’s mother looked dazed. Wobbling on her feet, she drifted off out the back of the shop. Ashton’s father watched her go with an air of concern before turning to them with a mirthless smile. Just looking at it, Claudia felt like her heart would burst. She clenched her fists tight.

“Ever since he became a soldier I knew, somewhere deep down, that this day might come. I knew it, and yet...” As he crumpled his hat in his hands, Olivia took a step forward. She took a pen from her pocket and held it out. Claudia was not about to interfere.

“This belonged to Lieutenant Colonel Ashton. I hope you’ll take it.” Ashton’s father stared down at the pen, then silently shook his head. Olivia couldn’t hide her confusion. “But why?”

“My son sent that to you in death, Olivia,” he said, his eyes full of compassion.

“How did you know...?”

“That pen was another thing he wrote about in his letters. I think it made him awfully happy to get a gift from you. He wrote pages about how grateful he was. I can’t accept this from you. You keep it with you, Olivia, just as you have until now. I’m sure that’s what Ashton would have wanted.” He gently wrapped Olivia’s fingers back around the pen. “Olivia, Claudia, you have my thanks for taking the trouble to come see us on behalf of our son. His was not a long life, but this I can say for sure: he cherished every day he spent with the two of you.”

First Ashton’s mother had gone out back as though in a trance. Now his father gave Ashton’s treasured possession over to Olivia’s care. It ate away at Claudia, growing into a devouring fire that left her heart in agony. The moment before the door closed behind them, she heard Ashton’s father let out a wail that would stay with her for the rest of her days...

“I don’t want my mom and dad to be sad,” Emil mumbled, hanging his head.

“Thought so,” Olivia said. “So I won’t take you, but I appreciate the thought.” She took the bag of sweets she kept strapped to Comet’s back, then handed it to Emil. “Here, this is a thank-you gift.”

Emil opened the bag, then broke out in a grin. “Sweets!” he exclaimed. The other two kids let out shrieks of glee. Then he paused. “Are...are you really giving us all of these?”

“You betcha. Share them with everyone, okay?”

“Okay! Thanks, miss!” The children waved enthusiastically as Olivia set off again.

If Ashton could see her now, his eyes would pop out of his head, Claudia thought. Was it his death that made her grow up? If so...I can’t imagine anything crueler. As she gazed after Olivia’s receding figure, Kagura whinnied.

“Oh, I’m all right,” Claudia reassured the horse. Kagura knew what to do without Claudia even having to touch the reins. With a clatter of hooves, she set off after Olivia.

The vanguard left Canalia and continued westward across the Plains of Ilys. They stopped off at Fort Caspar to rest and resupply. It was on the second day of their stay that the inevitable happened. Felix and Olivia were standing on either side of a map of Listelein Palace planning their next move when Matthew came with the news.

“Are you certain?”

“I could hardly mistake our former allies.”

“How many?”

“A little over twenty thousand.”

There were around eighty thousand soldiers stationed at Kier Fortress, weren't there? Even assuming they had sustained losses in the battle with First Allied Legion, twenty thousand was too few if they meant to exterminate the Azure Knights.

“I certainly don't plan on losing, but if I'm honest, I'd rather it didn't come to that at all,” Matthew said, raising his hands with exaggerated helplessness.

Felix looked at Olivia. “What do you think?”

She pressed a finger to her cheek. “I doubt Darmés would break his promise after all this...”

“I agree. There are some relevant circumstances. I sent a letter to Rosenmarie explaining everything and, acknowledging how unreasonable a request I was making, asked her to join us.”

“Rosenmarie von Berlietta, huh? That takes me back...” Olivia said wistfully. “But that means she must have come to join our side, right?”

“I just hope it will be that simple...” Rosenmarie wasn't the sort to go in for cloak-and-dagger, but she was calculating. The knowledge prevented Felix from being entirely pleased by the situation. He couldn't gauge her intentions.

“Well, wondering isn't going to get us anywhere,” Olivia said. “Let's go talk to her.”

“I suppose so...” Felix said. “I'll have the Azure Knights standing by just in case.” He gave Violet instructions, then he and Olivia went to find Rosenmarie.

Outside the castle walls, the air thrummed with murderous energy.

“Look who’s here! Playing together nicely, I see,” Rosenmarie drawled. The ranks of the Crimson and the Helios Knights loomed intimidatingly behind her. Her tone was playful, but there was no laughter in her eyes.

“I’m impressed you found us.”

“Don’t you go maligning the shimmers’ intelligence expertise, now. Dear me—Lord Felix, once of the empire’s Three Generals, has forgotten even *that*?”

Rosenmarie’s sarcasm was in fine form. Felix couldn’t help but smile. “Is that what you came here to say?”

“That was half the reason.”

“And the other half?” When he asked her this, Rosenmarie glared at Olivia. *Of course that’s how it goes*, Felix thought, sighing at the predictable turn. Olivia, meanwhile, gave Rosenmarie a cheerful smile and a wave.

“Long time no see, Rosenmarie. Looks like you’re doing well!”

Rosenmarie spat on the ground. “Still all sunshine and rainbows, I see. We’ve got a lot of unfinished business, you and I. As I’m sure you remember.”

Olivia only smiled and didn’t reply. Felix glanced sidelong at her. *She’s totally forgotten, hasn’t she?*

“And I mean to *get what I’m owed*.” No sooner had she spoken than Rosenmarie kicked off the ground and—

Two swords crossed, but Olivia’s wasn’t one of them. “What the hell are you doing?” Rosenmarie hissed. A stir rumbled through the knight orders behind her.

“I should be asking you that,” Felix replied. “I’d thank you not to make this all about *your* concerns.”

A beguiling gleam came into Rosenmarie’s eyes. “You’re not getting out of my way, are you?”



“This is foolishness. There is still a lot you don’t know, Rosenmarie. Surely this can wait until after you hear us out.”

Rosenmarie hesitated, then said, “Fine. I owe you, so I’ll go along with this for now. But whatever you have to say had better be worth it, or I *will* be picking up where I left off.” She took three steps back, then jerked her chin up, indicating for him to continue. Felix returned Elhazard to its scabbard. Then he laid out what had happened since he’d sent his letter.

“All right, so setting aside how insane that sounds, you’re saying that the one really behind this is a god of death who’s manipulating Darmés?”

Felix indicated with a grave nod that she was correct.

“A god of death...” Rosenmarie muttered. The corners of her mouth twisted up as she stared wolfishly at Olivia. “Got your ass handed to you, huh? You had it coming.”

“Yep, I was helpless,” Olivia said, straight-faced.

Rosenmarie spat again, then said irritably, “I can’t believe you went and got beaten by someone else. Don’t tell me the two of you are stupid enough to think that if you work together you can defeat this god of death.”

“I’m not saying anything like that. Still, together our chances are a lot better than just mine alone.”

“The fate of humanity now rests on her shoulders,” Felix added, resolution in his voice. “In order for her to be at her strongest when she faces the god of death, I cannot allow any harm to come to her.”

Rosenmarie scoffed. “You’re crazy. This is a *god* we’re talking about, right? I know you have this ‘good person’ thing going, but running into a battle you can’t possibly win is taking it a bit far, don’t you think?”

“To reiterate, the *fate of humanity* is at stake.”

“I couldn’t care less about the fate of humanity, and I’m not going to disgrace myself by compromising my convictions.”

“Now I see. This isn’t about reason. Well, if you mean to always put your own

need for revenge first...” Accepting that he had no choice but to remove her, Felix reached for his sword. Tension crackled in the air. Then Rosenmarie gave him an exasperated smile.

“All right, you’ve made it clear how determined you are, so cool it, all right? You’re always so stubborn.”

Felix felt a rush of indignation hearing this from Rosenmarie. He still did not take his hand off his sword.

Rosenmarie’s expression turned serious. “You’re sure that Emperor Ramza is himself again?”

“He is an honored guest of the Kingdom of Fernest,” Felix said, his mouth tightening.

“Ah...” Rosenmarie said, then she narrowed her eyes at Olivia. “Apparently I owe you now, so just this once, I’ll help you out. *However!* Once this is all over, we’re having a rematch. And I’m not taking no for an answer,” she added threateningly.

Olivia backed away from Rosenmarie a little but nodded.

To be sure, Felix asked, “Perhaps this comes a little late, but are you sure about this?”

“Just a *little* late. As you can see,” Rosenmarie said, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb. “I’ve brought a premium selection of the craziest bastards in the Crimson and Helios Knights with me. Don’t be afraid to expect great things on the battlefield.”

“You’ll hurt our feelings calling us things like that, m’lady!” called a broad-shouldered soldier, drawing a roar of laughter from her knights.

“Now, we have orders from the *great* Emperor Darmés to hunt down the Azure Knights,” Rosenmarie went on. “You’re clever, Felix, so I’m sure you catch my drift.”

“You’re going to pretend to search for us, I suppose?”

Rosenmarie smirked. “See? No need to go advertising myself as a traitor. Twenty thousand soldiers should do for appearances’ sake. If only you’d done

the same, Felix. But it's too late for that now."

Felix, who recognized that he had allowed his emotions to control him for a time, had no defense. He avoided meeting Rosenmarie's eyes.

"But then, if it weren't for that painfully sincere streak of yours, that lot wouldn't have stuck with you this far." Rosenmarie glanced up at the Azure Knights on the ramparts, bows at the ready, and nodded to herself.

"We needn't worry about Kier Fortress moving against us, then?" Felix asked. He didn't see Rosenmarie's chief of staff Oscar, which meant the man had to still be at Kier Fortress. Felix was familiar enough with Oscar's character to know he wouldn't be thrilled about what Rosenmarie was doing.

"He's torn between his loyalty to me and his pride as an imperial soldier, but I wouldn't worry. But remember this: if I think I'm on the losing side, I'll have no qualms about turning on you."

Felix couldn't help but observe that if she really meant to betray them, she needn't have said anything—she could have just quietly done it when the time came.

"You're not such a bad person yourself, Rosenmarie," Felix said with a wry smile. Rosenmarie spat again with even more vehemence than before.

Amid the swirl of ambitions and ulterior motives, the greatest figures of the age came one after another to the field where their fate would be decided. The final battle was about to begin.

II

In the year Tempus Fugit 1001, the three-hundred-thousand-strong army of the alliance arrived at the south of a rugged expanse of reddish earth that seemed to stretch on forever, punctuated only by towering rocky crags. These were the Trival Wastes.

To the north, the imperial forces spread out with Darmés's personal army, all in black armor, in the lead, followed by three hundred thousand of the Dawn Knights. Among them were a great number of undead dangerous beasts, inspiring no small amount of terror throughout the army of the alliance. The

Kingdom of Swaran and the Principality of Stonia had also sent their armies under the empire's banners, taking the field in a pincer formation. All told, this put the imperial forces at over three hundred sixty thousand, far outnumbering the armies of the alliance. The *History of Duvedirica* would tell of how, even before the greatest battle the continent had ever known began, the battlefield reeked of death.

On the eve of the battle, someone looked up at the heavens and compared the stars to the tears of the gods. A girl on the cusp of adulthood hugged herself at every intermittent gust of wind.

Olivia gazed up at the starry sky from atop one of the rocky crags. Then she heard familiar footfalls approaching. She called out, softly enough to not break the tranquility.

"You've got Featherweight down perfectly."

"You think too highly of me, ser. Though thanks to you, I get to explore places others cannot tread. As a result, I'm able to locate you before anyone else, and most importantly, that lingering stench of death doesn't reach up here."

Olivia smiled a little at Claudia's words. Claudia crouched down beside her, rested her arm on one knee, and looked up at the sky.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Olivia didn't say anything; she just reached up toward the sky as though to catch a star in her hand, just like the boy in the story had done.

"Is that for luck?" Claudia asked.

"Oh, no. I just remembered a book I read where a boy overcomes all sorts of challenges to catch a star, and then a god grants him a wish." Of course, there was no star between her fingers. "But this is reality," she said, waving her empty hand and laughing. Claudia gazed unblinkingly up at the sky.

"The battle is tomorrow. Do you think we can win?"

"I've talked everything over with the others. All that's left now is to do it."

Blood would be supreme commander, with Lara supporting him as his second-in-command. After seeing that the enemy had a large number of

undead beasts, Olivia knew that Sutherland's tactics would be useless—because she had observed them in every detail. They would therefore fight the old-fashioned way. There was no need for rigorous strategy—victory would come down to whoever had more raw power.

Olivia's first task was to deliver the first strike to offset their disadvantage of numbers.

"Yet I still can't stop worrying," Claudia said. "It's utterly pathetic."

It was just like Claudia to be a bundle of nerves. Feeling a rush of fondness for her, Olivia decided to raise a subject that would allay her fears.

"Felix has been busy behind the scenes in the lead-up to the battle."

"Lord Felix...?"

"Uh-huh. So I know it's going to go our way."

"That is very encouraging," Claudia replied. "But it's not just undead soldiers, beasts, and Darmés's army we'll be fighting. We can't forget that the Stonian and Swaran armies are in position behind them."

"I mean, we can't forget them, but it wouldn't matter if we did."

"Meaning...?"

"Um, basically, I mean we can just let Violet take care of them."

Violet was responsible for handling the Swaran and Stonian armies. Together they numbered forty thousand, but for Violet, a force of twenty thousand would be plenty to take them down. That didn't mean she could afford to be careless or cocky, but Olivia, based on her experience doing battle with Violet, thought that Claudia's fears were unfounded. In order to win, they had to take down Darmés, who controlled the undead, and Xenia, who was behind the whole thing—that was all. When Darmés was defeated, the undead would return to a natural state of death, so there was no need to go to extreme lengths to wipe them all out. Olivia thought that, so long as they stayed on the defensive without alerting the enemy to their plan, they should be more than capable of holding out.

To Claudia, whose anxiety was palpable, she said as brightly as she could,

“C’mon, it’ll be fine. Too much tension in your shoulders will make you lose a fight even when you should have won.”

Claudia shut her eyes and smiled faintly. “I think I know what Ashton would say if he were here. You could be a bit less lighthearted about the battle to decide the fate of humanity.”

Olivia nodded with a knowing look. “Yeah, I bet he would have. Probably with a giant sigh for good measure.”

They exchanged untroubled smiles. Then Claudia fixed Olivia with a serious stare.

“General, you will face a foe too powerful for me to even begin to comprehend. I know that if I tried to fight at your side I would only get in your way. The only thing I can do is pray that you’ll be all right. Being this useless makes me so angry at myself I could scream...”

Olivia laid a hand over Claudia’s tightly clenched fist. “It might not be much reassurance, but I’m going to do my best not to let you down.”

“Since I became your aide, you haven’t let me down once. From the beginning, I couldn’t have asked for a better superior officer...” Claudia trailed off, and silence fell between them. Olivia, looking at Claudia from the side as she waited for her to continue, saw a faint blush come over Claudia’s beautiful face. Another frigid gust brushed her neck.

“Superior officer, or...”

“Or?”

“Or f...”

“Or what?”

“F-Fr...F-Friend.” Claudia covered her face, looking mortified.

Olivia felt so bashful that she laughed to try and clear the air. But she immediately realized that was the wrong thing to do. She reached out and squeezed Claudia’s hand tight.

Claudia twitched. “That was an inappropriate thing to say to a superior officer. Please forget I said anything.”

Olivia shook her head. “How could I forget something that made me so happy? I mean, I’ve thought of you as a friend since *ages* ago—no, as one of my *best* friends.”

“Best friends...?” Claudia gaped at her. That was when Olivia told her what she was resolved to do—not for herself, but because she wanted her friends to be safe.

“I’m going to come back. That means you have to stay alive as well, to be there when I do.” She held out a little finger. Claudia intertwined her own slender finger with Olivia’s. There was no need to say anything more.

For a while longer, the two of them gazed up at the stars, enraptured, until there came a gust of wind that made Claudia involuntarily draw her head in. She sat up. “It’s getting very cold. Isn’t it about time we were getting back?”

“I’m going to stay a bit longer.”

“In that case, wear this.” Claudia took off her scarf and wrapped it deftly around Olivia’s neck. Kicking off lightly with one foot, she sprang up and, in an instant, was swallowed by the darkness.

“She *can* do Featherweight perfectly,” Olivia said to herself. Looking up, she reached out once more, spreading her fingers then closing them around a star. There, clutched in her hand, was—nothing. Olivia pressed her fist into her chest and smiled.

Wishes aren’t something you wait for someone else to grant. You have to fight for them yourself. That’s what makes them so precious. Right, Ashton? She pulled the scarf up over her mouth. *It’s so warm...*

Right then, even the biting chill of the midwinter wind could not reach her.

III

On the battlefield, life’s defiant cries melded together with the rich fetidness of death, blurring the line between reality and unreality beyond all recognition. Even the deatheater birds fled.

While the imperial army and the army of the alliance glared at each other

beneath an azure sky, Olivia, perched atop a rocky crag that towered over the imperial side, clicked open the pocket watch that Otto had given her back when he was alive.

Not long now... Putting away the pocket watch, she turned to the fairy who was staring dumbfounded at the horde of the undead.

“What’s up, Comet?”

“My name’s Silky! Get it through your stupid head!”

Olivia laughed. “Oops, sorry. Anyway, you looked kind of out of it. What’s up?”

“I’m not out of anything! I would *never*, not after Felix chose me especially to keep an eye on an ugly cow like you.” Just as Silky finished saying this, the moans of the undead drifted to them on the wind. She twitched.

“Are you scared...?”

“D-D-D-D-Do...Don’t be stupid! As if the beautiful and exalted fairy Silky Breeze would fear a pack of walking corpses! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“You sure talk fast,” Olivia said after a pause. “You sound sort of funny too.”

“Agh!” Silky clawed furiously at her pale-pink hair. Then, abruptly, she scowled at Olivia. “You’re sure this stupid ‘magic’ of yours will work, aren’t you?”

“I’m pretty sure it’ll be fine.”

“You’re ‘*pretty sure*’? Pah! You might have got Lassara’s respect, but I don’t trust you, not one bit. Well, don’t worry. Even if you do turn out to be useless, that’s why *I’m* here keeping an eye on you. You won’t know what hit you once you see fairy magecraft.” Silky grinned nastily.

Olivia had no idea why Silky had been so aggressive toward her ever since they’d first met. What Silky didn’t know was that Felix and Lassara had asked her to take care of the fairy. Olivia, suspecting it would lead to trouble, wasn’t about to tell her that.

“It’s time.”

“Hmph. Let’s see what you’ve got then,” Silky said condescendingly, folding her arms. Olivia planted her legs far apart, then brought her hands together with a *clap*. As she did so, she compressed down her prepared mana and the magical essence she drew in until it was incredibly dense. A single ray of light shone out from the gap between her palms, then many more burst forth. What appeared at first was a ball of light no bigger than a fingernail. As Olivia parted her hands, spreading one out to each side, the ball let out a high-pitched screaming sound in fitful bursts. It filled with black lightning of the sort never seen in nature, endlessly expanding, flashing, and obscuring the wasteland under its vast shadow.

“Crystal Planet Polychromus.”

Olivia’s creation was like a second sun. Yet unlike the sun, it shone with a kaleidoscopic array of colors. Surrendering to gravity, it began its descent over the imperial army.

“Wh...What the hell is that...” Silky’s voice trembled like she didn’t know what had hit her.

The army of the alliance seemed to have forgotten both their voices and the enemy in front of them. They should have been letting out a rousing battle cry; instead, they simply stared at the fantastical scene as it unfolded.

There was no sound, only a shining kaleidoscope of color. The undead, men and beasts alike, were engulfed by the torrent of light and disappeared without a trace. Rosenmarie, commander of the Crimson and Helios Knights, smiled to herself with a touch of self-deprecation.

“It seems that all this time I was wrong,” said Arvin, the shimmer who had once crossed blades with Olivia. “A mere monster couldn’t create all this. It’s like something straight out of a tale of gods and myths.”

“Arvin, that sounds like you’re calling Olivia a god,” Rosenmarie said teasingly. The terror did not leave Arvin’s face, but he forced a smile.

“If anything, it sounds like that’s what *you* think, Lady Rosenmarie.”

Rosenmarie, unprepared for this counterattack, cursed and clenched her fists.

Felix told me about magic, but who could have imagined it would be that powerful? I wouldn't put it past her to conquer a whole nation single-handedly.

Thinking back on all her bluster about settling the score with Olivia, she wanted nothing more than to punch her past self in the face. Even if she employed all her Odh, her chance of victory would be smaller than a grain of sand, while the likelihood of defeat stretched out like an endless desert.

She was pleased when Arvin said plainly, "Right now, I think she's terrifying, but that's all."

"She's terrifying, all right. But that's nothing to be ashamed of. Fear is essential to survival."

Arvin stared up at the ball of light. "Have you thought about giving up on your revenge?"

The sudden question sent a small tremor through Rosenmarie's heart. *My revenge...?*

She had not been cowed by the worlds of difference in their power, much less forgiven Olivia for killing her mentor. On the other hand, she was conscious of her fury at the girl ebbing. The conviction she should have felt had lost its direction, leaving her with her emotions knocked off-balance.

After dropping this on her, Arvin gave a small bow. "But I am only a shimmer. I have overstepped."

Snapping herself out of it, Rosenmarie raised her voice a notch and said, "Anyway, you're a real madman, aren't you? You've had plenty of chances to back out, yet here you are. You're a traitor now, and don't think you can worm your way out of it."

"I simply wish to see this battle through to its conclusion in my capacity as a shimmer. Isn't it the same for you, my lady?" Arvin replied, glancing significantly to the left. Rosenmarie's forces were positioned on the edge of the right flank, with the Azure Knights formed up right beside them in plain sight.

Rosenmarie snorted. "The day is here. There's no need to play pretend anymore. Simple as that."

Arvin nodded, then his mouth curved in a small smile. “And yet they still seem on edge, don’t they?”

The Azure Knights had walled off their right flank with a heavy defensive formation. They wouldn’t hesitate to fall on Rosenmarie’s forces like a pack of hungry wolves if she did anything even the slightest bit suspicious. Felix was so gorgeous that it distracted people from the fact that he commanded a band of unmatched warriors who subsisted on death. There was nothing gorgeous about that. Not for nothing had the Azure Knights remained the empire’s mightiest army up until the day they had rebelled.

“I can’t blame him. It’s the natural thing to do in his position.” There was a light burning in her crimson eyes that was both sublime and ruinous as she turned her thoughts to Darmés and the god of death lurking in his shadow.

Olivia has this insane power, and yet she said the god of death utterly crushed her. The enemy must truly be a god. She has to be out of her mind to take on such an opponent again, and the same goes for Felix for joining her. Not like I have any room to talk, since I’m going along with it too.

Arvin, watching as the light slowly dimmed, muttered to himself, “If what she says is true, then what we’re trying to do is hopeless. Mortals cannot triumph over gods any more than water can flow uphill.”

“What do you suggest, then? Stay here and rot like those ghouls? Once you cut off your own escape routes, the only way is forward, even if you have to crawl. Even if you know you’ll be covered in mud.” Rosenmarie gripped the hilt of her sword tightly and bared her teeth viciously. Letting her fighting instincts guide her, she released her Odh.

The last of the light faded. A horn sounded from main command, heralding battle.

IV

Blood split his forces into three main groups. He commanded the central force made up of the Royal Army and the Azure Knights. Lara commanded the left force made up of the Winged Crusaders and the Crimson and Helios

Knights. Finally, the Sutherland armies made up the right force. The mages who formed the core of their strategy he divided up, one to each force. They would have the difficult job of taking the lead in going after the undead beasts. By rotating the three forces clockwise, Blood kept the soldiers' fatigue to a minimum while countering the imperial army that continued to attack day and night. The battle unfolded just as he had predicted.

Johann, who was deployed with the right force under Lion's command, kept up a steady stream of magecraft, exterminating one undead beast after another without rest. He arrived at his next destination to find his allies under attack by a pack of ice foxes—class one dangerous beasts. He let out a sigh as heavy as mud.

"Cut me some slack, would you? I don't have infinite strength, *or* mana." But complaining wasn't going to change the situation. Johann set his sights on the ice foxes, then flicked his fingers at them in rapid succession. Each sent flames erupting from the pack, but they continued their rampage with no sign of stopping. Even when more than half their number had fire eating into their flesh, they went on attacking. Fresh chaos was spawned atop the old when a crowd of undead soldiers joined them.

"Thank you, Lord Mage! I thought we were done for..."

Johann didn't even look at the soldier who called out to him in a trembling voice.

"Seeing as you're alive, don't waste it. Take the wounded who can still walk and get the hell out of here."

"Y-Yes, ser!" The soldier blindly ran off to carry out Johann's order, leading away several of his wounded comrades.

"Right, then." During this short exchange with the soldiers, the creatures had apparently finished making a meal of his unlucky comrades. The ice foxes' clouded eyes turned to Johann and were fixed on him and him alone.

"It was fire that first allowed man to compete on even footing with beasts. And dead or not, you once were nothing more than beasts. I suggest you learn to fear fire like your kin."

In truth, Johann was not confident enough to justify being flippant. The foxes weren't nearly as strong as the class two dangerous beasts he had taken out, but as a pack, they could pose an even greater threat. On a basic level, people and beasts were the same.

When one of the pack dashed at Johann, the others followed, like a dam breaking.

"Uh-uh, I do *not* like that. You're dead, you don't get to go on a murderous rampage." Johann cast Adamantine Wind on himself to heighten his physical defenses. Stepping nimbly to dodge around the ice foxes' wildly chaotic attacks, he aimed solely at their legs, lopping them off. He had taken away most of his foes' mobility and was still alive—and it was in that momentary gap that the vampire bird he hadn't noticed in time dropped out of the sky.

His mind instantly began working, hunting for a way to survive, but—

I'm doomed. All his options for evasion were already closed off, and there was no time to cast a defensive spell. It was such an anticlimactic way to die, it was almost funny.

There's still so much I wanted to do... Even though he was facing certain death, a savage grin spread over his face. Facing the vampire bird as it came at him, scattering black feathers in its wake, he thrust out his left hand. In his mind's eye, he saw Angelica's innocent, smiling face.

"I hate to do this," he called out to the bird, "but I just can't stand to be alone, so you're going to have to die with me. Oh, except you're already dead. You've got nothing to complain about, then."

Moments before the sharp beak pierced his chest, a vast shadow fell over them from the sky above the vampire bird. Before Johann could see what it was, his vision went white.

What's going on...? Following his survival instincts, Johann jumped back. As he did so, he saw an enormous beast of godlike proportions crushing the vampire bird like an insect under its foot. *Is that...?!*

The creature was covered in fur as white as fresh snow, giving it a graceful, even kingly air. That alone would have set it apart from the other beasts, but

more telling still was the total absence of the stench of decay that rolled off the undead beasts and men alike.

Golden eyes that revealed a powerful intelligence fixed Johann with an imperious stare.

Is that the king of the beasts?! Johann sent flames swirling around the blade of his sword and took up a fighting stance. But then—

“Settle down, young buck. We’re on the same side.” The voice came from above his head. It was extremely dignified, but also clearly belonged to a young child.

“The— Did you say the same side?” Without letting his guard down, he looked up. Atop the great beast’s head, standing legs astride, was a small girl.

“He appears greatly confused.”

“So he does...” Lassara agreed. “I can’t believe he dragged me into this mess—at my age!” She was quite disgusted at herself for agreeing to take part in a war that did so much harm without any good to show for it. But she couldn’t turn Felix away when he’d asked her.

“The fate of humanity or some such is at stake. Such things are of little concern to me, but the same can hardly be said of you.”

“You can put a sock in it. I know all that without you harping on.” Lassara jumped nimbly down from Vajra’s head, then walked over to the wary young man, noting his well-honed physique.

“Hmm. Yes, every corner of your body is bursting with mana. You’re to be commended for training so diligently without losing yourself to your talent. Still, you forget about your flank. That’s how you end up making fatal mistakes. If I hadn’t been here, there’d be a dirty great hole in your chest to let the wind through,” Lassara finished with a cackle. The young man’s wariness did not decrease.

“You’re the empire’s mage. Why did you help me...?”

“Oho. Sounds like the youngster’s been talking nonsense,” she replied,

scowling to indicate her displeasure. “You listen to me—I’ve nothing to do with the empire of today. Especially not now that they’re raising the dead.”

“It seems I was ill-informed. I do apologize,” the young man said earnestly. “Not to compound the insult, but you are not the age you look, are you?”

Lassara had not expected this question. Glaring a little, she said, “That’s hardly a question fit to put to a lady. Still, I’m impressed that you picked it up so quickly.”

“Well, I’m better with women than I am with magecraft.”

Lassara snorted. “If you can mouth off like that, there must be life in you yet. All right, young buck, you deal with the dangerous beasts on the left. Broaden your field of vision. You’ve still got mana aplenty, so I won’t take no for an answer.”

Lassara’s large eyes bored into the young man. With so many more undead beasts prowling about than she had expected, she didn’t have the luxury of letting a talented mage sit on his hands.

At last, the young man’s guard came down a little. “This is the last place I thought I’d be reminded of my nagging old teacher.”

Lassara folded her arms and lifted her chin indignantly. “If you were my apprentice, I’d spank you a hundred times.”

“I beg your mercy,” the young man said, dipping his head in apology. He then turned away from her, let out a deep breath, then sprinted off west.

He must have had a mighty fine teacher. I didn’t catch a whiff of that arrogance that always hangs around mages. Yes, he’s not like the youngster, but he’s sweet in his own way. Lassara smiled, then looked over at Vajra, who had taken care of the remaining undead in their vicinity.

“They don’t hear you, then?”

“No. As ever, there is no response. There can be no doubt that they are dead. In all my long years, I have never seen anything like this.”

“Well, when you consider our enemy is a god that feasts on death and its puppet, perhaps it isn’t so surprising.”

“A god, eh...?” Vajra murmured, then fell silent. As a great plume of flame rose up into the western sky, Lassara finally gave voice to the question that she had kept hidden in the back of her mind.

“Why did you decide to help us?”

“Why? Because you asked me to, of course. Has senility come for you at last?”

“Who’re you calling senile?!”

Vajra only regarded her with a silent look of resignation. Lassara turned away, cleared her throat, then moved on to her next question.

“Are you ready to forgive the humans, then?” No sooner were the words out of her mouth than Vajra bared his gleaming fangs, leaning in toward Lassara as though he might tear her to pieces then and there.

“Forgive the murderers of my beloved child? No matter how many ages go by, that I will never do.”

“Then why help?” Lassara said levelly, her expression unchanged.

“I cannot leave my fellows to be degraded even in death. That is all.”

Time made even the most lasting memories fade, whether one wished it or not. While Vajra might never come to trust humans, it seemed enough time had passed that his hatred would no longer drive him to lash out at random. So Lassara observed as she regarded Vajra, who turned away from her.

“Well, whatever your reasons, I’m glad we have you. Even for a great mage, this is a little more than I can handle.”

Vajra snorted. “Still, even if we survive this, it will mean nothing if we do not strike at the root. I wonder if the boy and Garcia’s descendant can really pull it off.”

“Who can say...”

The nebulous fears that Lassara had harbored had turned out to be far, far worse than anything she’d imagined. After seeing Olivia’s magic in its full glory before the battle had begun, Lassara would not fight alongside Olivia and Felix. She was not worthy to do so. All she could do was keep faith that they would survive and ensure that they had a place to return to.

She jumped up onto Vajra's head, then with a dashing flourish of her vermilion cloak, cried, "Go forth!"

"Always with the orders..."

Lassara and Vajra set off, carving their way through the undead in their path as they pushed on east.

Meanwhile, Olivia and Felix held the fate of the world in their hands...

V

After she made her preemptive magical strike on the imperial army, Olivia hastened on foot from the battlefield. She met Felix in the location they had previously agreed on.

"I don't see Silky with you..." he said.

"Yeah, I don't know why, but she got *super* angry and stormed off back to Lassara," Olivia said, stroking the neck of her horse, Comet, with whom she had been reunited. Felix appeared to consider for a moment, then he nimbly mounted his own horse.

"Well, whatever it was, I'm glad she went back. Let us be off at once."

From then, they rode at full gallop for five days. Slipping past the watchful eyes of the imperial army as they went, they arrived on the outskirts of an isolated farming village on the western edge of imperial lands. There, they diverted left away from the road to climb a sloping path enclosed in a thick canopy of trees. At the top, it suddenly opened out on a sweeping view of thatch-roofed houses and crop fields scattered here and there across a wide, flat valley. Farmers paused as they swung their hoes to slap their aching backs, and small children were hard at work with hatchets to chop up firewood. There was a sort of tragic bravery to the scene. Seven-tenths of the empire's lands were cold and barren, and crops struggled to grow there. Out on the peripheries, things were even harsher. All that mattered to the people who lived in such parts was surviving from one day to the next. Wars entered into on the whims of bureaucrats were nothing but annoyances to them.

Felix looked down on the farming village with a complex mix of emotions.

Olivia hesitantly poked his arm.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Are we resting here?”

“No, we’ll just leave our horses in the village.”

“Huh? Our horses? How come?”

“We’re still all right here, but the closer we get to the capital, the more likely we are to be found.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. So...?”

Felix stifled a laugh at Olivia’s response, then went on. “As our time is limited, it is imperative that we avoid any unnecessary confrontations. My plan is to continue on to the imperial capital through the mountains, where horses may slow us down.”

“Ahh, I see what you mean.” To Comet, she said, “It’s goodbye for a bit, then.”

The horse gave a small, plaintive neigh, and his head seemed to droop. It was easy to see how attached he was to Olivia.

“We could rest a little. What do you want to do?” Felix asked.

“It’s fine. I’m not tired at all.”

“Then let us waste no time.”

Felix soon located a stable. He paid the farmer who fed the horses a little more generously than was necessary, then they left their steeds and swiftly departed the village.

“As I said, we really do not have much time. We’ll travel with Swift Step.”

“Gotcha.”

There was no sign of any figures moving off east, only the echo of a sound like a *snap*.

It would be some time before the two of them arrived at the imperial capital.

VI

Violet's Camp, Army of the Alliance

A little over a week had passed since the fighting had begun. Violet's orders from Blood were to subdue the combined Swaran-Stonian army that was closing in from their rear to catch them in a pincer formation. Behind the scenes, she set her plan into motion...

"Did the enemy take the bait?"

"They seemed to at first, but they pulled back straightaway. The commander said they were probably wary of a trap." The messenger's words confirmed what Violet had suspected from the start of the battle.

"I knew it. They aren't really interested in fighting."

"Ser...?"

"Just talking to myself. You needn't concern yourself."

"Yes, ser! By your leave, ser!" The messenger departed, just as her aide, Major Cassachy, who was in command on the front line, returned.

"What do you mean, they aren't interested in fighting?"

Violet narrowed her eyes at Cassachy. "I can't say I approve of eavesdropping."

"I wouldn't dream of eavesdropping, ser. It just so happens that my only redeeming feature is that my ears work better than anyone else's." He didn't look remotely embarrassed.

Wearily, Violet said, "I meant what I said, nothing more."

"They seem to be fighting in earnest to me."

"Their commander must be exceptional, then, if they were able to pull the wool over the eyes of my talented aide." Into the second half of this remark she injected a healthy dose of sarcasm, but this was apparently lost on its target. She stared at her uncle in awe as he gravely declared that the enemy commander must be a person of great cunning indeed.

"Right or wrong, the commanders are of the view that we should strike first,

lest it comes back to bite us later. I think we should actively listen to them—it could directly impact morale.”

Violet only had twenty thousand soldiers—half that of the forty-thousand-strong Swaran-Stonian army. But every one of them was a member of the Azure Knights. The commanders must have decided that—even accounting for their disadvantage in numbers—now that the fighting had been going on for some time, they could afford to go on the offensive. In broad strokes, their judgment was correct.

“I thought they’d start talking like that around now.” This was the only comment Violet made. Cassachy seemed to infer that she wasn’t going to agree with him. He put forward a different suggestion.

“Why not call for a truce, then? Swaran and Stonia are the empire’s puppets, after all. They’re only fighting because they’re forced to. There’s no need to sacrifice soldiers to this farce.”

“They have orders from the empire to exterminate the Azure Knights. If you were in their position, would you take our bait?” The empire was undoubtedly watching. Under such conditions, they had no choice but to fight. Cassachy’s proposal entirely ignored their opponent’s situation.

“So no change in our tactics, then,” Cassachy said. He sounded deferential, but he pouted like a child. The total disconnect between his words and his face was so entertaining that Violet burst out laughing.

“I suppose what you want to say is that we should cut the farce short, then go off to fight the undead.”

Cassachy gave her a grumpy look, then, when that had passed, he made a tube with his hand and gave a fake cough. “Some of their fangs may be broken, but they may still bite with the ones that remain. It is my view that we ought to go along with the farce without provoking them unnecessarily.”

It was such a perfect about-face that Violet could only smile helplessly. She could understand that he was worried about his lord’s daughter, but there was no room for such concerns on the battlefield.

“We aren’t fighting to gain anything here. It is imperative that we go on as we

have been—solidifying our defenses and *not* engaging in active aggression. At this stage, all you need to do is the job I’ve given you and no more.” Cassachy indicated his understanding, but he didn’t look away from Violet. “Do you think I’m being naive?”

“No, my lady...” he said. “But the enemy may take advantage of leniency to go on the attack.”

Fighting spirit burned in Violet’s voice. “Then we will see that they fear the Azure Knights in the very marrow of their bones. You need not be troubled.”

Cassachy dropped to his knees and bowed low. “As you command, my lady.”

Main Command of the Swaran-Stonian Army

“Even the Azure Knights hesitate to rush into an attack,” said Marshal Liberal Eltoria of the Swaran Kingdom. He was so off the mark that General Cecilia palla Cadio of the Principality of Stonia had to repress a heavy sigh.

In their crushing loss to the Holy Land of Mekia, Stonia had lost many of its senior retainers, chief among them Field Marshal August gibb Lanbenstein. Command of the Stonian Army had fallen to Cecilia, who once more found herself standing on a battlefield against her will.

She looked up at the fluttering banners of House Anastasia. “The Azure Knights’ commander is one of the greatest of our time. She guessed at our plan and is holding back from attacking. That’s all.”

“Our plan, eh...?” Liberal said significantly. Cecilia outright scowled at him.

“Am I the only one who went in fully aware of what we were doing? If the Azure Knights attack in earnest, it won’t matter that they have half our numbers. They’ll crush both our armies to dust in a matter of days. I’ve said it before, but so you don’t forget—we aren’t an army so much as an undisciplined mob.”

Liberal folded his arms and laughed bitterly. “I don’t deny that. But I also don’t think *they* will be happy with how things are going.”

Of course the “they” that he spoke of was none other than the imperial overseer sent to observe them. Clad in black armor, the overseer lurked in a

corner of the camp as they spoke, staring unsettlingly at them.

“And I’m doing all this so that they don’t pick up on it!” Cecilia, conscious of the overseer’s eyes, automatically dropped her voice to a whisper. Liberal’s smile vanished, replaced by a grim expression.

“The empire today is not what it once was. I don’t have the slightest desire to stand against those monsters. Whatever extenuating circumstances there might have been, I can’t comprehend how the Azure Knights could stage an open rebellion. I thought we were of the same mind on that point, General.”

Cecilia had no reply. The news of the Azure Knights’ rebellion had come to Cecilia via the mouth of a traveling merchant. She’d learned that the bizarre rumors that had started to fly at the same time were true when an emissary arrived from the empire. Now that she had seen the monsters with her own eyes, she fully understood that they were even more dangerous than she could ever have imagined.

Even then, I can’t...

There was pity in Liberal’s eyes as he looked at her, but it seemed to be just as much for himself as for her.

“Our king is still a child. If I am to protect my country, I must stay alive—no matter what, I must endure to that end. The same is surely true for you, General Cecilia, as successor to the great Marshal August.”

“But you saw it too, Marshal Liberal. That light.”

She had put together a battle plan that so utterly played into their opponents’ hands. This was in part because she had found out that she was fighting Violet, but the greater reason was that she had seen the empire’s monsters snuffed out of existence in an instant. In that light, like the wrath of the gods given form, Cecilia had found hope.

“Magecraft...” Liberal said. “It’s true; after witnessing that power I understand why they call mages the messengers of the gods. I also understand why it gives you hope.”

“Then—” she began, but the look Liberal gave her silenced her.

“But in the end, they are still only messengers. They cannot defeat the gods themselves.”

Cecilia had nothing with which to refute this. She found herself dropping her gaze and busied herself staring at the ground for no good reason.

“I have no objections to carrying on with your plan for the time being. But if the situation changes, so too may my position. The same is true if *they* catch on to you. I trust we understand each other. If you mislike it, you may by all means do as you please, but I will have you put down a sworn statement in writing that Swaran had nothing to do with it. That’s acceptable, I hope?” The softness of Liberal’s voice conveyed his resolve on this matter all the better.

“It is acceptable...” Cecilia said at length. In the end, the alliance between them was fragile, built on nothing more than the empire’s commands. Of course they could not stand as a united front. Cecilia bit back everything she wanted to say to give her agreement.

“If you must bear a grudge, let it be toward your own ill luck in being born into such times. Although, on this one occasion luck may be on your side.” With these words of despair and bitterness, Liberal turned away from Cecilia.

She gazed at the Swaran crest on his cloak and thought, *You are focused on the present without seeing the future. Haven’t you considered that we may be the next target of those monsters?* Feeling a strange chill, she hugged her shoulders and looked up at the sky. *All I can do is cling to hope.*

Even if that hope were as ephemeral as a fading candle.

Chapter Fifteen: The Asura

I

The last of the light faded like a lingering aroma. Fresh darkness obscured the ravine. A girl and a young man who should never have found themselves fighting on the same side were at that moment running together toward a shared goal. Very soon now they would have the imperial capital of Olsted in their sights.

Once we get through here, it's only a stone's throw to Olsted. We're almost there...

Felix glanced over at Olivia, who ran shoulder to shoulder with him. The ravine around them was hazy, like the air above a flame. It seemed to him that the closer they drew to the capital, the harder Olivia's expression became.

"The way out of the ravine is over this hill."

"Not far to the hut by the lake, then..."

Both of them sensed an inscrutable hostility and skidded to a halt, dropping Swift Step. They then heard the voice of a young man, cheerful in a way that was at odds with the hostile aura.

"One."

The empty space before them distorted into a writhing mass of enormous white snakes that rushed at Olivia and Felix. Felix cleaved across with Elhazard to impede the snakes, while Olivia leaped up into the sky.

"Two." The next voice was a woman's and absolutely devoid of humanity. A moment later, however, it filled with emotion. "Argh?!"

There was an extraordinary blast of wind from a blade as simultaneously, a corpse fell to the ground in a shower of blood, sliced clean in two. After cleaving through the snakes, Felix, without changing his stance, immediately reached behind him. He deftly drew the dagger that lay against the small of his back,

then threw it at a point in the gloom. The dagger glowed with azure light as it was swallowed by darkness. Then a shattered black mask slid down the slope to them. He barely had time to register the design of white snakes on the mask before—

“Three.” A vanishingly thin thread of pure murderous intent, as fine as a single hair, came at him out of a blind spot. But Felix’s instincts, recognizing that a hit would mean certain death, screamed out a warning at him. He was about to dodge—but he didn’t have to. With a rush of wind, Olivia shot past his back. She cut right through the thread and disappeared along with their attackers. In the next instant, everything turned gray, and the world turned upside down. Felix gasped, feeling as though he had been bound hand and foot. He couldn’t so much as twitch a finger. Blades came at him from every direction, striking with unerring precision. It all seemed to happen in less than a second.

Felix fell to his knees with a grunt as the world around him returned to normal. Strangely enough, despite all the sword strikes he had taken, only the pain stood out—most critically, he wasn’t actually bleeding. Felix realized then that this was nothing more than an Odic illusion to fool his perceptions, though it wasn’t possible to convince his brain of this in the blink of an eye.

Sliding its way through the gap came a voice ripe with age.

“Four. Checkmate.”

Felix’s body still refused to obey him. The attacker launched off a tree trunk, hurtling at him through the air. The perfect orb of light that shone, wavering, through the clouds offered just enough light for him to make out a black blade coming toward him. He had two seconds until contact. Felix judged he could just evade it since he managed to predict their movements. The attacker was sure he had Felix. That was his chance. Without shifting from his advantageous stance, he lined up a counterstrike, taking care that his opponent wouldn’t catch on to what he was doing.

The black blade closed in without a sound. Felix set his sights on it...

Something’s wrong. He ran over what the attacker had said in his mind. *First they announce their attacks, now he openly declares victory? Why?*

All that mattered to the attacker was taking out his target. He didn’t entertain

any feelings of pride. Felix knew that better than anyone. The answer to the incongruity came to him in no time.

His weapon—it isn't the black blade!

Felix stabbed Elhazard straight down deep into the ground, then pushed his Odh into the tip of the blade. In the time it took to draw breath, the Odh burst out, and the ground beneath Felix's feet caved in.

"Eh?!"

He was immediately proved right. Gouging a spiral into the ground where Felix had just stood came the true weapon—a black spear three times the length of the blade. If he had mistaken it for a blade to the last, it would have stabbed clean through him.

His attacker, knowing that he would just manage to evade the attack and that he would try for a counterstrike, had used his Odh to disguise his weapon. The announcement of the attacks and the victory declaration had all been part of the setup.

Felix kicked off the ground, shooting up into the sky with Elhazard thrust out directly above him. The attacker had left his body exposed, and the blade pierced straight through his heart.

So it was you, Barracio...

The sight inspired no trace of nostalgia nor any positive emotion in Felix.

Olivia landed soundlessly beside him.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, not meeting her gaze.

"No."

Felix let out a breath. Then, turning to the darkness, he called out in a clear voice, "Why don't you come out and face us?"

The sound reverberated out around the ravine. Two shadows stepped out from behind boulders to their right and left. One was Nefer, who had stolen into Felix's rooms at Listelein Palace. The other was an old man with muscles built up to the extreme, which he wore like a suit of armor.

You've come yourself, then... Felix moved in front of Olivia to shield her, then glared at Zebulla, leader of the Asura.

"You fought off all four of them, did you?" Zebulla said casually, paying no attention to his comrade sprawled at his feet. "All the better for me."

"Is Olivia your target?"

"As if you need to ask." Nefer put a hand on his hip and snickered. Of course Felix already knew the answer full well, but he still couldn't stop his every drop of blood from boiling.

"When will you desist in this foolishness? Both the king to whom you swore your oath and his kingdom have long since been lost to the sands of time."

"Kings die, nations fall. Such things mean nothing to us. Once we have formed a contract, we do not stop until it is fulfilled. That is our code—our truth. Do not tell me you have forgotten."

"Such a thing can be called neither code nor truth. It is nothing more than a *curse!*" On the last word, Felix threw his hand out as though to cast it away from him.

Zebulla was motionless. "Are you done? Of all things, you went and allied yourself with one of the Deep Folk—our sworn enemy. When I first heard of it, I could scarcely believe it. But thinking back, I'm not sure why I found it so hard to swallow. His talents paled in comparison to yours, but in the end, blood will win out."

Felix, unable to make any sense of this, narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Your father Cassiel's feelings did not run as deep as your own, but he, too, despised the Asura. His talents were mediocre. I could make no good use of him. Why, then, rather than purge him, do you think I allowed him to roam free?"

As far as Felix could remember, he had never witnessed his father denounce the Asura. Nearly all of the Asura-style sword work and martial arts he knew, his father had taught him. That being said, his lasting impression of his father was of a man who had always been in pain for reasons he knew not.

Felix gave Zebulla a look, indicating for him to continue.

“Because of *you*, Felix. It was all because of you, the Asura’s greatest masterpiece. But just as your phenomenal talents began to manifest in earnest, the fool came out and declared we were to stay away from you. Thus I had no choice at that time but to act.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Felix’s anger mounted, and he could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears. His breathing was unnaturally heavy. But before he could worry about these physical incongruities, Zebulla went on, his voice growing silkier.

“Assassination is our trade. And not all assassinations require one to physically carry out the deed. I can create a slow-acting poison disguised as medicine. Medicine and poison are merely two sides of the same coin, and mine are such that even a well-known physician would put it down as an unknown illness...”

All other sounds around him ceased. Only Zebulla’s voice echoed around inside his head. Felix forgot how to blink. His body began to tremble as though in fear. Then a strange sensation came upon him. Without turning his head, he looked around. His eyes met those of the girl watching him.

“Hey, you okay...?” The strange sensation was Olivia’s hand laid over his. The warmth of that human touch brought clarity back to his stupefied mind. The sounds of his surroundings came back in a rush.

Felix looked back and saw Zebulla laughing.

“You *scum*,” he shouted, glaring at Zebulla with all the hatred he could muster. From behind the mask, he thought he could see Zebulla’s leering smile. “Why my mother? My mother knew nothing!”

He remembered his sister Luna weeping and clinging to their mother on her sickbed, and how their mother had stroked Luna’s hair with her hand as wasted as withered twigs as she told Felix with a smile that he was to look after his sister. The next day, she had passed as quietly as if falling asleep.

“The Asura do not need attachments. We do not need love. We perfect our skills and our arts, we have our ultimate code. That is enough.”

Felix felt a pure and undiluted desire to kill this man growing rapidly inside him. His heart desired nothing more than for him to take up his sword and surrender to his hate. But at the critical moment, he maintained his self-control.

“Did you attack us knowing what is happening out there?” Felix forced himself to ask.

“Naturally, I know of it,” Zebulla replied coolly. “I also know that it is of no significance whatsoever to the Asura.” Nefer, whom Felix also had an eye on, shrugged.

“It was foolish of me to ask. It was my ignorance and my naivety that led to my parents’ deaths and caused my sister so much pain. I will not avert my eyes from you any longer. I will put an end to all of this here and now.”

He gripped Elhazard’s hilt. But he did not draw the blade. He stared down at the lily-white hand that held his wrist, then up at Olivia. She was regarding him with a complicated expression.

“You want revenge on them because they killed your parents?”

“Should I stop?” Felix asked. Olivia gave a small shake of her head.

“No, it’s just that from what I heard, those rats killed my parents too.”

Felix gaped at her.

“But for some reason,” Olivia went on, “it didn’t make me want to get revenge. I mean, it’s probably partly because I was only a baby, so I don’t really remember them. But, um, the thing I was wondering is, was I supposed to get angry like you are now?”

Felix felt his fury rapidly ebbing away as he stared at this girl who couldn’t even feel anger upon learning that her parents had been murdered.

“I’m afraid I don’t know how to answer that,” he said. “But at the risk of sounding presumptuous, what I can tell you is there is no right or wrong way to feel. Nor can that which you feel in your heart be false. That much I know to be true.”

“It’s pretty complicated, huh?” said Olivia with a rueful smile.

“That it is...” Felix answered with a small smile of his own. But his expression

immediately hardened. “You’re sure that they murdered your parents?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure she was telling the truth. Only the rat who told me isn’t here.”

“Not only my parents, but yours as well...” Felix said slowly. “I’m so sorry.”

Olivia blinked at him. “Why are you apologizing? It’s not like you killed them, right?”

“Well, no, of course not, but...”

“Then you’ve got nothing to say sorry for.”

Her earnest sincerity just made it all the more unbearable. The unconditional love and tenderness that she should have received had been ripped from her by the Asura. It was impossible to get that back, which made Felix’s anger burn hotter and hotter.

“Please stay back, Olivia. I will take both of them.”

“How come? Do you want to get revenge by yourself or something?”

“I won’t deny that I feel that way, true, but I’ve also simply been waiting for this fight. Above all, it is my duty as one with Asura blood in his veins to put an end to them.”

“Your duty, huh? I totally don’t get that sort of thing. But I did tell them that if they attacked me again I’d kill them, and I don’t want to break my promise now.”

“You are determined?”

“Yep. So let’s decide it with this.”

Olivia made a strange noise that sounded like “ta-da” and produced a coin from her pocket. Its distinctive markings immediately told Felix that it was Estorian gold.

“When you’ve got different opinions and neither side will back down, this is supposed to be the most peaceful way to resolve it. Ashton taught me about it. Do you want heads or tails? Oh, tails is the side with the picture.”

“We can’t decide with—”

“Okay, I’ll take heads,” Olivia said, cutting him off. She flicked the coin, sending it spinning up into the air and tracing a graceful arc. It kept up the rotation without losing speed right until the end.

“Aaaand it’s heads.” Olivia revealed the coin in her palm with a flourish, then giggled.

I suppose there’s no convincing her... Felix thought. Giving up on persuasion, he turned back to Nefer.

“Very well. I leave the man on the right to you,” he said to Olivia. But she held up her arms in a big X.

“Bzzzt, wrong answer. The rat on the left is yours. I take the big rat on the right.” Underneath her breezy tone, Felix could hear the steeliness of her will.

Nefer is no slouch, but I’m confident he wouldn’t best Olivia. Zebulla is a different story. His true powers are an unknown quantity. I wanted to avoid unnecessary risk, but...

Olivia, without taking her gaze off him for a second, repeated, “I take the big rat on the right.”

“Very well,” Felix said, resigning himself. “I leave him in your hands.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ve got it all taken care of.”

“Enough. This little routine grows tiresome,” said Zebulla, cutting into their conversation.

“Why tell me the truth now?” Felix asked. He was aware that Zebulla had been scheming to install Felix as his successor. All Zebulla could have hoped to achieve by revealing the truth was incur Felix’s wrath—and indeed, he had done just that. No matter how things played out, Zebulla would not get what he wanted. Felix couldn’t stop his mind fixating on the inexplicability of it.

Zebulla took off his black mask to reveal his face, then answered in a matter-of-fact tone, stroking his white beard that reached down to his chest as he spoke.

“Your soul is still not ready. At some point, I had to find the demon inside of you. And it had all gone ninety-nine point nine percent according to plan...” He

broke off to shoot Olivia an icy glare. “But then the Deep Folk girl had to interfere.”

“Who, me?” Olivia said, pointing at her own face. “I haven’t done anything, though, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Felix said with a smile. Olivia cocked her head to one side, looking baffled.

“Ah, it is a great shame. Truly, a great shame...” Zebulla said. “But so it goes.” His Odh surged explosively. A great flock of wild birds rose up shrieking and fled the ravine.

“I’ll leave the Deep Folk girl to you, then,” Nefer said breezily.

“So it must be.” Zebulla’s eyes glittered brightly like jewels.

II

“We are in a hurry,” Felix said. “Let’s begin without delay.” He raised his sword to point it at Nefer, who pushed his hands out in front of him to urge Felix off. “After all that? What are you up to?”

“Aren’t you curious?” Nefer asked. Silence followed. That alone was as clear as any verbal affirmation. “Of course, the old man came here planning to kill you for fighting side by side with the Deep Folk girl. But after listening to him, I’m sure you understand. Deep down, he still hasn’t given up on you. He was always the most smitten with your talents. In any case—this is where it’ll all be decided. There’ll still be plenty of time for us after the two of them have fought it out, don’t you think?” he asked, then added, “Regardless of who wins.”

Felix’s eyebrows shot up. “‘Regardless of who wins’?” he echoed. “Now this is strange. Eradicating the Deep Folk is everything to the Asura. I imagine your comrades would have a lot to say if they heard you just now.”

Nefer laughed. “You’ve gotten funnier, Felix. Of course, those comrades you mention have already snuffed it, all thanks to you.” Felix was silent. “You look lost. Well, the truth is, I’m confused myself. What I *do* know is that there’s no way in hell I’d survive a fight against that Deep Folk girl.”

After seeing Olivia in battle with his own eyes, Nefer had quickly realized that in terms of strength, she was in a different class than her mother, whom he himself had laid low. Olivia was beyond human.

He shook his head. “Anyway, now that’s cleared up, let’s go find somewhere to watch where we won’t be in the way.” Without waiting for agreement, he leaped over to a nearby boulder. Felix followed about two breaths later. He observed the two fighters while keeping his distance from Nefer.

If even the likes of me can see it, there’s no way you, the so-called second coming of our first great master, can have failed to understand. How the dice will fall on this battle, none can say...

When Zebulla first laid eyes on Olivia as she ran through the ravine, he knew immediately that he was the only one who could end her. The reason why, despite this, he had quietly stood back and allowed his subordinates to attack her was to get the measure of her. It all came down to that. Zebulla set his legs far apart and pressed his fists together in front of his chest. He focused his Odh in his belly, causing his whole body to radiate with a pale amber glow.

First, let’s see her reflexes. He kicked off lightly, silently closing the distance between Olivia and himself. Rather than moving in a straight line, he shifted from point to point using a special way of stepping—Illusory Step Cicada Shell. This art was the twin of Swift Step—it made the user appear to move instantaneously, throwing even the mightiest warriors off-kilter. But Olivia stayed where she was with her sword hanging down loosely and showed no sign of moving. It wasn’t that she couldn’t move, Zebulla decided—she *chose* not to.

In that case—

In order to provoke her, he deliberately took a step into reach of her blade. The moment he did so, her ebony blade flew into a wild dance that threatened to engulf him. She moved with the perfection of flowing water, more beautiful than the finest art, so that Zebulla could barely tear his eyes away. *Spectacular!* he thought.

Utilizing every muscle in his body, Zebulla repelled her every slash with his

gauntlet, then struck at Olivia with an uppercut. Olivia jumped away, bending her upper body back in line with the trajectory of his fist as she went. As a result, he only barely managed to graze her armor. Except—

“Huh...?” Olivia looked at Zebulla curiously as a trickle of blood ran down from her lip. “You only grazed me, right?”

“You wouldn’t still be chirping away if I’d gotten a direct hit.” Zebulla’s punch was anything but ordinary. Ignoring any and all defenses to directly strike at his opponents’ bodies, this was the Apogee of Destruction. Even armor forged by the world’s greatest smith would be as good as useless before it. There was no counter to it other than to evade.

“Huuuh. Guess I don’t want to take a proper hit, then...” Olivia wiped away the blood with the back of her hand, then slid her left leg back into a deep stance. Leaning forward, she rested the ebony blade against her left hip. It pointed not forward, but back.

She’s going to attack. Zebulla focused on— No, not the ebony blade. He looked at Olivia’s legs. Her blade seemed to come out of nowhere to a degree that far surpassed simple mastery. But to Zebulla’s mind, the greater threat was the baffling variation of movement that her footwork made possible.

In the same instant that Olivia appeared to have three overlapping legs, Zebulla felt every hair on his body prick up like needles as the ebony blade closed stealthily on him out of the corner of his eye. He dodged the deathly blow by a hair’s breadth, thinking as he did so that she had to be abusing Ultimate Swift Step. But she had been too quiet for that.

What is this...? He realized that his hand was shaking. Like water gushing up from the ground, it wouldn’t stop. In all his sixty-five years of life, Zebulla had never experienced such a thing before. *Ah, so that’s how it is...* he thought with a silent chuckle. He clenched his fist as though to interrupt his euphoria. The speed of Olivia’s strikes intensified still further, but he saw them all coming and parried them with his gauntlet, even as he concentrated his Odh in his vocal cords.

“I rebuke thee!!!” His roar hit Olivia at point-blank range and sent her flying off far into the distance. Without a moment’s pause, Zebulla concentrated Odh

in his belly in volumes incomparable to before. The muscles of his back bulged violently, then four arms emerged, all clad in amber light. When all four arms were fully extended, he took a single breath, then turned to the darkness and muttered, “It’ll take more than that to kill her.”

As though in response, Olivia came charging at him, slicing through the darkness. The two of them danced in and out of range, six fists and one sword clashing like wildfire. Neither would back down, but Zebulla quickly turned the back-and-forth battle on its head by playing his final card—Limitless Self. This was the simultaneous activation of Ultimate Swift Step and Supreme Illusory Step. It had been conceived by the first Zebulla, and since then none had been able to master this special illusory art. Fifty years earlier, he had cast the previous Zebulla from his throne, and now, he moved faster than Olivia’s reflexes could keep up with. A cold laugh rose up from his throat—then he heard the sound of wind. His breathing was horribly ragged. He tried to move, but his nerves refused to obey him. It seemed that the part he could still control was his eyelids, so he opened them. His eyes met Olivia’s. She held the ebony blade planted against her chest.

At the same time as his awareness swiftly caught up with the situation, confusion also reared its head.

“All six of my fists should have hit you directly. Why aren’t you a lump of meat?” He hadn’t meant to say it; the question simply slipped out as it occurred to him.

“Yeah, I knew after the first time you got me that that attack was dangerous,” Olivia replied obligingly. “So obviously I came up with a counterdefense.”

The corner of Zebulla’s mouth curled slightly. “How did you do that?” He had seen no sign of it during the fight, nor did he think that he had given her any openings. More importantly, Apogee of Destruction was not a technique to be avoided with some ad hoc defense.

“I imagined my Odh as a thin film covering the inside of my body. Obviously I didn’t just make one—I layered them over and over. Having to keep it up through the whole fight was pretty exhausting. I figured that seeing as you were attacking with Odh, I could cancel it out with Odh. Though it wasn’t actually as

straightforward as it sounds.”

“By building up numerous layers of Odic defense, you were eventually able to neutralize the effect...” Zebulla couldn’t help but be astonished—not only by her manipulation of her Odh, which defied all conjecture, but by the sheer volume of Odh required to make such an absurdity possible. He could now understand why Krishna had called her a monster. Of course, even if the realization had come earlier, it would have changed nothing.

“Um, I don’t really have time to chat, so if that’s all your questions, I’d like to wrap this up. That okay?”

Zebulla closed his eyes and said softly, “So it must be.”

Facing for the first time an opponent against which he could give his all, he had, unbelievably, found *joy* in their battle—so much, in fact, that he had forgotten his mission as an Asura. It was the most basic mistake there was, and the results had been disastrous. Yet strangely, he felt no regret.

“I seriously don’t get how you can make that face.” Just as he was about to cast off the last of his consciousness, he heard Olivia’s puzzled voice.

The look on Zebulla’s face as he lay dead in a pool of blood was one of absolute serenity. Without those involved having anything to say about it, the war between the Asura and the Deep Folk, which had raged in the shadows of history, approached its end. The moment the outcome of Olivia and Zebulla’s battle became clear, Nefer, who was bathed in the light of the moon, had used physical hyperactivation, moving behind Felix.

“You needn’t bother calling me a coward,” he said as his black claws rushed down like an evil omen. But they cut only empty air.

“I won’t,” Felix replied calmly. “Not in this battle.” The voice came from above Nefer’s head, and was accompanied by a great surge of power that overwhelmed his hyperactivated form. Nefer smiled softly. What that final smile meant, no one would ever know.

Final Chapter: I Wish for...

I

While Olivia and Felix were fighting off the Asura's attack, a storm of death ravaged the Trival Wastes. Olivia's preemptive strike, along with Lassara and the other mages' work, meant that in the two weeks since the fighting had commenced, neither side had taken the upper hand. However, discipline had gradually begun to emerge from the chaos of the undead forces, causing the situation to change dramatically. The army of the alliance, their sole advantage neutralized, began little by little to find themselves forced onto the back foot.

Blood was not sitting idly by as this went on. He attempted a number of plans based on the advice of Special Officer Clarice, who was serving as his chief of staff, but none succeeded in bettering their predicament. The soldiers' morale and strength only diminished. Then came news of a death that would be decisive for the rest of the battle. Everyone there felt an icy chill come over them.

"Thousand-Wing Amelia..."

"They say she took a great number of undead beasts and men with her at the last."

"How awful. The blow to morale after the death of a mage will be unavoidable."

"It was only with four mages that we just barely kept the undead beasts in check. With one of them down..."

The anxious voices of Blood's officers rang in his ears. When Amelia had fought with the Second Legion she'd been proud to a fault, and yet strangely enough, the idea of her dying had never occurred to him. When he heard the news, therefore, it didn't seem real.

"My lord—" Lise began, her expression hard, but she was cut off almost at

once by Clarice, who pushed up her red-rimmed glasses with gusto.

“Looks like we’ll have to lay it all on the line.”

“You mean you have something in reserve?” Blood asked.

Clarice smiled a little. “Yes, though it is of the reckless variety.”

Blood had only known Clarice for a short time, but the Ashton-like schemes she had undertaken so far told him that she was not exaggerating.

“What is your reckless plan then?”

“It seems likely that the source of the undead’s newfound ability to fight as an organized unit is that army in black that hasn’t moved since the battle began.”

“You think they control the undead. What are your grounds?”

“Instinct,” Clarice replied without embarrassment. “Someone once told me that in battle, with death near at hand, you need not only intelligence but also instinct in order to survive. Hasn’t instinct ever saved your life, Commander Blood?”

He couldn’t say no. On the central front, when the Second Legion had fought alone, he remembered at least two occasions where some sense had struck him and, as a result, he had escaped some nasty situations.

“They say that in ancient times,” Clarice went on, “humans did not have language and so communicated through their senses. The price we paid for the gift of language was that our senses degraded. Thinking about it like that, one cannot simply ignore one’s intuitions as *mere* instinct.”

“So you think I should charge into battle with the army full of undead beasts? That’s pretty damn reckless.”

“Yes, that’s why I just said it was,” Clarice retorted, a note of impatience slipping into her voice. Though depending on your point of view, she also sounded like she might be teasing.

“But I suppose whatever we do, it’s only a matter of time until they crush us. Even if people do call me reckless, this is the only option we’ve got. Is that not so?”

Clarice gave no indication of agreement or disagreement. She only looked at him inscrutably.

Blood sighed. "If only your grandfather was still alive. Then it wouldn't be my job to send us all off on this do-or-die scheme."

Clarice was unperturbed by this misdirected sarcasm.

"I believe my grandfather died without regret," she said serenely. "I expect he's taking a leisurely nap in the land of the dead, all his worldly burdens lifted at last."

"Us good-for-nothings put the old man through hell right to the end. I hope he's at least, as you say, in the next world," Blood said, then barked, "Colonel Lise."

"Yes, ser!"

"I have orders for you..." Blood set about reorganizing his forces. He put the left and right armies into a horseshoe formation and deployed them in the center. After luring in enough of the undead, they would split off to each side, leaving a gap for the central force to charge through in an arrowhead formation. After they broke through the wall of undead beasts, they would close on the army in black.

Much of the plan was a gamble, and a single misstep would be fatal, but Lara and Lion had only looked at him with the same uncertain expressions and not voiced any objections.

Which will come first? Will we be overrun, or will there be good news from Olivia? Or else...

The left and right forces followed their orders dutifully, and before long, the path for the central force opened.

"Colonel Lise, if anything happens to me—"

"If that time comes, then I shall die at your side. If nothing else, you won't be lonely." She smiled at him. He couldn't see any dark feelings in her face. Blood swallowed back everything he wanted to say and assumed a grim expression.

"Forward," he said.

Claudia, who belonged to the central force, chose to throw herself into death's jaws on the front line.

"Against so many undead beasts, you are impotent! You are in my way!"

"What the girl means, human, is that she wants you to go on ahead while she handles things here."

"Pah! Don't you try and read me, you trumped-up mutt! Forward! See your task through to the bitter end!"

Claudia indicated her thanks to Lassara, whose face was bright red as she worked her magecraft, and the enormous, strange beast who could understand human speech with a simple nod as she ran past them. The others of the former Eighth Legion followed in her wake. In no time, they broke through the undead beasts to where the undead soldiers awaited them in their ordered ranks, weapons in hand.

"Okay, hold on! No one told me they could use weapons!" came a screeching voice. That was Ellis.

"Too late to worry about that now. Onward!" Claudia used Swift Step to close with the enemy before anyone else. Her sword danced like an extension of her arm.

The battle quickly devolved into chaos.

"Oh, come *on*! No matter how many I cut down, they keep crawling out like maggots!"

Luke flicked off the chunks of undead flesh which adhered to his blade and said, "If you've got time to moan—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut *up*! Don't go all high-and-mighty superior officer on me!"

"I *am* your superior officer," he pointed out sensibly. Ellis ignored this, instead driving her sword deep into the right chest of another undead. Nearby, Evanson drove his own sword into another undead lying on its back, his shoulders heaving.

“We can’t keep this up forever,” he said. Ellis had only scathing condemnation for this defeatism.

“What, are you so desperate to make me laugh that you’re whining like a baby now?”

“Even if we survive this, we’re fighting a literal god. There’s no reason to think that after losing once, she can win this time.”

There was no need to ask who he meant. Ignoring the spurt of blood that splattered her face, Ellis grinned viciously.

“Oh, my idiot brothers really know how to make me smile. God, demon, it doesn’t matter. My big sister Olivia won’t lose to the same enemy twice.”

“As if anyone would believe that nonsense.”

“I believe it,” Ellis retorted, “because I love Olivia!”

Foster, his spear stabbing out in every direction, stared at Ellis as if to say, *She finally actually said it?*

“Even with all this, you lot are *still*—” Just as Claudia was venting her exasperation, a soldier arrived with some unsettling news.

“Lord Paul is here...”

Paul had fallen in Operation Twin Lions at Dawn. He couldn’t be here. Even as they all thought it, they all unconsciously turned to follow the soldier’s gaze.

One of the undead emerged from the crowd, approaching Claudia and the others with shambling steps.

“Ugh, that’s so not funny,” Ellis spat. Claudia found herself looking at what remained of Paul.

“The rest of you stay back. I’ll deal with this.” She turned to Paul, her sword at the ready. He let out a roaring noise no human could have made.

“Nigh!” Paul closed the distance between them in an instant, slashing down at her. Claudia dodged it by a hair’s breadth. If she hadn’t opened her Heaven’s Sight immediately beforehand, she would have been dead.

So Lord Paul knew how to use Swift Step too. No matter.

Paul came at her once more with Swift Step, but Claudia countered without so much as readying her sword. *If he were the real Lord Paul, he would have immediately struck again as soon as I dodged, and I'd have been finished.*

That meant one thing. *This creature that left itself so exposed cannot be Lord Paul.* With Heaven's Sight, she saw her moment. She perceived the blade's graceful arc with perfect clarity and thrust out across it to pierce Paul's right chest with perfect accuracy. Her golden, glowing eyes met his, which were cloudy white. Paul collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

Claudia forced down the unbearable emotions that welled within her. Her allies watched her with worry in their faces.

"We just keep moving forward." Her voice was flat. Once more, Claudia threw herself into the storm of death.

II

After arriving at the little cottage in the forest on the outskirts of the imperial capital, Felix and Olivia followed the cottage's keeper, Chirac, to the entrance of the secret passageway.

"I shall pray for your safe return, young master," said Chirac, his expression serious as he held out a torch to Felix. Felix took it with a nod. The two of them set off along the same path they had trodden last time. They stole into the inner courtyard of Lislein Palace without encountering any difficulties. Under the cloak of night, the palace was suffused with gloom like a dungeon. They sped straight through the courtyard under cover of darkness. As they dropped into a corner of the library tower, Felix noticed Olivia frowning beside him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Something feels weird..."

"How so?" Felix waited for her to answer.

Eventually, looking frustrated, Olivia said, "I don't know how to explain it. It's just weird." Unhelpful though it may have been, based on how she was acting, he knew he couldn't ignore it. Felix thought for a moment, then sent his Odh radiating out in all directions. What he learned was that the guards who ought

to have been on duty were nowhere to be found.

“What’s with the frown all of a sudden?”

“There isn’t a single guard around here.”

As he widened the reach of his search, Olivia asked curiously, “Is that a big deal?”

“It is unusual no matter how you look at it that there should be no guards patrolling the palace where the emperor resides. But I assume based on your question that the guards are not what concerns you?”

As he expected, Olivia nodded.

“Given the state of the palace,” he went on, “I think we can assume they expected us to come.” Now he thought about it, it was a similar situation to the last time. He could not say for sure if the conspicuous lack of guards was an expression of absolute confidence or not.

“But even if it’s an obvious trap, our only choice is to keep going. Right?”

“Yes, you’re right. Our allies are fighting their hardest as we speak. We don’t have time to waste on worry or hesitation. Let us proceed with haste—and with caution.”

Their plan had been to infiltrate the palace through the library tower, so Felix crouched down, ready to leap up to the balcony at its top. But Olivia quickly stopped him.

“There’s no point taking the long way round if they know we’re here, is there? I mean, we don’t have much time.” She was looking in the direction of the great palace.

“You’re not suggesting we sneak in straight through the great palace? That’s far too reckless.”

“You wouldn’t expect an enemy who sneaked in to walk in through the front door. I feel like it might actually work.”

“There are too many uncertainties. I can’t agree to it,” Felix protested strongly.

A smirk immediately spread over Olivia's face. "Can't agree, huh? At times like these—" She began to rummage around in her pocket. Felix quickly gave up hope of persuading her.

"Very well, we will go with your plan this time."

They left the library tower and took the shortest route to the great palace. Even as they ran, Felix never stopped sending his Odh radiating out. But of course he didn't detect a single guard. Before long he caught sight of the arched stone bridge that led to the main gate of the great palace. They both stopped at the same time and ducked into the shadow of a nearby building. Two soldiers in ebony black armor that melted into the shadows cast by the braziers stood there. Their ghostlike figures reminded Felix of Lieutenant General Flora Ray, whom Darmés had introduced to him before the battle with the Eighth Legion as the commander of his personal army. As he bristled, expecting a trap, Olivia reached for the weapon on her back.

"My mini ballista's handy for this sort of thing," she said, dropping to one knee on the ground then leaning halfway out of the building's shadow. She loosed two bolts at the soldiers in black. Both flew true through the darkness, and should have taken each soldier straight in the forehead—

"They caught them, huh..." Olivia said, sounding a little deflated.

"It would appear they did..." Felix replied in the same tone. He chose not to remark upon the fact that the weapon in Olivia's hands was unmistakably a prototype of a crossbow, a weapon that had been officially adopted by the imperial army around half a year earlier. The prototype was inferior to the official model, but it was still a powerful weapon.

After demonstrating their superhuman reflexes, the soldiers in black casually tossed aside the bolts, then slowly drew their swords and set off across the bridge. There was no discernible intent in the way they walked. As they came closer, their faces came into clearer view. They were so clearly insane that Felix couldn't help but frown.

They aren't normal. Could even this be Darmés...?

In that moment, as he stood lost in thought, Olivia shot out of the shadows like a rush of wind, running between the soldiers in black. Less than a moment

later, both had bid their lives farewell, their faces still twisted by insanity. Olivia smartly returned her sword to its scabbard, then pointed toward the main gate, indicating for Felix to follow her.

As the two of them approached, there was an unsettling screech, and the gate began to open, though they could see no one else around. It was as though the gate had a will of its own. Olivia prodded it.

“Just to check, is this new imperial technology or something?”

“If the main gate to the great palace could open by itself, it would be a disaster.”

“Is this some kind of magic too, then? But magic like that sounds totally fun, so Z would have definitely taught it to me...” Muttering her musings to herself, Olivia strode on ahead without hesitation. Felix followed cautiously, keeping watch on their surroundings. They walked down a vast gallery where silence hung in the air. Ramza IX had built the great palace as a demonstration of his majesty. Even shrouded in darkness, the interior lost none of its grandeur. The ceiling above their head was covered in painted scenes of what appeared to be the lives of the gods. The lengths of both walls of the passage were adorned by paintings of great historical worth, and, taken together, they related a single story. No extravagance had been spared for this gallery, which was primarily a site to conduct diplomacy, though it also saw many banquets, balls, and other social functions.

“They aren’t attacking,” Olivia commented.

“This gallery is full of priceless works of art,” said Felix, staring at her back as he followed her. “I expect they don’t want to see it defiled with blood.”

“Mmm,” Olivia replied vaguely. Felix deduced from this reaction and attitude that her interests did not lean toward the artistic.

They made it down the gallery without encountering any attackers. The gallery of pillars that followed was similarly empty. As they left it, Felix came to a halt before a fork in the corridor.

“The left-hand passage leads to a staircase connected to the emperor’s

private chambers.”

“I wonder if Darmés will actually be there.”

“He ought to be, normally...” Felix began, but the current situation was a long way from normal. It wasn’t only the guards—the absence of the golden knights whose duty it was to patrol within the palace made that clear as day.

Olivia stared down the right-hand passage. “What’s down that way?”

“That way leads—”

Before he could finish, Olivia set off down the right-hand passage. Felix followed a few steps behind her.

“This leads to a chapel dedicated to the first emperor. There’s nothing else there.”

“But there is *something*. I’m getting seriously weird vibes from down here.”

Remembering that Olivia had said something similar at the library tower, Felix quietly fell into step at her side. They walked on in silence. Still not knowing the source of what Olivia was sensing, Felix extended his Odh out toward the chapel. Sure enough, he felt something.

“I sense four people at the door. It may be an ambush.”

“Got it.”

They passed through the single simple door poised for battle. As they entered the chapel’s antechamber, the scene that greeted them completely upended Felix’s expectations.

“We have been waiting for you. I am Major Martina Ray of the emperor’s personal army.” The woman proceeded to bow courteously to the two of them—her enemies. Behind her stood several figures in black cloaks, their faces hidden behind sinister silver masks. Apart from Martina, the masked figures carried the same air as the Asura, of those that made their living through unsavory means.

“It isn’t my place to mention it, under the circumstances, but behind us is the chapel dedicated to the first emperor,” Felix said disapprovingly. “I don’t recall it being open for ordinary soldiers or whatever *they* are to come and go as they

please.”

Martina ignored this reprimand. “Our glorious emperor awaits you in the chapel,” she said in a voice entirely devoid of emotion.

“Darmés is here...?” His Odh had only detected the four people here. He sensed no one in the chapel. But Felix knew about this. He knew there was a man all his detection abilities could not pick up on.

“I finally get it,” Olivia said. “The way he cast the magic is all out of whack. That’s why it feels strange.” She nodded knowingly, looking satisfied.

“Please, do not let us detain you.” Martina stepped out of their way then deferentially invited them to enter the chapel. Just like the main gate to the great palace, the door opened without any human hands touching it. The chapel was constructed in two stories. At the entrance stood an enormous statue of Ramza I holding his sword level, and in front of that, sitting on a simple stone altar, sat a man. A hard glint came into Felix’s eyes.

“Unless you defeat me, you haven’t a hope of victory. I was sure you would come back. And the death god’s little toy! What a pleasure it is to meet you at last.”

“I’m not a toy. My name’s Olivia Valedstorm.”

“Names are nothing more than individual signifiers. There is nothing to be gained by going out of your way to correct them. But more importantly, I must thank you. You wrought so much more havoc than I had anticipated that my benefactor bestowed upon me the Elixir of Cursed Souls. Indeed, I should like to offer you a token of my gratitude.” Darmés cleared his throat. A large crystal ball seemed to appear in his hand, and he tossed it to Olivia. “They put up a valiant fight—far exceeding my expectations,” he went on, sounding amused, “but it appears they are at their limit.”

Reflected in the crystal ball was a view of the far-off final battle. The desperate faces of their allies as they fought came in and out view like a lifetime of memories flashing by. When Claudia appeared, breathing heavily and bleeding, Olivia bit her lower lip as though holding herself together.

“Point your swords at me if you wish, but you might also consider that

accepting reality and pledging your loyalties to me is not such a bad option. If you do it right here and now, I will have the Dawn Knights fall back at once. I will also allow your country to continue to exist—with some conditions, of course. I am already halfway to achieving my goals. In order to see the rest through swiftly, I would prefer not to spill any more blood unnecessarily.”

Felix drew Elhazard without a word and pointed it at Darmés. Darmés gave a little sigh, then shook his head.

“That is your choice, is it, Felix? You are as exasperatingly stubborn as ever. As for you...” He looked at Olivia. “It appears I do not even need to ask.”

Powerful determination burned in Olivia’s ebony eyes. “You stirred up chaos for no reason,” she said softly. “There wouldn’t be any meaning in a promise with someone like you. It doesn’t matter how hard the fighting gets for the others. I have something I have to do, and so I’m going to do it. I know what the right choice is.”

“‘Chaos for no reason,’ is it? Well, to a mere pawn who fails to perceive the greater picture, I suppose that is how it would appear...” Darmés rose silently from the altar, then carefully smoothed the creases in his robes. Then he looked at Olivia directly and said, “Answer me this: why do you think people go to war?”

It was exactly the question Olivia had once asked Z.

“Humans are cruel, love violence, and are easily swayed by greed,” she said hesitantly. “Even if they only want small things at first, the more they can reach, the more they want. Humans who taste power become greedy for more than what they have, and that leads to war.”

Darmés stroked his sunken cheek from top to bottom. “There is no weight to any of what you said. Those were not your words, were they? While they may capture part of the truth, I am afraid to say that your perspective is overly broad. This is what I think. Humans acquired some poor excuse for intelligence, which resulted in us fearing our own kind more than any other animal. Those who hold power start wars to conquer their own fears, great or small. Greed does no more than tag along with fear. And so, I thought, this would all be solved if I could only instill fear on another level entirely that would blot out

that fear of our own kind.”

“You mean the undead?” Felix asked. Darmés nodded gravely.

“This battle will instill into the people of the world an as yet unknown fear. Even so, idiotic rulers will continue to crawl out of the woodwork. When they do, my army will squash them, and show them who to fear. I will do it tens, hundreds of times, until the day comes that conflict itself comes to be feared. When people cast aside their weapons, those symbols of conflict, with their own hands, I shall become the embodiment of true peace.”

He wanted to use the undead to control the world and eradicate war. The means were horrifyingly twisted, but Felix was shaken to a degree he couldn’t conceal to learn that Darmés’s goal went beyond simple domination to the creation of a world that none had yet achieved.

“Do you seriously think such a thing is possible?”

“It certainly will not be easy. Indeed, it will take a dizzying amount of time. Alas, the time allotted to humans is laughably frail and fleeting.” Darmés spoke as though this was no concern of his. Given the man’s age, he had another twenty years at best. That was not nearly enough time to build the new world that Darmés described, and given the way he was talking, he must have been well aware of it. Felix couldn’t work out what he was really after.

“What if”—from beneath his hood, Darmés smiled an assured smile—“I and I alone were freed from the cycle of death?”

“Are you saying you’re immortal? That’s absurd...” Felix began, then he remembered Lassara, who had lived more than two hundred years through the power of magecraft, and the words died on his lips. The existence of the gods of death and Darmés’s cryptic reference to the Elixir of Cursed Souls were also lodged in a corner of his mind.

“Now, let me ask you again. You first, Felix. Will you swear loyalty to me?”

“The only one to whom I am loyal,” Felix replied, his head held high and proud, “is Emperor Ramza.”

“Stubbornness like that will win you an Imperial Cross,” Darmés sighed. His gaze then shifted to Olivia.

“I won’t,” she said immediately, just as adamant in her denial as Felix. “You were right before—I was just repeating what Z told me. I don’t have my own answer. Listening to you, I thought that even if the method has flaws, if it puts an end to all wars, it isn’t such a bad option.”

“Did you, now? Unlike somebody I could name, it seems you are not entirely set in your ways. Why, then, will you not join me? I am dreadfully curious.”

Olivia was quiet for long enough that Darmés began to lose his patience, then she said, “I couldn’t picture it.”

“Picture? Couldn’t picture what?” Darmés asked in irritation, frowning.

“Everyone’s smiles. In that future you’re trying to create where there’s no war, I couldn’t picture them at all. And that’s why I can say ‘no’ to everything you say.” Olivia’s words were perfectly clear and blew through Felix’s heart like a pleasant breeze.

“I am struggling to understand...” Darmés said. “But no matter. Toys are made to break. Be sure and watch from the land of the dead as I bring about peace.”

There was a dull, black streak of light. Felix put himself in its path, Elhazard slashing out with a high screech. Amid the blast of wind from the shock wave, he called behind him to Olivia.

“I’ll handle this. And this time we are not deciding this with a coin.”

“All right,” Olivia said at length. She took her hand from the hilt of her ebony blade, and stepped back.

Darmés brushed dust from his robe, looking displeased. “Am I only to face you, Felix?”

“Disappointed?”

“Not especially. The difference in effort to deal with one of you as opposed to two at the same time is negligible. It merely does not sit right with me that you would lower your own odds, however trivially. But that hardly matters.”

Felix immediately jumped left. Before he had the chance to breathe, he heard the sound of something behind him breaking. Darmés stared darkly at Felix, his palm thrust out in front of him.

“Did you see it? Or was that instinct?”

Felix was silent.

“No matter. This will tell me.”

Felix ran straight at Darmés. A barrage of shock waves flew at him, but Felix dodged them with a minimum of movement, thinking back on what Olivia had said...

“Maybe you couldn’t see Darmés’s attacks because most of your attention was taken up by Emperor Ramza? Odh and magic come from the same place. You’re even better than me at manipulating your Odh, Felix, so no matter what Darmés cooked up, there’s no way you wouldn’t see it. Basically, the important thing is recognizing it correctly.”

“It seems you do see it,” Darmés said. Felix heard no disquiet in his voice. He took a forceful step in, striking with Elhazard at the top of Darmés’s skull from his blind spot. But he was once again deflected by a transparent shield that covered Darmés from head to toe. Felix paid this no mind, putting his weight behind Elhazard. Their eyes met through the shield.

“You surprised me a little,” Darmés admitted, “but your precious sword is useless against this shield. As I believe you know from experience.”

“The important thing is recognizing it correctly,” Felix muttered, sharpening his senses to their limit. *I see it. I see the flow of mana.* The shield was made up of regular hexagons, with mana flowing down from the top. The closer it got to the bottom, the thinner it became. Felix concentrated his Odh in the tips of his toes, then, flexing his leg like a whip, he kicked the lower part of the shield. It let out a sound like breaking glass, then shattered into particles of light. With Elhazard now free, he slashed it down in front of him. Surprise flashed over Darmés’s face.

“I honestly did not expect you to destroy my shield. It seems I underestimated you, Felix.” As he spoke, he stared at the stump of what had been his right arm. He did not appear to feel any pain, but a torrent of blood gushed from his shoulder. At this rate, he would die of massive blood loss in minutes.

“This is the end of your twisted ambitions.”

“The end...?” Darmés had a glazed look in his eyes. The next moment, however, he broke out in a laugh so ghastly that Felix flinched away from him. “Oh, no. This is the beginning of true peace.”

A mass of tentacle-like appendages burst from his severed right arm where it had been cut from his shoulder. Tentacles also sprouted from the stump at his shoulder at the same time, and they met to pull themselves together. Felix took a step back. This was beyond human understanding.

“Aren’t you human...?”

“I suppose I cannot claim to be. Not that I ever had any particular attachment to being human.”

His arm now fully reattached, Darmés moved it around to check that it was working. Then he kicked hard off the floor with a burst of speed that easily matched Swift Step. Felix too used Swift Step as he unleashed a rain of blows at Darmés. Darmés answered with a short spear. His spear technique was no better than that of an amateur, but the way he interwove it with magic made him a fairly difficult opponent. As time wore on, Felix took more and more nicks and cuts. He gave Darmés some fair wounds as well, but it seemed that “fair” was not good enough to mean anything—the moment his blade made contact with flesh, the wound healed over. It was obvious whose favor the battle would turn in if this went on.

“Have you still not understood? My body, upon which has been bestowed the power of the gods, easily transcends the laws of nature. Why resist when a world of tranquility awaits you if you only surrender yourself to me?” Darmés looked at Felix in incomprehension, but a moment later, a dark, glistening light came into his eyes. “Incompetent false rulers and their lackeys are a scourge upon the world,” he went on. “The world ought to be governed by a perfect sovereign. Ramza, with his naive faith in peace, could not do it.”

All Felix said was, “Let us finish this.”

“As you wish.” Darmés’s strikes came faster. Felix ducked and dodged every one of them, leaving the beautifully polished floor to be torn apart. He backed up, waiting patiently for his moment.

“Are we finishing this or not?” Darmés asked. Felix was silent. “We are getting

nowhere.” The short spear disappeared from Darmés’s hand. In its place, Felix sensed a dense concentration of mana. It was brief, but when Darmés used magic, there was a pause where he was left completely open. This was Felix’s only chance to strike. He used Ultimate Swift Step to close on Darmés’s flank. As he arrived, he slashed out just as Darmés paused. But Darmés materialized a small shield to block his attack. Unlike his previous shields, this one was fully covered in a dense coating of mana. Felix felt through Elhazard that there was nothing he could cut through.

Darmés reached out and covered Felix’s face with his hand. “I was waiting for an opening too,” he said, his voice full of the certainty of his victory.

With Darmés’s hand still over his face, Felix said calmly, “First Order Obscura.”

A shimmer enveloped Elhazard, and the blade slipped through the shield that had just entirely repelled it like butter, cutting into Darmés’s defenseless flesh. His lower body remained behind as his upper body went flying, becoming impaled on the long sword of Ramza I.

How ironic, Felix thought as he stood in front of the statue and looked up at Darmés struggling desperately to free himself from the sword.

“This is nothing! As if I, upon whom has been bestowed the power of immortality, could be so bested!” The long sword shattered in his grip, and his upper body fell to the floor with a thud. Felix stomped on the tentacles that wriggled out from the cut, then stabbed Elhazard into Darmés’s forehead.

“A sword through the head should kill a human instantly. You really have thrown away your humanity.”

“Felix, reconsider this. You are throwing away forever the chance not for some fleeting peace, but of true peace for humankind—of a world where everyone will be happy!”

“I feel the same way as Olivia. I cannot imagine anyone smiling in the peace you would create. And even if peace is fleeting, it is far better than a world in which we are governed by inhuman creatures. We humans will solve our problems ourselves. We don’t need gods or immortals.”

“Felix, I am sure your ideals are the same as mine.”

“Yes, but we are too different in the methods we would use to achieve them. I cannot join you, Darmés.”

Darmés was quiet for a moment. “When I think back, perhaps it was when you defied me that my fate was sealed...” he said. “I was envious of the unmatched trust you inspired...and when I met that god...I could not resist the desires that resided within me... I have no regrets.”

“Darmés...” Felix cut with Elhazard straight down the centerline of Darmés’s body, then cut up what remained until it could no longer be recognized as a body. With a blast of Odh, he reduced it to dust.



Felix walked over to Olivia, who was incinerating Darmés's lower body.

"Guess he wasn't immortal after all, huh?"

"It seems so. Perhaps he was lied to, or perhaps the Elixir of Cursed Souls was never meant for humans. Either way, we have achieved half of our goal. The undead Darmés controlled should stop moving soon."

The sight that greeted them as they left the chapel was of things that could not even be called corpses—still in their armor and masks, but only skin without flesh or bones.

Felix crouched down and gripped the empty skin that had been Martina.
"Let's finish this. All of it."

"Yeah."

The night grew darker still.

III

Leaving the chapel behind them, Felix and Olivia returned to where the passage forked to find Emerich, captain of the Golden Knights, making his way unsteadily along with one hand against the wall. He did not seem to notice them, and they could have passed him by without any trouble, but Felix chose not to.

"It's been too long, Emerich." At this, Emerich finally noticed him. For a moment he looked as though he had seen a ghost, but then he quickly drew his sword.

"Why did you betray the emperor?!" he demanded.

"To protect Emperor Ramza from Darmés the usurper."

"What?! What are you talking about..." Emerich trailed off, speechless. Felix made the decision to divulge the situation to him. Based on the state he was in, Felix was sure that Darmés had worked some art on him. Now that Darmés was dead, the other Golden Knights and guards would likely go back to their proper duties, and he wanted to avoid any unnecessary confrontations before they

began.

“You can’t expect me to believe that nonsense,” Emerich said at last.

“Then let me ask you this. What have you, as the one responsible for the security of this palace, been doing all this time? And not only you—we infiltrated the palace some time ago now, and yet all I have seen are a few soldiers from Darmés’s personal army and some others whose allegiance I know not. We have not met a single member of the garrison, nor guards, nor any of the Golden Knights.”

Emerich seemed to know just what Felix was talking about. His expression grew obviously pained.

“I am not going to stop until I have achieved my goal. Do you still intend to stand in my way, Emerich?”

“May I ask one thing?” Emerich said at length. “Where is Emperor Ramza now?”

“He is in the Royal Capital of Fis as their honored guest. I can promise you he is safe.”

Emerich’s expression softened a little. “I am relieved to hear it. Where are you going now?”

Olivia replied that they were going to Darmés’s workroom. Emerich seemed to notice her presence for the first time. He stared at her warily, then his gaze alighted on her epaulets and the color visibly drained from his face. “Not her...?!”

“There is nothing to fear. We are working together.”

Emerich hesitated, but said, “Very well. I will accompany you.”

As Felix had expected, they encountered many guards and Golden Knights on their way to Darmés’s workroom. The sight of Emerich and Felix walking side by side made them all gape, and when it became known that the woman walking behind them was Death God Olivia, Listelein Palace exploded like a disturbed hornet’s nest.

On more than a few occasions, the Golden Knights crowded Emerich, but

each time, Emerich's glare was enough to get them through without incident. Only their three sets of footsteps echoed in the corridor to Darmés's workroom. When the great door with its intricately carved designs came into view, Emerich stood up against the wall and saluted.

"This is where I will leave you," he said. Felix and Olivia thanked him, then turned to face the room. Olivia put both hands on the door, then slowly pushed it open. Felix followed her into the room, casting his eyes over every inch of it, but needless to say, there were no gods of death to be seen.

Our enemy is a god—one of death. It is rash to assume that there is no more than meets the eye... While Felix looked around suspiciously, Olivia walked confidently up to the large bookshelf, then, drawing too fast for Felix to see, she made a series of intermittent slashes with the ebony blade. Before he could say anything, the bookshelf collapsed with a mighty crash, and Felix saw something he had never seen before in this room.

"There was an underground room hidden behind that bookshelf...?"

"Xenia was down here last time," Olivia explained. Paying no attention to the candlesticks in the hollow of the wall, she set off down the stairs. The staircase was by no means spacious, but their footsteps echoed loudly. Olivia's steps were perfectly measured as she walked ahead of Felix. There was no trace of unease there.

"Say, isn't there something a little odd about this darkness?" Felix said. Ever since they began their descent underground, he had felt something was off, as though the darkness was artificially created rather than natural.

"You think? I didn't notice anything."

"Yes, I can tell that from your footsteps."

"According to Claudia, I have really good night vision."

"Are all Deep Folk like that?" Felix asked out of pure curiosity.

"I have no idea. I've never met any other Deep Folk."

To the best of Felix's knowledge, all the Deep Folk except for Olivia had been hunted down by the Asura. He doubted any apart from her had survived and

regretted his careless question.

“I apologize. That was tactless of me.”

“Huh? Why are you apologizing?” Olivia asked, perplexed. It was obvious from her tone that his comment hadn’t bothered her at all. It seemed she was at heart an optimistic person who didn’t care to dwell on things, something he’d had an inkling of back when the subject of her parents had come up.

“Speaking of which, Felix, are you all right?”

“Me? Oh, yes. I can walk well enough for now.”

“Then doesn’t that mean your night vision is just as good as mine?”

Felix gave a wry smile. “I believe my eyesight is better than most, but it is not as good as yours. I should be able to see a little once my eyes adjust, though.”

“How come you’re fine now, then?”

“I manage by using Odh,” Felix replied vaguely. By sending out Odh at regular intervals in all directions so that it reflected back at him, he could build a three-dimensional picture of his surroundings without being able to see it. Displaying its greatest effectiveness indoors, this was one of the Asura’s loathsome assassination techniques.

“Huh. I didn’t know you could do that with Odh. You should teach me sometime,” Olivia said directly.

“It is a technique used by assassins. I would not exactly recommend it...” Felix said, softly expressing his reluctance. Though he was indebted to Olivia, he had no intention of passing on the techniques and arts of the Asura to future generations.

“You don’t recommend it because it’s an assassination technique? You say some strange things, Felix. I mean, it’s not like the technique kills anyone, right?” Without meaning to, Felix stopped walking. “What’s wrong?” Olivia asked.

“The technique doesn’t kill anyone,” he repeated. “You are absolutely right.” He laughed aloud. Olivia turned back to stare at him, mystified.

The staircase was a lot longer than Felix had expected. It deposited them in a

passageway barely wide enough for one person to pass through that stretched on and on. The unpleasant sensation that seemed to cling to his skin only grew more pronounced, and Olivia, walking in front, was distinctly tense and wary.

As well she might be. This god showed her how completely it outclassed her, and she is going to fight it again. The two of them went on in silence, their footsteps marking the passage of time. His eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, and he made out a hemispherical room. The moment he stepped inside, he realized what was strange about it.

The walls are completely seamless, and they're made of a material I've never seen before. He gave a nearby wall an experimental tap, but the sound was muffled. Even the empire's best technology couldn't produce walls like these. He was confronted by the fact that the room had not been built by human hands. At the moment, Olivia was the only one he could see. She was scanning their surroundings as well, but it didn't seem like she was looking for Xenia so much as trying to spot something.

Is there something hidden here? Felix wondered, watching her quietly as Olivia ran her hand along the wall. It felt like around ten minutes had passed when she stopped.

She laid her hand against a point on the wall as though making sure of something, then raised the ebony blade above her head and brought it down like a flash of lightning. Immediately, there was an ear-piercing screech, and the wall tore apart. On the other side was a staircase that seemed to stretch away up into the heavens. It was enough to render him speechless.

Olivia returned the ebony blade to its scabbard, then turned back to him. "I'm pretty sure that this is the point of no return," she said. "That okay?"

Even now, she still worries about others... He was glad of the thoughtful gesture. In lieu of a reply, he pulled something from his pocket and tossed it to Olivia. She caught it without difficulty.

"What's this?" she asked, looking confused.

"I heard that you like sweet things."

"Huh? This is a sweet?!"

“Yes, it is supposed to be delectable.”

Olivia’s eyes sparkled as she peeled off a corner of the paper wrapping to reveal the bar-shaped confection inside. It was called chocolate, and had been all the rage in the empire lately. Unusually, even Felix’s butler Klau, who usually objected to sweets, had given it his seal of approval.

“Thith’ith thuper good. Bu’ ’ow come—”

“I am giving it to you now?” Felix finished for her. Olivia nodded rapidly, at which he couldn’t help but smile. “We have a saying in the empire: you can’t fight on an empty stomach. That is my answer to your question.”

“So basically you’re pumped up to go murder Xenia too, huh?” Olivia said. The only way Felix could think to respond was to laugh. “Well, I’m full of tasty sweets, so I guess it’s time we got going.” As she crossed the rift in space, she was still on the alert, but she did not appear overly on edge. She was just the right degree of relaxed. Felix too took a firm step forward and followed her.

IV

The staircase was bleached white, but up ahead, a black stain spread over it as though someone had spilled darkness on it.

“Is that a carriage?”

“I don’t think so. Though it does have something resembling wheels, so I suppose it is probably a vehicle of some kind.”

Glancing sideways at the great mass of iron that hung floating in the air, Felix answered the latest of Olivia’s many questions with yet another guess. A little after they had begun to ascend the staircase, they had started seeing a variety of objects floating in the sky around them. There was an enormous creature that they had never seen before; a small, flat block that produced unfamiliar music; and even an abomination that looked like a cross between a human and an animal. All of it was beyond their understanding, or at the very least did not exist in their world.

“I believe I see the end up ahead,” Felix said. Beyond the final step of the staircase there was an empty expanse of white on white. There was a point in

that seemingly endless space that drew Felix's eyes—a black gate that towered high above them, and the figure that stood before it.

"Is that the god of death?" he asked.

"Yeah," Olivia replied quietly, glaring at Xenia.

It seems I was naive in my estimation, Felix thought. Going off of Darmés's powers, here he was devastatingly outmatched. Just the sight of Xenia sent a cold sweat and goose bumps crawling across his skin. Faced with a malevolence like nothing he had ever felt before, he started to sweat, when there came a voice like the whisper of death. It was clearly not a language he recognized, but strangely, he understood it.

I do not recall inviting you here.

"I came to destroy you."

Destroy me? You perplex me. Do you imagine that you will succeed because there are two of you? It was like this with Darmés too. I truly cannot comprehend your group-three minds.

Olivia tore a gemstone on a string from her neck and said, "This time is different."

Different? Nothing appears to me to have changed. Besides, even if it had, you are still an inferior species. I can hardly judge a change in a gnat.

From the way Xenia spoke as though humans were unworthy of its concern, Felix doubted it would suddenly attack them. All the same, he stayed on high alert.

"What is our plan?" he asked.

Staring at the gem in her hand, Olivia replied, "I use the magic ruby as a catalyst to elevate my Odh beyond its limits." The ruby on Olivia's palm, in which Felix could not make out a single imperfection, glittered bewitchingly as though in response to her words.

"From what you've said, I am loath to believe this object can be used without risk. Won't it put considerable physical strain on you?"

Olivia squeezed the gem and smiled softly.

That was a stupid question. Felix looked over at Xenia. “How much time do you need?”

“Five minutes. Actually, no, three minutes should do it.”

“Three minutes...”

“Is it too much?” There was worry in Olivia’s eyes. Felix turned away from her and strode unflinchingly toward Xenia.

As he undid the clasp on the hilt and rested his hand on Elhazard, he poured his resolution into words.

“Olivia, as you are the world’s hope, all I can do is give everything I have to be the bridge that carries that hope.” He breathed continuously and steadily, filling every corner of his body with Odh. By the time he confronted Xenia head-on, his entire body was suffused with azure light.

My, my. With that Odic glow, you must be descended from Asura. And judging from how it shines, you have some skill. Xenia chuckled to itself. *The Deep Folk and Asura are supposed to be mortal enemies, and yet here they are, working side by side. I do not understand it, but I am very much intrigued. In recognition of your absurd courage, I shall play along just this once.*

Xenia held its right arm straight out to the side, and a great scythe materialized in its hand. Just like Xenia’s body, it emanated black mist and gave off an aura that suggested it would reduce anything it touched to dust. Felix took a step forward, slamming his foot into the ground. He dropped slightly in his stance, readying Elhazard at his side. Xenia showed no sign of moving. And then...

Ultimate Swift Step!!!

A sound rang out like air popping. In an instant, Felix was behind Xenia. *There’s still no sign of movement. It’s wide open.* This was the perfect chance, but Felix continued to use Ultimate Swift Step.

The moment he moved away from Xenia, there was an ominous noise. Xenia hadn’t moved a step from where it stood. In the instant before Felix attacked, he had unconsciously decided to dodge instead. If he had resisted that decision even slightly, he would surely have ended up on the ground in two pieces.

I thought my first attack would be the end of this. Color me impressed.

Felix put Xenia's praise far from his mind, then used Ultimate Swift Step and headed up into the sky. The target of his attack was the top of Xenia's head. Spinning on the vertical axis, he slashed down hard with Elhazard. Xenia effortlessly raised its great scythe to knock the attack aside with ease.

Is it reading my movements from minute fluctuations in the air? he thought.

At that moment, Xenia acted at last. It made a gesture that set its robes billowing, at which the black mist that always hung about it surged up and, as though it possessed a mind of its own, moved to swallow him up.

If that mist gets me, it will certainly not end well! He had only moments to think, and the black mist carried the scent of a violent death. From the limited options available to him, he arrived at an answer. He materialized a small board directly beneath his feet.

Please let me make it in time!!! He kicked off the board, letting the rebound send him flying backward. At the same time, the board disappeared into the black mist where it melted in hiss of white smoke. *I can't let down my guard for even a moment. This really is a deadly balancing act.*

Felix put quite some distance between himself and Xenia, who gave him a generous round of applause.

I am surprised that any such as you still exist in this world, where levels of Ode have fallen to such remarkably infinitesimal levels. You far surpass even the Asura I remember. But enough of that. What shall I do with you? There was an audible note of excitement in Xenia's voice. It wasn't unusual for warriors to get fired up when facing a strong opponent, but the being in front of him was not human. It had no warrior spirit, nor, Felix imagined, would Xenia see much difference between his strength and that of an average human. He could therefore only think of one explanation.

"Do you want to eat my soul now? I thought you couldn't consume the souls of those with consciousness."

My, my. Aren't you well-informed? Did you hear that from the Deep Folk girl scheming something over there?

At this, Felix narrowed his eyes. “You know and yet you look the other way? That is surprising.”

Of course I do. Whatever her scheme may be, in the end, she is only a plaything. Indeed, I am looking forward to seeing what more she will attempt to pull off.

Felix found himself glancing at Olivia. Given how nigh on impossible it was to fight Xenia while keeping it from laying a finger on Olivia, its words came as a blessing in disguise. *Surely a god of death would not engage in trivial games with a mere human. That’s clear from how it talked. Now I can focus on fighting without worrying about Olivia’s safety.*

He focused power in his belly, raising Elhazard bravely. Xenia rested its great scythe on its shoulders.

Yes, that’s right, we were speaking of souls. It is true that I cannot devour a soul with consciousness. But I suppose the plaything did not tell you this—there are exceptions to every rule. Xenia laughed a high, bone-chilling laugh that echoed throughout the white space.

Felix acted first. *There are no counterattacks against a god of death. All you can do is attack first.*

He pushed off his left leg, deliberately exposing himself directly to Xenia.

First Order Obscura—

This sword technique made the real phantasmal and the phantasmal real. He cut down vertically only for the great scythe to effortlessly parry his blow, but he had expected that. Cloaked in illusion, Elhazard slipped by the scythe before becoming real again.

But before it could touch Xenia, the blade bounced off the spinning scythe. In the blink of an eye, the scythe swung down, but Felix, without losing his composure, thrust up with Elhazard. The edges met.

Second Order Asuran Whirlwind—

Elhazard spawned a small tornado, which blew off Xenia’s right arm, scythe and all. With one fluid motion, Felix continued his attack.

Third Order Ruthless Shadowless.

His sword moved too fast for shadows to follow it as he slashed out from all directions. He had used this technique in his duel with Olivia too, but this time, he fully released his Odh. As a result, the destructive force was on a whole other level. Xenia was helpless against the endless barrage. Then—

If his senses had not been honed to their absolute limits, he never would have noticed the attack.

Felix started, sensing a small, momentary ripple expand out at his feet. Once again, he instinctively moved to dodge. In the same moment that he dived straight off to one side, the place he had just been standing was swallowed up by a shadow like the mouth of a carnivorous plant yawning open.

Felix looked at Xenia, unfazed after he had cut its right arm with the second order technique then laid into it with a third order attack, and gulped.

How is it that such a thing exists in this world? it asked him.

Felix paused. “What do you mean?” he asked, raising Elhazard once more.

That sword, Xenia replied, irritation plain in its voice. *Where did you get it?*

“What is it to you?” Felix asked slowly.

I am the one asking questions here! Xenia bellowed. The black mist responded, swirling up violently like a maelstrom. It was all Felix could do to keep his footing and not be blown away. He threw a look at Olivia behind him. She didn’t flinch at the raging mists. Scarlet light poured out from the center of her forehead. Felix sensed an extraordinary amount of Odh growing inside her.

It looks like things are going according to plan, but that doesn’t mean Xenia won’t decide to interfere. Felix chose to keep talking, trying to buy time.

“This blade is Elhazard. It was bequeathed to me by His Imperial Majesty.”

“Did you say ‘Elhazard’?” At these words, the swirling black mist rapidly subsided. At Xenia’s unexpectedly strong interest, Felix’s eyes shifted of their own accord to Elhazard. *Is this sword somehow connected to the death gods?* he wondered. But he knew no more about it than what he had told Xenia, who was muttering to itself as though it had forgotten Felix’s existence. The only

thing he faintly made out was the mysterious word “attuner.”

This is my chance! He kicked off the ground, shooting up into the sky, then stabbing straight down with Elhazard.

Fourth Order Blazing Draconic Bite—

The dragon’s roar rumbled like thunder, and a needle-sharp flash of blue light left a deep hole in the ground. But that was not the result Felix had wanted. Until just before he thrust, Xenia had been directly below Elhazard. Xenia did not appear to have moved, nor had he taken a counterattack that had pushed him off-balance. *Is this some sort of illusion? If so, I’ll just blow the illusion away too!*

Without any buildup, he cleaved across with Elhazard where he landed.

Fifth Order Glorious Asuran Whirlwind—

This sword technique was an enhanced version of Asuran Whirlwind. It sent Xenia spinning up into the sky in a sharp spiral. Inside the vortex, blades of vacuum sliced into the god of death. Felix swiftly arched his body to assume a throwing stance. Azure light began to radiate from his arm and sword alike.

Sixth Order Shattering Twins—

He released Elhazard. It drove into Xenia’s abdomen, leaving air-shattering reverberations in its wake. Felix pulled his outstretched right arm back hard. Elhazard flew in an arc, then once more stabbed into Xenia’s chest before returning to his hand. In the time it took Felix to blink, Xenia had regenerated both the holes in its chest and abdomen, as well as restored its arm.

So this is a god of death...

Xenia descended slowly to the ground as though to demonstrate its superior power.

My interest has waned, Xenia said shortly, with a trace of irritation. Alarm bells blared in Felix’s mind.

Don’t be afraid, he told himself. *Just keep attacking first.*

He used Fifth Order Glorious Asuran Whirlwind again, but from behind him came a voice like a hand dragging him into death.

I have seen that already.

By the time he realized that the Xenia in front of him was an afterimage, it was already too late. He didn't even have time to dodge before the ferocious blow hit him in the back. Helpless to resist, Felix was sent flying off into the distance.

If I hadn't thrown up an Odic shield, I'd be dead...

As his field of vision swam, he saw Xenia was of course waiting for him. He was wracked by unbearable pain that made him curl in on himself. As with all humans, Felix knew how to willfully disassociate himself from pain. With his left hand, he slammed a compressed ball of Odh into the ground, sending himself flying like a cannonball. He used the momentum to flee into the sky, but Xenia immediately followed after him in furious pursuit. Felix did a half turn in midair, then caused a board to materialize at his feet, which he kicked off to deliberately close on Xenia even as it swung its scythe.

Seventh Order Asuran Light Barrage.

As he passed Xenia, he unleashed a storm of a hundred stabbing blows, but Xenia was able to deflect them all by spinning its scythe at high speed. Felix landed in a crouch, then looked up. The entire space seemed to be filled with great scythes.

Let the wild dance begin, Xenia commanded. The scythes rushed at him. Felix used Fifth Order Glorious Asuran Whirlwind for a third time, but it only had enough power to throw off a few dozen scythes.

I suppose that's to be expected after using it three times. He switched to Swift Step of Gales, which prioritized fine movements, then repelled the violent onslaught of scythes. But the attacks only grew fiercer with no end in sight. Felix's breathing grew more and more erratic, and breathing was directly connected to his control over his Odh.

It seems you have reached your limit, said Xenia. Wounds great and small built up on Felix's body. The fatal blow would surely come soon, but there was nothing he could do about it. His paths to escape closed off one after another like a noose tightening around his throat, until at last, he was surrounded by an unbroken mass of scythes. Sweat dripped down his cheeks. Xenia descended

before him with an aloof air, then spread its arms in provocation.

Eighth Order Asuran Sky Strike—

Xenia twitched as if in shock. Before Felix could execute the technique, it seized him by his right arm, then raised its index finger and slowly waved it back and forth.

I will have that sword from you, it said. I must study it in more detail.

Felix heard a muffled sound from the arm in Xenia's grip. Pain crawled up it like a snake all the way to his collarbone, and Elhazard slipped from his hand, hitting the ground with a dry clang.

Now I shall take it.

Just as Felix saw the black hand reach out toward him, he sensed a terrifying amount of Odh. A smile spread across his face.

"I was tired of waiting," he said.

A powerful kick hit Xenia in the head, and it disappeared out of sight.

"Thanks for holding out," said Olivia. "I'll take it from here."

"I leave it in your hands," was all Felix said. Olivia glowed with dazzling silver light.

V

Xenia walked toward her as though nothing had happened. Olivia copied it like a mirror. When the distance between them was all but gone, they both came to a halt.

You seem to have finished your preparations. And yet... Xenia looked at Olivia's forehead, then snickered. Don't tell me that is what's different? If so, I shall be terribly disappointed.

"You really do talk a lot. Not like Z." Without any warning, Olivia's foot whipped up at Xenia, sending it flying straight up. She went after it, unleashing an unbroken series of slashes as she caught up.

I stand corrected, it said as it parried her blows with its scythe. You are indeed

different from before.

“Humans grow, you know.” Though she had been beaten to a pulp last time, her experience fighting Xenia combined with training specifically for this battle meant that to a degree, she was able to predict what it would do and move accordingly. As the great scythe slashed at her from the side, she slammed the ebony blade down onto it from above, using the recoil to jump over Xenia’s head. Twisting around, she kicked hard at its unprotected back, then released a volley of firebombs as Xenia advanced in a straight line toward the ground. Wreathed in flames, the god of death came to an abrupt stop just before it hit the ground, as though it had stopped time, then lowered its toes lightly to the ground. By the time Olivia made it back to the ground, the flames were gone without a trace.

A mere human could not grow enough for it to matter to me in such a short period of time, Xenia said. Explain.

“I trained with Z,” Olivia declared proudly.

Your explanation is grossly inadequate. There are limits to what even a supreme being can teach.

“Z told me that when humans have something to protect, they can do things beyond their limits. And I’ve now got more people I want to protect than I can count.”

In short, there is no real reason for how you came by this power? When Olivia nodded, Xenia’s shoulders shook with laughter. Z would never spout such nonsense.

“You only say that because you don’t know Z at all.”

I know nothing of Z? After we have come through eons together? Do not make me laugh.

“Time’s got nothing to do with it. I’ll prove it.” Olivia held the ebony blade level, then, running her finger along the blade, she traced the words *Dimension Eater* into the metal. At once, pain shot through her whole body like lightning. Olivia’s face twisted with pain. Mitigating the emerging melody of annihilation with the vast amount of Odh flowing through her body, she simultaneously

manipulated her Odh with supreme finesse to use Ultimate Break Down Swift Step, the same technique she had used against Zebulla. Leaving behind all traces of her presence, she silently closed with Xenia. Her first blow followed without delay, taking off Xenia's right arm. Xenia jumped back and her second blow did not meet its mark.

Humans never learn, it said, paying no attention to its severed limb. *No matter how many times you cut off my arm—?! Xenia broke off*, staring hard at its arm. Its face was just as blank as Z's, making it difficult to read its emotions, but Olivia could sense its dismay.

What did you do?

Olivia was silent.

I asked you what you did! it shouted.

"Do you think I'll tell you?" Olivia replied, her voice perfectly calm.

Inferior life-form... it hissed. *You dare!*

Without warning, Olivia found herself enclosed in a great black sphere. Xenia clenched its left fist and the sphere gradually began to cave in with a heavy noise. Olivia slashed wildly at it but was unable to inflict any damage.



She heard Xenia's voice from outside the sphere. *In a single minute, the sphere and you in it will be erased from this world. Give up.*

"Giving up..." Olivia took a deep breath, then raised both arms high above her head, swapped the ebony blade to her other hand, and shouted, "...isn't an option!"

Stabbing the sword down hard into the base of the sphere, the blade's edge flashed with black light. As the sphere shattered apart, she leaped, immediately assuming a fighting stance, but Xenia was nowhere to be seen. Without dropping her guard, Olivia descended in free fall. As she did so, she caught sight of a scythe spinning silently toward her in her peripheral vision. By arching her upper body, she managed to avoid the blade by a hair. Still off-balance, the next thing she saw was Xenia closing in on her, its great scythe raised in both hands.

I can't dodge that. In which case— With what time she had, she leaned to one side. As Xenia passed her, it tore a gash in her left shoulder. Even through the protective barrier that the magic ruby had bestowed upon her, the pain was terrible. Olivia couldn't keep back the cry that escaped her. As she landed on the ground, she looked up. Xenia, short its right leg, sent black mist coiling around itself. Olivia had something Xenia did not—the fighting instinct and iron determination that Z had drilled into her. Now, they gave her a greater advantage. Xenia alighted on one foot.

Why does it not restore...? it wondered. Then it seemed to start. *Surely not?! You didn't teach that to the Deep Folk girl?!* It fixed Olivia—or more accurately, the ebony blade in Olivia's hand—with a furious stare. *You betrayed us!!!* it howled. The endless empty space twisted menacingly at the sound. Olivia was still gripped by excruciating pain that no ordinary person could have endured.

My body will only hold out another few minutes, she thought. *And the effects of the magic ruby won't last much longer either.*

As though to cut off the sweat that continued to pour off her, Olivia used Ultimate Break Down Swift Step.

Offering support to a lowly human! Xenia spat. *It is too much—Z will regret this when I throw your head at its feet!*

Their blades clashed furiously, striking up, down, left, right, never staying in one place. The shock waves could not so much as die away, they came so ceaselessly.

Olivia was mildly astonished that the loss of its right arm and leg seemed to not have affected Xenia's movements.

Still, it fights like an amateur. There are loads of openings I can take advantage of. Indeed, Xenia was struggling to fully counter Olivia's mix of feints and real attacks. She had landed more than a few slashes on it. *But I'm not getting through. I'm still not getting through.*

The shock wave from Xenia's scythe as it deflected her blade easily sent her flying.

Ngh! It's carrying me off...! Olivia bit down instinctively on the tip of her tongue and just managed to keep her grip on consciousness. She hugged her knees and somersaulted to kill her momentum, then, the moment her right foot touched the ground, she launched into Ultimate Break Down Swift Step. She resumed her relentless rain of sword blows. At a glance, they might have appeared to be evenly matched, but Xenia was still just getting started.

Olivia, meanwhile, was bound by the magic ruby's time constraints and was close to her physical limit. Above all, she felt like if she lost concentration even for a moment she would black out from pain. *Can I really win against Xenia?* she wondered. Then she spat out a mouthful of blood and her feelings of despair with it. *It's no good losing your nerve now,* she told herself. *Z said you can win, and Z never lies. That means you're not using enough of your power yet. Remember your training! Hit faster! Harder!!!*

Even as her own blood obscured her vision, Olivia's sword attacks approached their zenith. But even that was not enough for her to land a fatal blow on Xenia. The moment she moved to a new position to avoid a blow from the scythe, indescribable agony shot through her. *Not now...!* She'd only left herself open for a second, but in this battle, that was all it took to seal her defeat. To make matters worse, instead of attacking with its scythe, Xenia kicked at her with the blade of its foot, a move so unexpected that her reaction came fatally slow. Xenia's kick bounced off her head, violently rattling the inside of her skull. Her

legs ceased to obey her, and she fell to her knees with a thud.

I am going to devour you entirely, Xenia said, its voice echoing discordantly. Unable to lift so much as a finger, Olivia was just barely aware of Xenia's scythe swinging down.

Come on, move!!! she begged. But her plea went unheard. Thrumming with menace, the scythe reached the right side of her neck—then, without warning, Xenia vanished from sight.

"From here on, we do this together." Following the voice, Olivia looked up to see Felix standing before her. She felt an inexplicable rush of happiness and a smile broke out across her face. "This is no time to be smiling," Felix said.

"You're right. I don't know, I'm just really happy."

Felix looked over to where he had sent Xenia flying. "I cannot use my right arm. I am sorry to say that all I can do is back you up."

"Cool. Even that will be super helpful."

"...It's coming."

Xenia came at them with deadly intensity, skimming over the ground with its scythe held out in front of it. Olivia and Felix both raised their swords to meet the attack. As the scythe slashed across parallel to the ground, they both immediately dodged with Ultimate Break Down Swift Step, then launched a simultaneous attack from both sides. Felix moved around picking up the gaps between Olivia's attacks, but even then, Olivia grew more and more frantic as her attacks all barely missed. She slashed wildly with the ebony blade.

"Not enough!" The ebony blade danced wildly. "Not enough!" She slashed out hard. "Not even close to enough!!!" As the seemingly endless back-and-forth continued, Xenia's scythe slashed once again at Olivia's chest. It was easy enough to dodge. Olivia dropped, sliding over the ground and under the scythe. Just then, she caught sight of a new scythe that made her hair stand on end.

"Don't you dare!" Before the attack reached her, Felix beat it down with his sword.

Begone, scum! Xenia shouted. Felix was sent flying by the shock wave,

slamming repeatedly into the ground—then he stopped.

“Gyaaah!!!” Olivia pushed past her limits. The ebony blade was everywhere, like a riot of blossoms. Black beams of light streamed from her eyes as the blade moved faster and faster. Power far beyond any human kept her body from falling apart, then began to alter her physical appearance. The most explicit sign of this was the black blood that flowed from her nose.

There!

Olivia caught the slight waver in Xenia’s posture in the moment that it dodged her thrust. Twisting herself around recklessly, she laid the flat of her blade down at an angle, then, with a scooping motion, she flung the scythe up into the sky. Xenia threw itself back, landing sitting on the ground. Olivia set it in her sights, then, with a cry that burst from her whole body, she brought the ebony blade down. Xenia’s hand snapped up to grip the blade and block the attack, but Olivia paid this no attention. She kept pushing with every ounce of her strength.

Just a little—just a little bit further...! she thought. Just as the tip of her blade touched Xenia’s head, it began to be gradually pushed back. She no longer had the strength to push through again. With a cruel screech, their stalemate was broken. The ebony blade flew up in a high arc through the air above them. All that remained was the shattered fragments of the magic ruby. Olivia looked up as Xenia looked down at her. Their positions had been completely reversed.

I couldn’t keep my promise to return. I’m sorry, Claudia. I’m sorry, everyone... The scythe bore down mercilessly on her. All she could do was watch. Then, in her ear, she heard the voice of the man who fought alongside her—the man who, thinking he was dead, she had forced from her mind.

“Hundredth Order God Killer.” White light burst from Felix’s sword. It skimmed the top of Olivia’s head, then shot straight through Xenia’s defenseless form. Then—

“Huh? What...?” Olivia saw a woman swathed in white mist. She reached out a hand to stroke Xenia’s cheek, then wrapped the god of death in a loving embrace. It was like a scene out of a storybook. As Olivia stared in amazement, the woman looked at her with a tender smile. *Now, this is your chance...*

I knew an attuned was lurking in there! Xenia screamed. *Let go of me! Let go!*

Xenia writhed, trying to break free of the woman's grip. Its furious yells brought Olivia back to her senses. She summoned up all her remaining strength, then swung the ebony blade in a perfectly straight line. Xenia vanished in a burst of mist and incoherent shouts. As it did so, the great black gate began to crumble with a violent crashing. The woman vanished too, dissolving into the background. Tranquility returned to the white space...

VI

Olivia had pushed herself beyond all her limits. She collapsed right there where she stood, her arms and legs spread out in all directions.

Who was that woman? she wondered. As she recalled the mysterious scene she had just witnessed, Felix, beaten black-and-blue, came walking unsteadily over to her.

"I thought you were dead," Olivia said to him.

"I'd thank you not to write me off just like that," he replied with a wry smile. "In any case, you finally did it."

"It was thanks to that woman in the end. Who was she?"

"A woman? Who are you talking about?" Felix extended a hand to Olivia. She took it, then stood up and took a look around her, but of course the woman was nowhere to be seen.

"Does that mean you couldn't see her? She came out of your sword like *fwoosh*," Olivia said, miming it out. But Felix just looked confused. Given his reaction, Felix had not been able to see the woman, but she had been too blinding for Olivia to doubt what she had seen. If the woman hadn't held Xenia back, she and Felix would have reunited in the unknown realms of the Land of the Dead. She gave Felix's fallen sword a long, hard look, but then thought, *I guess it doesn't matter*.

As Felix looked puzzled, something strange appeared behind him. But it was a strangeness that Olivia was very familiar with. A tear opened up in space, then a black shadow extended out from the roiling storm-like backdrop.

Before Olivia could react, Felix had picked up his sword, then before she could stop him, he slashed at the shadow. With a high-pitched screech, the sword flew up high into the air. Felix looked shocked.

Your eyes make it obvious where you will attack. On top of that, you lack commitment.

“What...?!”

“Felix, that’s Z!” Olivia called to him. “Z!”

“It’s—? Eh...?”

Shoving Felix aside, Olivia threw herself into Z’s arms. “I beat Xenia!” she said.

You did very well. Z stroked her hair. It had been so long that Olivia couldn’t help but smile. Z turned to the dumbfounded Felix. *I wish to speak with her. I shall send you ahead back to your comrades.* Felix hesitated, but without waiting for him to respond, Z took him by the arm and vanished. Less than ten seconds later, Z was back.

“What do you want to talk about?” Olivia asked.

It is thanks to you that I was able to put a stop to Xenia’s rampage. For certain reasons, I could not have done it by my own hand. I wish to thank you.

“Huh? Oh, um, right. But I mean, I did it for myself, so...” Olivia mumbled, embarrassed at being thanked by Z for the first time.

After defeating Xenia, the right is yours to exact an equivalent price. What is your wish?

“Do you mean,” Olivia said slowly, “that you’ll grant me a wish?”

Z nodded. Olivia hadn’t seen this coming at all; it was completely out of the blue, and yet she spoke without hesitation.

“What if I said I want to be with you forever and ever and ever?”

After Z had vanished without a word, Olivia had thought just being reunited would be enough. But after their actual reunion, over the course of her training, she’d started to want more. She’d come to think that she wanted to live together with Z again.

Z answered her without any sign of hesitation. *If that is what you wish*, it said.

Z did not lie. It really would grant her wish. She could live with Z just like they had before. She shouldn't have hesitated.

Am I hesitating? Why? She couldn't figure out the reason, and the more she thought about it, the more lost she became. As she scratched her head in frustrated confusion, she heard something fall to the ground at her feet. The moment she saw what it was, the reason for her hesitation became clear. As if it were drawing her down, she dropped to her knees, then picked up the fallen item and held it tight.

"You'll really grant anything I wish for?" Olivia asked.

Instead of answering her question, Z asked, *What is your wish?*

Olivia rose, then looked up at Z with resolution in her eyes.

"I wish for..."

Epilogue: Off on a New Journey!

“Thanks for coming to see me off,” Olivia said with a smile. Her eyes reflected the varied expressions of her companions.

A young man came up to her and said in a muttered sigh, “Usually you’d look a bit like you’re going to miss us at a time like this...”

He handed her a wicker box. Olivia opened the lid to find neatly packed sandwiches cut into rectangles.

She laughed. “Special homemade mustard sandwiches, huh? My favorite.”

When Z had said it would grant her a wish, Olivia had asked to resurrect the young man who now stood before her, bashfully scratching his cheek—Ashton Senefelder. When she’d seen Claudia crying her eyes out as she threw her arms around Ashton, Olivia had known she’d made the right choice. Incidentally, Ashton’s resurrection had led to an uproar like a bee’s nest that had been hit with a stick. And naturally Olivia, as the one who had brought Ashton back, had been bombarded with questions. It had almost been funny how people had gaped when she told them that Z had brought him back to life because she’d asked, but after that, they had concluded that a god probably could pull off a miracle or two, and that was that. However, in reality, it had not been so simple...

“I want Ashton to come back to life.”

That is your wish?

Olivia nodded vigorously.

I shall grant it. Just like that, she was surrounded by dazzling light. She soon sensed it fade, then slowly opened her eyes—and saw Ashton floating horizontally there.

“Ashton!” she cried, immediately reaching out to embrace him. She pressed her ear hard against his chest and confirmed that his heart was beating. *It’s*

faint, but I can hear his heart. She gently laid him down on the ground, then threw her arms around Z.

“Thank you, Z! Thank you so, so much!” she said, her gratitude far greater than what could be expressed in words. Yet Z stayed silent. Something was clearly wrong. “Z...?”

Z’s form trembled, then it collapsed backward. In a panic, Olivia tried to help it up.

“What’s going on?! Are you okay?!” Olivia was frantic. She had never seen Z unsteady like this before.

It is nothing, said Z, gently refusing her assistance. *I merely used too much power.*

“Huh? Too much power...?” Olivia repeated. “You don’t mean because you brought Ashton back?”

In order to restore a once-withered vessel to life, one must undergo 999 steps. It is not a simple process.

“No...” Olivia had imagined that Z was all-powerful. She had even forgotten the obvious fact that works of power demanded an equivalent exchange. She was deeply horrified to discover that her own selfish request had done this to Z.

“Z, are you going to die?” she asked, voice trembling.

I will not die. I simply need to sleep for a time.

“How long is ‘a time’?”

A hundred years of slumber, at least.

Olivia, who had felt momentary relief at hearing that Z wasn’t going to die, was speechless.

“I’m sorry...” she said at length. “I just asked you without thinking...” No matter how many tears she wiped away, more welled up.

Z, gently brushing them away with its fingers, said, *You are very much like your mother.*

The unexpected words took Olivia completely by surprise. “You knew my

mother?”

I did. We were friends.

“Huh...?” Olivia processed this. “So when you said you’d had one friend before, you were talking about my mother?!”

She was a girl most worthy of observation, just like you.

“You don’t say...”

Z, who had raised her, had been her mother’s friend. Olivia still couldn’t find it in herself to care about her parents, but she couldn’t help but feel something about this. But at that moment, she was more worried about Z’s condition than anything else.

You are too pretty to always be making that face, Z said. And everyone will be waiting for you to get back.

Z created a mirror. In it, Olivia could see her friends raising their fists and cheering. The sight made her feel a wave of relief, but at the same time, the black mist that always coiled around Z was fainter than she had ever seen it. From its body, she heard a number of cracks like breaking ice. Every one of them stabbed at her heart.

You are no longer alone, Z went on. You have many friends who will give you a full life. Forget about me.

“Like I could ever forget you!” Olivia exclaimed. “You’re my—?!”

Z’s embrace prevented her from saying any more. The smell of goodbye enveloped her in its sorrowful embrace.

I am a god of death. You are a human, Z said, slowly drawing away from Olivia. Our paths may cross, but only ever with the transience of a dream. Never can we walk side by side. It pointed away in the opposite direction from the mirror—

“Huh?”

Go back to where everyone is waiting for you.

Olivia paused for a moment, then said, “You can have this back. It’s your left

arm, right?”

She held out the ebony blade, but Z declined to take it.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Z did not answer. Instead, a light note rang out as a black vortex swirled into existence behind it.

My observation of you is now over. Farewell...Olivia.

Olivia’s cry was drowned out by a swirling roar of thunder and lightning. Z was sucked up inside it, and the white space returned to its original tranquility. Olivia closed her eyes, her face still wet with tears, and clasped the ebony blade tight to her chest.

“Thank you for staying with me while I was sick. Thank you for teaching me how to hunt. Thank you for giving me loads of books. Thank you for teaching me so many things. Thank you for making me stronger. Thank you for raising me. Thank you so, so much.”

That was how she said goodbye to Z.

“Olivia, are you okay?” She looked around and saw her friends’ concerned eyes on her. Among them was Gile Marion.

“I’m glad you came back too, Gile,” she said.

Gile promptly dropped to his knees. “It is all thanks to you, Captain.”

“I was discharged. I’m not your captain anymore.”

“Discharged or not, you will always be my captain, as well as the goddess who gave me a second chance at life.” Gile’s eyes were gleaming.

Backing away slightly, Olivia said, “I mean, I wasn’t expecting you to come back to life...”

According to Z, Gile’s soul had been connected to Ashton’s to protect it. Simply put, he’d gotten inadvertently caught up in Ashton’s resurrection. Olivia had been surprised to hear this at the time, but then she thought that in a way, it seemed just like Gile.

“Oh...” Gile’s shoulders slumped dejectedly. It was of course Ellis who threw an arm around his neck and dragged him in close.

“You wouldn’t be begrudging my big sister Olivia’s generosity, would you?” she said pointedly.

“Of course not,” Gile retorted. “I’ve got nothing but gratitude for the captain.”

“Glad to hear it!” Ellis tousled Gile’s hair roughly, a big grin on her face.

Olivia said her goodbyes to everyone there, then picked up her bag from the ground and slung it onto her back.

“Right, I’m off to see the world. See you when I get back,” she said. A hand reached out to her. It was Claudia, her best friend.

Looking a little shy, she said, “Take care, Olivia.”

“You too, Claudia.” She paused. “You know, it feels seriously weird for you to not use my rank. Gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Honestly? Me too.” They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, then, smiling, they shook hands.

“See you later!” Olivia waved enthusiastically a few times, then walked away with a spring in her step. She disappeared from sight without looking back once.

“Just like that, she’s gone...”

“What’re you getting sentimental for, you big lout? We’ve got loads to do, so get it together. Just the fact that my big sister laid her hands on your grimy body to heal you is enough to make me sick...”

Gauss assumed his best scowl. “Hey, Ellis,” he growled, “you know I outrank you, right?”

“You expect me to defer to you after you napped through the greatest battle of all? Fine, if you insist. I’ll give you the full superior officer treatment.”

“Okay, okay, you win. I’m sorry.” Gauss sighed, his shoulders slumping. Evanson, who stood beside him, had a distant look in his eyes.

“Looking pretty forlorn there,” said Luke, his older brother.

“You aren’t?”

“It’s not as though we’ll never see her again.”

“Maybe so, but I’ll still miss her...”

Luke grinned. “You’d better go get that baker’s daughter to make you feel better, then.”

“Wh-What?! H-H-H-How did you...?!” Evanson spluttered. “Did General Olivia let something slip?!”

“It’s nothing to do with General Olivia. You just can’t hide anything from your big brother.”

The group that had come to see Olivia off made their way back to Galia Fortress, all of them talking about her.

As Ashton gazed after Olivia, who was completely out of sight, Claudia said hesitantly, “She really went...”

“Yes, and in true Olivia fashion—strolling off without a second thought.”

A brief silence passed between them, then, with some difficulty, Claudia said, “Didn’t you want to go with her? Aren’t you holding yourself back?”

“I’m not, ser,” Ashton replied. “The havoc Darmés wrought has thrown not only Fernest but every other country into utter chaos. I’m not sure how much help I can be, but I want to devote myself to recovery. What I want will have to wait until after that.”

“Oh...” Claudia said. “I see that even after coming back from the dead, you’re still you.”

“What are you on about?” The two of them exchanged a faint smile, then Claudia looked up aimlessly at the sky. The freshly blooming flowers Ashton could see told him that spring would soon arrive in earnest.

“B-By the way, Ashton, I...” Claudia mumbled. “I, um...”

“Listen!” Ashton blurted out suddenly, making Claudia jump. He went on without meeting her eyes. “Listen, ever since I was little, I’ve been bad at seeing the things that are really important. Because of that, I’m always making the

wrong choice.”

Claudia looked at him in confusion. “Really?”

“Yes. But thanks to Olivia, I think I’m making the right choice this time.” He took a deep breath, then lightly clasped Claudia’s hand.

“A-Ashton...?! ”

“Please, don’t let go of my hand.”

Claudia gaped at him. “M-Me? Are you sure?” There was a slight quaver in her voice. Ashton therefore answered with conviction.

“It could only ever be you.”

Claudia was quiet for a moment, then, with a shy smile, said, “You really are hopeless.” Her clear, blue eyes were wet with tears.



Another war ended, and peace returned to the continent of Duvedirica. However, peace would always be a breeding ground for fresh discord, as history had proved time and time again. For good or for ill, humankind was doomed to be unable to live without conflict. Humans were the most intelligent creatures to walk the earth, and thanks to this, their foolishness knew no bounds.

“All the same, it looks like we’ll be at peace for a while, so I’d better go see the world while I’ve got the chance.”

The birds wrote out their lovely songs on the stave of the sky. For the girl, a new journey was about to begin.

Afterword

Right from when I first started writing this story, I knew that Ashton was going to die. Even in fiction, if you are going to portray war then you cannot leave out death, and it feels extremely unnatural to me to exclude certain characters from that, even if they are central to the story. Young people are forced to go to war, where their lives are ruthlessly snatched away. Ashton could be said to symbolize those people.

On the other hand, I like stories where, whatever happens along the way, it all comes to a happy ending. Even after the war ended, with Ashton still dead, could Olivia and Claudia ever *really* laugh again for the rest of their long lives? As I approached the end, that thought grew more pressing in my mind, until eventually I ended up discarding my original plot. I expect people will be divided, but I hope you will feel that this is the best possible conclusion. This story is indisputably Olivia's heroic epic, but at the same time, it is also the story of a girl meeting many different people and growing as a person. It should be obvious without spelling it out that the main reason Olivia is able to stay who she is even amid the unique environment of the military is because of the people who support her.

One of the episodes that particularly shows how she has grown is her conversation with the children from volume 2 whom she met again in this volume. In volume 2, Ashton practically has to force her to hand out her cookies. In this volume, however, she gently chides the children who want to fight the imperial army and, to thank them for the thought, gives them her whole stock of cookies. Perhaps it was cruel that Ashton had to die for her to learn to think of others in this way, just as Claudia thought to herself. I think that the way Olivia keeps moving forward without faltering despite this shows that she is a real protagonist.

By the way, I left the number of mysteries that remain unsolved that way on purpose. The core reason for this is that I find it boring when everything is explained, leaving no room to use your imagination, but also, I would like to one

day release a side story about what happened between Olivia leaving the Forest of No Return and her volunteering for the Royal Army.

Finally, some acknowledgments. Thank you to my editor, Higuchi-sama, who waited with boundless patience as I fell behind and failed to make progress on the book. Thank you to Cierra-sama, who provided wonderful illustrations all the way through. And my deepest thanks to everyone involved in this series. It is five years and seven months since volume 1 was released. It is all down to you, my readers, that I was able to continue to the end. I am truly grateful.

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, flowing, light-colored hair. She is wearing a dark, gothic-style dress with a high collar and long, lace-up boots. She is holding a large, ornate sword or dagger. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with falling petals and a large rose. The overall tone is dramatic and romantic.

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUSTRATION
CIERRA

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

VII
FINALE



"I mean, I've
thought of you as a
friend since *ages*
ago—no, as one of
my *best* friends."

"Best friends...?"

"I'm going to come
back. That means
you have to stay
alive as well, to be
there when I do."



"I came to destroy you."

I do not recall inviting you here.



MAITO
AYAMINE

ILLUST.
CIERRA

Death
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

VII
FINALE

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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 7 Finale by Maito Ayamine

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