

Deaths DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE

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Prologue: The Girl Death Raised

“Grandma, read this book to me today!” said the little boy, taking a picture book from the shelf and holding it out to his grandmother Camilla, who sat reclined in her chair with her knitting. The hearth flickered with warm light, casting a soft glow onto the boy’s smiling face.

Camilla put down her knitting and took the book from the boy’s small hands.

“This one again? You really do love this tale, don’t you, Mikhail?”

The book was Mikhail’s favorite, and she had read it to him hundreds of times over—evident in its large patches of wear and tear. The damage to the picture on the cover was particularly severe, and it had long since worn away completely. Despite this, Camilla still remembered it well: a lone figure with an ebony sword planted before them, staring out into the distance from the top of a hill. The book was called *The Chronicles of Duvedirica*.

“Yeah, it’s the best! ’Cause the main character is the strongest out of all my books!” said Mikhail, huffing as he waved his little hands and feet excitedly about in an imitation of the hero from the book. Camilla couldn’t help but smile at his charming antics. No matter the era, little boys would always love heroes.

“Very well. Come over here, then,” said Camilla, gesturing for him to come and sit on her lap. Mikhail plopped himself down with a grin. She felt the youthful warmth of his body when he leaned back against her.

“Come on, read!” he said, swinging his feet as he looked up at her expectantly. Camilla gently stroked his silvery hair, and opened to the first page.

“Once upon a time, there lived a little girl who was raised by a god of death.”

This is a tale from long, long ago—the tale of the girl they once called the Ebony Hero.

It had small beginnings, as most things do.

Far from civilization, there was a forest. Further still into its depths, many great trees stood tall enough to pierce the sky, their canopies so dense that it was always dark as night beneath their boughs. What was more, a thick mist hung over the forest in perpetuity, as though to conceal its very existence. For as long as anyone could remember, people had spoken its name with fear: The Forest of No Return. No matter how sharp their sense of direction, there was no hope of escape for anyone who lost their way inside. On rare occasions, some daring soul who had heard the rumors would venture in, but there were no stories of anyone returning alive. Now, none dared to go anywhere near the place.

Secreted away at the center of the forest, there stood a tower built from glittering black stone. Despite being covered in moss and vines, an air of grandeur hung about it. Six great black pillars carved with complex designs loomed around it, though three of them were half in ruins. It was clear that a long time had passed since their collapse. The remaining pillars were also badly damaged, with cracks spidering across every surface that made it look as though they might crumble at any moment. This long-forgotten place was a temple, known by the people of ancient times as the gateway to the land of the dead.

Near its entrance lay, inexplicably, a sleeping baby wrapped in a bloodstained cloth. Beside it, a man lay slumped against one of the pillars, splattered head to toe with blood. Even in death, he still clung fast to the bladeless hilt of a sword.

Beasts ruled in the forest, and the sweet-smelling infant and the foul-smelling human corpse were easy pickings. By all rights, they should have been devoured already. But not only did no beasts appear, not even the chirping of birds could be heard amongst the trees. The area immediately surrounding the temple was silent as the grave. It was as though every nearby creature had fallen into slumber. At best, one could describe it as tranquil; at worst, the silence that enveloped the place was downright eerie.

Into the unearthly atmosphere hanging over the temple, there entered three shadows that shimmered like the air above a flame. They stopped abruptly, their gazes falling upon the man and the infant.

We came to see what had lost its way here—and if it isn't humans, one of the shadows whispered. The tongue it spoke was foreign to any mortal ears. They did well to make it to the temple. It seems the babe still lives, though the man is dead. His soul's vessel is already empty. It sounded bored as it inspected the child and the corpse in turn.

A babe... whispered the second shadow. *Such a vulnerable soul will do little to sate my hunger. But it shouldn't put up any resistance if we harvest it now.*

The second shadow raised an uncanny, shimmering scythe it hadn't held a moment ago, and without a flicker of hesitation, swung it down towards the child's heart. Suddenly, the third shadow threw out a hand into the scythe's path to deflect it. An instant before making contact, the scythe dissolved as quickly as it had appeared.

Why are you interfering? Do you wish to devour it yourself? asked the second shadow.

No, it's not that. I wish but to observe it for a time, said the third.

Observe it? Old habits die hard.

I don't know what you find so interesting about them, added the first shadow. *But no matter. Do as you please.*

With this, the first two shadows melted away together into the earth, leaving the third one alone. It approached the infant in silence, lifting the babe up into its shimmering arms. As though in anticipation of this very moment, the child's eyes blinked open, and the shadow saw itself reflected in their clear, ebony depths. For a little while, the infant stared curiously at the shadow, then smiled.

Yes, this will be well worth observing, whispered the shadow to no one in particular, looking from the baby's smiling face to the scarlet jewel that hung around its neck.

Ten years had passed since the shadow had taken the child into its keeping.

The girl lived in the temple, its dark, gleaming walls the only home she knew. Though the shadow that called itself Z technically resided there alongside her, it

did not eat, nor did it sleep, or play with her. It would not. Z hardly spared the girl the time of day outside of its observation of her.

And right now, it was observation time.

Z and the girl traded blow for blow in the training ground outside the temple. The girl wielded a blade that shone pure white against Z's great scythe, black as ebony and shrouded in a dark mist. Her strikes were easily knocked aside over and over again by the scythe, and after struggling for a time the girl leapt back, putting distance between herself and Z. She wiped the sweat that dripped from her brow with her sleeve, her shoulders rising and falling with her heaving breaths.

Thirty minutes had passed since observation began.

The girl was reaching the limit of her endurance, and she knew it. Z rested the scythe on its shoulder.

What is the matter? Are you tired already? it asked, its tone flat with disinterest. This wasn't meant as sarcasm—Z was never sarcastic. It simply stated what it observed of the girl's condition, nothing more.

Even so...

The girl took a deep breath and kicked hard off the ground. The landscape streaked past her in a blur as she closed in on Z, sweeping her sword up towards its side. But the white blade never met its mark—despite the fact that she'd put all her strength behind the blow, the scythe flicked up and batted her blade away, driving the sword's tip into the ground.

Good. Your Swift Step was acceptable, but your movements are too direct, murmured Z, more to itself than to the girl. With incredible speed, it flung a dagger at the girl. She seized the sword from the ground and shielded herself with it. As the fierce blow struck the blade, the air contracted into a gale and, unable to withstand it, she was flung up into the sky.

Gah!

A jolt of numbness wracked her senses, and for a second, she began to black out. She quickly bit down on her tongue and just managed to hold on to consciousness as she spun through the air and plummeted back to the ground.

The girl slowly brought her breathing under control, roughly wiping away the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth. She realized then that both of her arms were twitching violently.

I'm fine, she insisted. *I can... I can still fight*. She gripped her sword tight to control her trembling as she swung it up in a wide arc above her head in a protective stance. Z had taught her this technique. From this stance, she could react to attacks coming from any direction.

Are you ready? asked Z, swinging its scythe as effortlessly as it would a twig. The girl did not reply, only gripped the hilt of her sword tighter still.

It appears you are. As Z spoke again, the girl felt an uneasy sensation creep down her spine. She flung herself to the side, avoiding by a hair's breadth the blow that fell a split second later where she had stood. In response, she moved behind Z, raising her sword—then she stopped. She had no choice but to stop. Leaving an afterimage in its place, Z in turn had come around behind, and was now resting the tip of its scythe against her throat. Cold sweat dripped from her forehead.

Your ability to keep up with my movement has greatly improved. We will leave things here for today, said Z, and melted away into the ground. The oppressive aura that had hung around them dispersed immediately, and the temple returned to its usual silence.

The tension leaving her shoulders, the girl looked towards the ground into which Z had vanished. *Thank you*, she said.

The girl's days went like this, every day, without fail:

She had lessons where Z taught her about a great many things: the state of the continent, language, military strategy, magic, swordcraft, and martial arts, to name a few. Occasionally, when they went into the forest together, it even taught her how to hunt and prepare wild game. Z called all of this observation, but to her it was education and training.

One day, shortly after said observation had begun in earnest, Z taught her that she was an animal called a human, creatures that fell under the complicated category that Z called *group three intelligent life forms*. The girl,

curious about what kind of creature Z was given how different its form was from her own, then asked it exactly that. *What are you, then?*

Me? What indeed... The humans of this world might consider me a god of death, it replied. The girl's eyes shone in amazement. Amongst the many books Z had given her, there had been one about death gods. It described them as terrifying entities that harvested human souls indiscriminately. The book concluded with the line:

All creatures are equal in death.

She asked if Z would harvest her soul too.

That is a misconception, it said. *We can only harvest a soul when sentience has not yet emerged or in the moments following death. You are already sentient; therefore, I cannot harvest your soul.*

Now that she thought about it, the illustrations of gods of death in the book had depicted a skeleton cloaked in rags. She compared this to Z—the shadow shimmering before her like the air over a flame. If she had to choose between trusting Z or the book, she would, of course, trust Z. And that meant, she concluded, that sometimes books contained lies.

On another day, sometime later, they had just finished sword training when the girl asked Z a question. Why was Z teaching her swordcraft and martial arts—skills for killing humans? Humans, Z answered, were cruel creatures that loved violence, killing each other as much for sport as for survival. But it felt like something was missing from that answer; she herself was the only human at the temple, so why did she need to train to kill people who weren't there?

You will understand soon enough, was the only answer Z had reluctantly given her. Z's physical form was essentially a corporeal shadow, making it impossible for her to decipher what, if any, sort of emotion lay behind its answer.

And yet, inexplicably, the girl felt sure that at that moment, Z had ever so slightly smiled.

It was around that time that she and Z began to converse in human language. She didn't understand why, but it was what Z told her to do, so she diligently

obeyed. Z's observation of her continued every day, unrelenting. Seasons came and went, and Z and the girl continued their peculiar life together.

"Z, my head feels funny, and my back hurts. I think there's something wrong with me," said the girl after the day's lessons had finished. Z lay a shimmering hand against her forehead.

Hmm... You have a temperature. I believe this is what they call "a cold," it replied.

"What's that?"

What indeed... Imagine there are bugs inside your body causing mischief and putting it out of balance.

"Bugs? Is it because I ate ants yesterday?" said the girl, now regretting the ants she had eaten instead of her snack.

I have told you not to eat ants. I also believe I said the bugs were imaginary, said Z, sounding exasperated.

"Well, what should I do? Am I going to die? If I die, will you gobble up my soul?"

The human body is not so feebly constructed that such a minor thing will kill you. That being said, we will forgo the rest of today's training. Return to your room and go to bed. You will recover soon with proper rest.

"Okay."

The girl tottered back to her room and dove right into bed. She slept for a while, only waking when she felt a faint presence. Turning her head, she saw Z's wavering figure before her and did a double take—this was the first time Z had ever come into her room.

"Z? Have you come to eat my soul after all?"

I made you some soup, it said. Eat.

Z was, in fact, holding a tray with a bowl on it.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

That is because when you catch a cold, you also lose your appetite. Even if you are not hungry, you need to eat. You will get better faster, said Z. It sat down on the bed, gently helping her sit up. Then, it scooped up a spoonful of soup and held it up to her mouth. The girl stared.

Is something wrong? Come on, open your mouth.

“No, um...” mumbled the girl. She felt awkward and confused, but she opened her mouth as instructed. Z tilted the spoon slowly so that the soup ran down her throat. She felt the warmth spreading through her body.

How is it? I kept the flavors plain so that it would not upset your stomach.

“I-It’s nice,” said the girl, stifling a giggle.

Was there something wrong with it?

“No, ummm...”

Well, there does not appear to be any problem.

Z proceeded to shovel spoonful after spoonful into her mouth at an alarming pace, and before ten minutes had gone by, the bowl was empty.

“Thank you.”

Well done. You ate it all. Now drink this, said Z, placing a silver cup in the girl’s hands. A thick, green liquid sloshed around inside it; it brought to mind a monster from one of her picture books.

“This? It’s goopy and it smells weird. Is it really okay to drink?”

This is called “medicine.” If you drink it, you will get better even faster.

“You mean it?”

Have you ever known me to lie?

“No, never,” she said. She pinched her nose and downed the green liquid in one gulp. Even so, the bitter flavor spread through her mouth, wiping out all trace of the delicious soup.

“Z, it’s really bitter!”

Medicine is like that, by and large. Not that I have tried it, said Z, pulling a

chair up beside the bed and sitting down. It casually drew a book from the shadows around where its chest might have been and began to flick through the pages.

“Are you... Are you going to stay with me?”

Hm? Oh, this is part of my observation. When next you wake, you should be well again. Now, if you are quite satisfied, go to sleep.

“Okay,” said the girl, giggling again. “Good night, Z.”

Good night, said Z, after a moment’s pause.

The next morning, the girl woke with the sense that she’d had a wonderful dream.

It had been fifteen years since Z and the girl had met.

The girl’s life continued as it always had. If anything had changed, it was the difficulty of her education and training. Z had also given her a name, saying it was to avoid future inconvenience.

The girl had just turned fifteen, however, and her body had changed a lot. Her physique, hardened by Z’s training, called to mind that of some lithe and ferocious beast. But she was still very clearly a fifteen-year-old girl—her lovely, slender figure and ample breasts both attested to that. Her features were beautifully proportioned, not unlike a doll, and had she lived in town, she’d likely have turned heads. She had grown into a beautiful, young woman.

The girl rose early, as she did every morning.

Rising with the sun, she jumped out of her canopy bed, yawning widely and feeling the satisfying crack of her joints as she stretched. She hung the towel from the wall around her neck, then wandered out from her room and down the dimly lit corridor. She loved the tranquility of dawn so much that she got up early just to experience it.

Eventually, she arrived at the courtyard, where dappled light filtered in through the canopy of lush, green leaves. Narrowing her eyes slightly against

the glare, she headed for the well with a bucket in hand. Once she had a decent amount of water, she washed her face over the bucket, swallowing a mouthful. The water made her smile as it filled her empty stomach.

“Ahh, delicious,” she murmured in contentment. Next, she headed for the kitchen and dining room. It was a simple affair—just a brick oven and a small table. With practiced motions, she tossed some logs on the fire, then concentrated power into the index finger of her right hand.

This was the magic power that slept inside her.

She imagined herself binding together the trace magical elements in the air. A moment later, particles of blue-white light gathered at her fingertips, the mark of a successful binding. When the light converged to a single point, it morphed into a tiny ball of flame the size of a pea.

“Success.” She smiled at the fireball she had created, then tossed it at the logs. Blue-white flames sprang up around them, and she took a poker down from the wall and used it to stoke the fire.

Back when she’d first started learning how to make a fireball, she hadn’t been able to control its strength. She’d lost track of how many times she had ended up destroying the oven. It had always reappeared soon enough, though, fixed up good as new. At first, the girl had thought that this mysterious phenomenon was the work of a mischief-loving fairy called Comet, who showed up in one of her books. In the tale, the cowardly Comet came up with all kinds of schemes so that it could secretly laugh at the surprise of the humans who fell for its tricks.

The girl thought she’d surprise the fairy back, and spent the whole night hidden in a corner of her room keeping watch for the fairy. Eventually morning rolled around with no sign of Comet, and with education time approaching, the girl had no choice but to reluctantly leave the kitchen. When she returned at lunchtime, the oven sat there, good as new. The girl, getting stubborn, spent the next several days staking out the kitchen, but to no avail. Much to her disappointment, she later spotted Z using its magic to repair the oven.

The girl shook her head at these youthful memories, wiping the sweat from her brow. She put a pot of soup leftover from the previous day on top of the oven to reheat, and soon enough, the pot began to bubble and release a

delicious aroma. She ate alone, then said her thanks for the food, quickly tidied up her dishes, and left for the education room.

There were a number of rooms in the temple besides the girl's bedroom, but most were in a state of total disrepair. It was only natural, with no one looking after them. The education room was no different. The girl pushed open the familiar door, adorned with magical designs—only for it to suddenly fall to the ground with a dramatic thud, apparently rotted so badly that it had fallen right off its hinges. She didn't pay this any special attention, treading on the fallen door as she went and sat down at the single, ramshackle desk that stood in the center of the room. Now all there was to do was wait for Z to materialize out of nothing as it always did. She didn't suspect anything.

Not at first.

"Z's running late..." she mumbled to herself. She waited, and waited, and waited some more, but Z made no sign of appearing. This had never happened before. *This is odd*, she thought. Then she noticed a number of items sitting on Z's teacher's desk: an ebony sword she hadn't seen before, something that looked like a letter, and a scarlet jewel. She went up to the desk, and reached for the parchment. Sure enough, it was a letter—one addressed to her. She read it from start to finish once, then again, and again, then she snatched up the sword and dashed out of the temple.

"Z!" she cried as she ran. "Z! Z!"

It took her by surprise, the moment she realized the voice calling out for Z so loudly was her own. But Z did not answer the girl's call. Her voice merely echoed into the emptiness. Still she kept calling, desperate and pleading, until her voice grew hoarse. But Z did not appear.

"Z... Z... Z..." she murmured, over and over. Something warm was overflowing from her eyes, blurring her vision, and as her fingers touched the damp tracks running down her cheeks, she understood that she was "crying," something that happened when you felt sad. What she didn't understand was this crushing pain in her chest. It was unlike any she'd ever felt during her training, and none of her books had ever mentioned it.

How much time passed, she couldn't say.

It was when the girl reached to wipe away her tears with her sleeve that she noticed something. A black mist drifted around the blade of the ebony sword she still clutched in her left hand.

This is...

Its shape had changed, but this was unmistakably Z's great scythe. The girl held it close to her, and looked down in silence.

That day, the girl left the temple, never to return.

Chapter One: And So, the Girl Was Unleashed upon the World

I

Tempus Fugit 995

The curtain fell on a forty-year age of peace as war dawned on the continent of Duvedirica once again.

It followed on the heels of Ramza XIII's abrupt declaration as emperor of the Asvelt Empire, a powerful nation situated in the north of the continent, that he would unify Duvedirica. The empire proceeded to send a large force over the border into the Kingdom of Fernest, another powerful country in the east of the continent, and battle lines were drawn.

In the beginning, it was a war between Asvelt and Fernest—between two great powers—but soon its sparks were flying into the smaller countries in the region. Before long, the war spread to engulf the entire continent.

Tempus Fugit 997

For the peoples of Duvedirica, the war consumed everything. Since the war began neither Fernest nor Asvelt had managed to take the upper hand, but a turning point came when the empire seized the Kier Fortress, Fernest's greatest stronghold on the central front, upon which they had been pinning their hopes.

Once the nigh-impenetrable fortress had fallen, the empire proceeded like a raging tempest, using Kier Fortress as a rallying point and employing intimidation, conciliation, and whatever other means were necessary to bring the kingdom's smaller neighbors under its dominion.

Seeing all of this, the United City-States of Sutherland in the south of the continent chose not to interfere in the war. They declared their absolute neutrality, but were in fact secretly colluding with the empire. Citing

widespread bad harvests in the southeast of the continent as an excuse, the city-states abruptly ceased exports of food to Fernest. Famine throughout the kingdom followed thereafter, with starvation claiming vast swaths of the citizenry. Fernest had always struggled to sustain itself with domestic produce alone and had relied on Sutherland for seventy percent of its food imports. This lack of self-sufficiency had cost them dearly.

Fernest requisitioned rations from its civilians to send to the soldiers on the front lines, but with food already in short supply, this incited the citizenry to rise up in rebellion. The army was deployed to put down the uprisings, but this only created more unrest in what turned into a vicious cycle. Left facing enemies within and without, the Kingdom of Fernest plummeted in a downward spiral.

Tempus Fugit 998

Report after report of the royal army's failures arrived at Fernest's capital. The kingdom had to put everything they had into fortifying their defenses just to hold the line, let alone even consider mounting a serious counterattack. The alliance against them, spearheaded by the empire, grew with each passing day until it threatened to surround the nation completely.

In the midst of this, Alfonse sem Galmond, reigning King of Fernest, made a difficult decision.

He ordered the elite First Legion to leave the last fortification defending the capital and take back Kier Fortress.

Galia Fortress was situated in the west of Fernest, isolated from the capital by the Est Mountains. It marked the final defensive line for the kingdom and was the closest key military outpost to the capital. Further to the west, and to the southeast of Kier Fortress, was Fort Caspar, which had fallen to the empire. The imperial army controlled the towns and villages around Fort Caspar, and the main roads were under perpetual watch by soldiers patrolling along their length. They expected an attack from Galia Fortress any day now, and so were on alert for any movements by the royal army.

Captain Samuel, head of the watch on the Canalia Highway, was on duty

when he spotted a young girl, no more than fifteen or sixteen years old, walking in the direction of the royal capital.

Her features were exquisite as a doll's, her legs were slender, and her long hair like silver thread rippled gracefully with every step she took. A village girl, if the short, tan-colored tunic she wore was anything to go by.

Well, well, thought Samuel. *What have we here?*

He licked his lips unconsciously, then his eyes caught on the item at her hip. The magnificent scabbard she had belted there was very much not typical of a village girl. It was black, and embellished with delicate, interwoven designs in silver and gold—the sort of thing that would look at home with a powerful noble who liked to throw their money around, or a battle-scarred warrior.

Just the scabbard alone would probably fetch a fine sum. It was obviously an unsuitable accessory for a mere village girl.

And if that's just the scabbard, I'll bet the sword inside is one hell of a treasure.

As he pictured the sword sheathed in the scabbard, Samuel smirked. For a moment, it crossed his mind that she might not be a village girl at all, but some sort of thief. But he quickly quashed the thought. It was common knowledge that the imperial army controlled these lands. Well, maybe he was biased because he was an imperial soldier, but even so, surely no thief would show themselves so brazenly in broad daylight.

Samuel tapped the shoulder of the young soldier next to him, a man named Cliff, and pointed at the girl.

“Good news, Cliff. I’ve got your first job for you. Go and detain that girl.”

“Yes, ser!” Cliff replied with a sharp salute. He called out to the girl in a threatening tone.

“You there, girl! Halt!”

No reply. Despite Cliff’s order for her to halt, the girl did not stop.

Given the distance between them, she had to have heard him. And yet, she continued walking as if nothing had happened. The soldiers nearby began

teasing their comrade for being ignored.

“Hey, Cliff, be nice! Didn’t your mom teach you how to talk to girls?”

“Yeah, if you huff and puff all scary like that, you’ll send her running!”

Their jeering seemed to get to Cliff. He squared his shoulders, marched over to the girl, and grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Are you deaf? I said, halt!”

“What?” said the girl. “You were talking to me?” Her eyes were wide with confusion as she pointed at herself. There was no hint of deceit—she appeared to be genuinely surprised. But Cliff apparently didn’t think so. He clicked his tongue in irritation and took another step towards the girl.

“You think this is funny? I don’t see any other girls around here.”

“Oh, can’t you tell the difference between men and women? Even I know how to do that,” she said, and pointed towards a female soldier back at the watch station.

“Wha...? Me?” said the woman, alarmed as her gaze flitted from Cliff to the girl and back.

Maybe he thought she was making fun of him. As Samuel watched, Cliff’s face turned bright red, and he seized the girl by the collar.

“That’s the attitude you take with an imperial soldier, you little brat? Got a death wish, do you? These lands all belong to the empire now. There aren’t any pathetic royal soldiers coming to your rescue.”

“Ohhh, so you’re imperial soldiers. Everyone in armor looks the same—I can’t tell any of you apart. I wish I’d had a book on how to recognize armor,” said the girl, totally straight-faced as she peered closely at Cliff’s armor. Her unwavering, ebony eyes showed no trace of fear.

Samuel chuckled to himself. “Oh, this is good. She’s a feisty one,” he said, and casually raised a hand to call off Cliff who was about to draw his sword. But Cliff’s temper was running hot, and though he stopped, he didn’t take his hand away from the hilt. He was brimming with raw bloodlust.

“Ser, why must I stand down? That was a brazen insult. I request that you

order her immediate execution!”

“Now, now, don’t be hasty. I don’t—*can’t* kill civilian girls. And especially not such a fine specimen as this. Anyway, that’s the rule for this unit. My one point of pride. Don’t you forget it, Cliff.”

I’ve lost track of how many I’ve despoiled, though.

As Samuel remembered the women from the villages they’d taken, the girl gave a huge, bored yawn.

“Sorry to waylay you like this,” Samuel said to the girl. “I just have to wonder, what’s a girl like you hurrying off to do in the capital with that fine scabbard? These are dangerous parts, you know. There are starving beasts roaming about. Why don’t you let me protect you?”

The other soldiers all started laughing crudely. One held his hands up as claws and roared in an imitation of a beast, making the others laugh harder still. They failed to pick up on the cold looks the female soldiers sent their way.

“Oh, is that what this is about?” replied the girl. “I don’t really need protection. I’m on my way to the capital to enlist in the royal army, so would you mind letting me go?”

For a moment, none of them could process what they’d heard. Cliff stared in blank shock, and the other soldiers gaped. Samuel assumed he looked like just as much of an idiot.

“It’s been a long day,” said the girl, and started off again in the direction of the capital.

“Traitooor!!!” bellowed Cliff, coming back to his senses and drawing his sword.

His right arm still gripped the hilt as, in the same moment, it was sent flying through the air.

It was Tempus Fugit 998.

An endless blue sky and a spray of blood spread out across the Canalia Highway.

“Wha...???” several of the soldiers shouted stupidly. Then slowly, like rusted gears, their heads all turned to look at Cliff. He lay on the ground, staring at his right arm like it was some kind of anomaly. Then, his face twisted and he screamed.

“*G-Gaaah!!!*” The sound rang out down the highway as blood spurted from his severed right arm. Samuel turned to look at the girl, who at some point had drawn a glittering, ebony sword. Bright red blood dripped from the edge of the blade. It was clear who was behind this bizarre turn of events.

“It hurts! It huuurts!!!” Tears and snot streaked down Cliff’s face. Attempting to stem the fountain of blood with his remaining arm, he tried to scramble away from the girl, but—

“Right-o,” the girl hummed, twirling her sword about to bring it level. Then she threw it, casual and carefree, though the blade soared as though it had been shot from a great bow. It mercilessly pierced through Cliff’s armor, the point of the black blade jutting out from the back of his chest as a black mist began to emanate from it. Cliff gasped, twitched a few times, then collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. The girl’s cheerful voice carried through the silence that covered the Canalia Highway.

“I did ask you to let me go. Humans really do love violence, don’t they? Or did you not understand me properly? Human language is pretty complicated.”

The girl continued rambling nonsense as she went over to Cliff’s silent corpse, stood on his head, and pulled her sword out. She carefully wiped away the blood from the blade before looking over at a nearby soldier, who brandished a spear.

“Yaaahhh!” shrieked the soldier and thrust the spear at her.

Some of the other soldiers had started swinging around swords and spears like a bunch of lunatics too.

Keeping her movement to an absolute minimum, the girl calmly dodged each attack with the elegance of a dancer, the skirt of her tunic billowing gently with every movement.

Privately, Samuel was astonished. He doubted even an experienced warrior could move with such polish and perfect efficiency. The chance his soldiers had of landing a blow on this girl was so low it might as well have been zero. Samuel was now on high alert. Who this girl was, he had no idea, but he no longer entertained any notion of her being a simple villager.

“Hmm... I suppose it must be my turn soon,” he said.

Once the soldiers grew slow and clumsy with exhaustion, the girl moved in to return their attacks in kind. She sent heads flying, smashed faces, sliced off limbs, and stabbed straight through hearts. Each time her blade met its mark, it was followed by a piercing scream and a spray of blood and gore. It was a one-sided slaughter, the kind only the strongest of warriors were capable of, and soon the area around them was transformed into a sea of blood, strewn with piles of mangled corpses. The cloying stench of blood, carried to him on the wind, filled Samuel’s nose.



One by one, the few soldiers who had not joined the fight dropped their weapons. Trembling, they backed away from the girl one step at a time, eyes wide and faces drawn tight with fear. They looked like they'd seen Death itself. Not one had a shred of fighting spirit left. The girl, drenched entirely in scarlet, beamed at them with all the brightness of the sun.

"A-Aaah! A monster! *It's a monster!*"

"Th-This isn't happening! I can't die here!"

"M-Mommy! Mommy, help me!!!"

The soldiers wailed piteously as they scrambled to get away. Some wriggled on the ground like worms. Others shook so hard Samuel could hear their teeth rattling. Others still even let out strange peals of laughter. There really were all sorts. It wasn't conduct befitting soldiers of the glorious empire. But Samuel wasn't about to blame them. He could hardly tell them to hold their ground with the aftermath of this massacre in front of them.

The girl didn't seem interested in pursuing the fleeing soldiers, and stared after them in silence. She'd probably given them a pass because they hadn't turned their weapons on her. At least, that was Samuel's guess.

"Um... Captain, right?" said the girl, seeming to suddenly remember Samuel and turning back to him. "You can run too. So long as you let me go, I don't have any reason to kill you." She was giving him permission to flee. The hint of a smile played around her bloodstained, seductive lips.

"I get it. You're no ordinary girl. Now that that's clear, may I ask you a question?" said Samuel.

"Sure, whatever."

"Where'd you learn to swing a sword and move like that? That's no small feat for a kid like you—and a girl, no less."

"I mean, I don't know what to tell you. It's just what Z taught me."

"...Z?"

"Yeah, Z. Do you know where it is?" asked the girl with a guileless smile. Her face still held a childlike innocence. It was impossible to believe this was the

same girl who had slaughtered his soldiers minutes earlier.

Well, it would have been if she hadn't been drenched from head to toe in their blood.

"Sorry, can't say I've heard of them."

"You're sure?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. But if they're anyone who's anyone, I'd know them."

"Hmph. Anyway, are you really not going to run away? I won't chase you or anything."

Samuel wasn't so obliging a man as to just turn tail and flee when he was told to. He shook his head at the girl, who was waving her hand to shoo him off.

"Huh? You're not going to run?"

"Heh heh heh. I still don't see why I should. I'm not half bad with a sword myself."

"Really? You don't look like much."

A moment of silence hung in the air after this cutting remark. Then, Samuel roared with laughter.

"Bah hah hah! No one's ever mouthed off to me like that before! Oh, this is fun. Chances to meet a monster are few and far between when you're fighting a war, you know."

"By 'monster,' do you mean me? My name is Olivia," said Olivia, putting her hands on her hips.

"Is it now? I'll try to remember that. If nothing else, this'll be my first time raising a hand against a civilian girl. Or maybe the rule doesn't apply when it's a monster. No, I don't think it does."

Having answered his own question, Samuel slowly drew the great sword on his back. It was a double-edged blade, strong and supple, with the edges tapering off until they became razor thin. It was his most prized possession, and it had seen him through countless battles without breaking.

He flicked his tongue along the edge of the blade and breathed in deeply,

bringing the sword level. Before him stood the smiling girl. He lowered his body slightly, let out a silent breath, and charged at Olivia. He moved with a swiftness unthinkable for his large frame, and the deadly thrust of his sword carried his full weight behind it.

With this, his awe-inspiring Raging Bull, Samuel had cut down many a famed soldier. This time would be no different. Whether man or monster, he needed to simply cut down the enemy in front of him.

There's only one target—the heart!

The blade seemed to cut the air itself as it rushed towards Olivia's heart.

"It's miiine!" cried Samuel triumphantly, sure he had won. But he quickly realized that the scene before him was not what he had expected. He did not see Olivia, stabbed through the heart and coughing up blood as she crumpled to the ground. No, instead, he was looking straight up at his own body. How very odd.

As his consciousness rapidly faded, he thought he heard the girl's confused voice say, "What is?"

II

Fort Caspar, Base of Imperial Command Operations in Southern Fernest

Captain Samuel has been killed in action.

It was the middle of the night, but an urgent report borne by a watchman from the Canalia Highway sent the outpost into an uproar. Crowds of nervous soldiers stood watch under the flickering torchlight of additional beacons lit along the main gate. Body after body was carried into the fortress through a small entryway to the side of the portcullis.

"The report is true, then? Captain Samuel was killed in action?" asked General Osvannes. A man of fifty years, he was Supreme Commander of the Southern Imperial Army and a figure of considerable influence in the Asvelt Empire. As a soldier, he was renowned for his airtight offensive and defensive strategies on the battlefield.

The officer kneeling before Osvannes looked up.

“Yes, m’lord,” he said. “The soldiers stationed at the town of Canalia went there at once. They found the captain’s headless body, along with those of about ten others in a similar state of decapitation. We are in the process of recovering them.”

“Without his head? I suppose they took it as a trophy. I doubt there’s a soldier in the royal army who doesn’t know Captain Samuel’s name.”

“Ser, this was not Fernest’s work,” the officer said tersely. Osvannes frowned.

“If not Fernest, then who? You can’t be suggesting that Samuel was taken down by mere bandits or the like.”

“No, I... Erm...” The officer’s voice faltered. Colonel Paris, another high-ranking officer in the room, smoothed back his hair and regarded the officer with cold, narrow eyes. He inclined his head, signaling for the officer to continue.

“What... What we’ve heard from the surviving soldiers is that they were slaughtered by a monstrous girl wielding a black sword.”

“A monstrous girl?” Paris repeated in spite of himself.

“That’s what they said. And that she told them she was headed to Fernest’s capital to enlist in the royal army.”

Paris let out a snort of laughter at the delusions spilling out of the officer’s mouth. “Idiocy,” he said. He’d heard minstrels’ tales more believable than this. As a former agent of the intelligence division, he wasn’t about to believe such a preposterous story. The account must have been exaggerated somewhere down the line.

“Very well. You can spare us the tall tales,” he said. “Bring me the soldiers, so that I may question them directly.”

The trembling officer shook his head limply.

“I’m sorry, ser, but their minds have been affected—they can’t speak any sense anymore. And the soldiers who saw the state they’re in are all panicking over the news that a monster has allied itself with Fernest.”

“That bad...” said Osvannes, looking at Paris. “Maybe there’s a grain of truth in these reports after all.”

“My lord, you can’t be serious. This—”

“That’s enough, Paris. We’re wasting time,” said Osvannes, raising a hand to cut the colonel off. Paris still had plenty he wanted to say on the matter, but it was true that if the soldiers had lost their minds, they would provide no further information, in which case this was undeniably a waste of time. Their time was always limited.

“Yes, my lord. Please forgive my outburst.”

“Think nothing of it. All right, I see what we have on our hands here. You are dismissed.” Osvannes motioned for the officer to leave.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but might I have a moment?” came another voice, cutting off the general. The voice belonged to a man cloaked in a robe dark as night, its hood pulled up over his head. His appearance was, in a word, sinister. The man’s face was just visible beneath the hood, gaunt and sallow with a fierce glimmer in his sunken eyes, and though he looked over sixty years old he could not have been older than his midthirties. This was Chancellor Darmès, here to observe on the emperor’s behalf. Paris had heard that he had once been on the military analytical team, a nobody with zero prospects. But over the past few years, he had risen to power with unprecedented speed. In the entirety of the glorious Asvelt Empire, he was now second only to the emperor, and as the emperor trusted him absolutely, most saw this as unlikely to change. Rumor had it that the emperor’s plan to unify the continent had in fact been originally Darmès’s idea. Usually, though, the taciturn chancellor rarely offered his own ideas, earning him the moniker of “The Silent Minister.”

“Did something concern you, my lord Chancellor?” Osvannes looked in askance at Darmès. Darmès gave them an oily smile.

“Oh, it is of no great import,” he said, making a show of waving off the general. “I merely wondered about that black sword. You don’t happen to know anything more about it?” he asked the officer. The man looked greatly alarmed to be so suddenly addressed, and his eyes darted madly about.

“No need to be nervous. Just tell me what you know,” said Darmès, his voice

kind. Even in the pale light of the candles that illuminated the room, they could all see the nervous sweat on the officer's brow. His anxiety was understandable—under normal circumstances, the idea of the imperial chancellor directly addressing a noncommissioned officer was unthinkable. But when the officer still showed no sign of opening his mouth, Paris quickly became irritated.

“How long do you intend to keep the lord chancellor waiting? Answer the question!”

“B-But... I don't... I don't know anything else!” cried the officer at last. “A black sword, that was all they told me!”

Darmès smiled at him. “Thank you. In that case, you may go.”

“Yes, m'lord!”

With a brisk salute, the officer hurried from the room. Darmès also stood up from his chair, like he intended to follow suit.

“I will leave you here as well. Please do not hesitate to call on me if anything else comes up.”

“Your presence at this late hour was appreciated, my lord,” said Paris with a deep bow.

“Not at all,” replied Darmès, waving him off. He carefully brushed out the creases in his robe, then made his way from the room. Osvannes stared intently at the door the chancellor had exited. For some reason, all the color had gone from his face.

“My lord, are you unwell?” asked Paris. He got no response. “My lord!” As Paris grasped him by the shoulder, Osvannes started and seemed to return to himself.

“You can hear me then. What on earth was that about?”

“I-It's nothing. Pay it no mind,” said Osvannes, forcing a smile.

“Nothing? Well, if you say so. In any case, if what we just heard about this monster—this girl—is true, we should be getting reports from our agents in Fernest ere long.”

“Er, yes. Yes, indeed. For now, tell the guard to be on high alert.”

“Of course, my lord. Now, if you will excuse me. I must attend to the matter of Captain Samuel.”

Osvannes waited until the sound of Paris’s footsteps grew distant, then pitched forward heavily onto the table. A chill ran along his spine, and his heart hammered in his chest.

With shaking hands, he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and struggled to light it. Then, violently blowing out a puff of smoke, he sagged into his chair and thought back on what he had just witnessed. It had been like a bad dream.

What the hell was that? he thought. *Paris didn’t notice, but the chancellor’s shadow, the way it writhed... It was like it was alive...*

III

After she’d finished with the imperial soldiers, Olivia set off again for the capital with a spring in her step. Other people she passed along the way gasped and stared. It was a perfectly normal reaction—Olivia was, after all, still covered from head to toe in blood. Upon seeing a young girl in such a state, it wouldn’t have been unusual to ask what had befallen her. In fact, several of those she passed did think of calling out, but no one did in the end. As though afraid of what consequences might await them if they did, they only averted their eyes and stood aside to let her pass in silence. It was obvious why: inevitably, their eyes were drawn to the bloodstained scabbard that hung at her waist.

There was one other reason too.

“I wonder how much further it is to the capital...” Ignoring the stares she was getting, Olivia glanced back at the large hemp sack that she dragged along the ground, secured by a rope over her shoulder. The bottom of the sack was stained a dark red.

It’s not that heavy, but I’m getting kind of sick of this, she thought. For a brief moment, she considered the idea of just throwing it away. If she left it in the weeds over there, some beast would happily carry it off, no doubt about it. Without anything encumbering her, she could use *Swift Step*. It consumed a lot

of energy, so she couldn't use it frequently, but it would allow her to reach the capital without wasting any more time. But then she shook her head. "No, I can't," she muttered to herself. One of Z's lessons played in her mind:

Do you remember how, long ago, I told you that humans are violence-loving and cruel?

"Yeah, of course I do," she'd said.

Good. Let me give you an example. Humans often take the heads of their enemies.

"Why? Do they taste good?"

They do not eat them. Except in the most desperate of circumstances, humans almost never eat other humans.

"Huh. Then what do they do it for?"

One reason they do it is to show off their prowess in battle.

"Prowess? What's that?"

How should I put this... In other words, they want to show others how strong they are.

"They cut each other's heads off just for that?"

Yes. They are a cruel race indeed, are they not?

"Hmm. So, what about the other reasons?"

It pleases their allies to receive the heads of their enemies. Sometimes they might even get a reward for it.

"A reward? Like nice food or books?"

I do not know the answer to that myself.

Z said that humans are pleased by the heads of their enemies. I guess it was pretty lucky that those imperial soldiers attacked me. I don't get what's so good about a head, but I bet if I give it to someone from Fernest, they'll be pleased. Then they'll definitely hire me as a soldier.

Olivia smiled to herself and clenched her fists. Then she hoisted up the rope that had been threatening to slide off her shoulder and pressed on with renewed determination.

Around the time she left the Canalia Highway, she stopped seeing other humans. Instead, she caught glimpses of small animals in the undergrowth of the verdant plateau she found herself upon. They were probably drawn to the smell of blood. But when Olivia turned to look back, they fled with a start.

They all ran away... I'm not going to eat you. I'm not even hungry right now, she thought. She pressed on, her footfalls light as she journeyed beyond a field of flowers and descended a gentle slope, coming to a wide, shallow river at the bottom of the hills. She refilled her flask in its waters before following the river downstream for a time until she caught sight of an enormous fortress in the distance. The mighty castle was surrounded by wall after wall after wall.

"It's huge!" gasped Olivia. It was far, far larger than the Gate to the Land of the Dead. Gazing up at its parapets, she saw a great red flag billowing majestically there. She craned her neck to get a better look at it. In the center of the flag were two lions, gold on one side and silver on the other, holding up between them a silver chalice.

A silver chalice... Gold and silver lions... Olivia tried to remember where she had seen this crest before. Then, she remembered.

Oh, right! That's the flag of the Kingdom of Fernest. She felt pleased with herself for remembering, but then looked back at the sack. The breeze had carried with it the faint scent of decay.

Oh no, she thought. *What if they rot before I get to the capital?* She looked back at the fortress, crossed her arms, and thought hard about her options.

"Okay, that decides it. I'll stop off at this fortress and give them these heads as a present. I mean, if they rot too badly no one will be able to tell they were imperial soldiers..."

Olivia nodded to herself, then set off for the fortress in high spirits. At this rate, she'd make it there before sunset.

IV

Galia Fortress, Base of Royal Command Operations in Southern Fernest

After the fall of Kier Fortress on the central battlefield, Galia Fortress had received a sudden and massive increase in its military budget, which had contributed to extensive renovations on the fortress. With the capacity to house a hundred thousand soldiers, it was the largest stronghold in the kingdom.

General Paul sat at his ebony desk in the command room. He was a man of sixty years and the supreme commander of the Seventh Legion, which boasted a force of forty thousand soldiers. He leaned back into his genuine leather chair to listen to the report.

“A messenger came to us this morning with the news that His Majesty has ordered the recapture of Kier Fortress. He has declared that the First Legion, currently stationed in defense of the capital, is to be redeployed,” said his second-in-command.

“Well, well. If he’d only made such a bold move a year earlier, things might look very different today. But besieged as we are, I don’t see this having much strategic significance. Their chances of success are poor, even if they are the elite First Legion.” Paul sighed, pulled a cigarette from his pocket, and lit it. These days, tobacco was a luxury. Even for a high-ranking general such as himself, procuring it wasn’t easy. Paul pulled out another cigarette and placed it on the table without a word, but his second-in-command raised a hand in refusal. This was Colonel Otto. The man had been Paul’s companion these past twenty years, through thick and thin. He was highly competent, with his only shortcoming being his tendency to err on the side of stubbornness.

“It’s not my place to presume to know His Majesty’s private thoughts. Now, I also have a message for you, my lord, directly from the king himself.”

“Directly from His Majesty? Let’s hear it, then.”

“Yes, my lord. ‘General Paul, you are to hold Galia Fortress without surrender. To the death, if need be.’”

“Oho ho. Oh, don’t look so sour. If we’re defeated here, that means it’s all

over for Fernest. His Majesty just wants to make sure we know he knows that too,” said Paul, gently chiding Otto, whose face twisted in a frown.

“In any case,” replied Otto, coughing as he spoke, “our only job is the defense of Galia Fortress. Excuse me for changing the subject, my lord, but are you familiar with an imperial soldier by the name of Samuel?”

“Samuel? I think I’ve heard the name... Ah yes, I remember. The one who killed Major General Florenz of the Fifth Legion.”

Though only twenty-seven years of age, Major General Florenz had been a soldier of both courage and intelligence. Everyone had expected great things from him, but he’d fallen in the Battle of Alschmitz after a fierce battle against Samuel. Paul had heard that the imperial soldiers had crucified Florenz’s body in full view of Kier Fortress for three days and three nights. And then, several days later, the imperials had crushed Colonel Belmar and the remainder of the Fifth Legion despite their fierce resistance.

“Yes, my lord. That same Samuel? He’s been killed.”

“Oho! So, we still have a soldier with some fighting spirit left. Which division?”

“Hmm. Well, about that...” Otto trailed off, looking around the room as he struggled to find the right words.

“It’s no good bringing it up if you’re going to get tongue-tied like that. Whatever it is, spit it out.”

“Begging your pardon, my lord. The fact is, none of our soldiers killed Samuel, but a traveler—a young girl.”

“I’m getting older. My hearing isn’t what it once was,” said Paul. “But I’m pretty sure I was hearing things just now. Would you mind repeating that for me?” He jammed a finger in his ear to clear it out.

“Samuel was killed by a traveling girl on the road,” repeated Otto, stone-faced.

“You’ve grown a sense of humor, Otto. I hope we’re not in for a storm...”

Paul looked out the window and saw dark clouds rolling in on the horizon,

dotting the once-clear sky. It looked like he might have been right on the mark.

“I’m afraid this is no joke,” said Otto. “The girl in question has brought us Samuel’s head, along with those of a number of other imperial soldiers.”

Some few days earlier, Otto had been attending to something at his desk when an urgent message arrived from the sentinels guarding the main gate. A girl had arrived, they had said, carrying with her the heads of a number of imperial soldiers. Otto had rushed to the scene, only to find a young girl covered head to toe in blood and standing beside a large, bloodstained sack.

Upon viewing the contents, he found it truly was full of heads wearing what were undoubtedly imperial helmets. When the girl was questioned, she said she had run into them on the Canalia Highway, where she had fought back after they’d drawn steel on her. This was shocking in and of itself, but there was yet a more shocking revelation to come—when the soldiers had taken the heads of the bag for closer inspection, Samuel’s head had been among them.

“It isn’t some deception? There is no doubt that this was really Samuel’s head?”

“No doubt at all. It was Samuel, the Raging Bull himself.”

“This is unbelievable,” said Paul. He might have had an easier time wrapping his head around the outlandish tale had it been a boy and not a girl. All the heroes of old had demonstrated their exceptional prowess while still in their youth. Paul took a deep drag of his cigarette, then blew it out slowly.

“Indeed,” said Otto. “I doubt I would have believed it either, had I not seen it with my own eyes.”

“What brought her to the fortress, then? Does she want gold?” asked Paul. It was plausible, he thought. All humans wanted money. But Otto shook his head.

“No. She wants to enlist in the royal army, of all things. She was on her way to the capital when she stumbled across this fortress, and says she decided to present us with the imperial heads before they rotted.”

“Hah! This girl certainly has guts. And she’s the sort of maniac who’d volunteer for the royal army in this day and age... By the way, you called her a

‘girl,’ but how old is she, exactly?”

“When I asked, she said she was fifteen,” said Otto.

Paul was so taken aback he almost dropped his cigarette. *Fifteen?! That was the same age as his own granddaughter. Out in the wider world, a fifteen-year-old might be thought of as practically an adult, but as far as Paul was concerned, that was still very much a child. He stared at Otto, incredulous, but the other man shook his head silently. His expression said, *You can ask again, but the answer will be the same.**

“Hell. And where is she now?”

“I imagine she is in the mess hall,” replied Otto. “By the way, in light of her desire to enlist and the fact that she brought us a sack full of heads, I decided to welcome her to our ranks as a warrant officer.”

This time Paul actually dropped his cigarette. He glowered openly at Otto, but the other man looked supremely unconcerned. *Now that, he thought, is a step too far.*

“Colonel, we may be short on troops, but surely there’s no call for that,” he reprimanded the other man.

“Do you think so?” replied Otto, nonchalant. Paul could see what the soldiers meant when they called Otto “the man in the iron mask” behind his back.

“I certainly do. Now, of course it’s remarkable that she took down Samuel. If she’d been a soldier, she’d have earned herself a Silver Lion. But she *isn’t* a soldier. And besides, letting a girl barely out of the cradle join the army? Stop thinking like a soldier and think like a human being for a minute!”

“Forgive me, ser, but we do not have the luxury of worrying about such trivialities. I can’t deny I had some qualms, of course, but I don’t care if we’re talking about a young girl or an old crone—if they can kill imperials, we need them. Now, I have a mountain of work to attend to, so I’ll be taking my leave,” said Otto, giving a brisk salute before turning on his heel and leaving the room. Paul picked up the cigarette that had rolled away on the table, and slowly put it back in his mouth.

Otto’s right, of course. We can’t afford to turn her away. Even so, sending a

girl into battle just because she's got some skill with a blade... As grown men, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

He let out a deep sigh, a cloud of smoke wavering feebly as it trailed from his mouth.

The Mess Hall at Galia Fortress

In a corner of the crowded mess hall teeming with soldiers, a young man gave a deep sigh. His name was Ashton Senefelder, an alumnus of one of the most prestigious schools in the kingdom. He'd excelled in his studies and shown enough promise to earn himself an exemption from the draft, but as Fernest's defeats mounted, the young man had eventually had that privilege stripped from him. Now he found himself on the southern front.

Ashton wallowed in his misery and despair. To someone like him, who'd barely even held a weapon before in his life, he already had one foot in the grave that was Galia Fortress. It didn't matter how much he trained—if it came to battle, he was sure he'd die in a heartbeat.

A girl suddenly appeared beside Ashton, her mouth stuffed full of bread. Her pale face was slender, and her eyes were as clear as a mountain stream. Ashton had never seen anyone so angelically beautiful. She swallowed her bread and stared sadly at her empty tray. Ashton, in contrast, still hadn't touched the bread in front of him.

She still looks hungry... I suppose I could give her my bread—it's not like I'm not expecting anything in return...

As Ashton made excuses to himself, he accidentally made eye contact with the girl. He choked, and she eyed him curiously.

"Er, um, if you'd like, I mean, would you like my bread? I-I'm not coming onto you. You just looked hungry. I haven't taken a bite out of it yet, so it's okay."

"Really? Thank you. You're a good human, aren't you?"

Oh hell, it just slipped—wait, good "human"? Feeling slightly disconcerted by the girl's choice of words, Ashton offered her his bread. The girl flashed him her pearly white smile, took the bread, and stuffed the whole thing into her mouth.

“Thith bwedth dewithuth!”

“Did you just say... ‘This bread’s delicious’?”

The girl nodded vigorously, looking extremely pleased. Ashton watched her skeptically. Compared to the bread in the capital, this bread was dry and hard. Even if you were trying to be nice, “delicious” was a bit of a stretch. He was pretty sure it was bad by bread standards even outside the capital.

“Not to contradict you when you seem to be enjoying it, but this bread really isn’t very good,” he said.

“No way! Really?” gasped the girl. Her face glowed with amazement, and Ashton felt a slight sense of superiority growing within him.

“Oh yeah, the bread in the capital is miles better than this—crusty on the outside and soft and fluffy on the inside. But it’s hard to come by these days, what with the food shortages and all.”

“Huh,” said the girl, staring at what remained of the bread in her hand, less than half of what he’d given her. “Well, I’ve never had bread before, but it really was delicious. It always showed up in my books, so I wanted to try it.”



Ashton, who had been sipping at his soup, spat it out. A female soldier sitting across from him shot him a look of clear disgust. He panicked and apologized, but the girl's words still echoed in his mind. In this day and age, he'd never heard of anyone who'd never eaten bread before. No matter how remote the region, there'd always be someone selling bread. She had to be joking, he thought, and waited for her to continue. But the girl just chewed on her bread and gave no sign of saying anything more. Before long, she'd cleaned her plate.

She can't be for real. His eyes bored into the girl, but soon it became clear to him that she had been serious.

"If you've never had bread before... Where are you even from?"

"Um, I came here from a temple in the forest called the Gate to the Land of the Dead. That's where I lived, until recently. Do you know of it?" The girl's eyes pierced his own. Ashton wracked his brain, hoping she couldn't hear how hard his heart was beating. He still prided himself in the exhaustive knowledge he'd accumulated through the many books he'd read.

The Gate to the Land of the Dead... The Gate... He went over and over the words in his mind, but he had no memory of anything mentioning a place like what the girl had described.

"Sorry..." he said slowly, "I don't think I do."

"That's too bad. I mean, I lived there, but I don't actually know anything about it either." She laughed airily then stood up from her chair, taking the empty tray with her.

"Thanks for the bread. What's your name, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm... Um, I'm Ashton," Ashton stammered, taken off guard by the sudden question.

"Ashton. I'm Olivia. Hopefully I'll see you around," said the girl. Waving to him over her shoulder, she left Ashton to stare after her. Her silver hair stretched all the way down her back, he noted, and he couldn't help but notice how tall she was—when someone pulled the chair beside him and clapped a hand hard across his shoulder. He turned and saw a man with golden, flyaway hair. It was Morris, who'd arrived at Galia around the same time as Ashton. From what he'd

told Ashton, he, too, had been sent to this graveyard after being stripped of his exemption, and just like Ashton, he barely knew which end of the sword to hold. During training, the pair of them were always getting yelled at by their superior officer.

“Hey, Ashton, do you even know who that girl is?” grinned Morris, pointing at her.

“Don’t come out of nowhere like that! What, do you know her?”

Morris nodded like he’d been waiting for Ashton to ask. He looked around conspiratorially, then said in a whisper, “This is top secret, so no telling anyone else. Do you remember that talk about the new recruit who gifted us a bag full of imperial heads?”

“That’s what you’re here to say? Come on, that’s just a rumor,” snorted Ashton. What was top secret about that? He didn’t say it out loud, but he thought that if a second-class private like Morris knew about it, the information was already disqualified from being top secret.

“Oh, it’s real. Now, this is the good bit.” Morris paused, grinning even more broadly. Ashton found himself getting annoyed.

“If you’re not going to talk, I’m out of here,” he said and stood up, but Morris grabbed his arm and forced him back into his chair.

“Sorry, sorry! Don’t be so touchy. Anyway, that girl you were talking to? That’s her! She’s the volunteer who brought the heads—Warrant Officer Olivia!”

“What?! That little g—uh, I mean, she’s a warrant officer?!” At Ashton’s shock, Morris looked exasperated.

“*You’re* surprised? How do you think *I*... Well, anyway. I guess it is basically unheard of for a newly enlisted soldier to be made a warrant officer.”

“You’re not pulling one over on me, are you?”

“Why would I do that? Anyway, what were you two talking about? You looked pretty friendly,” said Morris, putting an arm around Ashton’s shoulders. Ashton brushed him off—his conversations with Morris never usually went on this long.

Morris was clearly interested in the warrant officer.

Well, when she looks like that, who wouldn't be? he thought, then sighed.

"I mean, I don't know what to tell you. It wasn't anything special. She said it was the first time she'd eaten bread and that she used to live at a temple. That's all."

"A temple? Like the Holy Illuminatus Church? Wait... No way, does that mean she's a mage?!" Morris asked, his smile morphing into a look of shock.

The Holy Illuminatus Church was the largest of the religions that worshipped the goddess Strecia, and its devout followers could be found throughout the continent. Those who resided in its temples were known as "mages," and revered throughout the land. The stories said that those mages could use "magic," an art that had been lost many, many centuries ago. According to The White Book of the Holy Illuminatus Church, the goddess Strecia herself had wielded powerful magic to create Duvedirica.

This is stupid, thought Ashton. *This isn't a fairy tale, and there's no such thing as magic. It's obviously just a story the church made up. I didn't think Morris was the type to believe in that rubbish.*

Morris was still staring at him, and he was starting to get sick of it.

"No, she called it the Gate to the Land of the Dead. Even I'd never heard of it before, so I doubt it's anything to do with the church."

"For real?"

"Why are you asking me? It was news to me, that's all I can say."

"Right... Not the church then, huh. Guess it wasn't that interesting a story, after all."

Morris said goodbye with a wave, and left the mess hall. After hearing she wasn't from the church, he seemed to have lost all interest.

Is Morris...a believer? wondered Ashton. *Not that it's any of my business, I guess.*

He let out another deep sigh and choked down the last of his watered-down soup.

The Parade Grounds at Galia Fortress

As the silver moon hid behind a cloak of darkness and bitter rain lashed the ground, a man slipped down from a corner of the castle wall. Clad all in black with a mask covering his face, he melted into the darkness. His name was Major Zenon, and he was a shimmer—an operative from the Imperial Intelligence Division.

Skillfully evading the eyes of the guards, he made his way to a large tree growing in a corner of the parade ground. When he drew near, another man in a black coat stepped out from the tree's shadow—a spy on an undercover mission at Galia Fortress.

"It's been too long, Major," said Master Sergeant Morris with a thin smile.

"Pleasantries can wait. Your report?"

"Yes, ser. The royal army hasn't made any major moves. They're fixated on improving the fortress's defenses."

"How many soldiers are here?"

"Around forty thousand."

Zenon nodded, pleased.

"Good work. Anything else?"

"There was...one other thing." Morris lowered his voice further.

"Tell me."

"A girl showed up looking to enlist. She was carrying a bag full of imperial soldiers' heads."

Zenon was too shocked to speak. The girl from all the rumors was *here*, at Galia Fortress? The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. He clicked his tongue at his own carelessness. Of course, Galia was the closest to the royal capital. It wasn't a stretch to imagine that the girl had found her way here en route to the capital. No, he ought to have already considered the possibility. It was an obvious blunder on his part.

“This girl, does she have silver hair?” he asked.

“Yes, ser... Did you already know about her?”

There it was, then. Groaning internally, Zenon gave a nod of confirmation.

“I do. She’s the one who took down Captain Samuel, after all. Right now, Fort Caspar is in an uproar on account of her.”

“The Raging Bull?! It can’t be!” It was Morris’s turn to be shocked. Zenon quickly glanced around them.

“I know it’s raining, but keep your voice down. I didn’t believe it either when I first heard, but it’s a cold hard fact.”

“Sorry, ser,” said Morris. “It’s just, well... I guess that answers the question of why they instantly made her an officer. Even then... If she killed the captain... No, surely not...” Morris fell silent as though mulling something over, his eyes wide. Zenon didn’t have time to hang around in enemy territory waiting for him to find his tongue. Hiding his annoyance, he pressed Morris to continue.

“What? If you know something, spit it out.”

“Y-Yes, ser. It’s just that the girl apparently spent time living at a temple. I wondered if she might be...a mage.”

“A mage?! If you’re right, we have a serious problem.”

“I don’t even want to think about fighting a mage.”

The pair fell silent. Then from behind them, cutting through the sound of the rain like the peal of a bell, came a voice.

“Don’t worry. I’m not a mage.”

Zenon and Morris leapt off to each side, drawing their swords and turning towards the source of the voice. There stood a girl, drenched from the rain.

“You!” In his shock, the words slipped out of Morris.

“What are you doing out here in the rain, anyway? You’ll catch a cold,” said the girl with a coy smile, twirling her dripping silver hair with her fingers.

“A girl with silver hair...”

"It's her," said Morris shortly.

"I thought so."

Quick as blinking, Zenon pulled out a knife and threw it straight at the girl's head. The needle-shaped blade had been balanced for throwing and painted black to better blend into the darkness.

The knife flew at a speed no ordinary human could discern.

The knife blended into the night, making it impossible to judge its distance.

The girl cocked her head to one side, and the knife flew straight past her. Zenon followed it with knives aimed at her chest, arms, and legs, but not one of them reached their target. It was like trying to hit a shadow. Every single knife vanished into the jet-black darkness.

Well, well, thought Zenon, she dodged all my attacks? This just got interesting. I shouldn't have expected anything less from Captain Samuel's killer.

Zenon licked his lips, then darted forwards to close the distance between himself and the girl. She gave absolutely no sign of moving. Not only did she not move to draw her sword, she smiled. Her ebony eyes, however, were fixed on him.

All that power has gone to her head, thought Zenon. But even as the thought crossed his mind, a sudden, awful chill raced down his spine. At the same time, his whole body was wracked with a sense he'd never experienced before. It wasn't bloodlust, but something far more terrifying. If he had to put words to it, it felt as though he'd been shrouded in death itself.

What the hell is this? I need to get some distance. Get a read on my opponent.

Zenon took his senses very seriously. He knew there were times where they became the crucial difference between life and death. By trusting his senses, he'd escaped death's clutches time and time again. But he was already in close quarters with the girl; if he tried to disengage, there was a high chance he'd eat a counterattack. And deducing from how she'd dodged his knives, it could well end up being a fatal blow. Zenon made himself think faster.

A maybe-fatal attack?

Or a maybe-fatal retreat?

It was a choice between two polar ends of the spectrum. A split second later, Zenon made his decision: he sped up. Just before he came into reach of the girl's sword, he tossed his weapon aside, making sure she saw him do it.

"Huh?!" said the girl, staring in puzzlement at the sword on the ground. She looked utterly confused.

She fell for it! thought Zenon. Despite himself, he thanked the goddess Strecia for the success of his plan. If he had looked in a mirror, he'd have seen the twisted smile that spread across his face. Zenon tugged hard on a cord at his waist with his right hand, and there was a satisfying click as a concealed blade shot out from his left sleeve. He angled it so that the blade would bury itself in the girl's neck. A fatal blow, right in his enemy's blind spot.

It truly would have been a spectacular plan...had it worked.

"How... How did...?" croaked Zenon hopelessly. The girl had stepped back into a half stance to dodge his blade, then spun all the way around and came at him with her sword. The blade bit into his torso, and his ears filled with the pop of ruptured muscles and the cracking of bone. He felt as if he were watching it happen from outside of himself. A darkness black as ebony ate away at Zenon's vision.

"That was a neat trick. I remember Z taught me some stuff like that, actually. You're just too slow. I'd work on getting a bit quicker," said Olivia to Zenon's dismembered legs and torso as she sheathed her sword in its scabbard. Zenon, of course, would never answer her. As this scene unfolded in front of him, Morris started to tremble violently. It had nothing to do with the chill of the rain—he trembled with pure, unadulterated fear.

"I like the rain," said Olivia, looking up at the sky. What was she talking about now? Morris forced his trembling feet to take a step back.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said.

"I mean, look. After all that blood sprayed everywhere, the rain is washing it clean. Don't you think that's wonderful?"



Olivia turned back to face Morris, stepping with the grace of a dancer. Her face, splattered with blood and rain, lit up with a smile.

Morris clenched his teeth, then spun around and set off running at a full pelt. Zenon had been one of the most accomplished agents in the Imperial Intelligence Division, and she'd killed him just like that. Morris himself had seen more than a few battles and could handle himself pretty well in a fight. Even then, he knew all too well that this was not an opponent he could take.

I've got an escape route planned for emergencies. There's nothing I can do now but get this intelligence back to the empire. I'm not going to stand here and get killed by that monster.

But as he started running, he tripped on something and crashed hard into the ground. He choked and coughed as muddy water filled his mouth. He scrambled to stand up, but his legs wouldn't move. Forcing himself upright, he looked down at his legs and—his legs, from the knees down, had been cleanly sliced away. A spectacular volume of crimson blood flowed out onto the ground. Morris screamed.

"Sorry, when you started running, I just reacted without thinking," said Olivia. "Um, I'll give you these back." She jogged over and carefully placed his legs where he could see them.

"I was listening to you both from the start, so I know you're a spy. What is it you're supposed to say now? Um... Oh, right! 'Prepare to be taken prisoner, scum!' How was that? Pretty soldier-y, right?"

Olivia saluted with a childlike giggle. It was like looking at a demon... Or a god of death.

Eager to escape the pain and fear, Morris was only too happy to let his consciousness slip away.

Galia Fortress was in an uproar. Olivia strolled through the fortress clutching the head of an unknown man in her left hand and dragging another man with both of his legs cut off in her right. The guard immediately conveyed news of this to Otto, and it was quickly decided that Olivia would be brought to an interrogation room for questioning.

Otto and Olivia sat across from each other at a plain desk. Paul stood behind Otto, wearing a dressing gown and smiling.

“So, um, do I have to keep sitting here? I kind of want to go to bed...” said Olivia.

“We’re still in the process of confirming what happened. Just a little longer.”

“How long is ‘a little’?” asked Olivia again. Otto said nothing in response. They’d already had this same exchange several times over, and he was getting tired of it.

Otto had been in the military for twenty-five years and had encountered all kinds of soldiers in that time. But he’d never seen one like Olivia. Less than a week after enlisting, she’d killed an infiltrator to Galia Fortress, and on top of that, she’d apprehended a spy lurking in the fortress walls. If any other soldier had achieved so much in so little time, he’d like to hear about it.

But he couldn’t just sit around being amazed. Otto heard footsteps, and looked to the door. A guard hurried in, and proffered the papers he held to Otto—the report on the body that had been abandoned in the parade grounds. The report said that the investigation had confirmed it to be an imperial spy. This confirmed Olivia’s testimony, and Otto let out a sigh of relief. Just in case, he’d had a number of his best soldiers ready for an ambush, but that fortunately turned out to be unnecessary. At the end of the report, it noted that Morris was still alive. A *torturous* interrogation awaited him once he recovered from his injuries.

“We’ve confirmed your story. The two men will be treated as spies, in accordance with your testimony.”

“Finally! I mean, I kept telling you that,” said Olivia, yawning. Otto frowned at her flippant tone.

“Mind your tongue. We have to consider the situation. In the army, we can’t be so naive as to trust every bit of information that comes our way.”

“Yes, ser! Understood, ser!” said Olivia, but she puffed out her cheeks sulkily. For all the power she wielded, at times like this she looked every bit the fifteen-year-old girl she was. Otto smiled wryly at the irony of it, but then a question

struck him.

“How did you even discover the spy’s identity?”

“I just happened to be taking a walk outside when I saw a human scurrying about like a rat, ser! I followed the human and he met up with another one. I listened to their conversation and determined they were spies.” Olivia puffed herself up as if to say, *Well? Aren’t you impressed?*

Taking in her soaking wet clothes, Otto asked, “You went for a walk? In this downpour?”

“I love the rain, ser!”

“Even though outside excursions at night are forbidden...?”

“I totally forgot, ser!” Olivia declared without hesitation. Otto pressed his fingers into his forehead. He heard a suppressed chuckle from behind him, to which he responded with a single, loud cough in protest.

“Very well. In this instance, I will forgive the nighttime excursion. But I will not stand for any more insubordination. Don’t forget that. But you did well tonight. Truth be told, we’ve been at a loss for how to deal with the spy.”

“Your praise is appreciated, ser!”

Otto had, to some degree, suspected that there was a spy amongst the ranks of Galia Fortress. But there were forty thousand soldiers just within the fortress walls, and another thousand noncombatant personnel on top of that. Trying to sniff out a spy in all that had been an insurmountable challenge. He had, of course, been conducting a secret investigation, but they’d been unable to snare their target. Olivia’s achievement here well outweighed her disregarding orders.

“Very well, Warrant Officer Olivia. At a later date, you will receive a reward in gold in recognition of your deeds tonight. You are dismissed,” said Otto. He stood up from his chair, but Olivia didn’t move at all. Instead, she muttered under her breath.

“Gold...gold...” she said repeatedly, looking dissatisfied.

“What? Is gold not enough compensation?”

“If possible, ser, I’d like bread—good bread, from the capital.”

Otto thought he'd misheard, and asked her to repeat herself, but the same words came out the second time. He hadn't misheard. Was the girl an idiot? Otto thought. Wanting bread over gold...

"May... May I ask why you want bread from the capital?"

"Well, Ashton told me that the bread in the capital is delicious, so I wanted to try it. He said the outside is crusty and the inside is soft and fluffy."

"...Well, that makes sense. And who is Ashton?"

"Huh? He's Ashton. He's a human," said Olivia, looking surprised that he didn't know something like that. Otto suppressed his irritation, and glared back at Olivia.

"I gathered that much. I'm asking you *who he is*."

"I *told* you though, he's a human! Honestly, nothing I say gets through."

"How dare you! You're in contempt of a superior officer!" Otto slammed his fist down onto the table with all his strength, though immediately afterwards he caught himself. What was he doing, letting a young girl get him so worked up like this? Embarrassed by his short temper, he held a hand to his head.

But then Olivia leaned towards him, and asked, "Are you okay?"

Otto found this infuriating, and disgraceful to boot. *Who's the one who made me react like that?* he wanted to say, but he forced the words down.

"Colonel Otto, calm down. This isn't like you. What's become of that cool head of yours?" said Paul, tapping Otto on the shoulder, sounding amused. He walked around to face Olivia. She looked up at him, perplexed. This was all off the record, so Paul had only introduced himself to Olivia by name.

"Warrant Officer Olivia. The capital has some fine bread, but the cake there is even better. My granddaughter loves it. Have you ever had cake before?"

Olivia's reaction was theatrical. Her eyes sparkled like diamonds, and her face lit up in a girlish smile, like a flower in bloom. Even Otto was so captivated by the sight that his anger fell to the wayside.

"Cake?! Did you just say cake, grandpa? Never—I've never tried it, but I read about it! It's sweet, right?"

Olivia half tumbled out of her chair as she stood up and seized Paul's shoulders. Paul beamed, nodding at her.

"Is that so, now? Well then, well then. We'll add a cake to your reward, then."

"No way! This is the best!"

"How dare you speak like that to the general!"

"Now, now," said Paul. "Look at me, I'm in my dressing gown. I don't mind a little lack of manners. And you can't deny that to Warrant Officer Olivia here, I *am* a grandpa—so no mistake there."

"Yes, my lord, but the example—"

"This is all off the record, Otto," said Paul, cutting the other man off gently. "Now, Warrant Officer Olivia?" His genial expression had vanished. Now he wore the face of the Supreme Commander of the Seventh Legion again.

"Yeah?"

"I might be dressed like this, but I am, as it so happens, the supreme commander in charge of this fortress. Appearances are important. As such, you'll need to moderate your tone in public."

Olivia looked confused, but saluted and said, "Yes, ser! Understood! Warrant Officer Olivia is dismissed and will return to quarters!" She went to the door, muttering, "I don't get human language at all," as she went. Otto didn't know what to make of that. Then, just after she'd left the interrogation room, her excited voice rang out: "Cake! I'm getting cake!"



Otto put his head in his hands.

Paul chortled. “So that’s the girl who killed Samuel and caught our spy. I was wondering what our heroine would be like. She’s quite the beauty! Could probably make it as an actress. A sweet child.”

“My lord, please don’t joke. This incident has shown her ability, but she’s clearly a country girl with no common sense or manners. I’ll be arranging for her proper education.”

“Well, this isn’t really the place for common sense or manners. Don’t be too hard on her.”

Paul let his face relax, and left the interrogation room. Alone, Otto leaned back in his chair and let out a deep sigh. He’d just remembered what the corpse of the agent he’d glanced at before the questioning had looked like. He’d never seen a body cut so cleanly in two like that before. Just from that, it was plain she wielded uncommon skill. As he stared into the flickering light of the candle, he thought to himself, *It might not be a bad idea to assign her one of those operations we’d given up on...*

V

The Asvelt Empire first appeared in the history books in the eighth century of Tempus Fugit.

In those days, many more countries existed than what remained in the present day, all vying for supremacy over the continent. It was said that the empire had its origins in that feudal age. Richard Heinz, a lord of one of the fiefdoms of the Kingdom of Fernest, played a pivotal role in this development. The most convincing theory was that Richard, disgusted by the political corruption of Fernest, broke away from the kingdom and established the empire. Intending to build the ideal nation, he gathered a great number of his allies, and they crossed over to the north of the continent. Unfortunately, there were not enough sources to conclusively back up this story, leading many scholars to doubt its claim. They questioned the plausibility of a man of his rank

breaking away to found a whole nation.

It was, however, well-established that corruption ran rampant in the kingdom in those days. In the same period, Leonhart Varkess, later hailed as the savior of the nation, displayed his acumen for politics as the chief of staff in the royal army, and the kingdom underwent dramatic changes. This perfect alignment of time lines led to the widespread acceptance of the Richard Heinz theory.

Another popular theory proposed that the organization that predated the Holy Illuminatus Church, the Disciples of Strecia, was involved in the founding of the empire. This was mostly inspired by the name of the archbishop amongst the list of founders. However, the Holy Illuminatus Church officially denied such claims.

A great mountain range ran through the north of the continent, leaving very few areas of flat land. On top of this, the soil lacked nutrients, resulting in poor crops, and hordes of savage beasts roamed the land there. For these reasons, the land was considered hostile to human settlement.

In less than two hundred years, this barren land transformed into a country that rivaled the Kingdom of Fernest, no doubt as a result of a succession of highly capable rulers. In the current age, the vegetable known as an “earth pumpkin” was grown throughout the continent, prized for its ability to flourish even in poor soil. This improved cultivar, developed by researchers on the orders of the emperor, was but one of their many achievements too numerous to list.

One could also look at how little attention the surrounding nations paid to the empire. The high mountain range that surrounded the empire made invasion almost impossible, but importantly, no rulers showed any interest in claiming such infertile land in the first place. This allowed the empire to steadily solidify its power without becoming embroiled in any external conflicts. Additionally, each successive emperor was of peaceful temperament and abhorred war.

This era of warlords, which had seemed as though it would never end, drew to a close around Tempus Fugit 950. Growing weary of conflicts that dragged on and on, Fernest recalled its foreign-deployed soldiers. The smaller countries to the south of the continent drew up a peace treaty to ensure their survival,

christening themselves the newly established United City-States of Sutherland. Though some conflicts still broke out between smaller countries, the continent settled into a state of relative peace.

This was the state of affairs in Tempus Fugit 965, when Ramza XII fell ill and died at only forty years old. He had ruled for only seven years, the shortest reign of any of the emperors. After him, his eldest son Diethelm ascended to the throne as Ramza XIII. Though only fifteen, his political acumen led the empire into an age of even greater prosperity. By the time he turned forty, the age at which his father had died, he was spoken of as the greatest of all the emperors, and people far and wide spoke of “Ramza the Good.”

It was this very same Ramza the Good who suddenly declared he would unify the continent under the imperial standard. After generations of emperors who opposed war, this came as a surprise not only to the citizens of the empire, but also to those of all the other nations. But the citizens of the empire did not harbor any doubt about the decision. There could be no fault in the judgment of Ramza the Good.

Audience Chamber at Listelein Castle in Olsted, Capital of the Asvelt Empire

These days, it was no exaggeration to call the Asvelt Empire the greatest country on the continent. The Audience Chamber, where the emperor heard from his many constituents, was lavishly decorated, a clear symbol of such power. One wall was covered entirely in elaborate carvings by the finest craftsmen, and a number of enormous paintings by famous artists hung around the room. Golden chandeliers ran across the ceiling, giving off dazzling light, and the floor was lined with a soft, bright red carpet that swallowed up the sound of even the loudest footfalls. Fixed to the wall at the very back was an azure flag with two crossed swords—the symbol of the empire, and its coat of arms.

The master of Listelein Castle, Emperor Ramza XIII, lounged upon his throne as he heard his vassal’s reports on the state of the war. To his side, Chancellor Darmès stood in his customary place as he, too, listened to the young commander’s report. General Felix von Sieger, whose talent had been

recognized by Ramza from a young age, was now one of the three imperial generals. He led the most elite division of the imperial army—the Azure Knights. He was a serious and honorable young man, and good looking to boot. All the ladies of the court were charmed by him. This assortment of traits also made him wildly popular amongst the general populace.

Using a vast map spread out on the table, Felix thoroughly explained the state of the war on each front—north, central, and south. Ramza nodded from time to time, but stayed silent throughout.

“That concludes my report. With His Imperial Majesty’s permission, I wish to launch an immediate attack on Galia Fortress. Do I have your leave to proceed?” Felix asked courteously. Ramza leaned over slowly to Darmès and whispered something in the man’s ear. Felix knew the thought was improper, but he couldn’t help but mutter under his breath, “Again?” Ramza never spoke to him directly anymore—everything passed through Darmès. When Felix had casually raised the subject with the others, he’d heard they received the same silent treatment.

Darmès nodded submissively, then turned back to Felix and answered, “His Glorious Imperial Majesty says that this is too hasty. Let us wait and see what move Fernest makes.”

“...As His Majesty commands.” Felix put his hand to his breast in a salute, took a step back and bowed deeply, then turned smartly and strode from the room.

I can’t deny there’s been something off about His Majesty these past few years... thought Felix. He was never exactly talkative, but to not even offer a single word, like he did today? His coloring was good, so I cannot think him unwell. Why, then, would he not approve the assault on Galia? I simply cannot understand it.

Felix had personally looked over Osvannes’s strategy proposal and hadn’t found anything unsatisfactory in it. They had adequate military force, and he had been informed that the soldiers’ morale was high. The only point that had bothered him was the odd report of one of their best men falling in combat to a traveling girl. But that was trivial when considering the bigger picture. There was no better time than now to launch the attack on Galia Fortress. That was

why he had sought Ramza's approval. That the usually shrewd Ramza had made such a judgment perturbed Felix deeply.

With a small sigh, Felix left the audience chamber. Darmès gave the emperor a reverential bow, and made to do the same. As they exited, the guards moved to close the great doors like a well-oiled machine, leaving only Ramza and his personal guard in the audience room. The sun had moved far to the west, casting the room in a scarlet glow.

Ramza did not move from his throne. He just sat in silence, his expression lifeless.

VI

The War Room at Leticia Castle in Fis, Capital of the Kingdom of Fernest

After the orders came from King Alfonse, the First Legion held a war council. It was recorded in the annals of Duvedirica that the main participants were the two generals—old Cornelius and bold Lambert—and Colonel Neinhardt.

“Have we confirmed the size of the force at Kier Fortress?”

“Yes, ser. Our spies described a force of...around eighty thousand.”

A heavy silence followed, hanging about the room like lead. General Lambert spoke first. He was a born soldier, the boldest commander in the First Legion, and boasted an array of scars across his body that clearly illustrated his long history of success upon the battlefield.

“Eighty thousand...while the First Legion has only fifty. Going off of those numbers, we are at an overwhelming disadvantage,” he said. Colonel Neinhardt was placing pieces on the map spread out on the table.

“Eighty thousand is only including the imperials. If the other countries who have fallen under the empire's sway—Swaran and Stonia—join their forces, they could muster one hundred and forty thousand,” he announced with the air of someone pronouncing a death.

“Hah. A hundred and forty against fifty? That's not even worth discussing. I

know I ask the impossible, but is there no chance of assistance from the Third and Fourth Legions?" asked Lambert.

"I have raised the point on several occasions, but they always say that they cannot spare the soldiers," Neinhardt replied automatically. He was placing black pieces on the map over the red line that indicated the northern front, surrounding the white pieces.

When the war began, the imperial army had raised a force of eighty thousand to launch a savage assault on the northern region of Fernest. Their objective had been to seize the kingdom's largest granaries and cut off their food supply. This indicated that the empire had already been anticipating a drawn-out conflict. Fernest then sent its Third Legion, led by General Latz Smythe, to meet them, along with the Fourth Legion, led by General Lindt Barthes. With this force of sixty thousand, they had beaten back the empire. Latz and Lindt had been close friends since their school days, and they worked together with unparalleled coordination. They tore through the greater numbers of the imperial force.

The Vehrkal Campaign soon followed after, which could only be described as a perfect battle. The Third Legion had feigned defeat to successfully draw the imperial army into a narrow and hilly region. They waited for the soldiers' ranks to be drawn thin before the Fourth Legion, which had been lying in wait, descended upon the imperials in a single wave, signaling the Third Legion to go back on the offensive. The imperial army was plunged into chaos, powerless to prevent their utter defeat that resulted in a devastating loss of forty thousand soldiers. Riding on the wings of their victory, the Third and Fourth Legions went on to crush the imperial army in battle after battle. When at last they had pushed the enemy back to the border, they followed the momentum to begin an offensive on imperial territory.

But the tides turned at the Battle of Alschmitz. The defeat of the Fifth Legion meant the Third and Fourth Legions was exposed at the rear, leaving them at significant risk of an attack from both sides. Some of the commanders took a hard line on continuing the offensive, but Latz and Lindt rejected this. They beat a rapid retreat, with the Third Legion protecting their rear. This was a prudent decision, but it also prevented them from undertaking coordinated operations.

The reality was that they had been forced into the ill-advised strategy of fighting a war on two fronts. Now they were stuck repelling the incessant assaults of the enemy, putting everything they had into maintaining their line of defense.

Field Marshal Cornelius glanced at the map with a sigh.

“Given you already know it is unreasonable, General, you ought not to ask,” he said. “We should be applauding their efforts in holding the northern front with the scarce numbers that they have.” Cornelius was the Supreme Commander of the First Legion, and in his youth, he had been known as the Invincible General. But now he was seventy years old; his spark had faded, and no trace remained of the daring man he had been. Lambert shrugged, and looked at Neinhardt.

“What’s happening at the southern front, anyway?”

“General Paul reports that the imperials have made Fort Caspar their base of operations. They are bolstering their forces in preparation for an attack on Galia Fortress.”

“So the Seventh Legion probably won’t have any soldiers to send us either.”

“That can’t be helped. Paul has orders from His Majesty to defend Galia to the death,” said Cornelius. “A careless move on his part could well bring the enemy down upon them.” The other generals looked troubled by this pronouncement. Galia was a key strategic location, and it was right that it should be defended to the last. Should the worst happen and the fortress fall, nothing would block the imperials from marching on the capital. The imperial army would cross the Est Mountains unimpeded and descend on the royal capital of Fis like an avalanche. There would be no choice left to the royal army but a fight to the death. Surrender wasn’t an option.

But they couldn’t just sit on their hands and watch as the empire’s detestable schemes played out. The Seventh Legion had as of yet suffered barely a single loss. The royal army couldn’t afford to let them sit around twiddling their thumbs. Of course, none of the officers said it out loud, but all of them were thinking it.

“If only we hadn’t lost Fort Caspar...” muttered one of the officers. All eyes in

the room focused on that point on the map.

Fort Caspar had a long history stretching back to the early days of the feudal age. It had been constructed to keep watch over the southern countries, but when Kier Fortress had been completed, it had lost its strategic significance and, in recent years, had been all but abandoned. Everything had changed, however, when Kier Fortress fell on the central front. The strategic value of Fort Caspar had been reevaluated, and it became a vanguard station to put pressure on Kier Fortress—but it was already too late. The imperial army moved on Fort Caspar less than a month after they took Kier Fortress. The reinforcements were unable to make it in time, and the fort's paltry garrison of fewer than five hundred soldiers, led by Lieutenant Kutum, had been wiped out. Fort Caspar was now being put to good use by the imperial army as a preventative buffer against attacks on Kier Fortress.

"Well, we did lose it, so it's no good crying over it now. Do we know the size of the force at Fort Caspar?" asked Lambert.

"Just a moment." Neinhardt rifled through documents until he found a page titled *Estimate of Troops Stationed at Caspar Fortress*. They had to take this kind of report with a grain of salt; it wasn't uncommon for reports to underestimate the numbers as a result of wishful thinking. But there was no need to worry about that this time. The face of a man with a grim expression floated up in Neinhardt's memory.

"They emphasized that this is only an estimate, but around fifty thousand soldiers."

"I see. Fifty thousand..."

Lambert crossed his arms, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips together. He looked like he was working out a plan. Neinhardt apparently wasn't the only one who thought so, because Cornelius, his expression questioning, asked, "What are you plotting, General?" With the eyes of all the other officers on him, Lambert slowly opened his eyes.

"Well, I just might have an idea. What if we attacked Fort Caspar first? We take twenty-five thousand from the First Legion and thirty thousand from the

Seventh to raise a force of fifty-five thousand. That should be enough to give them a decent fight.”

Several of the younger officers gave an audible noise of admiration at Lambert’s proposal. That lot already thought of Lambert as the Supreme Commander of the First Legion and wanted to cozy up to him. Lambert himself, however, paid them no attention.

They’re pretty cheery, considering that we’re sitting here on the brink of annihilation, thought Neinhardt. He regarded the young officers with exasperation, but they didn’t seem to notice. They had started debating Lambert’s strategy, pretending to know what they were talking about. It appeared that the fate of the kingdom was of little concern in the face of their own potential glory.

Ignoring them, Cornelius continued. “The Seventh Legion cannot afford any careless moves. I just said that.”

“Then so long as it’s not careless, you have no objections? If we can take back Fort Caspar, we can draw a strong line of defense around Galia Fortress. That could even make it possible for the Seventh Legion to retake Kier Fortress.”

“Well, yes... That may be so... But His Majesty...” Cornelius grumbled, tugging at his long, white beard and struggling to find words. It appeared that Lambert’s point was too sound to argue with.

Adding further weight to his position, Lambert went on. “Besides, if you look at the reports, no matter how the cards fall we have no hope of taking back Kier Fortress by ourselves—as I am sure you’re well aware, my lord. You’ll forgive my directness, but do you really intend for us to dig our own graves in front of Kier Fortress?”

“Oh, for...” mumbled Cornelius. He looked agonized at the severity of Lambert’s reproof. No one in the room so much as breathed as they watched this exchange.

“...Very well, then. Let us talk to His Majesty directly. General, draw up a specific battle plan with Paul. Make sure the two of you talk it through thoroughly before making any decisions.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Lambert. “Know that I am grateful for your support.” He made to stand and salute, but Cornelius raised a hand to stop him. The officers were looking at each other, faces full of relief that they had avoided a reckless battle. Neinhardt felt the same. But now, he steeled his nerves, and addressed Cornelius.

“My lord, might I request that I be sent to Galia Fortress to relay this news? There is another matter there that I would like to look into.”

“Hm... Yes, I don’t see any problem with that,” replied Cornelius. “You may go and attend to whatever it is that’s bothering you.” He stood up slowly, and Lambert took this as a sign to dismiss the council. The tired officers returned to their quarters.

Neinhardt carefully bundled up the documents before him, looking at a page from the report from the Seventh Legion. It had not been relevant to the war council, and so he had deliberately set it aside. Neinhardt had had a friend, Florenz, who had met a violent death back at the Battle of Alschmitz. The report concerned the one who had brought about that tragedy, the despicable Captain Samuel, and the new recruit who had killed him, Warrant Officer Olivia.

The report says she’s just a girl of fifteen... Unbelievable. But Colonel Otto wouldn’t make a mistake like that. Well, whatever the truth is, I need to meet her and thank her.

His thoughts on the unknown girl, Neinhardt quietly shut the door.

Colonel Otto’s Work Room, Galia Fortress, the Royal Army

In the capital, the war council was planning the recapture of Kier Fortress.

Otto had ordered Olivia to present herself so that he could brief her on a certain mission. But the scheduled hour came and went, and the girl showed no sign of appearing. Every five to ten minutes, a rhythmic clacking could be heard from inside the work room. The odd sound perplexed the soldiers passing by in the corridor outside.

It was thirty minutes after the appointed hour when Olivia finally presented herself. She stood in a dignified salute, not giving any particular sign that she felt guilty. Otto suppressed his irritation, and said, "Warrant Officer Olivia, you are thirty minutes late. I'd like an explanation."

"Yes, ser! It's because of my clock!"

"Your...clock? How does that relate to your lateness?"

"Yes, ser! I don't have a wonderful clock like yours, ser, so I can't tell exactly what time it is. That's why I was late, ser!" Olivia said, staring at Otto's pocket watch that sat on the work table with something like longing in her eyes. Otto groaned at the absurdity, then reached for the pocket watch where it sat on the table. Its cover was silver, engraved with a relief of flowers, and it sprung open to reveal a red second hand beating out a perfect rhythm. *Tick tock, tick tock*. Otto gazed at it for a moment, then without ceremony, he threw it. Olivia threw out her hands in alarm and the pocket watch, sailing in an arc through the air, came to rest in them.

"...Huh?"

"It's yours now. So no more tiresome excuses." It had only been a few days ago that Otto had let his anger get the better of him. For the sake of his nerves as much as anything else, he decided it was better to just give her the thing and get it over with. He hadn't thought any more of it than that, but Olivia was looking from the pocket watch to Otto and back with a look of amazement on her face. She clearly hadn't been expecting it. Otto waved her gaze away, annoyed.

"For me? Seriously?"

"I really don't care. And the proper question would be, 'May I keep this, *ser*?' I don't know how many times I've told you to mind your tongue with your superiors."

"Yes, ser, I'm sorry, ser! I am honored to receive your pocket watch, ser!" Olivia said, then grinned and started to play with it. She opened the cover, then closed it again, then opened it, then closed it. The same action, over and over. It was like watching a child getting a new toy, and Otto remembered his own six-year-old daughter in the capital. He was briefly lost in his memories, then

realized that Olivia was peering curiously at him. His expression had apparently softened considerably.

“R-Right, to business! Put that thing in your pocket or something.”

“Yes, ser! I will, ser!” Cradling the pocket watch like it was a precious jewel, Olivia slipped it into her pocket. Otto coughed lightly, and crossed his arms.

“I summoned you here today for a very important reason. Warrant Officer Olivia, I am offering you a special mission. As you are aware, however, military protocol dictates that you may refuse such an assignment. We are short on time, so I will need you to decide here and now.”

Special missions were difficult and highly covert, typically carried out by small groups. They came with an extremely high risk of death, and so those assigned them were given the right of refusal. Incidentally, the system also guaranteed a promotion to anyone who completed such a mission. From what he knew of Olivia’s personality, Otto thought it highly unlikely she would refuse.

Sure enough, Olivia replied without a moment’s hesitation. “I won’t refuse, ser! Warrant Officer Olivia will accept the assignment!”

“Very good. Now, the details. Your task, Warrant Officer, is to recapture Fort Lamburke,” said Otto, standing up from his chair and going to the map fixed to the wall behind him. He pointed to the symbol of a fortress, next to which was written a large *X* and the word *ABANDONED*. Olivia looked closely at the map, her head tilted quizzically to one side.

“Um, this says ‘abandoned’—er, I mean—doesn’t this say ‘abandoned,’ ser?” asked Olivia, realizing belatedly that she was being impolite again and hurrying to correct herself. Otto limited himself to the smallest of sighs as she smiled awkwardly at him.

“Yes, that is correct. The fort was abandoned ten years ago, and has become a hideaway for bandits. Your task, to put it simply, is to drive the bandits out and take it back.”

“How come you want it back if you threw it away?”

“*Language*—oh, forget it. The situation today is very different to what it was ten years ago. As you are aware, our forces have suffered heavy losses at the

hands of the imperial army. If we are to continue to hold off their invasion, we need Fort Lamburke.”

Otto had sent a number of teams to oust the bandits from Fort Lamburke in the past. None had succeeded. The surviving soldiers had reported that more than half of them were lost to a piker of terrifying skill. Otto had briefly entertained the idea of sending in a company to retake it, but never followed through. A large-scale military operation would attract attention, and these days the empire had eyes throughout the whole of Fernest. So long as he didn't know which places were being watched, chances were that any careless mobilization of soldiers would be detected. And if they were spotted, it would mean alerting the empire to the existence of the abandoned fort. There was no doubt in his mind that the empire would then send in soldiers to seize it. Worst-case scenario, that could lead to further attacks.

After weighing the merits and demerits, Otto had given up on retaking the fort. But now that Olivia was here, things were different. Whoever this master piker was, he would see how they fared against the strongest piece on the Seventh Legion's board.

Otto explained the details of the mission, then finally, to confirm Olivia's resolve, he asked, “You understand, then, that all previous attempts to oust the bandits ended in failure. Do you still believe you can succeed?”

“Hm... Basically, you're telling me to go beat the crap out of a bunch of bandits. Is that right?”

Otto frowned at the crude turn of phrase, but she wasn't wrong, strictly speaking. He nodded his head.

“To put it simply, yes.”

“Understood, ser. Oh, what about the heads?”

“Heads?”

“Yes. Heads.”

Otto had no idea what this sudden talk of “heads” was about, but when he asked her to explain, Olivia looked confused.

“Humans enjoy taking the heads of their enemies, don’t they?” she said, and now Otto remembered how she had arrived at Galia Fortress with the sack stuffed with the heads of imperial soldiers. He felt a sudden chill around his own throat, and unconsciously retracted his neck.

“Er, no. No, that won’t be necessary.”

“Very good, ser. In that case, I accept the assignment to recapture Fort Lamburke!”

“We’re counting on you, soldier. You are dismissed.”

Olivia promptly turned and walked away, radiating confidence. She didn’t appear to have any misgivings about her new assignment. Otto’s impression was only reinforced when he heard her exclaim cheerfully just after she’d closed the door behind her.

“Oh, I should have asked when I get the cake!”

Chapter Two: The Strongest Piece on the Board

I

It had been three days since Olivia had received her special mission assignment. She and her platoon, charged with ousting the bandits who currently occupied Fort Lamburke, were currently en route to their destination. The fort was located in the forest to the southwest between Galia Fortress and Fort Caspar. Olivia's squad was made up of twenty young men; a paltry number compared to the fifty to a hundred soldiers that made up the average platoon. On top of that, these were all new recruits, conscripted barely two months ago. They were all out of breath from trying to keep up with Olivia. Amongst them, propping himself up on his pike like it was a walking stick, was Ashton.

He'd heard that the rate of survival for new recruits in their first battle was about one in thirty, but Ashton wouldn't be so lucky. This recapture mission had, after all, already failed countless times in the past, with less than one in ten soldiers making it back alive. He couldn't understand why there wasn't a single veteran soldier amongst them. Olivia was probably the only one with any proper combat experience.

As Ashton speculated, his eyes fell on Olivia, walking ahead of him.

No way. That is never, EVER happening.

Morris had told him about how Olivia had been made a warrant officer, but he still couldn't fully believe it. The idea that those slender arms had the strength to slice off heads just sounded like a joke. Something itched at the back of his mind. He focused in on it, and then it occurred to him.

Huh. I haven't seen Morris around lately, he thought, remembering Morris's flippant smile. They hadn't been all that close, but they'd at least been the targets of the same "guidance" during training. He couldn't say this didn't bother him at least a little.

"Hey, have you seen Morris lately?" he asked Gile, the black-haired boy

walking next to him.

“What? Morris?” said Gile, looking up sullenly and sounding irritated. “...I guess I haven’t seen him, no.”

“You either, huh...? Do you think anyone else might know?” Ashton looked back, and Gile followed his gaze. The recruits behind them dragged their feet along like they might collapse at any moment, their eyes staring blankly ahead.

“No way. That lot won’t know anything. They got sent to the fortress even later than we did. They probably barely even know who he is,” Gile finished, then gave Ashton a long, hard stare.

“Wh-What?”

“Oh, I just envy you, having the energy left over to worry about other people in a place like this,” said Gile, shrugging.

“What, no! It’s not like that!” cried Ashton, raising his hands in protest. “I just wondered about Morris, that’s all. I’m barely hanging on too!”

“Well, whatever. We’re doomed anyway.”

A ragtag bunch of new recruits and that girl—goodness only knew what *she* was—as their leader. What their superiors had been thinking, Ashton couldn’t say, but he was pretty sure Gile’s words were right on target. No one wanted to say it out loud, but everyone knew this recapture mission would only end in failure. And that they wouldn’t make it out alive...

“Hey, Ashton? Ashton!”

Ashton realized that Olivia stood right in front of him, her cheeks puffed out sulkily. She was so close that he recoiled, at which she tilted her head in confusion. It didn’t mean anything, but he couldn’t help but find it charming.

“Y-You don’t have to yell. I can hear you. And what if a wild animal hears and attacks us?”

This wasn’t like the flatlands, packed with human towns and villages. All the beasts roamed freely here. If humans ruled down on the flatlands, beasts ruled the forests and mountains. There were more than a few that would kill and devour humans. Beasts didn’t distinguish soldiers with swords and armor from

the common folk—they saw all humans as prey to fill their bellies with.

To Ashton's reproof, Olivia replied calmly, "Well, then we just attack them back and eat them instead." As if they had any chance of doing that! And the way she said it, with that bright smile, Ashton felt himself getting angry. Forgetting he was talking to a senior officer, Ashton clicked his tongue three times, loud and sarcastic.

"Wow, that's a bird impression, right? Let me try too!"

"Why the hell would I be making bird noises?" Ashton retorted without thinking, but Olivia only cackled with laughter, clutching her stomach. The new recruits nearby had apparently heard the conversation, because he saw them smirking faintly at him.

"Oh, so guess what?" Olivia said. "I get to eat cake from the capital! Do you know what cake is? It's a kind of sweet."

"...When did we start talking about that? Yes, obviously I know what cake is. I've eaten it. I did live in the capital before this."

"You've tried it? That's so cool!"

For a moment, he felt genuine concern that she'd been mocking him this whole time. But looking into Olivia's eyes, he knew that wasn't true. They were sparkling, as though she'd met someone she idolized. He realized if they kept talking, he was just going to get more worn out and irritated. So he ignored her gaze and kept moving forwards, pushing the undergrowth that covered their path roughly aside. Every time he did so, bugs he'd never seen before came flying out, adding to his irritation.

Human tracks dotted the edge of the forest there, and they hadn't had to work too hard to keep walking. But deeper into the forest, great trees rose up haphazardly and the thick undergrowth relentlessly blocked their way. A sea of branches and leaves spread out and obscured the sky, blocking the sun's fierce heat. Thanks to that, the forest floor stayed at a pleasant temperature. But the odd bird calls that could be heard from time to time made him freeze up. The other recruits seemed equally uncomfortable, glancing around with wide eyes.

Ashton took a deep breath and roughly wiped the sweat running down his

brow. It was taking a lot out of him just to keep moving without a path to follow. Olivia, in contrast, walked like she was merely out for a stroll, her footfalls light. Every now and then she would spot a flower and pluck it, sucking up the nectar with delight. Ashton knew that the nectar of many of the flowers that grew in the forest contained poison—the Glamour Blossom being the most well-known example. Most did nothing more than produce a faint numbness, but others could cause high fevers and even death. Ashton wondered if Olivia knew that. To be sure, she hadn't plucked any poisonous flowers. For Ashton, this was just another of the many things he'd studied, but he was pretty sure it wasn't common knowledge. He supposed what she'd said about living in a forest must have been true.

Even then, how can she look so refreshed, walking in that heavy armor and carrying that sword?

Ashton and the other recruits wore leather armor made from animal hide. It might not offer much protection, but that also made it light. It still felt heavy to the recruits, though, still unused as they were to wearing armor. Olivia, on the other hand, was in full plate mail. Over a shirt of fine interlocking chain, plates of metal covered her shoulders, hands, thighs, and chest. The weight of it must have been incredible compared to mere leather armor, and yet she wasn't even sweating.

"Warrant Officer Olivia, ser. May I ask a question?"

"Huh? Sure."

"Do you feel tired at all? It's just... Your armor is much heavier than ours, and you have that sword..."

"Tired? No, I'm totally fine. This armor isn't that heavy."

"I... I see. Sorry, ser."

Olivia tilted her head at him, looking perplexed, but seemed to quickly lose interest, and turned to face forwards again.

I know she's my superior, but it's pretty pathetic that I can't even keep up with a little girl. Oh well, we're all going to get killed by bandits anyway, so no point worrying about that now, thought Ashton, gazing at Olivia walking happily along

beside him.

The sun had just begun to dip to the west. Olivia's team found a relatively open patch of ground to take a break. Olivia hadn't ordered it. Rather, it had come about after Ashton had pointed out that if they tried to keep up with Olivia's bottomless stores of energy, the whole team would die of exhaustion before they arrived at the fort. The other recruits had thanked him with tears in their eyes. Even Gile had come up to him spouting foolish things like, "You're our savior!"

Ashton had just smiled nicely at all of them. He was pretty sure he'd just wanted a break more than any of the others, but he'd rather have died than admit it out loud. Feeling slightly guilty, he chose a spot at random and sat down. When he did so, Olivia came over and, as though this were perfectly normal, sat down beside him.

"I'm so sorry! I wasn't tired at all, so I didn't think. Good thing you're here, Ashton," she said, and clapped her hands.

"Aha ha ha. I know you aren't. I did ask you whether you were tired before," he replied, with a self-deprecating laugh. Olivia's eyes widened, and her pale peach-colored lips began to tremble.

"Wait, did you... Did you ask before to try and help me, the leader, see that we needed a break? You were trying to get me to say it myself, but I didn't work it out. And then you had no choice but to suggest it yourself! Well? Am I right?"

He could hardly come back with *No, you're totally wrong*. He looked away from Olivia's piercing eyes, and saw that the other recruits were watching them as they ate. They were probably eavesdropping on the conversation too. Internally, he clicked his tongue at the unnecessary questions. If he revealed the truth here, all the other recruits would hate him. That meant there was only one thing for it. He gulped, then slowly nodded his head.

"Hah hah hah, you got me! I'm very sorry, ser. I overstepped." Ashton's tone was artificial, but Olivia looked pleased, nodding.

"I'm finally getting the hang of how humans think." It was unclear exactly what she meant, but Ashton allowed himself to believe it was best to let her interpret things as she wanted.

He let out a breath, and looked over again at the other recruits. They grinned at him, and saluted.

“R-Right. Shall we have lunch then?”

Feeling sweat running unpleasantly down his back, Ashton reached into his pack and pulled out his rations: brown bread and dried meat, and a single bottle of homemade mustard. Watching Olivia out of the corner of his eye and noticing how she observed him with great interest, he cut the bread in half and sandwiched the dried meat in it, then squirted in some of the mustard and immediately took a bite, savoring the mustard and its well-balanced bite and tang.

“Mmm, that’s good. Bringing this mustard from home was the right call,” Ashton mumbled to himself. Olivia’s stare bore into him. It looked like she might start drooling. After a while, when she still didn’t move to open her bag, he grew uneasy.

“Aren’t you going to eat, ser?” he asked.

“No, I already ate all the rations they gave us. I think I’ll go hunting and catch a bird or something.” Ashton stared at her, his jaw hanging open. Between the fact that she’d already eaten five days of rations and that she was casually chatting about hunting birds, it was all too much. She also didn’t look at all like she was about to get up and go hunting. Her eyes were fixed on Ashton’s hands. Even after he’d finished eating, she didn’t look away.

Oh, all right then, he thought with a sigh. Through his exasperation, he put together another sandwich like the one he’d just made, and held it out to her.

“Oh! Are you sure?”

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be offering. Besides, we can’t have you skipping off trying to hunt and getting savaged by some ravenous beast.”

“I mean, beasts are no problem... But thanks for worrying about me. You really are a good human,” Olivia said, and took a bite out of the bread. A moment later, her eyes shimmering, she said, “This is amazing.”

I wonder how many more meals we’ll get... thought Ashton, watching Olivia’s joyful expression. Just then, there was a scream from behind them.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Ashton spun around frantically, and saw it. An enormous, four-legged beast, covered in golden fur with a single white horn sprouting from its forehead—a unicorn.

Ashton felt all the hairs on his body stand up in shock. It was well known that unicorns were extremely vicious. They were adept at using their long horns to take down their prey. They were also omnivores, which meant they ate anything. Humans were no exception.

The unicorn was huge, but it moved with uncanny speed, charging at the closest recruits. They fell over themselves as they panicked, trying to escape.

“O-Officer Olivia! A unicorn! A unicorn just—!”

“Hm? Oh, wow, it really is. It probably wants to play with the humans,” said Olivia cheerfully, the shimmer still in her eyes. The recruit beside them, his eyes bloodshot, screamed.

“What the hell are you talking about?! Look at it! It’s attacking us!” The recruit’s yelling seemed to bring her around to the severity of the situation. Olivia narrowed her eyes, and took stock of the unicorn. For a moment, just one fleeting moment, Ashton thought she scared him more than the unicorn. But it probably was just his imagination.

“Ohh, that. I guess we have to take what we can get, but those don’t taste great...”

“Taste?” shrieked Ashton. “*Taste*?! Are you seeing this? We need to get out of here, right now!” He seized her arm and tried to run away. But his knees were shaking hard, and he couldn’t even manage to take a single step. It was like the soles of his feet were rooted to the ground.

No, no, no, this isn’t happening! He silently screamed at his feet to move, but they didn’t obey him. The unicorn seemed to notice him, and swung its sharp horn around to point at him. It bellowed, spraying spit, then charged at him.

...This is it, then. Not even a death in battle. I’m going to die being eaten by a unicorn. It wouldn’t even make a good story, he lamented, but even as his hands shook, he still clung tight to his spear. He took a deep breath, and brought it up to face the unicorn. He was well aware that this was pointless.

With certain death bearing down upon him, there was nothing a mere human could do to fight it off. This was his final act of resistance.

Ashton gave himself over to despair, but then, something unbelievable happened. He wondered if he'd gone mad with fear. Olivia, who had been standing beside him, was walking serenely towards the unicorn.

"No! Get out of here! It'll eat you too!"

She just laughed. "You say the funniest things, Ashton."

"Why are you laughing?! Hurry up and run!"

"There's nothing to worry about." A smile played about her lips as Olivia drew her sword—and vanished. To be perfectly accurate, she had just run towards the unicorn, but as far as Ashton's eyes could tell, it was as though she'd suddenly disappeared.

The unicorn bared its teeth and brandished its horn at her as she closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. Olivia parried the horn with the flat of the blade, then struck back, driving her sword up through its chin and out the top of its skull. The unicorn screamed in pain, then crumpled to the ground with an earthshaking thud.

No one could speak. It had all happened too fast. They just stared blankly at Olivia, who stood at the center of it all. She turned around, and jogged over to Ashton. A black mist coiled around the ebony blade she held in her right hand. Ashton realized he'd fallen down on his backside.

"I *told* you beasts weren't a problem, didn't I?" she said matter-of-factly, standing in front of him.

"Y-Yes, ser! O-Of c-course! You're absolutely right..." was all Ashton could manage to say.

It had been three days since the special platoon under command of Warrant Officer Olivia left Galia Fortress.

"Captain Olivia, are you hungry? I'd be honored to give you some of my jerky," said one of the recruits cheerfully, holding it out to her. A chorus of, *Me too!* and, *And me!* followed as the recruits gathered around her, offering up

their bread, candied sweet potatoes, and the like. Olivia took all of it with a grin.

“Thank you, thank you!” she said.

This had been happening every day. The recruits were like believers making offerings to a statue of the goddess Strecia, all because Olivia killed the unicorn. They’d all seen that she was no ordinary girl, but a warrior of fearful strength. Gile had dubbed her the “Silver-Haired Valkyrie” and started worshipping her like she was some sort of deity. This behavior spread amongst the other recruits like wildfire, giving their morale a massive boost, and they all tagged along after Olivia in high spirits.

As all this went on, Ashton couldn’t help but think about Olivia’s sword and the black mist that had shrouded it. He might not have been the most knowledgeable about weapons, but even he could tell that that was no common blade.

“Hey, you seem down. Are you hungry?” said Olivia, taking a piece of bread out of her full-to-bursting pack. *An offering from one of her believers*, he thought bitterly, shaking his head.

“I’m not hungry, ser. But if you’ll allow me, there was something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Sure, but um... All that ‘ser’ and politeness stuff? Could we not do that? It’s complicated and I’m no good at it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, ser,” said Ashton curtly. Olivia pouted, apparently displeased by his reply.

“Why, though? You talked to me normally when we met back in the mess hall.”

“I didn’t realize that you were my superior officer at the time, ser. I can’t just go back to talking like we’re equals...”

“Ugh, the army is such a pain... Oh! I’ve got an idea!” Olivia clapped her hands together. “This is an order from your superior officer! Ashton, you are forbidden from calling me ‘ser’! That goes for everyone else too,” she said. The recruits looked bewildered.

Only Gile knelt on one knee like an idiot and declared, “As my Silver-Haired Valkyrie commands!” Olivia, of course, did not look happy about this.

Ashton was privately grateful for the order. It hadn’t been that long since he’d first encountered Olivia in the mess hall. He was sure he only felt so uncomfortable now because they’d had that one normal conversation. If disregarding formalities with a superior officer was done so only under direct order, it shouldn’t bother him. He forced himself to believe that.

“Well, if you say so. I was wondering, what’s with that black mist that came out of your sword? I wasn’t imagining it, right?”

“You want to know about my sword? Well, actually—”

“Captain Olivia! It’s a fort!”

Olivia was cut off mid-sentence by Gile, who was waving frantically back at them from the front of the group.

“I think it’s the one we’re looking for,” said another recruit from beside him, pointing at his map. They saw a stone tower covered in vines that was in an obvious state of disrepair, even from this distance. Clearly a long time had passed since it had been abandoned.

“We’re here? Finally!” said Olivia. She raised her fist in the air and cried, “Right, team, off we go!” Then she set off running towards the fort without even a hint of caution.

No straight answer on the sword, in the end... thought Ashton. Oh well. I guess I’ll have time later.

The other recruits scrambled to follow her, and Ashton, watching them all from behind, started running.

“Hey! Hey, Olivia!” he yelled. “Are you seriously just going to run in there?”

“Captain Olivia, ser!” Gile called out too. “This is reckless! Far too reckless! Please, ser, come back!”

Olivia only giggled at the boys’ pleas for caution.

“This’ll be no problem! Let’s go!”

She strode out right in front of the fort, leaving Ashton and the others no choice but to follow her, watching their surroundings nervously.

“Wow, what a mess.”

Now that they were up close to the fort, its miserable state was brought into sharp relief. The walls had crumbled, leaving massive chunks of stone scattered around the fort’s base. Even the relatively intact parts looked like they might collapse, given a good push. Ashton couldn’t help but feel skeptical that this ruin would be of any help in the war.

“It’s oddly quiet for a bandit stronghold, don’t you think?” said Gile as he peered anxiously at the fort entrance. Ashton agreed with him. Olivia ignored the question; instead, she turned to the recruit next to her and said, “I’m just going to borrow this,” before she snatched his spear right out of his hands.

“Hey!” protested the bewildered recruit, but Olivia was already done with him. She held the spear ready, then hurled it at a patch of bushes across from them. The spear rumbled like a roaring beast as it crashed into the bushes.

“Nghhh!”

They heard a noise like a frog being trod on. It was a human voice. Ashton and Gile glanced at each other.

“...Did you just hear that?”

“You too, Gile? It wasn’t my imagination then.”

With a nod to one another, they and the other recruits tiptoed over to the bush where the voice had come from. Pushing aside the undergrowth revealed a man lying on his back, his face in utter ruin. Brain matter and blood the man had vomited up was splattered across the ground, and the spear’s blade was embedded deep in the trunk of a tree behind him.

No one needed any help imagining how he’d died.

“Hah, bull’s-eye!” cheered Olivia, appearing beside them and looking pleased as she examined the man on the ground.

“O-Olivia... Is that...?”

“Hmmm, yeah. I wonder. He kept poking his head out to spy on us, so he’s

probably a bandit, right? Looks more like a rat to me, though,” Olivia laughed. For a moment, the pale-faced recruits just looked at each other, before they scrambled to raise their spears. Ashton and Gile followed suit, casting their eyes around. Just then, a man wielding a pike stepped out of the shadow of the fort.

“Well, well, I’m impressed. Which one of you spotted him?” he said, an appraising look in his eyes. Then he saw Olivia, and stopped.

“I suppose it was you, then. You don’t carry yourself like your friends here. You’re in charge of this little band, girl?”

“That’s right!” she said, waving cheerily. “Nice to meet you, I’m Olivia.” The man’s mouth twisted in a smile, and he waved back.

“Such charming manners! I’m much obliged. The name’s Wolfe. Now just so we’re on the same page, you mind telling me what your business is here?”

Wolfe clicked his fingers casually, and in answer bandits began to pour from the entrance to the fort. There were around forty in total, and they smirked over at the recruits, holding their weapons with practiced ease. None of them looked like they’d think twice about killing a man. The recruits were trembling so badly their teeth audibly chattered, but Olivia stood perfectly still and replied,

“We’re here to take the fort back. I know it’s a bit weird, seeing as we abandoned it. But that’s work for you, I guess!”

“Not a girl to mince words, are you? Well, in that case, I don’t suppose you’d mind turning around and skipping on home? I don’t fancy cleaning up that many bodies,” Wolfe said with a shrug.

“*We’re* the ones who clean them up,” protested one of the bandits beside him. As the bandits continued this morbid exchange, Olivia turned to the recruits.

“Wait, you know I don’t clean up either, right? I hate cleaning. You guys don’t mind doing it, right?” she said. The recruits looked slightly ill, but they all nodded, Ashton and Gile included.

The smile vanished from Wolfe’s face, and a dangerous glint came into his eyes.

“Just for my own peace of mind, you wouldn’t happen to be talking about *cleaning us up*, would you?”

“I mean, yeah, wasn’t that obvious? Are my words not getting through?” said Olivia, in what anyone would have understood as an obvious provocation. The bandits immediately pointed their weapons at her, their eyes flashing, but Wolfe raised a hand to keep them back. He began to twirl his pike in one hand, effortlessly but with enough speed to make the air pulse and blow the grass over in a rush of the breeze.

“Are you brave or just plain stupid, girl?” he asked. “No one who talked to me like that ever lived to tell the tale, you know.”

“I guess I’ll be the first!” said Olivia, but the words had barely left her mouth when Wolfe surged forward to attack. Ashton was sure the fierce assault had caught her unawares. But just before the tip of the pike reached her heart, Olivia twisted ever so slightly and evaded, then, keeping the pike under her arm, slid down its length until she was nose to nose with Wolfe.

“Th-The hell are—!” cried Wolfe. He tried to extricate the pike from Olivia’s arm, but it didn’t budge.

“Pikes are handy for keeping your opponent at a distance, but you can’t do much at this close a range. A sword really is the best choice,” said Olivia, drawing the tip of her blade flush against Wolfe’s throat. The man’s spirit seemed to crumple, and he dropped the pike.

“O-Okay! Okay! We surrender! We’ll leave!”

“No can do, sorry. Colonel Otto doesn’t want your heads, but we’ve still got orders to kill you all,” said Olivia and, ignoring Wolfe’s pleas for mercy, she thrust the ebony blade up through the man’s skull. Blood spurted out, painting the ground in a swathe of deep crimson, and Wolfe’s body spasmed as the life faded from his eyes. It was over so quickly, it practically felt anticlimactic.

Olivia shoved Wolfe aside like a toy she’d lost interest in and turned to the other bandits, who stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. Her sword glinted bright in the sunlight.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!!! Why?! How could this happen?!” the man howled, pounding his fist on the ground. The screams and bellows from before had stopped, and now all he could hear was his own ragged breathing.

When he’d heard from his comrades that the royal army was advancing on the fort, he’d actually jumped for joy. Here was the chance he’d been waiting for to try out the edge on his new sword! He’d taken a peek, and they’d been nothing like the last force that had come to attack them. They all looked like they’d sing a pretty tune at the end of his blade.

“Damn it all! This wasn’t... We were supposed to...” He’d imagined himself, strong and manly, cutting down the pathetic royal soldiers, then drinking and laughing with his comrades before a mound of corpses.

That was how today was *supposed* to have gone. And yet—

“Are you done playing hide-and-seek?” said the girl, splashing through the blood that pooled on the ground as she walked towards him. A sinister, jet-black mist enveloped the bloodstained blade she wielded.

“N-No! Please!” he panted. “Don’t kill me! No, don’t!” His desperate pleas rang out as he yelled as loud as he could. He had no energy left to flee. He was going to meet his end, helpless and pathetic, slumped against a tree. His sword had been bent out of shape and would no longer do him any good. The cloying stench of blood didn’t even bother him anymore.

Are all the others...? He looked around him, but none of his comrades had survived, every last one reduced to silent corpses strewn across the ground. The one who had done it, the silver-haired girl, was like death given human form. She was a god of death.

For the first time in his life, the man found himself praying to Strecia.

Please, I don’t need money! I won’t rape anyone anymore, o-or murder them! So please, please save me from that god of death!

Her voice cut through his fervent entreaties like a death knell.

“But won’t you be lonely all by yourself?”

“Not in the slightest! I’ll do my best to live for all of my comrades!”

“Hmm. There’s nothing I can do about it, though. Colonel Otto did say to kill *all* the bandits. And look, this human’s saying he’s lonely—he’s crying.”

The girl impaled a nearby head on the tip of her blade, before tossing it over to the man. It flew in a graceful arc to land right in front of him. He recoiled. It belonged to his friend Dennis. Even in death, Dennis’ eyes were full of fear, blood and tears streaking down his cheeks. The man gibbered in horror.

“See? So that’s why,” said the girl. She smiled, and slowly raised her ebony blade. The man blinked, wondering if fear had made him hallucinate. Instead of a sword, he thought he saw a great scythe—

Olivia sent one of the recruits back to report that they’d secured the fort, then moved on to her platoon’s next assignment. They had to hold the fort until the new garrison arrived. It was only a formality, though. In reality, there wasn’t anything for them to do. With all the bandits dead, there was no chance of an attack coming in the near future. At most, they just needed to bury the bandits’ bodies so that no wild beasts came sniffing around. Olivia, true to her word, didn’t lift a finger to help.

With this sudden surplus of free time, Olivia started taking the recruits out hunting and fishing, leaving at dawn and returning as it got dark. She also ran training drills with them. Those carefree days were, for all of them, an all-too-fleeting spell of peace.

Under a clear sky full of stars, the recruits sat gathered around a fire, talking animatedly about Olivia.

“She’s like, too powerful, don’t you think?”

“Right? I mean stabbing a unicorn to death was one thing, but then killing forty bandits all by herself? No one can do that.”

“No one back at Galia Fortress will ever believe this...”

All the recruits nodded in agreement.

“Us, on the other hand...”

“Oi! We said we wouldn’t talk about that... It’ll just be depressing.”

They all slumped. Forget providing backup—while Olivia had cut down bandit after bandit, the recruits had been unable to do anything but watch and tremble with fear. A few of them had even wet themselves, they'd been so terrified. No one had laughed at them, though. They knew all too well that they could have easily done the same. It had taken a real toll on their masculine pride.

The fire gave a loud crackle in the dark of the night, and like this had been a signal, a morose-looking recruit said, "It's depressing, no mistake. But that's why we asked the captain to train us up, right? So that we can fight properly next time."

"Right. Right, yeah. Next time we'll be ready," said another, raising a clenched fist in determination. But several of the other recruits seemed less sure.

"Do you really think the captain's training will help, though?" said one.

"I dunno..." said another. "Honestly, I thought we'd be learning how to use swords and spears, not..."

"I can't see the point of any of the stuff we're doing at all," added a third.

All the recruits looked troubled.

Olivia's training routine was extremely straightforward. They broke up into pairs, with one person as attacker and one as defender. The attacker had a wooden sword and was only allowed to attack, while the defender staved them off with a wooden shield. When time was up, they swapped roles, and repeated. Unlike back at Galia, she didn't teach them how to hold their weapons, or have them swing their swords and spears at straw training dummies. Their current training might have looked good on paper, but practically speaking it was little different to children playing at being storybook heroes.

"What was it she said? About closely observing your opponent. Like, is that really going to make us better fighters? Not that I'm doubting! It's just... You know?"

Olivia's advice to the recruits usually went something like, "Look, see, observe!" or "Points to lines! Lines to circles!" The recruits never had any idea

what she was talking about. They'd asked her for simpler explanations, but all she'd said was that the most important thing was to observe your opponent.

"I guess it's too early to say for sure, but I can't see it," one of the recruits said after a bit of consideration.

"We just have to believe in her, though, right? If that's what Captain Olivia—if that's what our valkyrie says."

The recruits all looked over at the valkyrie in question. She was happily tearing into a whole roast bird, while Gile frantically plucked another beside her. Ashton had yet another, smearing some kind of sauce onto it.

"...You're right. The captain saved our lives. Besides, we're the ones who asked her to teach us. It'd be disrespectful of us to doubt her."

"Yeah, any other captain and we'd have been toast."

"Uh-huh. Okay then! A toast to our captain—to the valkyrie!"

"To the valkyrie!" the recruits echoed, raising their cups and grinning.

II

The Royal Army Command Room at Galia Fortress

After making his way to Galia Fortress, Colonel Neinhardt was taken to Paul to convey the plan for the First and Seventh Legions to cooperate in retaking Fort Caspar. Colonel Otto scanned the battle plan documents, frowning occasionally.

"...I see. Well, this has Lambert written all over it," Otto said. "If we did take Fort Caspar, it would alleviate a lot of our present worries. And it allows us to mobilize a good-sized force when the time comes to retake Fort Kier... And yet..." He trailed off. Paul sighed and looked up at the ceiling. The smoke from his cigarette hung in the air in a thick cloud.

"Something troubles you, my lord?" said Neinhardt slowly.

"Hmm. Many things trouble me, but right now what I don't understand is why we're pushing to take back Kier Fortress at a time like this. Well. It must be hard, getting old." Otto smirked slightly at the hidden insult in Paul's words.

Watching them, Neinhardt's lips twitched in the faintest of smiles.

So General Paul and Colonel Otto intend to oppose the plan, he thought.

The plan to recapture Kier Fortress had come from King Alfonse himself. Although Paul had been indirect, he could still have easily been called up for insubordination. But Neinhardt was content not to comment on it. The truth was that personally, he felt the same. And while neither Cornelius nor Lambert would ever say it, he suspected they did too.

Alfonse's order was just too dangerous.

The king was no fool, but he had ascended the throne at a bad time. He had only ruled for two years when Ramza the Good announced his war of unification. If they were at peace, he could have taken his time learning how to rule wisely, but instead the kingdom became embroiled in a war that had them on the brink of total annihilation. Not afforded the time to learn, he was just incapable of responding to the rapid developments of wartime.

So, out of desperation, Alfonse had come up with this plan for the First Legion to retake Kier Fortress. Fernest's slide towards defeat had begun when the fortress had been captured, and he probably thought that if only they took it back, they could get the upper hand.

It was with this train of speculation and reasoning in mind that Neinhardt admonished Paul.

"I understand your feeling, General Paul, but such are His Majesty's orders. And the fact is that we can't turn the tide of the war by just pouring everything into defense."

"...Can't argue with that. Forgive me, I've gotten us off track. In this plan where we march on Fort Caspar, where do you expect the imperials to meet us?"

Neinhardt pointed to a location on the map spread out on the table in front of them. Otto gave a large nod of agreement.

"The imperial army will set up formation on the Plains of Ilys. Its geography is ideal for moving a large force. We'll have to send our troops through here as well."

Crossing the Plains of Ilys was the shortest route to Fort Caspar. The only other roads went either through a vast forest or along a winding, narrow canyon. Neither option was remotely direct, nor good terrain for moving large numbers of troops. The plains were the only realistic option.

“Agreed. Which means we’ll have to cut through the imperials right at the start and get to Fort Caspar quick. You really don’t send us easy missions,” Paul said heavily. Neinhardt nodded without replying. With the First and Seventh Legions combined, they would have fifty-five thousand soldiers against the estimated fifty thousand imperials at Fort Caspar. They had the greater numbers, and on the battlefield that could make even a good strategy fall apart at the seams. The royal army should theoretically have had the advantage.

Things would change quickly, though, if reinforcements arrived from Kier Fortress. He knew as surely as he knew anything that the royal army would be forced to retreat. That was what Paul had been talking about, and Neinhardt didn’t have a good answer for that. Otto frowned, his mouth drawn tight in a thin line.

The three of them sat there in leaden silence when suddenly, there was a knock at the door. “Enter!” Otto barked, and a single soldier let himself in.

“Is there an emergency?”

“I’m very sorry for the interruption, ser. A messenger from Warrant Officer Olivia’s platoon has just arrived back with the report that they secured Fort Lamburke.”

“Well, well! That *is* good news.”

“The bandits were all dispatched and they have moved on to their next objective.”

“Very good. I’ll send new instructions for them later today. Tell the messenger to wait.”

“Yes, ser!” said the soldier, and marched out again. These unexpected, glad tidings lightened the mood in the room considerably, mostly thanks to Paul, whose expression relaxed.

“Oho ho. Warrant Officer Olivia has done a fine job, it seems. I mustn’t forget

to get that extra-large cake ready for when she returns, or she'll be cross," said Paul. Otto sighed.

"Again with that nonsense... If you're not careful, she'll become full of herself."

"Oh, don't be so crabby," said Paul with a hearty laugh. Otto let out another deep sigh, shaking his head in indignation. As a fellow aide, Neinhardt felt a rush of sympathy for Otto—but right now he had something more important to think about.

"Excuse me, but were you just discussing Warrant Officer Olivia?" he asked Otto urgently.

"Eh? Yes, that's right. I mentioned her in my report, I believe."

It's her. But by the sounds of it, she's not here now...

He knew he was letting his personal feelings get mixed up in his work, but meeting Olivia, thanking her, had been his one reason for coming to Galia Fortress.

"Is there something wrong, Colonel? You look ill at ease."

"Oh, um, sorry. It's just that General Florenz was a dear friend of mine, before Samuel killed him. Seeing as the warrant officer has avenged him, after a fashion, I wanted to offer her my thanks."

"General Florenz? You don't say... He was a good man," murmured Paul, rubbing his balding forehead. He spoke few words, but Neinhardt felt the depth and sincerity of his condolences.

"Thank you, my lord. I am sure General Florenz is happy to hear you say that too."

"I wonder," Paul said, stubbing out his cigarette. The leaden atmosphere from earlier seemed ready to return, but then Otto clapped his hands with a sudden realization.

"What?" said Paul. "You've thought of something?"

"I have indeed. There's something I'd like to try that, if we pull it off, could have us set up in Fort Caspar before reinforcements can arrive."

“Well, as much as I’m pleased to hear that...” said Paul, sounding apprehensive, “is this going to involve Warrant Officer Olivia again?” Otto gave a crooked smile.

“My lord, Olivia is currently the strongest piece the Seventh Legion has on the board. We have to use her as much as we can—especially if it could improve our chances of succeeding in taking back Kier Fortress.”

“Oh, very well, very well. Let’s hear this plan of yours, then,” said Paul, resigned. Otto gave an exaggerated cough, then paused before going to the map and beginning to explain his idea.

Neinhardt was, if he were honest, taken aback. Otto was a dyed-in-the-wool realist. He never inflated or played down his assessment of a military asset, whether they be ally or enemy. But now he was calling this Olivia the Seventh Legion’s “strongest piece.” Neinhardt was more eager than ever to find out who she was.

This is the girl who brought down Samuel, crazy though that still sounds. She must be a fearsome sight, he concluded, and settled in to hear Otto’s plan.

III

Olivia’s platoon had been at Fort Lamburke for only two weeks.

Galia Fortress was a hive of activity, bringing in supplies for when the First Legion arrived and preparing for the assault on Fort Caspar. Olivia’s platoon, meanwhile, continued their carefree lives at Fort Lamburke.

They were practically chased out, though, when the new garrison arrived. They returned to Galia Fortress, and had barely set foot through the gate when Olivia was summoned to meet Otto in the command room. She went up, staring at Otto’s pocket watch, and knocked on the command room door.

“Warrant Officer Olivia, reporting for duty on time, ser!” There was the faint sound of laughter from the other side of the door, then Otto’s sharp and familiar voice rang out.

“Enter.” She did so, and found three men sitting on a sofa.

Olivia examined each of them in turn. Paul was smiling cheerfully, while Otto looked grim. Next to them sat a man with flyaway blond hair whom she didn’t know. She wondered if he was gaping like that because he was imitating a fish. It wasn’t very convincing.

“I’m here *on time*, ser!” she said again, holding out the pocket watch.

“I can see that without you waving it in front of my face. Now put that away,” Otto said with a glare. It seemed there would be no praise for her today. She carefully tucked away the precious item. Paul smiled and patted the sofa, inviting her to sit down, so she did.

“I’m sorry to call you here just as you returned home, Warrant Officer. You did a fine job at Fort Lamburke.”

“Thank you, ser!”

“Indeed. Now, I heard there was a master piker amongst those bandits—he didn’t give you any trouble?” inquired Paul. Olivia was confused. She couldn’t remember anyone who fit that description. Maybe she’d forgotten. She thought she had a pretty good memory, though. She hadn’t forgotten anything from the books she’d read, after all.

Ashton *had* told her he couldn’t believe how good her memory was. If she’d forgotten this so-called master piker so easily, they couldn’t have been much of an opponent. It hadn’t taken her more than a single blow to kill any of the bandits. It didn’t seem fair that she was expected to remember them.

She remembered the fun parts, of course. Making friends with the new recruits, going hunting together, fishing in the river. She’d thought her sides would split from laughing when Ashton almost drowned. He’d been so mad at her after she’d rescued him.

It turned out that Gile had been a hunter, and he was a deft shot with a bow. The birds he’d plucked had been the best thing she’d ever eaten. When she told him as much, he’d fallen down on one knee and said, “I have honed all my skills so that I may better serve you, my valkyrie!”

She’d thought that that probably wasn’t true, but hadn’t said anything, feeling

that it might not go over well if she said the wrong thing.

The meals they'd had together, gathered around the fire under the starry sky, had truly been delicious.

"...Er, I don't remember much of the fighting. They all went down after just one blow."

"Hah! One blow? You don't say!" laughed Paul, slapping his thigh. "You hear that, Otto? Warrant Officer Olivia here doesn't see the difference between any master pikers or bandits." Otto sighed despairingly, while the blond man's eyes widened. He looked like he might cry, thought Olivia, a little concerned for him.

"Right! I almost forgot. I called you here today to give you this," said Paul. He went to get a white box sitting on the table, before bringing it back and setting it on her lap. He gestured at Olivia to open it, so she did so. Her eyes were met by a brightly colored assortment of cakes, and a sweet scent filled her nose.

"Cake!" she squealed with delight. "This is cake, right? General Paul, ser, thank you!"

"Oho ho. I'm glad you like it," said Paul with a broad grin. Olivia immediately reached out to take one of the cakes, but then faltered. Otto was yelling something at her, but she wasn't worried about that. No, she'd just remembered that one of her books had described cake as "tooth-rottingly delicious." What if her teeth all fell out? But she couldn't resist. She'd worry about it when it happened, she thought, and popped one of the cakes whole into her mouth.

Oh, it's so sweet and fluffy! Her mouth ached with the sweetness. She quickly reached up to check, but to her relief her teeth were still intact. That meant she could eat the rest of the cake without worry.

She was confused when, as she reached for another cake, someone suddenly grabbed her arm. She looked up and saw Otto, his face bright red and his lips trembling. He looked like the red demon from her picture book.

"Oh, do you want a cake too, ser? I'm sorry, but these were gifts from General Paul so I'm afraid I can't give you any."

"Do you hear me asking for cake?" Otto yelled. "How dare you! Do you know

where you are right now?” Olivia cocked her head, trying to work out what he meant. She’d seen the plate on the door—it said, “Command Room.” She was sure that’s where she was.

“Er, Colonel Otto,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, “have you been hit in the head lately?”

“What the blazes are you talking about now?”

“Um, I just read it in a book once. When humans get hit in the head, sometimes their memory gets fuzzy. I know where I am. This is the command room. It might be a good idea for you to see a doctor.”

“Y-You little... How...!” Otto spluttered, shaking with rage and flapping his fist up and down. She remembered the interrogation room and thought he probably wanted to hit the table. This only confused her further. She’d very kindly shared with him some of the knowledge she’d gotten from her reading, but all he did was get angry with her.

Z had told her that it was humans’ thirst for knowledge that separated them from other animals. Her words should have made him happy—certainly not angry. If only Ashton was here, he’d be able to advise her.

As she thought all this, she looked back at the box of cakes on her lap.

I bet he does want a cake, she thought. Who wouldn’t, after all? With something this sweet and delicious right before your eyes.

Otto had been kind to her, and he’d given her his beautiful, silver pocket watch. He might give her more things later.

Making up her mind, she picked up a cake and held it out to Otto.

“I suppose you can have *one*...”



“I don’t want your cake!” roared Otto, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang.

“Ah, so you *did* want to hit it, ser,” said Olivia, at which he pounded the table several more times. Paul watched him, his expression amused.

“All right, we have something important to discuss now. You go enjoy your cake in your room.”

“Yes, ser! Warrant Officer Olivia, going to enjoy her cake in her room!” said Olivia, giving her most energetic salute to date. She was grateful for Paul’s order—she could hardly enjoy the cake properly with Otto around.

She, of course, had the box of cakes clasped tight in her arms as she left.

“...How should I put this? She’s...a strange girl, isn’t she?” said Neinhardt as they listened to Olivia’s receding footsteps. It was his honest opinion. The girl he’d just met had been entirely different from his expectations.

“No need to be polite, Colonel Neinhardt. She is entirely deficient in both manners and common sense,” spat Otto. He was clearly still angry—his teacup shook in his hands. He’d hardly ever seen the usually coolheaded Otto get so emotional. He smiled without meaning to, and found himself skewered by Otto’s ice-cold glare. He quickly wiped the smile off his face.

“Isn’t she just the sweetest?” said Paul, his warm smile the total opposite of Otto. Neinhardt, unable to work out what he should say, opted for a vague smile. Paul probably thought of her like a grandchild. He’d heard the man actually had a granddaughter around the same age.

There was no denying that she’d been a sight to send hearts aflutter. She’d have passed for the daughter of a lord at a party if one put her in a gown, no mistake. She’d have had young men lining up for her hand, and no doubt she’d have made all the young ladies green with envy too.

Terrifying warriors... I let my imagination run away with me there... he laughed at himself. He picked up his cup of tea. Once a commonplace beverage, even tea was a luxury commodity now. Sutherland’s economic blockade, or as the city-states themselves called it, the “famine,” had forced them to rely on

smugglers to get hold of it.

Occupied by such disconsolate thoughts, he sipped his now-cold tea. Otto had at last gotten himself under control and was rubbing his fist, red where he'd hit the table when he suddenly seemed to remember Neinhardt.

"Hold on, didn't you want to thank her?"

"Oh, well," said Neinhardt. "I did, but it was all a bit overwhelming, and I totally forgot."

"Shall I call her back later?"

Neinhardt thought for a moment. "No, there's no need. Some other time. I'm sure she's busy with her cake now, anyway." He realized his mistake as soon as he spoke, and Otto predictably glared at Paul.

"Yes, his lordship here keeps spoiling her," Otto grumbled. Paul wasn't fazed, though. Quite the opposite, he sprawled comfortably on the sofa, enjoying his cigarette.

"Oh, Otto, don't complain so much. Your next little scheme is only possible because Olivia got us Fort Lamburke back. If you're too mean to her, she might even go over to the empire!"

Otto's face contracted like he'd been jabbed somewhere sensitive. "I-I don't..." he spluttered. Apparently, Paul's suggestion wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

The royal army had an ongoing deserter problem. Well, if they'd just been deserters, that would've been one thing, but a sizable number of them ended up joining the imperial army. There'd been one particularly absurd occasion where a whole platoon had deserted, then shown up days later in imperial uniforms.

These days, all deserters were sentenced to an immediate public execution to set an example. Some were burned at the stake, while others went to the executioner's block.

Fear of punishment was supposed to quash thoughts of desertion, but there were still soldiers who risked their lives every day to try and get free.

On the other hand, the executions were having the side effect of deflecting the resentment the civilians felt towards the army. It was ironic, really. This was the pitiful state that the royal army had been reduced to.

Neinhardt thought of Olivia's happy face as she'd eaten her cake. According to the report he'd read, she'd volunteered to enlist—and even brought a bag of imperial heads with her when she did so. Whatever Paul said, it didn't sound to him like there was much chance of her switching sides. They couldn't guarantee she wouldn't, though. She had an air of detachment that made him sure that what drove her wasn't patriotism, at the very least. It didn't feel like she was after personal glory either.

Without these, he somehow got the feeling all the empire would have to do to turn her was to offer a big enough cake.

It suddenly occurred to him to wonder—what had inspired her to volunteer, anyway? He scratched his chin, thinking.

These days, Fernest was as unstable as a house of cards. It could all come crashing down at any moment. The imperial army would have welcomed Olivia and her power with open arms. It wasn't an appropriate concern to say out loud, but he couldn't help but wonder why she'd volunteered for them and not the imperial army. It didn't make any sense.

"Colonel Otto," he addressed the frowning man. "Did Warrant Officer Olivia tell you why she chose to enlist?" For ordinary soldiers, they didn't ask why. If you could fight, you were in. But things were different with Olivia. From day one—no, *minute* one—she had shown herself to be an overwhelming force in battle. Ever-cautious Otto would surely have asked why she'd come to them.

"She did," Otto said slowly, "but her answer was, well, unhelpful." Otto paused, then continued. "She said that this was part of her search for someone called 'Z.'"

Of course he asked, thought Neinhardt, quietly impressed.

"You're saying she joined the army just to find someone?" he asked.

"Apparently."

"I suppose being in the army makes it easier to get certain information... But

Z? That's not a name you hear every day. Who on earth is he?"

"Olivia's story, absurd though it is, is that this Z is a *god of death*."

"...Excuse me?" said Neinhardt, stunned. "You mean like, with the big scythe? That sort of god of death?" He held his hands up to mime swinging a scythe, and Otto nodded begrudgingly. Everyone was familiar with the image of a skeleton cloaked in rags and wielding a giant scythe. Artists' interpretations might differ, but they all followed the same basic pattern.

"Another wholly unbelievable tale, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes. Yes, it is..." mumbled Otto.

Hm? Why's he stammering like that? thought Neinhardt. Watching Otto stroke his chin, he asked, "You're not telling me you believe her?"

"It's not about whether I believe her or not... But if she wanted to lie, surely she'd choose a more believable story. This one really is, as I said, absurd."

Otto probably hadn't been able to decide one way or the other. He looked, most unusually for him, totally at a loss. Neinhardt didn't know what to say, so just made a vague noise of assent. It appeared Paul was hearing all this for the first time as well, but his expression was strangely understanding.

"Well, well. She's searching for a death god then..." he said, chuckling quietly to himself.

This still doesn't make any sense, thought Neinhardt. *Is "god of death" some sort of metaphor? At the very least, I suppose the story that she enlisted to search for someone—if that is the correct term—was accurate, though.*

Neinhardt's train of thought cut off as he noticed the pile of papers sitting on the table. They had a mountain of other things to be doing rather than just sitting here musing over Olivia's behavior.

With a deep sigh, he reached for the page on top of the pile.

IV

Colonel Otto's Work Room at Galia Fortress

“Ah, the referral from Colonel Neinhardt. You must be...”

“Yes, ser! Warrant Officer Claudia Jung, reporting for duty to the Seventh Legion!”

“Very good. At ease, soldier. Take a seat.” Otto gestured at the sofa.

“Yes, ser!” said Claudia, and sat down. Otto took a teacup down from the shelf on the wall, then reached for the white porcelain teapot.

“Please, ser, allow me!” said Claudia. She tried to stand up, but Otto held up a hand to stop her.

“But ser—!”

“It’s no trouble,” Otto cut her off, pouring a cup of tea with practiced hands.

He doesn’t have a servant to do that? thought Claudia, bemused. He put the teacup down on the table, and its refreshing aroma wafted up to her.

“I’m afraid due to supply shortages I can’t offer you sugar. I hope you don’t mind going without.”

“Don’t even think of it, ser. Thank you very much.” She obliged him by taking a sip of the tea, then returned the cup to the table without a sound. She made an effort to sit up straight, and found herself looking right into Otto’s eyes.

“Colonel Otto, I... I apologize if I speak out of turn, but might I trouble you to tell me the reason for my emergency transfer from the First Legion to the Seventh Legion?”

“What’s that? Didn’t Colonel Neinhardt explain?”

“No, ser, I wasn’t told anything. The colonel said that he was extremely busy, and I had best pose any questions to you directly.” Otto looked both amused and annoyed by this. There was clearly some joke here she didn’t understand. If he hadn’t known her to be Neinhardt’s cousin, he certainly wouldn’t have smiled like that.

“Well, I’ll get straight to the point. Warrant Officer Claudia Jung, you have been assigned as aide to Warrant Officer—well, now she’s *Second Lieutenant*—Olivia,” said Otto. He held out a sheet of paper to Claudia.

“Aide... Thank you, ser,” she said, taking the document and reading through it. It listed Olivia’s numerous achievements, starting from her defeat of the Raging Bull Samuel and continuing with the capture and elimination of the two spies infiltrating Galia Fortress. It wrapped up with her practically single-handed recapture of Fort Lamburke.

It looked like she was already a bit of a hero—and she had done all of that at barely fifteen years old.

“Ser... Is all of this really true? I don’t mean to... It’s just...”

“It’s not surprising you think that, but everything written there is fact. The thing is...” Otto trailed off, letting out a deep sigh.

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“...Well, about that. As I’m sure you’ve gathered, there are no issues with her prowess in battle.”

“Yes, ser. You mean to say then that the problem is in another area?” Claudia asked. Otto nodded, looking satisfied.

“Correct. Lieutenant Olivia is lacking when it comes to manners and common sense. Honestly, I’m at my wits’ end with her.”

“Manners... And common sense, ser?” echoed Claudia, unsure how to reply. It was too vague a statement to make sense of.

“And his lordship just coos over... Well, that’s not important. Forget I said that.”

“Yes, ser.”

“Anyway. Lieutenant Olivia is at the center of this upcoming operation. That’s why we need a truly exceptional aide at her side.”

“...Ser, I apologize if this comes across as rude, but couldn’t someone else do this?” asked Claudia, thinking that there had to be plenty of other talented soldiers in the Seventh Legion. Otto shook his head shortly.

“None with a chance at reining in the lieutenant. She looks the part, but inside she’s totally wild. We thought that another woman might have more luck. I know it’s asking a lot, but we’re counting on you.”

“Yes, ser. As Lieutenant Olivia’s aide, I will guide her to the best of my abilities!” said Claudia. Otto looked ever so slightly relieved.

“Good. I’ve told her you’ll call on her. I imagine she’s in her quarters, so go pay her a visit when we’re done here.”

“I will go to her immediately, ser.”

“In that case, we’re done here. You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, ser!” said Claudia. Once she was out of the room, she heaved a deep sigh. Going off of Otto’s behavior, the duty she’d been saddled with would be anything but fun.

Pushing all this through without so much as asking me... she thought resentfully at Neinhardt, who’d recommended her for this. She headed for Olivia’s quarters.

When she arrived, Claudia checked her uniform was all in order, confirmed there were no problems, then knocked on the door.

“Claudia?” came a voice, clear as a bell. Claudia was taken aback to be so suddenly addressed by name, but called back,

“Yes, ser! My name is Warrant Officer Claudia Jung. I’ll be your aide starting today, ser, so I came to introduce myself.”

“Yeah, Colonel Otto told me about you. Come in!”

“Excuse me, ser,” Claudia said, and opened the door. The sight that met her eyes made her gasp involuntarily. A girl with a doll-like face lounged on the bed, reading a book. She was so beautiful that Claudia was spellbound for a moment, before their eyes met. Taking care not to tread on any of the books that littered the floor, Claudia made a hasty salute.

Olivia got up from the bed.

“I’m Olivia. Nice to meet you,” she said, grinning and saluting back. Then she sat back down, and started reading her book again.

Claudia was stumped. *Th-That’s it...?!* She thought, wondering for a moment if she was being tested. But the other girl really did just seem to be immersed in her book. Everything that Otto had said to her came back to her. It looked like if

she was to fulfill her duty as aide, first she'd have to get to know Olivia. She decided to start with small talk.

"Er... Lieutenant Olivia? You... You have a lot of books, don't you?"

"Huh?" She paused. "...Oh, Ashton told me about all sorts of cool-sounding things, so I had them delivered from the capital. That ate up all the reward money I got from General Paul. Books are pretty expensive," answered Olivia, without looking up from her book. Claudia didn't know what to make of any of this, but pressed on undeterred.

"You must be very fond of reading, then," she said. "May I ask, ser, who Ashton might be?"

"...Colonel Otto said the same thing. Ashton is Ashton. He's a human." Olivia looked up from her book for the first time to frown at Claudia. Her eyes were deep ebony, and Claudia saw no hint of a joke in them.



Right... I'm starting to see what Otto was talking about. Neinhardt, you bastard. You owe me for this, big time, Claudia cursed her cousin internally. She kept her expression passive.

"Of course, ser. Please forgive me for asking such an obvious question," Claudia said with a deep bow. Olivia shook her head and said, "Oh, it's fine. I just don't get why people ask things they already know... Do the words I say just not make sense or something?"

"Oh no, ser. I promise you it's not that."

"Hm... Well, that's a relief, at least. You're done introducing yourself now, right? You can go now," she said, and once again returned to her book. Claudia didn't feel like she was going to get any further today. She saluted Olivia, the other girl still lying on the bed, and said, "Thank you, ser. If there is anything you require, I am at your beck and call."

"Mmkay, thanks!"

Once outside the room, Claudia slumped against the wall and let out her second deep sigh of the day. Then, she set off for Neinhardt's quarters.

Chapter Three: The Battle of Ilys

I

The Imperial General Headquarters, Fort Caspar

The Seventh Legion is on the move!

The message arrived from a lookout stationed near Galia Fortress; General Osvannes quickly summoned his officers to a war council to address it.

“How far have they advanced?” he demanded.

“They crossed the Estich River and are making for the Canalia Highway, ser!” relayed the soldier breathlessly. The sound of metal on metal came from outside as soldiers scrambled about. Already the news of the Seventh Army had spread to every corner of the fort, leading the soldiers to rush to prepare for battle.

“My lord, from what the lookout said, we can only assume that their objective is Fort Caspar... It looks like they got the jump on us.”

“Indeed. I suppose they got tired of cowering in their hole,” said Osvannes with a smile, making the other officers roar with laughter. Paris looked away from Osvannes and let out the smallest of sighs. He knew that frustration lay hidden behind the general’s words.

Why did His Imperial Majesty reject the attack on Galia Fortress? As far as I could tell, my lord’s plan was flawless. General Felix gave it his seal of approval too. The first play should have been ours.

The others’ laughter irritated him, but he kept his voice even as he continued to question the soldier.

“And how many soldiers do they have?”

“The scouts report around fifty thousand, ser.”

“What?!”

The officers' laughter stopped abruptly, their smiles replaced with grim expressions.

"Fifty thousand... They had more in reserve than we thought, then?" muttered Paris. No one answered him. None of them had predicted this either.

The force stationed at Fort Caspar had, through numerous waves of reinforcements, grown to around fifty-five thousand soldiers. Paris acknowledged that fifty thousand was higher than expected—they had undeniably underestimated their opponent—but he didn't think it was as shocking as the other officers' reactions suggested.

They had guessed that Galia housed around forty thousand soldiers—forty-five at most. If one factored in the troops left behind to hold the fortress, that figure had to be closer to sixty thousand.

The spy at Galia Fortress hasn't made any reports lately... thought Paris. Probably means he got captured—or killed. Just when we needed information more than ever.

Paris had originally served in the intelligence division, so it was only natural that he valued information. He knew, after all, that the right information could be worth ten thousand soldiers on the battlefield; it could easily sway the course of a battle. Unfortunately, most people—including the officers present—didn't share his views. Information provided guidance, but that was all, according to them. They all believed wholeheartedly that at the end of the day, victory came down to military might.

Lieutenant General Georg was the loudest proponent of this view. He was a giant of a man and the head of the House of Bachstein, one of the founding families of Asvelt. Everything he had, he'd obtained through the power of his family name. He was also a seasoned warrior and commanded his own legion: the Steel Chargers. His successes on the southern front in the early days of the war, decimating the Sixth Legion, had only strengthened his unshakable confidence in his own judgment.

Georg glanced at Paris, before turning back to Osvannes with a fake smile plastered on his face.

"My lord, we can't let this concern us. The royal army are a pack of pathetic

weaklings, no matter how many they scrounge together. We should send our full force out to meet them, and let them taste the power of the imperial army!" said Georg rousingly, pounding his hand on the table to emphasize his point. The other officers, even those who had looked so grim just moments before, called out over one another in assent.

"Well said! We'll show the Seventh Legion not to underestimate us," Osvannes said, and looked to Paris. "Paris, where should we engage them?" Paris looked down at the map spread out on the table before them.

"Hmmm. I believe the Plains of Ilys would be most suitable, my lord."

"And why do you think that?"

"Simple. The geography is best suited for maneuvering a larger force. The only other options are the Forest of Arc or Glock's Canyon, and we can't maneuver an army in either of those. But most importantly, the plains provide the shortest route to Fort Caspar. Provided the enemy aren't all total fools, they will be thinking the same thing."

"Hah, a head-on battle, then," said Osvannes with an approving nod.

"There's nothing I want more!" said Georg. "Let the Seventh Legion cower before the might of my Steel Chargers!" He roared with laughter, and Paris saw the lust for battle in the faces of the officers around him. His sense of foreboding intensified.

I don't like this... he thought. We haven't fought a large battle like this in a long time, and everyone is in a hurry to prove themselves. This doesn't bode well.

The southern front had been quiet as of late. With the Seventh Legion holed up in Galia Fortress, opportunities for glory had been few and far between. All the officers had been getting more and more fed up, hearing about their comrades' heroic deeds on the central and northern fronts. It was only natural that the news of the Seventh Legion's advance had them all chomping at the bit, hungry for some glory themselves. Paris had to prevent that recklessness from bringing about their defeat. As an intelligence man, it was his job to always imagine the worst possible outcome. He turned to Osvannes.

“My lord, perhaps we should ask for reinforcements to be sent to Kier Fortress, just in case. There’s no such thing as being too careful, especially after —”

“What the hell are you on about?” Georg cut him off. Paris saw the other man glaring daggers at him and shaking with barely-contained rage. “Well?” he demanded at Paris’s silence. “What are you getting at? If we were outnumbered, maybe I’d understand caution—but this time we’re evenly matched. Does the enemy terrify you that much? Are you so eager to be called a coward?”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant General Georg, but if we can raise a decisively greater force, it could do serious damage to enemy morale,” retorted Paris. “Shameful as it might be, I thought only to minimize our losses.” Georg pounded another fist on the table.

“Fool! Suppose, just *suppose*, we crushed our enemy with overwhelmingly superior numbers. Who could boast of such a victory? You think there’s pride in that? Shame on you!”

Paris decided he had nothing more to say to a man who valued glory over the lives of his soldiers.

“...Of course, Lieutenant General. Please forgive me for wasting your time,” he replied, bowing low. He heard a few snickers of laughter and thought he recognized voices belonging to Georg’s toadies. They were all officers from high-ranking noble families. Paris’s family were low-ranking nobles, so he was used to this sort of treatment.

“Lieutenant General Georg, settle down. Paris is my aide, and was only offering his thoughts.”

“If you say so, my lord...” said Georg, before grudgingly stepping back.

Osvannes clapped Paris lightly on the back and said kindly, “We’d all do well to remember his words! But first, let’s get a good look at our enemy. After the first battle we should still have plenty of time to reassess.”

“...Yes, my lord.”

“Very good! Now, a toast!” Osvannes stood up, raising his glass. The other

officers followed suit.

“To the glory of the Asvelt Empire!”

“To our undying loyalty to Ramza the Magnificent!”

The next morning, fifty thousand soldiers stood rank-and-file under a crystal clear sky. A war horn cut through the air—the signal to move out.

“Everything is ready, my lord.”

“Good. Send all forces to the Plains of Ilys.”

II

The Royal Army on the Canalia Highway

The combined legions under the command of Lieutenant General Paul and General Lambert departed Galia Fortress and advanced west along the Canalia Highway without meeting any opposition from imperial forces. They marched under the banners of the Seventh Legion to conceal the presence of the First Legion; the longer they could keep the empire believing that the First Legion was still committed to defending the capital, the better. Paul and Lambert rode side by side at the center of the forces, discussing the battle to come. Their personal guards, clad in silver plate, formed a tight circle around the pair of them. The guards were in turn surrounded by a ring of foot soldiers in heavy armor, creating an impenetrable line of defense. The foot soldiers kept their eyes on their surroundings, never letting their attention waver as they pressed forward.

Neinhardt, meanwhile, led the vanguard, while Otto commanded the rear guard.

“Things seem to be going smoothly so far.”

“Indeed. Apparently, all the imperials in these parts went running with their tails between their legs.” Lambert surveyed the collapsed remains of army tents that lay strewn about them. Through the splattered mud, he could make out the crossed swords of the imperial army. They’d also gotten word that the royal

army had liberated the town of Canalia.

“I have to say, I’m impressed you got the king to approve this plan.”

“Ah, yes... The field marshal was kind enough to argue our case to His Majesty,” replied Lambert. He said it lightly, but in truth, persuading Alfonse had been no mean feat. At first, the king had doggedly insisted that they retake Kier Fortress, turning a deaf ear to Cornelius’s attempts at dissuasion. Cornelius had not been discouraged, however, returning to the palace time and time again to argue their case.

Eventually, Alfonse had grown so weary of the old man that he tried to ban him from any further audiences, at which point Cornelius had threatened to resign from the army. Alfonse had panicked and backtracked, giving them his approval. Cornelius might’ve grown old, but the invincible general resigning at a time like this could’ve had devastating repercussions. They were already in a dire situation—one wrong move and people might’ve started questioning Alfonse’s fitness as ruler, which would’ve only made things worse. Lambert assumed that this had been Alfonse’s reasoning for allowing the plan to move forward.

Paul scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Oho ho... A hard-won victory, by the sounds of it,” he said. Lambert looked at Paul, taken aback. He might have gotten older, but the other man was as keenly perceptive as ever.

“Yes, well. Thanks to him, the First Legion’s been spared a slaughter at the gates to Kier Fortress,” said Lambert with a deliberate shrug.

“What’s this? Lambert the Bold, shrinking from a fight? If you’re not careful, you’ll lose that title.”

“It’s poor taste to make jokes when you know full well what I mean,” said Lambert, exasperated. The corners of Paul’s mouth twitched.

“Sorry, sorry. Of course, even for the mighty First Legion, that would have been tantamount to suicide.”

“Exactly. I want nothing more than to die with a sword in my hand, but I’d rather wait for when it’ll mean something.”

Paul and Lambert’s eyes met, and they both laughed.

“That’s why we have to win this time, no matter what. The Seventh Legion is taking the lead on this plan, so I’m leaving everything up to you, Paul. Are you really sure about this? About...what’s-her-face. The girl.”

“Second Lieutenant Olivia?”

“Yes, her. I heard she’s only fifteen years old! Isn’t your granddaughter around that age?” Lambert said, looking at Paul with concern. He had met said granddaughter at a party some ten years earlier.

“That’s quite a memory you’ve got! Yes, she’s the same age as the lieutenant.”

“Hmph. I might be getting old, but my memory’s as sharp as ever, I’ll have you know.”

“You can’t be much past fifty.”

“Fifty is old enough! The point is, you’ve made this girl the same age as your own granddaughter central to our whole plan. From what I hear, she’s a force to be reckoned with... But are you sure this is wise?”

Lambert had heard the whole chain of events, starting from Samuel’s defeat. Under normal circumstances, he’d have written it off as fantasy. More than that, it had all transpired in a mere two months. The part where she’d skewered a unicorn, in particular, had been so ridiculous that he’d laughed out loud.

“Believe me, I understand your misgivings,” Paul answered. “But we can trust Lieutenant Olivia with this. Besides, she’s got that marvelous aide with her now.”

“Warrant Officer Claudia? Don’t even get me started... Poaching one of the First Legion’s best soldiers like that,” said Lambert, unable to keep the resentment off his face. Claudia had graduated second in her class at the royal military academy. She was highly knowledgeable and boasted a first-rate skill with a blade. Her youth and inexperience showed through in places, but she was still far ahead of anyone else her age. Lambert had been keeping an eye on her progression, so he’d been all the more indignant at her transfer to the Seventh Legion.

“Don’t try to put this on me, Lambert! It was your aide who recommended

her transfer in the first place,” retorted Paul.

“I know that, of course... Though *why* Neinhardt thought he needed to do that...” muttered Lambert with a resentful glare towards the vanguard. Just then, a soldier slipped through the ring of heavy infantry. He had seven silver stars on his red epaulets, marking him a messenger of the Seventh Legion. Paul pulled on his horse’s reins and raised his hand to signal a halt.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, General Paul.”

“You have news of the enemy?”

“Yes, ser. The imperial army is advancing towards the Plains of Ilys with a force of around fifty thousand.”

“Ilys, just as we thought. There’s nowhere else for them to go, of course,” Paul said with an approving nod. Lambert gave a sidelong look at Paul.

“Fifty thousand, you say?” he mused. “That makes our forces exactly matched, if you don’t count our detached force. They’ll have left at least five thousand defending the fort.”

“Likely so. All well within what we predicted.”

“Oh, yes, no problems there. Now, what’s happening at Kier Fortress?” Lambert asked, trepidation just audible in his voice. For their current strategy, this was what mattered most.

“We’ve seen no signs of troop movements at Kier Fortress, ser!” replied the messenger, and Lambert breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been ready to order an immediate retreat if there’d been any sign of reinforcements arriving. He looked at Paul, and saw the same relief in the other man’s face.

“That’s our biggest fear off the table, then.”

“Yes, if they’d opened by calling for reinforcements, that would have been the end.”

“Everything comes down to the detached force, then,” said Lambert. It was as much a question as it was a statement. Paul nodded, not a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

“Lieutenant Olivia won’t let us down. Not our Silver-Haired Valkyrie.”

“...Excuse me? ‘Silver-Haired Valkyrie?’” Lambert echoed in confusion.

“You haven’t heard that before? The maiden, flying heroically across the field of battle? It’s what the recruits who were with the lieutenant when she took back Fort Lamburke are calling her. Suits her perfectly, don’t you think?”

Lambert stared at Paul, who grinned stupidly. He’d heard about some of Paul’s affliction from Neinhardt, but hadn’t realized how advanced the symptoms were. That was not the face of a man about to lead an army into battle—no, that was the face of a proud grandfather. The soldiers around them looked at Paul with something like concern.

Is this really the same Paul they used to call the God of the Battlefield? His horse whinnied. Lambert stroked its neck, before letting out a deep sigh.

A week before Paul and Lambert’s combined force moved out from Galia Fortress, another regiment set out from Fort Lamburke. The royal army had been sending small platoons of soldiers to the fort to avoid detection by the empire, until it housed a garrison of five thousand. Meanwhile, three thousand mounted soldiers, led by regimental captain Olivia, formed the combined army’s detached force. They quietly departed Fort Lamburke, heading for the Forest of Arc.

Olivia sat at ease astride her black horse as they made their way through the forest. Beside her rode Claudia, her specially selected aide. Claudia, who took her duty extremely seriously, was therefore on constant alert.

“Claudia, I *told* you, you don’t have to glare at everything all the time. You’d be so pretty if you’d just smile,” said Olivia, tapping Claudia on the back with a giggle.

“I don’t mean to be rude, ser, but it’s hard to take being called ‘pretty’ by you as anything other than sarcasm.”

“Sarcasm? I’m not being sarcastic though,” said Olivia, cocking her head. Claudia sighed. The fact that Olivia meant it just made it worse.

“I’d encourage you to take a look in the mirror, ser... But to your original point, we can’t afford to relax until we’ve put the imperial army behind us. The

outcome of our mission will dictate the course of the war.”

The battle plan was based around a surprise attack carried out by the detached force, who would go through the Forest of Arc and sneak up behind the imperial army spread out across the Plains of Ilys. Just as the main force of the royal army met the imperials head-on, they would strike at the heart of the enemy’s command. If the daring plan succeeded, the imperial army would fall apart in a single blow.

Olivia’s job was to kill the enemy’s commander, and Claudia’s was to lead her there. Claudia was also responsible for the most crucial decision—the timing of the surprise attack. Feeling all that responsibility weighing down on her, Claudia watched Olivia, who didn’t seem to have a care in the world. As their commanding officer, that was how she *should* act—anything else would only distress the troops unnecessarily. Claudia was the aide, which meant she had to be nervous for the both of them. Balance was the most important thing.

“By the way, ser,” said Claudia, “you really have a way with horses. That black one has a reputation for being difficult to handle.” The black horse was both larger and faster than the others. This should have made it the ideal warhorse, but it rarely actually made it to the battlefield. The beast had a wild temperament and usually broke its riders rather than the other way around.

Claudia could count the others she’d seen ride the black horse on one hand. Yet here it was now, apparently unconcerned about having Olivia on its back. Occasionally it whinnied like it wanted attention, and Claudia found herself questioning if this was really the same horse.

“Really?” Olivia said, leaning forward to stroke the horse’s mane. “Horses are so calm, though. I rode a unicorn once when I was little. That *really* fought back.”

“What?! You don’t mean a unicorn like the one that’s classified as a class two dangerous beast?”

“Um, I don’t know about class two-whatever, but it had a white horn in the middle of its head. And it didn’t taste very good.” Olivia held her index finger up to her forehead and began growling in an impression of a unicorn. There was no menace in the display whatsoever—on the contrary, she was so adorable it

hurt. Claudia couldn't think of anything to say to this confession. In what universe did children ride unicorns? Or adults, for that matter? The idea that she'd actually *eaten* a unicorn strained Claudia's credulity to its limits.

She's not teasing me, is she? thought Claudia. She stared into Olivia's eyes, but couldn't see any trace of a lie there. Olivia watched the awestruck Claudia from the corner of her eye and continued to pet the black horse's neck. Then, of all things, she sprung up to stand on its back.



“Look! Perfectly calm, just like I said!”

“H-Hey, get down!” cried Claudia, reaching out for Olivia, but the black horse stepped sideways out of her reach. *Don’t you touch my master*, it seemed to say. Olivia took advantage of this to do a flip in the air, plant her hands on the saddle and push up into a handstand. Claudia heard gasps of amazement from the other soldiers, oohing and aahing at the display.

“Your acrobatic skills are undeniably superb, ser, but please—not now!” reprimanded Claudia, her tone cold. “We’re in the middle of an important military operation, and you currently command three thousand soldiers. Remember your position, ser.”

“Okay, okay,” giggled Olivia. “Don’t be mad.” She poked her tongue out at Claudia.

She heard a pair of other soldiers laugh at each other. “That’s the captain for you,” one said. Claudia didn’t know what to make of how laid-back they were. Some of the soldiers, it seemed, had experience with Olivia.

“You know Lieutenant Olivia?” she asked.

“Yes, ser! We served under the captain at the liberation of Fort Lamburke,” came the cheerful reply. The speaker was a black-haired youth who’d called himself Gile.

“Oh? Did you really?”

“Yes, ser. We were all too terrified to move, though... But thanks to the captain’s training, we’ve all gotten stronger! We’ll be able to pull our weight this time,” said Gile, puffing out his chest. His friends all nodded. The lot of them brimmed with confidence.

How naive. You don’t just get stronger overnight—it takes years and years of never-ending hard work, thought Claudia. *They’ll learn soon enough...* She herself had only acquired her current skills through such grueling training. She knew all too well that there were no shortcuts on the path of a warrior. Even so, she decided not to douse their high spirits. It would only lower their morale on the eve of battle, and there was nothing to be gained from that.

“Hmmm. I don’t think you’ve gotten *that* much stronger, though. Honestly, you’re all still pretty pathetic, so try not to die, okay?”

Olivia’s words crashed over them like a bucket of ice water. Claudia put her face in her hands. *So much for morale*, she thought—but then she saw that the soldiers were actually smiling at each other. They didn’t look downtrodden at all, but rather like they were totally used to this.

Olivia hadn’t finished her onslaught.

“And Ashton, you’re the worst. You let your guard down for a second and you’re dead.”

“What—?! Hey, leave me alone! I tried my best!” yelled back the young man who had to be Ashton, sounding highly offended. Olivia only cackled back at him. Claudia found herself staring intently at the man. So this was the mysterious Ashton Olivia kept bringing up? She hadn’t dreamed that he’d be a mere recruit.

“Humans are suited for some things and not others—that’s just how it is. You’d be better as an advisor, Ashton. When we played chess back at the fort, your strategy was really solid!”

“You... You really think I’d be a good advisor?” Ashton sounded delighted.

Or, at least, he did until Olivia cackled again and added, “You still couldn’t even beat me once though.” The other soldiers around them were smiling good-naturedly. Ashton, lifted up only to be thrown back down again, wore an unreadable expression.

“Are you talking about your time defending Fort Lamburke?”

“Yeah, after they said they wanted me to train them,” said Olivia. “But we were kicked out of the fort almost straight away, so I didn’t get through to them much.”

I wonder if that’s really true, thought Claudia, unconvinced. From what she’d seen, the soldiers marched with good form, and the way their eyes surveyed their surroundings even as they chatted showed her that they weren’t letting their guard down. These were little more than basic points, but far more than Claudia expected from new recruits.

I did hear that they sent a bunch of new recruits with no battle experience—basically amateurs—to retake Lamburke, thought Claudia. Privately, she was impressed. The second lieutenant must be an excellent teacher too. Where in the world did they find her?

She heard Olivia's excited voice from beside her.

"Oh, I wonder what sort of reward I'll get from General Paul this time!"

III

The Plains of Ilys

The Southern Division of the Imperial Army, led by General Osvannes, arrived at the Plains of Ilys ahead of the Seventh Legion. At Paris's urging, they'd set up the commander's tent on high ground that commanded a view of the whole battlefield. Lieutenant General Georg's twenty thousand Steel Chargers were at the center. Major General Heid took the left flank, while Major General Minnitz's light infantry made up the core of the right flank, for a total of twenty-five thousand soldiers. They raised their banners emblazoned with the empire's crossed swords and waited for the Seventh Legion.

Paul and Lambert and their combined legions arrived the next day. They decided to put the twenty-five thousand of Lambert's First Legion troops in the center, judging that that was where the enemy's force was concentrated. Another twenty thousand, led by Major Generals Hermann and Osmund, would make up the left and right flanks. They set up the commander's tent slightly removed from the battlefield, guarded by another five thousand under Paul's command.

Both armies set up in a typical line formation. This allowed them to make best use of the wide-open plains while preventing the enemy from flanking or getting behind them. War horns rang out and the beating of drums echoed across the plains. The Steel Chargers surged forward.

The Battle of Ilys had begun.

“My lord, please! You’re too close to the front line! Retreat to the back!” cried Georg’s aide, Colonel Silas. But his desperate attempts to detain the other man were in vain—Georg made no effort to slow his horse’s charge, instead digging his heels in to spur it on. Looking back at Silas, who was struggling to match his master’s pace, he bellowed,

“Fool! You fear the pathetic wretches of the royal army? I’ll skewer every one of them that stands against the Steel Chargers!” He grinned fiercely, driving his lance through soldier after soldier as he plowed through the enemy ranks. Seeing their commander ride headfirst into the fray invigorated his soldiers.

It had been a few hours since the fighting began, and still the battle raged fierce in the center of the plains.

Georg’s Steel Chargers were all clad head to toe in heavy steel plate. Instead of standard-issue spears, they wielded lances—weapons whose weight made them ideal for thrusting strikes and well-suited mounted cavalry. When combined with the momentum of a galloping horse, they could pierce through even plate armor. The Steel Chargers made the most of their superior offensive and defensive capabilities to steer the battle in their favor.

“Weak! I never saw such weaklings! The Sixth Legion was bad, but it seems the Seventh is no different! The Swaran army put up more of a fight than this lot.” Georg impaled a royal soldier on the end of his lance before tossing them aside.

“My lord, the enemy is retreating!” Silas called out to him, pointing in the direction where, sure enough, one section of the royal army had fallen back. The others, following their example, began retreating as well.

“Heh heh heh... Well, Silas? What do you make of this?” Silas shrank from Georg’s glare. The general wouldn’t excuse a poorly thought-out response just because he was his aide.

“Um, yes, ser. The enemy likely intends to fall back and regroup.”

“And how should we respond?”

“This is a golden opportunity, ser. We can break through their center and strike at their commanders.” Georg, having gotten the answer he wanted, was

satisfied. Silas was right. The royal army was probably regrouping—but piecing a scattered formation back together was no easy task. If they seized this moment to take out the enemy command, all the glory would be his. He could almost taste the promotion to general.

Georg shook the blood from his lance and bellowed an order.

“Silas! Charge their center and attack the command tents!”

“Yes, ser!”

“Heed me, my glorious Steel Chargers! Ride with me, kill their commanders, and all your hearts’ desires will be yours!”

The Chargers’ fierce battle cry rang out in response. Silas gave the signal, and they bore down once more on the royal army. Though Lambert’s First Legion put up a desperate resistance, there was nothing they could do to stop the charge.

The royal army’s center began to split apart as the Chargers bore down on the command camp.

Neinhardt kept his composure as he watched the battle unfold. He shot off arrow after arrow as he ordered his shattered unit to fall back. Unfortunately, his targets’ plate armor prevented the arrows from being truly effective. He would have aimed for the horses, hoping to unseat their riders, but even the horses were clad in plate.

“I suppose those are the Steel Chargers we’ve been hearing about, my lord.”

“It seems so. They’re smashing us to pieces like a battering ram,” nodded Lambert with something like admiration in his voice. “I have to hand it to them; they’re fighting spectacularly.” Neinhardt, too, had been impressed by the Chargers’ maneuvering and their fighting spirit both. He genuinely hadn’t imagined that the First Legion, which prided itself on its fortitude, could be pushed back so easily. He saw now how Lieutenant General Sara and the Sixth Legion had been defeated.

“Still, we can’t just sit here marveling at them, ser. What’s our next move? Do

we add our reserve forces?” asked Neinhardt. He looked back to where the banner of the Seventh Legion fluttered high above the command camp. Lambert snorted.

“It’s unbecoming, asking a question you already know the answer to. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you plotting something.”

“Begging your pardon, ser,” said Neinhardt. He raised a hand, and a unit of archers who’d been awaiting his signal stepped forward. Their arrowheads glistened with oil. Other soldiers came up beside them with torches, and set the arrowheads ablaze.

Neinhardt watched the flames spread out along the line of archers, then brought his hand down and shouted, “Shoot!”

The flaming arrows arced through the air above them before raining down on the Steel Chargers. They weren’t trying to hit the riders themselves, but to drive the horses into a terrified frenzy. Animals feared fire. Neinhardt heard the horses whinnying and bucking, and knew his plan had worked.

“Whoa, there!”

The Chargers desperately tried to calm their steeds, but one after another they were thrown to the ground, where the royal army’s heavy infantry was waiting for them. The Chargers tried to fight back, but weighed down by their armor, they struggled even to stand. The royal soldiers cut them down.

“That should keep the enemy at bay for now,” muttered Neinhardt to Lambert as they surveyed the battlefield.

“It should, but we can’t let our guard down yet. We’ve got them on the defensive, but they’re not going to stay that way.”

The pair nodded to each other without another word.

The battle fell into a pattern of advance and retreat, neither side able to break the stalemate. The fighting out on the flanks never grew as hot as in the center, and as time went on it fell into a lull. As the light of dusk painted the skies above the Plains of Ilys the color of blood, both sides sounded their horns to signal their soldiers to fall back. The first day of fighting was over.

The imperial army had lost around two thousand soldiers; the royal army three thousand. Though the fighting on the flanks had been evenly matched, the battle at the center had made all the difference.

The Royal Army Commanders Camp

Otto and his staff stayed up late into the night trying to piece together all the reports that had come in from the battlefield. The Steel Chargers' devastating assault stood out from the rest, a visceral display of the strength of the imperial army.

"You're working late," said Paul, slipping into the tent. Otto's staff leapt to their feet to offer him a hasty salute.

"My lord, you should be resting," said Otto, concern in his voice, but Paul only waved him off, sitting down in the chair one of the staff drew out for him.

"Don't worry about me. You know I never sleep well on the battlefield. Once my blood's up, it doesn't settle 'til the fighting's done—even at this age." His gaze was razor-sharp, and for a moment Otto saw once again the face of the man they'd called the god of the battlefield. The years had softened his outline, but the essence never changed.

"Anyway, what are our losses?" asked Paul, and Otto pushed aside his nostalgia to summarize the reports.

"Even Lambert the Bold couldn't hold them back... The Steel Chargers have lived up to their reputation," said Paul when he was done.

"Yes, my lord. The First Legion used flaming arrows to spook the horses and break the charge, but it was a close call. And..." Otto trailed off, looking up at the sky. The moon had bathed the plains in silver light, but now it was covered by dark clouds.

"We're in for bad weather."

"So it seems. Flaming arrows won't be nearly as effective in the rain. The First Legion will be at a serious disadvantage."

“If I know Lambert, he’ll turn it around somehow. When is the detached force due to arrive?”

“If everything went as it should, it’s possible they’re already in position,” said Otto. “But...”

Olivia and the others had orders to light a beacon after completing their surprise attack. The combined army was ready to strike the moment they received the signal.

“I see,” Paul said under his breath. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Purple smoke coiled up into the air above them.

Only a few hours remained until dawn.

The Second Day of the Battle, Weather Overcast

Lambert’s First Legion had learned from their defeat the previous day, and were ready with flaming arrows. They took a defensive formation to prepare for the Chargers’ onslaught. The Chargers themselves, meanwhile, had come up with no effective tactical measures against the flaming arrows, and put up a lackluster performance. The day’s fighting ended in a series of scattered skirmishes without any of the spectacular clashes of the first day. Most of the action happened instead on the wings.

The right flank of the royal army was led by Major General Hermann Hack. He was of common birth, but after drawing Paul’s notice, he’d worked his way up to his current rank. He was a rare example of a commander who could control a battlefield from a defensive position.

“Ser, the enemy cavalry has penetrated our formation!” cried his aide, Captain Louis. Five hundred soldiers on horseback thundered through the middle of the fierce battle.

“Stand fast! They’re in a crescent formation to try and overwhelm our line of defense. Tell your archers to spread out on our flanks and shoot all together.” Hermann’s commanding officers immediately relayed his orders to their archers. The archers seemed to move as one as they drew their bows and let

the arrows fly, whistling through the air and raining down on the enemy cavalry. Their horses reared up, throwing their riders to the ground. But it wasn't enough to stop the charge. They surged forward as though the whips of hell lashed at them from behind.

A panicked archer cried out, "Th-They're not stopping! They're on us!"

"Hold fast, and keep shooting!" bellowed the commanding officer, and the archers let off another wave of arrows, then another. As each came down, the number of fallen soldiers grew until at last more than half lay dead. In response to some signal, the remaining riders drew their horses around and began a messy retreat.

"The enemy is falling back—they're in disarray, ser! Should we press our advantage?" demanded Louis. Hermann stroked his chin.

"Yes... I suppose not giving chase now would arouse our enemy's suspicions..."

Really, Hermann himself should have been the one proposing the pursuit, not Louis. He couldn't afford to delay his decision any longer.

"What are you talking about, ser?!"

"No, sorry. That's for me to worry about. Take four hundred riders and pursue the enemy cavalry. But make sure you know when to turn back. Don't follow them too far."

"Yes, ser!" said Louis, and immediately sent the order to the commanding officers. Hermann kept one eye on him as he pondered their strategy. Only a select few knew of Olivia's pivotal role in it all. It had been kept that way to remove any chance of the enemy learning of the planned surprise attack.

The basic battle plan dictated that they were to avoid aggressive military action until the surprise attack had been carried out. Each commanding officer had strict orders not to make any spur-of-the-moment decisions. Paul wanted them to keep casualties to a minimum in preparation for the attack on Fort Caspar.

On the other hand, staying too passive would only arouse suspicion. Hermann had to parry the enemy's attacks, while also seeming to hold nothing back—all

the while making sure neither his enemies nor his allies sensed anything amiss. *This is harder than I imagined*, thought Hermann, running his fingers through his thinning hair with a sigh.

Everyone involved has faith in General Paul, so I'm sure it'll work. But I don't like that we've put all our fates in the hands of a fifteen-year-old girl. The looks on the enemies' faces if they ever learned the truth... He remembered the silver-haired girl he'd passed in the corridor at Galia Fortress. Then, he gave Louis his next orders.

Imperial Command on the Right Wing

"You've got some nerve showing your face here, you impudent wretch!" screamed Major General Minnitz el Stox, spittle flying from his mouth. He was dressed in sumptuous garb that had no place on a battlefield. Minnitz hailed from a high-ranking noble family, and his vanity was the stuff of legends. He was also as cowardly as he was self-important, and never made a move unless he held a clear advantage. He berated his inferiors for their mistakes while taking the credit for any successes himself. He had no business commanding an army, but the few drops of imperial blood his family claimed had landed him the position of the supreme commander of the imperial army's right flank.

"My lord, I think he understands. The man has lost a great number of his troops. He is traumatized," said Minnitz's aide, Major Lyoness. He was trying to placate Minnitz, who pressed the prostrate man's head into the dirt with the heel of his boot. The man had led a spectacular failure of an attempt to break the enemy's line. He'd lost around seven in ten of his men before he came crawling back on his belly. It seemed cruel, though, to place all the blame on him. Minnitz's plan to break the enemy line with a mere five hundred cavalry had been a risky gamble from the start.

"Shut up, shut *up*! Do you have any idea how cross my father will be if we fail? Get back on your horses and charge them!"

"M-My lord! You can't just throw more soldiers at the enemy without a plan! I'd have thought this failure would have taught you that."

"Cease your jabbering! General Georg is floundering out there, and that

means this is our chance for glory! Now go and charge them, I say! That's an order!"

Minnitz ran his fingers through his unkempt hair, muttering, "Charge them, charge them..." under his breath like a madman. There was no reasoning with Minnitz when he got like this, but Osvannes had personally asked Lyoness to handle the man, so he had to do *something*. He stifled a sigh, then said, "How about this, my lord? We break three thousand riders into three separate companies. The first company will charge at the center of the enemy's right flank, just like last time."

Lyoness unfolded their battle map on the table, and took out another three pieces. He placed one at the center of the line representing the enemy wing.

"That's what I'm ordering you to do!" snapped Minnitz. *Well, at least he's listening*, thought Lyoness with faint amusement.

"Yes, my lord. The next part is a little different, though. Given they repelled our last attack, the enemy will likely let their guard down when they see us trying the same thing again." He placed the other two pieces down at either end of the enemy line. "We use their confidence to our advantage, and penetrate their line with the other two companies."

"So the first team is a decoy—distracting them while the other two charge in. We end up attacking them in three places at once?"

"Adroit as always, my lord. But that isn't all. No, our true aim is what comes next." Lyoness smiled and began to explain slowly and clearly, so that Minnitz would understand.

"Enemy riders coming towards us, ser," said Louis.

Really? Again? thought Hermann, before reaching for his spyglass.

"Hmmm, there's more of them this time... Around a thousand, by my reckoning. Looks like they're trying to break our line with that crescent formation again."

"Yes, ser. They're unexpectedly persistent," said Louis, his tone dismissive.

“Don’t get comfortable,” Hermann reprimanded him. On the battlefield, you never knew where death might be waiting. He ordered Louis to tell the archers to be ready to meet the attackers.

“Here they come!”

The riders plowed into them, spears raised. The maneuver was identical to the last attack. There didn’t seem to be anything else to it. Hermann felt a twinge of unease as he confirmed that the riders were within bowshot, then gave the order to shoot. A cloud of arrows rained down like shooting stars. Riders began to drop.

“Perhaps I worried over nothing...”

“What was that, ser?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Hermann handed command over to Louis, and went back to his tent to rest. But before ten minutes had passed, Louis came rushing in, his face pale.

“S-Ser—!”

“What happened?”

“More riders appeared! They’re charging us, trying to break the line!”

Hermann hastened back outside and saw his soldiers in disarray. Their formation had been penetrated by the enemy.

“They were plotting something after all,” Hermann gritted out through clenched teeth. “And I played right into their hands.” The first riders had been a distraction, creating a chink in their defenses for the other riders to exploit.

“Should I give the order to fall back and regroup?” said Louis, his face twitching.

Hermann paused, then said, “Tell the archers to retreat. Establish a shield wall with spears behind, ready to attack through the gaps.”

“Yes, ser, at once!”

Hermann pointed his spyglass towards the battle. The enemy’s main force was approaching in an arrowhead formation.

Ah, the whole operation was the decoy, he thought. They sow chaos, then use it to break us with the main force. I underestimated them. He laughed at his own folly, and Louis looked at him in concern.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going mad,” Hermann reassured him. “This whole attack was meant to distract us. Their main force is moving towards us now.”

“No!” Louis gasped, reaching for his spyglass, before making a noise of frustration. “You’re right... Forgive me, ser. You left me in command, and I failed.”

“As did I. The enemy commander played this very well, right down to the timing. But I suspect this is the extent of their plan. Which leaves us only one course of action.”

“It does, ser?”

Hermann only let out a bark of laughter in response.

“Behold! The royal army is panicking! My plan is a glorious success!” cried Minnitz with a high laugh.

“There was never any doubt, my lord. Truly, ingenuity such as yours comes once in a generation.”

“The royal army’s luck ran out the moment they came up against you, my lord.”

Minnitz hopped up and down with glee, and his advisors took their chance to layer on the flattery. They paid no attention to the officers who watched them, stone-faced.

“I’ll be taking full command from here on out! Once the enemy line breaks, have the main force advance, and bring us back the commanders’ heads!”

“My... My lord?!” said Lyoness, startled. “Standard tactics would be to divide and conquer. What you suggest might be possible for the Steel Chargers, but we simply don’t have the forces. Will you not reconsider?”

“Silence! This is our chance for glory!” Minnitz slammed his fist on the table.

“Please, my lord—!”

“That’s quite enough, Major Lyoness,” cut in one of the advisors. “His lordship has given you an order. Continuing to dispute it would be tantamount to treason, don’t you agree?” At the threat, the other officers turned red with rage and looked ready to argue back, but Lyoness raised a hand to stop them.

“Of course,” he said shortly.

“Good, good. We’re all on the same page,” said Minnitz with a nod, his expression smug. He repeated his order to attack the enemy command.

An hour had passed since the main force under Minnitz’s command began its attempt to penetrate the enemy’s right flank. While his allies in the vanguard fought bravely around him, Lyoness found himself wracked with doubt.

This isn’t right. The enemy moved just as I expected, so even if we can’t get to their commanders, we should whittle down their force significantly. But it’s all going too well. If the royal army were just weak, then this worry will be for nothing, but after yesterday, I can’t believe that. I need more information.

Lyoness raised his sword to knock aside an incoming arrow, then turned to the advisor named Mars.

“I’m leaving command of the vanguard with you. I have something I need to check,” he announced.

“Yes, ser,” said Mars, saluting, but Lyoness was already swinging his horse around to gallop away.

“A hundred riders, with me!”

“Yes, ser!” the soldiers chorused back. Lyoness dug his boots into his stirrups, and galloped up to high ground.

“It... It can’t be...” What Lyoness saw from the top of the rise left him speechless. The enemy had almost totally surrounded their troops.

“What’s going on, Major?” asked a bewildered soldier. Wishing someone would explain that to him, Lyoness tried desperately to think it through. He soon realized there was only one possibility.

The enemy must have seen through our plan and faked the broken formation... He chuckled despairingly. *Best-laid plans, as they say...*

After all their attempts to outfox each other, his side had lost. All they could do now was to try and minimize the damage. Every second he delayed, the enemy's net grew tighter around them.

"Get back to the command tent! Make haste before it's too late!"

"Yes, ser!"

Imperial Command on the Right Wing

Lyonesse rode back to the command tent as hard as he could. He found Minnitz there laughing and drinking from a glass brimming with amber-colored wine.

"My lord! We are in the middle of a battle!"

Minnitz looked up with mild surprise. "Oh, Lyonesse. We're having a drink to celebrate our imminent victory. Do you want one?"

"Victory?! The enemy has us surrounded! We need to retreat, immediately!"

"You want me to order a retreat? Are you drunk on something yourself? What you see out there is clearly the result of our plan. The enemy has been broken, and they are trying to flee."

"The chaos is an act, my lord! We've fallen right into their trap!"

Just then, a soldier came running in, before falling to his knees. Seeing him, Lyonesse knew that the situation had grown worse still.

"Stop that racket! Are you an imperial soldier or not? Pull yourself together!"

"Forgive me, my lord. I... I..."

"What? Out with it!"

"Yes, my lord. We... The royal army... They have us surrounded! It's only a matter of time before they push through to the command tents."

"That rubbish again? Watch your tongue, or I'll have your—!" An arrow came careening past Minnitz's cheek. From outside, they could hear faint shouting

and screaming. Lyoness knew that they were out of time. Minnitz could only stare stupidly around, but little by little he seemed to piece together what was happening. He started to shake, and a wet patch grew out around his legs. The advisors fell over each other, crying out wordlessly.

“My lord! Get ahold of yourself!”

“What... What’s the meaning of this, Lyoness?! My army was winning! Why are there enemy arrows flying through my tent?!”

“I told you! The enemy has us surrounded. We are in immediate danger, and must make haste to escape.”

“Y-You... You d-d-did this!!!” shrieked Minnitz, pointing an indignant finger at his aide.

“If you want to scold me, my lord, I’ll be at your disposal later,” said Lyoness. He turned to the advisors. “Escort his lordship away from here. Now! I will hold them off for as long as I can to give you time to escape.”

The two advisors only nodded at him, shaking. They forced the ranting Minnitz onto a horse, then mounted up themselves and galloped away with him sandwiched between them.

Lyoness watched them go, before mounting his horse and drawing his sword.

“Major.” Only fifty of his riders remained, but they were there beside him. “We’re with you, ser.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lyoness, and together, they threw themselves into the oncoming wave of enemies.

“They took the bait, my lord.”

“Yes, very good.”

The enemy’s left flank was already halfway surrounded, and their archers were mowing them down. Meanwhile, the infantry attacked them with spears.

“Do we close in on them?” asked Louis. Hermann shook his head.

“Cutting off their escape route entirely would be foolish. Don’t underestimate

the damage cornered soldiers with nothing to lose can do.”

“Yes, ser.”

What an odd battle, Hermann mused. The original plan to pull the wool over our eyes was masterful, but then it devolved into mere brute force. I thought they'd read our strategy and move accordingly, but instead, it ended in this mess. I wonder what they were thinking...

The second day of battle ended in the royal army's favor, crowned by Hermann's success.

They had lost two thousand soldiers. The imperial army had lost five thousand.

And still Olivia's force did not appear.

The Third Day, Cloudy

The third day continued with a series of small skirmishes, but neither army was able to land a decisive victory against the other. The right flank of the imperial army had apparently lost the stomach for battle, instead reserving their strength exclusively for defense. Word had it that Major General Minnitz was cowering in a corner of his command tent.

Around dawn of the fourth day, dark clouds covered the sky, and at last, rain began to fall.

“Looks like the heavens are on our side!” said Georg gleefully. Silas looked at him with relief.

“We are ready to move out on your orders, my lord!” he said. The Steel Chargers stood before them, rank and file. All were spoiling for battle. Morale was high, and Georg was sure they'd have no trouble penetrating the enemy defense. Thanks to the rain, their biggest problem—the flaming arrows—was no more.

Georg leapt up into the saddle, and raised his lance.

“Hear me, my glorious Steel Chargers! Today, we stab the enemy right in the heart and take their command! Cut down all who stand before you! Leave none alive!”

“Yes, my lord!” came the resounding response. The Steel Chargers followed behind Georg like a raging typhoon as they bore down on the royal army.

“My lord—!” Neinhardt started to call out, looking up at the sky, but Lambert cut him off.

“I know. They won’t pass up a chance like this. Get into a crane wing formation to meet their attack,” he said. Lambert had clearly seen this coming and planned accordingly. Neinhardt himself had run through all kinds of formations in preparation, but the crane wing formation hadn’t occurred to him.

“You want to stretch the center thin...” he said slowly. “To lure the enemy into attacking there?”

“Precisely,” said Lambert. “They want to force their way through the center and take out our command. You must have worked that much out?”

“Yes. After seeing their attack on the first day, I thought that might be the case. Though if it is, it’s rather heavy-handed.” Neinhardt looked away from Lambert to the enemy’s central force.

“Yes, but I bet he thinks with the penetrative power of the Steel Chargers, it might just work. He’s like a wild beast. That’s exactly why they won’t be able to resist such delicious bait.”

“You’re very confident, my lord.”

“I am indeed! In their place I have no doubt I couldn’t resist sinking my teeth into a chance like this. Even if I knew it was a trap,” said Lambert, with a hearty laugh. Neinhardt shrugged helplessly, then ordered that the formation changes be conveyed to the commanding officers.

I see his point... thought Neinhardt with a wry smile. *But I wonder if he realizes he’s calling himself a wild beast?* He then proceeded to propose an addition to Lambert’s strategy. When he’d finished explaining it, Lambert’s face

scrunched up like he'd tasted something unpleasant.

"Behind that pretty face you've got quite a nasty streak, Neinhardt... I'm honestly a little ashamed to think I was pleased to have you on my side."

"You honor me. Coming from you, my lord, that is the highest praise."

"And thick-skinned to boot. Well, I expect nothing less from the aide to the commander of the First Legion," said Lambert sarcastically. Neinhardt put a hand to his breast in a salute.

"Truly, my lord, you are far too kind. I shall go and attend to the preparations immediately."

As he led a team of soldiers off to the supply tents, he heard Lambert heave a massive sigh from behind him.

As all this was happening, Olivia and Claudia lay pressed flat on their stomachs in a copse of trees on a hill behind the imperial army, surveying the battlefield through their spyglasses.

"As I suspected, several days have passed since the fighting commenced. I must beg your forgiveness, Lieutenant." Claudia hadn't meant to grip the spyglass so tightly, but now it creaked in her fist. Olivia looked over at her, puzzled.

"Don't apologize for that. It's not your fault, Claudia," she said. They would have arrived at the Plains of Ilys right on schedule, if it hadn't been for the incident at the Seams River just after they'd left the Forest of Arc. The rain from a few days earlier had caused the river to break its banks, making it impossible for them to cross.

"I know that, ser. It's just... No, it's not important right now. It looks to me like our forces are struggling to hold off the imperial army."

"Yeah. The cavalry troops at the center of the imperial army are at the heart of the fighting. Their movements are really polished. They must have trained a lot," said Olivia, clapping her hands in admiration.

"We don't have time to appraise their strategy!" Claudia snapped without

thinking. “There’s not a moment to lose. We need to launch the surprise attack right now!” She tried to stand up to go and prepare, but Olivia grabbed her arm and forced her back down. Claudia was powerless against the other girl’s strength, and crashed face first into the ground.

“Wh-What was that for?!” she spluttered, but Olivia only laughed.

“Oh no, your face is all muddy!” she said, all innocence.

“Only because you grabbed me, ser!”

“Ah, yeah. Anyway, it’s too soon to make a move. Let’s see how it goes for a bit, okay?”

“Too soon? Our forces are being overwhelmed!” Claudia glared at Olivia, rubbing at the mud on her nose. *“See how it goes?” How can she be so relaxed?*

“You never rush into a fight, Claudia. It throws off your movements,” replied Olivia, unperturbed. “Besides, take another look at the center. This spyglass is so handy!” She held hers out to Claudia, who took it and begrudgingly looked through. She wasn’t convinced, but she had to agree that it would be catastrophic if the surprise attack failed because they’d been too hasty.

After watching for a while, she said, “I don’t see anything different, ser. Our forces have assumed a crane wing formation in response to the enemy’s cavalry charge.”

“Mm. Doesn’t anything look weird to you?”

“Weird? I don’t know what you mean, ser,” said Claudia, irritated and wishing Olivia would just get to the point.

“Okay, so like, you saw how the imperial cavalry obviously have the superior penetration power, right? But then why are our forces risking thinning out their center with a crane formation? Usually, you’d pick a formation that puts more of your forces in the center, so the enemy can’t get through as easily.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true...” said Claudia. The crane wing formation was used to surround and destroy your enemy, leaving the center vulnerable to attack. Olivia was right—the enemy’s penetrative power was no laughing matter. If the center broke before the left and right flanks could close around them, it would

all be over.

“So, it’s weird, right? But seeing as they still went with the crane formation, I feel like it’s on purpose—like they’re setting a trap.”

“A trap... What sort of trap?” asked Claudia. Olivia scratched her cheek, frowning.

“Hmmm. I can’t tell. But if they pull it off, it’ll really throw the enemy. Those guys are the best the empire’s got. So I think we should wait and launch our surprise attack at the same time. That’ll throw the imperial army off even more and make it more likely to work. Two birds, one stone, you know?”

Claudia was stunned into silence. Olivia had made her point. She yawned widely, then stood up and brushed off the mud that covered her. Claudia watched her, feeling furious at herself for being so thoughtless.

I was so caught up in what was right in front of me I lost sight of the big picture, she realized. I’ve been so caught up worrying about the mission, I blinded myself to the plan outside of this mission. She slapped her cheeks a few times to pick herself up, then said to Olivia, “Lieutenant Olivia, I suggest we station a few soldiers here so that the moment the trap is sprung, we know. We have to strike before the enemy can get their bearings.”

“Uh, right... Yeah. Sorry, I was just confused when you slapped yourself. I’ll leave that to you then, okay?”

“Yes, ser!” Claudia saluted, and Olivia returned the salute with an awkward smile. Tilting her head this way and that like something had confused her, she went back to where their riders were hiding.

Under a nexus of competing interests, the Battle of Ilys approached its conclusion.

Georg grinned through the pouring rain as he charged down his enemies.

“My lord, please don’t just rush in! There’s something off about the enemy!” Silas called to him. He galloped along behind Georg, who knocked aside an incoming spear before smashing in the face of the soldier who’d thrust it with his lance. He pulled his horse up, wiping away brain matter and glaring at Silas.

“Something off? What’s that supposed to mean? Speak plainly, man!”

“Their attacks have been far too passive. Compared to the first day of the battle, it’s like night and day. The only explanation is that they’re planning some kind of trap,” Silas explained, but Georg snorted.

“And your point is?” he said.

“My lord? I don’t... It’s a trap, so...”

“If there’s a trap, we’ll rip our way free. Simple as that, no? Or are you suggesting that the glorious Steel Chargers can be brought down by whatever pathetic trick the royal army has cobbled together?” Georg held the point of his bloodstained lance between Silas’ eyes, who felt the blood drain from his face.

“N-No, my lord! I would never!” he replied.

“I thought not! So stop yapping and focus on taking out their command. You’ll be silent until I give you leave to speak.” Georg charged off again at the enemy’s center without waiting for Silas to reply. There wasn’t time to listen to his aide’s mewling nonsense. His moment of glory was close at hand.

As the Steel Chargers drew closer, Neinhardt returned his spyglass to his belt.

“Everything is proceeding as you said it would, my lord.”

“Of course it is. Who could resist such a tasty morsel dangled right in front of their eyes? ’Tis the tragic nature of beasts.” Neinhardt couldn’t help but let out a snort of laughter at the wistful note in Lambert’s voice.

“What? Was something amusing?” said Lambert, perplexed. *Where do I begin?* Neinhardt thought, but couldn’t say that. He shook his head.

“It’s nothing, my lord. Now that the enemy has taken the bait, I think it’s about time to get started. I await your command, ser.”

“Yes, you may begin,” said Lambert. Neinhardt turned and raised his hand to a soldier carrying a longbow—the best archer in the First Legion. The archer nocked a flaming arrow to his bow, drew it back, then released it up into the sky. It flew in a wide arc, coming down to lodge deep in the ground right into the path of the oncoming Steel Chargers. Around where the arrow struck, the

ground around it erupted in flames.



Fire. That was their plan.

Neinhardt had gone out before the fighting commenced and laid straw soaked in oil around the spot they would lure the enemy to. The Steel Chargers now unwittingly found themselves in the middle of a sudden inferno. The smell of scorched flesh drifted across the field. It was like a scene out of hell.

Meanwhile, Olivia and Claudia were tucking into Ashton's homemade mustard sandwiches with relish. Claudia looked overcome by emotion, nodding happily at the bread. Olivia was kicking her feet in delight, exclaiming like she always did. "This is so good!" she cried happily. No sooner had the words left her lips that their lookout came dashing in.

"The central battlefield is on fire, ser! I think the trap has been sprung!"

"Okay, good," said Olivia. "Go tell everyone we're leaving right away."

"Yes, ser!" The soldier ran out again.

"Just like you said, Lieutenant," said Claudia in amazement. "I can't believe they decided to use fire in this rain..."

"It's a bold move, huh? I wonder who came up with it? Thanks to them, the enemy commanders should be totally focused on the center. Makes our job easier," said Olivia, stuffing the rest of her sandwich into her mouth. She yawned again as she left the tent. It was still raining outside.

No matter how much blood is spilt, this rain will wash it clean, she thought, smiling slightly. She met the eyes of a few other soldiers, but they looked away from her as though afraid. She cocked her head, wondering what they were scared of, then heard Claudia's voice from behind her: "Wait for me, please!"

Imperial Command

Paris lowered his spyglass with a sigh, then turned to Osvannes.

"My lord, the enemy is using fire against the Steel Chargers. They've fallen into disarray."

“What’s that?! Fire? In this weather?”

“They probably covered the ground with oil-soaked straw. The Steel Chargers took the bait, hook, line, and sinker,” Paris replied to Osvannes’ consternation. He let out an involuntary groan. He knew the flaming arrows had thrown Georg badly. He’d probably thought the rain was their chance for victory. It had been a heavy-handed strategy, but Osvannes had decided to let him do as he pleased.

“How could Georg not have realized it was a trap?” Osvannes wondered.

“My lord... I can’t say for sure, but it’s possible General Georg realized it was a trap and went in anyway.”

“What?! Why would he do that?” Osvannes demanded, unable to make sense of Paris’s words. Georg wasn’t that much of a fool.

Paris sighed as he replied. “He may have deemed any trap planned by the royal army as unworthy of his concern.” That, thought Osvannes, was plausible. Georg’s faith in his Steel Chargers was absolutely unshakable, and his record in battle only gave it weight. Osvannes could easily imagine him coming to such a conclusion.

“Shall I order them to retreat for today, my lord?” said Paris, after a moment.

“Yes. If our orders can even make it through the mess out there...”

Just then, a pale-faced soldier came barging in.

“What are you doing in here?”

“My... My lord! The enemy is behind us! They’re approaching the command tents, and fast!”

A few minutes earlier, Olivia was galloping along on her black horse.

“Lieutenant Olivia, the enemy has spotted us!” called out Claudia from beside her. Where she was looking, the enemy command’s rear guard was scrambling into position.

“So they have. Too late, though,” said Olivia, smiling and drawing her sword. She urged the black horse forwards, lopping an enemy soldier’s head off as she passed. With masterful control of her horse, she went through cutting down

soldier after soldier. With each kill, black mist floated up from her ebony blade.

Everyone in the detached force seeing her in battle now for the first time were struck dumb by the gruesome massacre. Claudia was no exception. She'd read the reports, so she'd known what to expect, but seeing the terrifying extent of Olivia's power with her own eyes was different. Her heart pounded in her chest. But the enemy was approaching, so she pulled herself together and set about cutting down the soldiers that came at her, moving towards Olivia.

"Lieutenant Olivia! You can't just charge the enemy on your own!"

"Right, sorry! They were just wide open," laughed Olivia, poking her tongue out. Another of their soldiers rode over.

"Another group of enemy troops are approaching, ser!" he said, pointing to where around two thousand infantry soldiers were moving to flank them. Claudia made a split-second decision.

"Lieutenant, make haste to the enemy command tent. I'll keep this lot occupied!" she told Olivia.

"Are you sure?"

"Leave it to me, ser. I'll see you at the command tent." Claudia turned to their soldiers. "Third and Fourth Companies, with me!"

"Yes, ser!"

Claudia and a thousand of their soldiers charged off towards the enemy troops. Olivia watched her go, then announced breezily to the others, "Right, we can't let Claudia outshine us. Let's get going! Oh wait—we should kill these guys first." It wasn't exactly a rousing speech, but the soldiers looked emboldened by Olivia's words. They got back to swinging their swords, and blood sprayed up into the air like snow.

"Hey," muttered an imperial soldier watching them. "Isn't that the monster girl those guys who went crazy were talking about? Look, she's even got a black sword." The impact of these words rippled through the other imperial soldiers, first as shock, and then terror.

Their commanding officer, Major Brand, roared, "Keep it together! You call

yourself imperial soldiers, scared of one little girl? I'll take her down myself!"

He ran at Olivia, spinning his spear over his head before throwing it at her face, but she brushed it aside, and the next thing anyone knew, only Brand's legs were left on his horse, entrails dangling out from his severed lower half. Screams of terror rose up from the soldiers, and like a dam giving way they rushed to escape. Olivia's forces were ready for them, cutting, impaling, and crushing the fleeing soldiers under their horses' hooves. Olivia watched this patiently, then looked over to where the crossed swords banner fluttered above the commander's tent.

"Humans really are cruel and violent creatures, Z," she murmured.

Imperial Command

The surprise attack came from behind without warning.

While he was shaken by this unforeseen turn, Osvannes didn't let it show as he gave Paris instructions to get them more information.

That was how they'd learned of the monster girl's presence. They also heard of the gruesome way she'd killed the rear guard's commanding officer.

"My lord," said Paris, looking anguished. "You don't think..."

"Oh, I do. This has got to be the same girl that killed Samuel. We've been caught totally off guard."

"Forgive me, my lord. I should have known of this sooner," said Paris, bowing his head. Osvannes waved him off. The blame was just as much his own for not prioritizing intelligence. He now suspected he hadn't taken the story of the monster girl entirely seriously—it just sounded too much like nonsense. Even ignoring how she'd killed Samuel... Anyway, there was no call for Paris to feel he was solely responsible.

"Don't get hung up on it. They might call her a monster, but—" Osvannes was cut off when another soldier ran up to them, screaming. Paris raised his eyebrows, glaring daggers at the soldier.

“What do you want now?” he demanded.

“Th-Th-The monster!!!” shrieked the soldier, then fell silent. Little wonder, given the ebony-black blade protruding from his chest. His eyes rolled back into his head, and blood bubbled past his lips as the sword slowly retracted. Finally, he crumpled heavily to the ground. Behind him stood a girl with silver hair, covered head to toe in scarlet.

“Who the hell are you?!” bellowed Paris, even though it was abundantly obvious—she was the enemy. Osvannes supposed Paris just couldn’t stop himself asking.

“Uh, I’m Olivia. Now, could you tell me who the supreme commander is? Oh, and don’t try playing hide-and-seek with me. I know they’re here somewhere,” said Olivia, resting her sword on her shoulder. She cast a casual look around them. Four of his personal guard immediately sprang forwards to engage her, raising their swords as one. Olivia twirled like a dancer, and her sword flashed. The four guards froze in place, their swords still raised. That only lasted a second, though. The next moment, their torsos slid sideways, then toppled to the ground, leaving only their legs behind. Their innards spilled out along with an eruption of blood. The stink of it filled the room. It was like a bad dream, thought Osvannes, unable to do anything but gape.

Olivia went and inspected the face of each of the guards, then tilted her head and frowned.

“These aren’t the right humans... They don’t look very important. Oh!” she said, smiling. “The supreme commander is probably old, like General Paul!” She looked at Osvannes.

“My lord, get out of here, now! I can still scarcely believe it, but she’s a monster, no mistake. I won’t be able to buy you much time,” said Paris, pulling out twin daggers. He dived at Olivia, daggers crossed and pointed at her throat.

“Paris...” said Osvannes, as his aide’s head came rolling back to him. “I’m so sorry. But I can’t do that.” He reached out, and closed Paris’s eyes. He rose slowly, standing straight and tall before Olivia.

“I am Osvannes von Glarwein, Supreme Commander of the Southern Division of the Imperial Army!”

Royal Command

“My lord, the First Legion’s fire trap has pushed the enemy back.”

“I confess I was a bit taken aback when they spread out in that crane wing formation... I never imagined they were scheming up such devilry,” said Paul.

The Steel Chargers had tried to flee from the flames, only to be met by pikes blocking off their escape. They had to choose between burning alive, or impaling themselves on the enemy pikes. At that point, the left and right flanks had already closed around them, and were steadily closing in.

Paul and Otto watched from afar through their spyglasses.

“Looks like my worry over the rain was all for nothing,” said Otto.

“Didn’t I say Lambert would pull through somehow? Fire, though... That isn’t like him,” said Paul thoughtfully, lowering his spyglass and frowning. Otto had worked out who was behind the fire plan, but he didn’t say it. He was focused on what had become of the detached force, and he knew Paul felt the same.

“The detached force is taking their time.”

“My lord, you don’t think...you don’t think something happened to them on the way?”

The battle was already on its fourth day, and Otto thought it disadvantageous to wait any longer. The royal army had the upper hand for now, but that would only hold so long as no reinforcements came from Kier Fortress. If they couldn’t rely on the detached force, now was the time to launch an all-out assault.

“My lord—” He started to propose this to Paul, but the other man shook his head. The gesture said he already knew what Otto was going to say.

“I haven’t known you for twenty years for nothing. I know what’s on your mind.”

“Well, then.”

“I know this is a good opportunity. But the enemy commander is no fool.

When he realizes his disadvantage, he'll likely pull his forces back to Fort Caspar, and send for reinforcements in the meantime. And you know what happens then." Fixed by Paul's piercing gaze, Otto frowned but didn't argue. A smile flitted across Paul's face, and he clapped Otto comfortingly on the shoulder.

"I know they're late, but this is Lieutenant Olivia we're talking about. It'll work out. Besides, it's your plan, Otto! As a superior officer, you just have to trust those under you."

Otto let this sink in for a moment, then said, "Yes, my lord."

"Damn you, girl! Are you even human?!" gasped Osvannes, breathing hard. Olivia giggled.

"You're funny. Obviously, I'm human."

Osvannes swung at her again and again with what should have been fatal blows, but Olivia knocked each aside easily with her ebony blade. The tingling in his hands grew worse with every blow. He knew now that he was totally outmatched, and he couldn't shake the sense that death was lurking just behind him.

"Can we wrap this up soon?"

"I don't... I don't suppose if I said no, you'd just put your sword away?" He didn't imagine she would, of course. It was only a joke. But Olivia put her finger to her cheek, like she was considering it. Osvannes found himself darkly amused at how offhand she was about his life.

"Huh... You know, I didn't think about what'd happen if you said no. Sorry, I didn't use the right words. Human language is hard!" said Olivia, grinning. "Let's try that again. I'm going to kill you now!" She spun her sword. Osvannes thought, as he raised his own sword, that he'd seen the black mist that clung to the blade somewhere before.

"Let's finish this!" he shouted.

"Okay, ready when you are!"

Osvannes stilled his breathing, then swung his sword down with a yell. He put every ounce of his strength into the blow. It was too fast for any ordinary person to dodge.

“You move really well, Mr. Osvannes. Still too slow, though.”

His sword cut through empty space. The girl’s voice rang like a bell in his ear, just as the ebony blade flowed up through the air towards his neck. Carried by the force of his swing, there was no way for him to dodge.

Osvannes smiled faintly, and closed his eyes. Only one thought came to him in his final moment. It wasn’t the faces of his beloved family, nor his soldiers. Rather, it occurred to him that the mist around the ebony blade looked just like Chancellor Darmès’s writhing shadow.

Olivia wiped the blood from her blade. She had just returned it to its scabbard when Claudia and a few of her soldiers came running in, their breathing ragged.

“Lieutenant Olivia! You’re unhurt?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What about you?”

“Just a scratch. Not worth worrying about,” Claudia said. Olivia inspected the other girl and saw there was a dent in her armor. Blood ran down her arms and legs, but it didn’t look like her life was in immediate danger. Olivia breathed out, and patted Claudia on the shoulder.

“Take care of yourself. You only get one life, you know.”

“Yes, ser. Your concern is appreciated,” Claudia said, then paused. “Did you take out the supreme commander?”

“Huh? That head over there is the supreme commander. He said his name was Osvannes von Glarwein.”

Olivia pointed at a head with white hair. Claudia approached it with trepidation, gulping loudly.

“You really did it, ser...”

“Well, yeah? That was the mission. Hey, shouldn’t we be lighting the beacon?”

“Y-Yes, of course!” Claudia said, ducking down and getting to work on preparing the beacon. In a matter of minutes, she’d sent a streak of red smoke up into the sky.

“That will tell the royal army to go on the offensive. What are your orders now, ser?”

“Hmmm... First off, we should make sure everyone knows that the supreme commander’s dead. That should really crush their morale. Let’s stick the head on a spear.”

“Are... Are you sure, ser?!” said Claudia, looking horrified.

“Seeing the real thing will get the message across the best. It’s fine if you don’t want to, though,” Olivia replied matter-of-factly.

“I-I didn’t... I’m on it, ser!” said Claudia, and issued the order to her soldiers. Olivia yawned, only half paying attention. They’d reached the halfway point in the battle. Next came Fort Caspar. *Only halfway...*

“Don’t soldiers *ever* get a break?!” she groaned dramatically. Claudia couldn’t help but laugh.

Royal Command

“My lord, look over there!” Otto cried out. He was agitated, pointing over at the enemy command camp where red smoke was rising into the sky. Paul chuckled.

“No need to yell, I’m right here. Lieutenant Olivia’s mission was a resounding success, by the looks of it.” He grinned, looking almost like a tiger, then began issuing orders.

“Get word to Lambert, Hermann, and Osmund. Tell them the silver spear has been thrown. All armies are to go on the offensive, and give no quarter to any who stand against them.”

“Right away, ser!” said Otto, and relayed the instructions to the other commanding officers. Paul was already swinging up onto his horse.

“Time for us to go too,” he said. Paul’s main force of five thousand soldiers began their advance.

It was an hour after the beacon had been lit.

“That... That impudent scum,” Georg said through gritted teeth. Silas caught up to him, where he stood glowering like a demon at the burnt and blackened corpses before them.

“M-My lord...” he stammered. Right beside them lay Georg’s beloved warhorse, where it had died in the flames. He hesitated over whether to share the latest ill tidings, but then steeled himself.

“My lord, command has fallen to a surprise attack by the enemy. The right flank is on the verge of collapse, and while the left flank is in good shape, I cannot say how long that will last.” He paused, then continued, “We should retreat immediately.”

Silas waited, until Georg eventually replied. “Colonel Silas... Call me ungenerous, but I’m in no mood to listen to jokes,” he rasped. He raised his charred lance and held it to Silas’s chin. Silas pushed aside his fear and forced himself to stand his ground. Every moment they lingered, the enemy was only gaining momentum. They couldn’t afford to tarry here. As long as they had Fort Caspar, they could recover their losses, but only if they were still alive to fight another day. Silas squared his shoulders, and tried again.

“My lord, let me say this again. Our command has fallen. The window for us to retreat is closing. We should retreat immediately.”

“Is Lord Osvannes safe?” said Georg slowly.

“Reports... Reports say the enemy is going about boasting of how they killed Lord Osvannes. I cannot speak to the truth of it, but the Seventh Legion is attacking with renewed ferocity.”

“I see... Things have ended up the total opposite of our battle with the Sixth Legion. I suppose that’s what I get for underestimating my enemy,” muttered Georg, and Silas thought he heard an uncharacteristic note of remorse in the man’s voice. He waited in silence for Georg to continue.

“How many of our Chargers are still alive?” Georg eventually asked.

“Only two-thirds remain... And perhaps half of those can still fight.”

“I see. Get them into a defensive formation with the wounded at the center. When that’s done, we fall back to Fort Caspar.”

“Right away, ser!”

To Silas’s relief, a calculating gleam had returned to Georg’s eyes. He immediately set about gathering their soldiers, and they began their retreat.

“What are you standing there for?!” screeched Minnitz. “Retreat to Fort Caspar!” His eyes were bloodshot. While his advisors tried desperately to soothe him, his main commanding officers ignored them and went about getting ready to retreat. It wasn’t that they were following Minnitz’s orders; they just didn’t want to die, and especially not alongside their ass of a commander. No one said as much, but their feelings were writ plain on their faces.

As Minnitz’s advisor, Mars was at the end of his tether, but he still hesitated to speak back to the man. He knew if he opened his mouth now, all that venom would come down on him. Too late, he found himself appreciating how well Lyoness had kept the peace.

It was just as they were ready to begin the retreat that it happened. Afterwards, they would say that Major General Minnitz had been killed in the Battle of Ilys by a royal arrow. The truth was a little different.

“Where is Lord Minnitz’s horse?” demanded an advisor. “Do you cretins mean to make his lordship *run* from the battlefield?” Mars, who was leading the retreat, replied coolly, “I am not Lord Minnitz’s stablehand. If he requires a mount, he had best find one himself.”

The advisor looked thunderstruck. “You dare! What you just said is treason! But his lordship will forgive you this time. Go now and bring him a horse!”

“Accuse me of treason if you like. Go on!” said Mars, drawing himself close to the man, before punching him hard in the gut. The advisor groaned, and curled up in a ball on the ground. Another threw himself at Mars, but he was too slow.

Mars ducked away and stuck out a foot to send the man sprawling, before kicking him hard. The man vomited up bile before he passed out. Minnitz's advisors were really little more than bureaucrats. They didn't have a hope against a military commander like Mars.

Minnitz finally noticed the commotion, and cried out, "Wretch! How dare you lay hands on my advisors! I'll have your head!"

"Will you now, my lord?" said Mars. As Minnitz drew his sword, all the officers drew their bowstrings back.

"What's this?! Do you know who I am? The blood of the imperial family runs in my veins! Have you lost your minds?!" bellowed Minnitz, spraying them with spittle.

"It's no good yelling, ser," replied Mars, his perfect composure never wavering. "Thanks to your incompetence, the honorable Major Lyoness is dead. What's more, he died so that you could escape."

"This is foolishness! I was almost killed because of his schemes! It's only right that he's dead! I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes, and that's why you're going to die here," said Mars, and shot Minnitz. The arrow buried itself in Minnitz's forehead, and the man toppled forwards. He was, of course, already dead.

"D-D-Do you have any idea what you've—?" began one of the advisors, just as Mars yelled "*Shoot them!*" The officers released their arrows, and the advisors writhed like fish dragged up on land as they died.

"It saddens me to report that Lord Minnitz and his trusted advisors have been killed by royal archers. He laid down his life on the battlefield with honor. Now, we must retreat to Fort Caspar and alert them to these events."

"Yes, ser!" his soldiers chorused back. Mars mounted his horse, and led his remaining troops in a retreat.

Georg and his Steel Chargers fought tooth and nail to get away from the battlefield. They pushed back more than twenty enemy attacks as they left the Plains of Ilys, in a show of military brilliance that would go down in the history

of Duvedirica.

“Once we get past these rocks, we’ll be out on the plateau. Maybe we can rest there...”

“I don’t think that’s going to work, ser,” said Silas.

As though in mockery of Georg’s words, yet more enemies appeared in front of them.

“Don’t they ever give up?” he said.

“My lord, look over there!” said Silas, outraged. He pointed to a girl on a black horse. She held a pike, with the head of General Osvannes impaled on the point.

“So these are the ones who attacked our command...” Georg muttered, gritting his teeth so hard that he tasted blood.

“Do we eliminate them?” asked Silas. George gave a despairing laugh. Only two thousand of their force survived, and every one of them was battered and exhausted. That only their fighting spirit hadn’t faltered did them worse than no good.

“When did you start throwing caution to the wind? Are you feeling all right, Silas?”

“It seems, my lord, that I’ve caught on to your bad habits. Also, I for one will not stand here and leave Lord Osvannes in such a state,” he said, and drew a dark-colored blade. The other riders readied their lances, and they moved into position to charge.

“Fools, one and all,” chuckled Georg with a smile. “That’s my Chargers for you!” With that, he spurred his horse towards the royal army forces. Silas and the other two thousand riders thundered after him, like a single, galloping beast.

Georg rode straight for the silver-haired girl, who sat astride her black horse at the center of the enemy force. Under any other circumstances, he’d have laughed with scorn at the royal army for fielding a little girl. Now, though, his

senses told him that she was dangerous, and he trusted them. He turned his lance on the horse first, to cut down her mobility.

“How?!” He gasped as the girl knocked his lance aside with her ebony blade, sending it clattering to the ground. There’d been so much power behind the parry that he couldn’t keep his grip on it.

“It’s cruel to kill horses,” said the girl. His hunch had been correct. *This girl...*

“You’re the one who killed Lord Osvannes, then?”

“Lord Osvannes...?” Her eyes flicked up to the impaled head, then she looked back at him and smiled. “Oh, yeah. I cut his head off.”

“Just as I thought... What’s your name, girl?”

“Me? I’m Olivia.”

“Well, don’t worry, Olivia. I won’t forget you when you’re dead!” Georg drew his sword from his hip, and swung it savagely at Olivia. *Swing, strike, cut her down.* But he couldn’t even scratch her. She neatly dodged every blow. He backed away from her, trying to bring his ragged breathing under control. A breathless laugh escaped him.

“I don’t believe it. You’re barely even trying...”

“Can we wrap this up now? Wait, no. I’m going to kill you now!”

“Come on then!”

Georg kicked his horse, and galloped right at Olivia. He held his sword in his right hand, and swung it with all his power. But Olivia wasn’t there.

“No!”

She hadn’t just dodged his killing blow, she had used her horse like a stepladder to leap into the air. The last thing Georg saw was Olivia in midair with her sword pointed straight down, right before the blade stabbed into him.

“My lord! *Nooo!!!*” yelled Silas. He turned his horse, and raced towards them, brandishing his sword. Olivia took Georg’s sword from his hand, then threw it at Silas. It whistled through the air, before passing right through Silas’ head and embedding itself in the cliff behind them like a crucifixion.



An hour later, the mighty Steel Chargers were no more.

It was the fourth day of the battle.

The rain that had fallen since morning abated, and warm sunlight shone through gaps in the clouds.

Chapter Four: A Fated Encounter

I

Having disposed of Supreme Commander Osvannes and annihilated the Steel Chargers, Olivia's forces made their way west on Olivia's new orders, tidying up all remaining enemy soldiers they met on the way. They left the Plains of Ilys and entered the plateau that led to Fort Caspar. There, they rendezvoused with the logistics officers that Otto sent, who restocked their food and medical supplies, as well as replacing lost weapons and patching up their battered armor.

"It truly is an honor to spearhead the recapture of Fort Caspar," said Claudia. She squatted down and looked up at the clear sky. Her chest felt full to bursting with an inexpressible joy. She was sure her parents would be proud too.

"Is it?" said Olivia, frowning where she lay on the grass. "I don't get it. I'd rather have a book or tasty food over honor any day." Ashton, getting food ready beside her, looked annoyed.

"While we're on that topic, it feels a bit like I've become your chef lately," he said.

"It's just that that special mustard of yours is so good, Ashton!" grinned Olivia, and Ashton froze for a moment. "I can't help asking you to share."

"Well, um. I mean, making enough for two people isn't really any more work, so it's fine," he replied, his face softening as he sliced the brown bread. *That boy is an open book*, thought Claudia. *Probably can't lie to save his life*. She raised a finger to get Ashton's attention.

"Hey, could I get one of those too?"

"Huh?" He looked over at her. "You mean you took a liking to it last time, ser?"

"It was amazing. That mustard is simply marvelous—you'll have to tell me the

recipe sometime.”

“Yeah!” said Olivia, excited that someone agreed with her. “Claudia thinks so too!” She flashed Claudia a smile. Ashton, on the other hand, looked doubtful.

“What?” she asked. “Did something I say bother you?”

“Not at all, Warrant Officer Claudia. Er, you’re a knight, is that right?”

“Yes, that is one of the titles they gave me. What does that have to do with anything?” The title of knight was bestowed upon those amongst the nobility who displayed exceptional valor. Claudia couldn’t see where it tied into their current conversation.

“I just thought... As a knight, you can have all the good food you want, can’t you?” Ashton asked hesitantly.

“Oh, is that it? Yes, I suppose compared to a commoner, knights probably do have rather more opportunities to eat good food. But your mustard is up there with the best of it, Ashton.”

“R-Really? I never thought... Er, I’ll make you one right away, ser. Just give me a moment!”

With something closer to a smile, Ashton happily pulled the jar of mustard out of his bag once more, and started humming to himself. *An open book*, thought Claudia again. She reflected on the orders Paul had given her as she tucked into the sandwich. She’d been left in charge of the vanguard, but they only had twenty-two hundred soldiers left. Assuming Fort Caspar had a garrison of five thousand, a siege was impossible. A reasonable plan would have seen them field three times as many soldiers. *Capturing* Fort Caspar, however, was not the mission they’d been assigned. They were to carry out an extended assault on the fort and wear down the enemy—weakening them before the main force of the royal army arrived. Paul didn’t expect the detached force to topple Fort Caspar alone.

“Lieutenant Olivia, do you have any thoughts on our strategy for Fort Caspar?”

“Stwashajy? Weh, acshwy...”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” interjected Ashton. Olivia nodded, and gulped down the bite of her sandwich.

“Actually, I thought I’d work it out later, after we get a look at the enemy. Why? Did you have an idea?” she asked Claudia.

“Not so much an idea, I just... I’m honored to be in the vanguard and all, but given our mission is to wear down the enemy before the main force arrives, I was wondering what we can do to keep as many of our soldiers alive as possible,” Claudia replied. She looked over to where the other soldiers sat eating their lunch, untroubled and carefree. Ashton nodded emphatically in agreement, but Olivia made a dissatisfied noise.

“That’s so passive though...” She paused, before a smile blossomed on her face, and she said, “I’ve got a better idea! What if I just take the fort myself?” Claudia stared at her, wanting to believe that this sudden insanity was a joke, but there was no hint of humor in Olivia’s eyes. She sighed.

“Lieutenant Olivia, even you couldn’t manage that,” she reprimanded the other girl. “We don’t even have any siege weaponry.”

If they had a battering ram, that would be a different story, but penetrating the closed gates without one was nigh on impossible. Even if they had one, they didn’t have the numbers to use it effectively. On top of that, the enemy would without a doubt do everything they could to stop them. Their chances of success would only be around fifty-fifty.

“I guess, but I feel like there’s a whole bunch of options even without siege weapons... Ashton, do you have any ideas for taking down Fort Caspar by ourselves?”

“Huh? You’re asking *me*?” said Ashton, alarmed. Even so, he crossed his arms, and appeared to be thinking hard. Claudia couldn’t hold back a derisive smile. Officers just didn’t ask rank-and-file soldiers for their input on matters like this.

“Hmmm...” mused Ashton. “Fort Caspar was constructed in the early warlord period, correct?”

“If you say so. All I know is that it’s old.”

“Well, if I’m remembering correctly, I have a plan that might just work.”

Claudia felt a little like she'd been hit in the head after listening to Ashton's explanation. Olivia, who'd been silent throughout, beamed with pride and said, "Didn't I say Ashton would make a good tactician? Didn't I?"

Imperial Army, Fort Caspar

Colonel Blum, commander of the garrison at Fort Caspar, received a message about the royal army's advance.

"There's no chance this could be mistaken?"

"No, ser. All our lookouts have confirmed it," said the officer flatly. Blum felt a cold sweat break out down his back.

"How many are there?"

"The lookouts report around two thousand."

"Two thousand? The vanguard, then. What's behind that?"

"B-Behind that, ser?" the officer stammered, his face growing pale.

"Yes, after that. Stop gaping like an idiot and answer the question."

"Sorry, ser. The lookouts were, er, in such a hurry, they didn't manage to..." The officer's voice grew smaller and smaller before trailing off completely.

"Imbeciles!" shouted Blum, slamming a hand down on his desk in rage. "Don't waste my time with excuses. I want answers, right now!"

"Y-Yes, ser! Right away, ser!" said the officer, and scurried from the room. Blum glared after them, then picked up the bell on his desk and rang it. The door to the neighboring room opened silently to reveal his aide, Major Lanchester.

"You called, Colonel?"

"Relay the news of the royal army's advance to all our troops, then have them commence battle preparations."

"Of course, ser," Lanchester said, raising one eyebrow. "If I may ask... Does this mean that the southern army was defeated? It's only been a week. I find that very hard to believe."

“I, too, am loath to believe that Lord Osvannes could have been defeated, but we don’t know anything for sure yet.” *Not only Osvannes, but the Steel Chargers under his command*, he thought. Just as Lanchester had said, it all felt too ridiculous to be real.

“How many troops do they have, ser?”

“We have solid reports of two thousand,” he said. Lanchester’s eyes narrowed.

“Very well. I’ll see to the battle preparations.” He turned, clicked his heels, and strode from the room.

Blum was troubled by the reports brought to him later. They had detected neither hide nor hair of a rear force, leaving only the two thousand soldiers of the early reports.

Are they mad? Do they really mean to try and take Fort Caspar with only two thousand soldiers? he brooded to himself. *It’s no good. I don’t have enough information.*

Two hours later, the fighting between the Fort Caspar garrison and Olivia’s force began.

II

The battle was underway.

War horns rang out over the beating of battle drums, as Olivia’s forces began their attack with a barrage of longbow shots. They didn’t seem to be doing much more than that, however.

“Seriously? They don’t even know the effective range of a longbow? It’s one thing to be scared, but they’re not going to hit anything from that far away,” scoffed one imperial soldier.

“I reckon they’re all new recruits—they don’t know the first thing about fighting a war.”

“They’ve got the war horns and the drumming down though,” chuckled a

third soldier.

“Guess we’ll just have to go down there and show them how it’s done. I’ll take the lady soldiers!”

“And just what are you going to show them?” called another, and they all doubled up with laughter. They’d been sick with nerves right up until the battle began and they’d seen the royal army’s sloppy attempts at an attack. Their commander, Captain Thistle, knew how they felt, but it wouldn’t be appropriate for him to laugh along with them.

“Hey, pull yourselves together! They’re still far out, but we should be able to hit them with the ballista. So get to it!” he yelled. The soldiers scrambled to attention before running off towards the ballista mounted on the fort walls.

“All troops, fall back!”

The target of the soldiers’ mockery—Olivia’s forces—retreated back out of range of the ballista, defending themselves from its bolts with heavy shields. Not long after, they advanced, and began shooting from beyond their effective range again. This cycle of advance and retreat repeated several times more.

“Is this really going to work, Ashton? We might not lose any soldiers, but I can practically hear the imperials laughing at us,” Claudia said. She was watching the battle unfold through her spyglass.

“Oh, yeah, they probably *are* laughing at us. But we’ll get the last laugh when we win in the end, so I think we can ignore them,” replied Ashton, unconcerned. Olivia had given him a temporary promotion to tactician, so he was sharing command with Claudia.

“You’re not wrong, but as a knight, I don’t like fighting like this...” she said, then groaned with exasperation. “I still can’t believe *this* is your plan!”

Ashton’s plan went like this:

Forts constructed in the early warlord period always included a hidden passage for those inside to escape, usually letting out through an old well in the vicinity of the fort. That meant it could be used the other way around, sending people in from the well to access the interior of the fort. They would divide

their forces in two—one group creating a distraction on the outside while the other waited until that chaos left a hole in the defenses that they could then exploit to get the gate unbarred. Once the bar was lifted, their forces could waltz right into Fort Caspar without hindrance.

What they were doing right now was merely a spectacle to draw the enemy's attention.

"It's barely a plan, really. I only suggested something so stupid because I know how powerful Olivia is," said Ashton. Olivia had left them with a wave goodbye and a *See you soon!* as she headed for the old well with a hundred of their toughest fighters. She might have been going for an evening stroll for how laid-back she acted about it.

"It's still thanks to your knowledge of our forts that we have a plan at all. I bet the imperials holed up in there have no idea the hidden passage even exists. We didn't know, and our side built it!"

"Well, here's hoping all the time I spent combing through old military histories raises our chances of survival—even a little. I don't want to die yet," Ashton said with a forced smile. Claudia felt her mood turn somber. War took so many lives before their time. There was no guarantee that those fighting beside them today would still be there tomorrow. She guessed that Ashton knew this too. That was why he was using every bit of knowledge at his disposal so that even a few more might make it out alive, all the while probably putting all his willpower into not running away.

"We've come too far to die here, haven't we?" said Claudia, before gesturing for their soldiers to retreat once more.

Olivia and her soldiers had no trouble locating the old well. While the imperial army's attention was firmly on their comrade's false attack, they slipped inside Fort Caspar.

"Honestly, Captain, I thought this would be harder," said a one-eyed man with arms thick as tree trunks. His name was Gauss, and he was serving as Olivia's second-in-command for this mission.

"Yeah, it's a good thing the well was right where Ashton said it would be,"

said Olivia with a satisfied nod. She stamped on a rat scurrying around her feet, crushing it. A soldier watching from behind let out a little squeal. Olivia continued down the stone passageway, holding up a burning torch in one hand. Probably due to its original purpose as an escape route, the passageway was cramped and the air inside was stagnant. Enormous spiderwebs spread out all down the corridor to obstruct their path. If nothing else, there was no sign that the imperial army was using it.

“How do you want to divide up the troops, ser? At this point, we’ve made it halfway without any trouble,” asked Gauss, pulling aside a spiderweb. Olivia shook her head.

“I’ve already decided. I’ll go alone to create the disturbance. The rest of you can get the bolt off the gate and let in Claudia’s troops.”

“Alone, ser?” said Gauss, taken aback. “I don’t doubt your ability, but shouldn’t you take maybe ten others with you?” A few other soldiers around them nodded in agreement. Olivia only laughed, showing pearly white teeth, and patted Gauss on the back.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. It’s actually better if I’m alone—that way I can swing my sword as much as I like. Not that it’s likely I’d accidentally kill any of you! But you never know, right?” With a more subdued smile, she patted the scabbard at her hip. Gauss laughed politely, unable to do anything but nod. He’d been there for the Battle of Ilys, so he knew as well as he did his own name that Olivia wasn’t exaggerating.

An hour later, Gauss called out, “Captain, I think we’ve arrived.” He held his torch towards the depths of the passage to illuminate a small door. If that wasn’t evidence enough, it was also a dead end.

“Okay. Gauss and the rest of you, stand by for half an hour. Then commence the operation.”

“Yes, ser. And Captain—take care of yourself in there.”

“Thanks,” said Olivia. “Well, see you later!” She waved, then opened the door. A gentle breeze came through the opening, and they saw a narrow passageway that looked like it would at last be big enough for each of them to walk upright.

Further down, it was slightly brighter. She moved towards the light, and pushed on the stone wall in front of her eyes. It spun around, and ejected Olivia outside.

“This is great!” she said to herself. “Just like the trick house in one of my books.” She took in her surroundings. Judging by the stacks of dusty furniture, she had found herself in an old storage closet. She immediately opened the door and set off down the corridor outside, until she ran into a lone imperial soldier.

“Hello, do you know where the supreme commander is?” she asked, her tone friendly. The soldier rolled his eyes at her.

“What are you talking about? Did you get hit in the head or something? Lord Osvannes is off fighting at the Plains of Ilys.”

“What are *you* talking about? Mr. Osvannes is dead. I’m asking who’s in charge now.”

“Wha—?! Lord Osvannes, dead?! You’ve got some nerve talking like—hey, what’s your unit, anyway?” the soldier said, exasperation turning suddenly to suspicion.

“My unit? You mean the detached force?”

“Detached... Wait a minute...” The soldier’s eyes locked on to the epaulets on Olivia’s shoulders, on which were engraved a chalice and pair of lions.

“You—you’re from the royal army?!” he cried. Olivia laughed.

“Shhh, not so loud!” she said. Her hand shot out to strike the soldier in the jaw, then she drew the ebony blade with the other and stabbed him through the heart. His body spasmed a few times, and she pushed him aside. As the body hit the wall, the clatter of metal echoed through the corridor.

“What’s that racket?” called out another soldier, appearing from around the corner. “What’s... Wh-Wh-What’s going on?!”

“There goes my plan to kill the person in charge first...” Olivia sighed. “This is how it’s going to be then, huh?” As more and more soldiers appeared from around the corner, Olivia made her way towards them, casual as ever. A black

mist enveloped the sword in her hand.

Half an hour after Olivia left to create the disturbance, Gauss and the others emerged from the old storage closet and made for the main gate. Somewhere in the distance, people were screaming. They continued on cautiously.

“What the hell...?” said Gauss. The wall before him was covered in blood and scattered innards. A towering pile of corpses threatened to block the corridor. There wasn’t a single intact body amongst them. Without exception, a limb or a head was missing; some had even been sliced cleanly in half. The toughest soldiers in the detached force stared in shocked silence at the horror of it. Gauss felt a profound sense of relief that Olivia was on their side.

“Vice-Captain, that screaming...”

“That’s probably—No, that’s *definitely* the captain off wreaking havoc. Come on, to the gate!”

“Yes, ser!” chorused his soldiers, and with nods to one another, they set off running towards the gate.

Blum’s work room practically shook as he bellowed with rage.

“It’s one damn soldier! Why the hell is it taking so long to take care of her?!”

“This isn’t just any soldier, Captain!” retorted Major Padoin, looking stricken. “You heard the rumors, didn’t you? It’s the monster with the black sword!” Padoin leaned forwards as he spoke, and Blum unconsciously recoiled. He had, of course, heard of the monster girl. He just hadn’t believed it. Saying some little girl had killed Samuel was like saying the whole world had turned upside down.

“I don’t have time for this idiocy! Even monsters can be killed. Just get some archers to all fire at her at once!” Unlike in a battle outdoors, within the walls of the fort there were only so many places to run. If they cut off her escape routes and shot a barrage of arrows at her, that should have taken care of the problem. This all seemed obvious to Blum, but Padoin scoffed like he’d said something foolish.

“You think I haven’t tried that already, ser? The moment before the archers released their arrows, she appeared right in front of them—beheaded three with a single stroke! I’d say that makes her a monster!” he snarled, banging his fist on the desk. Blum sighed.

“Now you’re asking me to believe that nonsense everyone’s been spouting? What’s next, fairies?”

“I don’t care if you believe me or not, Captain. I’ve told you what happened, and I’ll be taking leave of my command now,” Padoin said. He turned to leave, but Blum wasn’t just going to let such insubordination stand.

“You’re abandoning your post? A man of your rank should know the penalty for that!”

“Failure to obey an order, so that’d be death?” Padoin laughed, his face twisting. “That’s fine by me. There’s no way I’m making it out of here alive anyway.” He left, chuckling sardonically under his breath. Blum sat quietly for a moment, then turned to Lanchester, who had been sitting beside him in silence the whole time.

“Make a note to deal with him later. What do you make of his story?”

“Is it true? I cannot say, ser,” Lanchester replied slowly. “However, I think it may be prudent for us to act as though it is.”

“You’re not serious?” Blum said, staring at Lanchester and unable to believe his ears. He knew the man wasn’t the sort to put stock in rumors.

“I am, ser. Like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, some simply have power that ordinary humans cannot stand against. Take the mages, for example.”

“I don’t—you’re saying this girl is like a mage?!” spluttered Blum. “I don’t believe it... And if she is? How do we stop her?!”

“If you’ll wait a moment, ser.” Lanchester stood up and went over to the adjacent room. He returned holding something shaped like a bow, and placed it on the desk.

“What’s that?” demanded Blum.

“This is a sample we received from the Imperial Weapons Development Unit.

It is, to put it simply, a mobile ballista. It is both faster and more lethal than any ordinary bow,” explained Lanchester. Blum picked it up. He could see how the design resembled a ballista, but it appeared to be operated not by a drawstring, but a metal spring. It was lighter than it looked, and sat well in his hands.

“You want to use this to kill the monster?”

“Yes, ser. Even without her, the royal army will be here soon. If we allow this to get further out of hand, we may find ourselves destroyed from within.”

“We are indeed short on ti—what was that?” Blum started as the sound of someone running towards them reached them from the corridor. They stopped outside, then an out-of-breath soldier flung the door open.

“You will knock before entering!” said Lanchester sharply.

“F-Forgive me, ser, but it’s urgent!”

“Tell me.”

“Yes, ser! The royal army has passed through the main gate, and are storming the fort!”

“What?!” cried Blum, jumping up from his chair. He looked at Lanchester, and saw the other man frozen in shock.

“What is the meaning of this? Did the enemy have siege weapons?” he demanded. Fort Caspar might have been old, but it was still a fort. You couldn’t just break through the gates with ordinary weapons.

“They didn’t use siege weapons, ser!” the soldier replied. “A group of enemy soldiers appeared out of nowhere and unbarred the gates! They’re wide open now!” This was so beyond anything Blum had anticipated that he found himself unable to speak. Then, he understood. The monster girl had been nothing more than a distraction—their true goal had been to open the gates. But that left an obvious question: how had the monster girl and the soldiers who’d opened the gate gotten inside in the first place? Maybe *they* could have done it, moving the way they did like shimmering wisps of smoke in the air, but there were only a few of them and, by the sounds of it, a lot of invaders. And the watch on Fort Caspar was too vigilant to allow invaders to sneak by unnoticed. Blum buried his face in his hands, reeling from the string of unforeseen events.

“This isn’t over yet, Captain. We still have an overwhelming advantage in numbers. I will take command and meet the enemy.”

“Lanchester...” said Blum. The usually emotionless Lanchester radiated a grim resolve. Blum was accosted by the realization that the situation was more hopeless than any words could express. A horrifying monster stalked the fort, and the enemy had all but strolled in through the gate. Morale, the most crucial element in a battle, was close to zero. They were long past the point where they could make up for all that with superior numbers.

As soon as Claudia saw the plan to open the gate had worked, she set about issuing orders.

“First, Second, and Third Companies are to enter the fort! We want to secure the important locations before they know what’s hit them!”

“The hour is nigh!” came a comically loud voice from the head of the First Company. “Lady Olivia has bestowed upon me, Gile, the honor of leading her personal guard! We must fight so as not to dishonor the Silver Valkyrie’s name!” His words were met with a roar of assent. Claudia turned to Ashton, her eyes narrowed.

“Care to enlighten me as to when exactly that boy became the leader of Lieutenant Olivia’s personal guard?”

“Ah, that...” stammered Ashton, looking down in embarrassment. “Sorry about that... He probably just made it up.” It was a flagrant breach of discipline, but it seemed to have gotten the soldiers fired up. Claudia decided to pretend it hadn’t happened.

An hour later, the detached force moved through the fort like clockwork, taking control piece by piece. The inside of the fort was in disarray, and the imperial soldiers all surrendered without much resistance. Oddly enough, they seemed relieved to be captured. Amongst them, weeping with joy, was Major Thistle.

“It looks like your plan was a great success, Ashton,” muttered Claudia. She looked a little deflated.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” replied Ashton, and his smile was apologetic. “I think it’s clear Olivia did something to scare them like this.” Even with the gate open, the imperials had them solidly outnumbered. They shouldn’t have laid down their arms without a fight. Something had happened to utterly decimate their morale, and Ashton thought he had a fair idea what that was. He hesitated to say it out loud, though, and Claudia didn’t ask. She removed her helmet and shook out her hair.

“*Something*. Yes, I imagine she did,” she said, and they both looked up at Fort Caspar.

“You’re the monster everyone’s talking about, then?” said Blum. He sat with composure at his desk, facing the girl who stood before him holding Padoin’s head.

“I’m not a monster. I’m Olivia. And you’re Commander Blum, right? This human kindly told me where to find you,” said Olivia. She tossed the head to him. It landed precisely on the desk, and rolled towards him. The monster had killed Padoin, just like he’d predicted.

“Hah! You threw a whole fort into chaos all by yourself. I’d say that makes you a monster,” Blum said, realizing as the words came out that they were the same ones Padoin had used earlier—the ones that he had ignored.

“I guess you’re the enemy, so it doesn’t really matter what you call me. What do you want to do now, anyway? I’m pretty sure Claudia’s already conquered the fort, so you can’t win, no matter what you do.”

“You’re right, we’re well and truly defeated. Even so—” In a flash, Blum pulled out the ballista he’d been holding under his desk, and loosed a bolt at Olivia. Then he laughed. Before him, Olivia gripped the bolt in her left hand. She snapped it in half, and tossed it aside.

“You really are a monster,” he said, still chuckling. Olivia eyed at the ballista with interest.

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting that! That packs way more punch than a bow. Mind if I keep it?”

“I certainly won’t be needing it. It’s yours, if you want it,” spat Blum, throwing the ballista over to her. As he did so, she drew her sword and leapt forwards.

“I suppose... I deserved that...” he said.

“Thanks for the bow-thing! I promise to take good care of it,” said Olivia brightly, driving her ebony blade deeper into Blum’s chest. Before she’d finished speaking, he was already dead. Olivia giggled. “First the pocket watch, and now I found this! I can’t wait to show Ashton and Claudia.” She left, stepping lightly and cradling the mobile ballista in her arms.

III

The Battle of Ilys was drawing to a close. Supreme Commander Osvannes, Lieutenant General Georg, and Major General Minnitz had all fallen. Major General Heid Börner, commander of the imperial army’s left flank, continued to put up a staunch resistance in the hopes of allowing as many soldiers as possible to escape. Paul left Lambert to deal with him, and set off for Fort Caspar. They were en route when a messenger from the detached force arrived bearing shocking news.

“I don’t believe it! Fort Caspar has *already* fallen?!” cried Otto.

“Yes, my lord! The fort is under our control,” the messenger answered proudly. When Paul asked for the full explanation, the story they recounted was more shocking still. A mere eight royal soldiers had been lost in the attack on the fort. The vast majority of imperial soldiers had surrendered without resistance. Otto had never heard of a siege that had ended with fatal casualties in the single digits, no matter how far back in history he looked. Paul had sent Olivia because he thought she’d be able to wear down the enemy, even without a large army. Even *he* hadn’t hoped for more than that. No one could have foreseen that they’d topple Fort Caspar in a single day. The man they’d once called the God of the Battlefield felt a chill run down his spine.

“Very good. Go back and tell Lieutenant Olivia to stay vigilant.”

“Yes, my lord!” The messenger gave an energetic salute, before mounting their horse and galloping off back to Fort Caspar.

“Yet another slaughter to add to Lieutenant Olivia’s achievements,” said Paul happily. “What are we to do, Otto? I doubt just cake is going to cover this.”

“Please, my lord, spare me such talk. Besides, we have more important things to consider.”

“Ah, yes, this Ashton who supposedly came up with their battle plan. Do you know anything more about the boy, Otto?”

“I’d never heard... No, hold on.” Otto’s eyes darted about, and he began to stroke his chin.

“That’s right. Back when we questioned the lieutenant, she referred to someone of that name.” Otto’s face grew dark, as though the memory was unpleasant for him. Paul thought back to the incident where they’d captured the enemy spy. He must have been there too. He strained his aging memory, and little by little it all came back to him.

“Ahh, I remember. Lieutenant Olivia mentioned him when she asked for good bread from the capital as her reward.”

“I honestly hoped you wouldn’t bring that up. It makes me remember all the other things she said,” replied Otto, his expression growing darker still. Paul only laughed.

Fort Caspar was bustling so much when Otto arrived that he felt almost light-headed. Though they’d won the fort, they couldn’t afford to relax until they knew the situation at Kier Fortress. They kept guards stationed around the fort at all times. On top of that, they had to secure the surrounding towns and villages and deal with the four thousand soldiers they’d taken prisoner. The prisoners in particular were a headache for Otto. They’d never taken so many before. Just keeping them fed was no mean feat. The fort’s storerooms were extremely well-stocked, but he wanted to keep those supplies for their own troops. Unfortunately, he couldn’t just execute soldiers who’d surrendered, and there wasn’t even a convenient mine nearby he could send them to labor in. He wanted more than a little to take out some of this frustration at Olivia, but he also knew that this resentment was misdirected.

Two weeks passed like this, until one day, Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton were all summoned to the command room. They stood in front of the door.

“Olivia, why do you keep staring at that pocket watch? It’s not going to blink, you know,” said Ashton.

“Colonel Otto is really, really strict about time. Didn’t you know that? Anyway, he gets super mad if you’re even a little bit late.”

“I mean, it’s the first I’m hearing of it, but caring about punctuality is normal for the military, isn’t it?”

“Lieutenant Olivia, Ashton, be quiet. We’re right outside the command room,” cautioned Claudia. Ashton clamped his mouth shut. Olivia, unfazed, knocked on the door.

“Lieutenant Olivia, Warrant Officer Claudia and... Hey Ashton, what’s your rank?”

“Private Second Class,” hissed Ashton.

“And Private Second Class Ashton!” continued Olivia loudly, knocking on the door again. “Lieutenant Olivia, Warrant Officer Claudia, Private Second Class Ashton, reporting *on time*—”

“Yes, that’s enough. Enter, and be quick about it,” came Otto’s exasperated voice, and Olivia flung the door open. Paul sat in the front of the room, laughing, while Otto sat beside him shaking his head. Olivia and the others saluted, and Paul returned the salute, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. With the supreme commander right there in front of him, Ashton felt like he’d been turned to stone.

“Welcome! Thank you for coming all the way up to see us. Today—”

“Do you have cake?” Olivia cut him off. Otto fixed her with an icy glare, and even though he knew it wasn’t directed at him, Ashton began to sweat.

“It’s all about cake for you, is it, Lieutenant?”

“Not at all, ser. I also like books,” said Olivia, completely unconcerned.

At least try to think about what you’re saying, thought Ashton.

“As admirable as the pursuit of knowledge is, I didn’t call you to the command room because I care about *what you like*.”

Claudia kept her head resolutely lowered. Paul let out a hearty laugh.

“You never change, do you, Lieutenant?” he said. “I’m afraid the cake will have to wait until we’re back at Galia Fortress. Today I want to talk to you about another matter.” Hearing this, Olivia seemed to wilt with disappointment.

“Understood, ser...” she said dejectedly. Paul gave her a mollifying smile, then turned to look at Ashton.

“Private Second Class Ashton Senefelder!”

“Y-Yes, m’lord!” replied Ashton, tripping over the words in his alarm at being addressed.

“No need to be nervous,” Paul said, his expression kind. “I’ve already heard Warrant Officer Claudia’s report. You displayed impressive talent with your plan to take the fort.”

“Th-Th-Thank you, m-my lord! But it wouldn’t have been possible without Oliv—I mean, without Lieutenant Olivia, so I... I...” said Ashton in a rush. Paul looked amused at his panic, and raised a hand to cut him off.

“You’re right. Without Lieutenant Olivia, I very much doubt things would have gone as smoothly. But that, Private, is just as much thanks to your planning. Am I wrong, Lieutenant?”

“You are absolutely correct, ser,” answered Olivia, puffing out her chest with pride. “Thanks to Ashton, we were able to easily capture the fort.”

“O-Olivia!”

“What? It’s true. By the way, you should probably call me ‘ser’ in front of Colonel Otto or he’ll get mad at you.”

“Wha—?! You’re telling me *at a time like this*?!”

“Would the pair of you shut up? Lord Paul isn’t finished,” barked Otto. Ashton jumped like he’d been stung by a wasp.

“Lord Paul, I beg you to forgive my impudence!”

“Yes, yes, all right. Now, what I wanted to talk about is this: Lieutenant Olivia appointed you as tactician in a temporary capacity. How are you finding it? Would you consider taking on the position officially?”

This was so unexpected that Ashton’s mind went totally blank for a moment. He’d only taken the role after Olivia had practically forced him into it. He hadn’t dreamed that it could become a permanent appointment.

Is he...? No, he’s not joking, Ashton thought. Paul’s expression was dead serious. Ashton didn’t know how to respond. He’d only been able to think up the plan because of the old military history books he’d read. He wasn’t so drunk on his success to think that meant he could craft a battle plan for any situation.

He looked at Olivia, and saw she was smiling at him.

Oh, for... Damn it, I can’t say no to that face. He felt himself turning red as he turned back to Paul.

“I really don’t know if I’m up for the job, my lord, but I’m willing to give it a try.”

“That’s what I like to hear! In that case, there’s something I’d like your input on.”

“Y-Yes, my lord... Er, what is the situation exactly?” he inquired, taking pains to keep his tone level as a voice in his head yelled *Right now?! Going from Paul and Otto’s looks of amusement*, he hadn’t succeeded.

“Try to relax a little. Otto will explain.” Otto walked out to stand in front of the three of them, and began to lay out in detail the problems they faced feeding and finding work for their four thousand prisoners. Olivia yawned widely several times as he spoke, clearly bored. Claudia continued to stare at the ground.

“Well, Private?” said Otto when he’d finished. “If you have any promising ideas, I’m all ears.” Unlike his words, his expression was wholly unwelcoming.

But Ashton thought for a while, then replied, “Well... What if we negotiated with the empire to do an exchange of prisoners? There are two benefits to that.”

“Oh?” said Otto. “Explain.” There was a steel in Otto’s eyes that made Ashton struggle to continue. He still wasn’t used to this air of intimidation the officers carried.

“Y-Yes, ser. The first is that if the negotiations succeed, we solve our food problem. The second is that with our soldiers returned to us, we can bolster our own forces.”

Otto paused for a moment before replying. “I see your point. That would certainly resolve our supply problem. But if we exchange prisoners, won’t we be allowing the empire to bolster its forces just as much?” Otto voiced his concerns.

So he’s on board with my point about food supplies, but thinks there won’t be any meaningful military benefit, thought Ashton. As far as I’m concerned, it’ll make a big difference.

“Yes, ser. However, I believe the benefit to the royal army in its current state may be more significant. Right now, you have soldiers like me on the front line who can barely tell the blade of a sword from the pommel.”

Paul and Otto both winced like he’d touched a sore spot. He went on.

“On top of that, from a humanitarian standpoint, the empire will have no choice but to engage in negotiations. They’d face significant backlash from their citizens if they refused.” Everyone in Duvedirica knew the reputation of Ramza the Good. Ashton felt sure he wouldn’t act in a way that tarnished that reputation, and said as much.

“I see...” said Otto. “You may be unaware of this, Private, but as a general rule, only those of high rank are exchanged as prisoners. It’s a measure we might consider should a member of the royal household be captured. It has never been done with ordinary soldiers. Your idea, however, merits further consideration.” He stroked his chin, and looked over at Paul, who grunted thoughtfully.

“Time for an emergency council, then. Thank you, Private Ashton. Your insight will be of great help to us.”

“Th-Thank you, my lord!”

Paul dismissed Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton, then pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket and put it in his mouth.

“What do you think, Otto? It sounds feasible to me.”

“I don’t have any objections. It does appear his performance at Fort Caspar might have been more than just luck. I don’t think it’d have occurred to me to do a prisoner exchange with ordinary soldiers.”

“It would be quite the embarrassment for us if he pulled off such a historic victory with just luck. Albeit all the more so for our enemies.”

“There is that, at least. Now, I’d best get started drafting a request to open negotiations.”

“Very good.” Paul watched Otto go, then slowly exhaled a mouthful of smoke.

IV

Felix’s Workroom in Listelein Castle in Olsted, Capital of the Asvelt Empire

“My lord,” asked Second Lieutenant Teresa tentatively, placing a cup of tea on Felix’s desk, “might I have a moment of your time?” Felix stopped writing and looked up at her.

“From the look on your face, it isn’t good news.”

“Yes, ser,” said Teresa, after a pause. She held out a report to Felix; he took it without a word, his eyes running down the page. Its contents were thus: Fort Caspar was lost. Osvannes and their other senior generals had perished in battle, along with at least forty-five thousand soldiers. It was the most crushing defeat the empire had suffered since the Battle of Berchel—perhaps more so, considering the death of a giant like Osvannes.

“Perhaps I should have pressed the emperor harder to pursue an attack on Galia Fortress,” said Felix. “Even at the risk of His Majesty’s displeasure.” A look passed over Teresa’s face that Felix couldn’t interpret. Their squandered opportunity had bought Fernest the time it needed to defeat Osvannes. Some might’ve ventured to say that the empire had all but handed them this victory.

There was no point in dwelling on what-ifs now, but Osvannes's plan had been so perfect Felix was sure that if only the emperor had approved the plan, the south would now be theirs.

Felix took a sip of his tea, then sighed as he stood up.

"I must go and tell the lord chancellor about this," he said to Teresa as he fastened on an azure-blue cloak emblazoned with the crossed swords. "We will have to hold a council on how to deal with this."

"Oh, forgive me, my lord!" said Teresa, startled. "Chancellor Darmès asked me to inform you there is to be a council of the three generals."

"The three generals?"

"Yes, ser. Two hours hence, in the second council chamber."

Felix's brow furrowed. There was no point in having a council of the three generals when two of them weren't present. Teresa seemed to guess his concern.

"Lord Gladden and Lady Rosenmarie arrived yesterday to report on the situation at the front lines."

"I see... Thank you, Lieutenant Teresa," said Felix, before he sat down again.

Two hours later, the three generals gathered in the second council chamber just as Darmès had instructed them. They sat around an ebony table that could have comfortably seated thirty. The moment the meeting commenced, General Rosenmarie slammed the report she held down on the table.

"You're not seriously telling me General Osvannes is dead?" she demanded. Marshal Gladden turned his sharp gaze on her.

"There can be no doubting the report. All the testimony from the soldiers who escaped to Kier Fortress corroborates it."

"Come on, though! There's got to be a chance that they're wrong!" snapped Rosenmarie, obstinate in her refusal to accept Osvannes' death. Gladden raised one eyebrow, irked by her disrespectful tone.

"Control yourself, ser. We have numerous eyewitness reports from soldiers

who saw Osvannes's head impaled on a spear. It is a fact," Gladden said emphatically. Rosenmarie puffed up her face in indignation, but she looked away. She had once been Osvannes's most trusted officer. It was only expected that she would struggle to accept his death.

The council chamber plunged into a tense silence that remained unbroken until Rosenmarie muttered, "Then I'll go to the southern front."

"You'll what?" exclaimed Felix. "Excuse me, General, but *what?*"

"I said I'm going to the southern front!" snarled Rosenmarie, baring her teeth at him like a wild animal. "We'll see how this Seventh Legion or whatever likes it when my Crimson Knights beat them to a pulp!"

"Yes, and what happens to the northern front while you're in the south? You'll leave them without a commander?" Felix shot back. It was the obvious retort. Abandoning one post to go and fight on another? It was absurd. But Rosenmarie had a counterargument ready that he hadn't expected.

"You take the north, obviously. Better than just sitting on your butt in the capital," she said, as though this decided the whole matter. Felix was too stunned to reply, but Gladden cut in for him.

"Now listen here, you little fool!" he bellowed. "You think you can go around making whatever decisions you like? You know full well Felix is charged with the protection of the capital—he can't just go gallivanting off on a whim!" But Rosenmarie only laughed coldly.

"Protecting the capital? Please. With our defenses, you don't seriously think the royal army can march on the capital in the state they're in, do you? Or are you getting a bit senile in your old age?"

"You—! You've got some nerve!"

Felix did his best to placate the other two generals, who looked like they were ready to come to blows. Privately, though, he had to hand it to Rosenmarie—the royal army didn't have the force to mount an assault on the capital. Like as not, no one would even notice if the Azure Knights rode off to the northern front. But she was also wrong in another sense. The elite Azure Knights' presence in the capital, where the emperor resided, both reassured the

commoners and served as a powerful deterrent to other nations. As long as the emperor did not wish it, they would not set a single foot outside of the city.

“Putting that aside for the moment,” said Felix. “With the fall of Fort Caspar, we’ve lost our last foothold in the south. We can’t leave that unaddressed for long.”

“If I may, General?” Darmès said, breaking his silence for the first time. The three generals all turned to look at him.

“Of course, my lord Chancellor,” said Gladden, speaking for all three of them. “You have your own plan, then?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” said Darmès. “I would merely like to suggest that perhaps we can simply leave southern Fernest be.”

“I’m... I’m afraid I don’t understand, my lord,” said Gladden, confusion writ plain on his face. None of them had seen such a proposal coming. Darmès’s face was uncanny in its lack of emotion, and it made his thoughts difficult to read, so Felix couldn’t tell what he meant by the suggestion.

“Just what I said, General. The fighting on the southern front had already come to a standstill long before this. As such, I see no pressing reason to dig our heels in there. So long as we hold Kier Fortress, the royal army cannot readily attack us.”

“I... Yes, I suppose so,” said Gladden, not sounding like he agreed at all.

“In addition, I believe the report stated that forty-five thousand of our soldiers are dead. Such a tragedy! Now is the time for us to offer our condolences, and mourn this sad affair.” As Darmès spoke, though, the edges of his mouth curled. Felix felt his misgivings growing.

“Is the emperor aware that Fort Caspar has fallen?” he asked.

“Oh yes, I told His Majesty myself,” said Darmès. “The emperor happens to agree with me, by the way—he believes our best course is to withdraw from southern Fernest.”

“Hey, no fair!” cut in Rosenmarie, bristling at this. “How am I supposed to avenge General Osvannes?”

“Rosenmarie!” cautioned Gladden. “Now is hardly the time for such trivialities!”

“You did not just call avenging General Osvannes trivial!” Rosenmarie snapped back, tossing her flaming red hair. Felix could see how Gladden might have sounded heartless to Rosenmarie, but he also agreed with him. They needed to focus on how to move forwards.

The council chamber fell once more into tense silence, until Darmès broke it, this time addressing Rosenmarie.

“Rosenmarie, my dear,” he said, his voice saccharine sweet, “the chance to avenge Osvannes may be closer at hand than you think.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?” Rosenmarie looked confused, and this time there was no mistaking the smile on Darmès’s sunken face.

“Now that the royal army has reclaimed Fort Caspar and can establish their defenses around it, they won’t be sticking so close to Galia Fortress.”

“What’s that got to do with my revenge?” said Rosenmarie, skeptical, no doubt, of Darmès’s cryptic explanation. Felix held back a sigh. Darmès was obviously trying to get Rosenmarie worked up.

“This is mere conjecture on my part,” continued Darmès, “but I imagine that after solidifying their defenses, they will advance on either the northern or the southern fronts. I seriously doubt they have such reserves as they can afford to leave soldiers idle.”

Rosenmarie folded her arms as she apparently mulled over Darmès’s words. Then, a smile stretched over her lips. “Understood, my lord Chancellor. So now we just need to get them to the northern front—willingly or not.”

“I knew I could count on you to quickly grasp the situation, Rosenmarie.”

Three days after the council, all imperial troops withdrew from southern Fernest, on the order of the emperor.

It had been a month since the detached force had taken back Fort Caspar. The royal army had built up a strong line of defense around the fort. Meanwhile, behind closed doors, prisoner exchange negotiations were taking place. As Ashton had predicted, the imperials had been receptive to their offer of an exchange. When they proposed Kier Fortress as the location for the official signing of the exchange agreement, however, a number of royal officers spoke out in protest. They descended upon the command room to voice their opposition.

“My lord, why do we have to go into enemy territory? We won the last battle, and the exchange was our proposal. Surely it is only proper to do the handover at Fort Caspar!”

Paul listened to the officers with a long-suffering expression. On the surface, their concerns sounded reasonable, but he knew they were just taking umbrage at the mere notion because it hurt their pride. Of course, Otto had chosen this moment to go off and check on the liberated towns and villages. He couldn't complain, though, as he himself had given the order.

“I don't remember ordering any of you lot to go to Kier Fortress,” muttered Paul, but this only upset the officers further.

“Don't split hairs, my lord! It's bad enough that you're entertaining taking a mere hundred soldiers as your retinue.” The empire had demanded that they bring up to a hundred soldiers and no more, and the officers had not been pleased.

“You think so? If I were in their shoes, I know I'd demand the same. Bringing an oversized force to their doorstep isn't very conducive to building trust.” Considering both the signing of the agreement and the journey to Kier Fortress, Paul could accept the terms of a hundred soldiers. In fact, it seemed to him a very carefully considered figure. It was enough to make any bandits think twice before engaging them, but not so many that they might cause trouble in the enemy's territory. It showed respect to the royal army while also not putting the imperial army at a disadvantage. He explained all this, but the officers continued to meet him with outrage from all sides as they launched into further objections.

“That... That may be so,” one officer said, “but I still cannot understand why the signing must happen at Kier Fortress! Summoning us to the very fortress they stole from us—it is a brazen insult!”

“So you’ve got a better idea, do you?” retorted Paul, his eyes flashing. “You came here prepared with an alternate proposal that will convince me and the empire both, did you? Of course, you’re not children, so you’d never just oppose a plan because it’s hard for you to swallow.” The officers all fell silent. Paul knew full well that they didn’t have any real solutions, and he wanted to put an end to this foolish discussion.

“B-But... My lord, I... What if something were to happen to you?”

“On *that* front, at least, you have nothing to worry about,” said Paul shortly. The officers all frowned.

“How can you be so sure, my lord? Even the imperials know well your reputation as the God of the Battlefield,” said one.

“That’s right. We can’t rule out the possibility that someone might use this opportunity to attempt an assassination,” chimed in another. The officers all latched onto this hypothetical situation. If someone wanted to assassinate him, it *was* a golden opportunity. Assassins were hard to see coming, and Paul was always on guard against such attempts. This time, however, it was a needless fear as far as he was concerned.

“The empire isn’t about to resort to such a half-baked plan when they have such an obvious advantage in the war,” he said.

“B-But, my lord—!”

“And besides, I’ll have Second Lieutenant Olivia there as my personal guard. Any more complaints?” The moment Olivia’s name fell from his lips, the officers’ faces went pale. After the Plains of Ilys and the Battle of Fort Caspar, hardly a soul remained in the Seventh Legion who didn’t regard Olivia with awe.

“No, er, of course not! No complaints, my lord.”

“R-Right, yes. If *she’s* there, that’s a different story.”

“Excuse us, my lord, for taking so much of your time!” The officers all saluted

as one, then practically fell over themselves hurrying out of the command room. Paul watched them go, then sighed and reached into his breast pocket.

Another week passed before Paul and his retinue set off down the north road for Kier Fortress. In case of trouble, Paul rode at the center of the convoy in between Olivia and Claudia, who were entrusted with his protection. They were, in turn, surrounded by the soldiers who had infiltrated Fort Caspar with Olivia.

Much to Claudia's consternation, Olivia kept making conversation with Paul as they rode. She felt like she ought to chastise her, but Paul looked so cheerful that she hesitated. In the end, she decided to pretend it wasn't happening.

This is agonizing... I'd rather be locking swords with the enemy than this, she thought to herself, side-eyeing Olivia and Paul as they chatted happily.

They saw neither hide nor hair of any bandits, and arrived safely at Kier Fortress on the fourth day following their departure from Fort Caspar. Kier Fortress was surrounded by three rings of towering walls in addition to the geography of its position giving it yet another layer of natural defense. Above its battlements, the crossed swords banners fluttered in the breeze—a stinging reminder of their defeat there. Paul and his retinue regarded the once so-called impenetrable fortress with ambivalence.

Only Olivia looked up at the fortress with unconcealed excitement.

“Wow, General Paul! Kier Fortress is even bigger and more impressive than Galia!”

“L-Lieutenant Olivia!” cried Claudia, unable to let this pass by.

“No matter,” Paul waved her off. “Do you remember, Lieutenant, that this fortress used to belong to Fernest?”

“Yeah, I know. Until the imperial army took it, right?” said Olivia conversationally. The bitterness in Paul's smile grew more pronounced.

“Indeed. All thanks to our own incompetence.”

“Don't beat yourself up, General Paul. We'll get it back, just like we did with

Fort Caspar. Then it'll be okay."

Paul chuckled. "When you say it like that, Lieutenant, it sounds so simple."

While they laughed together, the vast arched gate slowly began to open to reveal an elegant woman dressed in a black military uniform. Soldiers in full, azure-blue plate armor stood on either side of her in a defensive formation. The enemy's intelligence network must have given them ample warning to allow for such a well-timed welcome. Paul gave the order to dismount, then went up to the woman.

"Lieutenant General Paul of the royal army of Fernest, I presume?" she greeted him.

"Just so."

"Even in the imperial army, we all know the god of the battlefield. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, ser. I am Second Lieutenant Teresa, at your disposal. Right now, I am sure you are weary from your journey and would like to rest."

"You are most kind. I'd like that very much indeed."

They saluted one another, then Teresa turned and walked back inside, indicating for them to follow. They proceeded in silence. Teresa seemed to be particularly curious about Olivia, for she regularly turned to look at her. It took half an hour to pass through the gates in all three walls. There at last they were greeted by a familiar sight of the main gate. Teresa stopped before it, and turned to Paul once more.

"General, I'm very sorry to ask this, but for the sake of security we must insist that you bring only two others with you past this point. Rooms have been prepared for the rest of your retinue, and they are welcome to rest there."

"How dare you spring this on us?!" cut in Claudia, outraged at this duplicity. Even towards one's enemies, there was such a thing as common courtesy. Paul, however, put a hand on her shoulder, so she shut her mouth again.

"Calm yourself, Warrant Officer," he said. "Second Lieutenant Teresa, we accept your conditions in their entirety. These two—Second Lieutenant Olivia and Warrant Officer Claudia—shall accompany me." Teresa started at Olivia's

name, turning to examine her intently, but Olivia was too busy looking around enthusiastically at the fortress to pay her any attention.

“Is everything all right, Lieutenant?”

“I—er, yes, of course. Excuse me, General,” said Teresa, sounding flustered. “Please follow me.” She signaled to her soldiers and with a heavy creaking the gate began to open. Paul, Olivia, and Claudia followed her within.

The signing of the agreement for the exchange of prisoners took place the following day. The officers of the imperial army stood in their ranks in a vast hall, watching on as Paul and Felix signed their names. The two then stood, and shook hands. Murmurs of awe and shock rose up from the crowd.

“It is truly an honor to meet you, Lord Paul,” said Felix. “It may be improper of me to say as much, but coming face-to-face with the God of the Battlefield—it sends a shiver down my spine!”

“The honor is mine, I am sure, Lord Felix of the famed Azure Knights. I must admit, I had no idea you were so young!”

“You are not the first to say so, General,” said Felix with a smile that Paul returned. The remainder of the signing ceremony proceeded without incident. At its conclusion, the atmosphere was, at least on the surface, perfectly cordial.

“Have they gone?” Felix asked later, gazing out the window.

“Yes, my lord,” replied Teresa. “They departed just earlier. General Paul asked that I pass on his regards.” She paused, looking anxiously at Felix. “My lord, are you unwell? You look rather pale.” Feeling guilty for having caused her worry, Felix shook his head.

“No, I am in perfect health. Lieutenant, did you happen to speak with the two women who accompanied the general?”

“Not much, my lord, only... Well, one looked to be very young. I was a little taken aback to learn she was a second lieutenant like myself.”

“I see...”

“My lord?”

All through the signing ceremony, the silver-haired girl’s eyes had been fixed on him. *Observing* him. Even from behind Paul, her presence had been so overwhelming that the God of the Battlefield seemed to shrink in comparison. It had sent a chill down Felix’s spine.

That aura of death, and that unnatural stench of blood... She was like death itself given physical form. I get the feeling that girl is going to be trouble for the empire...

Olivia and Felix.

It would be a long time before the two of them met again.

Extra Chapter: Claudia's Secret

The morning sun climbed up above the mountains, bathing Fort Caspar in warm light.

In a corner of the parade grounds, Olivia and Claudia faced off, each gripping a wooden sword.

"I know it's just practice, but I hope you'll excuse me if I don't hold back, Lieutenant."

"Don't sweat it. I won't let you hurt me."

It could have come across as mocking, but Claudia knew better. She had skill enough with a blade to appreciate the unbridgeable chasm that separated Olivia's abilities and her own. Even against her own father, who had been one of the king's ten sworn swords, she hadn't felt this outclassed—Olivia's deeds at the Battle of Ilys had been that awe-inspiring. And somehow, she had the sense that even then, Olivia had been holding back.

"Then let's begin."

Claudia attacked first. She stepped forwards with her right foot and thrust with her sword, but Olivia dodged with only a slight twist of her torso. Claudia seamlessly transitioned into a sweeping strike to the side, but Olivia knocked her blade aside effortlessly. As Claudia had expected, Olivia responded to her bladework like she was entertaining a child. She hadn't even taken a single step. Claudia concentrated all her will and her strength to launch into a barrage of strikes that left her drenched in sweat. Olivia parried every single one, and finished looking as refreshed as she had when they began.

"Strong" doesn't begin to do her justice... thought Claudia, retreating to put distance between herself and Olivia as she struggled to control her breathing. I doubt even Father could hold his own against her. Fighting her for real, it's clear she's in a wholly different league—like crossing swords with a hero from the old legends.

“Okay, my turn,” said Olivia brightly—and then she appeared right in front of Claudia. Even as Claudia stiffened with shock, she somehow managed to twist to one side and avoid Olivia’s piercing strike. Olivia’s smile changed to surprise, and without a moment’s hesitation Claudia aimed a kick at Olivia’s right side. At this distance, she was sure there was no chance the other girl could dodge it.

But as though she’d expected it, Olivia’s left hand shot out to block with so much force that Claudia couldn’t retract her leg. Olivia slammed a front kick into her stomach, sending her hopping back before falling down on her backside. It was hard to accept that anyone could hit that hard while holding back.

“Huh,” said Olivia, sounding impressed and coming over to peer deeply into Claudia’s eyes. “You’ve got good eyes. I feel like that’ll come in handy.” Claudia forgot the pain in her stomach, staring back at Olivia. She hadn’t told anyone about her biggest secret—not since her closest childhood friend had called her a freak—but now she felt sure that Olivia had somehow worked it out. Olivia, however, didn’t pursue the topic further.

“Want to go again?” she asked.

“Ready when you are, ser,” Claudia said, making her knees bend and straighten to stand up. She forced herself to ignore the ache in her stomach, and raised her sword up in front of her face.

“Right. Here I go, then,” said Olivia. This time, instead of materializing out of nowhere, she vanished. Keeping her cool, Claudia summoned the power in her eyes and searched for Olivia. There—coming around on her right, she caught a flicker of movement. She deliberately pretended she hadn’t noticed. Then, just as Olivia swung the wooden sword down towards her, she brought her own sword around to parry it, sure she had her this time.

Claudia’s sword met only empty air. *She disappeared again?!* She scanned her surroundings, but couldn’t see Olivia anywhere. Her vision was growing cloudy.

Damn it, I can’t keep this up, she thought, feeling panic set in. Just then, she saw a shadow from above her head. She looked up to see Olivia against the red sun, her sword already swinging down.

“I... I lose.” Olivia stopped her strike a hair’s breadth away from splitting

Claudia's skull open. If this had been a real fight, she'd have died.

"You've got pretty good form. I can tell you trained really hard. You shouldn't use your eyes like that too much, though—it wears you out, right?" Olivia said with concern. Somehow, it seemed she knew about this power that Claudia herself didn't fully understand.

"Y-Yes, ser. You're right, it drains me. Do you... Do you know how it works, Lieutenant Olivia?"

"Yeah, I learned techniques just like it. Take *Swift Step*—what I did just now. I get totally exhausted when I use it too much," said Olivia, smiling excitedly and tapping her hands on her legs.

"Who taught you all this?" asked Claudia, eager to know. But Olivia shared nothing.

"I'll tell you one day," was all she said.

"So that thing where you seem to vanish—it's called *Swift Step*?"

"That's right. You know, I think you might be able to learn it too." Claudia felt her heart beat faster. With such a power at her command, she could rise still further in the ranks of knighthood. She knew full well that the sword was the only way she could make her way in the world.

"D-Do you really think so? I'd be honored if you'd teach me, ser!"

"Let's do it, then. I think it's breakfast time now, though. I'm ravenous!" Olivia said cheerfully, rubbing her belly.

"Very well, then. One Breakfast Special for Second Lieutenant Olivia, on me."

"No way! Seriously? Doesn't that cost extra? Like, a *lot* extra?"

"It's nothing, ser. Just an expression of my thanks for today's training."

"Hah hah! This is the *best*!" exclaimed Olivia with delight, setting off all but skipping towards the mess hall. Claudia hung back for a time, gazing at the other girl, until Olivia turned back and waved at her.

"Claudiaaaa! Hurry up, let's go eat!"

"Yes, Lieutenant!" She took off at a brisk run.

Epilogue: The Conferment Ceremony, and...

It was a month after the prisoner exchange. The First and Seventh Legions, entrusting the defense of Fort Caspar to Major General Hermann and the eight thousand soldiers under him, set off back to Galia Fortress. There was no sign of a response from Kier Fortress, and the new defensive line around Fort Caspar had come together, so there was no need for their continued presence. Lambert and Neinhardt were to continue on from Galia back to the royal capital.

Upon their return, Otto and a number of others were so snowed under by the day-to-day tasks that had piled up in their absence that they ended up working round the clock. Ashton, in his newly official role of tactician, attended to Otto, who in turn drilled into him everything he would need to know about the military.

Meanwhile, Claudia was on her way to see Olivia.

I can't wait to see the lieutenant's face when she hears this, she thought gleefully. She forced her face, which had slipped into a smile, back to a neutral expression, then she cleared her throat, and knocked on the door.

"Is that you, Claudia? Come on in." Despite the fact that she hadn't announced herself, Olivia guessed it was her. Wondering if there was some tell in the way she knocked, she opened the door. Olivia was sprawled on her bed as usual, reading a book. She looked up, then immediately said, "What's with the funny smile?"

Was I smiling again without realizing it? thought Claudia, feeling stung. "Wh-What? I'm not smiling!" she protested hastily. "Though as it happens, I have good news, ser. Prepare yourself for a real surprise!"

"Mm, I think I'll be fine," said Olivia seriously.

"That's what you think now, ser," said Claudia with a chuckle. "Second

Lieutenant Olivia, you are to be awarded a Golden Lion!” There was a moment of silence, before...

“Huh,” said Olivia without interest, and went back to reading her book. The silence drew out, punctuated only by the sound of pages turning.

That... That’s it?! Claudia was frozen with shock. Olivia had been true to her word. Now that Claudia thought about it, they’d had a similar conversation once before.

Back then, I was pretty sure this wasn’t going to be a fun job... thought Claudia dryly.

“Are your ears working, ser?” she pressed Olivia. “A Golden Lion! It is the greatest possible honor! You *are* aware that only three have ever been awarded, right?”

The first was awarded in the eighth century to Chief of Staff Leonhart Varkess, for his valiant efforts in purging the kingdom of political corruption and saving it from ruin. The second had been in the ninth century to Major General Tristan Windsome. The general had fought against Minister Theodor’s coup d’état in the Theodor Uprising, subduing the army of twenty thousand rebels in only two days. The third was awarded later that same century to a warrior who, through a string of military triumphs in the later days of the warlord period, had earned the moniker “The Invincible General”—none other than Field Marshal Cornelius vim Gruening. Each had gone down in history as a hero. With this, Olivia would herself become a hero of the kingdom as the first woman to receive this honor.

“You’re so obsessed with honor. I told you before, didn’t I? I’d rather have books and good food,” said Olivia, tapping the cover of the book in her hands. Claudia, at a loss for words, found her eyes drawn to the cover. To her surprise, she saw it was *Comet, the Mischievous Fairy*, a book she herself had read over and over again as a child.

“Are you fond of that book, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah. I love how Comet plots all these tricks, even when they’re terrified of humans. Have you read it?” she said, her interest sparked. Claudia puffed up her chest, as though to impress upon Olivia the foolishness of her question.

“I don’t mean to boast, ser, but I happen to own every book in the Comet series. When I was little—though it’s a little embarrassing to admit—I was convinced Comet was real and tried to catch them.” It made her squirm a little to reveal this memory, but no sooner was it out of her mouth than Olivia leapt up from the bed to seize her by the shoulders.

“Wh-Wh-What are you—?” yelped Claudia, feeling a little scared. Olivia’s eyes were gleaming like a predator with prey in its jaws.

“Me too! *Me too!* Oh, no *way*, I tried to catch Comet too!” cried Olivia breathlessly. Realizing she was just excited to find someone who felt the same as her, Claudia let herself relax—and as she did so, she felt happiness bubble up inside of her. None of her friends back then had loved those books like she did, not one. She decided to make a proposal.

“That is quite the coincidence, ser. I’d be happy to give you the rest of the books, if you like. I think they’re still all at my parents’ house.”

“You would?!” Olivia’s whole face lit up in a smile as brilliant as the summer sun. *Almost any boy she smiled at like that would fall head over heels in love*, Claudia mused absently, feeling the bones in her shoulders crunch a little under Olivia’s grip. *If they were a high-ranking noble, they could send her a hundred books—two hundred, even—without batting an eye.*

“Of course, ser. My only concern is... Well, there are over twenty volumes in the Comet series...” She looked around at the room, packed with towering piles of books.

“No problem!” said Olivia, clapping a hand to her chest. “I’ll get Ashton to help tidy these up.” The idea of doing it all herself apparently hadn’t occurred to her. Claudia felt a little pang of sympathy for Ashton, forced into cleaning duty on the whim of his superior officer.

“In that case, I’ll write home to have the books sent directly.”

“Thank you! Oh, you and Ashton are both such good humans!”

Though Olivia’s odd way of speaking threw her a little, as it always did, Claudia still thanked her politely.

I’ve told her about the Golden Lion, at least. Now, to ask about this. She

looked down at the white box in her arms.

“Sorry to change the subject, ser, but do you have a dress uniform?”

“A dress uniform?” said Olivia, perplexed. “Nope, I don’t have anything like that.” *Good thing I thought to procure one, then*, thought Claudia, feeling privately pleased with herself.

“That won’t do at all, ser. Everyone must be in full ceremonial dress for the conferment ceremony.”

“I can’t just wear my normal uniform?” Olivia asked, picking at the jacket she currently wore.

“While your standard uniform is good for most situations, ser, I’m afraid it won’t do for the conferment.”

“I guess I won’t go then,” said Olivia. Seeing her reach out again for her book, Claudia seized her wrist. Olivia’s eyes went round with shock.

“C-Claudia?!”

“You’re the guest of honor; you can’t just not go!” she exclaimed, then sighed. “Anyway. I had a feeling this might happen, so I took the liberty of bringing a spare dress uniform for you. Luckily enough we’re about the same height, so it should fit.”

“Claudia, you didn’t have to go out of your way for me,” said Olivia as she looked away from Claudia, but she sounded like a bad actor reading a script. She tried to casually slip her arm out of Claudia’s hand, but Claudia just tightened her grip.

“You really should try and sound like you mean it when you thank people, ser. Now hurry up and get changed. If anything doesn’t fit right, let me know and I’ll get the tailor to fix it up,” she said, and thrust the pure white dress uniform into Olivia’s hands. The epaulets were embroidered with the lions and chalice of Fernest. It was her first time taking the spare out of its box, but it appeared to be in good condition.

“You’re being so pushy lately, Claudia,” said Olivia, pouting as she began, reluctantly, to undress. The dress uniform was of more or less the same make

as the standard uniform, so it didn't take her long to change. The woman who stood before Claudia now was an officer of such nobility she might have stepped straight out of the world of legend.

"Just as I thought. You look wonderful, ser," Claudia complimented her. Olivia picked at the white uniform, tilting her head back and forth in dissatisfaction about something.

"Is there a problem, ser?" inquired Claudia. She couldn't see anything amiss in the length, nor the cut that would necessitate calling the tailor. Olivia made a discontented noise.

"The chest is way too tight, I can't breathe properly. And the waist is all baggy."



She looked up at Claudia when the other girl didn't respond. "Hello? Did you hear me?" she said.

"That's how it's supposed to be, ser. You'll just have to put up with it."

"What? But you said if anything doesn't fit right..."

"There's nothing to fix."

"But—"

"Nothing to fix." Claudia's gaze was ice cold.

"I... Um, okay. You're right, Claudia," Olivia said, then changed out of the dress uniform, still looking dissatisfied.

The Great Hall at Galia Fortress

The great hall rarely saw use, but today it glowed in the light of dazzling chandeliers, its walls lined with the crimson banners of the Kingdom of Fernest, each emblazoned with the lions and chalice. In the center stood Paul, wearing a purple cloak over his dress uniform. To his left and right respectively, civilian and military officials stood in perfectly straight lines. Otto stood beside Paul, also wearing his dress uniform. On a plinth, there rested a shining gold medal engraved with a lion.

"Let the conferment ceremony commence!"

At this pronouncement, trumpets blared, and the guard slowly opened the heavy doors to the hall. From behind them stepped forth Olivia in her white dress uniform. She showed no sign of nerves under the eyes of the assembled officers, and made her way forwards with her head held high. While they had all heard the rumors, for most of the civilian officials, this was their first time seeing Olivia in the flesh, and they gaped at her in amazement. One removed their glasses to check the lenses.

They probably expected her to be all muscle and brawn like Lord Paul in his younger days... thought Otto, just as a civilian officer nearby muttered, "Who was saying all that about muscles?"

Olivia walked up to Paul, then put a hand to her chest and sank down

gracefully on one knee. Otto was taken aback at how well she did it. He hadn't had time to teach her the proper manners for the ceremony, so he'd been prepared to grit his teeth through whatever indignities he had to witness. He looked over at Claudia, standing at the end of the right column, before shaking his head firmly.

Is this Warrant Officer Claudia's doing? I swear, I don't understand that girl at all, he thought, bemused. Beside him, Paul's eyes were shining like a young boy looking at a new toy.

"Second Lieutenant Olivia. Today, your great service to the Kingdom of Fernest is to be recognized through the conferment of the Golden Lion."

"Yes, ser! Thank you for this honor, ser!"

Otto went over to the kneeling Olivia and affixed the medal to her chest. She stood, took a step back, and bowed deeply. Then she turned, and with her crimson cloak emblazoned with the crest of Fernest billowing behind her, she strode from the room. Otto heard sighs and gasps of awe from the assembled officers, and— "My... My lord!" The atmosphere was shattered as a soldier came bursting into the hall.

"What is the meaning of this interruption?!" bellowed Otto, as the assembled officers all scowled at the intruder. "We are in the midst of the conferment ceremony!"

"Forgive me, ser! There's... There's been...!" The soldier appeared too panicked to continue.

"Calm down, soldier," said Paul. "What's happened?"

"My lord, we've just had word from the capital—the Third and Fourth Legions on the northern front have been defeated!"

It was the year Tempus Fugit 999. In the Kingdom of Fernest, dark clouds were gathering.

Afterword

...a skeleton cloaked in rags and wielding a giant scythe.

I think most people probably imagine a death god just as Colonel Neinhardt describes (if not, please accept my apologies!). The death gods that appear in this book, however, are shadows that shimmer like the air above a flame. They might wield giant scythes, but apart from that they're nothing alike. This is a bit of a spoiler, but as you'll realize if you keep reading, Z might get called a god of death in this world, but we don't know what he truly is.

This is the story of Olivia, taken in and raised by this self-declared god of death, using all the combat knowledge she's been taught to plow through the battlefield with a cheerful smile and a spring in her step. It's a kind of war chronicle, but I hope it's not so heavy-handed that people who don't like that sort of book can't enjoy it.

Lastly, I'd like to make some acknowledgments. First, my editor, Higuchi-sama—thank you for your kindness even with all the headaches I cause you. To Cierra, who produced the illustrations, I have nothing but gratitude for your beautiful work that went above and beyond my own imagination. Finally, thank you so much to everyone who worked so hard to get this book published.

I'd also like to take this moment to express my gratitude to all of you reading this afterword. Thank you, with all my heart.

Maito Ayamine



I
Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

Maito Ayamine
illust. *Cierra*



"Haha... You do?"

*Ashton
Senefelder*

"It was amazing.
That mustard is
simply marvelous."

"Claudia thinks so too!"

Olivia

Claudia Jung



"I am Osvannes von Glarwein,
Supreme Commander of the
Imperial Southern Area Army!"

Death's DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA



Bonus Short Stories

A Day with Olivia and Neinhardt

Fort Caspar

Following her orders from Otto, Olivia knocked on the door before her.

“Second Lieutenant Olivia, reporting, ser!”

“Enter.” The voice that replied wasn’t Otto’s. It sounded gentler, somehow. Olivia opened the door and found herself looking into the eyes of both a blonde man seated on the sofa and a mountain of mouth-wateringly delicious food on the table. Not that the food had eyes, but they may as well have for all that Olivia stared.

“Sorry to call you up here all of a sudden. Why don’t you have a seat?” said the blonde man. Olivia did so, taking the chair across the table from the man so that she faced him.

“Um... May I ask what you called me here for, ser? I don’t think we’ve had the chance to meet...” she said. The man looked a little surprised at this, then smiled crookedly.

“We have met at least once before, actually. In the command room at Galia Fortress.”

“Wait, seriously? Er, I mean... Is that so, ser?” There was a pause.

“Oh no,” the man said. “That must mean you don’t know why you’re here.”

“Yes, ser. Colonel Otto said he was too busy to explain, and that I should just come and hear what you had to say,” Olivia said. The man put a hand to his brow.

“This is how he gets back at me,” he muttered, the crooked smile returning. “My name is Colonel Neinhardt of the First Legion. Do you *really* not remember

meeting me back at Galia Fortress?”

Olivia frowned, thinking hard. She only had two memories from the command room at Galia. The first was the delicious cake Paul had given her. The second was Otto’s furious face as he pounded his fist on the table. As she wracked her brain trying to remember, Neinhardt spoke again.

“No need to strain yourself. If you don’t remember, you don’t remember,” he said, then made a gesture at the food on the table to encourage her to take it. “I called you here today to thank you.”

“To... thank me?” Olivia had absolutely no clue what he meant. For now, seeing as he’d offered, she decided to take a bit of the food—all cut into evenly sized pieces—and pop it into her mouth. As she bit into it, the outer layer split apart, and a sweet liquid filled her mouth. This was a thousand times better than sucking the nectar out of a flower.

“I am told that before you enlisted in the army, you slew a number of imperial soldiers on the Canalia Highway. One of them was a man of particular martial ability by the name of Samuel. He killed my closest friend. It may have been entirely coincidental, but by killing Samuel, you avenged that friend for me.”

“Huh. Okay,” said Olivia. The truth was, she didn’t remember the events Neinhardt was talking about, and she didn’t really care either. She was far more interested in this food full of sweet liquid.

“Er, anyway, I wanted to express my gratitude to you. Thank you, really.”

“You’re welcome. By the way, what’s this called?” Olivia asked, pointing to her mouth.

“That? It’s a type of fruit... They’re fairly common, I think...” Neinhardt went on to explain that this fruit was eaten throughout Fernest.

“What about those round ones in the basket?”

“What? Oh, those just haven’t been cut up yet.”

“Can I have them, ser?”

“I mean, I don’t see why not...” said Neinhardt. He looked lost.

“Thanks—I mean, Thank you, ser! May I be dismissed now, ser?”

“Oh, um. Yes, that’s all I wanted to say. You’re dismissed, Second Lieutenant.”
Neinhardt nodded at her stiffly. Delighted at her luck, Olivia took the fruit basket, cradling it in her arms, and left without so much as a salute.

For some time after this, Neinhardt sat frozen, his mouth hanging open.

A Day with Olivia and Otto

Galia Fortress

Otto ran into Olivia in civilian clothes in the corridor.

“Are you going somewhere?” he inquired.

“Yes, ser! It’s my day off, so we’re going to Laki to buy fancy bread!”

“Very well... Are those really the only clothes you have?” Olivia was dressed in the tan-colored tunic she’d arrived at Galia Fortress in. It appeared the bloodstains had come out, but it was conspicuously frayed in places. No matter how he looked at it, it was hardly appropriate attire for an officer of the royal army.

“Yes, ser! Nothing but the clothes on my back!” said Olivia cheerfully, pulling at the tunic’s sleeves.

“How you managed to learn phrases like that without picking up an ounce of common sense along the way... Anyway, as your superior, your manner of dress reflects on me. Can’t you ask Warrant Officer Claudia to get you something less tattered?” Claudia was nobility, which meant that she surely had an outfit or two lying around.

“No, ser. I did ask, but she said no,” replied Olivia. Otto was perplexed. From what he knew of Claudia, she wasn’t the type to refuse a request.

“Do you know why?” he asked. “The two of you are much the same height after all.”

“Don’t know, ser. She just got this scary, icy look and said, ‘It’s not as though my clothes would fit you anyway, Second Lieutenant,’” said Olivia. As Otto struggled to think of a reply, she added, “And then she asked if I enjoyed

mocking her.”

“Ah. I... I see. These things happen, I suppose,” Otto said haltingly. “Very well. I shall accompany you to Laki.”

“Huh? Do you want to buy bread too, ser?”

“Of course not. Now hurry up.” Otto set off at a brisk pace, Olivia following behind him with her head tilted in confusion.

It was an hour’s ride to Laki. After they arrived, Otto and Olivia went to the haberdashery.

“What sort of clothes do you like, Lieutenant? Though I imagine looking as you do, you’d suit just about anything,” said Otto offhandedly, checking the thickness of various fabrics as he spoke.

“You’re gonna—uh, I mean, are you saying you’ll buy something for me, ser?”

“Well, you can’t keep traipsing about looking like that. You’re going to make a laughingstock of the army. Now, hurry up and choose something.” He looked around for the shopkeeper, then called out, “Help her with the sizes, would you?”

“Of course,” replied the shopkeeper. Olivia happily followed them to try on some new clothes.

“Colonel Otto, look at what I got!” A blushing Olivia held up a red garment to her chest and gave a twirl that betrayed her age of only fifteen years. The shopkeeper beamed at her. Otto tried to imagine what the shopkeeper would do if they ever learned this girl had the whole imperial army terrified to death with her monstrous powers.

“Just one outfit won’t be enough. You wouldn’t be any better off than before. Pick another two or three. Off you go.”

“What? Seriously?” Olivia gasped, glowing with delight. Otto cleared his throat several times.

“I believe you meant to say, ‘May I, ser?’ How many times do I have to tell you

before it sticks?”

Olivia gave a sheepish laugh.

In the end, Olivia picked out four outfits. She skipped out of the shop, Otto following her with a bag of children’s clothing casually tucked under one arm.

A Day with Olivia and Ashton

Galia Fortress

Ashton was walking down the corridor after Otto released him for the day when he saw Olivia leaning against a wall. This somehow struck him as ominous, so he made to turn and go back the other way, only to hear the patter of footsteps from behind him just as someone gripped his shoulder.

“Ashton, I was waiting for you for *ages*,” said Olivia. Ashton met her smile with eyes full of suspicion.

“If you want another mustard and jerky sandwich, you can forget it. The ogre—Otto, that is—has been working me to the bone. I’m exhausted.”

“It’s not that. I want you to come to my room for a bit,” said Olivia, before seizing his arm and dragging him off with her. Once they arrived at her room, she gestured vaguely about. “You see how it is. Think you could help me out?”

“See how what is?” replied Ashton. Other than the books scattered all over the floor, he wasn’t sure what, exactly, he was supposed to be looking at.

“Huh? I want you to help me tidy the books up.”

“Yes, I got that much, though I sort of wish I hadn’t. The thing is, you made this mess yourself, right? Can’t you tidy it up yourself, too? I think you *ought* to, actually,” said Ashton. He put his hand on the door, but Olivia grabbed his left arm with both her hands. His heart began to pound, and he turned back to see her gazing at him with a forlorn expression.

“So you won’t help me?” she asked. Ashton was silent. “You won’t?” she asked again. Ashton let out a loud groan.

“Fine! Fine, I’ll help. Are you happy now?”

“You will? Oh, I knew you were a good human!” Olivia immediately started passing books to him.

“Hold on. It won’t do any good handing me books if you don’t tell me where the bookshelf is.”

“Bookshelf? What’s that?” said Olivia, tilting her head quizzically.

“You don’t even have a bookshelf? How were you planning on tidying up?”

“Can’t we just pile them up against the wall?”

Ashton sighed. “All right, wait here,” he said, and trudged out of the room.

“Phew. Done at last.”

Two hours later, Ashton wiped away sweat with his sleeve as he gazed upon the finished bookshelf with satisfaction. He hadn’t built anything in a long time, but it seemed he’d not lost his touch. Olivia, meanwhile, had spent the whole time watching him work with intense interest.

“Ashton, you’re amazing! So this is a ‘bookshelf.’”

“If you shelve the books like this,” he said, placing a few on the shelf to show her, “you can easily tell where they are, see?”

“Whoa, you’re right!” said Olivia, her eyes wide. “Now I can find the books I want to read right away! Ashton...” Olivia gulped loudly. “I think you’re a genius!”

Usually, Ashton would have felt like she was making fun of him. But given Olivia’s infamous ignorance of social customs, he suspected she spoke in earnest. He set about picking up all the books from the floor and lining them up on the shelf. When he was done, the room was so clean it was practically unrecognizable.

“Right, all done. I’m going back to my room.”

“Already?”

“Well, yes,

“It’s already so late though. Why don’t you stay here? We can sleep together,” said Olivia with an innocent smile, patting the bed beside her. Ashton’s head jerked up in disbelief.

“O-Olivia, what did you just say?”

“Huh? Come on, let’s sleep together—”

“Good night!!”

“Huh?!”

Ashton fled as fast as his legs would carry him.

A Day with Olivia and Claudia

Claudia’s Room at Galia Fortress

“I request another round, Lieutenant Olivia.”

“Really? You want to keep going?”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Well, no, I guess not...”

Two hours had passed since Olivia asked Claudia to play cards with her to kill some time. Claudia hadn’t seemed all that interested at first, but now she was dealing up the cards herself. The score was currently 15-0.

“I didn’t expect you to hate losing this much,” said Olivia.

“It’s nothing of the sort, ser. I merely apply myself seriously to any activity,” said Claudia tersely as she laid out the cards.

If that’s true, why do you look so bitter? The question popped up in Olivia’s mind, but she fought back the urge to ask it out loud. She had the feeling something bad would happen if she did.

“It’s your turn, Lieutenant.”

“Okay,” said Olivia, then flipped over two of the face-down cards. A cup and a sword. Not a match.

“Bad luck, ser,” said Claudia with a satisfied chuckle. “Now it’s my turn.” She flipped over her cards. “...Not a match,” she said, staring daggers at the picture of the joker on the card before her. It almost seemed to be laughing at her.

“H-Hey now, probability-wise, it’s really unlikely you’ll get a pair on your first try,” Olivia said placatingly, but Claudia didn’t respond. “Claudia? Did you hear me?”

“...It’s your turn, Lieutenant,” Claudia muttered. Internally, Olivia was perplexed. The game had started out as a bit of fun, but now it was anything but.

“C-Claudia, now that I think about it, it’s almost lunch time,” said Olivia with a deliberately breezy smile. Claudia looked back at her, expressionless.

“Your point?”

“I just thought that it’s lunchtime, so we should go have lunch, at lunchtime...” Olivia’s voice grew smaller and smaller as she spoke.

“Do you mean to say, ser, that you intend to take your winnings and run? Do you really think that behavior befits a knight’s honor?”

“I mean, I’m not a knight...”

“What was that, ser?”

“Uh, nothing,” said Olivia, shaking her head emphatically. Anything more would be poking the hornet’s nest.

“Then your next move, if you please, ser.”

“Right...”

The round ended. Claudia clutched the card she’d won, a huge smile on her face.

“Looks like I won this one, ser,” she said with a satisfied chuckle.

“Yep, guess I lost this time,” said Olivia. “Let’s go have lunch!” She went to the door. Just as she made to push it open, however, there was a whisper right in her ear. Claudia had come up right behind her.

“Just to be sure, ser...” she said in a chilling tone entirely unlike her usual voice, “it couldn’t possibly be that you lost *on purpose*?” Olivia turned back, then shook her head with all her might. “I thought so. A knight would never dishonor their opponent in such a way.”

“Th-That’s right! A knight would never!”

“Very well, Lieutenant. Let’s go to lunch. How about I buy you the lunch special?”

“O-Oh! Hooray...!”

As she watched Claudia walking cheerfully ahead of her, Olivia swore to herself that she would never invite the other girl to play a game ever again.

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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 1

by Maito Ayamine

Sylvia Gallagher Edited by Ori Starling

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