

◆ MAITO  
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.  
CIERRA

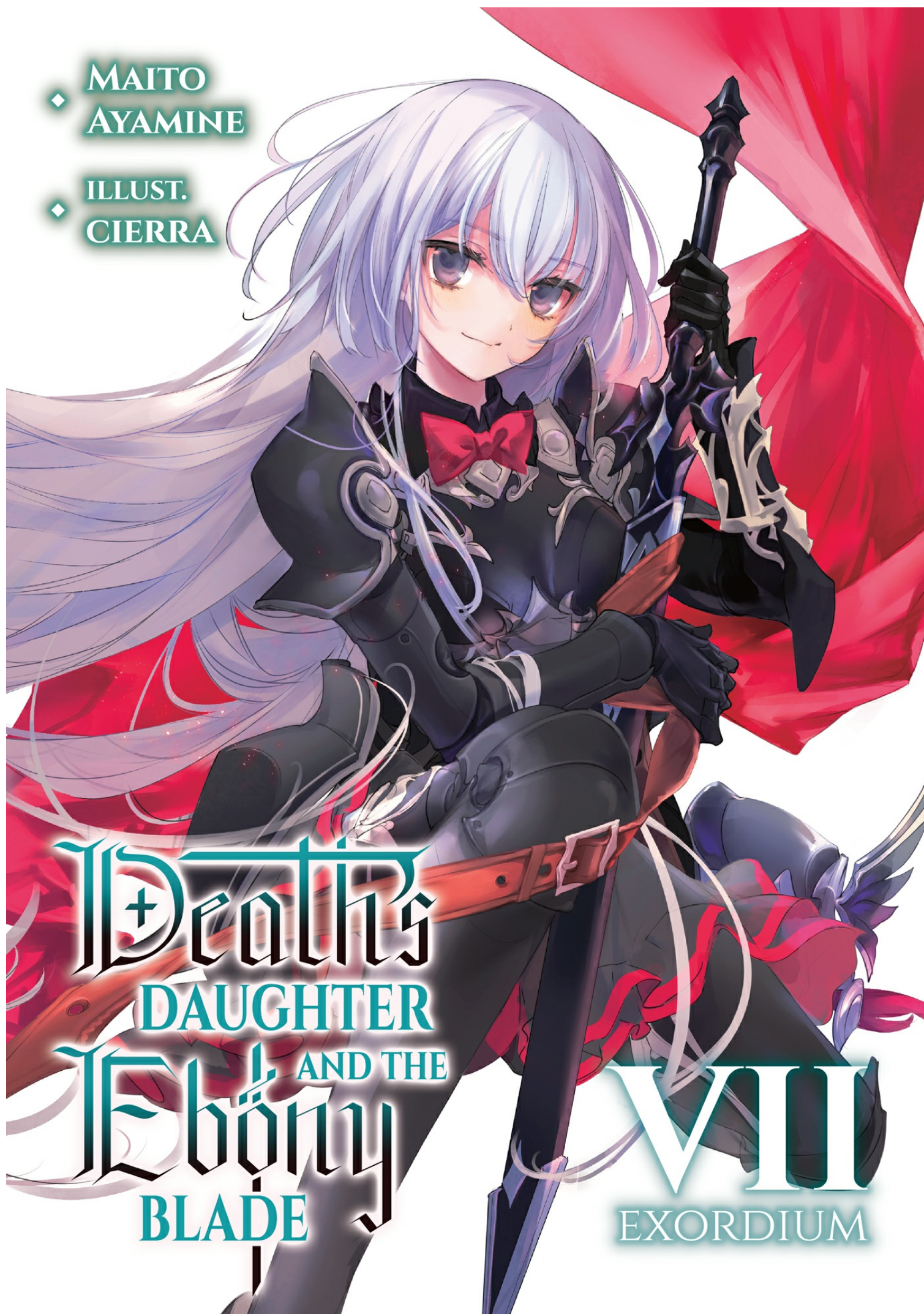
Death's  
DAUGHTER  
AND THE  
Ebony  
BLADE

VII  
EXORDIUM



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# Characters

## Kingdom of Fernest



**Claudia  
Jung**

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



**Ashton  
Senefelder**

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



**Olivia  
Valedstorm**

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



**Lise  
Prussie**

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



**Blood  
Enfield**

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



**Ellis  
Crawford**

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

**Lambert  
von Garcia**

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

**Cornelius  
vim Gruening**

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

**Alfonse  
sem Galmond**

The king of Fernest.

**Otto  
Steiner**

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

**Paul  
von Baltza**

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

**Neinhardt  
Blanche**

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



## Asvelt Empire



**Felix  
von Sieger**

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



**Rosenmarie  
von Berlietta**

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

**Darmés  
Guski**

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

## Holy Land of Mekia



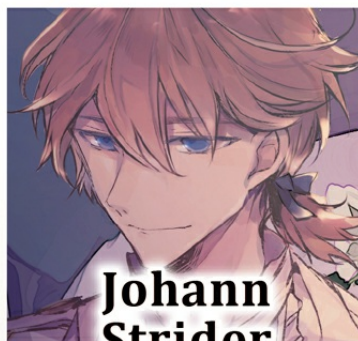
**Sofitia  
Hell Mekia**

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



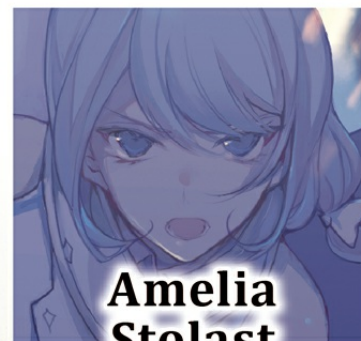
**Lara  
Mira Crystal**

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



**Johann  
Strider**

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



**Amelia  
Stolast**

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

## Others

### Z

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

### Xenia

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





Death's Daughter  
and the Ebony Blade

# VII

EXORDIUM

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## Prologue: The Final Sacrifice

*Eliot, Caroline, give me strength!*

Olivia leaped skyward, then looked down at the two Asura below her.

*These two must be some of the best the Asura have if they made it through Eliot's traps. I will see that they meet their ends here.*

She held two smoke pellets between her fingertips; then, she threw them down at the ground. There was a soft whistling sound as white smoke billowed out to fill their surroundings. Olivia set her sights on the Asura in the white snake mask, then stabbed downward with her sword of light. The blow should have pierced straight through the assassin's skull, but there was no impact—only the dry sound of the blade slashing through air.

“How very old-fashioned. One of the Deep Folk should know better than to think such sleight of hand would work.” The voice was laden with disappointment, and with it came a blade slashing out at Olivia's right. She ducked it, only to immediately dodge a set of vicious claws that threatened to rake her front, escaping by a hair's breadth.

She focused her strength in her legs to launch herself up into the sky once more.

*Not enough, then...* She took a deep breath, then threw another smoke pellet at the ground. The area filled with still thicker white smoke.

“Are you an imbecile? Or do you think you're better than us?” The masked Asura didn't bother to hide his annoyance. Olivia didn't grace him with an answer. Instead, she launched into another series of sword strikes. The Asura, wielding a blade with each of his uncannily long arms, dealt with these easily, all the while keeping her at a set distance. After a while, he sighed, and from behind Olivia came Nefer's throaty chuckle.

“I believe the Deep Folk woman thinks you're the easier mark, Safiss.”

“Yeah, well, she would, wouldn't she?”



“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Safiss chuckled. “Surely I don’t have to say it, Nefer.”

Nefer was grotesque with his wolflike fangs as he watched her from behind like a hawk for any momentary weakness, but that was not why Olivia had decided to take out the Asura called Safiss first. Rather, after observing the subtleties of their movements, she *had* determined that Safiss was the lesser fighter of the two.

Though her last blow had failed to meet its mark, it had split the mask in two, leaving Safiss’s face exposed. Beneath his disturbingly snakelike eyes, his lips curved as he ran his fingers along his cheek.

“You really are Gracia’s descendant. Not a single wasted movement. It’s been an honor to have our abilities rated by you, and while I hate to spoil your conclusions, we’ve got places to be.” With this, Safiss’s snakelike forked tongue flitted out to lick his lips. He came at Olivia with another unbroken series of slashes, which she parried with calmness and precision.

*He’s still only testing the waters, then. Even so, he really is quick—though not so quick that I can’t handle him...* Olivia struck back at every opening she found, all the while on alert for an attack from behind. If she lowered her guard for so much as a moment, Nefer would rip her to shreds with those claws he flashed at her even now. Just that fact that the fight was two-on-one put her at an overwhelming disadvantage. She could not afford even a moment’s carelessness.

“Didn’t I *tell* you that was futile...?” Safiss sighed. “I suppose you really are an imbecile.”

Olivia repelled a sharp strike from her left. But then, something unexpected happened. Safiss’s right arm, thrown back by the recoil from the parry, suddenly bent back in a direction otherwise impossible for normal human joints before it stabbed Olivia clean through her shoulder.

“Guh!”

For an instant, she faltered. Safiss seized the chance to slip in close, spiraling around her like a serpent wrapping her in its coils.



“That was over quicker than I expected.”

As the white smoke thinned and her field of vision came into sharper relief, Olivia saw Nefer standing in front of her, his razor-sharp fangs bared. As she struggled to free herself from Safiss, he only constricted her more tightly.

“Stop fighting the inevitable. Escape from my constriction is impossible.” Safiss sounded rapturous. His tongue slid lingeringly along her cheek.

*He’s right to be pleased with himself. If I can’t get free by force...* Olivia let all the strength leave her body. Safiss nodded appreciatively.

“That’s right. The important thing is always to know when to give up,” he said, turning to his companion. “Nefer.”

“On it.” Nefer moved slowly forward to stand directly in front of Olivia. Then, he thrust his vicious claws straight at her face!

“What...the hell...?!” Safiss toppled to the ground, blood gushing from the marks in his face that had been gouged by Nefer’s claws. For a long moment, Nefer stared at his fist, slick with Safiss’s blood. His gaze slowly shifted to the kneeling Olivia.

Olivia could not make out any panic or uncertainty in his expression over having just murdered his own comrade.

“What did you do? It should have been impossible for you to escape.” He paused, surprise dawning on his face. “Unless there was something in those smoke pellets... Poison, of course...”

Olivia, after gulping in a lungful of air, gave him a slight smile. Of *course* she had known perfectly well that smoke pellets would do nothing against the Asura. But hers had been no ordinary smoke pellets—they had contained a slow-acting poison. Though it wasn’t fatal, once imbibed, it gradually attacked the nerves to render the body immobilized. Quick-acting lethal poisons carried trace scents that the Asura would have had no trouble detecting as assassins trained from birth. The poison Olivia had put in the smoke pellets was a refinement of a secret elixir passed down by the Valedstorms. It was completely without taste or odor, and that was how she had slipped it past the Asura. Still, they had displayed an abnormally strong tolerance to it, and its effects had



taken a long time to manifest, such that Olivia had escaped by narrower a margin than she had expected.

*That leaves just the one...* she thought. Nefer really didn't seem to care that he'd killed his comrade. He clenched and unclenched his fists a few times experimentally.

"Not only poison, but a poison that could trick us Asura..." he murmured. "You played us."

"Looks like things didn't turn out as you wanted, did they? In a few more moments, the poison will immobilize you too. This is over."

"Over..." Nefer repeated. "I suppose that Safiss and I unwittingly underestimated you, what with it being two-on-one and all. I will have to reflect deeply on my mistakes here." Even now that he knew about the poison, Nefer's attitude of indifference never faltered.

Olivia frowned. "Bravado...? But that's not it, is it?"

Nefer didn't answer her. "You're right—things did not go as I wanted. Or at least, you're half right."

"Half right...?"

"I take it from your expression that you don't understand." Nefer formed a fist with his left hand, grinning wickedly. "I'll have to make you feel it, then—feel just how badly you've underestimated *me*." His grin grew savage. Then, little by little, his body began to grow. His muscles bulged, his fangs grew even sharper, and his claws darkened to a sinister black.

Olivia clicked her tongue. *That's Odic physical hyperactivation...*

Odic physical activation was a technique whereby one enhanced their physical abilities by sending Odh through their whole body. Anyone experienced with Odic manipulation knew it. Olivia was employing it at that very moment, and the late Safiss had done the same. However, the pure, corporealized Odh radiating off of Nefer made Olivia realize that the similarity to the technique as she knew it was only superficial. She had heard that Gracia Valedstorm, the greatest warrior of the Deep Folk and her direct ancestor, had been able to perform physical hyperactivation, but this was her first time



encountering someone who could use it in the flesh. Not only that, but it looked like this wasn't his first time.

Olivia raised her light blade, never taking her eyes off of Nefer as she carefully backed away. As though to signal that he was ready, Nefer put a hand to the back of his neck and cracked it.

"Trust the mistress of the House of Valedstorm to be so learned," Nefer drawled, as though he'd read her mind. "Not that knowledge will save you." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he was upon her, stirring up a gale around himself as he charged. Instantly, Olivia used Swift Step to try and put distance between them, but she was still outstripped by Nefer's speed. He immediately closed the gap.

"Damn!" Olivia hissed. Without stopping, she kicked off the ground and leaped to the side, out of the way of Nefer's fists unscathed, his black claws only brushing against her side.

Or so she thought.

*That little brush did this...?* She looked down to the source of the pain she felt. Her armor, crafted specially for her from steel lames, now bore five deep gouges from Nefer's claws. When she tentatively probed the wound with her fingers, they felt warmth and came away slick with crimson.

"Right now, these claws of mine are sharper than any blade," Nefer boasted, waggling them in front of her. Olivia licked the blood from her fingertips, then transformed her blade of light back into a whip.

"What a coincidence," Nefer said. "*Mine* can do that too." He made to close on her again, but Olivia beat him to the punch, her whip slicing across the ground as she brandished it at him.

For an ordinary person, perceiving a whip wielded by a master was no easy task. Not only that, but Olivia was of the Deep Folk—avoiding her whip was all but impossible. But Nefer evaded her every attack, hopping lightly from side to side. The way he moved defied all logic, but Olivia had not failed to anticipate it. She threw out her whip so that it wrapped around one of the boulders scattered around them, broke off a chunk, then hurled it at Nefer. But just as before, he dodged her easily.



After she had repeated the same attack six times, Nefer spoke up, sounding bored. “That won’t work, no matter how many times you try. You’ve given me a bigger target to dodge, and by the same token, your attacks have grown monotonous. How could you not realize—?!” Nefer didn’t make it to the end of his sentence. The latest boulder snared by Olivia’s whip glowed with a blinding light, then exploded, leaving a gash on Nefer’s left shoulder.

“Well played,” he said, sounding irritated as he supported his shoulder with the opposite hand. But Olivia was no less irritated herself. She had to admit that focusing her Odh in the boulder then shattering it had been her secret weapon. It had taken Nefer totally by surprise. And yet she had only managed to wound his shoulder. Moving faster than she would have believed, he had evaded almost every shard of rock. A bead of cold sweat trickled down her cheek.

*This is bad...* She still had a chance, if only she could lure him into a narrower spot. But to do that, she would need to get out of these plains, but Nefer’s physical hyperactivation was most dominant when he could move freely. In other words, unless Nefer was blinded by confidence, he would never, ever do as she wished.

*I’ll have to finish him here, after all.* She dispelled the whip, then shaped the blade of light into a slightly elongated knife. Without wasting a moment, she used Swift Step of Gales to draw him into close combat, close enough for their skin to touch. Olivia decided that this was the only way she could fight Nefer while stifling his advantages. As though in acceptance of her challenge, Nefer raised his fists. Olivia threw herself at him, slashing with the blade of light, but he held off her attacks moving with a fluidity belied by his hulking frame.

“A clever choice, I’ll give you that,” he said. Where he had devoted himself to evading her blows, now he went on the attack. It was hard to believe such a savage assault could come from someone who had just moved with such grace. Little by little, Olivia was forced back. Every time she dodged, Nefer’s claws carved deep into the ground, a ruthless reminder that the next time they hit her, it would be fatal.

“What’s wrong? I don’t see your precious light sword!”

Olivia grunted in frustration. As Nefer’s knife hand came at her, she threw her



upper body backward to dodge it, then let the momentum carry her before planting both hands on the ground and kicking up. Her toes slammed into Nefer's jaw.

*I dazed him!* she thought. Her ebony eyes found Nefer's unfocused ones. She kicked down hard, leaving a crater in the ground as she took off, twisting around to aim her blade of light straight at Nefer's heart. The blade, full of as much Odh as she could muster, blazed with golden light. Nefer's Odh made it as though he were clad in solid armor, but before her blade, it meant nothing. Just as she was sure she had won, Nefer's glaring eyes focused on her.

*He's recovered already?! That can't be!* She had not hit him with any ordinary kick—she had focused Odh into her foot. As her eyes widened in alarm, Nefer vanished.

*Oh no!* She immediately tried to use Swift Step of Gales. But right away, pain like none she had felt before rushed through her. Her Odh dissipated, and she couldn't get off the technique. As she felt herself about to topple forward, she stabbed the blade of light into the ground to steady herself.

"You miscalculated how quickly hyperactivation allows me to recover," Nefer commented.

Olivia stifled the moan of pain that threatened to escape her as she turned around. Nefer wore a vicious grin that showed off his fangs, blood dripping from his black claws. The pain was so intense she thought she would black out if she lost her focus for even a moment. It was a silent confirmation that the wound in her back was mortal. After coming so close, her hope of victory had been crushed. At this realization, Olivia's arms fell uselessly to her sides.

"Of course, even you'd give up after that," Nefer said, coming to stand before her once more. "But you did better than I expected. You no doubt would have won, if your opponent had been anyone else."

He slowly drew back his left hand. Olivia knew the hateful black claws were going to rip through her.

*Eliot, I'm sorry. I tried my best, but I won't be keeping my promise to come after you. But I swear, I will still protect both of you.*



Yet when the blow came rushing toward her, she took it in quietly. As she had expected, Nefer's fist passed straight through her armor and plunged on mercilessly, deep into her chest. She choked up a torrent of blood.

Nefer, as though he had lost interest in her, turned toward the Forest of No Return.

"Now the babe is all that remains of the Deep Folk. The contract is as good as fulfilled." He made to draw back his hand, but Olivia grabbed him by the arm. Nefer stopped, looking back at Olivia, then shaking his head. "There is nothing more you can do. Stop fighting the inevitable."

"I told you...at the start..." she gasped. "I will not...let you get to them..." The blade of light was still in her other hand. For the third time, she made it into a whip, then, drawing up what Odh she had left, she wrapped it tight around herself and Nefer.

"You and I...will both die here..."

Nefer didn't even glance at the rope of light that bound him. "Like I said, you're fighting the inevitable," he said.

But Olivia wasn't listening. She closed her eyes, picturing Eliot's and Caroline's smiling faces. Her beloved family. Olivia gave a faint smile.

*Eliot, Caroline, thank you for all the happiness you gave me.* As the last of her life burned away, Olivia's heart was full of contentment. A soft light wrapped her in its embrace...

The moment he saw the light shining out of the Deep Folk woman, Nefer flexed his muscles, making them bulge unnaturally. The rope of light snapped off him, just as he launched his fist at her head.

"I have to respect the courage, that she'd blow herself up to try and kill me too..." he muttered. "Still, it was stupid. If she'd just accepted death quietly, she could have at least died with her pretty face intact."

The light that had wrapped around the Deep Folk woman faded rapidly. Two-thirds of her head was missing, knocked away, and she crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut, brain matter oozing from her skull.



*You lost for one reason and one reason only, Nefer thought. You showed your hand too early. Maybe you were sure then that you'd won. But you should keep your secret weapon hidden 'til the last.*

Nefer had been caught off guard when she had shattered the rock. That was what had delayed his reaction and led to him taking a serious wound. If she had tried to blow herself up right at the beginning, even his hyperactivated body would likely not have survived it.

He turned his gaze to Safiss's corpse. "I avenged you, at any rate," he said indifferently, before he set off at a run across the plains in pursuit of the Barrier Master and the Deep Folk baby, a smile stretching across his face.

There was once a forest that, for many an age, swallowed up those who entered it. Mist hung ever over its boughs, and people feared it, eventually coming to know it as the Forest of No Return.

A young man with silver hair ran toward that forest as fast as he could. It was what his wife had told him to do in order to protect their daughter. He loved them both more than anything.

*I should see it soon...* he thought. Caroline was playing cheerfully with the red gemstone around her neck. Racing along with Swift Step, Eliot had just caught sight of the vast forest swathed in mist when, from behind him, he sensed an unbridled burst of violence. That presence he had felt so many times before was unmistakably that of one of the Asura who pursued them.

Eliot clenched his back teeth together so hard he thought they might crack.

*Olivia...* he thought. Though he knew all too well it was futile, he searched for the presence of any other person. But there was only one. He could not sense the person who filled him with warmth and comfort. A crushing grief overwhelmed him, but he could not stop running.

*I don't care if it costs me my life. I will keep our child safe!* From the start, fighting with Caroline in his arms had never been an option. Even without her, his chances against an opponent skilled enough to fight off Olivia were slim. It would even have been fair to call them nonexistent. Still, it was far superior to not fighting. Eliot turned to face the oncoming Asura, releasing a series of

throwing knives. The Asura, who was even more grotesque than before, easily swatted them aside with his black claws that seemed to Eliot like the manifestation of evil. Simultaneously, his mocking voice slid into Eliot's ears.

"I told the Deep Folk woman not to fight the inevitable. If you don't resist, I'll make sure the infant dies without any suffering."

Anger flared within Eliot, so powerful it seemed it would burn him up. But then he sensed something strange. Looking down, he saw Caroline looking at him with an anxious glimmer in her eyes. Eliot got himself under control. *How could I make Caroline worry?* he thought, internally cursing himself. To Caroline, he gave the best smile he could muster. Caroline watched him intently, then at last, she smiled back at him like an angel.

"Are you done with your final farewells?" the Asura called sarcastically. But Eliot no longer paid him any heed. Summoning up all his strength to protect his beloved daughter, he focused his mind on the Forest of No Return.

*If I make it into the forest, the Asura won't follow us there.* Even those assassins surely feared the forest. If he could only make it under the trees before the Asura caught up to them, they would at least be safe from the threat directly before them. It was only a little farther. But with the Asura gaining on them with earth-shattering ferocity, Eliot knew they would be just too late.

*If I could slow him down, just a moment would be enough...* He had used up all his knives. Even if he had more, it wouldn't slow the Asura down at all. All the same, he reached into his pockets, searching, and felt his fingers brush against something. With desperate hope, he pulled it out and found himself holding a small ball. Remembering what Olivia had said, he squeezed it tight.

*Olivia... Thank you...* Eliot turned. The Asura was now only a few dozen paces away. He threw the gray ball. When the Asura, a thin smile on his lips, knocked it aside with his claws, a blinding flash of light burst around them. The sound of footsteps ceased, telling Eliot that it had worked. The ball served no purpose other than to blind one's opponent, but in that moment, Eliot felt like a man who had been given an army of ten thousand.

Hearing the Asura cursing with renewed intensity, Eliot at last set foot in the Forest of No Return. A moment later, however, he was struck by the cloying



stench of death. He threw his arm out reflexively just as the black claws came down. There was a spray of blood, and his right arm fell to the ground. Horrible pain lanced through his body, but Eliot ignored it, continuing on into the forest...

Nefer stood at the timberline, his vision slowly returning. By the time he could see completely clearly, the Barrier Master and the Deep Folk baby had both disappeared into the thick mist.

He looked down at the man's severed arm and the pool of blood around it. "The Barrier Master won't last long, not after losing this much blood. The same goes for a baby without its parents."

Not only that, but this forest was known as an evil place. When one considered that several years back, even their skilled explorer Orlean had failed to make it out alive, Nefer saw no hope for the pair's survival.

*Still, if I wanted to be sure, I ought to go in and see them die with my own eyes...* Nefer's mouth twisted, then he released his Odic physical hyperactivation. Just in case, he stayed at the timberline for a while longer, keeping watch, but the Barrier Master and his Deep Folk baby did not return.

*With this, the ancient contract is fulfilled...* he thought, then snorted. *But I'll be damned if this forest isn't as unsettling as all stories say.* With that, he left the Forest of No Return.

Behind him, the gray mist seemed to grow deeper still.

# Chapter One: In the Dappled Light of the Forest, a White Flower Blooms

I

## The White Forest

The Great Mage Lassara Merlin possessed a genius that put her far ahead of her peers, and it was this that had led to her inheriting the Heavenly Orb mage circle from its previous bearer at a young age. When she'd learned that Felix's Azure Knights and Olivia's Eighth Legion were to meet in battle, she was determined to see the clash for herself and so left her dwelling in the forest, taking with her the fairy Silky Breeze.

She trudged for an hour along an unseen path through the deep snow, cloaking herself in a spell of concealment in order to avoid fruitless confrontations with dangerous beasts. Just then, there came a sudden flurry of snow from above, and Lassara, perceiving the vast shadow that fell across her vision, came to a halt with a heavy sigh.

"I cast a spell of concealment only for the *last* creature I wanted to see to find me," she muttered. "All right, what do you want?" Lassara looked coldly up at the magnificent beast that towered over her, covered in a coat of pure white fur.

Vajra, king of the beasts, feared by many as a fearsome beast of calamity, worshipped by some tribes as a god, flashed a mouthful of fangs that could have shattered boulders with ease.

"It is not every day that you venture forth from the forest. Whatever has gotten into you?"

"I don't have to explain everything I do to—"

"The two of us," Silky cut in breathlessly, "are going to see Felix."



*You just had to run your mouth...* Lassara clicked her tongue quietly, glaring at Silky, who hovered in front of her face.

“There’s no need to hide it from Lord Vajra,” the fairy pointed out, leaving a trail of stardust behind her as she flew up to perch on Vajra’s nose.

The great beast’s golden eyes narrowed slightly. “Did something befall him?”

“What’s that? It’s not like you to worry for the boy.”

“It is you, not I, who appears to be worried,” Vajra replied dryly, then sat down, causing an eruption of snow that buried Lassara. She brushed it off brusquely with one hand, while in the other she grabbed a handful of snow before lobbing it at Vajra as hard as she could.

“Would it kill you to take a bit of care when you sit down, you stupid mongrel?”

“Foulmouthed as ever, I see...” Vajra remarked. “But what has happened to Felix?”

“Not much. I just got word he’s to have it out with one of the Deep Folk, so I’m going to watch. That’s all.” Despite Lassara’s throwaway tone, Vajra’s three tails began to wave up and down in apparent interest. Silky, eyes sparkling, charged straight at the tails.

“The Deep Folk...” Vajra said. “The name has passed nary a lip in many years. Do you know of Gracia? Such a talent was wasted on humanity...”

Lassara was surprised by the hint of fondness behind Vajra’s words—she had only seen Vajra express a liking toward a human once before. Among all her knowledge, she *did* know of Gracia, renowned as the Deep Folk’s greatest warrior. And it was plain from how Vajra was acting now there had been some bond between them.

“I could not care less about your dog-eared stories that are so old, even the mold’s shriveled up,” Lassara said with blunt honesty. Vajra looked at her curiously.

“I do not believe I speak of anything so very old.”

“Gracia lived seven hundred years ago. Time doesn’t pass the same for

humans as it does for you, mutt.”

Vajra wiped its face with one of its front paws. “In any case. A descendant of the Deep Folk still lives, then. Indeed, they and the Asura were always rivals without equal. I understand why it would interest you.”

“Hmph. I’m not that interested,” Lassara replied grumpily, keeping one eye on Silky, who was having a wonderful time clinging to one of Vajra’s tails.

“Very well. I shall let the matter rest, then.”

“Is that all you wanted to say?”

Instead of replying, Vajra slowly stood up, throwing Silky forcefully from its tail as it did so. She landed, giggling, on Lassara’s shoulder.

“Ahhh, that was fun,” she said with a contented smile.

Vajra stared hard at her. “Silky Breeze, the fairy.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

“Humans are a cruel and ugly species whose fragility has made them uncommonly cunning. If you leave the forest, you must take care,” Vajra warned.

“You’ve got some nerve saying that in front of a human,” Lassara muttered.

“I thought you had all but cast off your humanity.”

“I cast off nothing!”

“I’ll be okay, Lord Vajra,” Silky Breeze interjected quickly. “Like I told Lassara, no lumbering human’s got any chance of catching me.”

“*Silky Breeze.*” Vajra’s voice was quiet, but carried a forcefulness that brooked no argument. The look on Silky’s face changed, and she started nodding frantically.

Lassara understood. Two hundred fifty years ago, Vajra’s only cub had been captured by a troupe that made its living putting rare beasts on display. By the time Vajra learned of its child’s misfortune, it was too late. Seeing the child changed beyond recognition, Vajra was consumed by a burning fury. Tearing the troupe to death with its fangs had not been enough to quell Vajra’s rage,



and it continued on to wreak devastation on the nation where the troupe was based. It showed no mercy to the scant few who escaped either. Vajra, it was said, pursued them relentlessly before slaughtering them all. From the perspective of the victims who had nothing to do with the troupe, it was nothing but an indiscriminate rampage, but on the other side of things, it wasn't hard to fathom the enormity of Vajra's wrath.

"She'll have a great mage beside her," Lassara declared proudly. "No need for you to worry yourself, mutt."

They regarded each other for a moment, then, instead of replying, Vajra crouched low before launching itself into the air at a speed unbelievable for its size, leaving like a roar of wind.

Lassara was buried in even more snow than the last time. "That was deliberate!" she bellowed after Vajra, who was now a mere speck in the sky. Silky doubled over laughing, her voice ringing through the White Forest.

Lassara and Silky left the forest, then positioned themselves on a sheer precipice that commanded a sweeping view of the Azure Knights' main camp. That being said, the camp was a considerable distance away, even through a spyglass. How, then, did Lassara observe the progression of the battle? She solved the problem through magecraft to enhance her sight: a spell called Far-Reaching Oculus. Silky lamented how awful it must be to have to use magecraft just to see across such a distance. The battle began without warning, and they looked on together...

"Hey, Lassara? Are *those* humans too?" Silky asked tremulously as the sky suddenly turned dark above them. She watched Felix and Olivia without any sign of excitement. The stench of decay carried to them on the breeze, along with the monstrous figures' horrifying moans, making it all too clear to Lassara that these were in no way human. Many ages had she lingered in life, and yet she had never seen anything like it.





“Lassara? Yoo-hoo!” Silky flew around to face Lassara, trailing sparkles, which captured most of Lassara’s attention. She knocked the fairy aside with the back of her hand.

“Don’t call those humans. Those are clearly corpses.”

“If they’re corpses, why are they moving?”

“How should I know?” Lassara snapped back.

Silky puffed out her cheeks. “You go on about being such a *great mage*, but in the end, you don’t know anything!” she cried, then immediately tried to kick Lassara in the head. Lassara roughly knocked the incoming attack aside.

“There’s plenty even great mages don’t know. All I can say for now is that those things have no minds of their own.”

The corpses emerging from the earth in their thousands were clearly targeting the living, throwing themselves wildly at royal and imperial soldiers alike.

From what Lassara could observe, they had no intelligence and didn’t even fight with weapons. They simply grabbed and bit. In that sense, they were almost like beasts, but even beasts had a certain order from which they did not deviate. The dead thronging beneath them clearly acknowledged no such order.

The ghastly moaning reached them once more, and for a moment Silky looked anxious. “Felix can’t lose to a bunch of creeps like that, can he?”

Lassara snorted. “You’re worrying over nothing. As if the youngster would let the likes of them get the better of him.”

“That’s what I thought! After he gave that weirdo lady what for and all. My Felix could *never* lose!” The second she said this, Silky’s face went beet red. Lassara had a good idea of why, but now wasn’t the time to tease her.

Felix and Olivia’s battle had brought back memories for Lassara of the two other battles between Asura and Deep Folk that she had witnessed. Unless her memory failed her, this latest superhuman clash had put the others to shame. The appearance of the dead had put an end to the battle before either of the two could finish it one way or the other, but there was no doubt that overall, Felix had had the upper hand. On that point, Lassara agreed with Silky.

She did *not*, however, think that Olivia was inferior to Felix. Throughout the battle, Olivia had fought with an assurance that seemed to imply that she could have turned the tables at any time if she so chose. The truth was, it had worried Lassara more than a little. What she knew for sure, having seen Olivia's ebony blade with her own eyes, was the true form of the shadowy fear she had felt.

*My guess is that blade trailing black mist isn't of this world. I sense something akin to those corpses from it, and I can't pretend it's just my imagination.*

Having said that, Lassara did not think that Olivia was responsible for the current state of things. For one thing, she sensed no darkness in the girl's nature, but it was just as obvious from how she and Felix fought off the dead together, covering one another's backs.

Lassara predicted it would take them ages to deal with the dead, but she was pleasantly surprised to find herself mistaken. Her gaze was drawn instinctively to a young man with blond hair in Royal Army armor.

*Genius crops up in every age.* Leaving Silky to her childlike delight at Felix's heroics, Lassara thought hard. *There's no chance the dead rising and the sky going dark are unrelated. The youngster seemed shaken, and I don't like that, but I can ask him about it later. First things first, I need to solve the mystery of why those corpses are walking about.*

"Hey," Silky said tentatively. "How come Felix is talking to that woman like they're friends? They've taken out the dead; they should get back to fighting. He should beat her to a pulp!"

The fairy's uncharacteristically hushed tone broke Lassara's train of thought. She looked over and saw that Silky's teeth were clenched in vexation, her hands trembling fists. If that had been all, Lassara would have let her alone, but when Silky then raised a tightly clenched fist high into the air, Lassara rolled her eyes and clicked her fingers.

"What're you playing at?!" Silky cried from behind the bars of the tiny cell she now found herself imprisoned in.

"That's what I want to ask you. What were you about to do just now?"

"Like you need to ask! I'm gonna give that cow what for! So you lift this spell

*right now!"*

Silky kicked at the bars. Lassara found herself regretting having brought Silky along after all.

"Oh, for..." Lassara muttered. "Forget your petty jealousy."

Silky went scarlet again. "I-I'm not jealous," she whined. "And I'm *far* prettier and more charming than that cow. Felix even said that I was pretty."

"Then pipe down a bit. The youngster likes his women quiet and well-mannered."

"What?! He does?!"

This was, of course, a lie. Lassara had no way of knowing what sort of women Felix liked, nor did she remotely care. She wasn't even sure he was interested in women in the first place.

Silky stared at her foot, still planted on the bars of the cell, then carefully lowered it with a chastened look.

"Um, Miss Lassara...?" she said haltingly. "W-Would you mind disappearing this cell?" Lassara didn't reply. "P-Please believe me," Silky tried again. "I'm mannered real good—" She broke off, clearing her throat. "I mean, I am a well-mannered lady."

Lassara, only just holding her laughter at bay, casually clicked her fingers once more. The cage around Silky vanished, leaving them looking at one another. Silky raised her fist with a will, but a moment later she lowered it with a forced smile, hiding it behind her back.

"Hm? Something wrong?"

"Oh, my back cramped a little, so I was stretching!" Silky replied, her tone unnaturally polite.

"That so? You'd best take care of yourself."

"Agh!"

"Agh?"

"I-I greatly appreciate your concern! I'll take it, um, I'll be *ever* so careful."



Silky covered her mouth with her hand and tittered. There was so much Lassara could have mocked her for, she very nearly broke her composure, but she held herself back—this would do if it saved her having to keep Silky from violence.

In the meantime, a group made up of the Azure Knights led by Felix, along with Olivia and a few of her soldiers from the Royal Army, began to move west. Lassara's eyebrows rose slightly. Lassara had assumed their alliance was a temporary one, just as Silky had said, but apparently this was not the case.

*That's odd. From the direction they're marching they can only be heading for the imperial capital. But what I can't puzzle out is why he's taking the Deep Folk girl along...*

"Miss Lassara, aren't we going to go and see Felix?" Silky said demurely.

"I want a look at those corpses first. Checking in on the youngster comes after that."

"What?! I don't wanna! I'm gonna—um, I mean, I wish to go to him now!"

"If you show yourself in front of Felix now, you'll be seen by a whole lot of other humans too."

"I don't mind."

"Perhaps you don't, but that won't matter if Felix feels different. Or do you think he'd be happy to see you discovered by humans?" Lassara asked pointedly. Silky's face visibly fell. "Looks like we're on the same page."

As soon as she was sure the banners of the Azure Knights and the Royal Army were both completely out of sight, Lassara took extra precautions by casting the same labyrinth magecraft she used on her cottage over a wide area.

*That should keep anything from bothering us.* Lassara darted nimbly down from the precipice, Silky flapping along listlessly with a sour look on her face.

## II

After rescuing Ramza from Darmés's clutches, Felix joined up safely with the Azure Knights, who were facing off against the chancellor's personal army. They proceeded to shake off the other force's pursuit, taking refuge in Fort Zaxxon

which had, for strategic reasons, been abandoned several years previously.

Now, almost three days had passed since their arrival.

*Could I have been more blind?* Felix, consumed by self-recriminations, looked at Ramza, who lay on a simple cot with his eyes wide open. Still wrought by his excruciating powerlessness, he opened the door and found himself face-to-face with his aide, Second Lieutenant Teresa, who stood looking down at the floor.

“How long have you been there?”

“I suppose...it’s been about thirty minutes.”

“I see...”

“I just...” she said falteringly. “How is His Majesty’s condition?”

Felix replied with a small shake of his head, then walked on. Teresa hurried to follow.

On the road to the fort, Felix had tried over and over to talk to the emperor, but Ramza had not returned to himself. There was no longer any doubt in Felix’s mind that Darmés had used some foul art upon Ramza, so he had sent Odh all through the emperor’s body, hunting for abnormalities, but he found no pale residue of light like he had in Gladden’s body, and even the flow of Odh was perfectly normal. This was what had Felix at his wits’ end now.

*The only consolation is that his body seems healthy. But even of that, I have no guarantee...*

Teresa was watching him like she was holding something back. When he looked at her, she said hesitantly, “Calling a healer wouldn’t do any good...would it?”

Felix only smiled blandly. If only bringing Ramza a healer would have helped, he wouldn’t be suffering as he was.

“Never mind, ser,” Teresa said in a voice that was barely there. She did not try to speak to him again. Felix sent her a silent apology, his mind continuing to work.

*When I asked Darmés if he was a mage, he denied it outright. There was no reason for him to lie back there, so that must mean he really isn’t one. But in*

*that case, what is the source of his power? It isn't magecraft, and he isn't using Odh either.* He paused. *I suppose there's nothing for it but to take him to Lady Lassara after all. But...*

The White Forest where Lassara secluded herself was far to the north of Fort Zaxxon. Even alone on horseback, getting there and back would take ten days. Given Ramza's condition, they would inevitably end up taking a carriage, meaning that like as not the journey would be even longer.

However, even at that very moment, Felix was sure that Darmés had his servants searching for the Azure Knights, and so his eyes and ears would be everywhere. As it was, Felix owed the Azure Knights a debt after he had made them go to such lengths so that he could rescue Ramza.

"I'm... I'm sure His Majesty will recover." Teresa was intelligent—she had to know perfectly well that her conviction was baseless. Even so, Felix understood why she had said it.

"I turned against the empire, and now I'm even making my aide worry for me. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Not at all!" Teresa burst out, then, her voice growing faint, added, "My lord, that's not true at all..." The only sound left in the hallway was the lifeless crunch of boots on gravel.

Teresa didn't speak again until they arrived at the door to their destination.

"They're both waiting for you, my lord. I'll take my leave here..." With a small, sad smile, Teresa saluted, then headed back down the corridor from where they had come. Felix stared after her.

"Truly, I ought to be ashamed of myself..." he muttered. Then he turned his eyes forward again and reached for the mahogany doorknob.

The door opened with an awful scraping, revealing Lieutenant General Violet and Major General Balboa sitting opposite one another at a long table in the center of the room. Apparently, the room had been well cleaned, as it didn't seem dusty.

"My lord, are you all right?" Violet said at once in a voice laden with concern. Felix couldn't help a sardonic smile. He must have looked even more sorry for



himself than he thought.

“My lord?” Violet said again.

“I beg your pardon. I’m quite well.”

“Well, if you say so...” While she gazed at him with worry in her eyes, Felix sat down at the head of the table.

First, he apologized for wasting so much time while leaving them without any clear orders.

“With His Imperial Majesty in his current condition, it couldn’t be helped,” Violet said comfortingly. “You mustn’t trouble yourself.”

“But we can’t hang around here forever,” Balboa said with a stern look. Violet’s expression turned hard, and she opened her mouth to retort, but Felix raised a hand to stop her.

“Major General Balboa is right,” he said.

“If we ration, our food supplies *might* last us another week.”

“I see...” Even the most elite army was weak without food. That was a truth that left no room for argument. What Balboa was intimating was that, with supplies tight as they were, if they ran into the imperial army, they would have no choice but to flee.

“My lord, the Anastasia Domain lies to the west of here,” Violet said, looking at him searchingly. Felix knew that the Anastasia Domain was governed by Violet’s father, Duke Beren von Anastasia. It was obvious what Violet was suggesting, and as such, Felix rejected it at once.

“I can’t bring trouble down on the duke’s head.”

“You needn’t worry about that. I might be his daughter, but I know that my father is a man of valor. If we tell him what’s happened, I’m sure he’ll assist us.”

Felix gave a pained smile. “All the more reason we can’t go.”

“Why, my lord?!” Violet cried, leaning over the table toward him.

Felix’s face turned grim as he answered. “I’m sure you heard what became of the others who defied Darmés. Even the great Houses of Ludis and Titan, who

were there at the founding of our country, received no mercy from that man.”

The heads of the Ludis and Titan families had openly opposed Darmés’s accession to the emperor’s throne. Felix’s personal guard had found them dumped like garbage in the dungeons of Listelein Castle. His guards had succeeded in bringing a few survivors out, but all of them were in the same state—every fingernail ripped off, every tooth torn out. The room had been strewn with their gouged-out eyeballs. Even now, after their rescue, all they did was beg for mercy with whatever remained of their voices.

Violet drew back slightly, but a moment later she leaned forward with even more intensity than before.

“Then let’s at least have him lend us food. If the Azure Knights are to survive, that isn’t up for negotiation.”

“If Darmés learned that he cooperated with us, no matter how slightly, he might well turn on the people of your domain, not just Duke Anastasia.”

“Slaughter the people? Surely even *he* wouldn’t go that far...”

“Doing such a thing openly would undermine his authority as emperor,” Balboa added.

Felix watched the other two exchange a look of confusion. “Darmés is so insane it’s impossible to say what he would or wouldn’t do,” he said plainly. “At least, that is how he seemed to me.”

Felix had seen with his own eyes Darmés’s irreverence for the emperor’s crown—the symbol of imperial authority. He went on to explain that Darmés had made it clear in his speech that he had no regard for the emperor’s throne—and so what the man’s true ambitions were, Felix had no idea.

Silence spread through the room like a fall of frost under the shade of night. It was Balboa who eventually broke it.

“If you’re certain, then it must be so. I couldn’t say so before, but I always thought there was something suspect about Darmés.”

It was Felix and Violet’s turn to exchange a look as Balboa launched into a tirade against Darmés. It did not last long, however. Violet burst out in cheerful

laughter, bringing color back to the lifeless air of the room.

Balboa narrowed his eyes and said, disgruntled, “Did I amuse you that much?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. It was just a little—not even a little, it was *highly* surprising.”

Balboa snorted. “Surprising? Everyone has a person or two they can’t stomach. In my case it just happened to be the scoundrel calling himself the new emperor.”

“When you put it like that, it does sound like you,” Violet replied. “Anyway, my lord. If you won’t turn to my father, may I be so bold as to ask what you *do* intend to do?”

Felix took a breath before he answered her. “I am going to turn to the Kingdom of Fernest.”

“To *Fernest*?!” Balboa and Violet shrieked in unison. Felix felt their fierce stares boring into him.

It was not a mere spur-of-the-moment suggestion, but something Felix had been weighing up ever since he’d rescued Ramza. Still, it meant seeking aid from the nation they had been at war with. It was asking too much, and he knew it. It was only natural that the other two looked at him in dismay.

“Why Fernest in particular and not some other country?” Balboa finally asked, looking bewildered.

“One of the key reasons is that I believe Fernest is the only nation left that can stand against Darmés’s empire.”

“Hmmm...” Balboa grumbled. “I’m not sure that’s enough for me to grasp your motivations, my lord... Wouldn’t the United City-States of Sutherland do, in that case? If you’re looking for a major power, then they fit the bill. They’ve remained neutral—on the surface, at least—so their military should be in far better shape than Fernest’s.”

“Yes, Sutherland is a major power. And just as you say, if it were a simple question of military strength, Sutherland might come in above the empire, to say nothing of Fernest. But I can’t help but question if they can really stand



against the empire.”

“Why is that, my lord?” Violet asked with curiosity.

“In times of peace, the city-states’ system of governance functions well enough. But you can be sure in a crisis, every decision will take them forever. With the situation developing so rapidly, it’s hard to believe they’ll be able to keep up.”

Balboa smoothed back his glossy white hair. “I suppose it is just a gang of minor nations, when it comes down to brass tacks.”

“Before, you said that was *one* of your key reasons, my lord,” Violet said, her eyes going cold. “Would another reason be Death God Olivia, by any chance?”

Felix nodded. “Darmés knows arcane arts beyond just manipulating corpses. That was what prevented me from killing him. It would certainly be reassuring if Olivia would continue to fight with us.”

Darmés had intervened before their battle saw its conclusion, but from the start, Felix had sensed from how Olivia fought that she had never been worried. He had not revealed his full strength either, but all the same, to the last he had been unable to imagine Olivia lying in the dirt. Every time their swords met, he had felt more strongly that while they both possessed hidden power, the nature of hers was different to his own.

The look on Violet’s face made it plain she was thoroughly displeased. Balboa folded his arms tight and let out a deep sigh.

“You’ll forgive me for saying so, my lord, but do you seriously believe Fernest will welcome us? If I were a commander in the Royal Army, I’d pretend to extend a hand of friendship while scheming a way to kill you in your sleep. A mortal enemy wandering into their hands? It’d be the perfect opportunity to cut you down while scarcely lifting a finger.”

“Depending on who we talk to, that is probably true.”

“That makes it sound like you’ve already decided who you mean to talk to...” said Violet, a dangerous edge to her voice. “I trust you don’t mean Death God Olivia.”

Felix smiled. "I think matters of politics are probably beyond her."

Relief flitted across Violet's face. "Then who?"

"The man they call the God of the Battlefield," Felix said, then picked up the cup of tea in front of him that had long since gone cold and drank it dry.

### III

#### **The Winged Crusaders at Kier Fortress**

From atop her gleaming chariot, Lara heard the latest news from the owls.

"You saw the dead with your own eyes, then?"

The owl nodded vigorously, eyes still alight with the terror of the sight.

"I thought hell had broken loose on the earth. I can't get the voices of those things out of my ears. It wasn't a cry or a moan, but something else..."

Lara turned without a word to look at Johann, who appeared to be deep in thought. Beside him, Historia stared at the owl with disbelief clear in her eyes. From hearing Darmés's declaration of his succession to the imperial throne inside their heads, to the horde of the dead dragging themselves from the ground, the story might well have invited Historia's skepticism. But the owls did not make false reports. As a mage herself, Lara came to the obvious conclusion that Darmés too was a mage.

*If he's a unique type, I can't rule out the possibility that he could be manipulating their very thoughts. Best to take every precaution.*

Lara clicked the fingers of her left hand. Her Holy Adders mage circle gave off a flash of green light too brief for ordinary eyes to perceive. In the same moment, a wind gathered around the owl, carrying with it motes of green light.

*The wind shows nothing suspicious. They don't seem to be compromised.* The motes were visible only to Lara. While the owl looked alarmed at the wind that whirled around only them, Lara turned to Johann.

"What would you do under these circumstances?"

"Retreat is the only option, surely," he replied without a moment's hesitation.

“Even if it is only temporary, the Azure Knights have formed an alliance with the Eighth Legion. Twin Lions at Dawn has failed.”

Lara was satisfied with this analysis. Darmés might have declared himself the new emperor and branded the Azure Knights rebels, but that did not mean Felix would sit back and allow the Eighth Legion to treat this as an invitation to invade the imperial capital. That he was a man of honor only made it more certain.

*This is getting messy. All the more reason...*

Lara felt someone staring openly at her. She looked down and saw the driver, clad in golden armor, looking at her with a curious look on his face. She planted her boot on that face, keeping it there as she continued to question the owl.

“Have you sent word to the seraph?”

“Yes my lady. Commander Zephyr is going to make the report directly.”

“Then hurry back and see Zephyr knows that the Winged Crusaders will be moving to withdraw from Kier Fortress.”

“Yes, ser!”

For Lara, all of life was a battlefield. Now, she felt in her bones that the fighting was moving to a new stage.

Johann twirled the tips of his bangs around his finger, listening to the sound of retreating hoofbeats.

“Still, an imperial mage appearing *now*? We’ve got more trouble on our hands, don’t we?”

“You think this is a mage’s work too, then, Johann?”

“Yes, of course. Who but a mage could pull off a feat like manipulating the *dead*?”

Lara’s smile was openly scornful. “Olivia might be able to do it. I mean, magic is far more powerful than magecraft, isn’t it? You said so yourself.”

“It isn’t her.”



“Quick answer.”

“Olivia doesn’t use magic against people. She promised that ‘Z’ person that she wouldn’t.”

“I am aware of that. But I don’t know any guarantee that she will keep that promise.”

“Olivia will,” Johann said with certainty. Lara narrowed her eyes.

“What makes you so sure? What is your evidence?”

Johann was quiet for a moment. “I danced with her, walked around eating at the market with her. I engaged in mortal combat with her. Well, all right, it was only mortal combat for *me*...but in any case, all of that is my evidence.”

“It’s flimsy to the extreme,” Lara scoffed.

Johann knew very well he hadn’t presented anything concrete, but it was all but impossible to explain how he felt to someone who hadn’t interacted with Olivia without any preconceptions.

*To be fair, I doubt Blessed Wing Lara actually thinks Olivia used magic to raise the dead, he mused. She can be surprisingly childish at times.*

For one thing, such an explanation would be at odds with the owl’s story, but Johann also knew that Lara had watched Olivia like a hawk over Sofitia’s shoulder for the whole time the girl had stayed in Mekia. Lara of all people couldn’t have missed that Olivia was diametrically opposed to any kind of scheming or deceit.

“Why do you bother wasting your time on things you don’t even believe?” came a voice to his right. “Typical Lara, don’t you think?” Johann looked over at Historia, who turned to face the opposite direction, whistling. She was right, but on the other hand, Johann could appreciate why Lara might be tempted to be sarcastic. Few understood how all-consuming magecraft was for mages. Johann had experienced firsthand the awesome power of magic, and even he had only recently been able to admit to himself that the mysterious art was superior to the supposedly divine power of magecraft.

Lara’s only response to Historia was a quiet *tsk*. Likely she couldn’t come up

with any legitimate retorts.

“Well, if it wasn’t Olivia’s magic, then it follows that Darmés must be a mage,” she went on.

“That is what the circumstances suggest. But don’t you think he doesn’t match the mage dear Amelia told us about?”

“True. The mage she talked about grew weary of the world and went into seclusion.”

“Exactly. And I can’t see that man lying about something so pointless.” Felix’s face, perfect as a doll’s, floated across the back of his mind. He was an enemy, but Johann liked to think he could read people well enough to know that much.

“Then that means there were two mages in the empire.”

“Two?!”

“Why would that surprise you so much? Just because the church knows how to identify people with the potential to wield magecraft doesn’t mean mages and the church are one and the same. You, Amelia, and I were all found by the church, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were mages out there with no such affiliation. In fact, I heard that when the seraph inquired with the church about the imperial mage, they told her it was the first they’d heard of such a person.”

“I’m not denying that there might be mages the church is unaware of either.”

Johann agreed with Lara, yet in the back of his mind there was something that didn’t ring true.

“I don’t know what part of this you’re having trouble with, but debating it isn’t going to get us anywhere. The important thing is that an imperial mage has entered the game, and one whose powers look to make things extremely messy. Not only that, but he’s taken the title of emperor. That’s plenty to go off of for now.”

Johann nodded gravely.

“And,” Lara went on, “between the two, I’m more interested in Olivia’s motivation for cooperating with the Azure Knights.”

Johann shrugged. “Brooding about that really *will* get you nowhere. There

isn't a person alive who can comprehend the inner workings of Olivia's mind."

Lara looked off into the distance, then snorted quietly. "True that."

"By the way, are you going to tell the Royal Army about this?"

"Just because we're in an alliance doesn't mean I'm about to turn soft. Besides, this concerns them too. They'll hear about it themselves before long."

"Then I'll start getting us ready to retreat right away!" Historia never usually showed any initiative, but she had apparently decided to seize the moment. She swung up on her horse, but in defiance of its master's wishes, the horse continued to munch on its fodder, lazily swishing its tail from side to side.

"Excuse me!" she exclaimed.

Lara chuckled. "What a fine steed. Its nature reflects its master's."

A muscle in Historia's face twitched. "You can stuff your face later!" Perhaps her desperate appeals got through, because the horse promptly stopped eating. Under Historia's skillful snap of the reins, the horse sprang away like a different animal entirely.

"Don't make the Royal Army suspicious!" Lara shouted after her. Historia waved back at them over her shoulder. "That woman," Lara muttered, "is a piece of work."

"It is typical Historia, though."

"You'd better be ready too, Johann."

"Of course. Whether it turns out to be Darmés or someone else, this certainly isn't the work of any ordinary mage. On which note, how fares our dear Amelia?"

"The owls should have brought her the same report. I'll let her use her own judgment."

"You're hard on her as ever."

"It's an excellent opportunity to see how she handles the decision."

Johann didn't argue. Amelia's strong proclivity for sadism honestly troubled him, but he recognized that she was a soldier of enough talent for Lara to

expect great things from her. Amelia would never make the wrong decision.

*Either way, I just hope no more trouble comes along...* Johann thought.  
*Though I mean, more than likely it will. If experience has taught me anything it's that things usually go from bad to worse.*

The driver, his face still crushed under Lara's boot, implored Johann for aid, but Johann looked straight past him. He stared instead at the Blazelight mage circle on the back of his left hand.

## IV

### **Main Camp of the Second Allied Legion**

The Second Allied Legion maintained a consistent advantage in its offensive against the forty-thousand-strong imperial force, succeeding on the twenty-second day since hostilities commenced in forcing the enemy to fall back...

"Ser, the enemy has begun to retreat!"

One after another, voices of jubilation broke out from the officers around the camp. Only Blood was silent as he watched the retreating imperial army. His face gave nothing away, but for Lise, as his aide, it was readily apparent that the situation did not sit right with him.

"You aren't pleased, ser?" she asked, keeping her voice low so as not to interrupt his thoughts.

Blood scratched the back of his head and replied bluntly, "Yeah, I don't like it."

Lise did not ask what he didn't like. She knew staying silent was the quickest way to draw an answer from him.

"Anything from the Eighth Legion?" he said at length.

"Nothing so far."

"So why is that lot clearing off?"

"If the Eighth Legion had defeated the Azure Knights, word should have reached us immediately. But we haven't heard anything at present. I assume



your misgivings lie in why, despite that, the imperial army is falling back?”

Blood looked away from Lise with a small sigh. “Their objective from the outset has been to cut us off from the Eighth Legion. And to my eyes, they’ve still got strength enough to resist us.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the imperial forces. “And look at them. They’re in shambles. If this was a planned retreat, they wouldn’t be in that sort of disarray.”

“In other words, something has happened within the imperial army that has left them no choice but to retreat?”

Blood’s only reply was to nod.

“What do you think that something is, ser?” Lise asked, but Blood only looked stony and didn’t seem about to answer her. With a wry smile, Lise answered for him. “You don’t know, and that’s what you don’t like.”

“Yeah,” Blood admitted hesitantly.

“But whatever the reason, the fact remains that they are retreating. It seems to me that we shouldn’t hesitate to put all our force into pursuit.”

“Of course we’ll pursue. But I’m going to leave that to the Winged Crusaders. We’ll make for the Turner Plains, where the real battle is being fought, going via the captured Fort Tezcapolis, and gather intelligence along the way.”

“The pursuit is to be carried out by the Winged Crusaders *alone*?”

“My orders stand as I said them.”

“Very well, ser. I only wonder if that woman will do as she’s told.”

Blood’s impression of Amelia was what you got if you put pride in a suit of armor. Lise found it hard to believe she would agree to the Winged Crusaders mounting the pursuit alone.

Blood took a battered cigarette from his breast pocket. “Then tell her I said it like this: I am pinning all my hopes on the might of the great Winged Crusaders.”

“Is that all, ser?” she asked, just in case. Blood only grunted his assent.

“Very well. I’ll send a runner at once.”

Lise saw the runner off, privately sure that the order would be refused, but the answer that promptly returned overturned her expectations.

“I can’t believe she accepted it just like that...”

One corner of Blood’s mouth twisted. “I’ve said it before—the Winged Crusaders need to make a show of their strength to gain an advantage in the postwar negotiations. I don’t know about their forces over at Kier Fortress, but the Winged Crusaders here haven’t achieved anything worthy of note so far. We’ve dominated the whole battle, after all. This is Thousand-Wing Amelia’s last chance for battlefield glory.”

“So that’s your aim, then...”

“You understand? Then let’s get moving. Send word for all troops to advance.” When Lise was silent, he added, “What’s the matter? Didn’t you hear my order?”

Lise didn’t confirm the order. Instead, she looked Blood straight in the eyes and asked, “General, is something making you anxious?”

To most, Blood would have seemed the very picture of calm, but to Lise, he looked horribly agitated. The Eighth Legion had weighed on his mind for some time now, but even accounting for that, his current manner was out of character.

Blood put his hands on his hips and let out a deep sigh. “Look...”

“If I may be allowed to first defend myself, I did *not* read your mind, ser. As I have told you before, your thoughts tend to show on your face. Though at risk of boasting, I am just about the only one who notices... I’m sure I’ve told you that too.”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry. Just see the order’s carried out first.”

Lise had no intention of causing trouble for her supreme commander. She obediently went about fulfilling his order. When she was done, she asked him again about the source of his anxiety. Blood abruptly rubbed his right arm.

“This old wound of mine’s been aching something terrible.”

“An...old wound, ser?”

“In my experience, something bad usually happens at times like this.” He added, “Now that I think of it, it played out like this just before I heard they were dead...”

Anyone else might have laughed his comment off. But to Lise, it made perfect sense. She understood intuitively there was a sort of special power that inhabited people who had brushed with death many a time and lived to tell the tale. Blood was the brave and brilliant commander who, even at a dire disadvantage, with the Fifth Legion destroyed and the Sixth Legion routed, had never backed down from the central front. Who was she to contradict such a man?

Blood began the march to Fort Tezcapolis. It was sooner rather than later that the appearance of a messenger from the Eighth Legion informed him that his sense of foreboding had come true.

“The Azure Knights and the Eighth Legion agreed to a *truce*? What the hell is going on?!” Lieutenant General Adam was usually cool and collected; Blood was taken aback to hear him raise his voice before anyone else could speak.

The messenger pulled a letter from his pocket. “From Lieutenant Colonel Ashton.”

Blood took it, then read through it. Then he read it through several times more, even though the outcome of the battle was written there plainly. The instance where corpses rose from the ground to attack the Eighth Legion and Azure Knights in particular made him seriously question Ashton’s mental state. The letter was signed at the end with the names of Olivia and Felix, the commander of the Azure Knights. He assumed that was to attest to the truth of the letter, but couldn’t help but wonder, *Are they seriously expecting me to believe this?*

As Blood struggled to get his mind around it, Lise impatiently snatched the letter from his hands. Soon, she showed the same reaction.

Blood turned his gaze on the kneeling messenger. “What’s your name?”

“Edwards, ser! Private first class.”

“Tell me then, Private Edwards. Do you know what’s in this letter?”

“Of course I do, ser. I was there myself,” Edwards replied without hesitating.

“In that case, you’ll have some idea of our confusion. To be frank with you, it doesn’t sound like reality. I order you, Private Edwards, to recount what you saw and heard, leaving nothing out.”

“Yes, ser! What happened was...”

The account Edwards gave was entirely consistent with Ashton’s letter. If anything, it was all the more evocatively visceral coming from someone who had really lived through the hellish experience. Everyone listening screwed up their faces in disgust, Lise and some of the others clutching their hands to their chests in dread.

“I understand,” Blood said. “To confirm: Lieutenant General Olivia is making for the imperial capital along with the enemy commander, and Lieutenant Colonel Ashton is leading the Eighth Legion back to Fis. Fort Tezcapolis and Fort Belganna are to be abandoned. Is that correct?”

“That is all correct, ser!”

Blood stroked his unshaven chin. “I rescind part of my earlier order. Tell Lieutenant Colonel Ashton to make for Fort Astora, not the capital. I’ll head there myself immediately.”

With the Twin Lions at Dawn strategy a failure, there was nothing to be gained by desperately clinging to Fort Tezcapolis and Fort Belganna. If they could hold just Fort Astora, they could check any renewed attempt at invasion. Olivia’s reason for going to the imperial capital with Felix was a mystery, but her orders made sense. If there was a messenger en route to the First Allied Legion, Blood was confident that the two commanders, even if they had the same reaction as him, would make the right decision.

“Understood, ser! Rest assured, I will see your message reaches them!” With that, Edwards left. To Blood, it was as though the future had disappeared beneath a thick veil of fog. But he could not afford to hesitate.

“General...” Lise’s face was the most worried he had ever seen it. He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“At least we know why they retreated. Seems like the imperial army’s in a real state too.”

“Yes. It seems probable that, at a minimum, the Azure Knights and the imperial soldiers we were fighting were not informed of the new emperor’s accession,” Lise said, then her eyes wavered for a moment. “Should I tell Thousand-Wing Amelia about this?”

“No need. It’d be pointless.”

“By which, you mean a certain secret intelligence unit will have been working behind the scenes?”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt of that. The Mekian vixen knows very well that information is power. I’ll bet her owls are flying about every which way so that she can keep up with all the battles. I know a half-wit king I’d like to see take a leaf from her book.”

“General!” Lise exclaimed, casting her eyes about them.

The corners of Blood’s mouth quirked up. “I never said anything about King Alfonse, did I?”

Lise started to protest, but her words were cut off as old Lieutenant General Adam called out to them in a voice laden with anxiety. “General, Lieutenant Colonel Lise, this isn’t the time for chitchat. I can’t help but feel like something terrible is going to happen.”

Blood nodded vigorously. “Lieutenant General Adam is right. Forget all our initial plans. We make for Fort Astora. Lieutenant Colonel Lise, get to work finding us the shortest route.”

“Yes, ser!”

The Second Allied Legion changed course, heading east toward Fort Astora. Blood rubbed his old wound, which continued to ache, thinking. Was Darmés, the man who had taken the imperial throne and could manipulate corpses, a mage? Why was Olivia working together with Felix? Right now, he had no way of getting clear answers.



A man with eight stars on his epaulets skillfully guided his horse up a steep mountain path.

*Thank goodness General Blood is a reasonable man*, Edwards thought. Now there was nothing left but to get the message to Ashton as quickly as possible, so he pushed his horse as hard as it would go. Suddenly, a wave of strong dizziness hit him, and he pulled on the reins.

After a time, Edwards kicked his horse to a gallop again as though nothing had happened. But now his eyes were entirely empty.

## V

### **Amelia's Camp, the Second Allied Legion**

Thousand-Wing Amelia's Winged Crusaders, in accordance with Blood's orders, set off in pursuit of the retreating imperial army.

"Send the seventh soaring squadron against the enemy's right flank."

"Yes, ser!"

"The third and fourth squadrons are to join the first. You are to pulverize the enemy's front lines in one swoop."

"Y-Yes, ser!"

Amelia stood herself at the head of the army, issuing commands while Jean looked on furtively from beside her.

"And what are you still gawking at me for?" Amelia rounded on Jean, her words like a sharpened blade. "If you have something to say, then spit it out. Or I'll strike you dead with all the world's cruelty."

What exactly "all the world's cruelty" entailed, Jean wasn't sure. She stood to attention without consciously meaning to do it. Under Amelia's gaze, she felt like a great snake was engulfing her in its coils.

Extremely nervous, Jean spluttered, "Yes, Thousand-Wing Amelia! It was only that I was a bit surprised that you were so willing to accept Commander Blood's orders..." Her voice was so small by the end even she couldn't believe it came

from a soldier. Amelia looked at Jean, then suddenly smiled. The expression might have seemed charming to anyone who didn't know her; to Jean, it was simply terrifying.

"That man came to *me* to try and provoke me into showing him how much glory I can win. Isn't that hilarious?"

From beside Amelia, Jean had heard what the runner had said, but the words themselves had been inoffensive. She had no idea how Amelia had interpreted them as a provocation.

*But then, my mistake was trying to understand how she thinks in the first place...* All Jean could do right now was assume a look like she understood and nod, saying, "I see."

She was excessively aware of the cold sweat streaming down her neck. Amelia stopped smiling and narrowed her eyes.

"Do you *really* understand?" she asked.

"Of course, ser!" Jean replied quickly and loudly. Amelia's eyes fixed on hers. Jean found herself half convinced that if those eyes kept staring at her they'd turn her to stone, like a mythical monster. She applied the difficult technique of appearing to keep eye contact while actually avoiding it, and as a result, Amelia at last released her from her gaze.

"Very well, then," she said. Jean, having been spared, experienced heartfelt relief. Wielding her spear against her enemies was a walk in the park compared to this, not to mention presenting less risk to her life. A little over a year had passed since she'd been appointed as Amelia's aide. With the pressure Amelia put on her at every opportunity, Jean thought it was only a matter of time before her stomach gave out.

"But isn't it odd that he assigned the pursuit to us alone?" she went on. She knew that Blood was going to reinforce the Eighth Legion. It made sense, with the enemy retreating, but Jean, for her part, had not entirely bought it. If there had been word that the battle had gone badly for the Eighth Legion, that would have been one thing, but for better or for worse no such message had arrived. The conventional course of action would have been to send all one's forces to strike the enemy here so that one didn't have to worry about them later.

Amelia brushed a lock of hair behind her ear with her fingertips. “The motives of the Royal Army are no concern of mine. What matters now is that we kill every last fleeing imperial soldier. I want enough of their blood to keep my bath full for three days and three nights.” She smiled as though possessed by a demon. Jean, quite sure that she was not joking, shuddered violently. There was only one thing she could do if she wanted to keep Amelia in a good mood. With her cross spear in one hand, Jean headed for the front line.

Under Amelia’s command, the Winged Crusaders ushered the imperial soldiers into the land of the dead with the force of a raging wave. The rear guard quickly fell, leaving the imperial forces to continue their retreat in chaos until at last, the Winged Crusaders drove them into a depression in the land surrounded by sheer cliffs. They did not even know that up on those cliffs, the Winged Crusaders’ archers lay in wait for them...

“Thousand-Wing Amelia! We have backed the imperial army into a corner, all according to plan.”

Amelia nodded lazily. “Good. Let us take our time crushing them.” She was just about to give the long-awaited order for an all-out attack when out of nowhere, an owl appeared before her, then knelt. Amelia glared at them. “Our revelry was just about to begin. Is this urgent?”

“Yes, ser! Master Zephyr instructed me to deliver this to you with all haste.”

“Zephyr...?” Amelia sought about in her memory but could not draw out a single recollection of Zephyr ever sending a message to her himself, for the simple reason that an owl could simply relay the contents on the spot. This alone was enough to indicate that something momentous has occurred.

Amelia gave a small jerk of her chin, at which the owl produced a letter from their pocket and held it deferentially out to her. Amelia took it without a word, immediately running her eyes over the contents.

“A great deal has been happening elsewhere, it seems.” Amelia kept her face impassive, conscious that there were guardians watching her, but she naturally couldn’t help but be surprised by what the letter said.

“Thousand-Wing Amelia? What does it say?” asked one of the senior

hundred-wings, speaking on behalf of all the other guardians in her camp.

“Read it yourself.” Amelia carelessly tossed the letter toward the speaker, who scrambled to catch it. Soon after, their mouth fell open in shock.

“Is this really true, ser...?” the senior hundred-wing asked at last.

“The owls don’t make baseless claims, do they?” Amelia said with a glance at the owl, who nodded emphatically.

“Ramza’s abdication and the truce between the Azure Knights and the Eighth Legion are incredible themselves...” the senior hundred-wing went on, “but surely all that about a horde of corpses rising out of the ground can’t really...”

“Well, what you all think is no concern of mine. What is clear is that what *was* a deathly boring battle that had nothing to do with me has finally gotten entertaining.”

“Erm...” a young hundred-wing began tremulously. “With all due respect, ser, what exactly is entertaining?”

Amelia cocked her head to one side. “‘What’?” she repeated. “Aren’t you entertained?”

Oh, the sensations she would taste, the response she would feel as her blade bit into corpse flesh. Just the thought made her heart leap. Amelia ran her tongue over her lips, and the hundred-wing trembled.

“I feel nothing but terror at the idea of a horde of the dead. Not only that, but the one controlling them is this new emperor...”

“Pathetic. You’re senior officers, aren’t you? In name, at least. Now, this Darmés who appears to be controlling the corpses must be a unique mage indeed...” Amelia chuckled to herself. “I certainly cannot fault his taste.”

If there were any guardians who might have shared Amelia’s opinion, none of them were here. Those present only stared with drawn faces at Amelia as she smiled. To Amelia, the imperial army in front of her had become as unworthy of her attention as crawling ants.

*In any case, I won’t be able to get the full picture stuck here. It’s safe to assume that Twin Lions at Dawn was over the moment the Azure Knights and*

*the Eighth Legion joined hands. The best course of action now is to return to Mekia for the time being. Blessed Wing Lara will certainly think so, and surely the seraph too.*

Amelia pictured Sofitia in all her divinity. Then, she looked back at the owl and curtly declared her intentions.

“Understood, ser. I will tell Master Zephyr without delay.”

As the owl dashed away, Amelia reached into her pocket and drew forth a white pocket watch engraved with the likeness of the goddess Strecia. She pressed open the lid, checked the time, then issued her commands.

“The archers are to shoot the imperials full of arrows until their quivers run dry. I want this battle over within three hours, at most.”

Discontented voices rose up from her soldiers. “With all due respect, ser, the enemy outnumbered us two-to-one, even if we do have them cornered. Wiping them out in three hours isn’t—?!”

Amelia didn’t wait to hear the end. She reached, seized the protesting senior hundred-wing by the collar, and pulled him close.

“Thousand-Wing Amelia?!”

“Our opponent already has one foot in the grave. We have the advantage of terrain. Their superior numbers are irrelevant. But if it’s still beyond your abilities...” Her other hand stretched toward her sword. The blood draining from his face, the senior hundred-wing recited back his orders.

Not long after this, arrows began to fly, skewering imperial soldiers left, right, and center.

*The situation is descending into chaos. But chaos suits me too.* Amelia smiled cruelly as the Winged Crusaders’ onslaught grew still fiercer.

The Bloody Sword banners—a single blade drenched in scarlet on a black field—fluttered gleefully in the breeze as though they were responding to Amelia’s bloodlust.



## Fort Tezcapolis

Faced with attacking imperial forces that none of them had seen coming, Ellis and the rest of her garrison fought on hopelessly, all for the sake of allowing one man to escape the fort...

“Oy, Sis!” bellowed Foster. “Did Lieutenant Colonel Ashton get out safely?”

“He’d better have, or what are we bleeding ourselves dry for here?!” Ellis split the skull of an imperial soldier who came at her with an uncanny smile. Her aide, Foster, knocked a group down with a mighty sweep of his spear.

“Something’s off, though, isn’t it? These clods are all grinning like they’re possessed or something.”

“If you want to know why they’re off, you should ask th—?!”

“As if I don’t know!” Without turning, Foster stabbed backward with his spear. The imperial soldier coming at them from behind had no chance to react before they were silenced. Despite the tragic state of his hairline, Foster was no slouch in a fight.

He was a good man to have on hand when on the back foot, but Ellis could already imagine how even the slightest praise would make him gloat. As such, she would have rather died than tell him.

“They just keep coming!”

The imperial soldiers came crawling around the corner in the corridor like maggots from a corpse. Ellis cursed under her breath.

*Every suit of ebony black armor makes me sick. I, who served as her double, am the only one allowed to wear my big sister’s noble color... All right, as much as I really don’t like it, I suppose it’s all right for that unit Gile put together too.*

An image of Gile, laughing like an idiot with that stupid look on his face, came to mind just as an imperial soldier turned to her and raised an enormous battle-axe so out of proportion with their height it looked ridiculous.

“Diiiiieee!” they shrieked.

“Oh, shut *up*! *You* die!” As the axe came crashing down, Ellis caught it on the flat of her blade, spinning as she did so to slice through the imperial soldier’s

carotid artery from behind. Little bubbles of blood welled up out of the line her sword left, followed by a gush of blood as the soldier's knees gave way. She went on cutting down every imperial soldier she saw, becoming steadily drenched in their blood. Then, she saw a familiar face coming toward her. It was Ashton's attendant, the boy called Lochie.

"Where's Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?" Ellis demanded before Lochie could speak.

He seemed unsure for a moment, but answered, "I think he made it out of the fort."

Ellis's eyebrows shot up. "You *think*? So you didn't make sure?"

Under her angry glare, Lochie said quickly, "Along the way we encountered a large number of imperial soldiers. I had no choice but to lure them away..."

"You guard Lieutenant Colonel Ashton from the shadows, don't you? That's no excuse. Why didn't you stay with him all the way?"

The sudden sharpness in Lochie's manner was palpable. "Why do you think I'm guarding Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?" he asked, backing away as though wary of Ellis.

Ellis gave a contemptuous snort. "Why? I should be asking you why you didn't think I'd notice. The fact is there are too many inconsistencies in what you do and how you act. They might all be small individually, but as they build up, they start to stand out. Basically, it's obvious to anyone with eyes to see it."

"I didn't notice a thing, sis."

"If a moron like you noticed him, he'd be out of work."

Foster pursed his lips irritably.

Lochie didn't take his eyes off of Ellis for a second. "All right, that makes sense," he said at length. "Apparently, my training has been far from sufficient. If my sister hears about this, I'm going to be in for an earful and no mistake." He relaxed somewhat, letting out a deep sigh. Though a glint of suspicion continued to simmer in his eyes, Ellis saw his wariness gradually drop away. He was skilled, no doubt, but apparently, he was also still naive.

“Can you take us to Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?”

“Yes, assuming he kept running as I told him.”

Ellis and Foster, now with Lochie joining their number, set off running once more through the fort that echoed with the screams and yells of combat and death. Lochie took the lead, demonstrating his unarmed combat skills to them on the imperial soldiers they encountered on the way.

Ellis saw neither fear, nor carelessness, nor arrogance in Lochie’s face. He neutralized each enemy who appeared before him with mindless efficiency. They passed by imperial soldiers with arms bent at unnatural angles, eyes glazed over and drooling from their mouths. Ellis was privately awestruck.

*It’s not just his physical technique, she thought. He’s cultivated his skills specifically for killing. I honestly didn’t expect this much from him, but that’s a happy mistake.*

Along the way they reunited with Evanson, who was equally drenched in blood, then as they continued after Ashton, Ellis and the others came to a wide-open door in front of which lay a heap of fallen imperial soldiers. Ellis stopped, looking at the other three. Then, keeping her guard up, she entered the room.

It was Evanson, his face twisted in horror, who spoke up as soon as they entered.

“No... Lieutenant Gile...”

Gile, his hand still clenched around his bow, had his back to another door, guarding it. He had died on his feet, eyes still open. It was clear he had been protecting someone, and in Fort Tezcapolis, there was only one someone that could be.

Ellis approached him, treading on the corpses of imperial soldiers strewn about the room. A gentle smile formed on her lips. “This room tells me all I need to know. I didn’t think a stupid, incurable bonehead like you had it in you to fight so well. I, Ellis Crawford, am genuinely impressed.” She softly lay a hand over Gile’s face, then slid it down.

“Lieutenant Colonel Ashton must have gone through there,” Lochie said.

Without looking at him, Ellis laid Gile down beside the door. “Don’t state the obvious,” she quietly admonished.

“I’m sorry...”

Ellis kicked the door in, then she simply ran, trying with all her might to hide the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Evanson and the others passed through the open door and saw a stable glowing in the light of the sunrise. The holes here and there in the roof made it clear it had not been used in a long time. Evanson crept toward the stables, signaling to the other three with hand gestures. It was a precaution against any soldiers who might be lying in wait, but in the end it proved unnecessary.

“It doesn’t look like there are any imperial soldiers here...” he said under his breath. Then Lochie, who had gone ahead, suddenly crouched down. “What is it?” Evanson asked. Lochie’s eyes ran over the ground as though he was searching for something. Evanson watched quietly until Lochie stood up, then pointed ahead of them and to the right.

“I think Lieutenant Colonel Ashton went that way.”

“Why?” Ellis demanded at once. Lochie explained that the footprints that remained unquestionably belonged to Ashton. Crouching down beside Lochie revealed that there were indeed footprints. But to Evanson, they looked no different from the ones he himself had left on the ground. Ellis and Foster apparently thought the same; they eyed Lochie with skepticism.

“What evidence do you have for being sure that these belong to Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?”

“Footprints are more distinct than all of you think. You can tell, for example, by the length of someone’s stride how tall they are, and the depth tells you roughly their weight. The way these footprints drag along the ground show that this person was extremely tired, and most importantly, there is a pronounced indentation from the toe. That is consistent with Lieutenant Colonel Ashton’s particular way of walking.”

Evanson and Foster both sat there, impressed by Lochie’s explanation. Ellis,

meanwhile, set off toward the long grass Lochie had indicated.

“Don’t let your guard down,” Evanson said, following after her.

“I know.”

He pushed his way into the grass, with Foster and Lochie behind him. They moved forward cautiously, clearing a path as they went. Then, Ellis abruptly stopped.

“Ellis?” Her gaze was fixed ahead. There, Evanson saw a dead imperial soldier, a look of delight still on her face. A knife that had presumably struck the fatal blow protruded from her neck. It was engraved with the lion sigil they knew well.

“Hey, sis...” Foster looked uncertainly at Ellis. Lochie, who had coolly killed all those imperial soldiers without a flicker of emotion, was like a different person, his face ashen. The reason was the knife clutched in the woman’s hand, stained red-brown. There was no question that she and someone else had stabbed each other, and given the dead woman was an imperial soldier, the inevitable conclusion was that her opponent had been with the Royal Army.

*Calm down. We don’t know that it was Lieutenant Colonel Ashton yet,* Evanson told himself. But denying it only made his heart beat faster. Scouring the area around him with his eyes, he noticed patches of bloodstained grass continuing away to their left.

*Lieutenant Colonel Ashton!* Before he knew it, he was running desperately. A little later, he heard uneven breathing from behind him. Whenever fear threatened to engulf him, he pushed it back, telling himself out loud that Ashton was all right, he had to be all right. At some point, the words turned into a prayer.

“No...”

The scene that awaited them was unbearably cruel. Evanson jerked to a halt like a broken clock, burying his hands in his hair.

Under the dappled light of the tree, Ashton seemed at first to be only sleeping peacefully. But the pool of dried blood that spread out beneath him pitilessly dispelled this image. The aroma of the white flowers blooming all around him



mingled with the scent of winter, leaving Evanson feeling as though he were dreaming.

“Lieutenant Colonel Ashton...” Lochie fell to his knees. “Second Lieutenant Ellis was right. Whatever happened, I should never have left his side. I am to blame.” Tears poured down Lochie’s cheeks as, without a care for the rest of them, he pounded the ground with his fists. Ellis, meanwhile, passed by him without a word. She began to shake Ashton lightly by the shoulders.

“What are you thinking, napping here, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton? It’s morning. Come on, get up.”



“Ellis...”

She knew that Ashton would not reply. But she didn't let a little thing like that stop her. She began to shake Ashton harder and harder.

“Sis, stop it! That's enough!” Foster ran over to Ellis, grappling her under the arms to try and pull her away from Ashton.

“You bastard!” she screamed. “You get your hands off of me!!!” She slammed the back of her head into his face, then, as Foster wobbled on his feet, blood streaming from his nose, she grabbed his collar and pulled him toward her before driving her knee into his stomach with her full strength. Groaning, Foster hunched over while Ellis ran back over to Ashton, then started shaking him harder than ever.

“What the hell!” she yelled at him. “What the hell did that bonehead give his life for?! Wake *up* already, damn you!”

As Ellis raged, Evanson walked up behind her and gently laid a hand on her narrow shoulders.

“Not you t—?!”

“Let him rest, Ellis. This is too unkind.”

Ellis dropped her hands, then stared at Ashton. An empty look came over her face, like it had when their father had finally passed away. Then, tears began to spill from her warm brown eyes, pouring down her cheeks.

“Let's go, Ellis. We can't die here too. It's our duty to live and tell the others of Lieutenant Ashton's death.”

Evanson got Ellis and Lochie to stand up, then slung Ashton over his back. It would likely be a brutal journey, carrying him all the way home. But Evanson decided the least he could do to make amends would be to let a certain two others see Ashton's fate.

“How am I supposed to face Big Sister Olivia and Colonel Claudia...?” Ellis wept in despair. No one answered her.

Evanson and the others set off to rejoin the main force that had gone on ahead, their legs heavy as lead and with a gaping sense of loss in their hearts.

## Chapter Two: A New Wind

I

The usually tranquil lakefront resounded with heavy blows that seemed to rise up from the depths of the earth. Following the sound to its source, one would have found a beautiful girl with silver hair wielding a blade of ebony black. The girl heaved for breath as she leveled her sword against her opponent. This opponent, with an aura closely akin to that of the girl's ebony blade and wielding a great scythe of the same shade, was not human but something *else*. Every time their weapons clashed, it produced a shock wave that radiated out across the lake's surface, throwing up spray such as would never have occurred naturally.

Olivia panted heavily.

*Your physical abilities have deteriorated further than I had expected*, it said to her. *We shall end our training for today.*

With all her effort on steadying her breathing, Olivia could not reply. In an instant, Z dispelled its scythe before disappearing in the depths of a black vortex. Once she was alone, Olivia crumpled to the ground with her limbs outstretched, breathing deep and deliberate.

"Z really is amazing," she said to herself. "I'm no match for it at all, in the end. Not that I didn't know that..." It wasn't until ten minutes later that she was finally able to get up.

The sky was awash with a great ocean of stars. For the first time in many moons, Olivia, surrounded by a scurry of gray squirrels, sat across a fire from Z. Between bites of succulently roasted meat, she told Z about the many things that had happened to her since she had left the forest.

"And then there's Claudia. She likes soft toys of cute beasts, but for some reason she keeps it a secret from everyone. I asked her why before, and she

said it's because it's embarrassing for an adult to like soft toys. She said I *really* had to keep it secret from Ashton. I mean, I think it's fine for everyone to like what they like, whether they're adults or children. Oh, and Claudia? She's really nice, normally, but when she turns into a yaksha she's suuuper scary. So lately, whenever I see the signs that she's turning into one, I make sure to get away from her right away. That way, I make it out unharmed. The other thing is Ashton was always telling me I couldn't read the room, but lately, he's *way* worse than me. Oh, so reading the room isn't like reading a book. It's about picking up on the atmosphere around you to understand how another person feels. I totally didn't get it when Ashton first explained it to me, and it was so hard until I got used to it."

Z listened as Olivia talked with quiet attentiveness. Now, it cast its gaze down at the quarreling gray squirrels that chased each other all over its shadowy form. *These two humans, "Claudia" and "Ashton," appear frequently in your tale*, it said.

"Do they? Well, that'll be because Claudia and Ashton are special—they're my dearest, closest friends, out of all the friends I made."

*Friends, you say...*

"That's right. Z, do you have any friends?"

Z stared into the fire for a time. *I had one, once*. A hint of a smile crept over its mouth. Z's face was as blank as ever, but Olivia had no trouble seeing it. She could count the number of times Z had shown what one could call an emotion on one hand. As such, she was now filled with such irrepressible happiness that she couldn't help but smile.

"Really?!" she exclaimed, then paused. "Wait, but you said 'once.' Does that mean you don't have any now?"

*Correct*, Z said at length.

"Oh..." Silence followed this for a time, broken only by the howls of dusksight wolves that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Olivia looked up at the night sky. Then, as she gazed at the multitudes of twinkling stars, a question struck her. "Why do humans do things like war?"

*Do you hate war?*

“I do. I’ve watched so many of my allies die. Do you think any humans *like* it?”

*As I once taught you, humans are cruel and violence-loving creatures. They also fall prey to greed all too easily. They may desire only trifles at first, but as their reach grows longer, they grasp at greater and greater prizes. Humans who taste the sweetness of power in particular tend to desire that which is beyond them. From time to time, this leads to war.*

“So the last Asvelt emperor started the war because he wanted Duvedirica? I don’t get that at all.” To Olivia, who thought being able to eat tasty food and sweets was all one needed, the reasoning of the former emperor seemed entirely incomprehensible.

Z threw a twig onto the fire. *Indeed. Perhaps there would be no war if all humans were like you. But this war was not brought about by the former emperor you speak of.*

“Huh? It wasn’t?” Before she could ask, “Then who?” Z went on.

*It was the doing of Xenia, and Xenia’s puppet.*

“Huh...” Olivia said thoughtfully. “But why did Xenia start a war? Oh! Was it after a big meal?”

Z ate human souls, which meant that Xenia, its former ally, had to be the same. If Xenia had a big appetite, nothing could be better for it than large numbers of humans killing each other in a war. But Z did not answer her question. As the fire crackled away, loud in her ears, Z produced a handful of flower seeds from somewhere, then scattered them for the gray squirrels gathered at its feet. They all scrambled over each other to start eating.

*I wonder...* she thought. Z had never been talkative, and that had never especially bothered her. But right then, Olivia felt strangely discomfited.

“Did I maybe ask something I shouldn’t have? If so, I’m sorry.” It had been a lengthy process for Olivia to learn that everyone had certain things they didn’t want to be asked about. She still didn’t have any, but that didn’t mean Z wouldn’t.



She waited and waited, but as Z still gave no sign of replying, she grew anxious.

“Are you angry, Z?” she asked tremulously.

*Fret not. I am not angry. Indeed, all my anger has long since withered away. Now, tomorrow we shall begin your training with the rising of the sun. As today was your first session in a long time, I held back much of my strength. From tomorrow, that must end. Eat well, and be sure to rest.*

Olivia replied with two small nods. Z rose from the fallen tree it used as a seat, then it was a streak of gleaming black, soaring away to the west.

Olivia thought back on that day’s training, and a shiver went through her.

*So that was Z holding back... she thought. I’d better do as it said and eat up and get a good night’s sleep to be ready for tomorrow. You know, when I was talking about everyone before, I started missing them a tiny bit. Once I’m back in the royal capital, I’ll get Ashton to make me egg sandwiches with his special mustard... Twenty or so.*

An image of Ashton as she had last seen him suddenly drifted through her mind. Olivia reached for her seventh skewer of the day, the meat dripping with fat, and tore into it with savage gusto.

## II

Rosenmarie, realizing that Death God Olivia had not joined the battle and assured that the siege of Kier Fortress itself was only a diversion, gave the order for the Caelestis Wolves to mount a raid that same night. The attack was carried out by a mere five platoons, but while the Helios Knights were famed for their defense, the Caelestis Wolves were the sole unit within them who were at their best on the offensive. With the Royal Army unprepared for an attack coming from the fortress, they suffered significant losses. However, when they continued night after night, those surprise attacks became no more than standard nighttime raids. Ten days after the first attack, Rosemarie’s forces had only succeeded in inflicting minor damage to the now unfailingly vigilant Royal Army.

At this point, Major General Zacharias Caralley, commander of the Caelestis Wolves, came to Rosenmarie to report. Zacharias was a battle-hardened veteran, but the smile Rosenmarie wore now was enough to send a chill up even his spine.

“The groundwork is more or less in place, then.”

“Yes, my lady. It all proceeded smoothly.”

“Then naturally the next step is to lay the foundations.”

Another five days passed. It was the midnight hour, when the dark hung deepest over the pall of night. At a point on the front line not far from Kier Fortress, two soldiers stood watch. One was a burly man in his prime, the other, a youth who still looked half a boy. The older of the two was looking up at Kier Fortress, still a commanding presence even in the darkness. He called over to the younger, who kept blowing into his hands.

“You that cold?”

“It’s freezing. Don’t it bother you, Captain?”

“I hail from the north of the north. This sort of cold’s nothing.”

“I’m jealous. Say, it’s been six days since them nighttime raids stopped coming, huh...” the younger soldier mused. “Guess they must’ve twigged that it was doing no good keeping them up.”

“Course they did. All right, the first day we were hit hard when they caught us unawares, but when it goes on every night, you get watchful, whether you want to or not. Can’t make head or tail of what they’re playing at, myself.”

“Whatever it is, I just wish they’d use the night for sleeping, all quiet-like and such.” The younger of the two breathed into his hands again, this time marching on the spot as well. The older soldier watched him, smiling.

The pair never managed to continue their conversation. All of a sudden, an inky shadow slipped between them like a gust of wind. When it passed, all that remained were two corpses, each with a single stab wound through the heart.

The same mysterious happening that befell the two soldiers was carried out against all the soldiers who stood watch on the front line, without

discrimination. The moon gave no sign of revealing its silver face from behind the clouds, and so the world remained covered in chill darkness.

On the battlefield, where death hovers always close at hand, the act of sleep was perhaps the most direct route to it. As he drifted in fragmented, nonsensical dreams, Major General Osmund Chrysler, though his ears perceived the discordant clamor of battle, was unable to recognize it as reality.

“Major General.” Someone shook Osmund. Unconsciously, he grabbed the blade he kept at his bedside, sitting bolt upright. He was met by the light of a candle held in a chamberstick. Slowly, Osmund looked up and his aide, Lieutenant Colonel Danish Stan, came blearily into view.

“What is it?” Osmund said at last.

“Our unit is currently experiencing a surprise attack,” Danish said, just as from beyond the tent flap, Osmund caught the sound of many hurried footsteps, along with voices calling rapidly back and forth.

“Major General, ser.”

“I hear you.” Dawn had not yet broken, as was evidenced by the thin light of the candle that lit up the tent. Questions rose up within Osmund in proportion to his growing awareness of the situation.

“It’s not a night raid?”

“It is a surprise attack, ser,” Danish replied without hesitation. The first nighttime raid they had not seen coming, the very definition of a surprise attack. After that, they had redoubled their guard, thanks to which they had not been caught off guard again. But now here was Danish, using the words “surprise attack” again.

“Were the watch soldiers sleeping on the job?” Osmund got to his feet, staring intently at the hard look he now clearly recognized on his aide’s face.

“An inquiry into that will have to wait. Please ready yourself quickly, ser.” Danish spoke in the same tone he used when they weren’t under attack, but that was what told Osmund just how dire the situation was. He swiftly donned his armor, using his teeth to pull tight the cords of his gauntlets. Danish waited

until Osmund had strapped his sword to his belt, then in one breath, he blew out the candle.

“It’s hell out there, ser,” he said. “Prepare yourself.”

“They fell right into Lady Rosenmarie’s trap.” At his aide’s words, Lieutenant General Gazel Tolstoy, or the Ruddy General, as he was known, nodded.

“Well, that’s no surprise.”

After receiving word from the shimmers that their mission was accomplished, Gazel assembled a force of twenty thousand—close to the full might of the Crimson Knights—and rode forth. He divided them into three units: five thousand against the Winged Crusaders on the right flank, another five thousand against the Royal Army forces on the left flank, with the remaining ten thousand to charge the Royal Army forces in the center. The units he sent to the flanks served as barriers to prevent them sending reinforcements, his objective being the annihilation of the central Royal Army force deployed closest to Kier Fortress. By the time the central force, which had lost every one of its watch soldiers, became aware of the Crimson Knights stealing up on them, it was too late. The Crimson Knights, seizing the chance for revenge, overran the helpless Royal Army. Even then, as time passed some units began to mount a counterattack, but the scorching heat of the crimson inferno quickly put them to flight.

“There’s nothing they can do now.”

The central Royal Army was crushed under the Crimson Knights’ impressive force. Gazel himself led a special unit of three thousand soldiers, cutting a path deep into the enemy formation. Soon, he recognized a banner with the image of a wine cask. A frenzied look came into his eye, and he charged forward, knocking aside any Royal Army soldiers who stood in his way. Then, from beside him, there came a chilling roar. In the same instant, without his willing it, his body twisted to the right, dodging by a hair the spear that thrust toward him as, with perfect timing, he stabbed his own spear straight through the attacker’s head.

“A real seasoned warrior, eh? You came this close to having me.” The body of

the soldier tilted heavily to the left, its skull shattered beyond recognition. Gazel spurred his horse to a gallop once more, striking out with his spear at will. The dead soldier behind him was already gone from his mind.

*There you are...* Gazel's attention had shifted to another man who stood protected by a group of soldiers.

Try as Osmund might to rally his forces, his efforts came to naught in the face of the Crimson Knights' indomitable offensive. It had been half an hour since Danish, announcing that it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed, had ridden alone into the oncoming storm, spear in hand.

Right now, the main force was in disarray, the clang of steel on steel ringing out from every direction. Watching his personal guard fall one after another, Osmund finally found his resolve.

*Looks like this is the end...* Osmund thought. He suddenly remembered the time that Olivia had saved him when he had been on the brink of death, then laughed at himself. Was some part of him thinking that she would show up just in time to rescue him again? *A lost cause if there ever was one, I am...*

As the last of his guards hit the dirt, Osmund raised his spear to the approaching imperial soldier.

"I am Major General Osmund Chrysler of the Royal Army."

"And I am Lieutenant General Gazel Tolstoy of the Crimson Knights. You should be rewarded for not fleeing—I'll grant you a swift death."

A moment later, their spears met in an exchange of blows. Though they were both mounted and fought with the same weapon, Osmund's opponent wielded his spear with a brilliance unimpeded by being on horseback, and he found himself in a bad position. The difference in strength between them was stark—it therefore felt to Osmund as though the gods had come to his aid when, just as their spears clashed, Gazel's stirrup snapped.

"Thanks be to heaven!" he cried. No mounted warrior, no matter how mighty, could fight effectively without stirrups. Gazel was heavily off-balance. Osmund twisted his arm inward to magnify the speed and force of the strike that he

aimed at Gazel's heart.

"—ngh!" Osmund had been so sure his spear had found its mark, but, as if in mockery of him, it pierced only empty air. In an instant, the strength went out of his raised toes, and, no longer able to stand in his stirrups, he fell, the ground seeming to draw him down.

"It'd take more than a broken stirrup to unseat the Ruddy General," said Gazel. Him losing his balance had been a feint. Not that that knowledge helped Osmund here. As if there were anything he could do now, with a spear through his throat. The sudden cold that gripped him couldn't just be the fault of the temperature.

Tugging at the vanishing threads of his consciousness, Osmund let out a voiceless cry.

"I know. I haven't forgotten your reward." As the expressionless voice reached him, he felt a rush of the last of his body heat. But that too subsided before long. All Osmund's senses left him completely as his heart ceased its beating forever.

"Well, that's a relief. Should we use this momentum to take their flanks as well?"

"This is all the victory we need. Our job is to lay the foundation, that's all. Anything more would rob Lady Rosenmarie of her fun, and if there's anyone whose wrath I don't want to incur, it's hers."

Gazel gave a helpless shrug. His aide smiled wryly. "I feel the same way, ser. I will send word to retreat at once."

The Crimson Knights returned to Kier Fortress triumphant. In the east, the sky had just begun to lighten.

### III

#### **Neinhardt's Camp, the Royal Army**

When word that Osmund had been killed in battle reached Cornelius, he sent



orders to the troops on the front lines to make a temporary retreat. To fill the gap in their forces this created, he sent his chief of staff, Neinhardt, with six thousand soldiers under his banner.

A few hours had passed since then. The overcast skies that had persisted for several days suddenly opened up, revealing refreshing blue skies that stretched over the battlefield where, in response to Neinhardt's summons, Lambert and Lara arrived at his camp.

"Why were Major General Osmund's forces the only ones to be flattened like that...?"

Neinhardt was aware that in recent days, there had been a spate of small-scale nighttime raids. It remained unclear what the imperial army had sought to achieve with them. Regardless, he didn't believe for a moment that the Royal Army had let their guard down.

This raised the question as to why Osmund's unit alone had suffered such devastation. Earlier, Neinhardt had gone to examine the place where Osmund had fallen. He had learned as a result of his survey that far too many of the soldiers had died without a weapon in their hand. Lambert and Lara, meanwhile, had also weathered large-scale attacks that night, but neither had taken more than minimal losses. It would have been easy to call it the result of a difference in the generals' abilities, but Neinhardt did not, in fact, believe that Osmund had been less able a commander than the other two. He had not come to hold a core role in the Seventh Legion under the command of Paul, the God of the Battlefield, for nothing.

"Osmund was sometimes rash, but he wasn't careless," Lambert said, then fell silent, knitting his brow.

The battle had, by and large, progressed according to the Royal Army's wishes. As such, the effect of the first death of a general in the First Allied Legion on the soldiers had been significant.

Neinhardt looked at Lara, who held her teacup. She returned him a thin smile.

"Don't look to me for answers. I don't even remember what this 'Osmund' looked like. What I will say, if I may, is simply this—the battlefield culls the weak without mercy."

“You think I’ll listen to some chit of a girl insult Osmund?”

Lambert’s eyes bored into Lara with the ferocity of a wild beast. Most would have broken down trembling before such a gaze, but Lara was apparently unperturbed. Only her smile turned icy.

“It appears I’ve much displeased you, Lambert the Bold, but I was speaking not only of people, but rather of a truth that holds for all living things—a law of nature. Come, I will forgive your rudeness toward me. I am mindful that it is the duty of those with power to be lenient to those without.”

“Oho...” Lambert’s voice grew softer. “Not enough to besmirch Osmund’s name, now you come for me as well.”

Lara raised her hand carelessly. “You’ll forgive me if I insulted you. I’ve never been one to lie or flatter.” She flashed another smile without warmth, then took a delicate sip of tea.

The air between them crackled, as though at any moment they might fly at each other with swords drawn. Before Neinhardt could come between them, he was beaten to it by the young man with flaxen hair who stood behind Lara—Johann Strider.

“Blessed Wing Lara, I wish you would stop picking fights where it isn’t necessary. We have an *alliance*. Do you *want* to embarrass the seraph?”

Johann’s words had a powerful effect on Lara. In an instant, the look on her face went from easy assurance to blankness. She was clearly perturbed. Neinhardt, who had never seen her like this before, found it quite startling.

Next, Johann turned to Lambert, inclining his head. “General Lambert, I offer my sincere apologies for my commander.”

Lambert’s response to the apology was to childishly turn his face away from Johann, so Neinhardt answered for him.

“As do I,” he said. “He does tend to forget to act his age.”

“’Tis the nature of having an exceptional commander that you torment one another, I suppose.”

Caught between the piercing glares, they snickered.

Lara let out a small breath through her nose. “In my opinion, it’s likely that the large raid last night had Major General Osmund’s unit as its target from the outset.”

Lambert still looked resentful, but Neinhardt caught his small nod.

“Do you agree, General Lambert?”

“It is true that, despite hitting us with the raid, they didn’t seem much interested in attacking. It would explain everything if their goal was to keep myself and that...that *commander* pinned down,” Lambert said.

What he said made sense. Neinhardt, too, felt sure that, as Lara had just suggested, Osmund’s unit had been targeted. But that couldn’t have been all that’d gone wrong to result in such a devastating attack.

“I can’t say I’m entirely satisfied,” Lara said, “but thinking it over all day won’t alter the facts. On which note, you’ll excuse me if I go on ahead—my position does not afford me time for leisure. The two of you may go on talking to your hearts’ content.”

There was a crash as a fist came down on the table like a boulder.



“We aren’t done here!” Lambert growled.

“I am done.” Deaf to all protest, Lara rose from her chair, then swept out of the camp, Johann following with his head down, awkwardly scratching at his hair.

*That went well,* Neinhardt thought as Lambert kicked over Lara’s chair. He chewed over what Lara had said. She was right—what was done was done, and there was no point in lingering over it. And yet so long as he couldn’t douse the sense that something was missing, he felt he *had* to keep thinking about it.

“Snotty, stupid little girl! How’d you like that! And that!”

Looking past Lambert, Neinhardt watched as the chair, which had done nothing wrong, lost all semblance of its original shape.

*For now, I need to do something about this.* Knowing how exhausting it was to calm Lambert down when he flew into a rage, Neinhardt leaned back in his chair and sighed.

“Welcome back, ser!”

Johann returned the salutes of the assembled guardians as he mounted his horse. He then promptly turned to Lara, who was astride her own horse beside him, and said, “You *do* know, don’t you?”

Lara seemed to mock his deliberate vagueness as she replied, “Obviously.” Johann couldn’t help a pained smile. Making sure his displeasure showed on his face, he went on.

“Does that mean you’re not going to let me in on the secret either?”

Lara turned toward him for the first time. Entirely contrary to Johann’s expectations, she looked thoroughly surprised.

“You can’t be serious?” she said.

“I apologize for my inadequacies, Blessed Wing.” It was no good expecting an average mind to be able to infer the reasoning of a genius. Johann inclined his head as Lara let out a sigh of something between disbelief and resignation.

“None of it was directed at us, but you do know that before last night’s attack, there had been small-scale nighttime raids some days?”

“Yes. The first night they were caught off guard, but of course they were on their guard from the second night on. And yet the raids continued. To be honest, I couldn’t see what they were trying to achieve.”

Lara sniffed.

“It seemed pointless, but it wasn’t. My suspicion is that the imperial army used the confusion caused by the raids to gradually sneak skilled operatives—shimmers, for example—into the midst of the Royal Army.”

“Shimmers...?” Johann said slowly, then... “Oh!”

“So you worked it out. A battle of this scale? An unknown face here and there wouldn’t rouse anyone’s suspicions. If the soldiers on watch were dispatched by the shimmers just before the attack, it makes sense that the Royal Army allowed themselves to be helplessly overrun. Heightened vigilance always leads to carelessness somewhere else. It’s how people keep themselves mentally and physically balanced. Our opponent saw the opportunity and exploited it masterfully. I suppose I should have expected it of her.”

“Rosenmarie von Berlietta,” Johann said. “Just as devious as her reputation suggests, then, isn’t she? But Lara,” Johann added in exasperation, “you were mean yourself to not let on when you knew all that.”

Lara snorted. “As I have said before, I have no intention whatsoever of turning soft. It was the height of generosity on my part just to hint at the answer. In any case, it’s obvious that this battle isn’t going anywhere. I really could not care less what Rosenmarie is up to anymore.”

As the last word left her lips, she spurred her horse to a spirited gallop. Johann hurried to keep up.

*So her mind is already elsewhere... he thought. The Royal Army can’t have heard about what happened to the Azure Knights and the Eighth Legion, if just now was anything to go by. They wouldn’t have time to idle away on investigations if they knew.*



The First Allied Legion renewed its assault on Kier Fortress the following morning. Naturally, they were on the highest possible alert against another nighttime attack, but the imperial army did not come again.

## IV

### **The Imperial Army, Kier Fortress**

Five days had passed since the devastating attack on Osmund's forces.

"Soldiers! At last, the time has come!"

There was a roar from the ranks. In tones of triumph, Rosemarie issued her commands to the assembled officers of Crimson and Helios so that the entertainment she had been eagerly anticipating could begin. In the first strains of dawn, the rays of the sun glittered. The tightly sealed first gate of Kier Fortress swung solemnly open.

"C-Captain! The gate!" Shouts flew between the commanders of the units on the front lines as first, out of the now-open gate, there came a lone soldier, robed in a cloak of majesty and bearing the white banner of the Helios Knights. They were followed by the brave peal of trumpets and the Helios Knights themselves, marching forth in step.

"The hell are those bastards doing?!"

"I don't know, ser, but I think we have a chance to take the gate!"

"No! Remember the last attack at night. Run in without thinking, and like as not we'll be playing into the enemy's hands. We should wait and see."

The Royal Army had been handed the opportunity, too good to lose, to break into Kier Fortress. And yet not one of their commanders could give the order to charge. In part, they were too taken aback by the brazen display from the Helios Knights. But mostly, they highly suspected a trap.

After the Helios Knights, the Crimson Knights emerged in the same fashion, and last of all a line of horse-drawn carts. Each cart was laden with large piles of wood. In the end, the Helios and Crimson Knights stood in a ring broadly encircling the carts.

## Neinhardt's Camp, the First Allied Legion

The first word to reach Neinhardt, who was commanding his forces on the front lines, came thirty minutes after the gates of Kier Fortress opened.

"So not only did they just open the gate, but they started *parading*?"

Kier Fortress was no common fortification. Up until the day it had been captured by the imperial army, it had been known as the Impenetrable Fortress. Right then, the sun shone down, nothing at all like the conditions of the last nighttime attacks. There was, in other words, no reason from the imperial army's point of view to actively throw aside their advantage and come out into the open.

"We also have a report of a large number of carts piled high with wood," said Captain Katerina Reinas. Neinhardt's expression automatically darkened.

"Piles of wood? Not weapons?"

"I asked, but apparently it is definitely only wood. With that on top of the parade, I can't work out what the imperial army is planning."

"My feelings exactly, but if they've come out, we have to meet them."

The imperial army's actions were a mystery, but they couldn't afford to speculate. Neinhardt gave Katerina his orders, but in the midst of their preparations to engage the enemy, a new report arrived that put a deep frown on Neinhardt's face.

"A ring formation, you say?"

The runner looked bewildered but said, "Yes, ser. They've shown no sign of moving since."

A ring formation, it scarcely needed to be said, placed emphasis on defense. Logically, it was ill-suited to an attacking force. In other words, the imperial army had come out into the open, and yet did not mean to attack. Neinhardt could see why the commanders at the very front had failed to act for fear of a trap. He himself kept the possibility of a trap in the forefront of his mind while he scrutinized the situation, and saw that, in the middle of the ring formation, the imperial army had started to build something. He saw nothing at all there to

indicate they meant to attack.

*Just what sort of scheme is this?* When a situation didn't make sense, it wasn't unacceptable, tactically speaking, to play it by ear and attack anyway. What held Neinhardt back from taking the first step to attack was largely this: he still had not found a clear answer for why Osmund's unit had been destroyed.

"Your hesitation is understandable, ser, but I think we ought to attack. It will be hard on the soldiers' morale if we don't."

Katerina's words made too much sense for Neinhardt to ignore them.

"Give the archers orders to attack."

"Yes, ser!"

Out of the limited options he had available to him, Neinhardt had settled on a longbow assault at range.

"Loose!"

"Loose!"

"Loose!"

One after another, the calls of the archer commanders rang out, and a great mass of arrows rained down on the heads of the imperial forces. But thanks to the solid wall of shields that rose up to cover the entire formation, not one imperial soldier was shot through. A second volley was loosed, then a third, but the archers only succeeded in wasting their arrows.

"That defense, isn't that..."

"The High Tower defense. A favorite of the Helios Knights." Seeing that further volleys would serve no purpose, Neinhardt immediately gave the order for the attack to cease. The Helios Knights lowered their shields, with no sign they meant to mount a counterattack. The same was true of the Crimson Knights.

"Are we going to engage them directly?" Katerina asked. Neinhardt pondered for a moment.

"Any movement from the Winged Crusaders?"

“None, ser.”

“What about General Lambert?”

“None from him either, ser.”

“Then let’s wait a while and see how things develop. I don’t know about the Winged Crusaders, but Lambert’s at his best on the attack. If he hasn’t acted, he must have a reason for it.”

“Very well, ser. It suits us too if they stay where they are. Our objective is to keep the imperial army pinned down at Kier Fortress, not to defeat them, after all.”

“Exactly. We aren’t trying to defeat them,” Neinhardt echoed. He was trying to reassure himself. Or was it a sign of the unease that had started to take root inside of him? Right then, Neinhardt couldn’t have said which.

### **Lambert’s Camp, the First Allied Legion**

Lambert had predicted that the enemy, after the large attack some nights earlier, would soon act again. Now, he had been proved right, but in a way so entirely different from what he had expected that for different reasons again to Neinhardt, he found himself immobilized. That being said, he had not dismissed the possibility that this was a demonstration designed to put them off their guard, and so he had ordered Lieutenant General Hermann Hack, who was known to be strong on the defense, to organize an iron wall formation with the Barthes Mountains to the north at their back. The mountains were treacherous, but they also connected to imperial territory. On the off chance that reinforcements came from the Azure Knights, Lambert meant to block them. But no imperial forces appeared.

“He’s become cautious too, it seems...” Neinhardt, encamped at the point closest to Kier Fortress, must have felt just as unsettled by this bizarre series of actions from the imperial army. His longbow volleys had bounced off their strong defenses without making any mark. Before long, the sun reached its zenith, and still the situation continued to smolder without catching alight.

“Our foe is going against all the principles of war,” remarked Grell Heit, more wrinkles appearing among the many that already covered his face. Lambert

wholeheartedly agreed. Back when Lambert was only a snot-nosed little boy, Grell had been the mentor who had drilled into him everything there was to know about war. Now, the old man served as his aide.

“This is a different beast altogether to when they were sneaking about like rats on those night raids,” Lambert said. “If you’re going to throw away your advantage to fight out in the open, you ought to have a plan you’re certain will win. But *this* lot just got into a ring formation and haven’t budged since. What are they thinking?”

“The reports said they’re sending carts laden with wood into the ring, ser.”

“Laden with *wood*? What, are they trying to build a castle overnight?” Lambert said, referencing a legend from a country far to the east no one was sure really existed. He wasn’t being serious, of course; it was only a simple jest born out of frustration.

“I would dearly love, ser, for you to enlighten me as to what the point would be in building a fortification a stone’s throw from Kier Fortress. For my future reference.” Grell narrowed his eyes, and Lambert, cowed, couldn’t help but shrink into himself. That was when he remembered: such quips never landed with his former mentor, who had no sense of humor.

Lambert hurriedly explained the joke. Grell’s manner only grew more forbidding.

“Still telling your so-called jokes. Some things never change.”

The next morning, however, Lambert saw with his own eyes that his joke was a joke no longer.

“They didn’t really build a castle overnight?!” Lambert squawked as he stared through his spyglass at the gigantic shape. Many of his soldiers stood around him, but they didn’t seem bothered by his tone. All of them were talking among themselves about the looming structure.

“Less a fort than a wooden watchtower,” Grell said dryly, looking through his own spyglass.

“You call that a watchtower?” Lambert looked more closely and saw that it was true; the construction didn’t appear to be as sturdy as he would have

expected for a fort. But he had also never heard of a watchtower of that size. In either case, it still served absolutely no purpose to the imperial army when they had Kier Fortress.

“Hmm. Why don’t we poke it and see what they do?” Grell said, then immediately ordered an attendant to bring him his horse. *Not again*, Lambert groaned inwardly as he hurried to stop the old soldier.

“I told you to stop trying to go off on your own.”

“There’s no law I know of that says that I have to sit here quietly after a thing like that was built right under our noses. Here, I’ll take only my own force. Nothing for you to fear, ser. Every one of them ranks among the greats of history, as you know. We’ll just go and have a quick look to see what sort of thing our foe’s got in mind.”

“‘Force’? You’ve got what, twenty men or so at most?”

On top of that, it had been many years since they had numbered among the “greats of history.” These days, some looked like a good breeze would knock them over. Every one of them should have retired from warfare long ago. Despite that, Lambert felt a loyalty to Grell that was without parallel. If Grell had ordered it, he would have happily followed the old man into the land of the dead itself. Usually, Lambert would have balked at being seen bringing such men to the battlefield, but as they were all private soldiers employed by Grell, he had looked the other way until now.

“Now that’s a laugh. Talking about a trifling thing like numbers. Take a look at them yourself and say that again, ser.”

Grinning fiercely, Grell turned. Lambert followed his gaze and saw that at some point the old soldiers had assembled, spears in hand, with their chests thrown out. Most of them were shaking all over, unsteady on their feet. Lambert, who could see that this was not out of fear, struggled to find the words to respond.

“Seems that put your mind at ease, ser,” Grell said, his face now full of pride.

Inwardly, Lambert shouted back, *At ease, my ass!* But so as not to wound Grell’s honor, he chose the words he spoke with care.

“Grell, if something were to happen to you, the consequences for the rest of the war would be immense. Please, I’m asking you to stay back and advise me here. It’s true, I can’t fathom what our opponent is up to in building a thing like that, but our basic strategy hasn’t changed. Throwing away lives for no purpose is not the act of a great warrior.”

Grell was silent for a moment. “Hmm. Well, if you insist, ser. I’ll stay.”

Lambert’s desperate appeal had worked. With a careless wave of his hand, Grell sent back the attendant who had brought his horse.

*Battle is a damn sight easier on my nerves...* Lambert thought. His realization that this incident had been nothing in the scheme of things would come a little later.

## V

### **The Third City of Bay Grand, the United City-States of Sutherland**

Julius Lira Fifth, a tall, young man with a gentle brightness in his eyes, passed by windows revealing a sky covered by a thin sheet of cloud as he walked down a long corridor on his way to the highest floor of Rizen Castle. At last, a door of agate with a dynamic swirl of flowers etched into its surface came into view before him. The guards flanking the door gave a two-handed salute, which Julius returned, before turning and gently rapping on the door.

“I wasn’t expecting you to get here nearly this soon,” came a mellifluous voice from the other side of the door, not sounding especially concerned. Stifling a grimace, Julius opened the door to where Marshal Lion von Elfriede, master of the Third City, stood gazing out the window at the rooftops below. Without a word, he went over to stand at Lion’s side and for a time, they took in the view together.

“And?” Lion broke the silence first. “What did you think?”

Julius did not ask him what he meant. “There’s no doubt that something highly unusual has occurred within the Asvelt Empire. On the surface, at least, we had established friendly relations, after all.”

“How are the other city lords taking the news?”



“Suffice it to say that it is just as your lordship imagines.”

Pulling out a chair for himself, Lion sat down. He placed his elbow on the table, resting his cheek on his knuckles, then let out a soft snort of laughter.

The shocking news that Ramza the Good himself had ceded his imperial throne had taken Sutherland by storm. Succeeding the man who had earned that epithet was his former chancellor, Darmés. Julius had met Darmés once, at the signing of the nonaggression pact that had required them to cut off the supply of food to the Kingdom of Fernest. He had seemed shrewd, but a shadowy air hung about his figure, and the impression Julius had come away with was one of inscrutability.

This secret treaty had come from none other than Darmés himself. Of course, this meant he was breaching an agreement of his own creation. It would have made sense if said breach had come after the empire had conquered Fernest, but the kingdom remained as stalwart as ever—indeed, they’d received word that the Royal Army was in the middle of a large-scale counter operation against the empire. This alone was enough to strongly suggest that the empire’s dominance was beginning to fray. That they had, in spite of this, not only unilaterally violated the treaty, but also demanded Sutherland’s unconditional vassalage, had understandably left Julius entirely baffled.

Julius poured all this out to Lion, who, gazing at the golden scales that rested on his worktable, said, “There’s no need to complicate matters so. The emperor stepped down, policies changed. Happens all the time.”

“It does, but always on the precondition that the previous emperor has died.”

Lion gave an emphatic nod, as though to say that this had been just his point. “Exactly. Ramza the Good is still alive. I’ve never even heard a rumor of him getting ill. It’s only natural to suspect something happened behind the scenes.”

“But even a Satori’s powers aren’t enough to work out what that ‘something’ is?” Julius asked earnestly, referencing the mind reading monsters of folklore to which Lion was often compared.

In response, Lion burst out laughing. Lion had never once freely shown joy in public. The daughters of their most illustrious families, it was said, spent their days engaged in invisible, cutthroat machinations to try and draw a real smile

from him.

*I might find myself the subject of a few grudges if they were to see Lord Lion now,* Julius thought idly.

Lion meanwhile leaned back deeply into his chair, nodding amusedly to himself. “How much more approachable you’d be to the ladyfolk, if you only let that side of you take center stage a bit more. As it is, you won’t be able to complain when groundless rumors start to spring up.”

“Coming from you, my lord, that sounds rather like the pot calling the kettle black...” As he spoke, Julius took one of the documents he held clasped under his arm and handed it to Lion. Lion took it, flashing Julius a sultry look as he did so, then quickly scanned the contents.

“Good grief,” he said, half exasperated. “A summons from the old boy already.”

The “old boy” in question was Shaola Gendall, lord of the First City of Bukh Haar. It was set out in the Charter of the Sutherland Thirteen that the Council of the Thirteen Stars had to be convened when deciding matters of national import. Sutherland had originally been founded through the union of thirteen small nations, and there was ostensibly no hierarchy between the cities. As such, it had become customary for Shaola, as the eldest of them, to convene the Council of the Thirteen Stars. By a preexisting decision, it would be hosted in the Seventh City that lay in the very center of Sutherland.

Lion returned the document with a cursory gesture, apparently no longer interested.

“You must have guessed the council would meet, with things as they are,” Julius said reproachfully. “And before you get any ideas, my lord, I would ask that you refrain from weaseling out of it by naming me as your representative. To be frank, it’s nothing but trouble for me.”

Lion had always had a tendency to foist anything he found tiresome onto Julius, but lately he had stopped holding back. On matters that did not merit the presence of the lord of the city, Julius of course held his tongue, but upon seeing plain as day that Lion meant to entrust him with a task that concerned the fate of their nation, Julius had jumped in to silence him.

Lion made a show of shrugging, letting out a little sigh through his nose. “You beat me to the punch. I can but obey your wishes, General Julius. I suppose there’s something to be said for knowing how the others are thinking at the moment, even if I already know full well what conclusion they’ll arrive at.”

“I agree completely, my lord.”

“Plus, it’ll be amusing to see how Her Royal Highness is faring after the Death God wiped the floor with her. You must be curious too, Julius.”

“I can’t tell you how it pains me to disappoint you, my lord, but such perversity does not interest me.”

Cassandra sm Sherry, who ruled the Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla, had taken the withdrawal of the imperial army from Fernest as an opportunity to mount an invasion with a force of forty thousand. The Northern Perscillans had ended up in a fierce clash with an army led by the girl they called the “Death God.” The result: a spectacular defeat in which they had lost four for every five of their soldiers. The memories were still fresh in everyone’s minds.

Cassandra, fearing a counterinvasion from the Death God, had appealed for reinforcements, but neither Lion nor any of the other lords had acquiesced. Sutherland still claimed a stance of absolute neutrality and nonintervention, even if for some time this had been in name only. It was the obvious outcome; there was no logic or sense—to say nothing of mercy—that could have persuaded any of them to extend a hand to Cassandra after she had broken their rule of her own volition. Even so, Cassandra had been relentless in her petitions, which had eventually garnered her one supporter: Cassael bell Stainz, ruler of the Seventh City of Crimson Liber.

Cassandra had of course leaped at the offer with the air of a drowning woman being thrown a line, but the Bat, as Cassael was unflatteringly called behind his back, had apparently demanded an outrageous sum of gold in exchange. The army of Crimson Liber had been dispatched to Northern Perscilla, in the end, so Cassandra, however reluctantly, must have swallowed her pride and agreed to the terms. Yet, as though in mockery of her fears, no counterinvasion from the Death God had ever come. Given the state the Royal Army was in, the likelihood of such an invasion had always been vanishingly low. That Cassandra’s fears had

been without merit could hardly have come as a surprise to the battlewise Cassael. Even if one couldn't produce so much as a drop of sympathy for Cassandra in the plight she had brought upon herself, the way Cassael had brazenly preyed on her weakness to extort a fortune out of her had been truly devious.

Lion stroked his face with its features like a masterpiece of fine art, then crossed his long, slender legs. "Sorry, Julius, but I'm taking you with me. I'll only end up bored if I go alone."

"I am only too happy to accept the appointment to accompany you, my lord marshal." Julius, who had come meaning to agree to just this, put his hands to his chest in a deferential salute. Lion rolled his eyes at him.

"Bootlicker. Now—"

"Rest assured, my lord, I have already sent out the Wolfpack."

To ensure they acquired accurate information, he had dispatched Lion's personal intelligence agents to the imperial capital of Olsted. In principle, no one was allowed to mobilize the Wolfpack without permission; that privilege belonged to Julius alone.

"Are you sure you won't go as my representative?" Lion asked.

"You'll forgive the disrespect, Lord Lion, but I am not going to enable you in shirking your duty."

"Hey, come on. That's not it..."

"I am also conscious that there is no shadow without the light."

Lion's face turned hard. "You walk proud under the sun, Julius. I never ordered you to be my shadow. But then, I've known since we were children that you don't listen." He finished with a half smile, then added, "But three days from now, that's pretty sudden."

"Lord Shaola must be in a great hurry."

"I doubt hurrying is going to do us any good here." Lion slowly spun his chair around to look out once more across the city.

Julius followed his gaze. Mist had settled, entirely obscuring the lay of the

town, but the bustle of life going on below conveyed itself all the same. Lion's capable administration had brought prosperity to the city of Bay Grand.

*Lord Lion said as much himself, but it's predictable how the council will decide to act. Open war with the empire is likely inevitable. Who knows what their new emperor Darmés is scheming, but aside from the Twelfth City, our armies have taken no losses. Moreover, with the empire on the wane, it's not as though we lack for options.*

In the depths of Julius's gentle eyes, a martial flame sprang quietly to life. Already, those eyes were looking ahead to the battle against the empire.

## VI

### **The Seventh City of Crimson Liber, the United City-States of Sutherland**

The expanse of land far to the south of Lazha, the central city of Crimson Liber, was known as one of the key battlefields of the warlord period and the ravages it had suffered then. Even now that half a century had passed, crops still failed to thrive there, and there was no sign of any people. In the midst of this desolation, flaunting its presence to the gray landscapes that stretched away to the horizon, reared the towers of Castle Vlad, the seat of Cassael bell Stainz. And making its way toward the castle, flanked to the front and rear by a tough-looking crew of guards, came a horse-drawn carriage. A golden wolf glinted on the door, the sigil of the house of Elfriede.

"We'll arrive soon, Lord Lion."

At the pleasant sound of Julius's voice in his ears, Lion slowly opened his eyes. At some point, the light coming through the carriage's little window had taken on a reddish hue.

"At long last..."

A day and a half had passed since the carriage set forth from Rizen Castle when Lion and Julius arrived at Castle Vlad. Following the directions of the soldiers who guarded the castle gates, the carriage trundled over the drawbridge. The driver brought them to a halt in the space set aside for them, then immediately jumped down and, with courtesy, opened the door.

“Watch your step, my lord.”

Lion’s feet touched the ground for the first time in nearly half a day. As Julius disembarked after him, Lion interlinked his fingers and raised his arms in a deep stretch to loosen his stiffened muscles.

“I must say, you slept very well, didn’t you, my lord?”

“Because you work me to the bone, Julius,” Lion said teasingly. “If not for chances like this, I’d never see a good night’s rest.”

“Well, seeing as you’re good and rested now,” Julius replied in the same tone, “I shall work you even harder.” The familiar banter cheered Lion beyond measure.

“I’ll ask you not to go *too* hard on me,” he said. “But I’ll be if this castle gives me the shivers every time I see it.”

It was not that the castle was in a state of disrepair—even the trees were cleanly pruned. Yet there was an air of degradation about the place. No doubt the desolate vistas that surrounded it played a part. With the bloody light of the sun on his back, Lion looked up to where clouds of bats fluttered around the castle spires.

“Take a look at that,” Lion said to Julius. “They call him ‘the Bat’ to sneer at him, but his castle’s crawling with the things. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen such delicious irony.”

“My lord, I suggest you refrain from further quips.” Julius’s expression was suddenly stern. Lion, feeling admonished, shrugged a little in response.

“Please, come inside the castle,” said an elderly steward with a splendid set of whiskers. “You must be weary from your long journey.” Lion followed him. As he stepped inside, he noted several items that had not been there on his last visit. These included a statue of a woman gazing up at the sky while a great, two-headed serpent coiled around her, and a painting where a glimmering black sun shone down on a barren field plowed by skeletons.

*Impeccable taste, as ever,* Lion thought. He noted with amusement the slight crease in Julius’s brow as, like they always did, they went up staircases and along corridors for so long it felt like a gesture of spite, until being led into a

familiar room.





*It seems we're the last to arrive.* The room had been designed to catch as much sunlight as possible.

Resting heavily in the center as though it had taken root there was a great, round table, around which sat all the usual suspects.

"What a very timely arrival," sneered the lord of the Fifth City as they entered. Lion ignored him, dropping into a chair directly opposite Lord Shaola of the First City, then deliberately crossing his legs.

"Giving yourself pompous airs like a king, are you?" This, too, from the lord of the Eleventh City, Lion let slide off him. Julius took his place standing behind Lion. He was not the only one—behind each of the city's rulers was an attendant doing the same.

Shaola, the chairman of the council, gave an exaggerated cough, which drew all their attentions.

"That's everyone present. In which case, the Council of the Thirteen Stars will now convene. As you all know, we are gathered here to discuss—"

He had scarcely finished opening the council when the sound of someone violently pounding the table filled the room. Lion turned a dispassionate eye to the source: Lord Leisenheimer Meyer of the Second City, his face a mask of fury.

"There's nothing to discuss! Unconditional vassalage to the empire? He could hardly insult us further! We ought to give the empire the response it deserves!"

More than half of the others nodded enthusiastically. Already, it was going just as Lion had expected. He gave a little sigh, then opened his mouth.

"Shall we move the discussion to how we'll wage war on the empire, then?"

"Lord Lion, this is a matter that concerns the fate of Sutherland. It is not a time to rush to a conclusion."

"Oh? Are you opposed then, Lord Shaola?"

"I said no such thing. But Sutherland still takes a stance of nonintervention."

Hearing Shaola refer to the Charter of the Thirteen even now, Lion couldn't help but snort. "There was a certain city *somewhere* that disregarded the

charter to invade the Kingdom of Fernest, I seem to recall.”

All eyes in the room concentrated in the same place. There, swathed in bright colors like the outstretched wings of a kaleido bird, sat Cassandra. Under their collective gaze, she looked venomously around the table.

“Enough of your pretty words. Did we not as good as involve ourselves in the war the moment we made that secret treaty with the empire? And yet, in spite of that, who was it who ignored all appeals for reinforcements? *That* was nothing short of desecration of the charter!” Cassandra finished passionately.

Diana Christine of the Eighth City, who sat to Cassandra’s right, regarded her neighbor with her cold, jade-colored eyes. “What a simply *marvelous* interpretation. The Charter of the Thirteen is only concerned with cases where Sutherland faces an invasion. How dare you demand we send our armies because you feared the foe that defeated you in a fight *you* picked might strike back. Do you have *no* shame?”

Every word Diana spoke was the unimpeachable truth. Cassandra herself must have understood that much, because she made no retort and instead settled for glaring at Diana. Drake, who stood behind her, showed no sign of indignance, despite the slight to his mistress. On the contrary, his expression brightened as though it had gratified him.

Diana continued to press Cassandra without mercy. “On top of that, it may be *you* we have to thank for all this. Are you quite aware of that?”

“What’s it got to do with me?!”

Today, the Cassandra who always wore a thin smile and draped herself in an air of moody allure was nowhere to be seen. Lion had gotten his wish earlier than he’d hoped.

“Obviously because your army went and suffered a *humiliating defeat*,” Diana retorted, drawing out the last two words. “Of course the empire would decide that Sutherland doesn’t constitute a threat after that.”

Cassandra looked away, as though she were trying to escape the other woman. She trembled with pure rage. It was Cassael who came to her aid.

“I know not how much of this you are aware of, honored lords and ladies, but

it was no common army that defeated Northern Perscilla. This is the army that ran rings around the empire's proud Crimson and Helios Knights, led by the girl who strikes such fear into the imperial army that they dubbed her the 'Death God.'"

"You're telling us the Northern Perscillans lost to an army led by a little girl?!" screeched the lord of the Tenth City, making it clear that he had been paying no attention whatsoever to the conflict between the empire and Fernest. Lion decided to observe how each of the cities' leaders would react.

*With the exception of the Bat, let's see... he thought. Just Shaola and Diana, then. This is even more dire than I expected. When the most powerful people of so-called great nations grow complacent, they generally come to a sticky end. Does this lot really believe they'll be the exception, when history has born it out time and time again? Or has that much not even occurred to them? Either way, I don't see a bright future in store for Sutherland. It looks like I'll have to bring forward the plans I've been preparing...*

He glanced behind him. Julius gave him the slightest of nods.

Shaola cleared his throat again to draw their attention back to him. "It seems we have gotten rather far off course. I would like to return to the matter at hand. The empire has unilaterally violated our treaty and demanded our unconditional submission as its vassal state. Do any here wish to go along with this?"

"Like hell!" Leisenheimer shouted, as though the very idea was absurd. Shaola looked around the table, then, with a look of resignation, he nodded.

"Then I shall proceed. This naturally leaves us with two choices: war, or vassalage. I call for a vote by ballot."

The chief steward, who since the start of the council had stood in a corner of the room like a piece of furniture, now approached the round table. He laid a slip of paper and pen before each of them.

For a brief moment, the room filled with the scratching of pens.

"Very well, I shall cast the first vote." Shaola dropped his paper, folded in half, into the glass box proffered. By the time the chief steward finished a circuit of

the table, it had been joined by twelve more.

“The result of the vote is as follows,” the chief steward announced flatly.

Votes for war—thirteen.

Votes for vassalage—none.

Hereby, the United City-States of Sutherland did unanimously vote to enter into open war with the empire. Further deliberations followed, in which they decided the number of troops each city would commit:

Thirty thousand from the First City of Bukh Haar

Twenty-five thousand from the Second City of Gorgon

Thirty-three thousand from the Third City of Bay Grand

Twenty-two thousand from the Fourth City of Hispana

Thirty thousand from the Fifth City of Pentania

Twenty thousand from the Sixth City of Rue Shalla

Twenty-two thousand from the Seventh City of Crimson Liber

Twenty-nine thousand from the Eighth City of Rune Barrés

Thirty-two thousand from the Ninth City of Bavel

Ten thousand from the Tenth City of Phoenikia

Twenty-four thousand from Eleventh City of Liddel

Five thousand from the Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla

Twenty-seven thousand from the Thirteenth City of Leddeheim

*So we'll mobilize a little over three hundred thousand soldiers. That's a pretty impressive number on its own—only, I wonder how things will play out.*

Lion looked at Shaola. None of the old man's earlier hesitation remained. He could feel the residual heat of the flame within the man who long ago had risen to rule over his country by dint of his spear alone.

“Needless to say, if we are going to fight, we had better win. For that, it is essential that we create a single chain of command.”

Shaola was absolutely right. If each city's armies were left to fight however they liked, all they would find waiting for them was bloody chaos. There was a general voicing of agreement from the others. It seemed as though a silent sizing up of one another's intentions was about to begin, until Cassael raised a hand.

"Lord Lion seems an appropriate choice for supreme commander," he said. "His valor in battle is already known to us all. What say you?"

By "valor in battle," Cassael obviously referred to the Kasthall Unrest that had flared up in the Sixth City of Rue Shalla some years earlier. Though the name of the Sixth City's ruler, Lady Luciana Hartley, might have been unknown to some, everyone knew the name Kasthall Raider. A warrior of the sort bards sang of, when Kasthall had mounted his insurrection, Luciana had been forced to admit herself outclassed. She had called upon Lion for aid, and he had come with his army and subdued the rebels.

*He can't have guessed my motives, can he?* Lion thought. *But then, I wouldn't put it past the Bat. Still, I can't have him call me out here.* He looked across at the shimmer of a smile playing about Cassael's mouth and wanted to spit in the man's face.

"Yes, that was a feat few could hope to imitate," Diana said. "I have no objections."

After her, Shaola, Luciana, and the lord of the Ninth City spoke up too in agreement.

*I expected that the Bat would have had his spies infiltrate the city. That's why we've proceeded with such great caution. I put Julius in charge of arranging everything, and he would never slip up.*

"He's got talent beyond that of common men, I grant you," Leisenheimer said. "But he's a bit young."

"Do you mean therefore to suggest, my lord, that you yourself are fitted to the role?" Diana replied. Leisenheimer looked momentarily embarrassed, but quickly rallied.

"I'd find it profoundly regrettable to think that's how you heard it, my lady. I

meant no more than that, given our opponent, would it not be reasonable to appoint a commander with a wealth of experience to draw on?"

Leisenheimer found two supporters, from the fifth and thirteenth cities. The decisive difference between these two and Lion's supporters—with the exception of Shaola—was that they were both soldiers who commanded their own armies.

*It won't be easy to sniff out spies hidden among the populace. Trying it in the first place would be like announcing we have something to hide, which would be the height of stupidity...*

"Lord Marshal." Even as a whisper, Julius's voice was clear. Lion turned his attention back to the table to find that everyone was staring at him.

"Do you accept the post of supreme commander, Lord Lion?"

He paused a moment. "On one condition."

"A condition? Let's hear it, then."

"The supreme commander's orders are to be followed without question, even those you disagree with. Failure to do so will result in harsh punishment. If you don't like that, choose someone else."

Leisenheimer immediately opened his mouth to protest, but Cassael effortlessly cut him off.

"Surely there is no question of that," he said in a singsong voice. "Or else there would no point in having a supreme commander."

This ended up shutting up not only Leisenheimer, but also the rulers of the fifth and thirteenth cities who had been ready to add their voices to his.

"Then it is my humble honor to serve," Lion said. Following this, it was settled that Shaola would send an official letter formally refusing the empire's demands. With the finer details of their plans to be left to the morrow, the council was brought to a close.

"We have done good work here today, my lords and ladies," Cassael said. "The evening meal will soon be ready, but in the meantime, please do rest. Rooms have been made up for you." He rang a bell by his hand, summoning a



procession of servants dressed all in black who accompanied the cities' rulers from the room.

"Er...the others have all retired to their rooms, my lord..." one of the servants said tentatively when Lion showed no sign of rising from his chair. Julius gently instructed her to wait outside.

"Understood." The servant hurried from the room, cheeks flushed pink.

"You like girls like that, do you, Julius?"

"My lord."

"I'm teasing, forget it," Lion said. "Anyway, do you think the damn Bat is on to us?"

"He is, but he doesn't know the details. That's why he brought it up with you so directly, to see how you would react. Or something along those lines."

"Hmm. You're probably right. In any case, with the Bat hovering around us like a bad smell, we'll have to be extra vigilant."

"I know, my lord. In all honesty, though, given how you detest wearisome tasks, I was surprised you agreed to serve as supreme commander."

"That's *why* I agreed to it. Still better to be upwind than downwind, isn't it?"

"True, I suppose it is," Julius replied with a quiet chuckle.

"Shall we go, then? We can't keep that poor girl waiting forever—speaking of which, you didn't answer my—"

"You needn't ask again, my lord," Julius said irritably. Amused, Lion opened the door. The servant from earlier appeared, bowing low.

"We're terribly sorry to have kept you waiting," Julius said to her. "Could we trouble you to show us to our room?"

"Th-Th-Th-This way, my lord!" she replied in a strained stutter. Watching Julius awkwardly interact with the servant girl, it was all Lion could do to hold back his laughter.

A week before word of Emperor Ramza's abdication reached the United City-States of Sutherland, Senior Hundred-Wing Zephyr delivered the same news to Seraph Sofitia Hell Mekia, seventh of her line. In terms of both quantity and quality, however, the difference in the information they received was like night and day.

### **The Cloudy Chamber in La Chaim Palace, Elsphere**

As she reclined in her magnificently ornamented throne, Sofitia's first thought after hearing Zephyr's report was that Darmés must be a mage. She already knew from the information Amelia had brought her that there was a mage in the empire. However, the description Felix had given of that mage did not fit Darmés at all. Which led one to the theory—

"Could there have been *two* mages?"

"I'm entirely at a loss when it comes to mages, My Seraph, but I will say one thing, if I may. There's no way that was the doing of an ordinary man. Not that...that..." Words failed Zephyr, and Sofitia saw the thinly veiled terror in his face. She had not seen him like this since he had described Olivia in battle to her.

Those who had left this life had dragged themselves from the ground to attack those still living. Sofitia considered herself well-versed on the subject of magecraft, but she had never so much as heard of magecraft that so desecrated the dead.

*Perhaps I might find answers there...* she mused, thinking of a certain person as she continued to question Zephyr.

"You are sure that Lord Sieger set himself against Darmés when he claimed himself the new emperor?"

"Completely certain, My Seraph," Zephyr said with conviction. It was not that Sofitia doubted what he said. The situation had simply deviated so dramatically from her plans that she was, in truth, left befuddled. Everything that had occurred up until Olivia and Felix crossed swords had ended up in line with her predictions. But thanks to Darmés's intervention, along with the rising dead, their battle had ended undecided. Olivia and Felix had formed a temporary truce and marched off to the imperial capital together.

*After their conversation, there can be no doubt that Lord Sieger returned to the capital for no reason other than Ramza. But what about my dear Olivia? I cannot work out what reason she had for accompanying Lord Sieger to Olsted. To get a look at the state of the city in anticipation of a battle to come?* Sofitia immediately discarded this idea. To her knowledge, Olivia did not have a scrap of ambition, nor any interest in war. War simply happened to follow in the course of her search for Z; the idea that she would be so calculating was unbelievable.

*Ah well. I'm sure Olivia's situation will reveal itself in time.* Sofitia looked at the kneeling Zephyr.

"You have proof of the new emperor's accession, yes?"

"We have, My Seraph. I had word from the owl we sent to infiltrate the capital confirming it. Blessed Wing Lara, Senior Thousand-Wing Johann, and Thousand-Wing Amelia have also received this report. It was my determination that the older the information, the greater the risk. My Seraph, you have my full apology for taking this decision upon myself without seeking your counsel."

"No apology is necessary. Indeed, I don't recall appointing a master of the owls who would not rely on his own judgment in a crisis."

"Thank you, My Seraph."

Sofitia acknowledged him with a small nod, turning the matter over in her mind. *Twin Lions at Dawn has fallen apart. True, the defection of the Azure Knights has drastically weakened the imperial army, but even accounting for that, I don't see the future bringing any chances for Fernest to turn the tables. The greatest problem is Darmés and the dead he seems to control. His horde of several thousand was apparently quashed, but if it really was his magecraft, the same thing will almost certainly happen again. And we must not fail to consider that the Azure Knights and the Eighth Legion were only able to deal with the dead because they are the elite. What concerns me more than anything else is the number of dead. It was possible to put down a few thousand of them, but what about an attack by tens or hundreds of thousands...?*

Perhaps several thousand was the upper limit for the number of corpses Darmés could press into his service, but only a fool would base future strategy

on such a convenient assumption. So long as Darmés's powers remained an entirely unknown quantity, Sofitia decided it was best to act assuming the worst. Thus, a single choice remained to her.

"What did the other three say?"

"All were in favor of withdrawing."

"I see. They do not disappoint." Sofitia was pleased that they too had kept cool heads in making their decision. "I concur. You will therefore summon them back to Mekia."

"I shall see to it at once, My Seraph."

"Oh, and please tell Angelica to come to me."

"Very well," Zephyr said, then departed the Cloudy Chamber. Not long after, Angelica appeared.

"I have come at your summons, My Seraph!" she proclaimed.

"In high spirits as ever, I see."

"My spirits are always high, My Seraph!" Angelica said with a friendly grin. Sofitia returned a quiet smile as she got straight to the point.

"I will be making a journey to the Artemiana Cathedral. I wish for you to prepare me a carriage and to act as my bodyguard."

Angelica cocked her head dubiously. "You want me, My Seraph? Not the Seraphic Guard?"

"It will be a sudden visit. Appearing with a throng of attendants in tow would cause undue inconvenience for our hosts."

"In that case, I'm your woman. There's something serious going down, isn't there?"

"Whatever makes you think that?"

Sofitia had not *meant* to show any outward nervousness. For one thing, anyone whose inner thoughts were easy to read was ill-suited to rule a nation. She stared at Angelica, wondering.

"Just a gut feeling!" Angelica replied cheerfully.

Sofitia kept back a smile. Now that she thought about it, the girl *had* always had good instincts.

“I thought we might leave in an hour. Will that work?”

“No problem at all, My Seraph! I shall await you at the palace gates!” Angelica saluted, raising two fingers to her temple, then trotted out of the Cloudy Chamber. Sofitia watched her go, her eyes on the enormous sword that entirely obscured Angelica’s narrow back as she idly wondered, *Will such a large sword even fit in a carriage?*

A large carriage with a large sword strapped to its roof clattered gaily along through the mountains. Sofitia and Angelica sat within as, for around two hours, the carriage climbed the gentle slope. Looming above them, in the midst of the northern mountains, was the heart of the Illuminus Church—they had arrived at the Artemiana Cathedral.

The cathedral was the work of two hundred years, finally completed in Tempus Fugit 724. It was circular in shape, with towering images of the Goddess Strecia carved into the walls to the north, south, east, and west. There were always believers who, upon seeing the cathedral for the first time, were moved to tears by its sublime beauty. In addition, since rumors had spread that Strecia’s expression subtly changed depending on the angle at which it was viewed, believers endlessly circling the temple had become a common sight.

“The fog’s *very* thick today, isn’t it, My Seraph?” Angelica said, her cheek squashed up against the carriage window. The childlike behavior charmed Sofitia, who sat diagonally across from Angelica.

“I believe the temperature fell very low last night,” Sofitia replied, “so I doubt this fog will clear for some time.”

Looking out the window as they passed a snaking column of believers making their way to the entrance to the nave of the cathedral, Sofitia and Angelica entered through the side door reserved for persons of high standing. Awaiting them on the other side, accompanied by several priests, was the man who stood atop the hierarchy of the church, Archbishop Ariel Harmiton himself.

The driver graciously offered a hand to Sofitia, who took it as she stepped

down from the carriage. She faced the softly smiling Ariel, held out the skirts of her black gown covered with intricate silver embroidery, and curtsied.

“Your Holiness. It has been too long.”

“A messenger hurried to inform us that we would have the unexpected pleasure of your company. I rushed to make myself presentable.”

“I hope you will forgive our sudden intrusion.” Sofitia bowed low, at which Ariel became greatly flustered.

“Oh, this is embarrassing. I didn’t mean to imply anything like that...” He faltered. “But, Seraph, you are radiant as ever. As I recall, it has been two years since last we met, yet to my eyes your beauty has only grown more exquisite.”

“You have that right! The seraph gets more beautiful every day!” Their conversation was interrupted by Angelica, her chest swelling with pride. Even for kings and rulers, it was considered no mean feat to meet with the archbishop in person. Such was the reputation his position commanded, and so one might have understood the intense dislike with which the other priests glared at Angelica.

“Angelica, here you must be mindful of what you say,” Sofitia chided her. Angelica’s eyes grew as round as a gray squirrel’s, and she tilted her head sharply to the left.

“Huh? But it’s true, isn’t it? I mean, His Excellency the Archbishop thinks so too.”

“I could not agree more with the young lady,” said Ariel, nodding along. Angelica thrust her nose in the air and nodded herself. The sigh that escaped Sofitia was so profound she even surprised herself. She had, without exaggeration, nothing but admiration for the nerve it took to stand undaunted before the man who occupied the highest position in the Holy Illuminus Church, but she also fervently wished Angelica would consider whether now was really the place and time.

“I sincerely apologize for my subject’s impropriety.” The actions of one’s subjects all reflected on their ruler. Sofitia bowed her head again.

“Please raise your head, Seraph. Indeed, I envy you having such excellent

people in your service.” Ariel did not appear offended in the slightest. On the contrary, as he stroked his bushy beard, he seemed to be enjoying himself. “But we should not stand chatting away under these wintry skies. Please come inside. I will have the wrath of the Mekian people to contend with if I allow Seraph Sofitia to catch a cold.”

“I wish you wouldn’t jest about such things.”

“Huh?” Angelica interjected. “But the people *would* be angry.”

“*Angelica.*”

In a state of discomfiture, Sofitia followed the merrily grinning Ariel into the cathedral.

Sofitia’s and Ariel’s footsteps echoed in the silence of the cathedral. They walked for five minutes through the mystical cloisters that floated into view in the pale, blue-green light. Then, Sofitia was shown into a room so sparse as to make everything up until then seem like an illusion.

“This is my room,” Ariel said. Sofitia felt genuine surprise. Everything on his person, from the robe of his office to his many ornaments, were fine enough to rival the spectacle of the cathedral. Sofitia did not engage in the distasteful habit of speculating on the private quarters of others, but even so, she could not deny that this was unexpected.

“Not what you were expecting?” he asked with a gracious smile that said he had guessed her thoughts. Sofitia readily admitted that it was not, which made him chuckle.

“I had it rebuilt nearly a year ago,” he explained. “I imagine it feels horribly cramped to you, but this is where I am most at ease.”

“It is not so different from my own room. You need not be concerned.”

“It is a relief to hear you say that.” Ariel directed her to a simple round table, where a fine-featured boy in a white robe drew out a chair for her. In the middle of the table there was a small vase of white porcelain, containing a single, modest blossom. Singularly rare, with each of its petals taking on a different color, it was a spinacia—Sofitia’s favorite flower.



*Archbishop Ariel really remembered that little conversation from all of two years ago.*

Ariel made no mention of the flower as he sat down opposite her. A moment later, another boy identical to the first appeared to offer her tea.

*They must be twins*, Sofitia thought. As the boy bowed his head and drew back, he gave her a furtive glance that was full of curiosity. When Sofitia smiled at him, he retreated, looking flustered.

“We have everything we need. You may go.”

“Yes, Archbishop,” the twin boys chorused in clear and ringing voices. They left in perfect step with one another, as though they had rehearsed it. Sofitia found her eyes following their retreating backs, until Ariel spoke softly.

“That which glittered so brightly to my eyes in my youth has come to seem very foolish as I grow older.” Bouncing the shining platinum medallion that hung around his neck on his palm, he gave her a sly smile. This medallion, which he now handled with such irreverence, was the mark of his position as archbishop and one of the Three Great Treasures of the Holy Illuminus Church. Anyone with any connection to the church knew this.

Sofitia felt laughter rise up within her at this very un-bishop-like behavior, and was unable to contain it.

“If His Holiness, Archbishop of the Holy Illuminus Church, means to carry on like that, he had best be prepared for the sermon Bishop Krishna will give him.”

Bishop Krishna Halbert was second in the church hierarchy and commanded what was effectively the church’s standing army: the Knights of the Sanctuary. He was known to be foremost among the militant faction of the church.

“Indeed, I don’t want to imagine what *he* would have to say if he found out. He was dead against it when I had this room rebuilt too. I can still hear him going on and on about the ‘dignity of the archbishop’ and what have you like it was yesterday. That being said,” he went on solemnly, “this conversation will be our secret. Not a word is to pass thy lips!” The next moment, he burst out laughing. The two of them chuckled together with the open ease of old friends.

When their amusement had subsided, Ariel turned his eyes, like liquid amber

flecked with gray, down to the table.

“Still, I have to keep up appearances with the priests and the faithful. But lately I have found myself wishing I could wash myself clean of it all and give myself wholly to the service of the Goddess Strecia, as I did long ago.” There was sadness in the lingering hint of his smile as he reached for his teacup. It was the lot of those who held great power, to be shackled by it in equal measure.

Sofitia looked around at Ariel’s room once more. None of the furnishings would have looked out of place for sale in an ordinary shop. She saw nothing that would have fetched a high price.

*Any ordinary person would see this as an ordinary room, but to Ariel, it might just be his last bastion of freedom*, she thought. Like as not, Ariel would not see his wish granted until the day he set out for the land of the dead. In the same way, Sofitia had traded away her own freedom when she’d inherited the title of seraph. So well did she understand Ariel’s feelings that in that moment, words escaped her.

“I fear I have let my mouth run away with me,” Ariel said. “Why don’t you tell me what has led you to grace us with your presence today?”

As he quietly raised his teacup to his lips, Sofitia composed herself. “I shall come straight to the point,” she said. “I ask your leave to view the *Book of Stella Vera*.”

“The *Book of Stella Vera*, eh...? Have you taken an interest in the deep mysteries of magecraft, Seraph?” The teacup stopped where it was. Ariel’s eyes, serene yet lit by a piercing gleam, seemed to look straight into her soul. Just like that, Sofitia could not help but be aware that this man stood at the head of the Holy Illuminus Church. The *Book of Stella Vera* contained descriptions of a wide variety of magecraft, and was, like Ariel’s medallion, another of the Three Great Treasures. If the medallion symbolized light within the church, the *Book of Stella Vera* symbolized the shadows, the existence of which were known only to a very select few. One did not make the request to view it lightly.

Sofitia was well aware of all this as she held Ariel’s gaze without looking away.

At last, he made a thoughtful noise. “I see you are not asking from mere curiosity. But that book is far more precious than this bit of metal around my

neck. I cannot reveal its secrets just like that, even to one who makes such generous annual donations to the church as yourself, Seraph. You understand, I hope?”

“Of course, I make my request in full knowledge of that.” Sofitia would never have insisted that he show her the book because of her donations. All the same, after coming this far, giving up was not an option. Sofitia stared at Ariel with still greater determination. The gleam in his eyes grew brighter.

“Would you tell me *why* you wish to see it?” he asked at length.

“Very well.” Sofitia did not hesitate. She told him the information the owls had brought her, concealing nothing. When she finished, Ariel’s expression had grown so grave as to be unrecognizable.

“I see... Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed you would tell me *that*. So if I have this right, you want to find out if magecraft exists that would allow one to control the dead?”

“Yes.”

“I must say, I have never heard of magecraft that blasphemes against Strecia. I don’t remember any such spells recorded in the *Book of Stella Vera*...”

“Your Holiness, it is my belief that we have not seen the last of the risen dead. Even a clue might help us later on.”

Ariel considered. “Very well. I suppose I cannot ignore the matter, when it concerns my congregation.”

“I am most grateful for your understanding.”

“No need to thank me. Only, the whole thing is written in the ancient tongue of Levina. Will that be an issue?”

“Ancient Levinian will give me no trouble,” Sofitia said, smiling.

Ariel rubbed his head with a look of amused resignation. “Strecia have mercy, no trouble, eh? As I recall, even the scholars who specialize in that tongue struggle to master it...but in any case, I shall take you there at once.”

Sofitia and Ariel left his room and made their way to the Spire of Heavenly Light where the *Book of Stella Vera* was kept. The spire rose up from the center

of the cathedral's outer walls, closely resembling the main tower of La Chaim Palace. The story passed down in the present day was that when the first seraph had built the palace, it had been modeled on the Spire of Heavenly Light. Artemiana Cathedral was eight stories high, but the spire was only accessible by an overbridge on the fourth story, along which Sofitia and Ariel now crossed. A great door came into view, its sturdiness apparent even at a distance. Standing pressed to the wall on either side of it, looking no less sturdy than the door itself, stood four of the Knights of the Sanctuary. They saluted, holding their fists over their hearts. Ariel gave them a small nod, then stopped in front of the door and began to fish around in his pockets.

"What we're after is on the highest floor. We have a great many stairs ahead of us. Do you think your legs are up to it?" Ariel produced an exquisitely crafted silver key.

Sofitia smiled. "Physically, I am sure I will be up to the task, though I admit I quail at the thought of going above the clouds."

Ariel chuckled. "Fear not, Seraph. We will stay below the clouds."

She watched from behind as he inserted the key into the center of the door. A heavy *thunk* echoed down the corridor.

"Let us enter, then." Two of the knights pushed open the door for Ariel, who strode on through. Sofitia did the same, the two knights following after her without a word.

"There are a great many traps, to keep out intruders. Please do not, under any circumstances, touch the walls."

"I will be careful." The knights took up positions to their front and rear as Sofitia and Ariel ascended the staircase that extended up along the walls. Through careful observation of the walls, she realized there were unnatural indentations and little holes set into the stone at irregular intervals. She supposed a trap would snap up any intruder who brushed the outer wall before they had time to react.

After thirty minutes spent ascending the stairs, Sofitia started to get out of breath.

“This isn’t too hard on you, is it, Seraph?” Ariel asked.

“I am quite all right. I hope I do not come across as insincere after it was I who made this unreasonable request of you, but this isn’t too hard on *you*, is it, Your Holiness?”

Ariel stopped with one foot on the next step up. He turned, and Sofitia saw at a glance that his face was dripping sweat.

“Much as I’d like to say it’s not, my years have gotten the better of me.”

“I’m sorry to have made you come so far.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Ariel brushed her off. “The place has to be aired out regularly, or it stagnates, so I make the climb twice a month. All part of my duties as archbishop. There’s no one else I can trust with it, after all.” Ariel turned back, then set off again up the stairs.

After a little over an hour of climbing, they arrived at the top of the spire. The knight at the head of their group mopped the sweat that glistened on his neck with a handkerchief, then went around to light the candles affixed to the walls. On a clear day, the window set in the ceiling would have let in the light, but from what Sofitia could see of the scenery outside, the fog had still not lifted.

“Please watch your step in the dark,” the knight said.

“I’m used to it. See you attend to the seraph.”

“Your Holiness.”

The torches led away straight ahead. Stepping carefully, Sofitia followed Ariel until they arrived at another solidly built door.

“A moment, if you will.” From his pocket, Ariel took out a gold key that closely resembled the silver one. He inserted it into the leftmost of three keyholes, then turned it clockwise. There was a *click* as he withdrew it, then inserted the same key into the rightmost keyhole and turned it counterclockwise. Finally, he inserted the silver key into the central keyhole and carefully turned it left, then right. A screech that sounded like the coiling of an iron chain filled the passageway.

“Just a little longer,” Ariel said. A minute passed, then silence fell once more.

Ariel removed the silver key from the door, then turned to Sofitia, who had watched all this without a word. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

The rumbling as the two knights pushed the door open shook the floor beneath them. Sofitia followed Ariel and saw at the other end of the room a plinth carved from black glass, standing as tall as herself. What was more, despite its great size, she could see no pins or wedges holding it together. Truly astonishing though it was, this was proof that it was entirely unworked black glass.

“I’ve never seen black glass like this before...”

Needless to say, black glass was a rare mineral, and even in the Holy Land of Mekia, where it was mined in abundance, a piece of this size was by no means a common sight. Sofitia doubted the merchants who based themselves in Mekia would have said differently.

Having said that, there was nothing other than the plinth that stood out. Placed against the wall were a small desk with a chair, and that was it. She cast her eyes over the whole of the room, but there was nothing especially elaborate in its construction.

Without specific reference to the plinth, Ariel said, “You will find the *Book of Stella Vera* over there.”

“You surprise me. It is in a very conspicuous place.”

“It would be meaningless otherwise,” Ariel said with an air of significance. Eyeing his smile dubiously, Sofitia walked up to the plinth. She saw a richly bound book resting atop it.

“Is this—” Before Sofitia could finish, Ariel’s stern voice cut her off.

“Do *not* let your hands touch the book.”

“You mean,” Sofitia said slowly, “that this is another trap.”

Ariel nodded gravely. He explained that picking up the book activated a mechanism that dispersed a tasteless, odorless poison into the area around the plinth. Inhale even the slightest amount, and it would slowly eat away at the body until the flesh rotted off one’s bones.

“Then where is the real book?” Sofitia asked.

Rather than reply, Ariel inserted the medallion around his neck into a depression in the center of the plinth. There was a whirl of gears turning as a single board emerged. Lying atop it in a symmetrical arrangement were two discs inscribed with ancient Levinian script. Ariel placed a hand on each and began to move them with practiced gestures. Sofitia watched in fascination, then from beneath her feet there came a humming vibration as another plinth slowly rose.

*It’s extraordinary that they made it this elaborate*, she thought. She found her gaze drawn to the center of the new plinth. Nestled in a cleanly carved-out square was an old book. Handling it carefully as though it might fall apart, Ariel picked it up.

“This is the real *Book of Stella Vera*,” he told her. As she took it from him, he added sternly, “I’m sure I don’t need to say it, wise as you are, but you will refrain from removing the book from this room.”

“Naturally,” Sofitia replied as she looked over at the little desk and chair. “Might I make use of the desk over there?”

“Anything in this room is yours to use as you please. I will have the knights wait for you outside. Call out through the door when you are done reading, and we will return to escort you.”

“I am much obliged to you for all the troubles you have taken for me.”

“I pray your search bears fruit, Seraph. May the blessings of Strecia be with you.”

As Ariel left the room, the great doors swung tightly shut behind him with another heavy rumble. Though he had not said it explicitly, she could sense with powerful certainty that, ruler of Mekia or no, he would not suffer any abuse of his trust in her.

*Well, then*, she thought. *I hope you have the answers I seek*. Without further ado, she lowered herself into the chair, then set the *Book of Stella Vera* down on the desk. Then, slowly, she turned the first page.

## Chapter Three: A Declaration of War

I

There was a civilian official in the intelligence division of a certain nation who was supremely confident in his abilities and always offered up his opinions to his superiors.

In that nation, however, ability was valued less than blood, and the man came from the lowest tier of the lower nobility. It would have been easier to find water in a vast expanse of desert than a superior willing to listen to him. Indeed, his superior was no exception—just another one of many.

“—so, Chief Secretary, if we put my proposal into action, it will dramatically improve our information processing. I hope you will give it serious consideration.”

Without so much as a glance at the stack of papers laid on his desk, the chief secretary fixed the man with a withering look.

“I *told* you,” he said, slowly and pointedly. “How many times do I have to repeat it before you give up on wasting your time?”

“Please, read over the papers.”

“I,” the chief secretary replied, “am an *extremely* busy man. Right now, I must go out to patrol the streets.”

“Chief Secretary! We beg leave to accompany you on your rounds. Through close observation of you in the course of your duties, we hope to apply ourselves to our work with still greater dedication!”

“What a bunch of good-for-nothings,” the secretary replied indulgently. “I suppose I can make an exception today.”

His smirk was met by smug grins from his other subordinates as they chorused their thanks.



“But Chief, my papers—”

Alas, the man had no way to make the leering crowd listen to him. They disappeared off into the town at dusk in fine spirits. As he clutched his stack of papers, someone called over to him. It was a colleague who hailed from the same low noble stock as himself.

“Stop beating your head against the wall already. That scum will never listen. Even if you *did* somehow get him to take up your idea, he’d just steal the credit without batting an eye. We’re never going to move up in the world, no matter how hard we try. We should just shut up and get on with the jobs we’re given.”

It was sound advice. If only the man had excelled in the arts of war, he might have found any number of opportunities available to him. But with a frame that even a charitable observer would have described as scrawny, he could never have endured such a life.

After this, the man’s colleague continued to take every opportunity to admonish him, but he closed his ears to all of it. Eventually, the colleague stopped trying to talk to him, and, helped by the fact that he had never been talkative to begin with, the man became more and more isolated. He would only mutter and smile to himself.

“—meaning no disrespect, Chief, but is that really true? Just the idea that you used to work with His Imperial Majesty...”

“Beyond belief, isn’t it?” the Chief Secretary said with a crooked smile.

“Of course, I know you would never make up stories like that,” the younger official said quickly. “But I don’t understand it. How did a civilian in the intelligence division end up rising to *emperor*...? Please, if you have any insights, I would love to hear them!”

In a sense, it was to be expected that the young official, eager to move up in the world, would have questions. The man who had once been the emperor’s colleague and was now chief secretary, the only one who knew anything about the matter, looked at the youth with an utterly lifeless expression.

“If it’s success you want, you should concern yourself with working harder.

Unlike in the old days, even low-ranking nobles have plenty of opportunities for success, if they're competent. That's all I've got to tell you. Oh, and you're not to repeat that story. And don't even think about prying further. I'm sure you'd rather not end up an unidentifiable corpse at such a young age?" With that, the chief secretary left the wide-eyed young official there and, with the dragging steps of a bone-tired man, exited the room.

### **The Emperor's Workroom at Listelein Castle, the Asvelt Empire**

Darmés Guski, after laying out Ramza as bait, had seen him stolen away by Felix and allowed the latter to slip through his fingers. Given that in the end it would only briefly delay their deaths, however, he went on with his duties as the new emperor of the Asvelt Empire without any particular sign of concern.

"Have you established the Azure Knights' location?"

"I beg your pardon, Your Imperial Majesty. My people are searching as hard as they can, but the Azure Knights continue to elude us."

"This is not a hunt for one man. I fail to see how it can take this long."

"Of course, I apologize..."

Marquess Schwarz von Hermit, appointed as the new minister of the interior as part of the reshuffling of the officials at the heart of the nation's governance, dabbed at his brow and cheeks with a damp handkerchief throughout his report to his new emperor. After a few minor skirmishes with Darmés's army on the outskirts of the capital, the Azure Knights had withdrawn, then vanished. With the city's former defenders now turned into a pack of traitors, Darmés's personal army had since taken over their role. The usual recourse would have been to send them in pursuit of the Azure Knights, but with the threat of an invasion by the Royal Army still lingering, Darmés had given up on that, which had in turn led them here.

"But what does Lord Sieger mean to *do* after running off with His Imperial Highness, I wonder?"

Felix and the Azure Knights' betrayal had shocked the people of the empire even more than the accession of their new emperor. Since Darmés had made it publicly known how Felix had stolen into Listelein Castle in the dead of night

and kidnapped Ramza, rumors about him had become nothing short of a public obsession. Now, wildly embellished stories flew all over the capital, including within the halls of Listelein Castle.

“Perhaps he labored under the unjust suspicion that I would subject His Imperial Highness to abuse. Felix does seem to have been remarkably attached to the former emperor, after all.”

“If that is true, he can really only be called shortsighted,” Schwarz said. Inside, however, he thought there was something extremely off about this. Their relationship had been entirely professional, but even so, he was fairly well acquainted with Felix. It was this that had, when he had first heard of the Azure Knights’ betrayal, made him write it off as a joke in poor taste. At the very least, the Felix that Schwarz knew was a wonderful man, accomplished of many a great thing in spite of his youth, and endowed with both courage and intelligence. He also knew how Ramza had favored him so.

*But in reality, this is how things played out...* Schwarz couldn’t even so much as begin to guess at Felix’s thought process. Meanwhile, Darmés had been named as the successor to the throne by Ramza himself, a qualification no other could claim. All the high-ranking nobles who had been summoned had witnessed Ramza lay the crown on Darmés’s head with their own eyes. As such, if Felix’s rebellion was condemned as a self-serving mockery of Ramza’s will, that could not be helped.

Darmés breathed a deep sigh. “For but a fraction of the loyalty he swore to our former emperor, I would have shown Felix favor above and beyond what he had enjoyed before.”

This show of lament from Darmés, as the new emperor continued to scribble away with pen in hand, struck Schwarz as blatantly false. So as not to expose his feelings, he deliberately kept his tone flat as he declared, “I shall continue to give my full efforts to the search for the Azure Knights.”

“Regarding that,” Darmés replied, “I thought we might assign Rosenmarie to carry out the search—and suppress their rebellion, while she is at it.”

“Eh? Lady Berlietta?”

“What, pray tell, do you find so strange about the idea?”

The Azure Knights were renowned as the mightiest soldiers in the imperial army. Schwarz himself was as far from a military man as it was possible to be, but he knew no ordinary army would be a match for them. As Rosenmarie was now in command of both the Crimson Knights and provisional commander of the Helios Knights, she was the natural choice for the task of subduing them. Schwarz did not disagree with this, but...

“Have you forgotten, Your Majesty? Lady Berlietta is presently engaged in battle with the Royal Army at Kier Fortress.”

For a split second, Darmés’s hand froze. Then he spoke, his pen already moving again.

“That’s right. She is, isn’t she? In that case, please send her word both that I am now emperor, and that she is to wrap things up there with all speed.”

Schwarz felt a slow twisting sensation in his gut as he realized that Darmés had not changed his mind at all.

“Forgive me, great Emperor, but I must protest. Of course I shall see that Lady Berlietta is informed that the coronation took place. But as I said, she is at this very moment in the middle of a battle. I humbly suggest that even if we tell her to *wrap things up*, she is hardly in a position to take on the subjugation of the Azure Knights, not so long as the Royal Army does not withdraw.”

At this, Darmés looked up for the first time and met Schwarz’s gaze. “The siege of Kier Fortress was no more than a farce designed to draw our eyes away from the invasion of the empire. Now that the Royal Army’s attempt to take Olsted has ended in failure, I imagine it will not be long before they retreat.”

“So that’s how it was...” Schwarz replied. “Very well. I shall include that in my missive to Lady Berlietta.”

“That will not be necessary,” Darmés said dismissively. So casual was the rebuff that for a moment, Schwarz thought he had misheard.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty, but why is that?”

“A thing like that, Rosenmarie will pick up on somehow or other.” Darmés stroked his unhealthily sunken cheek. “But then, we can’t rule out the possibility that they alter course to attempt to topple the fortress...” he mused.

“Perhaps best to send reinforcements, just in case. Schwarz, you are to make this your first priority.”

Schwarz took the document Darmés proffered. What was written there made him balk.

“Something wrong?” Darmés’s question felt like icy water dripping down his spine. He started to mop the sweat on his brow at even shorter intervals.

“No, nothing at all. I shall see to it at once, Your Majesty.”

The high nobles, at first surprised by Darmés’s inheritance of Emperor Ramza’s throne, had, as the days went by, begun to give voice to a variety of grievances. What had sparked these grievances was Darmés’s origins as a noble of low rank. More than a few had harbored discontent during his stint as chancellor, but because of the absolute trust the emperor had placed in him, no one had ever spoken of it in public.

But the difference in the power held by the chancellor and that held by the emperor was vast. When the houses of Ludis and Titan made their dissatisfaction public, what had been smoldering embers burst fully into flame. Even the emperor could not ignore the two great houses who had laid the foundations for the founding of their nation and still hope to govern effectively. The whole of the nobility had looked on, waiting to see how Emperor Darmés would act...

*His Imperial Majesty didn’t so much as hesitate. He ordered the arrest of the heads of both houses for high treason as though he did it every day. After seeing their wives and children slaughtered before their eyes, the pair of them lost their minds and died. I never knew anything so dreadful.*

The deaths of both lords had been announced immediately. The extreme harshness of their new emperor’s justice had horrified the nobles, and public expressions of displeasure had rapidly subsided. The document Schwarz now held was Darmés’s closing words on his great purge.

*But then, perhaps those who died in ignorance were the lucky ones. Just the memory of that horror makes me tremble...* Schwarz’s throat was dry, but he was too preoccupied even to swallow.

“By the by, has there been a response from Sutherland?”

“There has, Your Majesty, only...” Schwarz trailed off.

“Then there is no need for preamble.” Darmés’s voice was perfectly even.

“Tell me their answer, and make it concise.”

“Very well. They do not intend to acquiesce to our demands. In addition, they say that if the empire means to unilaterally violate the nonaggression pact, they will not hesitate to go to war.”

Darmés chuckled. “Even that herd of sheep without a shepherd still hold on to their pride as a great nation, I suppose.”

“Our analysis division’s calculations indicate they can field an army of over two hundred thousand soldiers.”

“Yes, well, they *are* only neutral in name. A force of that size is to be expected.”

“I am no expert in matters of war, but by no means does that seem like a number to sneer at...”

“Yes, if one were to base one’s argument purely on the difference in troop numbers, I suppose our imperial army would be at a disadvantage,” Darmés replied. But even as he said it, it was plain from the smile playing about his cracked lips that he was not remotely concerned. He practically radiated confidence, and Schwarz knew why.

Even now, the ghastly, soul-chilling wails and hideous figures were indelibly burned into his mind’s eye. When Darmés had first shown him those soldiers, like the heralds of hell itself, he had been so terrified that he had soiled himself. The memory was as fresh as if it had happened the previous day. How Darmés controlled his army of hell, Schwarz had still not been able to ask.

“You intend to send them against Sutherland, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, yes. They cost us nothing, after all, and they will win the empire tremendous victories on the battlefield. I wonder if they might not reconsider after we destroy, say, a city.” Darmés’s eyes narrowed as a low laugh escaped his throat. Schwarz had never before seen the madness he now perceived so

strongly in Darmés. There was nothing he could do for Sutherland, about to be overrun by the army of hell, but to pity them with all his heart.

“You know, I have been wondering,” Darmés remarked. “Is it so very hot today? I find the cold quite chills me to the bone, myself.” He smirked. Schwarz clenched his handkerchief tight, so drenched with sweat it had changed color, and forced himself to smile. For the entire time it took him to hurry from the room, Darmés’s smile never wavered.

## II

In the United City-States of Sutherland’s Sixth City of Rue Shalla, there was an old fort named Dagon. It was the farthest north of all their military installations, built in the warlord period to keep Fernest in check. A century later, Fort Dagon continued to fulfill this same purpose—but with Fernest in decline, no one now believed they would invade Sutherland. Accordingly, the soldiers stationed at the fort were so few in number as to be little more than an afterthought.

### **The Walls of Fort Dagon**

One never would have believed Fort Dagon lay on the border with an enemy nation, so relaxed were the soldiers who defended its walls. That day, like every other, they toiled away trying to stave off boredom. The guards on the gate at least still held their spears at their sides as they dozed; up on the wall, many had swapped spears for playing cards, chatting away without a care in the world.

“Another day of leisure, eh...” Shelah, a man of slight build, yawned widely as he dealt a hand of cards. The third-born son from a tiny farming village, he had become a soldier for the simple reason that he figured there’d always be something to eat.

“Too much leisure, and you’ll get rusty. A soldier’s got to cut a man down from time to time or you lose your touch.” Donga, who was twice Shelah’s size, stood up and began to mime swinging a sword with his cards. Shelah watched, unimpressed, as the other man’s sagging belly and chin jiggled with every stab.

“That again? You’re incorrigible. How about you get rid of that disgusting belly

before you start yapping? You ain't convincing no one like that."

Donga, apparently unfazed by this, let out a wistful sigh. "If only Fernest would invade, then you'd see that the legend of the great hero Donga is true!"

Donga, who hailed from a larger town compared to Shelah's, had supposedly been a renowned swordsman. Not a day went by that he didn't tell them the great expectations the other townsfolk had for him. If he were such a man, one would have thought he'd be posted to a more important fortification than an all-but-abandoned fort, yet for some reason, Donga spent year after year adding to his record as the longest-serving soldier at Fort Dagon.

"He's still going on. Always struck me as odd—don't it ring a bit hollow to you?"

"Don't even bother. That one's got flowers growing where his brain ought to be. It all goes in one ear—hah! Take a look at that, I win again. Everything's coming up Hahato today!" Hahato, a man bald as an egg, spread his cards before them with a flourish. Three of the five showed the Goddess Strecia.

"C'mon, no one's that lucky..." Shelah grumbled. "You'd better not be cheating." He pulled two copper coins from his pocket, then tossed them unceremoniously at Hahato, who snatched them smartly out of the air before cheerfully slipping them into his own pocket.

"I'm out." Donga tossed down his cards, then slowly looked up at the sky. "Now, I don't ask for my own Strecia. But if I only had a girl, it'd breathe some life into this humdrum existence."

"I told you, you can think about that after you lose the belly."

"My belly? What's my belly got to do with it, eh?"

"It's got everything to do with it. Unless you're a noble, most folk judge a book by its cover. There, did I make it clear enough for even a self-titled master swordsman to catch my drift?"

"Hah! Let's get one thing clear. Womenfolk like a strong man. Always have, always will."

Shelah snorted. "Oh yeah? Where's your girl, then?"



“Your theory’s full of holes!” Hahato added, and the pair fell about laughing. Donga eyed them resentfully.

The three of them went on entertaining themselves at cards until a voice called, “Oy.” All three looked around at the same time and saw Enya, who had definitely been snoring loudly until just earlier, now looking up at the sky. Automatically, the three exchanged a glance—Enya never woke up of his own accord.

“Enya woke himself up, eh? You reckon we’re in for a storm or something?” Shelah joked. He went to stand beside Enya, but the other man’s eyes stayed fixed on the sky. Shelah followed his gaze. “Hey, there something up there?”

“You haven’t noticed, Shelah?”

“Eh? Noticed what?”

“They’re gone. The death-eater birds that always fly over this time of day.”

“Death-eater birds?” Shelah looked back at the sky again and saw that indeed, there were no death-eater birds in sight. He didn’t see what it mattered, though.

“Most likely, they found a new feeding ground, no? I mean, they do get called the land’s cleaners. They must be able to sniff that much out.” He looked back at Enya, half exasperated that he’d been called over for something so pointless, only to be met with a look of even stronger exasperation.

“Once death-eater birds claim their territory, they almost never leave it. Everyone knows that.”

“I never heard that. Well then, they made an exception and moved ’cause there’s no food here. Man or bird, you can’t live without food. Territory doesn’t come into it, does it?”

“Are you stupid? We’re surrounded by woods, and you think death-eater birds can’t find a meal around here? If you’re really thinking that sort of thing, you ought to have a healer check your brain.”

There were no towns or villages in the vicinity of Fort Dagon. What land could be seen from the walls was blanketed with forest. Bored out of their minds out

here in the middle of nowhere, all the soldiers had to look forward to was buying small indulgences from the merchants who visited the fort once a month.

This, Shelah told himself, was ridiculous, as he began to grow annoyed with Enya's roundabout way of saying everything.

"All right, where'd the death-eater birds go, then?"

"How should I know?" After putting on airs as though he were an expert in death-eater birds and their habitats, Enya declared his ignorance with such confidence it made Shelah's head spin.

"Then stop talking all significant-like. Death-eater birds are about as important as a gray rat's arse." Hahato and Donga gestured at him to hurry up and get back to his station. He didn't especially care about continuing the card game, but it would be a damn sight better than carrying on with this stupid conversation.

"Well, enjoy your bird-watching anyway." He had only taken one step toward Donga when a hand grabbed him hard by the shoulder.

"—the hell?!" Shelah let his annoyance show in a furious scowl, but Enya paid this no heed at all as he pointed mutely to the northeast. "Hey, what the hell?!" Shelah repeated. Cursing under his breath, he followed Enya's outstretched finger and saw ash crows rising up into the sky with screeching *caws*. In fact, they were taking wing in a line that led *toward the fort*. Even Shelah had to admit it was disturbing.

Enya stared hard at the ash crows, his expression growing still graver.

"Something's obviously scaring them. That's the only reason for them to all let out warning calls like that."

"Even I can see that. But what the hell is it?" Shelah's spyglass had, like his weapons, long since ceased to be anything more than an ornament. Now, though, he pointed it at the crows. Just among those he could see, a considerable number were colliding with one another in midair. It was clear they had fallen into terrible confusion.

"Even the black-taloned eagle isn't enough to spook them like that, and

they're natural enemies," Enya muttered. "Something's very wrong."

"Just what's going on out there...?" Shelah kept watching through his spyglass for a while longer until, before he knew it, he was staring right at the source of the crows' terror. He flailed, toppling backward onto his bottom as beside him, Enya did the same.

"Oy, how long are you gonna keep us waiting, eh? Come on and finish the game before my luck runs out!" Hahato sidled over to them, grinning stupidly. Shelah tried to tell him what was happening, but all he managed was to frantically open and close his mouth without a sound. It took everything he had just to raise an arm toward what he had seen.

"This a new amusement, is it?" Hahato looked out over the wall. "The ash crows sure are making a racket today."

"I wish I could fly too..." Donga added. Neither was any less untroubled. Miming frantically, Shelah tried to communicate to them to look down. They exchanged a puzzled look.

"Is he saying to point our spyglasses down there?"

"What's gotten into him, eh?" Looking as though they really couldn't be bothered, they took out their spyglasses. Scarcely moments later, they too fell back on their behinds.

"G-G-Ghouls?! What are those?!" Hahato wailed, his face a mask of pure fear.

Shelah struggled and finally found his voice. "The hell should I know!"

The figures were shaped like humans—except that no human kept walking without a head. Enya got back to his feet, raising his spyglass with a shaking hand.

"Just at a glance, there's got to be fifty thousand of them..."

*"Fifty thousand...?!"*

Hahato let out a hollow laugh. "Y-Your time to shine, D-Donga," he said with a rigid smile as his whole body trembled. Donga shook his head hard enough to give himself whiplash. It was a confession that all his stories were nothing but hot air, but right now Shelah didn't have it in him to call this out.

Enya's breathing was ragged, his spyglass still pressed to his eye. "They're slow, but no doubt about it—they're headed for the fort! What do we do?!"

"Do...?" Shelah repeated stupidly. "W-We gotta tell the commander! As soon as possible!"

"Him?!" Hahato snapped. "What's that horse's ass gonna do?! All he's good for is sleeping and stuffing his face!"

"Like I need you to tell me that! But if we run before the commander, this here's what we'll have to look forward to!" Shelah drew a line across his neck with his thumb, sticking out his tongue.

"I don't want to be beheaded!" Donga's voice was a whine, his face the palest it had ever been as he trembled violently.

"There's no time. We gotta move," Shelah said. The other three nodded, then they all set off at a run for the commander's quarters. Voices like wails and moans came to them on the wind, only serving to further stoke their fears.

It was just after lunch, and through the window there came a pleasant breeze. Kleric Major Ashyn was reclining in his favorite woven cane rocking chair when the door flew open with a *bang*. He leaped to his feet.

"Wh-Wh-What's the meaning of this?!" he spluttered as the soldiers who came bursting in seized him. Before he could even wipe the drool from his chin, they hauled him off to the fort walls. And the ordeal didn't end there—next, they thrust a spyglass at him.

"Just what in the blazes is going on here?!"

"Shut up and look down there, ser!" Shelah shouted back even more loudly. Cowed despite himself, Ashyn did as he was told. The scene that appeared through the lens was as though hell itself had manifested on earth.

"What...what is that...?" he quavered.

"Don't ask us! Right now, we need your orders, ser!"

Surrounded by chaos and faced with a crowd of soldiers bearing down on him with a desperation in their eyes he had never seen before, all Ashyn could think

to do was to scream furiously, “What the hell do you mean, ‘orders’?!”

“What d’you think?! Order us to *flee*, ser!”

His soldiers weren’t worth the rations they ate, but apparently their minds weren’t completely empty. Any soldier who fled without an express order from him would face the executioner’s block, no exceptions. With trepidation, Ashyn raised the spyglass once more.

*I’m just the commander of a backwater fort! I can’t deal with that!* The whole forest swarmed with the ghouls. Meanwhile, the garrison at Fort Dagon numbered only two hundred soldiers. Whether they stood and fought or not wasn’t even a question.

“Kleric Major! Give the order to fall back!”

“Shut up! I need quiet while I think!”

“Think? What’s there to think about other than running?!”

“I am commander of Fort Dagon! Not a rank-and-file nobody like you lot! I have all sorts of things to think about!”

They would run, in the end. That wasn’t up for debate. But he had to get word of the situation to the lady of the city with all haste, so in order to buy time, they would need to put up *some* resistance. To be sure, it was not a wish to defend his country that had Ashyn thinking along these lines.

*If I make a stand here, my heroism might even put me in the running for Kardenal. Now that’d be the life... All right!*

Nursing his rapidly inflating ambitions, Ashyn had just made up his mind that they would stand their ground when on the wind there came a cry that went through him like a blade of ice piercing his heart. He let out an incoherent whimper. It had, of course, come from one of the ghouls, and in that moment, the desire to get away from this place *right now* easily overtook his ambition. His terror took hold of him, and he turned on his heels.

“I’m sorry to say it, but as of this moment, I declare Fort Dagon abandoned! Now run, run ’til your feet bleed!!!”

“Ser, yes, ser!” As the soldiers shouted back, it was the first time they and

Ashyn had ever felt united as one.

### III

*The Sixth City of Rue Shalla is destroyed!*

The shocking news arrived at the Third City of Bay Grand, carried not by the intelligence agents of the Wolfpack, but rather by a handful of soldiers fleeing together with the mistress of the Sixth City—Luciana Hartley herself.

#### **Lion's Workroom at Rizen Castle**

“—and that is what has brought us to you. I am the lady of the Sixth City, but even I...even I was helpless...” Luciana had not once touched the cup in front of her. Tears poured down her cheeks and soaked into her dress, turning the purple fabric black.

Lion took a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her, but Luciana only thanked him and did not move to take it. He glanced at Julius, who stood beside him, and the other man saluted before leaving the room.

According to the gate guard who had first spoken with Luciana, her face had been smeared with mud, her clothes so filthy as to make it impossible to know their original color. If the others had not been dressed in the distinctive cassocks of Rue Shalla's army, the guard had said, they would have been turned away as beggars.

“Now, those ghouls—” At the word “ghouls,” Luciana shrank back in terror. Cursing his lack of tact, Lion cleared his throat to try and mask the blunder. “That, ah, *force*, has halted, then?”

Her lips remained set in a tight line and her eyes were downcast, but Luciana nodded. Lion contemplated her in silence, suppressing a heavy sigh.

*I certainly wasn't expecting this just when we're on the eve of war with the empire.* The Sixth City of Rue Shalla was situated to the north of the Third City of Bay Grand. In other words, chances were high that if the army of ghouls were to march again, Bay Grand stood right in the line of fire. As they were not human, he could not guess at *why* they had stopped, and the amount of information he had been able to obtain was vanishingly small compared to the

vast scale of the destruction that wretched force had left in its wake.

What they knew now was that the first eyewitness reports had come from soldiers from a fort on the northern edge of Rue Shalla, and that the ghouls went after the living. Lion, hearing that Luciana didn't want to wait to tell what had befallen her, had set up the meeting with all haste, but now he decided that her mental state could not take much more of this.

Softening his expression, he said, "At any rate, I am glad to see you safe, Lady Luciana. A room has been prepared for you. Won't you rest a little?"

"I thank you for your kindness. I..." She hesitated. "I know not whether I now have the right to ask this of you, but if any of my people or my soldiers should flee here..."

"Rest assured, Bay Grand will welcome them all."

"Thank you. Truly, thank you." With a faint hint of relief in her eyes, Luciana rose and left the room.

At once, Julius returned to take her place. Lion moved from the sofa to his desk, where he sat back in his chair and let out a long breath. On the other side of the window, the sun hung low in the western sky. In less than an hour, the room would fill with the vermilion light of sunset.

"You sent off the Wolfpack?"

"Yes, my lord. With orders to capture a ghoul."

"Excellent work, as always."

"It sounds, from what Lady Luciana said, that they are effectively mindless. I believe it should be possible for the Wolfpack to catch one, with their experience."

"A good call. We can't begin to deal with an opponent we know nothing about."

"Indeed. I also gave word that all our forces are to move to alert level one."

Lion gave a small nod, then looked properly at Julius again. "And? What do *you* think?"

“Lady Luciana is not lying, of that I feel certain. Her tale is difficult to believe, yes, but such are the facts.”

“Agreed. You’d never expect anyone to buy a story about an attack by a horde of people who ought to be dead. It just makes me all the more sure that it’s true.”

For better or for worse, Luciana was known as a gentle soul. Out of the thirteen lords and ladies of Sutherland, she was the least inclined toward violence and ambition, another thing that gave credence to her tale.

“I did not anticipate that before fighting the empire, we would find ourselves fighting off inhuman creatures.”

“What’s that, Julius? Are you thinking of *fighting* those things? I’ll beg off, myself.”

“When you don’t even believe they will stay in Rue Shalla,” Julius said pointedly.

“Ah, well,” Lion sighed. “If the situation calls for it, I can always use *that*. Even I had mixed feelings about using it on humans, but if we’re calling them *former* humans, I can act without scruples.”

“Are you sure that is the right move?”

“It isn’t *right*,” Lion replied with a note of indignation. “It is the means, as I live and breathe, by which I am going to unite not only Sutherland, but the entire continent.”

Julius chuckled. “That there, Lord Lion, is why I would follow you to the end of everything.” He gazed at Lion with a look in his eyes that said, *I know everything*. Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, Lion spun his chair to turn his back on the other man. The city on the other side of the window was as full of life as ever.

“I’ll be going to see *her* next.”

“You think there is mage involvement with the ghouls?”

“You really have to ask?” Walking corpses were an abnormality; the way these creatures attacked and fed on humans was a gross departure from the



natural order of things. And in Lion's opinion, the majority of unnatural occurrences involved mages—mages, those folk who had transcended the boundaries of what it meant to be human.

"Then may I accompany you?"

"Suit yourself." Swiveling his chair back, Lion rose, then he and Julius set off down into the bowels of the castle.

### **Beneath Rizen Castle**

"What is *this*?"

"Who can say..." Julius smiled nervously. Lion turned to the door, to which was affixed a paper sign that read *DO NOT OPEN. DANGER*, and unceremoniously shoved it open. There, sitting before a gigantic contraption, her hands a blur of motion, was a woman. Before Lion could call out to her, her hands stopped moving and her shoulders began to shake with laughter.

"People can never resist opening something when they're told not to," she chuckled. "And boys who laugh in the face of danger like you, Leo baby, are the worst of all." The woman turned to face them. She wore enormous, black-framed glasses that dwarfed her small face, and a white coat that was similarly ill-fitting, its sleeves flopping about over her hands. The woman's name was Heaven Mercury, and, to the best of Lion's knowledge, she was the United City-States of Sutherland's only mage.

"You're as incomprehensible as ever, I see," Lion said.

"And you're as drool-worthy as ever, Leo baby. Mm-*mmm*." Heaven ran her eyes slowly over him, then pretended to wipe her mouth with a dirty chuckle. Lion was sure she wasn't *actually* drooling until he saw a patch of her sleeve that was a decidedly darker color. He shuddered.

"But what brings you here?" she asked. "I told Lord Julius just today that I'm not finished yet."

"I got your report, of course. Today I'm here on another matter. Before I come to that, though, why's he 'Lord' while I get '*Leo baby*'? How does that figure?"

He knew Heaven was too much of a nut to have a solid reason, so he didn't expect a straight answer. Still, he asked, holding on to a pinprick of hope.

"Why, because you're Leo baby, and Lord Julius is Lord Julius. You ask the *oddest* questions." Heaven blinked at him as though he'd utterly mystified her. As much as he wanted to ask who *she* was calling odd, he knew all too well how much good it would do him; that was to say, none at all.

*I'm the idiot for daring to hope for a real answer*, he thought. Glancing at Julius, who was facing away from Lion with his hand over his mouth as his whole body shook with repressed laughter, Lion got straight to the point.

"Can magecraft be used to control corpses?" he asked.

"Magecraft to control *corpses*?" At once, Heaven's face took on a look of cool intelligence, making her seem like a different person entirely. Lion thought he saw her glasses flash, but it had surely been a trick of the light. "Magecraft is what I live for," she went on warningly. "I won't stand for anyone making a mockery of it—not even you, Leo baby."

"The thought never entered my mind. But if that's how you feel, so be it. Killing me should be a breeze for a mage, if she were so inclined." Lion spread his arms wide and grinned.

Heaven gave him a searching look. "To be honest, I've never heard of magecraft so fantastical. Such magecraft—if that's really what it is—would have to be the work of a unique-type mage like me..." She paused. "If you're *not* making fun, why the sudden interest?"

Lion told her everything he had been able to learn. In a flash, Heaven threw herself into his arms. He and Julius stood there frozen in surprise as she buried her face in his chest.

Then, her head shot up, and she said, "I want to see." Her face kindled with delight like Lion had never seen before.

"You what? You mean the *ghouls*?"

"Obviously! There's nothing else I *could* mean, it's so obvious!" She shoved Lion away, as though suddenly irritated by him, then began to pace back and forth, issuing a stream of dark muttering.

The whole day was going to slip away while he stood here quietly waiting to see what Heaven did. This was not acceptable to Lion.

“The ghouls are definitely a mage’s work, then?” he asked.

Heaven came to an abrupt halt. “Maybe...” she said at length.

“‘Maybe’? What do you mean, ‘maybe’?”

“As I think you know, in order to use magecraft, one needs a power source—which is to say, mana. Now, mana is generated within the body, but one’s capacity for wielding it is fixed at birth. At present, there is still no established method for *acquiring* a greater reserve of mana.”

“You told me once that just having deep mana reserves is enough to make someone extraordinarily gifted.”

Heaven nodded, then resumed her restless pacing. Every now and then she also pulled at her hair, making her look like a madwoman.

“I could see making a few corpses move, but controlling fifty thousand at the same time is absolutely impossible, by the laws of magecraft.”

“You’re trying to say that the mana would be massively insufficient?”

“Massively? Try *entirely* insufficient. You see how hard *I* work, don’t you, Leo baby?”

A little annoyed by her patronizing tone, Lion nonetheless looked past her at the enormous, clear vat that overshadowed everything else in the room. It was close to ninety percent full of a yellowish green liquid that glowed dully.

“And that’s why you can’t say for sure there’s a mage involved...”

“Just so. Maybe if there were someone even more powerful than a mage, but as far as I’m aware, no such person exists or has ever existed.” Heaven’s hair was now a hopeless tangle.

*I suppose the only thing to do is wait until the Wolfpack returns with...* he thought, then stopped as a memory came to him. *Hold on.* Within his vast personal library, there was a volume that told of a creature, worshipped as a sacred beast, that had been able to use magecraft. At the time, he had laughed it away as a bit of fantasy, but now that the borders between fantasy and reality

were growing less and less certain, he found he could not dismiss it so easily.

“Heaven, do you know about the sacred beast?” he asked. Heaven stopped pacing again.

“The sacred beast...” she murmured. “Yes, perhaps, with the sacred beast...”

“You *do* know about it, then?”

“If anything, I’m shocked that *you* know about it, Leo baby. Though I hear these days they call it the ‘Cataclysmic Maw, class three dangerous beast.’”

Lion had heard of the Maw. But it had never entered his mind that the sacred beast and the Maw might be one and the same.

“Maybe we should consider the possibility that the sacred beast is pulling strings behind the scenes,” he said, voicing the idea as it came to him.

Heaven’s expression grew dark. “All right,” she said, “assuming you’re right and the sacred beast did this, what would its purpose be?”

“How should I know how a beast’s mind works?”

“When you don’t know, it’s best not to go jumping to conclusions. You’ll only end up further from the truth. On which note,” Heaven went on, “make arrangements for us to go see these walking corpses.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?!”

“I just told you that the ghouls laid waste to the Sixth City. You might be a mage, but I don’t see you taking on tens of thousands of those things. How could I give permission when I know your life would be at risk?”

Besides the staggering sum of gold he had invested in Heaven, Lion had not the slightest intention of giving the ghouls more to feed on—especially not a rare mage.

Julius too tried to persuade Heaven, but she wasn’t budging.

“It’s not as though I *want* to die, not when I’m still so young and perky, not to mention adorable *and* gorgeous. I swear I won’t do anything dangerous. Plus, if I see them in real life, I might be able to tell if it actually is a mage controlling

them. See, Leo baby, there's something in it for you too."

Lion considered for a moment. "True, there is," he admitted. "But you'll have to wait a little. At the moment—"

"Why do I have to wait?!" Heaven shouted, rounding on him aggressively. "I want to see them! I want to see them *right now*! If you tell me no, I'll just go myself!"

Lion had had enough. "Let me finish. At the moment, I have the Wolfpack inspecting the site. I also gave them orders to catch me a ghoul while they're at it, so all going well, you'll have the pleasure of its acquaintance in the next few days."

"You're serious?!" Heaven exclaimed, suddenly beaming. Next, she wormed her arm through his. Lion extricated himself from her, somewhat forcefully.

"I know it's no good lying to you," he said. "So *wait*."

"Oh yes, of course. I'll wait until your Wolfpack gets back. But if they fail to catch a ghoul, I *will* go get one myself, and you won't stop me."

"Yes, fine. Works for me."

"Excellent!"

"After we catch the ghoul, we'll need to run tests. Can you get it ready by then?"

"Leave it to me. I'm *really* going to pull out all the stops."

"I appreciate it. The *vesse/* will be ready soon too."

Heaven tore off her white coat and tossed it aside, then turned back to the contraption, licking her lips. Julius averted his gaze, looking embarrassed as her petite yet still voluptuous figure came into full view.

*Still so innocent*, Lion thought as he called to Heaven's back, "I'm counting on you." She gave him a careless wave, then, facing the contraption before her, began to intone something in an unknown tongue.

"No one can get through to her when she gets like this."

"So long as she devotes herself to the work, that's all that matters. The rest

will have to wait until the Wolfpack returns.”

“I expect the Council of the Thirteen Stars will be convened at once, won’t it?”

“It’s a massive nuisance—but I can hardly say no after Rue Shalla was destroyed.”

Two days passed. The Wolfpack was successful, returning safely home with several of the ghouls held captive. But the report they brought him left Lion reeling with shock. For they had learned that the ghouls flew the banners of the imperial army.

## IV

The Second Allied Legion advanced toward Fort Astora. As the vanguard drew near to the pass that led to Fort Belganna, word arrived from Lieutenant General Adam, who commanded the unit bringing up the rear, that they had encountered a force of imperial soldiers all clad in black armor.

“I wasn’t expecting a counterattack, the situation being what it is...” Blood rubbed the back of his head tiredly.

“There seem to be around fifty thousand of them.”

“Fifty *thousand*?”

“Yes, ser. At this stage, there has been no sign of an ambush.”

“What game are they playing...” This imperial force had not even a quarter of the Second Allied Legion’s numbers, nor did the terrain around the location of Adam’s unit give them any special advantage. Blood only had to give the order to switch to the offensive, and he would be in an overwhelmingly advantageous position. As such, he couldn’t work out what the imperial army was trying to do.

“Lieutenant General Adam proposes that you push on for Fort Astora, ser.”

“And leave his unit to handle them alone?”

“I believe that is what he intends, yes.”

“Does he, now...” A battle ought to be avoided—that was Adam’s unsaid message. Blood well understood the implication there. Adam had judged that,

even with the advantage of numbers, the wiser course here was not to engage. Adam had weathered many a battle as commander in the Second Legion, and his battlefield instincts were good. He might, therefore, have sensed a threat from the imperial soldiers in their black armor. With no reason to reject Adam's proposal, Blood turned to where Lise sat mounted at his side.

"I would add my support to Lieutenant General Adam. An army of imperial soldiers all in black makes me uneasy..."

"That's decided then. I leave it to Lieutenant General Adam to deal with them."

If this turned out to be the rumored walking dead, he would have to ignore Adam and set the whole army against them. The fact that they all wore the same armor suggested the appearance of an unknown *fourth* knight order, but Blood thought simply evading pursuit should be well within the realm of possibility.

"Move out!" At Lise's order, the Second Allied Legion began to march once more toward Fort Astora.

Nearly four days had passed since the Second Allied Legion had set out for Fort Astora after receiving Lieutenant Colonel Ashton's report.

Blood pulled on his reins to stop his galloping horse as he sensed a faint presence coming from the stand of trees on his left. His personal guard swiftly fanned out to protect him, drawing their swords. The air grew thick with tension, but it soon dissipated.

"Isn't that..." muttered Lise, her eyes narrowed. Pushing her way through the undergrowth came a woman whose face Blood knew. A memory flashed through his mind of a woman standing tall and proud with the Valedstorm banners behind her. Her hair was a different color, but this was Ellis Crawford, whose performance as Olivia's double had rescued the Second Legion from the brink of defeat.

Behind her began to appear a train of soldiers in the armor of the Royal Army. Every one of their armor was drenched in crimson. Blood, seeing that one of the largest among them carried a blond-haired youth on his back, scratched his

head.

*This line of work's getting reaaaal hard to stomach...* The youth, his face utterly bloodless, was unmistakably that of the Eighth Legion's young tactician: Ashton Senefelder.

"It can't be...?!" Lise's small exclamation was almost a whimper.

Ellis came plowing through Blood's guards, shoving them aside. Once before Blood, she clicked her heels together and announced, "Second Lieutenant Ellis Crawford reporting, ser. By your leave, General Blood, I would like to ask why it is that we find you here?"

Her hand was raised in a salute. Her courtesies and manners were all in order. And yet every word she spoke overflowed with rage—rage that Blood knew with certainty was directed at himself. It was immediately apparent to him that something had gone wrong for the Eighth Legion.

"Calm yourself, Second Lieutenant. We've been totally in the dark here."

"I am calm, ser. But with all due respect to you, General, we are the ones who've been in the dark."

"Ell— Second Lieutenant!" A young soldier whose features bore a strong resemblance to Ellis's rushed over to call her off, but walked right into a textbook-perfect elbow blow to the solar plexus. He sank to his knees, groaning. Ellis, as though there had been no interruption, smiled coldly at Blood.

"Lieutenant Colonel Ashton remained at Fort Tezcapolis on your orders, General Blood. Now this is the result. So I will ask again—what is it that keeps you here, rather than heading to Fort Tezcapolis?"

Lise looked as though she was about to cut in, unable to watch any longer, but Blood stopped her. He was starting to form an understanding, however vague, of what had befallen Ellis and the others.

"First things first. I didn't order Lieutenant Colonel Ashton to stay at Fort Tezcapolis. My orders were for him to make for Fort Astora with all haste."

Ellis stared at him. "Say what? What the hell are you on about? You've lost me." Gone was any effort to address him as a superior officer.



“How dare you!” burst out one of the guards. “Who do you—” Blood stayed him with a gesture, then ordered them to take custody of Ashton’s body. All the soldiers before them were gray with exhaustion, but the one carrying Ashton in particular looked as though he might collapse at any moment.

“Don’t you *touch* him!” As the guard tried to take Ashton, Ellis grabbed at him like a threatened wolf. But her hand never found its mark. Instead, the guards seized her and pinned her to the ground.

“You sons of bitches! Get off me! Get *off*!” she shrieked.

“Are you out of your mind?!” The guard captain looked as though he might put his sword through her skull then and there.

“Leave her,” Blood told him.

“But ser!” The captain began to protest, then stopped. “Understood.”

Leaving him glaring at Ellis, Blood turned to the other three. “Does someone capable of talking sense want to take over for her?”

“I... I’ll tell you what happened, ser.”

“Name?”

“Evanson... Captain Evanson Crawford, ser.”

“The little brother, eh? That was a neat elbow she got you with. You all right?”

“I’m fine, ser,” Evanson said, getting shakily to his feet. Then, he began to relate what had occurred at Fort Tezcapolis. He told how, after hearing out the messenger, Ashton had remained behind at Fort Tezcapolis with five hundred soldiers. How the imperial army’s ambush had fallen on them with uncanny timing. And how it had become clear that their objective was Ashton’s death.

“We did everything we could to allow him to escape, but...” A look of agony contorted Evanson’s face, and he trailed off, his fists shaking.

“Thank you, soldier,” Blood told him. “As I said, there was no order to stay put at Fort Tezcapolis from me. Which leaves only one plausible explanation—the messenger gave Lieutenant Colonel Ashton incorrect orders.” He swiftly went on to explain that the messenger’s actions had been deliberate.

Evanson was visibly shaken. “Deliberate?! Commander Blood, are you suggesting that the Eighth Legion’s messenger betrayed us? That’s absolutely impossible. The messenger to whom the letter was entrusted was trustworthy. That’s *why* Lieutenant Colonel Ashton entrusted it to him.”

“Nothing is absolute. You live in this world. Surely you must know that well enough.”

“But—”

“Hold on, let me finish. That messenger—he called himself Private Edwards, I believe. Well, I spoke with him myself, and I definitely didn’t sense any hint of treachery—at least, not while he was here.”

“Do you mean to say, Commander Blood, that he had a change of heart on the road?”

“That is what facts suggest.”

“That is *absolutely* impossible!”

“What did I just say about absolutes? But this time, it’s quite possible it wasn’t deliberate on *his* part.”

“Now it wasn’t deliberate? What does that mean, ser?”

“I mean someone else might have manipulated his mind.”

“Manipulated? But that’s too...too fantastical to be true.” But despite Evanson’s protests, Blood could clearly see he was exploring the possibility. His open-mindedness told Blood that this was an able young man.

“Was there anything off about Private Edwards when you saw him?”

“I was there with Lieutenant Colonel Ashton to hear his report, but I didn’t notice anything especially...” A frown flickered over Evanson’s face as he spoke. Blood didn’t fail to notice it.

“So there was something.”

“Not exactly something...” Evanson hesitated. “I remember he was unusually pale. At the time I wrote it off as exhaustion from the long ride, though Lieutenant Colonel Ashton did seem a little uneasy. But that was all.”

“Well, that does seem like it might be nothing. But now that, of all the ridiculous things, the dead themselves have risen, we need to consider every possibility, don’t you think?”

“I see your point, ser,” Evanson said at length.

“You sound as though you understand, but you’re not convinced.” Evanson kept quiet, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, which had rather the effect of eloquently proving Blood right. “But then,” he went on, “whether you’re convinced or not, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton will still be dead.”

Evanson gasped. “That is no way to speak, ser!”

“How about I shed a tear or two, then? Would that convince you, Captain?” Blood said, fixing Evanson with a fierce stare. The younger man looked away, shamefaced. “We are at war. I can’t afford to lose sleep over every death, no matter whose it might be, and if you’re going to wear that captain’s badge you’d better stop deluding yourself.”

Suddenly, Blood heard a low laugh. He turned, and his eyes met Ellis’s, staring at him out of her mud-splattered face.

“As expected from the supreme commander of the Second Allied Legion. Not a shred of mercy. You may count Ellis Crawford very much impressed.” Even pinned to the ground, she spoke with heavy sarcasm. Blood gave her a crooked smile.

“If we’re done here, you can go join the rear ranks.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll gladly get out of your hair,” she shot back. Then to the guards, she snapped, “Get *off* me already!”

Blood’s guards released Ellis, who left with the other men following her, a complex mix of feelings on their faces. Blood let out a small sigh and set about rummaging through his pockets. As he did so, Lise turned to him with a troubled look.

“The way you handled them was very...*you*, ser,” she said, “but are you sure that was the right way to do it?”

“That lot are angry with themselves for failing to protect Lieutenant Colonel

Ashton. They know it too. I just hope by chewing them out like that, I managed to distract them a little.” He lit a drooping cigarette.

“I don’t know.” Lise shook her head. “This is why I can’t leave you alone.”

“Hm? I can’t hear you when you mumble.”

Lise turned so that she was in profile to him and cleared her throat. “In any case, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton’s death is a terrible tragedy. Worst of all, when the other two find out...”



Blood didn't have to ask the identities of the other two Lise spoke of.

"Colonel Claudia is just as crucial a figure in the Eighth Legion as Lieutenant Colonel Ashton was. Now that we've lost him, we cannot afford to lose her too." The mental and the physical were closely interlinked. Even if Claudia were in peak condition physically, a disturbance to her mental state might render her totally incapable of carrying out her duties as an officer.

"Claudia has a strong heart. I know that better than anyone. Even so, I could see her being overcome by sorrow. That being so, ser, may I have your leave to go to her for a short time, to comfort her in her grief?"

Blood was silent a moment. "I should be asking you. Are you sure?"

"Leave it to me, ser. It's my duty as an old friend," Lise said proudly, only a hint of sadness in her smile. *No matter what I do, I'll never be as good as her*, Blood thought wryly.

"That just leaves Liv..." He stared at the smoke drifting up into the sky from his cigarette, thinking about Olivia. Watching her from day to day, one could be tricked into thinking that she didn't even know how to be sad. But perhaps that was only because real sadness was something she had yet to experience. Even with her immeasurable strength, even if the imperial army had named her the Death God, she was still a sixteen-year-old girl.

*Really, the best thing would be for Colonel Claudia to break it to her as her aide, but that won't work this time. I can't even guess what she's up to in the imperial capital with the Azure Knights, but when she gets back, I suppose I'll have to tell her myself...* His cigarette had turned almost entirely to ash. Lise looked at him with worry on her face. To try and hide the strange awkwardness he felt, Blood gave an exaggerated shrug.

"I really drew the short straw, eh?"

"You have my sympathies, ser."

The Second Allied Legion changed course three times on the way to Fort Astora.

“Snow...” Lise murmured to no one in particular as she looked up at the sky. It came down in flurries from the thick clouds, robbing them not only of warmth, but even of spirit. Beside her, though it was already as high as it needed to be, Blood pulled the collar of his military trench coat up around his neck.

## V

After Felix and the others left, Lassara spent a week painstakingly examining all of the corpses. Reaching the final body, she let out an involuntary groan.

“This is wrong. This wasn’t raised with magecraft...” Where magecraft had been involved, it always left traces of its constituent particles, known as spell motes. It was an unwritten law of magecraft. But Lassara could find no spell motes on the corpses. Felix had told her once that he could use Odic force to detect the interference of magecraft, but in this area, Lassara’s analytic abilities were vastly superior. If she could not find any spell motes, that meant this was not the work of a mage. With no other conclusion left to her, Lassara called over to Silky, who was sound asleep in the branches of a tree.

Silky yawned broadly. “Are you done, then, Lady Lassara? Your humble servant here did think you were spending too long on it...”

“A poor investigation will never get you any more than poor results. That’s why when I investigate, I do it *thoroughly*. That’s my way,” Lassara told the fairy. Even if you turned up nothing, you could move on knowing nothing would come back to bite you later. Lassara’s many years of life had taught her that while at first it might seem like a roundabout method, this was the shortest path to finding an answer.

“So was it a mage, my lady?”

“No, not a mage, it would seem.”

“Wait, really? My lady?”

“Are you doubting me?”

“Yes, I very humbly am,” Silky replied at once, grinning. Lassara turned up her nose.

“Then check them yourself. You’re always boasting that fairy magecraft is so much better than human magecraft. I’m sure you can see for yourself.”

“Eww, no way am I getting any closer to those gross things...” Silky said. “I humbly decline,” she added for good measure.

“Well, if you doubt yourself, I won’t make you.”

“Huh? What did you say to me? Like I would ever!” Setting her sights on a comparatively presentable corpse, Silky went over and began to flutter busily around it. Scarce moments later, she returned, sticking her tongue out in disgust. Not that it mattered, but Lassara noted that her well-mannered act was starting to slip.

“Well?” she asked.

“It was *suuuper* gross.”

“I’m not interested in *that*,” Lassara said dismissively. Silky turned her back on her. Apparently, the fairy thought she was being subtle, but the “Bleeeh!” she let out was perfectly audible, so Lassara had no trouble working out what she was doing.

Silky turned back as though nothing had happened, then said, “I didn’t smell any magecraft at all. My lady.”

“You mean to say that you detected no signs of magecraft? Well, if the *great* fairy Silky Breeze can confidently state as much, there can be no more room for doubt.” Just for the fun of it, Lassara switched to flattery. Unexpectedly, however, Silky frowned, turning her head from side to side as though puzzled. Usually, she would have been helpless to that sort of flattery, and she couldn’t have failed to hear the comment. As such, Lassara’s curiosity was suddenly piqued.

“Something on your mind?” she inquired.

“I didn’t smell magecraft, but I did get a whiff of something else.”

“Something *else*? You’d better not mean the smell of rotting flesh.” This *was* Silky, after all. The likelihood of her fooling around was high.

“Are you an actual moron, or just acting like one?” Silky demanded. “Of



course I don't. It's more like, you know. Oh, you don't get it." Silky ran her fingers through her hair, kicking her legs up and down. The only thing Lassara got from this was the remarkable deficiency of Silky's verbalization abilities.

"Seems I don't," was all she said.

"I wonder why..." Silky mused. "I guess even though you talk yourself up as a great mage, you're nothing special after all." She threw the insult out casually, taking advantage of the general confusion. With absolute conviction, Lassara thought that if she had a flyswatter in hand in that moment she would have swatted the fairy without hesitation.

"I never smelled it before, at any rate," Silky went on.

"How did it compare to how magecraft smells to you?"

"Hmmm..." Silky considered. "Oh! It had *elegance*. Yeah, elegance. Like how I'm so elegant. At last, a way to explain it that even the likes of *you* can understand." She nodded, looking pleased with herself.

Lassara gave her an icy look. "By the way, given up on being well-mannered, have we?"

For a second, Silky gaped. Then, she said primly, "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean, Lady Lassara." She covered her hand with her mouth and tittered.

In the end, all Lassara had learned was that no mage had been involved in this incident with the dead. Still, in a stroke of good luck, what Silky had brought up seemed as though it might hold a clue to the answer.

"Now then," Silky said in a singsong voice, hopping up and down in midair, "why don't we depart this creepy place as fast as possible and go to see Felix?"

There was no new information to be gained by lingering here any longer. Lassara had no reason to reject Silky's suggestion. But instead, she said, "As I have told you time and time again, I'm not about to see you exposed to humans."

"*What?*" Silky cried. "No way! You did not seriously bring me all this way only to not even let me see Felix? Don't even *try* to tell me that."

“Don’t jump to conclusions. What I’m saying is if we’re to meet with him, we have to choose the right time and place.” Indeed, this was true not only for Silky, but for Lassara herself. Time had stopped for Lassara when she had inherited the Heavenly Orb mage circle at the age of six. The best a little girl showing up out of the blue to see Felix could hope for was to be turned away by the guards at the gate. Even if the young girl in question was stunningly pretty.

“Honestly, don’t scare me like that...” Silky sighed, relieved. When Lassara fixed her with a penetrating look, however, she backed away dubiously.

“Wh-What’re you looking at?”

“Where’s the youngster now?”

“Huh?”

“I asked you where he is.”

Silky looked blank for a moment, then her lips slowly curved into a smile. “Felix’s location, is it? Oh, I can find that out right away. After all, unlike *your* cheap excuse for detection magecraft, Lassara, *mine* is the best of the best.”

The fairy’s words rankled, but she spoke the truth. Lassara’s detection spells only gave her a rough location. Silky’s, on the other hand, could pinpoint a target exactly. Lassara could locate a target accurately if she marked it by touching it directly, but then she had to keep the spell going continuously. It was, in other words, extremely inconvenient.

“Would you get on with it, then?”

“Oh, I can’t say no to you.” Silky gave Lassara a smug, sidelong glance, then, making a show of it, she raised her left hand high. After a long, teasing pause, she snapped her fingers. There was, incidentally, no purpose to all of this. Lassara knew full well it was nothing but a tiresome performance.

As pale blue light blossomed around Silky, Lassara pulled a map, folded into six, from her pocket. She had made it herself over the course of the journeys she had taken around the continent to fill her spare time, and there was no other map like it.

“I know where Felix is!” Silky said at last. For a while she stared hard at the

map, which Lassara had spread out on the ground for ease of viewing, then pointed to a place marked *Fort Zaxxon*. It was so far from anywhere Lassara had expected to find Felix that she couldn't help but eye the triumphant fairy with suspicion.

"You're sure, are you?"

"Don't ask stupid questions! I won't stand for any insult to my magecraft!" She flew at Lassara's head with a barrage of kicks.

Deflecting these with the back of her hand, Lassara said, "All right, all *right*. I'm sorry. I just didn't think he'd be so close..."

"Then let's be off," Silky said cheerfully, her ladylike voice back. Lassara cloaked them both once more in a spell of concealment, then pushed her hands into the pockets of her shimmering vermilion coat. She set off walking northeast, toward Fort Zaxxon, Silky humming a tune beside her. Dead leaves, fallen from the trees, whispered coldly as the wind picked them up and carried them away to who-knows-where. Lassara's breath clouded as it had back in the White Forest. Yet it seemed to her there was a murkiness to it, and at the thought, a grim look settled over her face.

## VI

### Fort Zaxxon, Imperial Territory

Powdery snow drifted down through the dark night. The room was utterly silent where Felix sat drifting in and out of sleep, with only Ramza, who lay prone on the bed before him, for company. Then there came a tiny creak, and he saw the door to the room open halfway.

*I can't sense anyone there...* he thought. In the first place, no one in this fort would have opened the door without knocking. Felix stood up, focusing his Odh. At almost the same time, a cheerful voice rang out.

"I've come to see you!"

"That voice..." He paused. "That can't be Silky Breeze?!"

"That's right, it's me!" Felix suddenly found himself looking at the fairy. He

was struck by a combination of surprise and confusion, but before anything else, there was one thing he had to ask.

“Did you come alone, Silky?”

“Of course not,” Silky replied as Lassara appeared behind her, leaving Felix stunned all over again. Before he could ask what they were doing here, Lassara slipped out of her vermilion coat and strode briskly over to Ramza’s bedside.

“Who’s the sleeping man?”

“His Imperial Majesty Emperor Ramza.”

“Truly?” Lassara leaned in to stare hard at Ramza, then made a thoughtful noise. “He does still retain some of the look, it’s true. But why is the emperor in a place like this?”

“It is a long story. Also, I have something to ask of you, Lady Lassara,” Felix said in a rush. Lassara moved closer to Felix and gently rubbed his arm to settle his restless nerves. Her eyes were endlessly kind.

“It’s not like you to get so worked up. It’s about your emperor over there, I expect. For now, tell me what happened. We can get to everything else after that.”

“You’re right.” Felix bowed deeply. “I’m sorry you had to see me in such a sorry state.”

Lassara patted his shoulder. “Never fear. I’d as soon be upset by a difficult child.”

Silky snickered at this. “Child? More like *grandchild* in your case, if I may say so. Your grandchild’s grandchild’s grandchild, even.”

“If you’ve nothing to do but blather, how about you put up a labyrinth barrier on this room?” Lassara snapped back. “What do you think I was concealing us all the way here for?”

“Do it yours—!” Silky began, then cleared her throat. “Don’t you think it would be better if *you* did it, Miss Lassara?”

Felix wasn’t sure what to make of Silky’s odd new manner of speaking, but the pair’s familiar banter brought a small smile to his lips and eased his heart a

little.

“You’re the faster of us,” Lassara pointed out.

“Oh, well, I *suppose*.” Looking smug, Silky began to glow with pale green light. Meanwhile, Lassara’s eyes roved around the floor.

“I’ll get you a chair at once,” Felix said, before immediately remembering that there was only one chair in the room and feeling foolish. He reached for the chair he had been using, but Lassara waved him off. With a light click of her fingers, she created a little chair of shining silver.

“Now speak,” she said. “Time, at least, we have in ample supply.” She sat down in the chair and folded her arms with an air of great dignity.

Felix dutifully relayed all that had transpired. Beyond the occasional nod, Lassara took in everything he said without interjection.

“Very well. I see,” she said when he was done. Her gaze shifted to the emperor, and unlike before, Felix thought he saw pity in her eyes.

“Darmés said that he isn’t a mage, but he doesn’t have any significant amount of Odic force either. And yet despite that, he demonstrated extraordinary power. Just what do you think he is?”

“I have no more idea than you. To tell you the truth, I watched your battle from a distance. I know about the corpses, of course, and I’ve looked into whether it was magecraft that controlled them.”

*No wonder she wasn’t surprised to hear of the walking dead*, Felix thought, her words making sense to him now.

“What did your investigation reveal, then?”

“Just what you’re thinking, youngster.”

“In other words, that you found no traces of magecraft?”

Lassara nodded gravely.

“I knew it...” Thanks to Lassara, Felix now knew that Darmés had spoken the truth. But at present, that was the limit of his knowledge. He still had a great

deal he needed to consider, not least the source of Darmés's powers. But right now, his most pressing concern was having Lassara examine Ramza.

"Lady Lassara," he began, rising eagerly from his chair, "could I ask you to look at His Imperial Majesty now?" Lassara gave him a long, hard look, then let out a small sigh. "Lady Lassara?"

"I'll cut straight to the point. Returning the emperor to the way he was is beyond even my power."

"It's—?! But you haven't even tried anything yet!" Without meaning to, Felix found himself shouting.

"I don't need to," Lassara replied with infinite calm. "Not after what you've told me." She looked at Silky, at which the fairy fluttered quietly down to land on Ramza. Felix watched her without a word until she turned back to him regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Felix. This human doesn't smell like magecraft."

"He doesn't *smell* like magecraft?"

"What Silky means to say is that he hasn't been touched by magecraft," supplied Lassara. "This confirms that Darmés is no mage. Do you smell the *other* thing?" she asked Silky.

The fairy hesitated. "Yeah."

"What are you talking about?" Felix asked.

"In that case, whatever is affecting the emperor is almost certainly the same art used to raise the corpses. If this were magecraft, I'm sure I could find any number of ways to counter it. But against this unknown power, I am helpless. You had an inkling, didn't you, youngster? You only turned to me after trying everything you could, after all."

"I..." Felix sought about for words. "Then His Imperial Majesty, his mind won't ever..." Feeling the shadows of despair creeping over him, he sank lifelessly back into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

"Don't cry, Felix," said Silky. "I'll find a way." She stroked his head, to which Felix offered no resistance. Then, he heard a heavy sigh.

“No patience, as usual. Don’t go getting ahead of yourself. I can’t put your emperor back how he was, but I’ve an idea of someone who might know the true nature of this power.”

“Do you really?!” Felix’s head jerked up. The look Lassara met him with was one of exasperation.

“Of course I’m sure. It’s *your* story that suggested it to me.”

“My story...?” Felix frowned, not following. “What do you mean?”

“Now, youngster, I don’t know why you’re running yourself ragged over this emperor, nor do I care to ask, but it *is* clear to me that your head has grown dull as a brick.”

Felix tried to think, but nothing came to him, so he waited for Lassara to continue. She gave a small shake of her head.

“Good grief. What am I to do with you? When Darmés used his arts to speak directly into your mind, didn’t Olivia Valedstorm say she’d seen it before? Specifically, that this ‘Z’ used it often?”

“Oh...” Felix felt his cheeks grow hot as he realized how stupid he had been. A small smile curled upon Lassara’s lips, but he could tell from the warmth in her eyes that it wasn’t mocking.

“There is a good chance that Olivia Valedstorm knows the nature of Darmés’s power. I can’t say what the future holds, but seeing as you mean to take temporary refuge in Fernest, we can assume you won’t be meeting her in battle for the time being. If you explained it to her, she just might help you.”

Felix was just thinking that Lassara had made a good point when Silky descended in front of his eyes, arms outstretched as though to bar him from going anywhere. Her face was screwed up in uncharacteristic fury.

“Felix, you can’t!” she cried. “You can’t have anything to do with that stupid cow.”

“With who?” Felix asked. “Are you calling *Olivia* a stupid cow?”

“I don’t care what she’s called!”

“Why are you acting like this all of a sudden...?”

“You just *can’t*!”

Felix saw that nothing more would get through to her. He couldn’t work out Silky’s vehement opposition, despite the fact that he was sure she had no connection to Olivia whatsoever. When he cocked his head in puzzlement, Lassara gave him a despairing look.

“You do worry me sometimes, youngster. Now, do you know where Olivia Valedstorm is? I’d like a word with the girl myself. She seems like an intriguing character.”

“After we separated at Listelein Castle, I don’t know where she went. Many days have passed since then, so she probably returned to her country.”

“I see. Then I suppose we must call upon the great fairy Silky Breeze.”

“I’ll *never* do it!” Silky said forcefully, talking over Lassara. Then she spun to face away from him so fast he thought he felt a breeze.

“Ah, so you can’t help Felix, yes, I see,” Lassara said. “Well, if you don’t want to, I’m not about to force you.”

Felix could see Silky as her face grew more and more agonized before his eyes.

“I would like to humbly point out that I never, ever said I can’t help Felix...”

“What was that? I’ve lived far too long, and it’s taken its toll on my ears. Care to say it again for me, louder?”

“Gah!” Silky stamped her foot furiously in the air.

Felix moved to face her directly. “Please,” he said. “Will you help me?”

Silky groaned helplessly. “O-Of course, Felix,” she said. “For you, I’ll do anything!” Tugging madly at her pretty, dusty-pink hair, Silky began to glow with a faint blue light. After a moment, she called out, “Lassara, the map!”

“Don’t you boss me around,” Lassara muttered as she spread out the map. Felix’s attention was immediately drawn to it.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Eh? Oh, I just sketched it to fill the time. What of it?”



Felix was no cartographer, but even he could tell that whatever Lassara said, the map had been plotted with breathtaking precision. Even his military maps, the ones not available to the general public, were nowhere close to its level of quality. It was the sort of thing a savvy trader might give their right hand for. No doubt any of the major merchants who plied their wares all over the continent would have happily paid a fortune for it.

“The cow is here.” Silky pointed with careless indifference to a place far to the south of Duvedirica, where the map showed a lake. It was surrounded by deep forests, and there wasn’t a single town or village nearby.

“What is she doing in a place like that...?” Felix wondered aloud. Beside him, Lassara stared agog at the map.

“Even with the fastest horse alive, it would take three weeks to get from the capital to where Olivia Valedstorm is now. It doesn’t add up. It doesn’t make sense...”

As the two of them puzzled over it, Silky said happily, “I suppose given she’s so far away, you won’t be able to see her anytime soon.”

“It seems so...” Felix agreed. “In any case, the Azure Knights will make for Fernest. I’m sure we’ll meet sooner or later.” Seeing Silky puff up her cheeks, Felix smiled nervously.

Though it was still a little better than running after shadows, the sense that there was now hope for saving Ramza made Felix feel as though a weight had been lifted from his chest.

“I’ve been wondering, Silky,” he said. “Why are you talking like that?”

“Huh? Why, because I learned that you prefer women who are well-mannered.” Stroking her hair back, Silky gazed up at him through her lashes. Felix was lost—as far as he could recall, he had never said any such thing. He glanced over at the likely source of this information just in time to see Lassara turn away with a look of studied innocence on her face. Felix sighed quietly, then turned back to look directly at Silky.

“Silky, I like the real you better by far.”

“Huh? You do?”

“I do.”

Silky gaped, then little by little, her fingers began to curl into fists of rage. Scarce moments later, she bore down on Lassara with a face like thunder.

## Chapter Four: A Heroes' Ballad

I

At the summons of Lion von Elfriede, the Council of the Thirteen Stars convened once more. It was highly irregular for the council to meet for a second time in the same month, and so was the location—not the Seventh City, but the Third.

### **The Third City of Bay Grand, the United City-States of Sutherland**

When the lords and ladies of Sutherland gathered in Bay Grand heard from Luciana of the destruction of the Sixth City of Rue Shalla, all were lost for words. Though she was almost haggard with exhaustion, Lion had asked her to break the news in his stead—not because he wished to torment her further, but to make others recognize the arguably absurd story as reality, and press them to address the threat that bore down upon them.

When Luciana was finished, Lion picked up where she had left off with the latest information his Wolfpack had brought him, then a dead hush settled over the room.

“As if a horde of ghouls wasn’t ridiculous enough, you say those same ghouls flew imperial banners?” It was Leisenheimer of the Second City who broke the silence.

“Yes. That is why I asked you to convene here, rather than Crimson Liber. We are close enough here for you to ride out and see them.”

“Those spies of yours couldn’t have mistaken what they saw?”

Lion’s lips curled in a mirthless smile. “Weren’t you listening? If you doubt me, go and see for yourself.”

Leisenheimer’s eyes widened. “How dare you—!”

“Do calm yourself, Lord Leisenheimer,” interjected Lord Shaola of the First City. “Lord Lion, there is not a soul here who would accuse Lady Luciana of lying

after seeing her thus. In light of that, however, I will ask again if you can truthfully say that the banners the ghouls flew were those of the empire.”

“Well,” Lion said dryly, “if there is a nation other than the Asvelt Empire whose banners bear crossed swords on an azure field, I would reconsider, but I, at least, know of no such land.”

Shaola made a noise of acknowledgment that was almost a groan, then fell silent. Losing none of his air of disdain, Lion went on. “In your wisdom, I am sure you have all realized that we are meant to take the swift annihilation of Rue Shalla as an explicit ultimatum. In other words, this new emperor has, in his generosity, responded to our declaration of war by offering us the chance to reconsider.” He paused. “What will it be, then?” he asked, voice laden with sarcasm. “The path of submission, or of ruin?”

A heavy *thud* echoed through the room. Its source, as Lion had guessed, was Leisenheimer, who had pounded the table a second time.

“There’s no question! We fight!” he raged. But the only one to display any support for him was the lord of the Fifth City, and even his reaction could hardly have been called enthusiastic. Lion’s impression was that, given the Second City provided him with most of his mineral resources, he felt obligated to at least offer that much. The remaining lords and ladies all wore the same grim expression.

“Come on, now! Have you all lost your tongues?” Leisenheimer exclaimed. “Surely you haven’t all gotten cold feet, not now?” He cast his gaze around the long table, a threatening glint in his eyes.

“I voted for war because I thought our opponent would be the empire,” purred Lady Cassandra of the Twelfth City, hiding her mouth behind an extravagant purple fan. “I don’t recall consenting to do battle with ghouls.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Leisenheimer replied, not even looking at her. “No one was expecting anything from a pathetic excuse for a military who let the Royal Army crush them.”

Cassandra gritted her teeth, then turned to glare at Drake, who stood behind her. Drake, for his part, kept his eyes fixed somewhere in midair, as though the matter did not concern him.

*From what I hear, Drake consistently opposed the war with Fernest, but his queen, cheerfully stupid as ever, refused to listen to a word he said. Truly, my heart weeps. Even against the Death God's forces, with a veteran commander like Drake in charge, she could at least have avoided losing eight for every ten of her soldiers.* Lion regarded Drake with a faint flicker of sympathy.

Leisenheimer, frustration burning in his eyes, turned to glare at Lion, then, lowering his voice, said, "Don't tell me even *you've* lost your nerve, Lion."

"It's not as simple as that," Lion replied. "The ghouls have stopped for now, but when they march again, their next destination will be..." He rapped his knuckles on the long table as though knocking on a door. "This seems like a good time to make things clear. If we fail to stop the ghouls here, in the not-so-distant future Sutherland will find itself an imperial territory. That is not a prediction—it is a certainty." He cast his eyes around the long table as Leisenheimer had done earlier, gauging each of their reactions.

"How many of these so-called ghouls are there, anyway?" the lord of the Fourth City asked. In order to add to the air of chaos, Lion had purposely failed to disclose the total number of ghouls. The question from the lord of the Fourth City had come at the perfect time. He held up five fingers for them all to see.

"Five thousand..." the other lord said. "Not many, to have destroyed Rue Shalla." His incredulity that, ghouls or not, the Sixth City could have fallen to such a number was written plain on his face. The reactions from the others showed more of the same.

With a crooked smile, Lion shook his head. "You're missing a figure on the end."

"Not *fifty thousand*?! A host that great?!"

Amid the uproar that followed, Leisenheimer sprang to his feet.

"A mere fifty thousand!" he roared. "That is nothing to fear! With our three hundred thousand soldiers waiting to be mobilized, we far outnumber them!" He looked and sounded as though he were spurring on soldiers in battle, and a number of the others responded, adding their agreement.

*Oh, he's a sly one,* Lion thought. *But then, I suppose I can't expect better from*

*people who let a brief spell of peace lull them into indolence.*

An advantage in numbers meant an advantage in battle. While these were true words, there was something the others still failed to grasp—the foes they were facing were not soldiers, nor even human at all.

“It’s not people we’ll be fighting,” he told them flatly. “Put delicately, they *used* to be people. It’s safe to assume that neither the numbers game nor conventional strategy and tactics will help us here.”

“We can’t know that until we fight them!” Leisenheimer shot back furiously.

“Do you not understand I am saying that after we fight them, it will be too late?”

The air crackled as they stared each other down. But then a quiet hand went up, drawing all eyes in the room like a magnet. Following the account she had given at the start, Luciana had sat passively at Lion’s side like an ornament, but now she spoke.

“Those *things* don’t understand language. No matter how you cut them, they feel no pain. Some of my soldiers and civilians who were attacked even became *like* them. Soldiers who moments earlier had fought with all their might to protect me suddenly came at me, teeth bared and hungering after my flesh. Such...such creatures!” She was trembling as though she might have a fit. Lion softly laid a hand on her shoulder. He felt her stiffen for a moment, then the tension gradually drained out of her.

“Thank you, Lady Luciana, for your instructive words.” Lion took his hand from her shoulder, then rose slowly from his chair to address the room. “I think Lady Luciana has made it clear enough just how dire our situation is. The truly terrifying thing about the ghouls is that, while not all are afflicted, those they bite are in turn transformed into ghouls. In other words, the more of our soldiers they kill, the more their numbers will swell. I said they numbered fifty thousand before; now, there are likely far more. You don’t need me to tell you why, I hope?”

Leisenheimer folded his arms tightly, his mouth now set in a hard line. Satisfied that there would be no more unnecessary noise thanks to Luciana’s input, Lion tucked back the locks of hair that fell over his eyes and took a few

steps forward.

“That being said,” he continued, “it is no easy task to make someone accept that which they have not seen with their own eyes. General Julius, see to Lady Luciana.”

With a nod, Julius helped Luciana to her feet, then led her off to an adjoining room. Lion waited, feeling the suspicious eyes of the other lords and ladies on him, until he was sure the two were gone, then turned to the soldiers who stood at attention at the entrance.

“Bring it here,” he said.

“Yes, my lord!” The two soldiers together opened the door wide to reveal eight other soldiers, all of their faces stiff with terror. On their shoulders, they supported an iron cage covered with a black cloth. As they carried it carefully into the room, those around the table watched with bated breath. But only for a moment. As a dreadful noise emerged from beneath the cloth, they all began to speak at once.

“Lord Lion, don’t tell me...”

“It is exactly what you think it is, Lord Shaola.” Lion went over to the cage, seized a corner of the cloth, and tugged hard.

*“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”*

With a shriek that could have pierced stone, Cassandra tumbled ungracefully from her chair. While the others’ reactions to the ghoul were not as obvious as Cassandra’s, as the creature rattled at the bars with its mottled arms and let out a moan to chill the blood of the living, palpable fear swept over the room. Lion himself had unconsciously recoiled the first time he saw it.

“That’s a ghoul, all right...” Leisenheimer muttered, a faint sheen of sweat on his brow.

“Now, just how much of a threat does our friend here pose? Rather than me simply telling you, you can see for yourselves.”

Lion beckoned to one of the soldiers, and they handed him their sword. He slipped it between the bars, then slowly pushed it into the ghoul’s stomach. It

pierced through without much resistance, but this did not seem to trouble the ghoul. Instead, it began to beat its head against the bars, trying to tear at Lion with its teeth.

“This... This is what we have to fight...?!” There was a shrill note in the voice of the lord of the Thirteenth City that none could fail to hear.

“I can see now just how Rue Shalla could fall to a force such as this,” the lord of the Fifth City added. “How is the empire controlling these things, exactly?”

Lion still had no answer to this question. Even as they spoke, Heaven remained down in the bowels of the castle gleefully running tests on the ghouls, but no results seemed immediately forthcoming. He replied, with the qualification that he was only speculating, that he thought the creatures’ existence the work of a mage.

“A mage...” Lady Diana of the Eighth City regarded the ghoul with revulsion. “Yes, this sort of perversity is certainly their specialty.”

Naturally, all of them there understood the threat a mage posed. The air of foreboding that settled over the room was, therefore, inevitable.

“As I said, this is mere speculation, nothing more,” Lion said. “And right now, our attention is required elsewhere.”

“You mean the ghouls on our doorstep, I assume,” said the lord of the Ninth City. “But how do we even fight a creature that doesn’t blink when you stick a sword in its gut? I’d sooner go head-to-head with a dangerous beast than this thing.” The previous ruler of the Ninth City had had skill enough with a blade before succumbing to a sudden illness, but children did not necessarily inherit their parents’ talents. In Lion’s evaluation, the current lord was the very picture of mediocrity.

“A valid concern. For all they lack in intelligence, it’s true that the ghouls are nastier than any dangerous beast. However, they are not invincible—as I will now demonstrate for you.”

In one motion, Lion withdrew the sword from the ghoul’s stomach. A few of the others, seeing the turbid yellow fluid that oozed off the blade, covered their mouths with their handkerchiefs. The ghoul was still entirely unconcerned. It



went on moaning and rattling savagely at the bars.

“The way to incapacitate them—” Lion began, then drove his sword through the right side of the ghoul’s chest. The loud moaning filling the room cut off as though it had never been. He drew the blade back, and just like that, the ghoul collapsed. “—is to stab them in the right side of their chest.”

For a while, no one spoke. Their eyes were glued to the fallen ghoul. Diana was the first to break the silence.

“Rather ironic that their weak point is on the opposite side to the heart, isn’t it?” she said, shaking her head in a show of morbid amusement.

“Is that their only vulnerability?” Leisenheimer asked.

“Lopping their heads off works fairly well too,” Lion replied. “The trouble is, even without the head, the body keeps moving. I tried a range of methods, but if you want them to go down immediately, the right side of the chest is your best target.” He tapped the right side of his own chest with his finger.

“Now we know where they are weak,” Shaola said. “My next question for you, Lord Lion, is if we have any chance of victory against these inhuman creatures?”

“As to that, I have no idea,” Lion replied bluntly.

The lord of the First City looked pained. “We need you to know.”

What was Lion supposed to say to that? After much experimentation he had ascertained the ghouls’ weak point, yes, but he would not still be so cautious if that alone were enough to win. He would have given Shaola all the guarantees of victory he wanted, if such guarantees were possible, but they were facing a foe that dealt with neither words nor reason.

This was why he was rushing to complete the vessel—his secret weapon.

“Maybe we *should* submit to the empire...” This came from the lord of the Tenth City. He had not, it seemed, intended to say it out loud—when he realized that all eyes in the room were now fixed on him, he hastily added, “I-I mean, to be precise, that we *pretend* to submit to the empire. Once we see the ghouls have withdrawn, we sweep in to invade them. Just another idea...”

Lion didn’t let his exasperation show as he replied. “Schemes and intrigue are

all very well, but we can't hope that Darmés will be easily deceived. Rest assured that if we offer vassalage, he'll come back with some sort of demand—ordering that we disarm ourselves, for example. He'll likely also ask for hostages. He'll never call back his army of ghouls until he is sure beyond a doubt that all our will to fight is gone. We must set aside any starry-eyed fantasies.”

The lord of the Tenth City shrank back so far it was as though he wanted to dive under the table. In his place, Lord Nelson Freesia of the Eleventh City spoke up.

“Doesn't that leave us with no choice but vassalage, then? Lady Luciana has my most heartfelt sympathies for the loss of Rue Shalla, but this empire is not the empire we know. I don't love the idea of licking Darmés's boots, but I'd take it over being torn apart by ghouls any day.”

“Rolling over to show your belly without so much as a fight!” Leisenheimer burst out. “Tell me, when did you become the empire's dog?!”

Nelson huffed through his nose. “I commend your courage, that you still want to fight after what we saw, but I am simply looking at the reality of the situation. If we lose, we will have lost everything. Instead of letting your feelings govern you, I suggest you try and use your head.”

“You dare!” Leisenheimer seemed as though he might fly at Nelson then and there, but Lion quelled him with a look.

“Casting ballots will take time we do not have. If any other agrees with Lord Nelson that we ought to surrender to the empire, I ask you here and now to raise your hand.”

Nelson thrust his arm up with undisguised insolence. A few moments later, Cassandra, leaning on Drake's arm to climb back into her chair, also raised a trembling hand. There was another pause, then the lord of the Tenth City joined them, his face turned down. The last hand belonged to the lord of the Ninth City.

“*Four* of you...” Leisenheimer fumed. “Have you, the rulers of Sutherland, no *pride*?!”

“Can’t say I do,” Nelson replied without a hint of embarrassment. The others, afraid of further trouble, all looked elsewhere.

“Very well, the four of you who raised your hands shall henceforth be deemed enemies of Sutherland. Not a problem, I trust?” Lion said matter-of-factly. Nelson’s smirk disappeared.

“Wha—?!” he exclaimed, gaping. “How did it come to that all of a sudden? Besides, *you* have no right to decide any such thing!”

“A majority support fighting the empire. I’m not about to invoke the Charter of the Thirteen now, but you *did* choose vassalage under the empire. One naturally assumes that you were ready to face the consequences.”

“Don’t give me that! My choice to accept vassalage to the empire is a highly political one, and nothing else. Even if we are reduced entirely to a vassal state, so long as Sutherland endures, sooner or later an opportunity will arise. Like I said, this is a *highly political decision*.”

“How incredibly naive you are. So, what? You won’t join the fight against the empire, but you don’t want to leave Sutherland either—is that it?”

“That’s right.”

A *bang* echoed through the room as a powerful blow struck the long table.

“You’d best start taking me seriously,” Lion said softly. There was an intake of breath from the others. Only Julius’s face remained impassive as he observed his lord’s transformation from his place behind his chair.

Lion ran a careless hand through his golden hair, then went on. “The fate of Sutherland is riding on this battle. My patience for your prattle, you self-enamored fools immediately rushing to save your own skins, will only stretch so far.”

“C-Come now, Lord Lion—”

“I’ve heard enough.” Lion clicked his fingers, and Julius’s melodious voice rang out.

“Guards!”

The door to the adjoining room flew open, and soldiers in full armor began to

pour forth. Now, while the other lords and ladies sat stunned by the sudden development, it was Lion who called out. His voice then, as Julius would later describe it, cut like a naked blade.

“Arrest the lords of the Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Cities immediately!”

The guards moved swiftly. Lion was satisfied to see that before the four could so much as rise from their chairs, the guards had them in custody. The only one who had given him pause was Drake, but though his fingers reached the hilt of his sword, he immediately raised his hands to show he did not mean to resist.

“You will not lay your common soldier’s hands on my noble skin! Aurion Gravis Drake! *Do* something about this!”

“Nothing I can do.”

“*Drake!*”

“Lord Shaola!” Nelson called. “Please, put a stop to this madness of Lord Lion’s!”

In contrast to the lack of resistance from the lords of the Ninth and Tenth Cities, Cassandra and Nelson went on desperately calling for aid even as their faces were pressed into the table.

At Nelson’s words, Shaola turned to Lion with a tortured look. “Isn’t this going a little far?”

“This is an urgent situation—an infant child could see that. I will not show mercy to fools who turn a blind eye to reality.”

“Hmmm...” Shaola considered. “I suppose it must be done...”

“Lord Shaola?! You *condone* this outrage?!”

As though to avoid Nelson’s frantic pleading, Shaola looked down at the table and began to fiddle with his beard.

Lion looked around the table again. “If any of you take issue with how I’ve dealt with this, speak up now. I don’t want the bother of people whining at me later.”

Leisenheimer, his arms tightly folded, spoke up at once. “It was a high-handed way of doing it, but I’m not complaining. I’ve no use for a pack of cowards who want to bend the knee to the empire.”

“That being said,” a voice broke in lightly, “after observing that brilliant performance, one wonders if you had already anticipated this turn of events, Lord Lion.”

Lion turned, his eyes meeting those of Diana, who rested her elbows on the table with her chin in her hands. The fact was, he *had* anticipated all of it, and so he answered plainly.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“In my opinion, you made just the right decision.” As Diana spoke, she looked down the table to where Cassandra was held bent double against the table, the chill in her eyes so bitter she looked like a different person.

“Lord Lion. We will be losing eighty thousand soldiers by arresting those four. How, may I ask, do you plan on making up for that?”

He had spoken not a word up until then, but now Cassael, lord of the Seventh City, fixed his gaze on Lion. Rather than showing fear over the major reduction in their military strength, his eyes were ever-watchful, as though probing for something. Lion would have liked to spit in his face.

He had been sure beyond a doubt that Cassael would never submit to the empire, but even now, Lion couldn’t help but think how much easier this would be if he *had* voted for submission.

“Yes, we will lose eighty thousand soldiers, but here, I have readied a weapon to match if not surpass that loss. Let that be answer enough for now.” Even without turning around, Lion knew the look of shock that would be on Julius’s face. Feeling the penetrating stares of the other lords and ladies on him, he observed the mysterious glint that lit up Cassael’s eyes.

“My, my...” the lord of the Seventh City murmured. “A weapon worth more than eighty thousand soldiers, you say. I know *you*, Lord Lion, are not a man to throw around empty words. Truly, this is most intriguing.”

“I imagine it is, *especially* to you, Lord Cassael,” Lion replied acidly with a mirthless smile. Cassael kept silent, but a cunning smirk slid momentarily across his face. That was the moment Lion knew with renewed conviction that he hated the man.

“Whatever could this weapon be, I wonder?” Diana mused, looking at him with eyes alight with interest.

Lion registered Julius giving orders for the four they had restrained to be placed under house arrest as he spread his hands in mock apology. “The truth is, it still isn’t finished,” he admitted.

A mix of disbelief and unease filled the eyes of the others. Diana, meanwhile, pressed her index finger to the corner of her mouth and said lightly, “Will it be ready before the ghouls resume their march, pray tell?”

“I am hastening its completion to see that it is.”

Of course, if the ghouls started moving again that very moment, it would *not* be ready in time. But Lion did not think he needed to worry about that. The fact that even after they had openly refused vassalage, Darmés had tacitly presented them with the choice a second time, suggested that he wanted Sutherland’s unconditional surrender. If not, he would not have pointedly left his army of ghouls in Rue Shalla to encourage them to reconsider. The other side of this was that he would not think it mattered if he gave them more time.

*I’m sure I can only push it so far, of course. But when he gave me time, he made a fatal mistake.* Lion felt his eagerness for battle growing.

Diana smiled at him. “Well, then, I look forward to the finished product. And,” she added significantly, “what is to come.”

Lion only raised his eyebrows a fraction, then went on to describe to them his military policies as their supreme commander going forward. “That is all,” he concluded. “Our basic objective is unchanged. Return to your lands and mobilize your armies.”

Not long after, the council concluded. The lords and ladies emptied from the room, each of their faces reflecting their different thoughts. Leisenheimer stopped abruptly in front of Lion, fixing him with a sharp glare.

*Such an easy man to read*, Lion thought wryly. At the same time, he arranged his face into a polite expression and said, “Yes?”

“The blow of losing eighty thousand soldiers is beyond words. Will this so-called weapon of yours *really* be up to the task of filling that gap?”

“Can it be that even *you* fear what will happen without my weapon, Lord Leisenheimer?”

“Nonsense. With this weapon or without, *I* will not back down.” For a few moments, they held one another’s gaze. It was Leisenheimer who looked away first, then he left the room without another word.

Julius waited until all the other lords and ladies were gone before he spoke up. “That was not when I expected you to reveal it.”

“The way things were going, if I hadn’t revealed *something*, more might have voted to surrender. Are you displeased?”

“I think it was a wise move.” Julius smiled.

“If we can show our strength against the ghouls as anticipated, it will enable us to drive a powerful wedge between the other cities.”

Julius nodded in strong agreement, then added, “Incidentally, though, it appeared to me that Lady Diana is aware of our true intentions.”

“You thought so too?”

“I did, my lord.”

“Lady Diana isn’t like *Her Majesty*, after all. She has more intelligence than any one person needs. That she went out of her way to drop a hint then during the council, well, that can’t mean anything else. We can make good use of a woman like that. If she joins me of her own volition, I’ll make sure she is very well taken care of.”

He pictured Diana’s smile, so full of meaning, but a moment later, the image disappeared off into oblivion as Cassael’s repellent face pushed its way into his thoughts.

“Did the Bat look like he realized?”

“I expect we will have an easier time fighting the ghouls than deciphering the inner thoughts of that gentleman. However...” Julius paused. “I think it better to proceed on the assumption he knows.”

“Agreed. Can’t be too careful with that one, after all.”

Julius regarded him. “Lord Lion, you seem to be getting excited.”

Lion responded by flashing him a steely grin. The battle between the empire’s ghouls and Sutherland was nigh...

## II

### **The Imperial Army, Rosenmarie’s Camp**

Rosenmarie looked up at her finished “stage” and gave an approving nod. “For a thing you built in a day, this is fine work.”

Oscar, who also looked up at the construction, now turned to Rosenmarie with a sour expression. “My lady, just what is your purpose in building a thing like this right in front of Kier Fortress?”

“That’s a surprise,” she replied. “Really, though, who’d have thought the Royal Army were such cowards without Death God Olivia around? Even animals don’t hold back when going after tasty prey that wanders across their path.”

“The Royal Army are not animals, my lady. They can hardly help but suspect a trap when we’ve been so brazen. For what it’s worth, if I were one of the enemy’s commanders, I would take care to avoid any rash action—especially if my objective were to keep us pinned down here.”

“Even then, if Death God Olivia were here, *she* wouldn’t be watching quietly. She’s that sort of woman.” With a smirk, Rosenmarie scrambled nimbly up the ladder beside them.

Not even Oscar, her chief of staff, was privy to exactly what it was that Rosenmarie planned on doing next. Perhaps the only ones who knew were the soldiers who followed her up the ladder with large wooden boxes strapped to their backs. Naturally, Oscar had questioned her about it at every available opportunity. But her answer was always the same—that it was a “surprise.” So



long as Rosenmarie wouldn't talk, Oscar had no choice but to guess. He racked his brains, and yet in the end he had still not arrived at an answer.

*With even our own side in this state of chaos, the Royal Army must be at their wits' end. Perhaps Colonel Guyel would have worked it out, after he served under Lady Rosenmarie for all those years. Not that there's any way to ask him now...*

Oscar sighed heavily as he grasped a rung of the ladder to go and see what Rosenmarie was up to.

Rosenmarie was in high spirits as she mounted the stage. With the same momentum, she went to stand front and center, planting her hands on her hips as she scowled imperiously down at the Royal Army below.

*"A glorious view."*

Even at this distance, the confusion of the Royal Army troops deployed on the front line was palpable. In contrast, the Winged Crusaders showed no such uncertainty. What her bird's-eye view from atop the stage had revealed to Rosenmarie was that the Winged Crusaders were preparing to retreat. As long as one was on the ground, it probably only looked like they were arranging their formations.

*That implies they haven't told the Royal Army about their plans. That's odd...*

Rosenmarie had no way of knowing the nature of the alliance between the Kingdom of Fernest and the Holy Land of Mekia. There was no doubt that it was an alliance purely of convenience, but even so, Rosenmarie couldn't make sense of why Mekia would decide to retreat before it was clear which way the battle would go.

*Oh well. If you want to retreat, be my guest. You still owe us for Fort Astora. Once I'm done wiping the Royal Army off the map, we'll have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves.* Her gaze drifted naturally to the Royal Army's forces spread out at the very back. Like the Winged Crusaders, there was no sign of concern there either. *There you are, Invincible General. So this little game isn't enough to shake you. Nothing less from the man who outplayed Gladden.*

The rematch with Olivia that she had been holding out for might have been delayed, but Rosenmarie had by no means entirely lost interest in the battle. Her crimson eyes roved around for the aged hero she had yet to regard.

“Lady Rosenmarie!” A Crimson Knight in Royal Army armor came up to her, sounding cheerful. “We’re ready at your command.”

The preparations, it seemed, were complete. Rosenmarie took the deep crimson cloak presented to her and donned it with a flourish.

“Then let’s begin, shall we?” Rosenmarie sang, announcing the opening of the show.

### **The First Allied Legion, the Front Line**

The standoff between the Royal Army and the imperial army continued, concentrated around the rapidly constructed watchtower, when the sudden sound of battle drums emanating from the structure drew the Royal Army’s attention afresh. After a time, the drumming died away and a brass instrument started up with a sweet melody in its place. The melody, which might have been pleasing to the ear in peacetime, sounded nothing but eerie on that field ravaged by pure violence.



“First they build that strange watchtower, now this? These imperials holed up in Kier Fortress go from one bizarre ploy to another.” The platoon captain, who led a unit of light infantry, glared unremittingly up at the watchtower, perhaps to conceal the unease that had taken root in his heart.

### **The First Allied Legion, Neinhardt’s Camp**

Seeing the soldiers suddenly begin to clamor, Neinhardt’s aide Captain Katerina Reinas barked, “What’s going on?!”

A nearby platoon captain with a spyglass in one hand called over to her. “Look over there, ser.”

Katerina, her severe expression unchanged, took her spyglass from the holster at her hip. Soon after, she went to Neinhardt’s side, her face now showing something between panic and fury as she pointed and, repeating what the platoon captain had said to her, said, “Look over there, ser.”

Neinhardt obediently pointed his spyglass at the watchtower. His brow knit as he took in the scene.

“Are they...” he said slowly, “putting on a *play*?”

Soldiers clad in what was obviously Royal Army armor raised their swords theatrically, while the Crimson Knights responded by putting up swords of their own. As both sides let out battle cries, a high-hearted tune began to play, and the stage descended into battle.

“General.” Katerina seethed in barely contained rage even with that one short word. Only an idiot, Neinhardt was convinced, could now mistake what was happening atop the structure for anything other than theater.

“So it wasn’t a watchtower, but a stage,” he observed. “They’re really laying the mockery on thick.”

The play went on even as he and Katerina spoke. The soldiers dressed up as the Royal Army fell clattering to the floor as they were routed by the Crimson Knights. The Crimson Knights in turn planted their boots on the fallen, then raised their spears and roared in triumph. Then, the music became sinister as a soldier with silver hair and black armor entered from stage right.

“Is that...?!”

“It’s obvious who that’s supposed to be.”

The silver-haired soldier walked forward, drawing her sword before cutting down the Crimson Knights who came at her one after another. Those who remained edged backward.

“Hark, wicked Death God! Your villainy ends here!” A woman’s gallant cry boomed out across the stage. At once, the musicians struck up a heroic tune as, with a dashing sweep of her crimson cloak, a red-haired soldier appeared from stage left.

“You don’t see red hair like that every day...” said Neinhardt. “With that appearance, she has to be Rosenmarie von Berlietta of the empire’s Three Generals.”

Rosenmarie strode to the center of the stage and raised her sword skyward. Then, she and the silver-haired soldier began to act out a duel. The clash of steel rang out as the pair pulled out an array of acrobatic tricks worthy of street performers. The climax seemed near at hand as the music swelled to a fever pitch. At the last, Rosenmarie’s blade raked the silver-haired soldier from shoulder to hip, and, pretending to writhe in agony, the soldier fell where she stood. Rosenmarie returned to the center of the stage and raised her sword in triumph.

“I have slain the Death God!” she cried. The Crimson and Helios Knights who were gathered around the stage broke out in thunderous applause, and so the play came to an end.

### **The First Allied Legion, Hermann’s Camp**

As Hermann watched a unit disregard orders and charge at the enemy, his first thought even before it occurred to him to be angry was, *No surprises there*. A mere charade though it might have been, the imperial army had openly ridiculed Olivia, and while she was now the supreme commander of the Eighth Legion, she had originally served in the Seventh Legion. That it had been too much for the soldiers to bear was therefore a sentiment Hermann sympathized with. However, sympathy was one thing—disregard of orders was another.

“Call back the fools who charged off, right now.”

“Yes, ser!” His aide, Louis, immediately passed along the order. Hermann looked on, running a careful hand over the lonely strands that were what remained of his hair these days.

*If the enemy wanted to provoke us into attacking without thinking, there were plenty of ways to do it without resorting to such a complex contraption. What’s their commander plotting, I wonder...?*

Unfortunately, in the end, Hermann’s orders had no effect. After the first unit charged, others followed with no end in sight—indeed, not only Hermann’s own unit, but Neinhardt’s and Lambert’s were also swept up in the current. Here, Hermann understood for the first time that he had fundamentally underestimated what Olivia meant.

*To think she held such sway... he marveled. I guess that’s what you’d call a hero.*

It was not what the Royal Army command had intended, but the battle was underway once more.

### **The Imperial Army, Rosenmarie’s Camp**

Rosenmarie dropped into the chair that someone had placed in the middle of the stage. In one fluid motion, she placed an elbow on one armrest, threw a leg over the other, then rested her cheek on her fist. As she gazed lazily out at the Royal Army, her lips curled like a crescent moon.

“You know, I think my debut performance was a hit.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, my lady?”

“Yes, I am. Aren’t you, Oscar?”

“I still can’t get past the part where I have no idea what the play was *for*.”

Oscar had watched the whole thing from off to stage left. The point of the play—perhaps the first in history to be put on in the midst of battle—had been to insult Rosenmarie’s bitter enemy Olivia. That much was clear. But Oscar couldn’t see what more there was to it, and so felt nothing but bemusement.

Rosenmarie, inscrutable, was still smiling. “Do you always need your

entertainment to be *for* something?”

“Entertainment...?!” At this, Oscar was unable to keep his voice calm. “Are you telling me, my lady, that you did all of this to *entertain* yourself?!”

“What’re you getting worked up for *now*? I’ve been saying from the start that I wanted to have fun.”

Oscar did remember Rosenmarie declaring as much at the war council. But he had assumed she was simply being metaphorical. No one would have thought she really meant it. *Except, you shouldn’t be so sure of that*, Oscar reminded himself. He recalled the Crimson Knights who had taken the stage alongside her, and the relish they had seemed to take in playing their roles. In any case, his questions around all of Rosenmarie’s behavior now had answers.

Oscar came around to face Rosenmarie, then knelt.

“Now that the play is over, the players ought to leave the stage,” he said.

Rosenmarie laughed. “That’s practically witty, coming from you, Oscar. But no.”

“Why, my lady?”

“Why? Well, because the real show is about to begin.”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘real show,’ but we have no escape route here.” Oscar knew this without needing to check. Battle cries rose up to them as a thunderous rumble, telling him that the two armies had clashed. The air grew hot with the fever of battle, and moments later, a vast cloud of arrows rose up, heading for the stage.

“My lady!”

As one, the Crimson Knights raised their shields to protect Rosenmarie, who still lounged in her chair. But they couldn’t deflect every arrow. And just so, a single arrow weaved its way through a gap between the shields, straight at Rosenmarie. None of the Crimson Knights noticed. Oscar was the only one who caught it.

*There’s no time to tell them!*

Everyone, Oscar himself included, agreed that he was a *thinking* man. He

didn't have a shield to repel an arrow, nor did he have the skill to knock one out of the air with a sword like a skilled warrior might. Oscar did the only thing he could. Without hesitation, he threw himself in the arrow's path—

“My...my lady?”

“Are you *stupid*? You are my chief of staff; you do not casually toss your life away for one piddling arrow.”

Thrown onto his backside, Oscar stared in stunned amazement at Rosenmarie, who now held the arrow clenched in her fist.

“I still need you up and doing your job, got it? Now hurry up and get off the stage.”

“O-Of course...”

“One of you lot go fetch my bow.” Rosenmarie rose unhurriedly from her chair, then held out an arm. At once, one of the Crimson Knights came forward with a longbow stained a deep red. When they then attempted to hand her arrows, however, Rosenmarie only said coldly, “I don't need those.”

“Now we offer our finite lives to be consumed in the fires of battle—*now* is the real show. I'm going to savor every moment of it.”

Shifting only slightly, Rosenmarie avoided the incoming arrows, then somehow she caught one from the air and, in the same motion, knocked it to her own bowstring.

“You, first.” The arrow flew from the red longbow, cloaking itself in scarlet as it cleanly took off the head of a Royal Army soldier. The nearby soldiers froze in shock.

Even exposed to innumerable arrows, Rosenmarie bared her teeth in fearless glee, and where she stood, Oscar found himself thinking he saw a vision of Floressia, the mythical goddess of battle.

### III

#### The First Allied Legion, Main Command



As Neinhardt moved up to the front lines, Senior General Paul von Baltza took his place in the rear guard. He and Field Marshal Cornelius vim Gruening, who held command over the whole First Allied Legion, were watching the progress of the battle when a runner arrived with the news: the Winged Crusaders had begun to retreat.

“I wonder why now...”

Since the imperial army had gone on the offensive, the Royal Army had suffered its share of losses, including that of Osmund. He could understand making the decision to cut and run when placed at a disadvantage, but this did nothing to hinder them in carrying out their initial objective. Paul was left scratching his head.

“I’ve said it before, but this alliance was only ever one of convenience, built on naught more than sand. I cannot say what prompted it, but they have decided there is no longer anything to be gained for their side. Thus, they withdraw.” Cornelius was unflappable, his tone matter-of-fact. Paul suspected that for the Holy Land of Mekia, the mutual destruction of Fernest and the empire was the most desirable outcome. However, given his position and having entered into an alliance with them, he had avoided saying so openly.

He stroked his cheek, then said, “Is it possible they acquired some information we don’t know about? Say, for example—” Paul forcibly swallowed back the words that rose to his lips. If the Winged Crusaders had heard before them that the Eighth Legion had fallen, they might well give up and leave.

“Well, it is said that Mekia’s intelligence gathering surpasses that of the empire. It’s very possible they know something we do not. But it will not do to dwell on it. We damned ourselves when we unfairly laid too heavy a burden on a child’s shoulders. Now all we can do is have faith in her to the end, and wait for word.”

“I suppose so...” Paul realized with a sense of self-derision that Cornelius was saying what he himself had once told Otto. “But that doesn’t change that it’s a violation of military orders. Should we go after them and demand an explanation?”

“Better not. Sowing further conflict will do us no good.”

“Well, if *you* say so, Lord Marshal.” With this, Paul put the Winged Crusaders out of his mind and turned his gaze on the stage in the distance. “The imperial army has worked it out, haven’t they? That our siege of Kier Fortress was only a feint, I mean.”

First had come the series of small-scale night raids, then the construction of the stage right on Kier Fortress’s doorstep. As soon as he heard about the pantomime performance the imperials had put on, Paul had been fully convinced.

“They went with a choice we did not predict.”

“Just so.”

The imperial army had opted neither for hunkering down in Kier Fortress, nor calling for reinforcements, but rather a third option—totally absurd though it was, they had decided to turn the battle into a game. Such a game would account for their otherwise seemingly pointless actions. A game had no point. The only requirement was that the players had fun.

“So this is Rosenmarie von Berlietta...” he said. “Seems she’s even more of an unruly character than I’d heard.”

“I noticed it back when we clashed with the Crimson Knights on the northern front. But really, in the face of this sort of foolery, all you can do is laugh.”

“Still, it does explain one thing,” Cornelius mused.

“And that is?”

“Originally, it was Gladden von Hildesheimer who held Kier Fortress. When I faced him on the central front, he held on to safe and sure tactics well past the point of sense.”

Paul understood what Cornelius was getting at. Rosenmarie and Gladden, from what he had heard of the man, took entirely opposite approaches to waging war. The fighting following her shift to the offensive had been anything but safe and sure—one didn’t see anything of Gladden’s hand in it, at any rate.

“True, that is odd. Do you think something happened to him?”

“Maybe it did, maybe it didn’t. Either way, if reinforcements are not coming

from the Azure Knights, that works in our favor. Now we just have to ensure we don't rise to any more of this naughty child's taunts."

"Major General Neinhardt and Lieutenant General Hermann are bad enough, but I could hardly believe it when even *Lambert* couldn't keep his troops in line."

"Even if it was only a play, it still made a mockery of her. We should not be too quick to blame the soldiers. Indeed, we might well have seen a blow to morale if they had been forced to stay back."

"And yet it looks like the units who charged in are getting their heads handed to them...?"

"Those are three first-rate commanders," Cornelius said. "They will find a way to pull through."

"I hope so..." Paul muttered.

Suddenly, sensing some unidentifiable disturbance, he looked up at the sky.

"You felt it too, Paul?" Cornelius asked.

"I did." All that met his eyes was the gray expanse of the sky. At any other time, he would not have given it a second glance. But Cornelius leaped straight into action.

"Have our main force spread out in two flanks. Assemble the best archers in each unit and place them at the center. Add to that lookouts to be deployed in all directions over a wide area. I want them on their guard and on high alert for enemy movements."

It was obvious that Cornelius's orders were not born out of concern about the imperial army. Paul understood. Cornelius felt the same formless unease that was lodged within his own chest.

From above the battlefield, where death was part of the normal state of things, the death-eater birds had vanished. No two ways about it—something abnormal was afoot.

### **The First Allied Legion, Travis's Unit**

Cornelius, upon learning that the lookouts to the east had ceased to make

their regular reports, moved to identify the cause. The elite unit to whom he assigned this task was under the command of Lieutenant General Travis Meyer. Travis was the head of the House of Meyer, one of the families who made up the Six Flowers, Fernest's most preeminent warrior houses.

*Why our unit...?* Travis's aide, Colonel Diane, was in a cloud of confusion. That the lookouts had stopped making contact was far too flimsy a reason to justify mobilizing Travis's elite unit of six thousand swordsmen. This had left her harboring misgivings over the judgment of a *hero*—the so-called Invincible General—though she had even more misgivings about the sense of tension that hung in the air around Travis. It was unlike anything she had seen before. Even in the battle on the Central Front, where the fate of Fernest had hung in the balance, he had never been like this.

"Something on my face?"

"Oh, no," Diane stammered. "It's just, I've never seen you look so grim..."

"It makes one grim, seeing the looks the lord marshal and Lord Paul had on their faces."

"Their faces..." Diane faltered, then blurted out what was on her mind. "I know it's not my place, ser, but surely this could have been handled well enough by a single platoon."

Travis's mouth softened into a slight smile. "Just what makes the lord marshal the Invincible General..." It was an unexpected remark. He wasn't quite talking to himself, nor was it exactly a question.

Though confused, Diane hazarded an answer. "I think it's because he's never once lost a battle."

This was even written in history textbooks; the name of Cornelius, the Invincible General, made the rounds not only of the Kingdom of Fernest, but the entire continent. He was a genuine living legend. But why Travis had brought it up now, Diane couldn't guess.

Travis gave a small shake of his head. "That's true, but it's not the heart of the matter. The lord marshal crafts his strategies by always knowing what his opponent will do before they do it. *That* is what makes him the Invincible

General.”

“I’m sorry, ser,” Diane said hesitantly, “but I don’t really follow what you’re saying. Is that connected somehow to our unit going out by ourselves?”

Travis was silent for a moment, then without a trace of self-consciousness, said, “I don’t know myself.” He then set about stroking his horse’s back. Diane was sure that if she’d had a mirror, she would have seen a face full of frustration staring back at her. As it happened, Travis’s next words confirmed this.

“Don’t make that face. If I understood how Marshal Cornelius thinks, I’d be an invincible general too.”

“That’s quite the leap of logic, ser.”

“Let me tell you something. Any battle is always bedeviled with uncertainties. It might be as you say, and one platoon would be more than enough to deal with this. But the lord marshal commanded *our* unit to go—and Lord Paul agreed with him. That alone, as I see it, is cause enough to be wary. Now can you accept it?”

“I accepted it from the start, ser,” Diane replied with an air of detachment. She might have had her misgivings, but she had never meant to argue with orders. In the military, one’s only job was to reliably carry out orders from superior officers.

“I see,” Travis said, smiling again.

Before long, Travis’s unit sighted a forest that spread out before them. A blanket of mist was creeping across the land.

“This fog’s growing mighty thick.” By the time they emerged from the forest, they were swathed in a deep shroud that obscured their vision. Travis gave the order to greatly slow the pace of their march—a precaution against being caught off guard by an unexpected engagement. But not ten minutes had passed when he was struck by a sense he could not put a name to.

*What in the hell is this feeling?* It was something different from the way his skin prickled when he faced a powerful foe. If he were to compare it to

something, the horrible sensation felt as though slime had oozed down upon him from head to toe. He realized that his hands, gripping his reins, were slick with sweat.

“General? Are you all right?”

That was the Diane he knew. He made sure to keep an appearance of calm on the surface, but she had picked up straightaway that something was off with him.

“Get the word out to be on your guard, and hurry.”

“Understood.” Diane didn’t ask questions; she immediately executed the order. But they were already out of time. Before the orders could travel to the soldiers up ahead, one voice, then another, called out in terror. Not long after, Travis heard a moan so awful that it made the horses quail.

“Agh!”

“Don’t! Don’t come any closer!”

The bellows and screams broke over Travis like a turbid river, making him forget for a moment that those under his command were all elite soldiers.

“Ghouls...” Diane whispered as though paralyzed by fear. It was the most concise name that could be given to the enemy. Redolent with the foul stench of decay, they attacked as a horde. They appeared human in shape and size, yet human they were surely not. Even as they were rent by swords and gouged by spears, they raised no cries, instead biting, tearing, *devouring* the soldiers’ flesh. The sight ruthlessly drove home their monstrous nature.

Travis’s unit was undeniably elite, but none of them had expected to be fighting *ghouls*.

“We should retreat,” said Diane, her voice trembling. Already, half of the unit had lost all semblance of military order. The remaining half would soon be rendered nonfunctional too. With no way to swiftly quell the chaotic spread of the carnage, Diane’s solution was the optimal one.

Travis was just about to open his mouth to declare their retreat, when an impossible sight jumped out at him—a hulking brute of a ghoul brandishing a

blue banner emblazoned with a pair of crossed swords. There could be no doubt—it was the banner of the Asvelt Empire.

“Why are ghouls flying the empire’s colors?!” Diane exclaimed, giving words to Travis’s thoughts. This in fact brought him back to earth, allowing him to observe the ghoul’s behavior.

“They’re not that fast! Push the long spears to the front! Keep them at a distance while blocking their attack and fall back!” Travis’s booming voice succeeded, if only marginally, in bringing his troops out of their confusion and back to their senses. But he knew it would not last. “Give me that.” Travis reached over to one of his personal guards, who had formed up tightly around him, and snatched the long spear from his grasp.

“Please, wait!!!” Diane cried.

“I don’t have time to argue with you, Diane,” he replied, then turned to the guards. “It might not be much, but we’ll have to buy the troops time to retreat!”

“Yes, ser!” they answered as one. And so Travis and his personal guard plunged into the maelstrom of madness. The hordes of ghouls closed in with lumbering steps, their voices seeming to pull all who heard them toward hell itself.

Travis spat hard on his hand that gripped the long spear. “Like hell am I taking this from a bunch of rotting ghouls!”

Together with this soul-stirring roar, his spear shot out lightning fast in a wild thrust—passed down through the generations, this piece of spearcraft was an art taught only to the heir to the House of Meyer.

## IV

### **The Cloudy Chamber in La Chaim Palace, Elsphere, Capital of the Holy Land of Mekia**

Several days after the return of the Winged Crusaders who had taken part in the Twin Lions at Dawn operation, Sofitia learned that the villages scattered around Mekia’s eastern border had been wiped out by the undead. It was with

a rare grim look on her face that she summoned to the Cloudy Chamber the mages Lara, Johann, and Amelia, along with the Twelve Angels and the senior hundred-wings.

*How will the seraph respond to this, I wonder...?* Johann stood straight as a rod and motionless in the center of the front row, his eyes fixed on the richly ornamented throne. Amelia was on his left, just as still and erect. For her success in being the only one to slay an enemy commander in the course of the Twin Lions at Dawn operation, she was soon to be promoted to senior thousand-wing.

“The holy seraph!” The guardian’s announcement of the seraph’s arrival rang out. All of them moved as one to greet their liege with homage. Sofitia entered, wearing a scarlet gown that made her appear to be engulfed in flames. Her steps clacked coldly on the stairs of white glass as she ascended them.

“My Seraph.” A deferential attendant held out her silver staff adorned with rings. Sofitia took it, then gracefully lowered herself onto the throne. Her wisteria-colored eyes that seemed to see to the heart of everything now turned to the right of the front row, where stood Zephyr, his false eye gleaming mysteriously.

“Let us not waste time. Please tell me how the evacuation is progressing.”

“My Seraph,” Zephyr answered. “Evacuation orders have been issued to the towns and villages that fall in the path of the undead. At present, four-fifths of the residents have evacuated. I have also stationed owls in the other towns and villages, where they will make ready to evacuate immediately at the first sign of danger.”

“Thank you. I wish for you to continue to guide the evacuation.”

“Very well, My Seraph.” Zephyr lowered his head deeply. Sofitia’s gaze moved on to where Lara stood beside a map on a stand.

Lara took a step forward and saluted, then turned to the guardians and jabbed with the baton in her hand at a black point on the map.

“According to the latest intelligence from the owls, the army of the undead is continuing its march westward. Their progress is slow, but if they stay on that



course—” She slid the stick to the left, coming to an abrupt stop at the point marked *Holy City of Elsphere*. “—in approximately ten days, more than ten thousand walking dead will overrun the holy city.”

The entirety of the Winged Crusaders knew about the dead, but only a limited few—Johann, Amelia, and the Twelve Angels—had a grasp on the most recent developments. As she had expected, murmuring broke out among the senior hundred-wings. Lara rapped her baton on the map.

“Get a hold of yourselves!” she barked, and like a receding wave, the muttering died away. When Lara was satisfied of this, she went on forcefully. “Of course, we cannot allow these impure creatures to take so much as a single step into the holy city. I mean to meet them with the entirety of our forces.”

Amelia spoke up at once. “If we send all our forces, who will defend the city? And, by extension, the seraph?”

La Chaim Palace was half a fortress and surrounded by three strong walls, but these would not matter if there were not enough guardians to defend it.

The response to Amelia’s question came from none other than Sofitia herself.

“Of course, you may assume that the bare minimum of a garrison will remain behind. And besides that, on this occasion I intend to ride into battle myself.”

The tumult of voices from the senior hundred-wings far outdid their earlier reactions.

“My Seraph?! Go to *battle*?!” burst out a grizzled old senior hundred-wing with white hair pulled tightly back, leaning forward. “That absolutely must not happen! I beg you, be prudent!” The others joined in with their own earnest remonstrations for Sofitia.

Meanwhile, Amelia had lost her usual appearance of impassivity. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung agape in a naked display of shock. Johann himself was only hearing about Sofitia’s intentions for the first time now, but he knew that her core philosophy was ultimately to rely on force of arms. As such, rather than being a surprise, it felt strangely right to him.

*All the same, as her subjects, it’s not an easy thing to go along with...* Johann looked at Lara. Usually, she would have been the first to protest, so it was

powerfully disorienting to see that on this occasion, she had her mouth pressed tightly shut.

Sofitia was extraordinarily gifted, even among all the other seraphs of history. It was as though she had been born to reign over the world. If she were to die, Mekia would inevitably descend into unprecedented chaos. Johann, therefore, couldn't understand Lara's attitude. But then, in a flash, it came to him.

*Ah, you already knew, didn't you?* Going over it again in his mind, it made complete sense. Sofitia would have known, sure as day follows night, that Lara would adamantly oppose her intentions. Thus, she had conveyed them in advance. *Though by the looks of it, she isn't happy about it...*

The *clink* of the rings of Sofitia's staff rang out through the chamber. As one, her subjects fell silent.

"This time, we are fighting neither man nor beast, but an enemy wholly unknown to us. Some days past I journeyed to the Artemiana Cathedral to find out the true nature of this dark art. I regret to say, however, that I did not arrive at the answers I sought. It therefore behooves me to assess our foe with my own eyes. It is my duty as seraph of the Holy Land of Mekia."

Her eyes were beautiful, free of all impurity, and Johann could not contain his admiration at the warrior's spirit he saw burning in them.

*Truly our ruler is to be praised. My Seraph, I shall do everything in my power for you as you strike out on this path to supremacy through might.*

No one had any further remonstrations for Sofitia after hearing her conviction. They knelt, faces full of determination to protect her with every fiber of their beings.

"Senior Thousand-Wing Johann."

"My Seraph!"

"You will be the linchpin of the holy city's defense."

"This is a great duty, and one I am honored to accept." Johann had assumed, given how things were going, that the task of protecting the city would naturally fall to him. This was what allowed him to answer without hesitation. Johann

was more than willing to believe that the army of the dead was a diversion, and that the empire's true objective was a surprise assault on Elsphere.

The information the Winged Crusaders had on Darmés was sparse, but it did contain an evaluation of his character. The evaluation had been done by Miranda Khan, the woman ordained as head priest of the Olsted branch of the Holy Illuminus Church. She had met Darmés, and described him to a close relative as a fearful man, well-versed in cunning. Sofitia gave close attention to all information, no matter how trivial it might seem. Johann could therefore appreciate why she would have him, with his affinity for wide-area magecraft, defend the city. And yet...

*I'd really prefer she didn't expect too much of me...* he thought. *My mana reserves are the lowest of the three of us, and all my spells burn through it like crazy.* He let out a mental sigh, then his eyes met Sofitia's. She was smiling. Not that it was anything new, but she had apparently easily read his thoughts. *Being her subject might just be a curse as well as a blessing.* All Johann could do was smile apologetically back at his great ruler.

"We rose in challenge to the empire," Sofitia announced. "Now, to my horror, they have chosen to retaliate with methods that blaspheme against the Goddess Strecia. I will not tolerate the loss of any more of my people." Sofitia's face was hard as she glared down at them from atop her throne. All her subjects felt themselves bound by an overwhelming force of will that filled the whole of the Cloudy Chamber.

Lara took up where Sofitia left off, pointing to a spot on the map. "In accordance with what the seraph has told you, we, the Winged Crusaders, will meet the dead at the Ceirass Plateau and decide this once and for all."

The Ceirass Plateau lay to the east of the holy city. It had singular geography within Mekia, with small hills laid out like the web of a net. By positioning their forces on the various hills, they would have an unquestionable advantage in both offense and defense. As far as Johann was aware, there was no better region that lay in the path of the oncoming dead better suited to an engagement. Everyone in the Cloudy Chamber must have known that. As such, not one raised any objection.

“We are to march three days hence. There is little time. Each of you is to make ready with all haste.”

“Yes, ser!” the others answered as one, their brave voices echoing in the Cloudy Chamber. Sofitia returned her staff to the care of her attendant, then rose from the throne. Here, she closed her eyes and crossed her hands over her chest.

“May the blessings of Strecia go with you.”

At daybreak three days later, atop a six-wheeled chariot that shone with a dim gleam, Sofitia stood clad in magnificent light armor. In front of Johann, a force of forty-five thousand stood in perfect formation.

“In the name of the Goddess Strecia, we shall see our evil foe consumed by holy fire.” The sight of Sofitia standing there, her voice pure as a clear stream, moved many of the guardians to tears. With her dignity of bearing that revealed not a trace of fear, she looked every inch a warrior.

“Well, then, Johann. I leave the holy city in your hands.”

“You may count on me, My Seraph.”

Sofitia gave Lara, who rode with her in the chariot, a smile, the signal for Lara to call in a ringing voice to move out.

*I will be awaiting your safe return.* Johann and the six guardians who were staying behind with him to defend the city held their salute until the chariot was out of sight.

The Winged Crusaders rode forth from the Holy City of Elsphere to meet the army of the dead. They arrived at the Ceirass Plateau just on schedule. On Lara’s orders, they spread out into formation atop one hill in the net after another. From atop her own steed, Amelia observed the formations alongside Sofitia up in the chariot.

*Blessed Wing Lara never disappoints. This should be over in less than half a day.* Amelia was genuinely impressed. Then, from her left, someone called over to her with a laid-back air totally unbecoming the charioteer.

“Heeey, Amelia.”

Amelia ignored this.

“Ameeeelia.”

“This is a *battlefield*,” she finally snapped back harshly. “You will address me by my rank.” But she knew all too well that with Angelica, any reproach was a wasted effort. Angelica, indeed, showed no contrition. Instead, she puffed out her cheeks.

“If you heard me the first time, you shouldn’t have ignored me. It’s not a good quality, you know.”

Finding herself on the receiving end of a lecture, Amelia lost herself in a heavy, drawn-out sigh, then groaned. “*Fine*. What is it?”

“Did you see these walking dead everyone’s talking about?”

“No. I’m afraid that they did not appear where I was.”

“You didn’t, huh...?” Angelica said idly. “But like, walking corpses? *Super* gross, right? I’ve been wondering, do you think they bleed when you cut them?”

“I couldn’t say,” Amelia said icily, in the hopes of ending the interaction, but of course it had no effect on Angelica. The woman was always the same, and it was this that drove Amelia so utterly up the wall. She heard a quiet chuckle and turned to find Sofitia gazing down at her from the top of the chariot with amusement. In a panic, Amelia bowed her head.

“My Seraph, this was an indecent conversation to have in your presence. I cannot apologize enough.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. On the contrary, I was glad for the chance to see a different side of you, Amelia.”

“My Seraph, I...” Amelia was overwhelmed by shame.

But beside her, Angelica, not at all in the tone of a subject addressing her liege, said, “My Seraph, did you know Amelia actually loves pretty clothes?”

“Oh my! Does she really?”

“*Angelica!*” Amelia said angrily. The guardians around them all glanced over dubiously, but Amelia glared at each of them, and they quickly looked away. Clicking her tongue, Amelia then turned her glare on Angelica.

“You are not to trouble the seraph with such frivolous matters.”

“Oh, come on, it’s *fine*. Besides, I don’t think it’s frivolous,” Angelica added, pouting unhappily.

“The pair of you are such good friends. I am beside myself with envy.”

“Yes, My Seraph! Amelia and I are the very best of pals!”

As Amelia clenched her teeth, Sofitia said, “Thank you, Angelica, for teaching me something about Amelia I never knew. I hope you will teach me many more things.”

“Of course, My Seraph! I have loads more to say about Amelia, *loooooads!* Oh, just you wait!”

“I am looking forward to it.”

Amelia’s ears were unpleasantly hot, but she couldn’t bring herself to complain as the other two chatted away happily. Just then, she caught sight of a guardian galloping toward them. They brought their horse up in front of Amelia, then slipped lightly to the ground before dropping gracefully to one knee.

“Senior Thousand-Wing Amelia, I come with a message from Blessed Wing Lara. You are instructed to move into position.”

“Tell Blessed Wing Lara her message is understood.”

“Yes, ser!”

Amelia dismounted, then faced Sofitia. “My Seraph, it appears we are ready. I will take my leave of you here.”

“I look forward to the news of your success.”

“As you will it, My Seraph.” Amelia saluted, then mounted back up. She pulled up alongside Angelica, then brought her lips to the other woman’s ear. “The dead will never reach here; indeed, I will give my life before I ever allow such a thing. Still, if worst comes to worst...” She paused. “You understand, don’t

you?”

Angelica’s face turned serious. “Don’t worry. I’ll see the seraph safely through this, even if it kills me.”

“You,” Amelia said slowly, “do not have my leave to die. You are to protect the seraph *and* yourself.”

“What, *you’re* allowed to risk your life but not me? Isn’t that unfair?”

“Not in the slightest.” Amelia stared directly into Angelica’s eyes. They widened in surprise, but then Angelica beamed like the sun.

“Always so demanding, aren’t you, Amelia? But I hear you.” She tapped her chest confidently. Amelia said nothing more, only nodded. Between the two of them, that was enough.

Amelia’s pale blue hair danced to the gentle music of the wind as she galloped along.

“Now, then,” she murmured to herself. “Will the music I play be pleasing to the dead, I wonder?” Her lips curved in a cold but lovely smile.

## V

*A taint is upon the earth where the death-eater bird shows not its face.*

It was a saying for barren lands forsaken even by the birds that fed upon the dead. Though most despised the death-eater birds as omens of death, in a remote village on the outskirts of the Asvelt Empire, things were somewhat different. To them, life and death were two sides of the same coin, and they therefore revered the death-eater birds as a symbol of rebirth.

This village had a unique custom. When a villager came to the end of their life, the whole village put on a magnificent festival. At the end of the celebrations, they laid the body upon a towering altar in the village square as an offering to the death-eater birds. The belief was that those whom the death-eater birds fed upon were blessed and would be reborn into this world. In a society where the normal custom was to bury one’s dead, these beliefs were without question unorthodox, but then, there were many customs beyond the comprehension of

ordinary folk.

## **The Imperial Army, Rosenmarie's Camp**

"Something's strange..." Rosenmarie was having a fantastic time when the faint sense of something *wrong* came to her. At that moment, her Crimson and Helios Knights were hard at work making mincemeat of the Royal Army soldiers who had charged them.

*I can't see a death-eater bird anywhere. That must be what feels off...* As she thought it, an old memory came back to her. She clicked her tongue.

"Lady Rosenmarie, is something the matter?"

"I dislike all of this," she muttered, not looking at Zacharias.

"I'm sorry? My lady, our forces are dominating the enemy..." he said, misunderstanding her. Rosenmarie ignored him and stared up at the sky.

*I don't go in for foolish superstitions and the like, but the battlefield is a cradle of death. For the death-eater birds to disappear here, something is definitely abnormal.*

While Zacharias eyed her curiously, she looked out over the battlefield but found nothing suspicious. Then, she finally met Zacharias's gaze.

"Do you feel anything?" she demanded.

He hesitated. "I beg your pardon, my lady, but what do you mean?"

Rosenmarie looked at the sky and jerked her chin upward. Confused, Zacharias looked up, then over at the battlefield. "Well, as I said, our forces do appear to have an overwhelming advantage."

"Anyone with eyes could see that. I'm asking if you feel anything *else*."

"Something else? I don't..." Zacharias stammered, his confusion only deepening. He looked back at the battlefield, then shut his mouth.

Rosenmarie sighed loudly. "Why are you even here? I didn't call you."

"I am here for your protection, Lady Rosenmarie..."

"You're not needed. I can look after myself."



“But I can’t just—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” Rosenmarie waved a hand as though swatting away a fly, driving Zacharias away from her. Arrows sporadically came flying at her, and she sent them hurtling back from whence they came, but her thoughts became more and more preoccupied by the death-eater birds.

*I feel sick...*

Two hours after the end of the play, Oscar received a curious report.

“A great number of *rats*?” He thought it was some sort of metaphor, but quickly learned otherwise. According to the officer, they couldn’t see the ground for the great flood of rats running westward. And not only rats—there were gray squirrels, gray rabbits, and all manner of other rodents in there too.

*Could a natural disaster be coming?*

Animals were said to have abilities to sense things, which humans had long since lost. There were ancient texts that told of a great earthquake that had struck Duvedirica and altered the shape of the land itself. Two days before the quake, these texts said, beasts everywhere had run wild. There were also accounts of a seven-colored light flashing across the sky half a day before the disaster. The sky Oscar could see, however, was the color of lead. He saw not even a glint of seven-colored light.

“It’s upsetting some of the soldiers.”

“If you want me to help them...” Oscar had been sure that if he interrupted Rosenmarie’s fun to tell her small animals were displaying strange behavior, the only response he expected to get was, *So what?* Perhaps if the times were different, but right now they were in the middle of a battle.

*It’s definitely an unusual sign, though...* he thought. *I’ll just look into it.* He had just made up his mind to dispatch a few units to investigate when word arrived that a messenger had come at great speed from the imperial capital. Fears that the Azure Knights had been defeated immediately filled his mind.

“Call them here at once,” he instructed, fighting back his impatience. The matter of the animals’ abnormal behavior was banished from his mind. A

woman in ebony black armor presented herself to him, followed by a group all dressed in black overcoats, their faces hidden behind silver masks.

*Based on that armor, she must be from that personal army of Chancellor Darmés's that I've heard rumors of...* The woman did not strike him at all as a soldier. From their unsettling appearances to the air of gloom that hung over her and her entourage, they were more like the folk who made their living by unlawful means.

The woman saluted Oscar. "I am Major Martina Ray, of the direct forces."

"Major General Oscar Remnand," Oscar said. He wasted no time demanding an answer. "The Azure Knights haven't been defeated, have they?"

"Defeated?" Martina said tonelessly. "No, the Azure Knights turned traitor."

There was a long pause, then— "*What?!*"

This was far too outlandish for him to process, and his brain struggled to catch up. As such, Oscar could do nothing but stare at the woman like a fool. In the meantime, Martina went on talking. By the time she finished, Oscar was in a state of blank astonishment.

"You are telling me that Emperor Ramza abdicated the throne, after which Chancellor Darmés succeeded him as our new emperor. Lord Felix was dissatisfied with this, and so led the Azure Knights in a rebellion. Do I have that right?"

"That is all correct," Martina confirmed. She spoke as though none of it had anything to do with her. Oscar grew more and more unsettled by the way she appeared not to feel anything at all. "One thing," she cautioned. "The Azure Knights are rebels. I would take care before giving titles to their ringleader."

"I-Indeed..."

"I shall now relay His Imperial Majesty's decree."

Oscar knelt, ready to accept the emperor's words, and Martina nodded.

"In the name of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Darmés Guski of the Asvelt Empire, you are commanded to exterminate the renegade Azure Knights."

"The emperor's wish is our command..." Oscar hesitated. "But we are fighting

the Royal Army,” he went on, his voice naturally growing stronger. “What does His Imperial Majesty have to say about that?” Ordering them to go after the Azure Knights under the circumstances could only be described as ludicrous.

“The Royal Army will soon learn that their operation was a failure. Once this happens, it is His Imperial Majesty’s belief that they will withdraw.”

As Oscar listened, he wondered if things would really work out so tidily. It seemed equally possible that after failing to take the imperial capital, they would set their sights on retaking Kier Fortress instead. However, he could hardly contradict the word of the emperor, so he could only express this indirectly.

“It would be ideal if the Royal Army were to quietly withdraw, yes...”

“There is no cause for concern. The possibilities that you fear have naturally been taken into account. The emperor has sent a mighty host as reinforcements.”

“A mighty host?”

“Yes, it will not be long...” Martina paused. “I believe they have arrived,” she said, looking to the east, just as a pale-faced soldier in the armor of the Helios Knights burst into the room.

“Major General Oscar! Ghouls...! There are ghouls...!!!”

The woman’s artificial expression and the word “ghoul” seemed to fit seamlessly together. Before he knew it, Oscar’s legs carried him over to where the soldier was pointing.

“What the...?!” They had not been exaggerating. A disordered horde of grotesque creatures was lumbering toward the Royal Army’s flank, letting out moans that chilled the blood.

“How ill-mannered your soldiers are. Calling the soldiers sent by His Imperial Majesty himself ‘ghouls’...” Oscar realized Martina was standing at his side. Contrary to her words, her face was utterly vacant. It only made her all the more unsettling.

“Are...are those *people*?”

“They used to be. Now, they pledge their undying loyalty to our glorious emperor. Rest assured that unlike a certain order of knights, *these* will not betray us.” The discordance between her unchanging expression and the excitement in her voice was what finally pushed Oscar into feeling afraid of Martina. “Now, I must attend to my duties. Excuse me.”

Martina left, and the figures in their silver masks who had stood there like ghosts through it all without uttering a word followed her out. Oscar stared after them as though possessed.

“You’ve got more important things to do than stand around gaping, Oscar Remnand,” he told himself. His gaze fixed upon the stage that reared up behind him.

“—the hell is *that*?” Rosenmarie was keeping up a steady stream of arrows when, emerging out of nowhere from the east, she sighted the grotesque horde as it fell upon the Royal Army. She stared as chaos swept up both armies in the blink of an eye, soon followed by the sound of frantic footsteps coming up the ladder.

“Hey, what’s—”

“They’re imperial soldiers!”

Rosenmarie blinked, then looked closely at Oscar, whose shoulders rose and fell with his heaving breaths.

“Those things are with the *imperial army*? Is this some sort of joke?”

Oscar looked down at the battlefield, coughed loudly, then said, “I am assuredly *not* joking, my lady. Not one of them has raised a hand against our allies.” He went on to explain that they were reinforcements dispatched from the imperial capital.

“‘Reinforcements’? I didn’t ask for reinforcements, and if the imperial army has been keeping ghouls like those as pets, it’s news to me.”

Even accepting that they were of the imperial army for argument’s sake, it would have been entirely unnatural for her, one of the empire’s Three Generals, to not have heard about such a military concern. All her doubts, however, were swept aside by what Oscar said next.

“They were sent to us by His Imperial Majesty, the newly ascended Emperor Darmés.”

“Say wha...?!”

“I will explain, my lady.”

The story that began to spill out of Oscar’s mouth only served to disorient Rosenmarie further. Finally, when they reached the part about the Azure Knights’ defection, she held up a hand to cut him off.

“Hold up a moment. I’m processing.”

As Oscar nodded, she started off by breaking down what he had said.

*To begin with, we have the change of emperor... she thought. The first thing that comes to mind is illness, but I never heard so much as a whisper that His Imperial Majesty was ill. Even if they were keeping it quiet, it’s unnatural that not even a hint of it reached my ears. The former emperor did come down with an unidentified illness and passed away young, though, when he was only in his forties. It’s not outside the realm of possibility that he passed the risk on to his son...*

The problem was that Ramza had no heir. The Asvelt Empire was, without exception, a hereditary monarchy, but as far as Rosenmarie knew, Ramza had always talked about how the imperial throne *ought* to go to a person who truly had the makings of an emperor. Needless to say, this view of his was the height of heretical thinking and utterly unacceptable to his subjects. Most of them were naturally eager for him to take an empress into the imperial family and produce a son who would inherit the throne. But Ramza had always said it would only breed conflict and stubbornly refused to listen. The Asvelt Empire had enjoyed the rule of generations of good emperors, but that was not to say that, in the empire’s long history, conflict had never broken out over the succession.

Tempus Fugit 888. The attempted assassination of the third prince had spawned a conflict now commonly remembered as the Labyrinth of Night Mist that had, in less than a month, grown into a civil war that tore the empire asunder. After several years, the third prince had defeated the first prince’s forces, taking the throne as Emperor Ramza X. As the *Record of the Asvelt*

*Empire* had it, there had been unspeakable bloodshed, and neither nobles nor commoners had been spared. If a foreign nation had chosen that period to mount an invasion, the Asvelt Empire would have faced its darkest hour since its founding. But it seemed no such attack had come. In that grim age, the winds of war tore through the whole of the continent. In Rosenmarie's analysis, they had all been too preoccupied to go to the trouble of invading a region with no resources to speak of.

*The empire's produced its fair share of good emperors, but it's easy to insert meaning into what's passed. Anyone who thinks we'll have good emperors forever and ever is either a massive fool or the world's biggest optimist.*

One only had to look at the current state of Fernest to know the fate of a country ruled by a dullard. And Rosenmarie, on a personal level, was not as much a patriot as Felix or the late Gladden. Still, it was precisely because she had seen up close how Ramza, driven by fear for the future of the empire, had devoted himself to the affairs of the realm that she had sworn him her wholehearted loyalty. It had been a move quite unlike herself, really.

*Then there's the next thing—Felix and the Azure Knights' defection. That makes even less sense than a new emperor...*

Felix's absolute loyalty to Ramza was plain as day, but that by itself was not a reason to stir up rebellion against the empire. If everything Oscar had told her could be believed, then it was a direct line from refusing to acknowledge Darmés as emperor to refusing to acknowledge Ramza's own word. The Azure Knights would not have followed him as far as to mark themselves as traitors, not to mention that Felix would never have held his position among the empire's Three Generals in the first place if he were so shortsighted.

*There must be a reason for why the Azure Knights chose to go along with Felix's rebellion. Much as I get the feeling it'd be fastest to get the story from the man himself... Well, in any case, I'm sure I'm right about the emperor.*

But when she offered her theory about Ramza's death being due to illness, Oscar dismissed it right away.

"What? It wasn't illness, then?"

"It was not, my lady."

“Then some sudden accident?”

“Not that either. I was told that His Imperial Highness himself announced his intention to abdicate and named Chancellor Darmés as successor to the throne.”

“I’m finding it hard to swallow any of this,” Rosenmarie muttered at length. Everyone knew how deeply Ramza had trusted Darmés. But short of an illness or an unforeseen accident, abdicating while they were still in the middle of war was completely and utterly unnatural. The current conflict had begun when Ramza had declared his intention to unify Duvedirica. Bluntly put, abdicating the throne without seeing through to its conclusion a war that he himself had instigated was intolerably selfish.

“I think as you do, my lady. But with the abdication ceremony over and the coronation having followed it in short order, dismissing the story as a fabrication might prove difficult.”

“And then Felix found it even harder to swallow than I did, so he raised a rebellion against our new emperor Darmés. Is that the way of it?”

“Guessing at Lord Felix’s reasoning is beyond my poor intellect, but it seems the Azure Knights did clash with the emperor’s direct forces in an early engagement on the outskirts of the capital.”

“Direct forces?” It took Rosenmarie a moment. “Oh, the army under that ghastly woman’s command.”

Once, at Darmés’s introduction, she had exchanged a few words with Lieutenant General Flora Ray, who commanded his direct force. Rosenmarie remembered her as being pale as a corpse and sounding when she spoke as though she had left her emotions behind somewhere. It seemed she had originally headed the intelligence division that Darmés had established independently of the shimmers. This was only something Rosenmarie had happened to overhear, so how true it was she didn’t know, but what was certain either way was that she had not gotten a good impression of the woman.

“I was told that the actual battle ended in a series of scattered skirmishes...” Oscar spoke evasively in a way that wasn’t like him. Rosenmarie jerked her chin

up, indicating for him to continue.

“Apparently, while these skirmishes played out, Lord Felix stole into Listelein Castle...” He hesitated. “Well, if you’ll forgive my cutting to the point, it appears he kidnapped His Imperial Highness, former emperor Ramza.”

Rosenmarie was amused by how this did not even shock her anymore. For Felix, pulling that off had probably been a walk in the park.

“But why would Lord Felix have taken such risks to run off with His Imperial Highness?” Oscar asked.

“How should I know? He’s the one you want to ask...” Rosenmarie paused. “Hold on, the Azure Knights should’ve been fighting the Eighth Legion. How did that end up?”

Against common rabble, the Azure Knights’ victory would have been assured beyond a shadow of a doubt. But they had faced the army helmed by her sworn enemy, Death God Olivia. Though her forces were the underdog by far, from what Rosenmarie heard, in their very first campaign they had run circles around the Northern Perscillan army when it invaded Fernest. She doubted even the Azure Knights would have found them easy to best.

“The envoy says even she doesn’t know what happened there. This is nothing more than my own opinion, but I can’t see the Azure Knights losing, not so long as they were in shape to fight. My guess is that before the battle reached its conclusion, they declared a truce.”

“A truce...” Rosenmarie considered. “It’s not impossible, I suppose, considering Felix ran off with the former emperor... Now, what does our new emperor want *me* to do?”

Oscar looked taken aback, then he said reluctantly, “My lady, your orders are to take the Crimson and the Helios Knights and vanquish the traitorous Azure Knights.”

“I see. That explains why Emperor Darmés sent us reinforcements by way of this horde of creatures neither fish nor fowl. Hasn’t this gotten interesting?” Rosenmarie put her hand to her chin and let out a low chuckle. Oscar’s expression grew surpassingly grim.



“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you, my lady, that this is an imperial decree. It is not a thing one simply ignores, even if one were one of the Three Generals.”

“An imperial decree...” Rosenmarie murmured. “An *imperial decree*...” She picked up a fallen arrow, nocked it, then loosed it at a ghoul that was just then about to fall upon a soldier of the Royal Army. The arrow punched out the ghoul’s heart, emerging robed in scarlet, yet the creature sank its teeth into the soldier’s head as though nothing had happened.

“My lady!” Oscar shouted. Rosenmarie shrugged.

“Oops, I missed. You have to hand it to imperial soldiers these days, though—even losing a heart doesn’t faze them.”

“My lady, please,” Oscar said slowly, a tinge of desperation in his eyes. “Please just don’t do anything impetuous. If we defy the emperor, we’re as good as dead.”

“You say that, but Felix rebelled, didn’t he?”

“As I said earlier, it is not for the likes of me to guess at Lord Felix’s feelings.”

“I don’t have a damn clue what goes on in his mind either,” Rosenmarie replied. “But he’s not the sort of person to act without thinking.” First the drama of the imperial succession and the Azure Knights’ treason, now the ghouls Darmés had sent under the name of providing reinforcements?

“Something is rotten in the empire at present, make no mistake. If we’re going to work out what lies at the heart of it,” Rosenmarie explained, “we can’t afford to make any unconsidered moves.”

“In other words, you are going to ignore His Imperial Majesty’s imperial decree?” Oscar’s voice shook.

“I didn’t say anything of the sort.”

“That is how it sounded to me, my lady.” Sweat visibly beaded on Oscar’s face, and his breath came in shallow gasps. Rosenmarie took an embroidered handkerchief from her pocket and tossed it at him.

“It’ll set a bad example for the soldiers if they see their esteemed chief of

staff making a face like that.”

Oscar looked from the handkerchief in his hand to Rosenmarie, then back again, before mumbling an apology. Rosenmarie waved him off as though in irritation. “Before you get any ideas, you don’t have to give that back. I don’t need a handkerchief drenched in your sweat.” The corners of her lips curled up. Oscar’s did the opposite.

“You treat me cruelly, my lady,” he reproached her.

Rosenmarie cackled, giving his shoulder two friendly pats. “Oh, stop worrying. So long as I’m a soldier in the imperial army, I’m not going to ignore a decree from the emperor. I am still responsible for the lives of you lot, after all.”

“It would deepen the soldiers’ devotion to you still further if they heard that,” Oscar said readily, his expression clearing with undisguised relief.

“So long as our reinforcements are keeping the Royal Army occupied, our work here is done. We’ll leave a unit on lookout and head back to Kier Fortress.”

“Understood!”

Listening to the sound of Oscar’s boots as he descended the ladder, Rosenmarie gazed out across the battlefield. Even as she watched, the ghouls, in thrall to their instincts, threw themselves at the soldiers of the Royal Army fleeing in disarray.

*You call those things imperial soldiers? Don’t make me laugh!*

The things swarmed the soldiers who fell screaming and crying, tearing open their bellies and clawing at one another to be the first to stuff the exposed entrails down their gullets. Rosenmarie shifted her gaze and was greeted by the sight of another ghoul as it grabbed a soldier by the hair and sank its teeth into their neck, ripping off and chewing up chunks of flesh amid a fountain of blood. Down there, there was nothing resembling battlefield tactics. It was now nothing more than a slaughterhouse. Rosenmarie realized her hands, clenched into fists, were shaking with fury.

*You come here and ruin my game...* With that, she dashed up atop the stage. The hideous voices that came to her on the wind only added to her rage.

## VI

Travis's messenger came with word that they had encountered an army of ghouls flying imperial banners. Cornelius did not stop to question the truth of the report. He sent a unit to aid them, then, without hesitating, he gave the order for all forces to retreat, and for a defensive formation to be assumed with all haste against the ghouls attacking from the east, centered around Lieutenant General Hermann, who excelled at defense. Cornelius made his announcement with speed and precision. But they were all but powerless against the ghouls that welled up like water released from beneath the earth. Their strength to resist was whittled away with every passing moment.

### **The First Allied Legion, Lambert's Camp**

The battlefield around him stank of blood and decay. Lambert swung his sword with everything he had, but there was no end in sight. As his unit fell back again and again, they were being driven into a corner.

"If it weren't for the Lord Marshal's quick judgment, I don't doubt we'd have passed through the gate to the land of the dead long ago," Grell said. Lambert agreed with every word. If Cornelius had ordered them to fight back to the last against the ghouls that had come out of nowhere, the best they could have hoped for was losing half their unit—at worst, it could have meant total annihilation. What little preparation they had managed was all that had prevented a bloodbath. And yet—

"Still," Lambert muttered to himself, "it may only be a matter of time."

"Now that won't do," came Grell's rebuke from behind him.

"Faintheartedness from our commander? I'll have no more thoughtless comments from you." Grell whacked his small shield into a ghoul that ran at him from the left, then drove his long spear deep into another that came at him from the front. This didn't seem to bother the ghoul, however. Still impaled by the spear, it pressed forward, its vicious mouth gaping open. Lambert swung around to the ghoul's right, then mustered every last drop of his strength as he brought his sword down on it.

"You mustn't be too reckless," he told Grell.

At length, the older man said, “This is a terrifying foe.” Lambert was taken aback. It was true that the ghouls who seemed to feel no pain as they attacked were terrifying creatures. But he had never thought the day would come when he heard those words come out of *Grell’s* mouth. Without thinking, he told him as much. Grell’s brow furrowed.

“Not because of how they look, or how they don’t care when they’re attacked. Battle is a *noble* thing, where you pit your body and mind against your opponent. I taught you that, my lord, long ago. But these things don’t have that. There’s nothing inside them at all. *That* is what terrifies me.”

Lambert nodded gravely. “In any case, running away is the only option we’ve got.”

The plains that stretched out around them without anything to obstruct his line of sight were not suited to defense. But if they could keep retreating east, they would reach a ravine known as one of the most perilous passes in Fernest. From how the ghouls had moved so far, Lambert didn’t think they were capable of fine-tuning their movements like a human could. He could only marvel at how Cornelius had immediately settled on east as the direction of their retreat.

*Do these things never get tired?!* No matter how much time went by, the ghouls’ ferocity never ebbed. Lambert’s unit was falling into the depths of exhaustion and despair. The only reason they were able to keep up some semblance of an organized retreat was thanks to nothing other than Lambert’s masterful command. And yet—

“*Graaauuugh...*” The crushing weight of numbers was beyond what they could make up for with skill. A ghoul dragged itself over the ground to rip with its teeth into Lambert’s thigh. With his mobility, his one advantage over the creatures, taken away, all that was left to him was the implacable call of death.

*I always hoped to die on the battlefield. It seems my wish will be granted, though I wouldn’t have chosen ghouls for my final foe,* Lambert thought. *Even the gods enjoy their cruel jokes.*

He let out a breath as deep as the deepest places in the earth, then raised his sword high above his head. In the same moment, someone behind him grabbed

his shoulder hard. Lambert spun around and found himself staring into Grell's exasperated eyes.

"What the hell?!"

"None of that. I never taught you to die without carrying out your duty."

"I can't run anywhere on these legs. I've decided to die here, so leave me be." Lambert turned his back on Grell, then raised his sword again.

"That's nonsense. If your legs fail you, you crawl out of here."

"I am a general! As if I'd disgrace myself like that! Grell, *you* get out of here!"

Grell was quiet for a moment. "You will not run, ser?"

"How many times do I have to say it?!"

"Then this is how it must be." At the same time as he took in these final words from Grell, a sharp pain shot through Lambert's neck.

"...Grell, you...bastard..." As his vision faded to white, the last thing Lambert saw was Grell's face, set hard as iron.

"A student's got no right to die before his master," Grell muttered. He called over a few soldiers who stood nearby and ordered them to take Lambert and flee. Then, he turned to the ghouls, long spear in hand. To the soldiers behind him, he shouted, "From here on, it's a one-way trip to the land of the dead. Are all your affairs in order?"

"Like you need to ask," grinned an old soldier. "I've long since sorted that out."

"I've been waiting for this day," said another, twirling the blade that had carried him across the continent with the dexterity of an acrobat. "Now, at last, I can share a cup with our comrades who went on before us."

By some miracle, the soldiers Grell had brought to battle with him were all there, with not one face missing.

Grell looked at them with a fearless grin. "Come, then. To the ends of life itself."

The band of old warriors who numbered not even twenty set off, first at a walk, then gradually gathering speed until by the end, they surged forward like wildfire. Their battle cry drowned out even the awful moans around them to ring through the darkness of the battlefield.

### **The First Allied Legion, Neinhardt's Camp**

"Don't fool yourselves into thinking that you can take the ghouls on! Just focus on running!" Even in the jaws of death, Neinhardt's sword never stopped moving as he barked commands. Katerina came up to him, her sword coated in grime and her breathing heavy. Her expression was agonized.

"General, Lieutenant Colonel Tabitha's unit has been cut off. She is requesting aid."

"Much as I'd like to oblige her, I don't have the soldiers to spare. We've got our hands full ourselves..." He was effectively telling Katerina to abandon Tabitha's unit, but Katerina said nothing to object. Of the six thousand soldiers who served under Neinhardt, only four thousand remained. When it came to surviving battle, nothing mattered more than experience. But even the keenest minds and most adept swordsmen among them might as well have been helpless babes when up against such a strange foe as the ghouls.

The trade of life and death went on unabated.

"Damn!" A swarm of ghouls rammed into Neinhardt, bringing down him and his horse both. He tucked in his limbs to roll, making sure his legs tangled in those of the ghoul that bore down on him to drag it down too. He was on his feet again straightaway, only to see the unit that formed the core of their defense disappearing under a wave of ghouls. A disgusting hand reached toward Katerina's back. Neinhardt took it off with an upward stroke of his sword, then took the reins of a horse that cowered nearby and mounted up. He held out a mud-smeared hand to Katerina.

"But our allies, they're still..."

Neinhardt gave the slightest shake of his head. "I'm sorry you were saddled with such a good-for-nothing commander."

“That’s not—!”

“Take my hand.” Katerina held out a shaking hand. Neinhardt gripped it tight, then pulled her up behind him on the horse. “Hold on tight, and make sure you don’t fall off.”

“Yes, ser...” Katerina wrapped her arms tightly around his middle. They felt even thinner than they looked, and even through his armor he could tell how badly she was shaking.

“Let’s go!” Neinhardt squeezed with his legs and flicked his reins, and the horse answered its new master, racing away from the precipice of death. The horse galloped along at a swift pace, and soon they left the cacophony of screaming behind them. Perhaps it was the work of some animal instinct for survival.

The icy knife of the wind sliced mercilessly into Neinhardt’s body and his heart. Rivulets dripped from his hands as they clenched his reins, adding to the ever-growing red stain on his horse’s back.

### **The First Allied Legion, Main Command**

“Did Lieutenant General Travis’s unit make it away safely?”

“Yes, ser. It seems he was able to withdraw successfully.”

“What about General Lambert and Major General Neinhardt’s units?”

“Both have taken heavy losses, but from what I hear, it has not impeded their retreat.”

“Thank you.”

“Ser! I will leave you here, Lord Marshal!” The messenger left the camp at a run. Cornelius watched, internally letting relief wash over him. Then a voice came from behind him, cool and collected. It was Paul’s aide, Brigadier General Otto.

“Lord Marshal, Lieutenant General Hermann’s unit appears to be barely holding on.”

Cornelius raised his spyglass. A raging mass of ghouls closed on Hermann and his soldiers, forcing them back. Cornelius made his decision swiftly.

“Send Colonel Sachiel to him at once.”

“That will mean weakening your protections, my lord,” Otto replied without hesitation, taking a step forward.

“Lieutenant General Hermann’s unit is the linchpin of our defenses. If he breaks, it will be the first link in a chain that ends in our destruction. I know you know that, Brigadier General.”

Otto hesitated. “I’ll send him at once, ser,” he said at length.

Sachiel and his battalion of two thousand heavy infantry departed in haste to provide reinforcements. With this, the only forces remaining around the main camp were the battalion of two thousand light infantry under Paul’s direct command, Cornelius’s personal guard, and the three of Fernest’s Ten Swords who were there as his protection.

“Running a *little* low on people to look after you, don’t you think?” Paul said wryly from beside Cornelius.

“I’m not yet so decrepit that I need a caretaker,” Cornelius retorted, stroking his thick white beard with an exaggerated scowl. Paul was only poking fun because he was worried about Cornelius, and Cornelius only responded so theatrically because he knew it. At the same time, the younger officers who only knew them as superior and subordinate all looked tense.

*This is where it will all be decided.* Cornelius took out a pocket watch engraved with a leda leaf—the coat of arms of the House of Gruening—and opened it to check the time.

“Well. A few more hours, then...” he murmured. “Any word from the Eighth Legion?”

“None, ser. They are probably still engaging the Azure Knights.”

“I see. That may well be so.”

The Eighth Legion’s opponent was the empire’s most powerful knight order. They had Olivia, but even then, he did not expect victory would come easily. *Of course, what has befallen us might have fallen upon them too...*

Everything he had seen in Claudia’s reports proved that Olivia also possessed



a strong gift for command. She would know when it was time to withdraw.

“You have nothing to worry about where Lieutenant General Olivia is concerned, Lord Marshal,” Paul said in a voice brimming with confidence. Cornelius couldn’t help but frown.

“You’re acting like a doting old fool again.”

“You’re one to talk,” Paul replied. “In any case, the one saving grace is that the Crimson and Helios Knights haven’t gotten involved.”

“It might be less that they didn’t and more that they *couldn’t*.”

“Looks that way to you too, then, Lord Marshal?”

“Those ghouls are supposed to be on their side, but they were clearly rattled.”

Paul had had an inkling of this too. If the ghouls were part of a larger tactical plan, things could easily have been dire for the First Allied Legion. The reason they were still just holding the creatures at bay was of course in part the result of Cornelius’s leadership, but more importantly it was the lack of any order to the attacks. Despite being gifted this excellent opportunity, Rosenmarie and her soldiers had immediately abandoned their game and retreated back to Kier Fortress—something that only made sense if the imperial forces stationed at the fortress had been unaware of the ghouls’ existence.

“Ghouls or not, it’s impossible not to see that they used to be people. Do you think the empire has been working in secrecy to develop this godsforsaken atrocity?”

“The empire’s technological innovation is advanced, but even then, I doubt they are capable of this. Look at it from another angle altogether, however, and you realize there is a power known to us since long ago that could have brought this about.”

“You mean mages...” Paul said at length, his face clouding over. Cornelius nodded gravely.

There was an outbreak of excited muttering from everyone around them. Back in the age of warlords, Paul had fought a mage from a minor nation who could manipulate clumps of earth. After a grueling battle he had fought them

off, but to this day he bore a great scar on his back from that battle.

“I agree, the so-called hands of the gods are a real possibility,” Paul went on. “Only that would mean a powerful mage has allied themselves with the empire.”

“There’ll be time to give the matter due consideration once we get through this.”

“*If* we get through this...” Paul looked over at where Hermann’s forces fought, repeating the same words over in his heart.

### **The First Allied Legion, Hermann’s Camp**

With the main camp half in ruins after being overrun by ghouls, it could no longer function as the center of command.

“Alma’s unit of fifteen hundred troops has been destroyed. We can no longer hold the front line. General Hermann, you at least...ought to flee...” The soldier fell face down in the dirt, already gone. Hermann, breathing heavily, could say nothing back. His attention was focused on driving his sword through the right side of the chests of the attacking ghouls. He dodged, occasionally taking a step forward. In the course of stabbing so many ghouls that he’d dulled the edge of his blade, his suspicion had solidified into certainty.

*I knew it.* He shook hard to dislodge the ocher fluid that clung to his blade like a bad grudge, then, without pausing to catch his breath, he looked at Louis. “Their weak point is—?!” Right in front of his eyes, a ghoul tore out Louis’s throat, following him down to the ground in a great spray of blood.

“Gene...I don...wa...die...” Ghouls climbed over each other to swarm over Louis. Slipping out in between their hideous groans, Hermann could hear a mixture of screams and sobs. But Louis was beyond his help now. No one could escape their fate once it was sealed.

“Damn it all!” With the shreds of Louis’s dying screams filling his ears, Hermann found himself momentarily rooted to the spot.

“Ng...gah!” Pain cascaded through him like lightning. He looked down and saw a ghoul that was only a torso with its teeth buried in his left ankle.

“To hell with you!” He shifted his sword grip, then stabbed straight down through the right side of the ghoul’s chest. Straightaway, another jumped on his back. He threw himself backward, slamming it into the ground beneath him. There was an unpleasant, sticky sound, followed a few seconds later by a stench that turned his stomach. Hermann rolled along the ground until he reached what remained of Louis after the ghouls’ teeth had torn him apart and devoured him. Then he started. As though to take advantage of his momentary opening, a ghoul, its gaping mouth stretching still wider, came scuttling toward him on all fours with unbelievable speed. Hermann roared at the top of his lungs—then, without even reaching for his sword, he drove his clenched fist into the ghoul’s open mouth.

“Suck on that!” he bellowed. The sound of screaming bone rang in his ears as his fist struck the ground. Without pausing for breath, he drew his knife and stabbed it into the creature’s chest. Once he was sure it wasn’t moving, he slowly drew back his fist, then sat back heavily. *Didn’t think I’d be caught off guard twice...* he thought. *I suppose this is the end of the road for me. Forgive me, Marshal Cornelius, General Paul, for giving out here.*

His consciousness was fading when a young soldier came dashing over and heaved him to his feet.

“General Hermann! Get on my back!”

“Don’t bother...” Hermann murmured. “What’s left of my life is about to burn away...and I have vital orders... Your ear...”

“But ser...”

“Quick...ly...”

The soldier hesitated, then put his ear to Hermann’s mouth. After a moment, he said, “Understood, ser. I will make sure this reaches the lord marshal.” But Hermann could no longer answer him.

Hermann Hack, determined to remain a commoner to the last, was steadfast in his refusal to inherit the name of a noble house. Even many years after, in the village where it is said he grew up, a magnificent bronze statue in his likeness still stood.

## First Allied Legion, Main Camp

Hermann's forces had fought like lions until, when around half of the soldiers had successfully withdrawn, the units fell apart. Each of them had been balanced on the brink, and when one collapsed, the others followed one after another. In the midst of this, one of Lieutenant General Hermann's soldiers appeared in the main camp.

"Lieutenant General Hermann was slain in battle." With the soldier's words, it was as though a great, icy shadow had fallen over the camp. "He entrusted me with one last message."

"His last..." Cornelius paused. "Tell me."

"Yes ser. The ghouls' weak point is in the right side of their chest. Stab them there, and they stop moving."

"Is that so..." Cornelius said thoughtfully. "You did well to bring this to me."

Otto immediately spoke up. "I will command the rear guard. The two of you —"

"What, we should run away?" Paul finished his sentence for him.

Otto's next words caught in his throat, but he recovered quickly. "The war does not end with this battle," he argued. "What I meant is that we cannot afford to lose you."

"That's why we have to get as many soldiers out of here alive as we can."

"Yes, and I am telling you that I will shoulder that duty!" Otto shouting was a rare sight. The corners of Paul's mouth twitched.

"It's been a long time since I saw this side of you, Otto. Takes me back to your squabbles with Lieutenant General Olivia."

"How can you make light of a situation like this?!" Otto exclaimed. Paul laid a hand on his shoulder.

"These ghouls pose a threat greater than any other. If this really is the work of a mage, then the Royal Army has harsher battles still in its future." Paul paused and gave Otto a warm smile. "But I am not worried at all. Because I know that despite all this, those who will lead the next generation have grown up strong."

“With all due respect, ser, it is precisely because of the threat the ghouls pose and the harsh battles that lie ahead that now, more than ever, we cannot afford to lose either of you. I am begging you, ser. Please! Please give me command of the rear guard!”

Paul’s expression grew stern, and he gripped Otto’s shoulder harder. “In every age, it is the young who carve out new paths to the future. There’s no place left for old men.” Otto gritted his teeth, his face anguished. Paul patted his shoulder twice, then turned to the other old general, who had been quietly observing their exchange. “Do I have that right, ser?”

Cornelius, as though unable to hold it in any longer, burst out laughing. “Paul, you took all the words straight out of my mouth. I suppose that is that, then. I expect to see the God of the Battlefield in his full glory.”

“As you wish.”

“I hope you haven’t forgotten us, Lord Marshal.” The voice came from Solid Jung, Claudia’s father, speaking on behalf of Fernest’s Ten Swords. Cornelius’s expression changed, his eyes growing hard.

“You will return to the capital. You have a duty to protect King Alfonse.”

“In the interest of acting at His Majesty’s behest, I must humbly refuse.”

“I tell you again, you are to go back to the capital. If His Majesty knew the current situation, you can be sure he would tell you the same thing. I know his nature better than anyone.”

Solid’s gaze grew sharp, and a sly smile spread across his face.

“Indeed, you might be right about that. But at the end of the day, nothing you say amounts to more than speculation. Not meaning any disrespect, Lord Marshal, but I am not convinced.” When Cornelius only glared silently at him, he added, “Come now, there’s no need to be unkind. I know I’m rough around the edges and no great talent, but at least let me be your shield, my lord.” He put his left hand to his breast in a knight’s salute. The other two with him planted their swords on the ground. Apart from Solid, Fernest’s Ten Swords were not knights. They were masters of the blade. This gesture meant they intended to stay loyal to the end.

Cornelius looked at them with a mix of emotions in his face. “You’re impossible, every one of you...” he said helplessly. “Have it your way, then.”

“Yes, my lord. With your leave, we shall do just that.”

Cornelius then deployed his forces in a ring formation, then pointed them at the biggest gap and quietly gave the order to advance. The horde of ghouls flocked to the rear guard like moths to a flame.

Cornelius’s blade moved like water through the ghouls in his path. He was every bit the warrior he had been in his glory days. Ghouls attacked from every direction, but Cornelius moved with the lithe grace of a cat, sinking low to the ground, then spinning sharply like a top to strike with his treasured blade, Lemuria. There was a streak of blue, and a ghoul rolled away along the ground with its legs severed. Cornelius swiftly drove Lemuria through the right side of its chest, and the creature, which had squirmed like an insect, fell entirely still.

*The knowledge that Lieutenant General Hermann died to tell us will not go to waste.* His sword was at the ready again at once. Paul called over from behind him.

“Ah, this takes me back to when we were young men, swinging our swords side by side.”

“That it does. I wish we could have taken the time to drink and reminisce together about those good old days. But somehow things never worked out that way.”

“Without question.”

“But see here, Paul. The fire’s a little slow to kindle today, is it not?”

“Such harsh words, ser. Belated though it might be, I’m finally feeling warmed up. I believe I am ready to fulfill your lordship’s expectations.”

Paul turned to the nearest of the ghouls bearing down on them, then brought his blade down with a crack like lightning. In the same motion, he lowered his stance, faced the fresh ghouls that appeared in the gap between the last one’s severed halves, then used Swift Step of Thunderclaps. For every ghoul he sped past, there was a flash of steel. The creatures crumpled helplessly to the

ground, holes stabbed clean through the right sides of their chests. His feet dug a groove into the ground as he skidded to a halt, a dozen unmoving ghouls strewn in his wake. Something like steam rose up from his body, coiling into a shape that strangely resembled the figure of some fierce god.

“The God of the Battlefield still lives,” Cornelius said. The art he employed was the opposite of Paul’s Swift Step—the art of illusions. He moved to press his back lightly to Paul’s, an indomitable smile on his face.

“I’m just getting started. The real fight starts now.” But despite his words, Paul was getting impatient. The ghouls were as mindless as their intelligence had suggested, but they were animated by something like an animal instinct.





The trouble was that while animals knew when to give up, the ghouls had no such instinct. So long as the weak point in their chests stayed intact, they were indifferent even to being torn limb from limb. In small numbers, they would be no threat, but over ten thousand of them was a different story. The Azure Knights, the empire's most elite soldiers, would have been the easier opponent by far.

*But that's not the worst bit...* Paul could feel sweat pouring unabated from his every pore. There was no point in making comparisons, but still, at the height of his powers he would have taken out twice as many with his last attack. Keenly aware of his body's decline, he looked over at the members of the Ten Swords protecting Cornelius. Their defense was rock solid right down to the line, and they were covering for the gaps left by Cornelius's personal guards. *They live up to their reputation. He should be safe for the time being.* It would take time to withdraw their full force. Paul gripped his sword harder. *Just hold on for me until the retreat is complete...*

A ghoul slipped by the line of guards, coming into striking range. Paul sent its grasping arms flying into the air in a single slash, then brought his blade back to stab it through the chest. A moment later, he had his sword free and once more used Swift Step of Thunderclaps. Paul bared his teeth in a ferocious snarl as he charged into the mass of ghouls.

*Even with power running through every fiber of my body, it doesn't make the weight of the years any less crushing.*

Cornelius's illusion technique was in how he moved his feet. He fooled his opponents' eyes to make them give him an opening. The fact that it was working well enough on the ghouls showed that, like humans, they used their eyes to identify their targets. On the other hand, some ghouls had lost their eyes, while others didn't even have heads. For the time being, their reactions were considerably slower than the more intact ghouls, but there was no doubt that they had picked up on his and the others' locations. Sight might have been their main method of identifying targets, but it wasn't the only one. Cornelius judged that they probably detected the sense of presence that humans unconsciously gave off. This was the reason for the heavy sigh that now

escaped him.

*Chances are, we are going to find ourselves in quite the bind...* He did not have long to wait until his bad feeling became reality. Ghouls against which the illusion had no effect began to appear everywhere. Worse, he was struggling to keep up the technique which, like Paul's Swift Step, burned through his strength like wildfire.

Nothing for it but to fight the old-fashioned way.

Cornelius dropped his illusions, simultaneously ducking to evade the fist of a large ghoul that came swinging at him. The rush of air buffeted the back of his head as he drove his sword between the creature's legs.

*"Groah!"*

Lemuria carved up perfectly along its center line as Cornelius rent the thing in half.

"Next."

Ghouls piled over one another with the momentum to crush Cornelius flat. He took a few short breaths, then slashed the air. Leaving a streak of blue in its wake, the crescent blade cut the ghouls to pieces. This was a true finishing strike, and one that could only be realized by Cornelius and Lemuria together.

"Joyous as that was to behold, my lord, methinks you put yourself at too much risk." Solid cracked open the right chest of another ghoul, then moved smoothly to place himself in Cornelius's blind spot.

Cornelius took a deep lungful of air. "If now is not the time for risk, then when is?" He forced himself to choke back the blood that rose in his throat, then raised Lemuria and stabbed at the next wave of ghouls.

A black stain spread across the land, encroaching further and further as the sun sank into the west. Like the concentration of all the evils of the world, it chewed through great names, mighty wills, and even human dignity in its all-consuming advance.

“Hrngh...” Cornelius grunted.

“Lord Marshal! Fall back, ser!” Solid’s voice jarred discordantly in his ears. Cornelius’s world warped around him as he looked down to where his right leg was being chewed to shreds.

“Right now, you might still make it... You must...fly. That much time I can buy you.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m not in the mood for jokes, my lord.”

“Listen. I am in the grips of a fatal disease. No matter what happens, my time is...short...” This had revealed itself back on the central front, not long after they had driven back the Helios Knights. Learning at that moment that he did not have long to live, Cornelius had staked everything on Twin Lions at Dawn in a play to turn the tide of the war.

“But for now, you are alive. So long as you live, I mean to serve as your shield.”

“You confounded fool...” He picked up Lemuria in his remaining hand, using the sword as a cane to haul himself to his feet. As Solid maneuvered himself to cover him, Cornelius, in his heart, silently thanked him.

Some time passed. As he watched Solid sink into a roiling mass of ghouls, Cornelius summoned the last of his strength into his arm.

“RAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!” The roar exploded out of him as he slashed apart the ghouls in front of him one after another, the arc of his blade flashing blue for a fleeting moment before fading away. He did not mean to drop Lemuria, but the blade tumbled from his hand, hitting the ground with a hollow clang. The ghouls came on in a savage advance. He no longer had the strength to resist. Yet every line of Cornelius’s face showed only calm.

“It was the smile you sent me to war with, Sabrina, that kept me fighting to the end. I was blessed with the best of wives.” He was silent for a moment. “Thank you.”

Cornelius thought of his wife cheerfully baking, and slowly closed his eyes...

Cornelius died at the age of seventy-two. No one in the generation to come would know his final words. But the great deeds of Cornelius the hero would grow into songs and epics, and he continued to be loved by many.

“Forgive me, Lord Paul, that I could not be at your side ’til the end...” The captain of the guard, the last of them still standing, drew in his final breath. Paul looked over to where Cornelius was, but the spot where the man once stood was already swarmed by ghouls.

*You went on ahead, eh...?* Paul thought back on what he had said, half joking, back at Galia Fortress. Cornelius, it seemed, had really honored it. *Could anything be more like you, my lord? “I’ll be close behind”...?!* All of a sudden, he found himself looking at someone who ought to have been long gone from that place. *The fool!* He cursed, jumping into Swift Step of Thunderclaps. Stabbing through the chest a ghoul just as it was about to dive on the other man, Paul bellowed, “What the hell are you doing here?!”

“The ghouls divided us, ser.” Otto turned back, his voice calm as he flicked a fragment of skull from his blade. “I ended up left behind.”

Not for nothing had Paul kept Otto at his side for twenty years. He saw right away that this was a total fabrication. At the same time, Otto knew that Paul knew. “Able soldiers will be needed in the days to come. You understand that full well, yet...” He broke off, then burst out, “You infuriating idiot!” A group of ghouls came at him, but Paul cut them down in a furious strike.

“Me, able? This is the first I’ve heard of it.” Otto drove his spear through the chest of the last ghoul.

Was it some ghoulish caprice? Their attention, if they had such a thing, seemed to focus on the corpses strewn over the ground. Paul and Otto took the opening to put some distance between them.

After catching his breath, Otto went on. “I don’t know how things stand for the Second Legion, but whatever struggles lie ahead, General Blood—and Lieutenant General Olivia—will overcome them. In short, my lord, I simply have faith in what you told me.”

Paul chuckled. “To think the day would come where I’d hear those words

come from your mouth. Blood's one thing, but imagine the girl's shock if she heard you now." He pictured Olivia's face, her eyes wide in surprise, and smiled despite himself.

"While she did test me greatly, her successes exceeded all my expectations. Thinking back, I wonder if I wasn't a little jealous of this girl who walked her own path without being bound by authority or custom... No, I *know* I was." The face of the man, nicknamed the Man in the Iron Mask behind his back, lit up now in an unfamiliar, soft smile. It was a fresh sight, even to Paul.

"Then you should tell her that yourself." He knew it was no good, yet still he asked without asking for Otto to reconsider. As expected, the other man answered with a crooked smile and a shake of his head.

"What about you, my lord? I believe Lieutenant General Olivia promised you cake, did she not?"

"I'm always in awe of the things those ears of yours catch..." Paul muttered. "In any case, I'll content myself to wait 'til she's lived out the rest of her days and comes knocking at the gate to the land of the dead herself."

"I hope, when that time comes, I may join you."

Paul nodded, then said gravely, "Otto Steiner, you are commanded to accompany your general, Paul von Baltza, to the land of the dead."

"Ser!" Otto barked. "I never meant to do anything else." He gave a grin, which Paul returned.

"Insolent to the bone, eh? That's the Otto I know."

The ghouls' moment of caprice was over. They resumed their rampage through the living. Otto and Paul exchanged a silent nod, then turned to the torrent of death and charged.

Long after, the House of Baltza, said to possess the powers of warrior gods, remained shrouded in mystery. Many sources spoke to the deep affection Paul held for Olivia, but one theory posited that this was because the power Olivia possessed—the power of a death god—in certain ways resembled his own power. However, the veracity of this was never established. What was clear was

the scholars' agreement that if Paul had not placed the trust he did in Olivia, despite her rampant disregard for convention, her own hero's song would never have been born. Viewed alongside his own battle record, there was no doubt that he had been one of the greatest men of that era.

The symphony dreamed up in the pits of the damned died away, and the bloodred sun sank below the horizon, leaving only a faint glow. The black of muck that stretched over the earth darkened further still, and hell's servants paused in their work.

The year was Tempus Fugit 1000. Operation Twin Lions at Dawn, the Kingdom of Fernest's great counteroffensive, had ended in failure. Seven for every ten of the First Legion's soldiers escaped that battlefield, but the price they paid was inconceivably vast. A storm was brewing, greater than any before, ready to wreak destruction upon Fernest.

# Chapter Five: The Girl Holds the Ebony Blade to Her Heart

I

A northwest wind blew down from the Est Mountains, bone-chillingly cold, bringing an unseasonal heavy snowfall to the Royal Capital of Fis.

## The Audience Chamber at Leticia Castle

The thick snow cast a ceaseless shadow on the stained glass window as the king of Fernest, Alfonse sem Galmond, lowered himself into his frozen throne as an entourage of guards took their places beside him. It had been a long time since he had sat in it, and he was irritated to find it ever so slightly cramped. As he thought this, he looked down at the kneeling figure before him—his sickly son Selvia.

“It is rare for you to request an audience.”

Selvia did not wear the nightgown that he so frequently wore these days. Instead, he had dressed up properly. Before he was Selvia’s father, Alfonse was king, and this was the audience chamber, where there was an official procedure to be followed—dressing properly was only to be expected. But it was novel all the same.

“Thank you for granting my request for an audience on such short notice, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. Still, this room is a tad chilly; it will take its toll on your health. Keep this short, eh?”

“Your Majesty,” Selvia acknowledged. What followed was the news that Twin Lions at Dawn had ended in failure. Even as Alfonse reeled, the story continued to unfold like a bad dream come to life. Selvia left the worst of it for last.

“The old man, dead...?” Alfonse stammered. “Is...is this a joke?” Even he

could clearly make out the tremor in his voice.

Selvia said nothing, only gazed back at him.

“The old man... No...” His staff fell from the dais and rolled away with a sharp clatter that echoed through the audience chamber. Louder still, Alfonse heard the sound of something shatter. His vision was engulfed by darkness.

“Father...father, steady yourself.”

“The old man...not the old man...”

“Father.”

“The old man...my sword lessons...”

No matter how many times Selvia called his name, his father the king only went on repeating Cornelius’s name. In an instant, Alfonse’s face seemed to have aged twenty years. He rose from the throne then, with unsteady steps, and turned to leave the audience chamber. The guards looked at Selvia in distress. He gave them a slight nod, and they hurried after his father. Selvia got slowly to his feet, the white mist of his breath hanging in the air of the chamber.

*From the looks of him, he might just be done.* Selvia knew that his father had relied on Cornelius more than anyone else. Despair he had expected, but it had taken a form far, far worse than what Selvia had anticipated.

*My father is a scholar. This troubled age was far too cruel for him. The world might not have looked kindly upon him, but I know he tried as hard as he could, in his way.* Selvia had just turned twenty and, due to his weak constitution, had spent almost all that time within the confines of the castle. His father had never said as much, but Selvia doubted he had planned on passing his throne to his sickly son. The king had never once spoken to him of anything concerning governance. Selvia sourced his information entirely from the gossip of ladies-in-waiting and what his older sister Sara told him, on the occasions she visited him in his convalescence.

*Out of all of the royal family, Sara was the only one who understood the situation most clearly. But I couldn’t bring myself to add any more to her*



*burdens.*

It was Sara, assigned to the defense of the royal capital, who had told him what had happened. With the forces of the Holy Land of Mekia added to their own, his father had been optimistic about victory. As such, there had been much agonized discussion over who would go to inform him of the situation. Usually, they would have simply left the job to Cornelius, but never again could they turn to him now. Shuffling off the burden of delivering every piece of bad news onto their hero was undoubtedly what had gotten them into this situation.

“And so,” Sara had said with a helpless smile, “as I am the one most well-informed on the matter, it seems I must be the one to tell the king.” At that, Selvia had insisted firmly that she did not go, then set up a meeting in the audience chamber to break the news himself. That had brought him here.

*But it isn't over yet. On the contrary, we're buried in problems.* Cornelius's death had left supreme command of the army up in the air. That was a major concern, but what Selvia feared the most was that, upon hearing of the state the king was in, Sara would try to act as monarch. Unfortunately, Sara was the fourth princess—not only that, but as an illegitimate child, if she took that role, he could well imagine the emotional conflict it would bring about, first and foremost from the king's lawful wife—and Selvia's mother—Bertille, as well as his younger sisters, the first, second, and third princesses.

*I can't hide behind illness to feign disinterest any longer. The Royal Army has lost both a great hero and a general known throughout the continent in one stroke. They will be in total disarray. If the royal family descends into a senseless power struggle now, it will surely mean the end of Fernest. If I am to head it off, I have only one option.*

Having reached a decision, Selvia left the audience chamber, which had grown still colder, behind him. Dark clouds were gathering above the Kingdom of Fernest on a scale greater than anything before, but hope was not yet lost. Selvia's mind was on the girl who had occasionally appeared in Sara's stories.

*I have to meet her. The Death God who terrifies the imperial army—the girl called Olivia Valedstorm.*

The sands of time drew back to the moments after Claudia and Olivia parted ways.

After escaping Listelein Castle, Claudia and her soldiers advanced back along the hidden passage by which they had come until they arrived at the cottage at its entrance...

“The look on that old man’s face, Colonel Claudia, it was like as far as he was concerned, we couldn’t get out of the empire fast enough,” said her second-in-command Saizo, looking back over his shoulder at the cottage. “Here, he’s *still* watching us. Looking at him, I’d say he’s not going to move an inch ’til he’s sure we’re gone.”

“Well, our truce with the Azure Knights doesn’t change the fact that we are enemies of the empire,” Claudia replied matter-of-factly, keeping her eyes forward.

“But the Azure Knights have moved in open rebellion against the empire. It seemed pretty clear from the way that old man talked with their commander that they’re close, so I don’t see why he had to be so short with us.”

“What about you, then? Could you work with the Azure Knights without any ill feelings?”

“I, well...” At once, Saizo was at a loss for words.

Until just two days earlier, they and the Azure Knights had been killing each other. Though, with the way things had played out, they had found themselves fighting on the same side, by rights such a thing should have been intolerable. Yet because the order had come from Olivia, the soldiers—Claudia herself included—had obeyed without so much as a discontented mutter. Like as not, the Azure Knights held similar feelings. Considered like that, there was nothing especially mysterious about the old man’s attitude.

“If you ask me, we ought to be happy that he took care of our horses,” she said. They rode on, skirting counterclockwise around a lake, until at last they arrived at the paddock the old man had directed them to. Each went to their trusty mount and led them out from inside the fence.

“I’m sorry I left you alone,” Claudia said to Kagura as the horse nuzzled her happily. Claudia stroked her cheek.

“The night’s getting on, ser. What do you say we set up camp around here for tonight?” Saizo suggested. But Claudia, hooking a foot into her stirrups to leap up onto Kagura’s back, shook her head.

“We’re close to the imperial capital here. Our best course is to get away before we’re caught up in any more trouble. And I want to know what became of the Eighth Legion after they went on ahead. You can’t fault me for that, not at a time like this.” As she spoke, her mind was on a certain young man.

“Understood.” Saizo passed along the instructions, and her soldiers all mounted up. “All ready now, ser.”

“Good, then move out.” At Claudia’s word, they set off at a gallop along the forest road, guided by the silver light of the moon.

They continued down that road for a time, until Saizo, who rode beside her, suddenly spoke. “I know it’s a bit late now, but do you really think General Olivia will be all right by herself? Looking the way she does, she stands out at the best of times...”

Claudia saw what he was getting at. If she were discovered by imperial soldiers who knew her face, there would be a panic like someone had kicked a hornet’s nest. But she replied, “It’s not a concern. On the contrary, we’d just get in her way.”

Claudia had decided that it was only fear for their safety that Olivia had pushed her away as coldly as she had. If this Darmés who was calling himself the new emperor was really controlling the dead, then there was no chance she and the others could have taken him on, even if they had remained. The last thing she had wanted to do was burden Olivia by staying behind.

*Not to mention that it’s brought us an unexpected opportunity.* Olivia likely thought nothing of it, but in going to see Darmés she was also going to confront the *emperor*. The man beneath the crown might have changed, but what had not changed was that if they captured the emperor, the Royal Army had won. That was a given. Olivia and Felix’s duel failing to produce a victor had meant, in real terms, a defeat for the Eighth Legion, but the moment Olivia had infiltrated

Listelein Castle, they might as well have had a knife at the empire's throat. Olivia simply wanted to ask Darmés questions, and Claudia didn't believe for a second that he would go along with it quietly.

Even if he *did* talk, he wouldn't be stupid enough to let her go on her way afterward—it was perfectly natural that he would take advantage of the opportunity to do away with his greatest enemy. And Olivia had neither mercy nor hesitation when someone drew steel against her. It was possible that Darmés did have power akin to the mages—the so-called hands of the gods—in which case he truly ought to be considered a serious threat. But after being always at Olivia's side, Claudia knew with certainty that she would not lose.

“Well, I don't know about you getting in the way, Colonel, but you're absolutely right about the rest of us. And it's not just me—anyone who had that waking dream of a battle play out in front of them would say the same.” Saizo's hollow laugh drifted through the night like dry leaves. It was still a long time until dawn...

The next day, the sun was hidden behind a bank of thick clouds. They had passed through the Elfiel Canyon and started up the mountain road to Fort Tezcapolis when Claudia and the others saw a great flock of death-eater birds up in the sky. Everyone knew why death-eater birds were known as the land's cleaners. What few knew was that they only fed upon relatively fresh meat. Even from a distance, it was clear that the birds were circling around the fort. The air between Claudia and her soldiers grew thick with tension.

“I've got a bad feeling about this, ser,” Saizo said.

“Yes. We'll make haste.”

Their horses picked up the pace from a steady trot into a full-on gallop. They climbed the gently sloping path through its snaking curves until they reached the top and saw Fort Tezcapolis.

*I knew it...* Claudia's eyes were drawn first to the flock of death-eater birds that pecked at the corpses strewn about. Some held up eyeballs in their beaks like victory trophies, while others could be seen here and there flapping their distinctive magenta wings at one another as they gleefully fought over slimy,

glistening innards. It was an everyday scene in the aftermath of a battle, but even so, it wasn't often that one saw it up close. Even Claudia, who had thought she was used to corpses, couldn't help but look away from the horror of it.

"The imperial army attacked? *Now?*" she breathed.

Saizo spat in disgust. "It's carnage, isn't it...?" The youngest soldier in their group watched a death-eater bird perched on a corpse. The bird let out a cry like the scraping of rusty armor, and the soldier doubled over and dry-heaved.

"For now, let's get rid of these scavengers." Claudia and the others brandished their swords at the death-eater birds and drove them away. Then, they set off once more at a steady pace, weaving between the scattered corpses as they took in the state of the fort. Though the style was very different, the imperial soldiers all wore armor that bore a remarkable resemblance to Olivia's.

"Some new knight order?" Saizo wondered. Claudia could see why he thought so—all the imperial army's knight orders had their soldiers wear armor in the same color.

"That seems likely," she replied.

"But something's off. The imperial army retook the fort, but left no garrison at all. Would anyone do that, normally?"

"Not normally, no."

"Exactly. Normally, it'd be out of the question."

"*If* things were normal..." Claudia looked down at a dead imperial soldier whose mouth was stretched in a horrible grin. All the others were in a similar state. Whatever this was, normal it was not. Even in death, she could still feel the madness within them.

"How can the empire even have the extra forces to mount a counterattack?" Saizo said. What with the Azure Knights' rebellion, one didn't have to be privy to the workings of the empire to guess that there was trouble afoot. Claudia understood Saizo's disbelief. The fact was, they had been too optimistic—herself included. After seeing this, she had no choice but to admit it.

*The question is, why were so many of our soldiers still at the fort? The bodies only look two or three days old, at most. They should have been long gone by then...* The order to abandon any forts they took, with the exception of Fort Astora, had come from Olivia, who was second-in-command in the Second Allied Legion. The only one who could have overruled her orders was none other than Supreme Commander Blood himself. Given the time frame, news of the Eighth Legion's situation had to have reached Blood. He might have issued additional orders, but Claudia couldn't believe he would have been so stupid as to *rescind* any.

"Colonel Claudia, there might be survivors inside the fort," Saizo said, requesting permission to search. Claudia thought quickly.

"We'll divide into two groups. Half will search for survivors. Be on your guard; there might be enemy survivors too. The other half will keep watch on the perimeter. Regroup here in an hour's time."

"Yes, ser!" her soldiers replied as one. They moved swiftly into action. Saizo led the search party, and they made their way cautiously into the fort. The next hour passed without any further news.

*It's about time they were back...* Claudia thought, shutting the pocket watch her father had given her. She had just given up on finding any survivors when Saizo came running up to her, his face pale.

"What is it?" she asked.

Saizo glanced around them several times too many, then hissed, "I have something to tell you in confidence."

Claudia was so shocked by what he whispered in her ear that before she knew what she was doing, she had used Swift Step and was rushing toward the fort. She flew down the staircase that led below ground, then along a narrow corridor. There, under the watch of a number of her soldiers, she saw a soldier sat propped up against the wall.

"Is it true?! Were the imperial forces who attacked the fort after Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?!" She rounded on the soldier, grabbing him hard by the shoulders. He was barely conscious, but his eyelids fluttered open halfway.

“Colonel...Claudia...” he murmured. “It’s...true...”

Claudia choked, then demanded, “And Lieutenant Colonel Ashton? Is Ashton safe?!” The soldier made no answer. “I asked you a question!” she shouted.

“Colonel Claudia.” A hand closed on her shoulder, and she spun around instinctively. “The man’s already dead...” It was Saizo, short of breath. All of Claudia’s strength left her, and she dropped limply to the floor.

“Why...why was Ashton here...?”

“Ser, let’s leave off the search and get out of here. I’ve gotten the others ready to leave.” Claudia complied, standing up sluggishly. The ground beneath her feet felt as insubstantial as clouds as she made her way back out of the fort. Kagura came over to her, whinnying in concern.

“That’s true,” Claudia said to the horse. “You’re right.” Under her soldiers’ mystified stares, she leaped up into the saddle. Then, she gave the order for them to move out from Fort Tezcapolis. Scarcely ten seconds later, the thunder of frenzied hoofbeats came from behind them. As Claudia rode hell-bent down the slope, the cries of the death-eater birds that circled in the sky above the fort sounded like mocking laughter.

“Colonel Claudia, slow down! The others can’t keep up! And you’ll ride the horses to death!” Claudia did not reply. “*Colonel!*”

She heard Saizo, of course. And from the sweat pouring off Kagura like never before, the horse was terribly tired. But the thought of Ashton made her refuse to slacken her pace. Her fears grew unchecked until they arrived at Fort Belganna, the imperial fort they had taken after Fort Astora. It was deserted.

*Here they clearly carried out the orders. So why? Why was Ashton still at Fort Tezcapolis?!* She slammed her fist into the wall.

Saizo, looking hesitant, said, “We should head on to Fort Astora.”

Claudia set off at a gallop. None of their voices reached her anymore...

## **Fort Astora**

When Lise received word that Claudia had returned, she was with Blood and a few other officers deliberating over the repairs to the fort. Twin Lions at Dawn

had failed in its objective of bringing them back from the brink, but Fort Astora had originally been built as a fortified outpost against invaders for Fernest, and it still had the potential to threaten the empire. Blood's opinion was that, after suffering its first loss of territory since its founding, the empire would have to reconsider its strategy going forward, and that was why one of his first orders after arriving at Fort Astora had been for repair work.

*I'm glad Claudia made it back safe, at least. The real fight is only just beginning, Lise Prussie. Time to step it up!* She swallowed her tea in a single gulp, then slapped her cheeks to marshal her spirits. "Right!"

Blood looked at her with worry, but Lise smiled at him. "I'll go to receive Colonel Claudia."

"Right. Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Ser!" Lise left the room, then, with a glance at the ongoing repairs to the outer walls, she set off briskly toward the gate. The guards had orders direct from their supreme commander that when Claudia returned, they were to keep her there.

The main gate came into view, and Claudia with it. She had her arms folded and was pacing back and forth in front of it. Even at this distance, it was clear she was annoyed. The guards who had to have borne the brunt of her anger were cowering so badly Lise felt sorry for them.

"Just how long do I—?!" Claudia caught sight of Lise. Shaking off the guards' attempts to hold her back, she approached. Lise raised a hand to signal to the panicked guards that all was well. Then, she turned to Claudia and gave a salute they could have put in a textbook for new recruits.

"Colonel Claudia! My sincere apologies for keeping you waiting, ser!"

"Is Ashton here or not?!"

Claudia, who set such store by rules and discipline, had never in Lise's memory raised her voice without so much as returning a salute before. Up close, her expression revealed a tangled knot of anger and impatience that she had never seen before. Lise could make out none of her usual levelheadedness.

*How she found out, I have no idea, but it's clear from how she's talking that*



*she knows something happened to Lieutenant Colonel Ashton. Nothing more specific than that, though. So that's where we are...*

"I asked you to tell me where Ashton is!" Claudia shouted. "You will answer me *now*, Lieutenant Colonel Lise!" Her hand shot out to grab Lise's collar, but Lise was faster, quickly knocking it aside. Shock bloomed on Claudia's face while Lise turned away from her.

"I'll take you to him," she said, doing away with formalities of rank. "Come on." Without waiting for an answer, she walked away. Claudia followed a few steps behind. Not another word passed between them until Lise had seen them to their destination.

"Lieutenant Colonel Ashton is in here." Lise pushed open the door to the small mausoleum contained within Fort Astora, then gestured for Claudia to enter.

Claudia's expression had changed completely. There was now undisguised panic in her eyes. "This is the mausoleum, isn't it...?" she said slowly. "What would Ashton be doing *here*? Stop joking around." At once, she turned and tried to leave.

"You already know, don't you?" Lise called after her, her voice cold. "You've lied to yourself long enough."

Claudia gaped at her. "I'm not *lying* to myself!"

Ignoring this, Lise walked over to the stone pedestal in the very back of the room. Light streamed in through a skylight in the ceiling, casting the stone in a dreamy glow. There was a white coffin atop the pedestal. Around it hung the scent of new wood.

"I don't understand. Lise, I don't understand what you're saying..."

"Hurry up and come here," Lise replied softly. "He'll have been waiting for you too."

Claudia's eyes flitted frantically this way and that, and her lips trembled. She looked nothing like the heir to the House of Jung now. It took her a long time to arrive before the coffin, moving in a series of small advances and retreats that spoke volumes for her emotional state.

“Ash...Ash...ton?”

At first glance, Ashton appeared as though he were only sleeping within the coffin. But the utter absence of warmth in his skin made it harshly apparent that blood no longer flowed in his veins. Lise had only spoken with Ashton on a few occasions. But even then she had understood why it was that Claudia, who was devoted to her sword to the point of stupidity and totally oblivious to matters of the heart, had fallen for this young man.

Claudia stood frozen, staring blankly at Ashton for what felt like around five minutes before her lips began to move in time once more.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m sorry...” Over and over again, the same apology spilled from her lips. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m sorry—”

Atonement suffused every word that poured forth from her. Lise silently watched this unspeakably cruel reunion between the two. As Claudia gazed down at Ashton, one fat tear then another spilled from her eyes.

Lise went over and wrapped her friend tightly in her arms. “There’s no one here but me,” she murmured. “So if you want to cry, you can cry.”

Claudia whimpered, then began to wail. Her anguish echoed through every corner of the mausoleum. Lise gently stroked Claudia’s hair—anything she could do to ease even a fraction of her grief.



### III

Twenty and four days had gone by since Olivia's training began. The lakefront, aglow in the light of the sunrise, was full not with the fierce clangor that had become practically routine, but rather the gentle chirping of little birds. For the first time in a long while, the lake welcomed a peaceful morning...

*This marks the completion of your training. You have done well.* Z addressed the ground where Olivia knelt on hand and knee, her shoulders heaving as she dripped sweat. Though it was no easy feat for her, brow furrowed with the effort it took to breathe, she managed a smile at this—the first words of praise Z had ever given her.

*As I warned you when we began, the sword technique you have learned is magical in nature and will consume even the wielder. The magic ruby may only be used once, and no more. Do not forget it.*

"Yeah..." Olivia replied between breaths. "I know." She braced her hands on her knees to get to her feet, then drew out the scarlet gem from her shirt. Squeezing it tight, she nodded determinedly. Z clicked its fingers.

"Wha—?!" Before she knew what was happening, Olivia found herself wrapped in Z's arms, just like the parents with their children she had sometimes seen in towns. She felt her cheeks rapidly grow hot. Z was staring away to the north. "Z, you're *embarrassing* me..." Olivia mumbled, squirming slightly.

*Xenia's puppet has not been subtle with his first move, it seems. People are waiting for you to return home. I will now take you to them.*

Before Olivia could get another word out, her vision undulated, again and again, until she found herself looking at the orange spires of the Emaleid Citadel.

*Z must have teleported us...* Based on the position of the sun, they were on the hill that lay to the southwest of Emaleid—but before she took her leave to head back to the citadel, there was something Olivia absolutely had to know.

Afraid of what she might hear, she asked, "Z, are you going to go away again?"

Z lowered her carefully onto the ground, then stroked her head. *You need not worry about that*, it said. Then, it melted away into the scenery.

*Z never, ever lies*, Olivia thought, filled with a deep sense of relief. *Thank goodness...* She interlinked her fingers over her head and stretched. Then she looked back at the spires of the Emaleid Citadel. *But why the Emaleid Citadel and not the royal capital? Did something happen before they got back?*

She made her way down a gently sloping path until it deposited her on the main road to the citadel. Not long after, she arrived at the familiar main gate. A guard she knew named Malkin called out to her with relief all over his face.

“General Olivia, I’m overjoyed to see you safe.”

“Yep, I’m safe and sound as can be, but...” Olivia hesitated. “Is everyone from the Eighth Legion here, then?”

“Yes ser. The Second Legion has returned too.”

“The Second Legion? What are they doing here?” Olivia asked at once. Consternation flashed across Malkin’s face.

“I am only a gate guard, my lady. I’m afraid I don’t have the answer to that...”

“Oh, right. Well, seeing as they’re here, I’ll just ask them myself.”

“I’m very sorry, my lady.” Malkin bowed deeply. Olivia waved, then set off for the military district. To get to the military district, however, one had to pass through the residential district. Sure enough, no sooner had she set foot into its streets than a delicious smell wafted over to her, prompting a riot of merriment from the orchestra in her stomach. *But we can’t right now...* she told them. Mostly for the reason that Ashton and the coin purse he carried weren’t there, she shook off all the smells, then picked up her pace. Then, out of nowhere, she heard a familiar voice.

“Here, over here!”

Olivia turned and, through a gap in the crowd, she caught a glimpse of a face she recognized. A smile broke across her face, and she waved enthusiastically.

“Mrs. Stallkeeper!”

“Budge up, I’m coming through.” The stallkeeper made her way over to Olivia,

using her large behind to bounce people out of her way in an impressive performance that Olivia couldn't have reproduced to save her life. Judging by the large paper bags in her arms, she was on her way home from shopping.

"I knew it was you the moment I saw that silver hair, Major General."

"It's 'Lieutenant General' now."

"Eh...?" For a moment, the woman froze like a statue. Then she inspected Olivia closely.

"Is it, now? Ah well, nothing's impossible where you're concerned, eh? Anyway, the important thing is you're safe." She said all this with a strained smile, her eyes flicking back and forth to either side of Olivia.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked.

"That lad's not with you today?"

"What lad? You mean Ashton? We split up during the battle, so no, he's not with me. I only just made it back now."

"That right? I don't know, after only ever seeing the two of you together, it feels off seeing you alone..." The woman leaned in to put her mouth to Olivia's ear. "On that note, was there some trouble in the army? Thing is, every soldier I see looks so grim, I wondered if the war had taken another turn for the worse. Oh, but I'm being silly. It's not as though you can answer me anyway, Lieutenant General."

Olivia, unable to get a word in edgewise, felt a little overwhelmed. "Um, well, yes. I am a soldier and all..." she mumbled. Because Twin Lions at Dawn had been kept secret from the general populace, all she could do was try to laugh it off.

"Ah well. Never mind that. Now, take these with you." The stallkeeper's hand thrust into the paper bag, then came back out with two cloudy peaches. She placed one in each of Olivia's hands.

"For me? You know I don't have any money, right?"

"Don't be silly. I bet you're hungry."

"You can tell, huh? I actually didn't even get to have breakfast before I left, so

I'm starving." As she took the cloudy peaches, the orchestra in her stomach crescendoed to a frenzy.

"When you get to my age, you pick up on these things straightaway," the woman said, her belly bouncing as she laughed heartily. Olivia stared at her, wondering if *her* belly would bounce like that when she got to the same age. She thought that might be fun in its own way.

"Anyhow, I'd best be off," the woman said. "I'm sorry to have waylaid you when you're in a hurry."

"Don't be sorry," Olivia replied. "Thanks for these."

"You needn't thank me. Just mind you don't take too many risks." With that, the stallkeeper set off once more, nudging passersby out of her way with her bottom until she disappeared into the crowd.

Olivia tucked into one of the cloudy peaches as she continued on her way to the military district. Its aroma and refreshing sweetness filled her mouth.

*Mmmm!* In the blink of an eye, she'd polished off one peach. Just as she was about to pop the second into her mouth, she pulled up short. *Come to think of it, Ashton said he likes cloudy peaches too...* She remembered him munching on a peach with relish. The orchestra in her stomach was clamoring for her to hurry up with the second peach. Olivia gave it a long look, then tucked it away in her bag. *Ashton will be so pleased.* As she pictured the happy look he would give her, Olivia couldn't help but smile.

She arrived at the military district with a spring in her step. In sharp contrast to the hustle and bustle of the residential district, the gloom that hung in the air was palpable. Given the despondent looks on the soldiers' faces, it was not simply her imagination.

*I wonder what happened. Is it because Twin Lions at Dawn failed?* Darmés's interference had dashed any hope of success for the operation, but Olivia thought they ought to have more than enough opportunities to recover the situation. As such, the atmosphere puzzled her.

She started up the long stone staircase to the commander's station, when,

partway up, she spotted Evanson engaged in conversation with a few other soldiers, his expression grim. The moment their eyes met, Evanson practically fell over himself rushing down to reach her.

“You were so late in returning I was worried.”

Olivia laughed. “Sorry about that. I was doing a bit of training for the first time in ages.”

“You what? *Training?*”

“But forget that. Is everyone depressed about something or what?”

“Well...” Evanson seemed to hesitate before he told her in a mutter that she should ask Claudia directly. Olivia was confused, but agreed to do just that, then headed into the building that housed the commander’s station. She returned the salutes of the soldiers she passed on the way until she arrived at the quarters of the second-in-command—her own rooms. She opened the door and saw through the window that it was raining.

*It wasn’t raining just before. Oh well. I’ll take a break, then go and find Claudia and Ashton.* She opened the large bay window behind her work desk, then bopped the gray rabbit soft toy that sat on the windowsill. Claudia had found the stark emptiness of the room so unbearable that she had left it there, looking mortified all the while. Olivia took off the bag from her waist, then placed the cloudy peach the stallkeeper had given her on the desk. Then, she swiveled the chair around to face the window and leaned slowly back. The soft pitter-patter of the rain was soothing. Drowsiness crept over her, and she was just drifting off when there was a half-hearted knock on the door. Olivia sensed at once that it was Claudia, but it didn’t *sound* like the Claudia she knew. That was enough to banish all her sleepiness.

“Come on in.”

Even though it hadn’t been so very long, the sound of Olivia’s voice filled Claudia with nostalgia as she opened the door. But then, when she thought about it, it was only natural given they had scarcely been apart since she had first been assigned as Olivia’s aide.



Olivia sat in a chair with its back facing away from her, staring out the window. With the sound of the rain in her ears, Claudia came up to the desk, then clicked her heels smartly and saluted.

“I’m glad to see you safe, General...”

“I was just taking a break before going to find you,” Olivia said. “But Claudia, what happened? You sound really down.” Olivia didn’t turn around to face her, for which Claudia was extremely grateful. She felt like she might start shaking at any moment, so she clenched her fists to hold it at bay as she forced herself to string words together.

“Ser, I have a report for you. Two weeks prior, the imperial army mounted an ambush on Fort Tezcapolis. Lieutenant Colonel Ashton Senefelder was killed in the fighting, along with at least four hundred of his soldiers.”

The silence could not have lasted more than ten seconds, but to Claudia it seemed like an eternity. She felt as though she was suffocating as she waited for Olivia to speak.

Olivia did not so much as twitch. “I didn’t understand you just now, Claudia. Could you repeat that?”

“As many times as you wish.” Claudia repeated her report, identical down to the letter. “Two weeks prior, the imperial army mounted an ambush on Fort Tezcapolis. Lieutenant Colonel Ashton Senefelder was killed in the fighting, along with at least four hundred of his soldiers.”

There was a slight creak as Olivia’s chair slowly turned. At the sight of her, Claudia’s breath caught in her throat. Olivia’s face, usually so expressive, was now entirely devoid of anything resembling emotion. Meanwhile, her ebony black eyes seemed to have grown even darker. For the first time, Claudia felt afraid of her.

*I do not understand you, Claudia.*

“G-General...?”

*I said that I do not understand you.*

“General, forgive me, I don’t know...” The cold, inhuman sounds that issued

from Olivia's mouth seemed to be a language, one that sounded at once like the irregular droning and keening of an insect cry, and also like a song. Either way, it was totally incomprehensible to Claudia.

She stood there at a loss, Olivia's eyes boring into her. Then, Olivia slammed her fist down on the table. There was a mighty *crack* and the whole thing broke clean in half. A cloudy peach rolled onto the floor, coming to a stop at the toe of Claudia's boot.

"Are you deaf? I'm telling you that this joke isn't funny!"

"I'm not *joking*!" Claudia exclaimed. "Ser, do you seriously think this is something I would...I would *joke* about?"

Oh, if only it *had* been a joke. When Claudia had come face-to-face with Ashton's body, her world had grown dark and cold. Even now, her memories of what had happened after were hazy, as though obscured by mist. All she did remember was being held in Lise's arms. It had been two weeks since she had learned of Ashton's death, but just the thought that she would never again see his smile or hear his voice made her shake.

But Ashton was not the only one who had died. Many of their soldiers had fallen in the battle, Gile among them. When seen in the light of all the lives that had been lost so far, it was unacceptable that the aide to the commander of the Eighth Legion should allow herself to wallow in grief over a single soldier. Every moment, Claudia sternly reminded herself that the war was not over yet.

"There is more, General," she said. "Marshal Cornelius, Senior General Paul, and Brigadier General Otto all lost their lives in the battle with the undead."

Olivia stared down at the worktable she had destroyed, then, without another word, she started walking toward the door. Claudia reacted instinctively to place herself in the way.

"Move."

"Where are you going, ser?"

"Where else would I be going? I'm going to murder the human who killed Ashton and the undead who killed Grandpa Cornelius and Grandpa Paul and Otto."

“You can’t possibly know which soldier in the imperial army killed Ashton, to say nothing of the dead who killed the three commanders.”

“Then I’ll kill the whole lot of them!”

“Lieutenant General Olivia!” Claudia barked. “This is war. In war, people die easily. Those are the words you always said to the soldiers.”

“Colonel Claudia Jung,” Olivia replied at length. “I order you to move aside *right now*.”

“I do not accept that order. You are not just any soldier, ser, you are the general in command of the Eighth Legion. I will not stand by any longer while you put your personal feelings above your duty.”

“All right. Then I quit the army. Now you’ve got no grounds to stop me.”

“You—?!” Claudia exclaimed. “I am still not letting you go, and that’s final!”

If Olivia had really wanted to, she could have eliminated Claudia without breaking a sweat. But Claudia still grabbed hold of her to try and stop her.

“Let me go.”

“I will not!”

Olivia didn’t drag herself from Claudia’s grip; instead, she started walking without another word, and Claudia found herself bodily dragged along.

“Get yourself under control, for Ashton’s sake!” she burst out. Olivia stopped short, then looked furiously at Claudia.

“For Ashton’s sake?! He’s dead, and you’re...! Claudia, aren’t you even *sad*?!”

“How the hell could I not be sad?!” Claudia shoved Olivia away from her as hard as she could. Olivia stumbled a few steps, a look of utter surprise on her face. “Of course I’m sad,” Claudia went on. “I still can’t sort out everything I’ve been feeling since I heard he was dead. Every day I ask myself why I wasn’t there when he needed me most, and the guilt I feel only grows. But even then, even *then*, I have no choice but to move forward.”

She fell silent for a moment, then continued, “Ashton once said there was so much he wanted to do when peace returned. For us, the ones left behind, we’re

the only ones left who have the power to bring about the peace he so wished for. In other words, ending this war. After all that time that Ashton fought when he never wanted to fight, this is what I can do for him... That's why I'm...why right now...just for now..." Claudia let out a sob, her tears splashing on the floor. Olivia sat down there and then and began to bawl like a child.

The rain did not let up for three days and three nights, as though it too sympathized with the two in their grief.



## IV

### The Military District of the Emaleid Citadel

It was well after lunch when Claudia realized she couldn't see Olivia.

*Where has the general gotten to?* Starting out with the mess hall, she searched everywhere she could think of, but Olivia was nowhere to be found. She asked Ellis, Evanson, and the others she passed on the way if they knew Olivia's whereabouts, but they only shook their heads helplessly.

*Gile would probably have had no trouble guessing where she is. He was always boasting about how there was nothing about the general he didn't know...* Sometimes it was only after losing someone that their worth revealed itself, and Gile was a case in point. Love him or hate him, Gile had breathed energy into the Eighth Legion. As though to get away from the memory of his face, Claudia unconsciously increased her pace. After that, she went through the commander's station from top to bottom, but could not find Olivia anywhere.

*If I still haven't found her, that means...*

She could only think of one other place that Olivia was likely to go. Claudia left the military district, her feet carrying her into the rows of shops and businesses of the residential district.

### The Residential District

"Nice cuts of ash boar in store today!"

"Get in quick for the ripest cloudy peaches!" Animated voices called out from the shops lining the streets. As always, the residential district bustled with throngs of folk going about their business.

*This is a world away from how things were while we were fighting the Crimson Knights. I suppose it's just a sign of how much time has passed. Still, if only the people knew how things stand for the kingdom right now...*

Cornelius had practically been Fernest's guardian deity. When the people learned of his death, along with that of Paul, supreme commander of the

Seventh Legion and the fearsome God of the Battlefield, the despair it would inspire was easy to imagine. With the arrival of the dead pressed into service to the empire, Fernest was facing a crisis like nothing ever before.

*Even then, if Ashton were still alive...! No, stop it! Get it together, Claudia, or then where will you be?!* She slapped her cheeks to drive Ashton's smiling face out of her mind, then, spotting a shop that Olivia might have stopped off at, she started asking around.

Thirty minutes passed. As she finished questioning her tenth shopkeeper, Claudia couldn't help a wry smile. *It seems the general has really won the hearts of the people of Emaleid.* The fact that Olivia was known in every shop she went into had been surprising in and of itself, but what really stood out was the way they all talked about her as if she were part of their own family. She inquired further, but only got more of the same. At last, Claudia came to a stop.

*I thought she'd be here...* she thought. *Honestly, where can she have gone?* As she stood there at a loss in the middle of the street, someone tapped her on the shoulder. Claudia turned and found herself face-to-face with a woman of generous proportions. The woman was a total stranger to her.

"I beg your pardon, but have we met?" she said.

"We haven't, but would I be right in thinking you to be Lady Claudia?"

"Er, yes, that's right, but..." As Claudia tried to make sense of how the woman had accurately guessed who she was, the woman, pointing out that they were in the way here in the middle of the street, led her beneath the eaves of a closed shop.

"I'm terribly sorry to stop you when you're busy with your military duties."

"I'm not worried about that, but how did you know my name?"

"Our little lieutenant talks about you all the time, Lady Claudia. I wondered when I saw you, and so I took the liberty of coming over." The woman was looking at her with a satisfied smile.

Claudia tilted her head. "'Little lieutenant'?" she repeated.

"Young girl, silver hair so beautiful you'd think she was an angel?"

“Ah.” There was only one person Claudia knew of with silver hair, and once she’d mentioned angels, it was clear the woman meant Olivia. This at once dispelled all her doubts. What the connection was, Claudia had no idea, but apparently this woman and Olivia were acquainted.

“You really are just like our little lieutenant says, you know,” the woman said, giving her a thorough looking-over. Claudia was more than a little surprised to learn that Olivia had talked about her. What concerned her more, however, was *what* had been said.

“So, ah... What did Lieutenant General Olivia have to say about me?”

“She said you have very pretty eyes, that you are noble and kind, and also that you are *stunningly* beautiful.”

“O-Oh.” It was so far from what she had been expecting that Claudia could only stammer incoherently. “The, um, the general said all that...?”

“Now, the reason I called you out of your way like this. It’s none other than our little lieutenant herself...” The woman’s cheery expression grew serious.

“The general—did something happen to Lieutenant General Olivia?”

“It was about two hours back; I happened to catch sight of her. It—”

“You what?! Where was this?!” Claudia demanded, so surprised that this woman of all people knew something about Olivia’s whereabouts that she took a step toward her.

Looking alarmed, the woman turned to look over her shoulder and said, “She was heading straight down the street just past here—”

According to the woman, she had happened to catch sight of Olivia in the warehouse district. She had been about to call out to her, but Olivia’s expression was so forbidding that she’d hesitated.

“She’s usually such a cheerful girl that it made me wonder, you know. You wouldn’t have any ideas, would you, Lady Claudia?” It was obvious from how the woman spoke that this was not mere talk—she was genuinely concerned for Olivia. Naturally, Claudia *did* have an idea, but that was all the more reason she couldn’t tell this woman about it.



“I... No, I don’t,” Claudia lied, feeling wretched. From the look that came over the woman’s face, she was not deceived.

“No matter how important a general she might be, she’s still only a child. She really seems to trust you, Lady Claudia. I only ask you take good care of her.” The woman bowed deeply. Her hands were clenched tight in front of her apron. She must have loved Olivia as though she were her own daughter. Otherwise, she would never have been able to make such a gesture to a total stranger.

“Ma’am, I understand,” Claudia said. “Please stop bowing.” From a certain angle, it might have looked like she was a soldier abusing her power over a civilian—and indeed, a few of the passersby were sending them sideways looks. But the woman raised her head.

“Wish that young man well for me too. From what I’ve seen, our little lieutenant relies on him just as much as you, my lady.”

Claudia understood at once who she was talking about. In the same moment, she felt a stabbing pain in her chest, as though a thorny vine had wrapped itself around her heart.

“Yes, of...course...I’ll tell him...”

“Lady Claudia?”

“Well, I’d best run. Excuse me, ma’am.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Wait! You don’t mean something happened—!”

Shaking off the woman’s attempt to stop her, Claudia ran. She didn’t need a mirror to know what a miserable sight she must be.

Quite unlike the residential district, the streets of the warehouse district were almost empty. Claudia made her way confidently past laborers carrying what were probably food supplies into a storehouse until she reached the main gate. There, she called out to the guard.

“Private Malkin, has General Olivia passed the gate?”

“Colonel Claudia?!” Malkin spluttered. “Ser, I can’t tell you what an honor it is that you remembered my name!”

“I *would* appreciate it if you answered my question,” Claudia said with a crooked smile.

“Just so, ser,” Malkin replied hastily. “Did, um, something happen to Lieutenant General Olivia? I don’t mean to presume too much, ser, but she looked a bit out of sorts.”

“Nothing you need concern yourself with, Private. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, ser! Begging your pardon!” Malkin saluted. Claudia pressed straight on without hesitation. She had a good idea now of where Olivia had gone.

*She was here, after all...* Claudia’s destination was a hill not far from the citadel, a picturesque location that overlooked all of Emaleid. There, resting her hand on a broad-leafed elma tree, stood Olivia. With her long, silver hair rippling in the breeze, Claudia thought she looked beautiful, but also ephemeral, as though she might disappear.

After a while, Olivia, without looking around, said, “I’m impressed you worked out I was here.”

Claudia came over to stand beside her, gazing down at Emaleid just as Olivia was doing. “I remembered Ashton telling us how he liked to lean up against this elma tree and read. I thought if there was somewhere you’d go...”

“Ah...” Olivia said. “Hey Claudia, do you know about the effects of elma trees? They’re fascinating.”

“Effects, General?”

“Right. Humans find the scent of its leaves very calming.”

“The elma tree has that property? I had no idea...” Claudia looked up with fresh eyes at the tree. It must have stood as tall as ten men. The leaves that spread out in a lush canopy over the hill *did* have a distinctive aroma.

Olivia reached out and plucked off a leaf, then held it up to her nose and quietly closed her eyes.

“It made me think—if the whole world were covered in elma trees, maybe then humans wouldn’t fight with each other anymore. War would just be something you read about in books.”

“I...”

Claudia knew very well that there was nothing so human as the act of war. So long as there were humans in the world, there would also be war. It was one side of a coin, and peace was the other—history had proved this time and again.

While Claudia struggled to think of a reply, Olivia linked her fingers, then stretched up toward the sky.

“Before Twin Lions at Dawn, Ashton and I came up here loads to read on our days off. We brought our favorite books and swapped them. Ashton would lean up against the elma tree, just like you said, and I’d lie on the ground next to him, and we’d read. Come to think of it, for some reason most of the books he brought were adventure stories. I finished them straightaway, so I’d just doze off there on the ground. Then when I woke up, we ate whatever Ashton made for us together. He used to laugh at me and say I seemed more interested in eating than reading. After I’d read my book from cover to cover—pretty rude, don’t you think?”

Those scant few days of quiet, ordinary life with Ashton in the midst of a bitter war were clearly a cherished memory for Olivia. Indeed, a smile lit up her face as she spoke. To Claudia, however, Olivia looked for all the world as though she were about to cry, and the sight made her chest grow suffocatingly tight.

A soft breeze wove its way over the hill, setting Claudia’s hair gently swaying. A butterfly perched on a white flower spread its wings, ready to take flight.

“Do you remember me saying there were lots of things Ashton wanted to do when we had peace again?” Claudia asked.

“Yes, of course,” Olivia replied.

“Well, there really were a *lot*. I laughed my head off when he listed them off and told him even with three of himself, he’d never get through it all. One of them was to travel and see the world. He said there’s a limit to what you can learn from books, and so it was important to really see and hear and touch all sorts of things. I’m sure that’s why he brought you so many adventure books.”

“Huh, so Ashton wanted to see the world...?” Olivia said. For a while, the two

fell silent. Then, Claudia took a cracked pen from her pocket for Olivia to see.

“Is that...?”

“I’m told you gave it to Ashton as a present. Getting a gift from you must have made him very happy. It seems he kept it close at all times.” Claudia held out the pen. “I am returning it to you, General.”

With a tiny shake of her head, Olivia refused to take it. “I gave it to Ashton. You hold on to it, Claudia. I’m sure that’s what Ashton wants too.”

“I-I can’t!” Olivia stared at her in confusion as Claudia grabbed her hand and wrapped her fingers around the pen. Claudia had the sense she didn’t know what to do.

“Claudia...”

“I can’t... I... Ashton wanted you to have it, General, I’m sure of that.”

“He didn’t—”

“He *did*,” Claudia insisted. Olivia looked more confused than ever.

*I’m sure Ashton would have...*

Claudia took a few steps back, then saluted with a loud click of her heels.

“There is a war council scheduled for noon tomorrow, ser,” she announced, then, without waiting for Olivia to reply, she walked quickly down the hill. In her thoughts all the while was that she had realized her feelings too late.

Left alone once more, Olivia thought over Claudia’s stubborn refusal to take the pen, but got no closer to understanding it. She’d started to feel like Claudia and Ashton made sense to her, but perhaps in reality, she hadn’t understood them at all.

She thought about what came next. *I actually managed to see Z, after searching for all that time. Now that I’ve achieved my goal, I don’t have any reason to stay in the Royal Army. Claudia would still be my friend even if I left, and the same goes for all the others. When I said I’d quit the army, Claudia was*

*against it, but I'm sure she'd be happy for me in the end. I mean, there's no one anywhere as kind as she is...*

A memory came back to her, drawn forth by the pen she still held in her hand. It was a memory of Ashton.

"To think the day would come that Olivia Valedstorm would ask me to teach her how to use money. There'll be thunderstorms tomorrow if we're lucky—worst case, fire and brimstone raining from above." Ashton looked up at the sky and shivered.

"You're so funny, Ashton," Olivia said, laughing. "You know you're probably one of the funniest humans alive."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'funniest humans alive'? I actually half believe it— Augh!" As Ashton looked about to walk straight by their destination, Olivia grabbed him by the back of his collar.

"We're here."

"You—*ack, ack!*—you just about killed me!" Ashton choked out, then looked around them. "*This* is the place?"

"Yep. Come on, let's go in."

"Are you sure this is right? Just in case, you know they don't sell food, right?"

"I know *that*." Olivia took no notice of Ashton's frown as he looked up at the sign, taking his hand and pulling him over the threshold. Inside the dimly lit store, the shelves were crammed with all sorts of bits and pieces, just as they had been last time.

"I want to buy this." Without further ado, Olivia reached into the back of a shelf and pulled out—

"A pen? What? You want a pen?"

"Yep." Olivia twirled the pen between her fingers. Ashton gave her an intense look. Olivia thought he might bore a hole in her if he kept staring like that.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right? That's not a pen-shaped cake. It's a real pen."

“I feel like you’re being mean to me...” Olivia said, before continuing as though she’d never stopped. “Anyway, do you think this is enough money?” She unstrapped her purse from her belt and opened it up to show Ashton. As he peered inside, his eyes widened.

“Just a minute, there’s nothing but Estorian gold coins in there!”

“It isn’t enough?”

“Forget ‘enough,’ with this you could buy the whole store and then some. *One* of these would be too much.”

“So one coin will do it! Got it.” Olivia cheerfully took the pen over to the shopkeeper, then produced a single gold coin. “I want to exchange this coin for this pen.”

The shopkeeper gaped at the coin, then at Olivia.

“Is there something on my face?” she asked seriously.

“Er, no, ma’am...” the shopkeeper stammered. “Am I correct in my understanding that you wish to make a purchase?”

Olivia confirmed this. The shopkeeper gaped at the coin again. “Er, much as it pains me to show disrespect to one of our soldiers...” He hesitated. “Would you mind if I took a look at that?”

Olivia only cocked her head at him, so Ashton answered for her. “Not at all. Inspect it however you like.”

The shopkeeper thanked him for the permission, then took a set of scales down from a shelf and set about authenticating the coin. It looked like a difficult task with Olivia watching him so closely that her nose almost touched the scales.

After a while, the shopkeeper looked up. “I apologize for the wait. This is undoubtedly an Estorian gold coin.”

“Huh? You thought it might be a fake?”

“Huh?”

Olivia and the shopkeeper stared at each other with identical expressions of

surprise, albeit for different reasons.

Ashton sighed quietly. “Olivia, the value of Estorian gold is so high that ordinary stores don’t deal in it.”

“How come? I mean, it’s all money, isn’t it?”

“It’s all money, but we use different kinds of money depending on the situation. Look, I’d be happy to explain in detail, but you’re not interested either way, are you?”

Olivia shook her head at top speed. “Nope, absolutely, one hundred percent zero interest. Money’s just as massive a pain as I thought.” She looked like she was already sick to death of the whole thing as she accepted her change, then dropped it carelessly into her purse. She then picked up her purchase and immediately held it out to Ashton.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“I’m giving it to you.”

“But you just bought it...” Ashton stopped short. “Wait. Could it be that you bought it for *me*?”

“That’s exactly it,” Olivia replied matter-of-factly.

“Why this, all of a sudden...?” Ashton stammered. “I mean, this is silly...”

“It’s not silly at all. I mean, you have to write reports and stuff as part of your military duties, right? That’s why I thought it’d be good for you.”

“I can’t believe you...” Ashton said, incredulous. “What’re you always going and surprising me for? Basically, you’re giving me a present?”

“Right. I mean, it would be silly if I used your money to buy your own present, wouldn’t it? With all the things I’ve learned, I know at least *that* much,” Olivia said proudly, planting her legs apart.

Ashton was quiet for a moment. “Thank you, Olivia. I’ll take good care of it.”

Olivia still remembered with clarity the quiet smile on his face as, handling the pen as though it were a priceless treasure, he had tucked it away in his pocket.

She could tell at once from the way it still gleamed as bright as the day she had bought it that up until it had cracked, he really had taken good care of it.

*Ashton...* she thought, slipping the pen into her pocket just as Ashton had done on that day. As she did so, she remembered what Z had said.

*This war was the doing of Xenia and its puppet. If I defeat them both, the war will end. And then...* Olivia looked down at the magic ruby that glittered at her breast, then drew the ebony blade from its scabbard. Z, she said silently, *give me the strength to see this through to the end.* She held the blade to her heart.

After that, she lay down on the hilltop and let the day pass in silence until the clouds drifting across the sky turned vermilion.

The girl left that hill with her heart full of new resolve.

As though in answer to her, black mist coiled up from the ebony blade.

To be continued in *Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 7: Finale.*





# Afterword

To my readers—it's been too long. This is Ayamine, full of dread at how fast time seems to have been slipping by lately.

As I touched on at the end of volume six, the plan was for this to be the final volume. But after cramming in all the bits and pieces I needed to wrap the story up, it ended up split into two parts. The only one to blame is me and my inability to keep my plots from wandering. Still, I hope you will be generous enough to bear with me to the end.

Olivia hardly appeared in this volume, despite being the main character, but you can expect to see her back in the starring role in the final volume!

Now for the customary acknowledgments. To Higuchi-sama, my editor. Thank you for your astute advice as I put together this manuscript! Next, Cierra-sama, the illustrator. I am sure you had your work cut out for you with the many new characters who appeared in this volume, but you drew them all beautifully, and for that, I am extremely grateful!

To all of my readers, I hope to see you again in the final volume!

Maito Ayamine



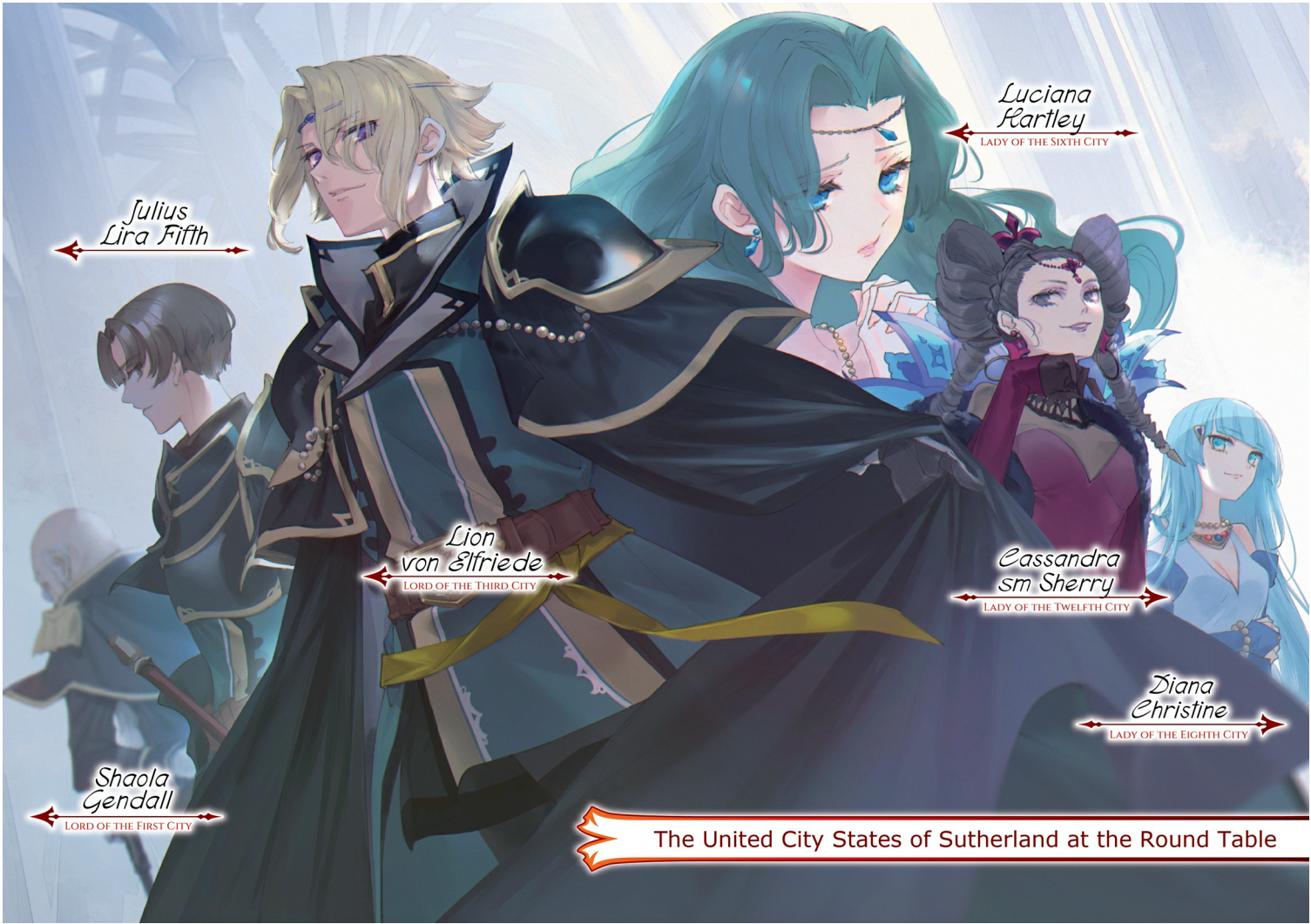
◆ MAITO  
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.  
CIERRA

Deaths  
DAUGHTER  
AND THE  
Ebony  
BLADE

VII  
EXORDIUM







Ashton  
Senefelder

Olivia  
Valedstorm





◆ MAITO  
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.  
CIERRA

Death's  
DAUGHTER  
AND THE  
Ebony  
BLADE

VII  
EXORDIUM

# Bonus Short Stories

## Private Academy Z: Senior Year! — Home Room

Mr. Otto entered the classroom just as the bell rang, his steps clipped and precise as he drew up to the teacher's lectern.

"Let's begin homeroom."

Claudia, the student representative for their year, called, "All rise!" They stood up together, every face gripped by the same tense expression.

"—Gile!"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Your fingers are curling! Straighten them out!"

"Understood, ma'am!"

"And you, Ellis!"

There was a pause, then—"Yeah?"

"Your skirt is five millimeters too short!"

"Oh, like you can tell from that distance!"

"Well, then. Let's measure it, shall we?" Pulling a tape measure from her pocket, Claudia unfurled it with a *snap*. Ellis raised her hands in surrender.

"All right, all right! I'll fix it, okay? I'll fix it!" She hurriedly slipped off her blazer, grumbling under her breath as she rolled her skirt back down to its original length.

*The rest*—Claudia looked around—*seem to be in order*. With a nod, she went on.

"Bow!" she shouted. "Be seated!" There was a clatter of chairs being pulled out. When it settled, Mr. Otto picked up the class roll from the desk.

“Roll call,” he announced. “Olivia...” No answer came. “Olivia Valedstorm?”

“Olivia is probably late again today, Mr. Otto,” Claudia said, looking at the chair to her left.

Otto let out an irritated sigh. “Late *again*. Has the girl ever been on time?”

“So far this term, only on Sports’ Day.” In fact, she had been *early* that day.

*She was really looking forward to Sports’ Day, huh*, Claudia had thought with a healthy dose of exasperation.

“Here she is.” Straight A student Ashton tapped her on the back. As Claudia looked over to the corridor, she heard light footfalls approaching. The attention of every student went to the corridor. The door flew open.

“Goowohming ebweewom!” There was Olivia, bread sticking out of her mouth as usual, waving breezily at her classmates.

Otto massaged his temple. “At least do something about the bread in your mouth.”

Olivia nodded, and in the blink of an eye, the bread was gone.

“Good morning, everyone!” she repeated. “And to you, Mr. Otto!”

“You are to say, ‘I’m sorry I’m late, Mr. Otto.’ How many times do I have to tell you?”

Olivia looked perplexed. “Don’t you get sick of saying the same thing every day, Mr. Otto?”

“You think so? Then don’t be late. And stop coming to school with bread in your mouth.”

“Huh? But when it comes to being late, the beauty of form is in coming to school with bread in your mouth, isn’t it?”

“There is no *beauty of form* in being late!” Otto exclaimed, then sighed. “Oh, just forget it. Sit down. Talking to you makes my head ache.”

“Okaaay!” Mr. Otto’s reprimand rolled off her like water off a duck’s back. With her long silver hair and her skirt rippling behind her, Olivia went to her seat.



The boys stared at her, practically drooling, but when Ellis gave them a murderous glare, they quickly turned away. Just like they did every day. The heavy sigh Claudia heard from behind her was another everyday occurrence. Ashton had the great misfortune of having grown up with Olivia.

“Good morning, Claudia.” Sitting down, Olivia gave her a wave and a smile.

*Another day of falling victim to Olivia’s whims...* Claudia looked at Olivia, who the boys of Private Academy Z called the Angel of Angels, and let out a sigh even deeper than Ashton’s.

## First Period

After homeroom finished, Ashton and the others went to the changing room, got into their gym uniforms, and then assembled on the field in front of the school building where Blood was waiting.

“Look who’s here,” he said. “The infamous troublemakers of third-year Class 9.”

“Mr. Blood, I request an immediate amendment! Infamous only applies to a few students!” Claudia, the student representative, shot a glare at Gile and Gauss. They looked away innocently, failing to look natural. Also on the receiving end of Claudia’s glare was Olivia, who was cheerfully amusing herself with some ants on the ground.

Blood gave a long-suffering smile. “I don’t envy Mr. Otto,” he said. “Now, today’s class. You will compete...to see who can fall asleep the fastest.”

More than half the class looked bewildered. The first one to speak up was Claudia.

“This is just you wanting a morning nap, isn’t it, Mr. Blood? Hungover, I expect. I’ll be reporting this to Principal Z.”

Under Claudia’s icy gaze, Blood’s face went comically stiff. Then, he clapped his hands like nothing had happened.

“Jokes aside, today we’ll be doing short distance running. Let’s get started. I want you in pairs doing your warm up exercises.” He got up on the hall stage,

then sat down, crossing his legs.

While the others went on finding partners without any trouble, Ashton looked around desperately. Just when he was about to call out to Evanson, a voice came from behind him.

“Ashton, let’s be partners!”

“No thanks. Go find another girl to pair up with.” Even if they were childhood friends, she was still a girl—and the school’s “Angel of Angels” to boot. Ashton, not interested in having every boy in the school jealous of him, tried to refuse, but Olivia placed a hand on each of his shoulders and forced him into sitting.

“I said ‘no,’ didn’t I?!”

“Come on, spread your legs out.”

“Listen when people talk to you!” Ashton kept grumbling, but he spread his legs as he was told. With both hands, Olivia slowly pushed down on his back.

“You’re stiff, huh, Ashton?”

“I’m on the flexible side, actually. You’re the weird one, the way you bend like an octopus.”

Olivia laughed. “You’re always so funny, Ashton.”

“I was absolutely not trying to be funny.”

“Okay, here we go!”

“Huh? What do you mean—wait! Ow ow ow owwww!”

Olivia pushed down on his back with her whole body. Ashton howled with pain, but then— “Ashton, you bastard! Think you can get cozy with Olivia, huh?!”

“I’d die happy if only Olivia would do that to *me*!”

“Every boy in the school wants that and can’t have it, but just because Ashton’s her childhood friend, he makes it look easy... All I can think is how much I want to kill the guy.”

“Dude, I’ve been itching to murder him forever.”

Building on Olivia's physical assault, the mental assault from the boys mounted in ferocity.

*Do they seriously think things ended up this way because I wanted— What in the?!*

Imposing itself into Ashton's vision as it hung down from a window in the school building was an enormous banner upon which was written GO TO HELL, ASHTON.

Next came the icing on the cake.

"Shall I just go ahead and cut off the eyes, nose, and mouth, then?"

The terrifying words floated up out of nowhere. The boys who had been so unreservedly wishing him ill all suddenly looked at him with sympathy.

Ashton looked at the source of the voice. Claudia's smile was glacier cold.

*I don't know what's going on, but at this rate, I'm going to get murdered by the student repre...oh.*

A sound he absolutely under no circumstances could be hearing rang brightly in his ears.

"H-Hey...Olivia...?" With a jerking motion like a rusty hinge, Ashton tilted his head to one side.

"Went a bit far, huh?" Beside him, Olivia was laughing.

It took Ashton two weeks to make a full recovery...

## **Second Period**

"What've we got second period again?" Gile asked, fanning his face with his pencil board. Ashton finished changing into his uniform, then replied, "Next, it's...math with Ms. Lassara, yeah."

"Blegh!"

"My, my. From the enthusiasm in your voice, I gather you're excited for class, Gile."

Gile froze in the midst of fanning himself. His eyes, full of dread, swiveled to the classroom door where Lassara stood, lips curling in the shape of a crescent moon.

“Oy! Why didn’t you tell me sooner Lassy was—gah!” The chalk hit Gile square in the face, and he doubled over in agony. Lassara mounted the special stool student representative Claudia had arranged for to accommodate her childlike stature, then dropped a stack of papers on the teacher’s lectern with a thud. In the same moment, the bell rang to announce the start of second period. Claudia rose from her chair.

“All rise!” she shouted, then added, “Gile!”

“Understood, ma’am!”

There was a pause. “You know I haven’t told you off yet?”

“Crap. Sorry, conditioned response.” Rubbing his cheek, Gile poked his tongue out.

“Your tie is crooked.”

“Understood, ma’am!”

Claudia went on. “Bow! Be seated!”

Lassara looked around the class, then nodded with satisfaction. “This class has more than its fair share of troublemakers, but thanks to your excellent student representative, order is maintained. I’m much obliged to her.”

While Claudia looked smug, the troublemakers in question—Gile, Gauss, and the like—gritted their teeth resentfully. Alas, it escaped their notice that, without prompting, they had taken Lassara’s words as true.

“Now, I know you’ve been eagerly anticipating it, so today, we have a quiz.”

“We have *not*. We didn’t even hear about any quiz!” Almost precisely as Gile called out in protest, Lassara took another piece of chalk from the case on the lectern and threw it.

“No chance, not when I know it’s coming!” Gile called, cleanly dodging the incoming chalk. “Gile’s the king of motion perception, and don’t forget it!” He crowed with laughter. “That shut you up, huh, Lass—guh!” The next piece of

chalk hit him square in the face again, and again, he doubled over in agony, covering his face with his hands.

Regarding him, Lassara snorted. “Morons are so predictable.”

“Screw you! I’ll dodge ’em all next time, you see if I don’t!”

Ms. Lassara started to hand out quiz papers to the front row, observing to herself that there was no cure for stupidity. When she had seen to it that every student had a paper, she looked down at her watch.

“You have twenty minutes. I’ll be grading and announcing the results as soon as you’re done.”

“Come on, Lassy!” Gauss chimed in. “No one’s into that humiliation stuff—ow!”

“Stop standing up. And that’s ‘Ms. Lassara, ma’am’ to you,” Lassara snapped. “Not only are you big as an ox, but you’re loud as one too, you great pest.”

“You’re small—”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.” Cringing, Gauss sat back down.

“Oh, and anyone who gets less than thirty is taking a remedial class, no negotiations,” Lassara said. “Now begin!”

With that, the classroom filled with the sound of scratching pens.

Ashton was making good progress on the test questions when he happened to look up to his left. Olivia was face down on her desk, sound asleep.

*What? Is she done already? Even I’m still only halfway through.*

He set down his pen with five minutes remaining.

“—pens down,” Lassara announced. “Turn your papers face down and pass them forward.” Lassara had the papers collected in no time, then, true to her word, she set about marking them.

“All right, your marks. First, Gile. Ten.”

“She actually said it?!”

“What’d you expect? Next, Gauss. Fifteen.”

Gauss chuckled smugly. “Well, well, Gile. Seems I win this time.”

“Aw, man!”

“Moron One and Moron Two! That’s enough squabbling over last place.”

Lassara’s announcement of their marks went on, punctuated by whoops and groans.

“Ashton, ninety. Lots of careless mistakes, as usual. Pay better attention.”

“Yes, Ms. Lassara.”

“Next, Olivia. One hundred.” A murmur rippled through the room. Olivia had continued her streak of getting perfect marks in every class. She took back her paper, her eyelids drooping.

Lassara gave a small shake of her head. “And here I’ve never even seen you study. You’re the only one I can’t work out.”

Ashton glanced over and saw Claudia glowering at Olivia, who drifted unsteadily back to her seat, then quietly started to snore again.

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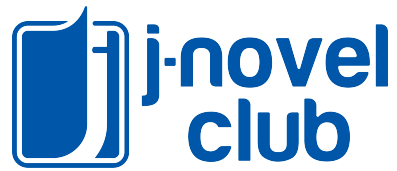
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