

Death's DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE

MAITO
AYAMINE

ILLUST.
CIERRA

V



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Characters

Kingdom of Fernest



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



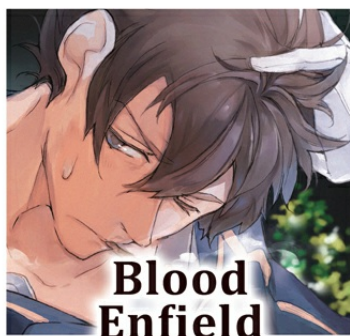
Ashton Senefelder
Making a name for himself after Paul praised his peerless tactical mind.



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 Groening

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

Alphonse sem Gallmond

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.

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.



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and the Ebony Blade

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Prologue: The Dead Tell No Tales

Field Marshal Gladden's Workroom at Kier Fortress

The Helios Knights had suffered an unthinkable defeat at the Battle of Nobis. Since then, three months had passed, and Major General Oscar Remnand, Chief of General Staff of the Helios Knights, paid a visit to the workroom of Field Marshal Gladden to make his report on recent events.

"The Eighth Legion, under the command of Death God Olivia, engaged the armies of Northern Perscilla, the Twelfth City of the United City-States of Sutherland, and repelled their invasion into Fernest's domains."

The shimmers from the imperial army's intelligence division had reported that the Northern Perscillan Army had lost around eighty percent of its soldiers. Their military capabilities would be crippled.

Gladden listened to Oscar's report before reaching for the wooden box in which he kept his cigarettes.

"I suppose they saw our momentary retreat as an opportunity to invade Fernest and grabbed it..." he mused. "That was rash."

"Rather than a consensus decision by the United City-States, it appears that the Twelfth City has a propensity for acting independently. Though it is undeniable that it was rash."

Gladden blew out a mouthful of smoke and snorted with laughter.

"I'm sure they thought they could run off with the bone. This'll be a good lesson for them," he said, then his face grew serious. "So the Death God has her own army at last. That can be nothing other than a threat."

Oscar looked at Gladden curiously as the marshal heaved a deep sigh. He sensed there was more to it than concern over Death God Olivia.

"Is there something on your mind, Lord Marshal?" he inquired. Gladden didn't reply at once. Eventually, he took out an envelope from a drawer, tossed it

down on the desk, and gestured sharply with his chin. Oscar interpreted this as an order to read it.

“Excuse me,” he said, picking up the envelope and opening it to find it written in Felix’s flowing hand. He read in silence, his frown growing unwittingly deeper with every sentence.

“My lord...” Oscar said when he was finished. “Forgive me, but what can Chancellor Darmés be *thinking?*”

Death God Olivia was wreaking havoc on the imperial army. It was simply unconscionable that not only would Darmés take no action against her, he was telling them to leave her as well. The empire’s second most important man ought not to make such statements. Oscar felt a rush of sympathy for Gladden’s foul temper. Even a child could understand the logic behind the old saying, “If you know where the infection is, you cut it out without delay.”

Oscar returned the letter to its envelope and placed it on the desk, where Gladden seized it and hurled it back into its drawer before crushing the stub that remained of his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Don’t ask me what goes on in that bastard’s mind,” he said harshly.

“From the letter, it sounds like he pressed hard on Chancellor Darmés to try and sway him...”

“Naturally. If I’d been in Felix’s place, I’d have done the same. Even Rosenmarie would have.”

“What are you going to do, my lord?”

“Well, I obviously have no intention of leaving Death God Olivia running around.” Gladden’s expression was as hard as Oscar had ever seen it. He understood at once that the marshal planned to go and negotiate directly with the chancellor.

“You’ll go to Olsted, then?”

“Yes. A letter demanding answers would more than likely be ignored. I’ll go in there and wring the truth out of him myself.”

“Will you permit me to accompany you, my lord?” Oscar asked quickly.

Gladden looked up, his eyes moving as though he were considering something, then said shortly, “No, I will not.”

“May I ask why?”

“Because I mean to entrust the running of Kier Fortress to you in my absence.”

“Surely Lieutenant General Ramon could handle the task. Please, my lord, let me go with you.” Oscar stepped toward Gladden as he spoke, and the marshal looked at him curiously.

“What’s gotten into you today?” Gladden asked.

Oscar had no clear answer to this question. All he had was the sense that he ought not to leave Gladden’s side.

“Please, my lord,” he repeated.

“I don’t know what’s got you so worried, Oscar,” Gladden said. “It’s not like I’m going to eat him. And for all we know, the Royal Army could attack while I’m away.”

“I can’t argue with that...”

The Royal Army had momentum right now. As Gladden said, they could easily be emboldened by that momentum into an assault on Kier Fortress.

“I have no qualms about Ramon’s valor, but the fact is, I couldn’t rest entirely easy leaving only him here. That’s why I want my Chief of Staff here too. I’m sorry, Oscar, but that is my decision.” Gladden’s words were kind, but there was a note in his voice that told Oscar he would brook no arguments. Accepting that further attempts at persuasion were futile, Oscar bowed in acquiescence.

“Very well, my lord. I will see that all is taken care of.”

“Good. I’ll make this as quick as I can,” Gladden said, standing up as he spoke and calling to an orderly to bring him his jacket.

“You’re leaving already?” asked Oscar.

“There’s no time to waste,” Gladden replied, slipping on his jacket and donning a white cloak embroidered with crossed swords. “See that all is well

while I'm away."

And with that, he strode from the room after the orderly. Oscar felt a pang of anxiety as he watched him go.

Gladden set off from Kier Fortress with a few guards to accompany him. They rode on horseback, taking the shortest route from the fortress to the capital, and arrived in Olsted after a three-day journey.

"The capital never changes..." Gladden murmured to himself, urging his horse on toward the Nordheim District in the city's center. When they at last came into sight of the drawbridge at the entrance, he turned to the guards.

"I will return home for now. Tomorrow, I will visit the palace, so you may do as you please until I return. It's been a while since you were in the capital. Enjoy yourselves a little."

"Thank you, Lord Gladden!" replied the man who served as guard captain. "Allow me to express my deep gratitude for your forbearance!" With that, he turned his horse and set off back down the road by which they had come.

Gladden crossed the heavy drawbridge and rode on, gazing around himself at the city. At last, a towering gate of wrought iron that shone silver in the light came into view. Gladden brought his horse to a gentle stop before it, then fixed the soldier who stood at the guard post with a stern look.

"Eh...?" Realization dawned on the guard's face. "It can't be Lord Gladden?!"

"Good day."

"Ser!" The soldier turned, bellowing, "Get the gate open now!"

Soldiers on the other side of the gate frantically released the lock. Two soldiers heaved against the wrought iron, and, with a muffled scraping of metal, it swung inwards.

It's been a long, long time since I made it home... Gladden thought. He continued through the gate and along the cobblestones that ran through the sweeping expanse of his estate. Along the way, he saw his dog Triton in the distance playing with his son, Feld. Triton was quicker to catch wind of him and

let out a loud bark, at which Feld noticed too and came sprinting over.

Gladden released his feet from his stirrups and dropped lightly to the ground.

“Father! Welcome home! Did you wallop the nasty Royal Army?”

“That’ll take a little longer.” Feld threw himself into Gladden’s arms, who held him tight. “My, how you’ve grown since I last saw you!” He ruffled his son’s smooth blond hair. Feld was his only child, born at long last when Gladden was already well into his forties, and because of this, Gladden doted upon him.

Feld looked up, his cheeks flushing. “One day I’ll be even taller than you, Father! And I’m going to be an even greater warrior!”

Gladden chuckled heartily. “A greater warrior than me, is it? I’ll be counting on you, then.”

“That’s right! So please, father, teach me how to fight with a sword!”

“You’re a bit young for that, aren’t you?” Triton was rubbing his head against Gladden’s legs, and he scratched the dog behind the ears as he looked Feld over properly. The boy was only seven years old. At that age, he ought to be playing with blocks, not swinging a sword.

“I am *not*, father!” Feld protested stubbornly. “If anything, I’m too old!” Gladden couldn’t help but smile at this, which only made Feld say, “There’s nothing funny about it!”

“Very well, very well,” Gladden surrendered. “But you’d better know what you’re getting into. I’m a harsh teacher.”

“I understand!”

“Feld.” Perhaps drawn by the sound of their voices, there stood Gladden’s wife, Liana, in an elegant, sky-blue gown. “Your father has returned home after a long time away,” she said reprovably. “You ought not to demand too much of him.”

“But Mother...” Feld puffed out his cheeks and rocked back and forth on his feet. Shaking her head at him, Liana gave Gladden a look of apology.

“I’m sorry, Gladden. Feld is being selfish.”

“That’s the nature of children. I wouldn’t call a little thing like this selfishness.” Gladden turned to his son. “Feld, bring your father’s wooden training swords. You know where they are?”

“Yes, Father! I’ll get them right now!”

“Be grateful to your father, Feld.”

“Of course!” Feld dashed away happily, in moments vanishing through the entrance to the house. Gladden watched him go with a fond smile.

“We weren’t expecting you home...” Liana said anxiously. “Did something happen to call you back so suddenly?”

“An urgent matter. I have to call at the palace.”

“Listelein Castle?” Liana’s expression at once grew dark. “Is the war going badly?”

His wife’s intuition was keen as ever. With an internal grimace, Gladden exerted himself to keep his voice light. “There’s nothing you need concern yourself about, Liana. Look at Olsted—the very picture of peace, isn’t it?”

“It is, thanks to Lord Felix’s ceaseless protection.”

“There, nothing to worry about, then.”

“I suppose...” As if to cheer herself up, Liana took Gladden’s hand and said in a brighter voice, “Now, are you able to take some time off today, at least?”

“I am. I have to keep you company as well as Feld, after all,” Gladden said, throwing his hands up in mock exasperation.

“Oh, I see! My company is unpleasant to you, is it?” Liana, not to be defeated, folded her arms, and turned dramatically away from him.

“Do I look like I find it unpleasant?” Gladden rubbed his cheeks as if to check. Liana chuckled.

“No, you don’t,” she said. They kissed, and then Liana set off back to the house, her steps light. Not long after, Feld returned, clutching two wooden training swords in his arms.

“I brought them, Father!” he announced, grinning from ear to ear. Gladden

looked down at his son and smiled.

Gladden spent that evening dining alone with his family, delighting in every moment.

The next morning, Gladden put on a new uniform, shouldered his white cloak embroidered with crossed swords, and set off for the castle to make Darmés explain what he was really up to.

No matter how much His Imperial Majesty trusts the man, I've had it with his continued interference in military matters. It's high time I laid that out clearly...

The interior structure of>Listelein Castle was complex. Gladden traced his way through the mazelike corridors until he saw Darmés's workroom ahead of him. The guard, noticing him, made a smart salute.

"Is Chancellor Darmés in there?" Gladden asked.

"Yes, my lord. But I have strict orders to refuse anyone seeking entry."

"Anyone? My business will not wait. Let me pass."

"I-I can't, my lord! My orders are to not let anyone enter, no matter what their business might be!"

The guard bowed, nervous sweat beading on his brow. Gladden had to credit his dedication to his duties, but with the Royal Army bearing down on Kier Fortress, he didn't have time to argue.

"What's your name, soldier?"

"They call me Tokma, my lord! Private first class!"

"All right, Private First Class Tokma. I am Gladden von Hildesheimer, the leader of the Three Generals, and I have new orders for you. Get out of my way."

"B-But Chancellor Darmés..."

"When the chancellor hears what happened, you won't be blamed. This is a matter concerning the very fate of the empire."

"But my lord..."

“Must I repeat myself? You have nothing to fear. I swear on my honor that no harm will come to you, Private First Class Tokma.”

The guard hesitated for a moment, then submitted. “Very well,” he said, bowing his head and stepping to one side of the door. Gladden clasped his shoulder briefly. Then he made a purely perfunctory knock and entered.

“Where is he...?”

The room he found himself in was absurdly spacious for a workroom, but it only took Gladden one look to confirm that Darmés was conspicuously absent. He was met instead by an array of expensive ornaments that boasted their owner’s authority. Among them, Gladden’s eyes were drawn at once to an enormous ebony bookcase. It had slid far to the left of where Gladden remembered it, revealing a staircase leading down underground. Gladden had been in this room many times before, but he had never suspected it was equipped with such a mechanism. He went and peered hesitantly down the stairs, but could make out nothing in the darkness.

That rat of a chancellor. For what scheme did he build this? Gladden’s interest was piqued. Placing one hand on the wall to guide him, he started to make his way carefully down the stairs. He almost lost his footing several times on the way, but he made it to the bottom. He followed the passage until he saw the flickering light of candles and heard snatches of voices.

“—very soon—yes—yes, Your Eminence—just one more great battle—yes, I am certain—yes.”

That croak is Darmés, no question. But who the hell is he talking to down here?

The only person Darmés assumed that obsequious tone with was Emperor Ramza himself. But the idea of Ramza coming to call upon a subject, even the chancellor, was unthinkable, especially in such a suspicious underground chamber.

Gladden snuck a look around the corner and nearly cried out. Darmés was prostrate, his head pressed to the ground, but it was the unnatural figure before him that caught Gladden’s attention.

It's shaped like a human, but it's obviously anything but. What the hell is this?!

The figure was dark as a shadow and ensconced in a swirling something that looked like mist. Gladden stared, not daring to breathe, as the figure went on in a tongue he couldn't comprehend.

The chalice is nearly full, then, it said.

"Y-Yes, Your Eminence!"

He understands whatever that monster is saying? Gladden had forgotten his original purpose in coming here. He was captivated by the monstrous figure.

Darmés looked up, an uncanny gleam in his eyes that Gladden had never seen before.

The fulfillment of your ambitions is nigh.

"I shall have Ramza order that I ascend the throne, and henceforth rule over the empire as its new emperor."

Rule the empire?! The bastard's been nursing such outrageous ambitions?! He must be out of his mind if he thinks he can make the emperor give such an order. Thinking he has that sort of power... Or does he?!

As Felix had complained, of late Ramza had ceased to so much as react to any words other than those that came from Darmés. Gladden himself had been uneasy about the dramatic shift in the emperor's demeanor. If Ramza's free will had somehow been bound, Darmés's ravings started to sound attainable. It would be simple, in fact. After gathering everyone to a public audience, a word from the emperor would be enough to cede the throne to Darmés.

Humans are so slavishly devoted to trivialities. I will never understand it.

"Your Eminence," Darmés replied, pressing his head to the ground once more.

Gladden slowly drew back around the corner. He realized his back was drenched with sweat.

This goes far beyond Death God Olivia. Some unnatural horror is lurking in the heart of the empire, and it's in league with Darmés. Not only that, they've made the emperor their puppet. I have to find Felix at once and work out a plan, or there'll be hell to pay.

For a moment, he considered reaching for the knife at his belt, but he stopped himself. Darmés alone would be one thing, but he couldn't see a knife doing any good against that unnatural being. He quietly backed away, about to leave, when—

Darmés, said the figure.

“Y-Y-Yes?!”

That human over there has been listening to our conversation for a while now. Does that not concern you?

Its language was still incomprehensible to Gladden, but when it pointed a finger his way, he understood its meaning in a heartbeat. As Darmés turned slowly around, Gladden tried to flee back along the passage by which he'd come, but his legs grew heavier and heavier until he couldn't take a single step. Some invisible force gripped him, and he was dragged back into the chamber and deposited at Darmés's feet. He looked up and saw the chancellor's lips curling in a hideous smile as he stood contemptuously over Gladden.

“My thanks for drawing my attention to this, Exalted Xenia. Now, then, I don't recall inviting you, Marshal Gladden. What brings you all the way down here?”

“What have you done to me?!” Gladden gritted out.

“I asked the first question. And I hardly think that is an appropriate attitude to take with your new emperor,” Darmés remarked. “Now bow.”

“Ngh!”

Darmés gave a languorous wave of his hand at Gladden's body, and Gladden found his head forced down to the ground. When he tried to rise, the same invisible force from before held him down. He couldn't even move a finger.

Darmés nodded with satisfaction at Gladden's humiliated grimace. “That's much better,” he said.

“So you've allied yourself with that monster to push aside the emperor?! I'll never let you get away with it!”

“‘Monster’ is an awfully irreverent turn of phrase, Marshal Gladden, when you have come face-to-face with a god with power over death.”

“A what...?!”

The uncanny figure made no comment throughout all this. The black mist continued to shiver like the air above a flame. Darmés seemed to be calling it a God of Death, but it looked nothing like any image of a God of Death Gladden knew.

“That doesn’t look like what I’d call a God of Death.”

“Oh, well. It doesn’t concern me whether you believe me or not. If you had only reined in your curiosity, you might have lived a little longer...” Darmés paused for a moment, then said, “But rejoice, Marshal, for your life shall become part of the foundation of my great vision.” He slowly extended his withered arms toward Gladden’s throat. Behind him, the figure said something, then made a sweeping gesture across with its arm. A black vortex materialized in the air, sucking the figure into its depths. Then it was gone, as though it had never been.

Gladden was shocked, but he focused on screwing up every ounce of his strength to reach for the knife at his belt—

“Any resistance is pointless. The God of Death has bequeathed me with a share of its power. None can stand against me.”

Darmés’s hands closed around Gladden’s throat, and the next thing Gladden knew, he had been thrown across the room like a rag doll. His back hit the wall behind him hard.

“Ugggh...” Barely holding on to consciousness, Gladden’s eyes found Darmés, who had appeared directly in front of him.

“You did ever so well, leading the Three Generals as you did. I cannot thank you enough.”

“...even...if...I die here...there’s still...Felix...” Gladden had to force out every word. “You won’t...get...away with...this...”

“Did you say Felix? I still have use for him, so fear not. I intend to let him live for the time being. Do make some time when you’re in the Land of the Dead, Marshal Gladden, to take a good, long look at my new empire—at a unified Duvedirica.”

Darmés reached out once more, with Gladden powerless to resist. There was an awful crunching from the bones in his neck, and darkness overtook him, as though he were falling into an abyss.

“Goodbye, Gladden von Hildesheimer.” A strain of slow, dragging notes rang out, and Gladden fell heavily to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head. Darmés’s deranged cackle echoed around the chamber.

Chapter One: A Journey

I

Olivia set off from Galia Fortress for the Holy Land of Mekia, accompanied by Claudia, her aide, and Ashton, her tactician, as well as a platoon of fifteen soldiers that included Evanson and Ellis. Their journey along the road to Mekia would see them first to the town of Amil. In the center of their procession were two large, horse-drawn carts that trundled along with a soft clatter. Both were engraved with the crest of Fernest, but no one rode in either. Instead, they were full to bursting with gifts for the people who awaited them at their destination.

It was mid-autumn, and the leaves were beginning to change. It ought to have been the perfect weather for travel, but for several days the sun had beaten down with the merciless intensity of midsummer. Naturally, the whole platoon save for Olivia suffered from the heat.

Olivia alone hummed cheerfully to herself, looking cool and refreshed. Provoked by a certain degree of irritation, Ashton eyed her resentfully.

“I suppose this is all a walk in the park for you, if you’re *humming*.”

“I guess?”

“You can’t seriously tell me you don’t feel hot?”

“What?” Olivia looked at him blankly. “Does it feel hot to you?”

It wasn’t as though the sun were avoiding her in particular.

“Oh, come on. ‘Does it feel hot?’ she says. Of course it’s hot!”

“It really is,” Evanson piped up in agreement, mopping the sweat from his brow. Claudia, who had been listening to their conversation, gave the pair of them a stern look.

“Ashton, Evanson, you feel the heat because your will is weak. At times like

these, you sit up straight and hold your head high. You know how the saying goes: ‘to a clear mind, even fire feels cool.’”

“Come *on*. This obviously has nothing to do with ‘will’ or whatever.”

“I’d muster up any amount of will, but even then, I don’t think this heat would ease up...”

In response to Ashton and Evanson’s objections, Claudia shook her head sadly.

“Don’t be pathetic. As officers, you’re supposed to set an example for the other soldiers.”

“You say that, Lieutenant Colonel, but you’ve been drinking a lot of water. It’s because you’re hot, isn’t it?” Ashton looked coolly at the canteen Claudia held in her hand.

“O-Of course I’m not hot!” she spluttered. “I—I’m... That’s it! As the general’s aide, it’s essential that I keep well hydrated!” With this, she stuffed her canteen into her bag and gave an exaggerated cough. Nothing in what she’d said explained why regular hydration was important for an aide. It was plain to anyone with ears, not just Ashton, that Claudia was deflecting.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” she demanded, when Ashton didn’t respond.

“Oh... Nothing...”

Sensing the growing tension between the other two, Evanson chimed in casually, “General Olivia, you really don’t mind the heat at all, do you?”

Evanson was the same age as Ashton, was highly sensitive to the people around him, and could well be described as the conscience of the Eighth Legion. It wasn’t hard to imagine the toll having an older sister like Ellis took on him.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes. I don’t suppose you know some secret trick for enduring the heat? If you do, I’d really love to hear it.”

Olivia appeared to think for a moment; then something seemed to occur to her, because she clapped her hands together.

“Oh, right! You’re all too hot because you don’t have this,” she said, looking down at her chest.

“Are you wearing something?”

“Yeah. Just a sec.” Before anyone could react, Olivia had pulled off her scarf and was undoing her front buttons. She paid no heed to the wide-eyed stares of the rest of the platoon as she actually plunged her hand under her clothes and started groping at herself. All eyes, Ashton’s included, zeroed in on Olivia’s chest. Alas, that was simply male nature. There was nothing anyone could do to change it.

“General!” Claudia barked, stepping in front of Olivia to shield her from the gawking men. “Please refrain from such vulgar behavior in front of everyone! And you lot,” she went on, mustering all her fury at the onlookers and waving her hands as though she were shooing away flies. “Avert your eyes from the general at once!”

“—here.” Meanwhile, right at the center of the commotion and totally unperturbed by the stares she was getting, Olivia produced a single leaf from within her clothes. It was about twice the size of her palm.

Ashton examined it closely. “Is that, by any chance, a Cuzco leaf?”

“That’s right,” Olivia said, clapping her hands. “Trust you to know it, Ashton.”

“I mean, that’s nothing special,” he mumbled, scratching his nose in embarrassment at Olivia’s praise.

The Cuzco was a heterophyllous plant, having both scale and needle leaves. It grew in the depths of the forest where little light reached. It was primarily valued for its anesthetic properties, but venturing into the depths of the forest meant running a high risk of encountering dangerous beasts, making its procurement challenging for all but the most seasoned hunters. As such, it continually fetched high prices when sold at the market.

At this point, it would have been foolish to ask how Olivia had so casually come to be in possession of a leaf one could only obtain by risking one’s life. That aside, Ashton had never heard of such a usage of Cuzco leaves before.

“I feel like you don’t believe me,” Olivia said, leaning over in her saddle to

peer closely at Ashton's face. When she got close enough that it seemed their lips might even touch, Ashton drew back sharply.

"I-I didn't say that..." he stammered. "I've just never heard of it being used like that."

"Well, you'll believe it when you see it!" Just like that, Olivia offered him the leaf that had been stuck to her all this time. Ashton, feeling thoroughly flustered, reached a hand up to accept it. No sooner had he done so, however, than another hand darted in from one side and swiped the leaf out from under his nose.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. Looking around, he saw Ellis cradling the leaf as though to protect it. Not only that, but she was looking at him with something like *outrage*.

"Major Ashton, that's *quite* the leer you've got on your face. I bet you were thinking something dirty, weren't you?"

"I— I am *not* leering!" Ashton protested fervently. "And I'd *never* think such things, not for a moment, not ever!" He kept one eye on Olivia as he spoke to see how she reacted. Ellis gave him a slimy smirk. When it came to expressions like that, no one could compete with Ellis.

"In that case, it's funny that you're blushing so much," she remarked. Then, before Ashton could respond with more than a look of indignance, she thrust the Cuzco leaf inside her uniform. At once, a look of bliss spread over her face.



“It still has my big sister’s righteous warmth...her pure fragrance... Oh, this is *heaven...*”

“No, come on, what are you *on* about? Get to the point, would you?”

Ellis sighed dreamily. “I’m so, so happy to be alive.”

“Look,” Ashton said, getting exasperated, “I’m not interested in your nonsense impressions, I want to know whether it works or not.” Ellis didn’t reply. “Hello, Ellis? Anyone home?”

“There’s no point talking to my sister when she gets like this, Major Ashton,” Evanson said with a deep sigh. “I sincerely apologize for her behavior...”

Ashton looked back at Ellis, who was totally entranced, and gave up on questioning her any further.

“Just a minute.” Beside the defeated Ashton, Olivia began to hunt through the bag tied to her saddle. With a grin, she produced another Cuzco leaf and held it out to him.

To himself, Ashton thought, *You had more?! but out loud, he merely shared his thanks and accepted the leaf. Still not convinced it would really work, he put the leaf against the back of his neck. At once, a pleasant coolness spread out from it.*

“It really works...” he breathed. “This is incredible.”

“One thing, though,” Olivia said sagely, holding up a finger. “*Only* putting a Cuzco leaf on doesn’t do anything.”

“You mean there’s some sort of trick to it?”

“Yeah. The key is that you have to coat the leaves with crushed Mondblum berries, then dry them for a day. It’s only after that that they’re ready to use.”

Ashton looked at the Cuzco leaf again and saw that he could indeed make out the traces of something smeared on it.

Unconsciously, he let out a whistle of appreciation. “So the Mondblum berries act as a cooling medium...” he said. “That’s quite the discovery.” Then he looked back to Olivia. “Just to be sure, you came up with this yourself?”

Olivia giggled. “Yep. Impressive, right?”

Ashton knew that many of the countries in the United City-States of Sutherland to the south had hot climates. If he told his parents about these leaves, he thought, it might lead to some happy business opportunities.

Claudia cut through his thoughts. “Your mercantile ambitions will have to wait until after the war is over.”

“What?!” Ashton yelped in alarm. “How did you know what I was thinking?!”

“Oh, I’ve known you long enough for that,” Claudia said, a faintly smug smile playing at her lips.

“Are you trying to say that Ashton’s simple?” Olivia asked innocently. Choosing to ignore this cutting remark, Ashton instead stared at Claudia, awestruck.

As though to escape his gaze, Claudia raised her voice and declared, “Now, the Holy Land of Mekia might be our ally, but that doesn’t mean we can let our guard down. Not only here on the road, but also during our stay in Mekia, I want you all to do your utmost to protect the general.”

A warm gust of wind rustled through the platoon as all of them nodded seriously. All with the exception of Olivia, who chatted happily to Comet.

II

Olivia’s platoon spent a night in the town of Amil as planned, then traveled another week or so, passing through the towns of Coscelia and San Caledo before leaving Fernest and journeying out into central Duvedirica. Separated from the road, they now traveled by the forest to the north, where lay a small nation. The Kingdom of Swaran, ruled by its boy king, Alan von Swaran, boasted a storied history that stretched back nigh on three centuries. Tempus Fugit 997 had seen the breakout of what was now called the Swaran War, which had resulted in the Asvelt Empire defeating the Kingdom of Swaran. Heid von Swaran, the former king, had been beheaded in front of their lamenting citizens, along with his key senior ministers. Following the annexation, the Kingdom of Swaran had joined the empire’s vassal states and taken up a hostile

stance against Fernest. Memories were fresh of the attack the previous year on Fort Peshitta, defended by Lieutenant General Sara.

We have to do everything we can to avoid unnecessary contact.

On Claudia's orders, they advanced southwards to avoid the notice of the Kingdom of Swaran, until at last, the platoon arrived at the picturesque village of Lago.

Claudia checked her pocket watch and saw it was already close to dusk. She proposed to Olivia that they stop to rest in Lago and received her immediate consent.

But things did not go as expected.

"You want us to leave? Right now?" Claudia asked the elder who had come out as soon as they arrived at the village, naming himself their representative.

"I am very sorry..."

Claudia frowned. From what she'd seen on the map, there was nothing resembling a town or village beyond here. They were more or less used to sleeping rough, but it had been a long journey, and both the soldiers and the horses were tired. If possible, she wanted to give them a solid day of recuperation here. Besides that, Ashton was looking at her with hope in his eyes, imploring her to somehow persuade them.

"I realize we're imposing on you," she tried again, bowing her head, "but is there really no way we can make this work?"

The elder's face hardened, not budging in his refusal.

This isn't going anywhere... Claudia decided that pushing any further would only cause a nuisance for the village.

"Esteemed elder, I apologize for making demands of you. We will leave, but before we do, could I trouble you for an explanation?"

After a moment's hesitation, the elder said in a low voice, "Our village is small and remote. We've managed to live in peace without being swept up in any wars. Now you appear at our doorstep. Frankly, letting soldiers such as yourselves into the village, even for a night, would be calling war upon

ourselves.”

Claudia was taken aback by this response. “I’m impressed that you recognized us as soldiers,” she said, her frown deepening. As they were leaving Fernest’s domains, Claudia and the others were all disguised as merchants. This was, of course, a precaution to avoid being caught up in unnecessary conflicts. They naturally were dressed not in military uniforms, but the kind of garb favored by merchants of the day. Even the swords that usually would have hung at their belts were all hidden inside the carts. Short of a close inspection of the carts’ contents, no one should have been able to tell they were soldiers. She did have a knife on her belt, but it was only good for self-defense. Any traveler might carry such a thing.

The elder’s response shed light on her questions. “I don’t know whose army you’re from, but there’s been no end to the fighting in these parts since the war began. We’ve seen our fair share of soldiers.”

“I see...”

From the center out to the west of the continent, Duvedirica was fragmented into a great many minor nations, and all of them fought tooth and nail among themselves to further their own agendas. In truth, they had passed places along the way to this village that bore the marks of comparatively recent conflict. As such, Claudia had no choice but to accept the elder’s words.

“I really am sorry,” he said, bowing low. Following his lead, the assembled villagers also started bowing awkwardly. It was clear the villagers wanted their platoon to hurry up and leave. Claudia stifled a sigh, then turned and whispered in Olivia’s ear so as not to be overheard by the elder.

“General, they aren’t going to be persuaded. We’ll be camping out in the open tonight. Is that all right?”

Olivia nodded at once. “That’s totally fine by me. I like sleeping outside.”

“I’m truly sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Don’t be. It’s not like it’s your fault.” Olivia didn’t seem put out in the slightest, and she immediately gave the order to depart.

At this, the elder visibly relaxed. But the next moment, his eyes widened in

shock.

“What is it?” Claudia asked, sensing something amiss. But the elder only stood there as though frozen in time. The other villagers had reacted in the same fashion.

“Mama, mama,” said a small child, tugging on his mother’s sleeve. “Are those the bandits?” He was pointing at something behind Claudia. At once, the mother swooped down and clasped her hand over the child’s mouth.

“Not bandits, lad! You’re looking at the noble Warriors of the Sunrise!”

Claudia turned. A group of fierce and wild-looking men stood blocking off the entrance to the village, their leering grins turned in the group’s direction. One man clad in crude armor stepped forward, at which the villagers scattered.

“What did I tell you?!” the elder shouted, his face now twisted with hatred. Leaning unsteadily on his walking stick, he hurried away after the others.

The man watched him go with amusement, coming to a stop in front of Claudia.

“Well, well! You’re some mighty fearsome-looking merchants, now I see you up close,” he declared. “And it’s a rare day we see such a *fine* selection of *goods* out in these parts. I think it might just be our lucky day.” His eyes slid from Claudia to Ellis to Olivia in turn; then he grinned as his comrades had, nodding with satisfaction.

“Can we do something for you?” Claudia gritted out, disgusted. At once, the man’s face turned serious.

“One of my boys brought us word that there were merchants here without any guards. You know about the brushups between the Republic of Lean and the Carnera Kingdom in these parts, yeah?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“You *don’t*?! For merchants, you’re taking all this pretty lightly. I’d expect— Eh?” He broke off, his eyes finding the crests painted on the doors of the carts. “You’re merchants from Fernest?”

“We are,” Claudia said at length.

“Well now,” he said, nodding as though it all made sense now. “Then you can’t help being out of the loop, eh?”

“So, can we help you?” Claudia asked again.

“Begging your pardon. I got sidetracked there,” the man replied. “Cutting straight to the point, what do you say to hiring us as guards?”

“You want us to hire you?”

“Like I said, these parts are far too dangerous for merchants to wander about without protection. You’ll tell us where you’re headed, and we’ll make sure you carry on your journey without getting mixed up in anyone’s fighting. Ah, on that note,” the man added, “I haven’t introduced myself. The name’s Domon Gilborough, captain of the Warriors of the Sunrise.” He drew his sword with a flourish, then twirled it a few times, showing off. He had the routine down pat, so clearly he wanted them to see his confidence.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid we’re not in need of any protection. You’ll have to find some other merchants,” Claudia told Domon, inwardly smirking. The idea of soldiers hiring mercenaries as guards was too stupid to even be laughable.

Domon’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “Was that a refusal?”

“Well, that’s what I meant it as.”

“Good grief...” Domon shook his head in disbelief. “You know what it’s like around here, right? You hear me telling you you’ll most likely end up caught in the fighting? Now isn’t the time to be stingy.”

“I believe I understand the situation. I still tell you we have no need of protection. Besides, aren’t you mercenaries? Surely you’d make far better money on the battlefield than guarding merchants for a few coppers.”

Mercenaries served no nation, but they would go into battle if the price was right. With the world in the state it was, mercenaries were in hot demand—especially if they knew their trade. In essence, mercenaries were those who lived with death always near at hand, in exchange for which they received a substantial amount of gold.

Claudia had thought her question more or less reasonable, but Domon’s face

twisted, and he spat in irritation. No sooner had he done so than Ellis burst out laughing, coming forward to face him down.

“Something funny, wench?”

“Well, *obviously* it’s funny,” Ellis said. “Warriors of the Sunrise, was it? Well, you can call yourself by whatever grand name you’d like, but *my* guess is you’re a bunch of washed-up sellswords who can’t find anyone to hire you. Even if they did, you’d probably just cause trouble, right?” When Domon didn’t respond, Ellis said, “Was I spot on? Oh, you poor *things*. Of course, if you were any good, most would turn a blind eye to the small stuff and hire you anyway. So in truth, you’re nothing special. Which is why you’re here offering protection to merchants...” A giggle burst out of her. “If it were me, my pride would *never* let me do *that!*” She buried her face in her hands in mock embarrassment. When it came to bad-mouthing an opponent, no one could hold a candle to Ellis. Not even *close*.

It’s not that uncommon for mercenaries to offer protection services for merchants, Claudia thought. Though more importantly, the lashing she gave him. That woman scares me...

In the wake of this deluge of scathing remarks from Ellis, Domon’s eyes glinted dimly, and when he spoke, gone was the friendly air from before, replaced by a menacing tone.

“All right, you’ve run your mouth off enough. Thing is, you don’t seem to get it. This offer of protection isn’t optional. You don’t get a choice in the matter.”

“No, stop it!” Ellis cried, doubling up with laughter. “Don’t say any more, or I’m going to die laughing!” There were even tears in her eyes, so presumably she actually did find this hilarious. Ashton and the other soldiers all stared at her in awe. All except Evanson, that is, who buried his head in his hands.

“You bitch!” Domon shouted.

Ellis, gasping for breath, got herself under control. “All right, all right. How about this, then? You—Dommy, right?—and me, in single combat. If I lose, we’ll give you *everything* in those carts.”

Domon frowned. “Say what?”

“You planned to rob us from the start, didn’t you?” Ellis said, smirking.

“Ellis! What are you—!”

“Big Sister Olivia!” Ellis called out cheerfully, drowning out Claudia’s objection. “You don’t mind, do you?”

She’ll never say yes to this. As though in mockery of this thought of Claudia’s, Olivia agreed without a moment’s hesitation, and with a beaming smile on her face to boot.

“Oh, I *knew* I could count on my lovely big sister,” Ellis cooed. “You know me so *well*.”

“General!”

“I said it’s fine. Besides, you know what the outcome will be, don’t you, Claudia?”

“Well, yes, but...” She glanced at Domon and saw him swing his sword a few times, his face contorted with fury.

“You lot think you’re all that, you little twerps! If you think I’d ever lose to a *merchant* you’ve got another thing coming!”

“What’s that?” Ellis said, in a tone of exaggerated concern. “Don’t tell me you’re scared of single combat?” Her every word dripped with contempt, but then again, antagonizing one’s opponent was a valid battle strategy. Not that Claudia believed for a second that Ellis had thought it through that far.

“Like hell!” Domon shouted. “I’m gonna make you sorry!” The other men behind him nodded uncomfortably. They were probably just as thrown off by this unexpected turn of events as he was.

“Hey, you ever heard the saying, ‘a barking dog never bites’?” Ellis said. She then ordered Evanson to bring her sword, and he ran off toward the carts. Claudia wondered if he understood that he outranked Ellis.

“You’re a mouthy one, eh? Here I was thinking I’d wait for the right moment and have myself some fun, but *you*—I just have to kill you myself!”

“Mm, okay. That’s the most small-time speech I ever heard.”

Evanson rushed back and tossed the sword to Ellis, who caught it casually. She slid the blade from its scabbard, threw the scabbard aside, then raised her hand and beckoned Domon forward. She clearly didn't respect him at all. In battle, underestimating your opponent like that was wont to trip you up.

But that wasn't what happened.

"Damn you! How?! How come some merchant wench can fight like that?!"

Domon's hands slammed into the ground, his breathing ragged. Ellis brought her sword down to the point between his eyes. Claudia, seeing that this time everything had gone as she'd expected, breathed a sigh of relief. If Ellis had lost, Olivia would undoubtedly have handed over the contents of the carts.

Ellis looked coolly at Domon, as though he were a worm. "It's obvious, isn't it? I'm stronger than you, plain and simple."

Domon's face turned scarlet, and he beat his fists on the ground. "What are you pissing around over there for?!" he bellowed at his men. "Get over here and kill the bitch!"

"Oh, you're going to be like that?" Ellis said. "I'm afraid even I don't find that funny."

"Screw you! Now you've done it. We'll tear every one of you to pieces!" He looked back. "Hey, what's the deal? I said get *over* here and *kill* them!"

His men looked at one another. Then they all turned and walked away.

"H-Hey! You bastards! Where are you going?!" Domon shouted after them, but they only moved on out of the village in silence. Every single one of them ignored his command.

"Th-They... Why?!"

"That was the proof that your men—or *former* men now, I suppose—read the situation better than you did," Ellis said. "Anyway, it's about time you died, I think."

At this declaration from Ellis, all of Domon's bluster left him. He raised his arms in a show of surrender. "W-Wait! I know these parts, I'll guide you, I'll do

whatever you want! You don't want to get mixed up in the war, right? Right?" He laughed foolishly.

All emotion left Ellis's face. "If there's one thing I hate," she said slowly, "it's people who start begging for their life the moment things aren't going their way. Just looking at you makes me *sick*." With that, she raised her sword and lopped off Domon's head. His decapitated body spasmed violently, then fell forward onto the dirt.

"Looks like that's that," Olivia said lightly. "Shall we go, then?" And as though nothing had happened, she gave the order to move out.

The only one to reply was Ellis. "Yes, ser!" she cooed sweetly.

III

It was twilight when Olivia's platoon arrived at Fort Charna on the way to the Holy City of Elsphere. The sky was painted deep orange, fading dreamily into ultramarine blue. Two weeks had passed since they set out from Galia Fortress.

"So this is Fort Charna..."

"Here at last," Olivia said. Claudia nodded, looking up at the fort. It was a cylindrical tower, not large but sturdily constructed. From its walls hung banners emblazoned with silver wings, the national emblem of Mekia. The guards at the gate gripped their weapons warily as Claudia announced their identity. Then, she unfolded the official invitation sent by Sofitia herself to show them.

"So you are Lady Olivia's retinue from the Kingdom of Fernest. We've been expecting you." The guards' attitudes changed at once. They saluted with the utmost respect, and one called out in a ringing voice, "Open the gate!" There was the creak of a winch turning as the left and right halves of the gate slid away, bringing into Claudia's view the figure of a man who had come out to meet them. He wore a lilac and white military uniform with an insignia of silver wings embroidered on the upper sleeves. Judging by the quality of the fabric, which a glance showed to be very fine, Claudia guessed he was a high-ranking officer. And, proving her right, the man introduced himself as Senior Hundred

Wing Valencia Heim, the man in charge of Fort Charna. He welcomed the platoon into the fort, explaining the schedule as he went.

“—Now, was all of that clear?”

“My thanks for the thorough overview. That all sounds acceptable to me.”

“Not at all. I have sent a fast rider to the Holy City of Elsphere, so I imagine an emissary will arrive for you tomorrow. I’m sorry that I can only offer such shabby accommodations, but please, stay here for tonight and rest from your journey.”

“You’re too kind, going to all this trouble for us,” Claudia said, bowing.

Valencia made a show of waving her off. “It’s nothing, I assure you! My mistress, the seraph, has given orders for your stay to be made as smooth as possible. Please do not hesitate to call me if you encounter any inconvenience.” Turning, he added, “These women will see to it that you are looked after during your stay here. You may ask them for anything.” Where he was looking there stood a row of servants, their heads bowed. Claudia guessed that they hadn’t been prepared to be summoned—several of them were breathing so hard that their shoulders quivered.

She thanked Valencia once more. At a word from him, the servants all sprang into action, and they were each escorted to the rooms that had been prepared for them.

“Please, go ahead and eat. I only hope it is suited to your tastes,” Valencia said with an air of apology as he welcomed them to dinner. The broad table before them was buried under platters of food.

He hardly needs to worry about that, Ashton thought, surreptitiously looking over the spread. Every dish looks like a work of art.

Nothing here could be called everyday fare, not by any reckoning. It was the sort of cooking you’d find on the tables of the highest-ranking nobles back in Fernest. No matter how rich the Holy Land of Mekia might be, there was no way Valencia dined like this all the time, even as the commander of a fort. It had obviously been arranged for Olivia’s sake, no doubt on the instructions of

Seraph Sofitia. She had already worked her way into Olivia's heart via her stomach. The unnerving speed with which Olivia wielded her knife and fork made that clear enough. While Sofitia's motives for inviting Olivia into her realm remained a mystery to Ashton, he couldn't shake the sickening feeling that everything thus far was going as Sofitia had planned it.

Claudia, who sat beside him, didn't even glance at him as she said, "There's no point in worrying about it now. It's not every day you get a meal like this. Enjoy it."

Ashton was privately astonished. It was as though she had once again seen right through to his innermost thoughts.

"You look surprised," Claudia remarked.

"Well, yes..."

The corners of her mouth twitched. "You wear your thoughts remarkably openly. I'd recommend learning to conceal them better, if you're going to be a tactician. Soldiers watch their superior officers closely, even if you don't notice them doing it," she advised him, then took a mouthful of herbed roast chicken. The self-assurance with which she held herself even in the middle of what was essentially enemy territory practically made her seem relaxed.

"D-Dear me, I see you aren't one to flinch in the face of a good meal," Valencia said, with a nervous smile. "Most heartening, I say." He clapped his hands lightly, then instructed a servant to bring out more food at once. Given that the new dishes appeared only moments later, Ashton had to assume that word had spread of the deep pit of Olivia's stomach. It would seem it had *not*, however, been communicated to the servants, who stared, transfixed, at Olivia's voracious eating, even as they carried out the plates.

Meanwhile, Ellis, who sat opposite Ashton, was tucking into her meal with gusto, her eyes glittering. Evanson sat beside her, a similar look on his face.

"Delicious," Ellis said, letting out a sigh of delight. "To think, if we were still guarding towns, we'd have gone our whole lives never eating anything this good."

"I have to agree with you there," Evanson said.

“Right? And all of it, every last bit, is thanks to my big sister, my beloved goddess, *Olivia*.” Ellis turned to look at Olivia with scorching devotion in her eyes.

“Ellis,” Evanson warned, lowering his voice, “under no circumstances are you to put your *condition* on display. Luke gave you strict instructions before we left, didn’t he?”

“You and our brother are so *annoying*. All I’m doing is praising Olivia and you call it a ‘condition’? Careful how you answer, or I might forget that you’re my little brother by blood...” Ellis set down her knife and fork and fixed Evanson with a smile totally devoid of human warmth as she ran her hand over her left sleeve.

Evanson shot a look of alarm at the guards who stood along the wall. “Don’t touch those knives you keep hidden in your sleeves. It’s not funny,” he hissed. “These people won’t turn a blind eye if they catch you out.”

“That’s funny. Now, how did you know about my hidden knives? You must *really* love me. But I’m afraid even if you loved me so much you couldn’t live without me, I still couldn’t marry you, so you’d better go find another woman.”

“Who said anything about marriage?! And seeing as *you* seem to have forgotten, may I remind you that I am your superior officer?”

Listening to how the pair talked from day to day, one tended to forget that Evanson did in fact hold a higher rank than his older sister. In the military, rank trumped family hierarchy. Ashton himself was now a major. Whether he’d wanted it was irrelevant; he now found himself in a position of command over a great number of soldiers. The proper thing for a superior officer to do here would be to reprimand Ellis...

But then, even I don’t show proper military courtesy to Olivia, he thought. Olivia, cheeks bulging as she added sauce to her plate, noticed his gaze and cocked her head. Ever since she had forbidden him from calling her “ser,” he had dutifully carried out the order. Or, more truthfully, he had used it as a pretext to avoid using the term entirely. Public appearances were one thing, but something about the idea of using stiff military formality with Olivia from day to day made him cringe. Though Claudia had objected to the impropriety at first,

these days she gave her full, if tacit, acceptance. Part of it was probably Olivia's public assurances that she didn't mind, but Ashton's private interpretation was that, for better or worse, Claudia'd loosened up a bit.

"So what if you're my superior officer?" Ellis retorted. "This is a chance for you to learn something, so listen closely. The bond between older sister and younger brother is *infinitely* more sacred than that of superior and inferior officer. So, I have no obligation whatsoever to defer to you. Got it?" She glared coldly at Evanson, who looked in turn at Ashton, a cry for help in his eyes.

"Um, this salad is delicious, isn't it?" Ashton said, taking a mouthful of the brightly colored salad and pretending he hadn't heard a word of what they'd said. If he tried to defend Evanson and failed, then Mad Dog Ellis would turn her fangs on him next. Maybe Gile, who got on well with Ellis, could have smoothed things over, but he'd stayed behind in Fernest. Of course, if Olivia would only intervene, she could resolve the matter with just a word. Given the way her knife and fork continued to dance, though, any hope of that was futile.

In other words, this is the best solution. With a silent apology to Evanson, Ashton devoted his full attention to chewing his salad. Evanson, who could read the room, sighed pointedly, then set about painstakingly cutting up the piece of meat on his plate.

"I'm relieved that our nation's cuisine seems to agree with you," Valencia said, pleased. With that, he turned the conversation to an inoffensive discussion of Mekian delicacies, which adequately eased the tension at the table.

Still... Ashton looked around the table once more. His eyes found Olivia, the personification of gluttony, still shoveling food down her throat. Then there was Ellis, content to continue drinking Olivia in with her eyes, while beside her the worry-prone Evanson still sighed to himself. Finally, there was Claudia the Yaksha, detachedly going through the motions of eating.

He sighed to himself, wondering, *Are they really going to be all right?* Ashton didn't get around to considering his *own* faults.

The next morning, they enjoyed a breakfast that, while not on the scale of the dinner, was splendid in its own right. Partway through, Valencia came to inform them that the emissary had arrived, and it was decided Ashton and the others

would gather in the commander's office.

"I'm glad to hear you met with no trouble on the road," she said when they arrived, then introduced herself. "My name is Historia Stampede, and I will be accompanying you to the Holy City of Elsphere."

With Historia in the lead, Olivia's platoon left Fort Charna and headed west, heading for Elsphere. What set this leg apart from the journey thus far were the members of the Seraphic Guard, clad in ornate full plate armor, who rode on either side of the platoon. The Seraphic Guard were apparently entrusted with the protection of Seraph Sofitia herself. Their presence made it clear that she was trying to show Olivia every possible courtesy.

"She's very beautiful..." Ashton murmured, staring at Historia, who rode ahead of him on a majestic, pure white Ailish Spinea—a rare breed of horse. Claudia, astride her own equally stunning pure white horse, the Adalucillan that Olivia had named Kagura, shot him a cold look.

"Wh-What?"

"You like women like that, do you?"

"Excuse me?" Ashton gaped at her.

"I *asked* if you like women like that," Claudia repeated, the irritation clear in her voice.

Ashton finally caught on. "I— No, I didn't mean it like that at all..." he stammered. He'd only meant it as you might look at a flower and think it was beautiful. He hadn't expected to be interrogated about what sort of women he liked.

Claudia brought Kagura up alongside him. "Then what *did* you mean?" she said aggressively. Perhaps it was his imagination, but Ashton thought Kagura looked angry at him as well.

Ignoring the horse and wishing Claudia would leave off picking fights over everything, Ashton replied, "I only said what came into my mind, that's all. I didn't mean anything by it..." He added, "She reminds me of you in a way, Colonel Claudia. I mean, you're beautiful too."

There was a slightly awkward silence. “I don’t want your flattery,” Claudia said at last, glaring at him.

Ashton, who hadn’t had the slightest intention of flattering her, didn’t hesitate to defend himself. “That wasn’t flattery. I’m telling you what I really think,” he said earnestly. At this, Claudia drew back, looking flummoxed. She maintained an air of aloofness for a while afterward, smoothing down her hair incessantly. Ashton wasn’t used to seeing her like this, and so eyed her with deep suspicion.

“Very smooth, Major Ashton,” came a whisper in his ear. Ellis had pulled up her horse beside his.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come now. No need to be embarrassed.” Ellis elbowed him in the ribs, grinning conspiratorially. Ashton had no idea what she was talking about. He frowned, which caused Ellis’s smile to wilt rapidly. “You don’t mean...” she began.

“Mean what?”

Ellis gracefully ignored the question, stealing a glance at Claudia. Before too long, though, she gave a hopeless shrug. “Knock on wood, I don’t want to speak out of turn and end up getting throttled again.”

“Ellis, what are you talking about?” Ashton asked, getting annoyed. Ellis heaved a deep sigh, then with one fluid motion she reached out and laid her hand on Ashton’s head.

“A slip of the tongue. Don’t worry your head about it.”

“Come on, you can’t just say that now...”

“Pay it no mind, Major Numbskull!” Ellis tugged on her reins, turning her horse and heading back to Olivia.

Major Numbskull? Ashton thought. *It can’t be—Ellis doesn’t think Claudia has feelings for me, does she?* Shaking his head at this absurd notion, he cast his gaze forward and to the right—and found himself eye to eye with Claudia, who had been looking his way too. Claudia, looking mortified, immediately made a

show of looking everywhere except at him. For a moment, the gears of Ashton's mind all ground to a halt.

No. No way. At best she thinks of me like an annoying little brother, that's all, he told himself. *Right?* He looked back at Claudia, but she was already engaged in conversation with Evanson. *See? You're reading too much into things.* Ashton decided that Ellis had gotten the wrong end of the stick and turned his attention to what lay ahead.

We can't let our guard down around Sofitia Hell Mekia. Keeping a tight guard on Olivia is our main goal, but we also need to work out what she's after. If I'm going to do that, I need to know more about her, but it's not even certain if I'll be permitted to speak with her...

She was, after all, the ruler of a whole nation. Ashton, on the other hand, was a mere commoner. Under the natural order of things, he wouldn't even be allowed to speak to her. In truth, he wasn't even sure he'd be let into the audience chamber.

"Major Ashton? What's the scowl for?" Ashton looked up and saw Evanson had come over to ride alongside him. There was concern in his eyes.

"What do you think about Sofitia's invitation to visit Mekia, Evanson?" Ashton asked.

"So that's what you're thinking about." With one eye on Historia ahead of them, Evanson went on. "I was just talking to Colonel Claudia about the same thing. I think it's clear the seraph is interested in General Olivia."

"Yes, she probably is." Sofitia wouldn't have snubbed the royal family to make her invitation to a mere soldier like Olivia unless she was interested in her. The question was what Sofitia saw in Olivia to rouse said interest. The first thing that occurred to Ashton was the military prowess that had made Olivia into the feared Death God in the eyes of the imperial army.

"Well, there's nothing we can do but wait to see what move she makes. We're here on an official visit, after all. We can't afford to cross any lines, whatever she might be plotting."

"Still, I think we ought to consider all the possible eventualities."

“Of course, but please don’t do anything risky. Just like there’s only one General Olivia, there’s only one of you too, Major Ashton.”

Ashton nodded, his face hard.

With the Seraphic Guard alongside them, the roads were as peaceful as could be. They saw no more second-rate bandits like the Warriors of the Sunrise, and around a day after setting out from Fort Charna, Olivia’s platoon arrived at the Holy City of Elsphere.

Chapter Two: The Spider's Web

I

A great wall encircled the Holy City of Elsphere. Olivia and her platoon followed Historia through the imposing main gate and found themselves looking out at tidy streets lined with elegant buildings, full of people bustling about.

"The town is so full of energy," Claudia said sincerely, gazing about her at the people coming and going. Historia smiled pleasantly.

"It's only grown more so since Seraph Sofitia ascended the throne," she said. Claudia nodded, casting her eyes over to a gloomy alleyway. At the very least, she couldn't make out any miscreants lurking there. The guards stationed at strategic locations would be one reason for that, but it was also a testament to the excellence of Sofitia's governance.

My impression of her from the dinner party wasn't mistaken, then, Claudia thought. That meant there was no telling what Sofitia might be planning, which only served to arouse Claudia's caution still further.

"The faithful are very conspicuous, aren't they?" Ashton said. It was true; the followers of the Illuminatus Church, in their white robes, were impossible to miss. Even in a great nation like Fernest, you never saw this many of them gathered together.

"The Artemiana Cathedral lies to the northwest of Elsphere. It's customary for pilgrims to stop here for food and supplies before continuing on to the cathedral," Historia explained. Under her guidance, they soon left the city streets and began to climb a gently sloping hill. Claudia saw a towering building up ahead. Historia looked to the Seraphic Guards, at which one spurred their horse and galloped off toward it.

"You are looking at La Chaim Palace, the seat of the seraph," she said. As they approached, the full shape of the palace came into view. It was both so grand

and so unusual that it left Claudia speechless. In the center was a spire that soared up as though to pierce the clouds, with eight outer towers around it. The castle walls were a gleaming black, which had to mean they were made of Black Glass, the hardest of all stone. A poorly orchestrated attack wouldn't even put a chip in them.

This is supposed to be a palace? I'd be more likely to believe you if you told me that it was a fortress...

They all looked up in wonder at La Chaim Palace, though only Olivia voiced her admiration.

"This castle is *far* more impressive than Leticia Castle!" she said, her eyes sparkling.

"You're too kind. If the seraph were here, I'm sure your words would please her greatly," Historia replied, sounding amused as she too looked up at the castle. "The common people call it the Unassailable Tower, by the way."

Why does she always say things like that? Claudia thought, forcing back the reprimand that rose in her throat at Olivia's public expression of contempt for the seat of her own king. An admonishment here would in and of itself cause offense to Historia.

"The Unassailable Tower..." Ellis repeated slowly, her eyes fixed on the castle. "I think I see why." It was rare to hear her give an honest opinion without any sarcasm. The castle must have made a deep impression on her.

They were all still captivated when, with a sudden shrieking sound, the chains suspending the drawbridge began to turn. Historia waited until the bridge was fully lowered before indicating for them to ride on. What they found on the other side proved an even greater surprise for the platoon. They passed under twelve gates, each adorned with engravings that were distinct in style, though alike in intricacy, and then arrived at last at the central tower.

There, they were met by two solemn rows of guards to their left and right, holding aloft the national flag of Mekia. At their head, in a gown of shining white, stood Sofitia. She held a silver staff adorned with rings and a smile played about her lips. Three others stood behind her, all decked out in immaculate military uniforms. There was the fine-featured woman called Lara,

the woman with pale blue hair who had struck Claudia as coldhearted, and finally, Claudia's archnemesis, Johann. Catching her eye, he sent her a smile and a wink.

I see he's as ridiculous as ever. As Claudia quietly seethed, Olivia gave the order to dismount. Then, she herself approached Sofitia and knelt.

"Seraph Sofitia Hell Mekia, I speak on behalf of my sovereign, King Alfonse, when I offer you my thanks for inviting us here."

This flawless display of courtesy left Ashton staring at her in slack-jawed amazement. The shock was less pronounced for Claudia, who had seen how Olivia conducted herself at the conferment ceremony. All the same, not even she had expected it. Johann, who had the most familiarity with Olivia of anyone in Mekia, also looked taken aback.

Sofitia lowered her head, then knelt herself so that her eyes were on the same level as Olivia's. She took the girl's hand in her own, a beautiful smile lighting up her face.

"Dear Olivia, there's no need for such ceremony between us. We're friends, after all."

"Oh, right!" Olivia looked up and giggled. The guards, who hadn't been privy to Olivia and Sofitia's conversation back at the dinner party, all stood frozen in consternation at Sofitia's behavior. Even Lara, who *had* been present, had the same reaction. With this, Sofitia had made the status that was to be afforded to Olivia clear to her subjects.

That was an impeccable performance. She didn't reveal even the slightest vulnerability. Everything must be going according to her plan. Claudia watched Olivia like a hawk as Sofitia had her stand up and address her as though they'd known each other for years.

"I expect you're tired after your long journey."

"Oh, no. I'm not tired," Olivia replied earnestly. "It was fun traveling after so long."

Sofitia's smile was patient. "I've had hot baths run for you. Wouldn't you like to wash off the weariness from your travels?"

“Hot baths? That does sound nice. I’m a bit dusty.” Olivia brushed off her uniform.

“Please, by all means. Oh, and Olivia, are there any foods you dislike?”

“I don’t think so...” Olivia said, thinking. “Oh, maybe unicorn meat. I don’t like that very much.”

Sofitia’s eyes went wide for a moment, left a little flustered by the response. “I-I see,” she said. “Well, tonight we are to have a banquet, prepared by the preeminent chef in the Holy Land of Mekia. Please rest assured that unicorn meat is not on the menu.”

“A banquet! All right!”

Sofitia laughed softly. “Shall we, then?” she said. Olivia couldn’t have looked more at ease beside her as they walked away together. Claudia heaved a massive sigh, then set off after them.

II

The Hall of Agnetia, La Chaim Palace

Constructed under the eye of the foremost builder of the era, the great expanse of the Hall of Agnetia was a work of art. Tonight, it glittered under the dazzling lights of the chandeliers. The dulcet strains of a string quartet provided a fine accompaniment to the many graceful dancers.

“C-Colonel Claudia! Slow down a bit!”

Claudia sighed. “Are those really the tightest steps you can manage?”

“I— What do you want from me? I’m a commoner...”

“Don’t you pull the commoner card.”

“B-But...”

In the center of the hall, Claudia danced with Ashton—her leading, him falling over his own feet trying to follow. Ellis and Evanson stood nearby, both looking thoroughly out of sorts.

“The nerve! Grasping my big sister’s noble fingers,” Ellis seethed.

“How’s she supposed to dance without holding hands?” Evanston hissed in reply.

“If I may have your attention, I will introduce our honored guest from the Kingdom of Fernest and my personal friend,” Sofitia announced, garbed tonight in a black dress rather than her usual white gown. As she finished, the great doors at the very top of a spiral staircase carpeted in azure blue swung slowly open.

“The woman of the hour makes her entrance.”

“I’ve never heard of the seraph making such a fuss over anyone before.”

“She even announced they were friends, didn’t she?”

“I heard she’s something of a beauty.”

“Surely nothing compared to the seraph.”

The generous reception Sofitia had shown Olivia was already common knowledge. All the high-ranking officers and blue-blooded nobles held their breath as they waited for a glimpse of the girl behind the rumors.

“Her Ladyship Olivia Valedstorm!” cried the man who stood in wait at the door. As his voice rang out, Olivia stepped into view, and silence fell over the Hall of Agnetia. It was as though time had stopped. The old texts of that time which remained to later generations would describe Olivia that night as “a sight of such beauty as to dazzle the eyes.” She wore the pure white ceremonial uniform bequeathed to her by King Alfonse for the journey to Mekia, while from her shoulders fell a crimson cloak emblazoned with lions. Both had been made especially by the king’s personal couturier.

Olivia descended the staircase, the heels of her military boots clicking loud and clear in the awed silence. No one breathed a word. Olivia’s beauty and nobility shone out of her, and every eye in the hall was riveted to her.

Claudia was basking in the glow of vicarious pride when beside her, she noticed Ellis’s shoulders trembling. The other woman’s eyes shimmered, and her cheeks looked flushed.

“Ellis?” Claudia whispered. “Are you feeling unwell?”

Ellis seemed not even to hear her, her eyes pointed down. Claudia was about to ask again when Evanson came up behind her.

“Colonel Claudia, I believe she’s having an episode of her condition. Don’t worry about her.”

“Her condition?” Claudia looked around and saw Evanson sighing heavily. “Oh,” she said, shaking her head, *“that.”* This is all convoluted for me.”

Olivia had now descended the staircase and went to stand beside Sofitia. If there was a person alive who could have disputed that here stood the two most beautiful women in Duvedirica, they were not in the hall that night.

I’m sure she won’t try anything on an occasion like this... Claudia thought uneasily. *Still, just in case something does happen, I’d better be ready to act right away.* She looked at Olivia and Sofitia and clenched her fists.

“Everything is ready, My Seraph,” Lara murmured in her ear. Sofitia, her smile never slipping, accepted a glass from a servant and raised it halfway. Her subjects all took their own glasses in hand.

“To the prosperity of the Holy Land of Mekia.”

In response to her toast, voices rang out from around the hall.

“May the seraph be our light!”

Glasses rose and clinked, and the Hall of Agnetia lit up as the string players set into a delightful new refrain. Right on cue, the main doors to the hall swung open and servants appeared bearing platters piled with all manner of dishes. Olivia watched these with rapt attention.

“Well then, Olivia,” Sofitia said to her, “why don’t we talk over dinner?”

“Okay!” Olivia nodded repeatedly. Sofitia showed her to a table, pulled out her own chair, and sat down. Olivia positively quivered as plate after plate was laid down before her.

“Can I eat yet? Can I?”

“But of course. Please, eat as much as you like.”

Olivia didn't need to be told twice. In the blink of an eye, the knife and fork laid on the napkin before her were in her hands and propelling food into her mouth at blistering speed.

At the dinner party back in Fernest, Sofitia had observed Olivia's voracious appetite from a distance, and had therefore thought she knew what to expect. But now, with a front-row seat to the display, she was so captivated that for a while she forgot to speak.

"This is *amazing*, Seraph Sofitia!" Olivia exclaimed.



“I-I’m glad.” Recalling herself, Sofitia forced a smile. She could feel herself slipping into following Olivia’s lead. *This won’t do*, she told herself, and, sitting up straighter, she quickly started on a different topic.

“I’ve heard all sorts of stories of your valor, Olivia,” she said. “However did you come to possess such strength?” She posed the question despite the fact that she already knew the answer, purely to see how Olivia responded.

“Fwell, itth—”

“You can finish your mouthful first.”

Olivia nodded and gulped loudly. “Right, well. It’s thanks to everything Z taught me.”

“Was Z your master?”

“No, not my master,” Olivia said, cheerfully spearing a whole roasted fowl with her fork.

It was all just as Johann had reported. It appeared that Olivia wasn’t trying to hide anything.

“Was he your father, then?”

Olivia giggled. “I wathwaba—”

“You can finish your mouthful first.”

“I was left in the forest as a baby. I don’t even know what my parents looked like.” Olivia recounted the tale of her abandonment casually, her attention on the bird meat she was tearing into. Thinking she’d accidentally touched on a sensitive topic, Sofitia decided to change the subject.

“Olivia—”

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Olivia butted in. “All this delicious food is going to get cold.”

Sofitia paused, realizing she’d been too eager. “Very true,” she admitted, and cut off a piece of fish from a plate in front of her. She then waited until Olivia had polished off every last morsel on the table before she spoke again.

“How did you come to join the Royal Army?”

“To find Z, of course.”

“You mean this Z of yours disappeared?”

“Yep. It was sudden too.” For the first time, Olivia’s knife and fork halted, and she looked at Sofitia with a forlorn smile. In that smile, Sofitia smelled the first hint of weakness. She pushed on.

“How terrible. There’s nothing sadder or more painful than losing someone you love.”

“Do you think I’m sad and in pain?” Olivia asked.

It wasn’t the question Sofitia had expected, but she answered at once. “I can’t see why you’d go as far as joining the army if you weren’t.”

“Huh. I suppose I am, then.” Olivia stared off into the distance without moving a muscle. Sofitia coughed quietly.

“But how did joining the Royal Army help you find Z?”

“Before I enlisted, I was traveling with a human who told me that the Kingdom of Fernest had a longer history than any other country. They’d have all sorts of knowledge there, they said, so the most efficient way to get information would be to join their army.”

“I see...” It was true that information was easy to come by in the military. Having ascertained how Olivia came to belong to the Royal Army, Sofitia allowed herself a private smile. If this was all just a way for Olivia to find Z, winning her over would be relatively simple. And now that she knew Z was missing, she wanted Olivia at all costs.

“And were you able to find any clues about Z?”

“I did, sort of. But I think it’s going to take a lot longer.” Olivia smile was listless. Sofitia at last moved on to what she really wanted to say.

“I don’t believe you’re aware of this, Olivia, but Mekia has its own excellent intelligence agents.”

“You do?”

“Yes, and I flatter myself that they outperform even the empire’s shimmers.”

“Shimmers? Ohh.” Olivia looked unimpressed. “Those rats.” Apparently, she’d encountered the shimmers before. The sight of her writing the empire’s intelligence agents off as “rats” was so amusing to Sofitia that it took her considerable effort to stifle the urge to laugh before it burst out.

“Well, Mekia’s intelligence agents are better than those rats,” she said. “Let me see. I could have them turn all their energies to searching for Z, if you so desired it.”

“Would you really?!” Olivia leapt to her feet, sending her chair clattering to the ground behind her. Everyone in the room turned to look at her. Among them was Claudia, whose gaze was fixed closely on Sofitia.

What was that glow? For a split second, Sofitia thought she saw something bright flash in Claudia’s eyes.

“Really? Would you really?!” While Sofitia’s attention was on Claudia, Olivia had come up so that they were now almost nose to nose. She really was breathtakingly beautiful, Sofitia observed as she answered.

“Yes, although I would ask that you let me make a request of you first.”

“A request?” Olivia paused. “Do you want gold?”

Sofitia laughed softly. “No, not gold.” When Sofitia prompted her, Olivia, her agitation in no way lessened, sat down again. Sofitia sensed she almost had her.

“I want you to join the ranks of the Winged Crusaders,” she said.

Olivia stared at her. “Um. By joining the Winged Crusaders, you mean leave the Royal Army?”

“Precisely. Naturally, I guarantee you will be afforded all the privileges of your current rank and more besides.”

“I couldn’t really care less about rank...” Olivia mumbled, thereby revealing to Sofitia that she wasn’t a person for whom rank or power held any attraction. Additionally, it told her that Olivia’s whole heart was set on finding Z.

“A nod from you, Olivia, and I will set our intelligence agents to work at once.”

“Right...” Olivia said uneasily. She folded her arms and turned to look up at the ceiling, conflict plain on her face. Seeing that she was clearly torn, Sofitia decided now was the time to add fuel to the fire.

“As I mentioned, our agents are far more skilled in gathering information than the empire’s shimmers, or anyone in the Kingdom of Fernest. You can rely on them to get results.”

“Can I have a little while to think about it?” Olivia said at length.

“But of course.” Sofitia smiled. It would be fatal to rush things. She might not have won Olivia’s agreement, but she sensed her approach was working. She would be satisfied with that for the time being.

“By the way...” Olivia said slowly.

“What is it? We’re friends, so you needn’t hold anything back.”

“There isn’t any more food coming, is there?” Olivia rubbed her belly, her eyes fixed on the table. This time, Sofitia laughed out loud. Apparently, eating held priority over all else for Olivia right now.

“There’s plenty more still to come,” she reassured her. “And it won’t cease until your appetite is sated. I hope you’re ready.”

“You bet!”

Servants laid out plate after plate in front of Olivia, who went on shoveling their contents down her throat at even greater speeds than before. Sofitia watched her, a fond smile playing on her lips.

III

The magnificent banquet came to an end without incident. The members of Olivia’s platoon clambered into the four carriages Historia called for them, and so set off from La Chaim Palace.

“I will now show you to your accommodation,” she told them. The carriages ran along, wheels clattering and setting a smart pace. After around ten minutes, they reached a street lined with some of the largest buildings they’d seen in Elsphere, and the carriages came to a halt. At once, the doors opened.

“Please dismount here.” They followed the drivers’ instructions, and one by one stepped down from the carriages. Historia checked they were all present, then turned away from them to look up at the stately residence before them.

“This house is yours to use as you wish for the duration of your stay,” she said.

“What?! This place?!” Ashton exclaimed loudly before he could stop himself, forgetting it was the middle of the night. Under the light of the moon, the house stretched far out on either side, and stood three stories tall.

No matter how you look at it, this is clearly the home of a high-ranking noble... he thought, staring up at the house in awe.

“We originally planned on giving you rooms at the palace,” Historia explained apologetically, “but then thought it might be hard for you to relax, so I offered my house for your use.” She paused. “If it isn’t to your liking, I can find you another.”

“N-No! There’s nothing wrong with it at all!” Ashton shook his head emphatically, and Historia chuckled.

“Lady Olivia? Lady Claudia? Will this be suitable for you?” she asked.

“Yep, it seems fine,” Olivia said, without much interest.

“I apologize for my officer’s rudeness. I have no objections, of course.” Ashton saw Claudia’s hand reaching for him just as his head was shoved forcibly down.

Historia turned away from them, cleared her throat several times, then turned back, her expression serene. “Shall we go inside then?” she said.

Following as she marched ahead with the clipped steps of a soldier, Ashton observed their surroundings. They passed through a well-kept garden, then entered the house itself. Ashton saw a grand staircase in the center with a row of servants standing in neat rows on either side of it.

One, two, three... At a rough count, there have to be at least thirty of them. Even if they got a servant each, there’d still be half left over. Of course, Ashton intended to do everything in his power to refuse any attempts to assign him a personal servant.

“You’ve all had a long day. If there is anything you require, you need only say a word to one of the servants. Tomorrow, someone else will be here to collect you.”

“Huh? It won’t be you?”

“Will you miss me?” Historia said, smiling at Ashton, who was left at a loss for how to respond. Just then, a fist made violent contact with his skull.

“Ow!”

“I apologize *yet again* for my officer’s rudeness. I appreciate everything you’ve done for us, Historia.” Claudia turned, then barked, “Ashton!”

“R-Right, thank you very much!”

Historia chuckled. “You really needn’t be so formal. All I did was carry out my duties as ordered.”

“All the same, we’re grateful,” Ashton insisted. In an instant, Historia’s face turned serious, and she raised two fingers to her temple in salute.

“I take my leave of you!” she barked, and with that, she stepped back, turned gracefully on her heel, and swept out of the house. They were left in the entrance hall with the servants.

“Unbelievable,” Claudia said, looking daggers at Ashton. “I’ll ask you to refrain from embarrassing me any further.” He was about to dispute this, but she snapped, “Don’t make excuses,” and he found himself unable to string a sentence together.

“Um...” Evanson chimed in. “What are we going to do now?” This was a lifeline for Ashton, who snatched at it to pull himself out of harm’s way. Ellis said she wanted to relax and get settled in her room, and the others agreed.

Olivia, meanwhile, rubbed her stomach and muttered, “I think the orchestra in my tummy has started playing again...”

“The *what?*”

“Don’t you know what an orchestra is?”

“You’re not telling me you’re hungry again, are you?” Ashton said slowly.

Olivia cocked her head and fluttered her long eyelashes at him. “Am I not allowed to?”

Ashton let out a groan of exasperation. “I can’t...” he began. “You ate enough to kill a person back at the banquet!” He’d been watching from afar as Olivia, without any regard for the fact that they were in a foreign country, had consumed that aberrant volume of food. Eventually he’d grown too mortified to keep watching and averted his eyes. He now felt a rush of heartfelt sympathy as he wondered if this was how Claudia felt all the time. Anyone who wasn’t familiar with the deep abyss of Olivia’s stomach might have thought she was kept half-starved from day to day. In fact, Ashton clearly remembered a nearby noble looking pitifully at Olivia and remarking, “I’d heard they were running low on supplies, but are even the generals going without proper meals in Fernest these days?”

“That wasn’t enough to kill someone,” Olivia replied. “See, I’m not dead!” She burst out laughing, totally oblivious to Ashton. He fought off a wave of dizziness just as Claudia laid a hand on his shoulder, a wry smile on her face.

“It appears you understand a little of how I feel,” she said.

“I thought I understood before,” Ashton replied. “Only now I see I really only *thought* I understood. Now I understand more than I think I wanted to.”

Claudia nodded with satisfaction as Ashton let out a heavy sigh. One of the servants, a woman who looked the youngest among them, approached them.

“Um, do you need something?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

“What? You were listening?” It hadn’t been an especially sensitive conversation, but he still found himself responding in a tone of accusation. Evanson came to the servant’s defense.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, you weren’t exactly keeping your voices down,” Ellis added. “And even if you were, voices really carry in here. Anyone with functioning ears would have heard everything.”

The servant thanked Evanson and Ellis with a tactful smile, then looked at Olivia, who was still rubbing her stomach. “I’m afraid it can’t compare to what you were served at the banquet, but I’ll do my best to cook you something, my lady. Would that do for you?”

“You’ll make something?” Olivia replied.

“Of course, my lady. Just leave it to me.”

“There!” For some reason, Olivia turned to Ashton with a look of triumph. He couldn’t turn down the servant’s kind gesture, so he threw up his hands.

“Fine, fine. Do what you want, General Olivia.” Thinking about it, unlike at the banquet, they weren’t exposed to outside eyes here, and more importantly, it wouldn’t burn a hole in his own purse. He might feel exasperation with Olivia, but he didn’t actually have any reason to object.

“Thanks, I will,” Olivia replied.

“In that case, Lady Olivia, I’ll show you to the dining room.”

Olivia said, “Let’s go!” and the servant, with a bow to Ashton, issued instructions to her assembled colleagues. She then bustled from the entrance hall with several of them in tow. Ashton was more than a little shocked to discover that the woman he’d thought was the youngest also appeared to be the most senior among them.

“We’ll show you up to your rooms,” said another servant. Ashton and the others were led away to where their rooms awaited them.

“That was amazing!” Olivia, who had heartily enjoyed her meal, downed the cup of tea placed in front of her in a single gulp, gave a big stretch, and stood up.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, my lady,” said the servant. “If you please, I’ll show you to your room now.” They returned to the entrance hall together, then ascended the grand staircase, feet sinking into the scarlet carpet, until they reached the third floor. The servant led Olivia to a corner room right at the end of a long corridor.

“Your room, Lady Olivia.” She turned the doorknob, and gestured for Olivia to enter. Olivia stepped over the threshold and found herself in a room far too large for one person to occupy.

“It’s so big...” she said. The ceiling soared high, and the furnishings were all in the same shade of white. To Olivia’s mind, it looked like the room of a princess she remembered from a picture book.

“If it isn’t to your liking, I can show you another.”

“Oh, no. This is fine,” Olivia said. In truth, she would have felt more at home in a room the size of the one she’d had back at the Gate to the Land of the Dead—specifically, one where everything she might need was only a few steps away. Humans with lots of gold all seemed to either live in—or want to live in—enormous houses. She’d asked Ashton and Claudia why once, but they’d only laughed and shaken their heads at her without giving a straight answer.

But there’s other things to think about right now... A great canopied bed insisted on her attention. She could tell it’d be feather-soft just from looking at it, and she couldn’t wait to dive into it.

“I think I’ve got everything now,” she said.

“Very good, my lady. One last thing. If you need anything, please ring the bell and I will be at your side at once.” The servant rang a golden bell that lay on the table, and a clear peal filled the room.

But she won’t be able to hear it, will she? Olivia thought. As though reading her mind, the servant added not to worry, as she would be waiting outside Olivia’s room at all times. Olivia remembered the chair she’d seen out in the corridor.

“You mean you’re going to sit out there the whole time?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“You won’t eat?”

“I’ve already had my dinner.”

“Or sleep?”

“No,” she replied matter-of-factly. “If I slept, I wouldn’t be able to respond at

once to your every request.” Olivia stared at her in disbelief. Just the idea of sitting out there with nothing to do but wait in silence for a bell to ring made a shiver run down her spine. *I could never be a servant*, she thought.

“Um, so humans have this thing called a growth spurt, and— Sorry, I didn’t ask what your name is.”

“It’s Tabitha, my lady,” the servant said, standing up straight and giving a small curtsy.

“Well, Tabitha, I don’t know if you know this, but during a growth spurt, you have to eat lots and sleep lots, or you won’t get any bigger,” Olivia said, repeating what Z had taught her. “So I think you should go back to your own room and sleep. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Tabitha looked at her in confusion and said, “I’m well past any growth spurts I’m likely to have.”

“Past them? Why?”

“I’m not quite sure how to answer that...” Tabitha replied, “but I am twenty-seven years old...”

“What?!” Before she could stop herself, Olivia seized Tabitha by the shoulders and peered closely at the woman’s childlike face. This whole time she’d thought that Tabitha was younger than her, yet here it turned out she was actually more than a decade Olivia’s senior. She knew the others would be shocked when they found out.

“Lady Olivia,” Tabitha said, “I beg your pardon, but that hurts a little.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry!” Olivia quickly released the woman, who rubbed her shoulders, letting out a sigh of relief.

“I’m very grateful for your concern for me, my lady,” she said. “But that’s the way of things. Please don’t feel reluctant to use the bell.”

“R-Right. Okay.” Olivia nodded uncomfortably.

“I’ll take my leave then, my lady.” Tabitha crossed her hands in front of her and bowed, then opened the door without a sound and slipped out.

Olivia, feeling as though she’d just seen a mysterious creature, threw herself

with abandon onto the bed.

It's so soft... After luxuriating for a while in the bed's feathery embrace, Olivia slowly rolled over to look up, and went back over what Sofitia had proposed to her.

So if I join the Winged Crusaders, she'll help me find Z... That's not a bad deal. Especially when she says she has the best intelligence agents. Who knows, it might not give them any trouble at all.

Olivia had stumbled into her promotion to general in the Royal Army; she didn't have any particular attachment to the rank. The fact was, she'd only accepted the progressive advancements so that she might have more opportunities to learn things. Not having to adhere to military courtesy was another bonus, but it had always been a secondary concern to her.

This is really tough... She knew without a doubt that the Olivia from before would have jumped at Sofitia's offer. What had stopped her from agreeing at once tonight was an image in her mind of all the friends and allies she'd made along the way.

Claudia, always kind and reliable. Ashton, who took care of her despite his complaints. Paul, who smiled and gave her delicious cake. Otto, who found something to fault her on at every opportunity. Gile, a first-class hunter (even if Olivia wasn't quite sure she liked him). Gauss, big as an oak, with his hearty laugh. Ellis, who insisted on calling Olivia "Big Sister" even though she was definitely older than Olivia. And Evanson, with his perpetual sighing.

To Olivia, Z was special and irreplaceable, and so very, very precious. That would never change. But now, Olivia had a whole manner of other precious things. She could never have had any of that on her own. If she left the Royal Army and joined the Winged Crusaders, all those precious things would slip through her fingers, and she felt only fear at the mere thought of that.

But I miss Z. I don't want to be apart anymore. It wasn't like there was anything she wanted from Z if she saw it again. She didn't plan on complaining that it had vanished without a word. She missed it, that was all. Olivia wasn't one to be indecisive, as a rule, but now she was at a loss.

Just then, she heard familiar footfalls from the corridor, followed by a knock

at the door.

“I’m coming.” She jumped down from the bed and opened the door without a sound. There stood Claudia and Ashton, their faces grave.

IV

“What’re you two doing here?”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s late, but I needed to talk to you...” Claudia peered through the crack in the door into the room. “Do you mind if we come in?”

“Sure, I guess...” Olivia replied. Ashton was looking at her searchingly. Bemused, she let the two of them in. As she did so, she noticed that Tabitha was sitting in her chair, just as she’d promised.

Once inside, Claudia cast her gaze over every corner of the room. “This is very spacious,” she said. It seemed to Olivia as though she were on watch for something.

“Who’s the servant in the corridor?”

“Apparently she’s sitting there so if I ring the bell she can come right away.”

“There? All night?” Ashton glared at the patch of wall behind which Tabitha sat.

“I guess. I did tell her she should go back to her own room and sleep...” Olivia looked at the other two. “They didn’t send someone for you?”

Ashton and Claudia both shook their heads in silence. Olivia was the only one receiving this service, then.

“They’ve really thought of everything.”

“Yeah...”

The other two both looked grim as Olivia showed them to the sofa, then sat herself down with the table in between them.

“Want something to drink?” she asked.

“I’d appreciate something warm, if you don’t mind. I’m freezing,” Claudia

said, then looked over at the window. Engrossed in her thoughts, Olivia had totally failed to notice that it had started to rain.

“What about you, Ashton?”

“Oh, something warm for me too.”

“Got it.” Olivia promptly rang the bell, there was a knock at the door, and Tabitha appeared. It really was a tough job, Olivia thought.

“Lady Olivia, you called?”

“Can you bring something warm to drink for the three of us?”

“Of course, my lady. Will Mekian leygrantz do?”

“Well, I like it, so it’s fine by me...” Olivia looked over at Claudia and Ashton to confirm. They both nodded their agreement. “I guess that’s fine, then.”

“Very good, my lady. I’ll put a pot on at once.”

Olivia watched Tabitha leave, then turned back to the other two. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“That,” Claudia replied, “is precisely the question I wanted to ask you. Did Seraph Sofitia say something to you?”

“Huh? How’d you know?” Olivia was taken completely by surprise, for the simple reason that she thought she’d acted completely normal around the others.

“Because we’ve known you long enough by now, Olivia,” Ashton said. “Colonel Claudia will tell you I’m not exactly perceptive, but even I can tell when you’re not yourself.”

Ashton looked more serious than Olivia had ever seen him. Claudia smiled dryly and nodded. Olivia’s initial surprise was fading, and happiness was bubbling up to take its place. Why, she couldn’t have said. But right now, she felt happy.

“You look pleased about something,” Ashton said dubiously.

“Yep, I am.”

“You’re so weird.”

As Ashton frowned, Claudia cleared her throat and asked, “So just what did the seraph say to you, General?”

“Well...” Olivia got no further.

“Is it something you can’t even tell us?”

For a moment, Olivia wavered on whether she ought to tell them. But in the end, she confessed that Sofitia had asked her to join the Winged Crusaders, and that she’d offered to help Olivia search for Z in exchange. Ashton and Claudia were shocked, but they listened in silence until she was finished.

“I guess you’re surprised?” Olivia had an uncharacteristically searching look in her eyes.

“Well, I knew she was scheming something,” Claudia began slowly, “but this is certainly beyond anything I expected.”

“So she wants her in the Winged Crusaders...” Ashton said. “Perfectly believable, when you consider Olivia’s military potential.” He broke off as a halting, bitter laugh burst out of him. Despite everyone lately who had lauded him as some sort of genius tactician, he hadn’t been able to deduce anything of Sofitia’s intentions. *Who wouldn’t laugh at you?* he thought, disgusted with himself.

“So how, ah...” Claudia began, looking down at the cup in her hand to avoid looking at Olivia. “How are you thinking of responding, General?”

Ashton of course knew how much Olivia adored Z, who had raised her like a parent. She’d also told him, long ago, that the whole reason she’d enlisted in the Royal Army was to help her find Z. It was this, he was sure, that made Claudia too afraid to look Olivia in the eye and ask. Ashton felt the same way himself.

Olivia was silent for a long time. At last, she smiled unhappily at them. Had she already decided to join the Winged Crusaders? From that smile, it was impossible to tell.

I never even imagined that she’d come at us from this angle... Monarch or not, Ashton had been prepared to do whatever it took to stand in her way if Sofitia

had seemed like she might try to do Olivia harm. *But really, she was after something else.*

Though it was only to bribe Olivia into joining the Winged Crusaders, Sofitia was offering Olivia help. The greatest error Ashton had made in his calculations was to underestimate the depths of Olivia's devotion to Z. Sofitia had done no such thing.

The result was that now, the Royal Army was going to lose Olivia—*Ashton* was going to lose her. *How could you have gotten this so wrong, you colossal moron?* Olivia had always been there at his side, and he had simply assumed that she always would be. But that had never been anything more than an illusion.

Ashton was unable to bring himself to be the next to speak, and sat in silence.

Then, Claudia, her face drawn tight in a pained expression, faced Olivia and bowed her head low.

"General, I never realized the true depths of your feelings," she said. "I have failed as your aide." That sounded to Ashton like Claudia had arrived at the same conclusion as himself.

Olivia stared at Claudia, who didn't rise from her bow. She looked shaken.

"Z was always my problem to deal with. There's no reason you should worry about it," she said.

"No, General. Personal matter or not, after you've done so much in service of the Royal Army, I could have mobilized our intelligence division to search for Z. Instead, I was focused solely on discipline and order..." Claudia's voice caught, and she broke off, her eyes shining.

Ashton was thrown entirely off guard by the sight of Claudia in such a vulnerable state, but Olivia's reaction eclipsed his entirely. Stammering nervously, she tugged a pink handkerchief out of her pocket and started dabbing at Claudia's eyes.

"I'm sorry..." Claudia said.

"N-No, don't be!" Olivia replied in a slightly hysterical tone, fervently rubbing

Claudia's back.

Ashton waited until Claudia had regained her composure before asking, "Couldn't you try to ask them now?"

Claudia shook her head. "Right now, everyone in Fernest is committed to carrying out the Twin Lions at Dawn strategy..."

"So it's impossible? But if you explained the situation to Field Marshal Cornelius, or General Paul, surely they'd lend us a hand?"

The outcome of the war wasn't going to be decided by Olivia alone. Having said that, Ashton knew that without Olivia, the Royal Army would never have been able to regain as much ground as it had. Paul doted on Olivia as though she were his own grandchild. He'd never sit back and do nothing if he knew about this.

"Like I said," Claudia replied, "everyone is committed. That includes everyone in the intelligence division."

"But—"

"Besides, Ashton, you must have heard of the owls. Mekia's master intelligence agents. They're supposed to outclass even the empire's shimmers when it comes to getting their hands on information." Claudia said nothing more. It was clear that she didn't believe the Royal Army's intelligence division to be any match for the owls, even if they could have relied on its assistance.

Which means we have nothing to make Olivia stay. We've exhausted all our options. Ashton looked over at the grandfather clock that reached almost to the ceiling and saw that it was almost midnight. Olivia didn't say a word, and without her usual exuberance, the room felt forlorn and empty. *Wasting away the hours like this isn't going to make Olivia change her mind,* he thought. He was afraid to ask, but unless he did, they couldn't move forward.

Ashton looked Olivia straight in the eyes and gave voice to the question neither of them had been able to speak.

"Olivia, are you going to join the Winged Crusaders?"

Olivia took a moment, then, worrying at the ends of her hair, said, "I'm still

not sure. Z is important to me, but..." She trailed off. The sound of the rain lashing the window panes was deafening to Ashton. Beside him, Claudia leaned in to catch every word. He exerted all his patience in waiting. Then, at last, as though time had resumed its flow, Olivia's lips moved once more. "But you're important to me too, Ashton."

"What...?" At this unexpected declaration, Ashton felt his heart start to race.

V

Before Ashton could recover from his shock and speak, Claudia asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean? I just mean what I said, that's all..." Olivia looked back at her, confusion writ plain on her face.

"Just what you said, which is to say..." Claudia stole a glance at Ashton and saw he'd gone very obviously red. Just as she felt some unspeakable emotion bubbling up inside of her, Olivia made another confession.

"You're important to me too, Claudia."

"Eh?" Claudia choked. "You— *I'm* important to you?"

"Huh? Of course you are." As Claudia reeled from this, Olivia went on in a list that included Paul, Otto, Gauss, Gile, Ellis, and Evanson. Realizing that she hadn't been talking solely about Ashton, Claudia felt an unconscious rush of relief.

Eh? Why does that make me feel relieved? It's not like there's anything wrong with Ashton being important to the general, is there? Growing suspicious of her own emotions, she turned to look beside her and saw Ashton looking at Olivia with an ambivalent expression she couldn't give a name to.

Trying again to ascertain what Olivia meant, she asked, "So it's because all of these people are important to you that you're not sure what to do? Is that right?"

Olivia nodded. Claudia stared at her, agog. *We're all this important to her...?* she thought.

Her initial impression of Olivia, back when they'd first met, certainly hadn't been a positive one. A large part of that had been Olivia's almost total lack of humanity, likely a result of the unique circumstances she had been raised in. Even these days, the way she spoke made it clear that she still had those tendencies, but even so, Claudia felt nothing but joy to hear that Olivia thought of her as important. Thus, she made her decision.

"As your aide, I am obligated to do everything in my power to stop you..." she said. "But I swear on my honor as a knight that I will respect whatever decision you make."

"*What?!* Colonel Claudia, are you really sure about that?" Ashton was looking at her with open reproach in his eyes, but Claudia nodded decisively.

"I am," she said.

"Well, maybe you are, but I...I'm..." Ashton's hands, balled into fists, were trembling. Come to think of it, Ashton had known Olivia longer than she had. Claudia understood with painful clarity why it was so hard for him to accept this.

"If you're a real man, you'll respect the general's wishes and be happy for her when she leaves," Claudia said firmly. When the others—not just those here under their command, but their superiors back in Fernest as well—heard what she'd done, she would no doubt face harsh criticism. That, she could handle, but in the worst-case scenario, she might even be thrown out of the army altogether.

But I can live with that, Claudia told herself. After everything Olivia had done in service for the Royal Army, she owed her that much. Such was the resolution that now lay in Claudia's heart.

"All right, but what about our new Eighth Legion? Who's going to command it?" Ashton demanded.

"Well..." The new recruits were one thing, but all the old hands who had been with Olivia since the days of the Independent Cavalry Regiment were fiercely devoted to her. It was human nature to be drawn to strength, and Olivia's extraordinary skill in battle, combined with her beauty, made her a powerfully charismatic presence. The candidate to succeed Olivia in leading the Eighth

Legion who immediately occurred to Claudia was her cousin, Neinhardt. But assuming he did take the role, he'd inevitably be the subject of unfavorable comparisons.

While Claudia struggled to think of an answer, she saw Olivia raise a tentative hand.

"What is it?"

"Um, well, like I said before, I still haven't made my mind up. So could you give me a bit more time before I answer?"

"Can I assume that we'll have your answer before our five days here in Mekia are up?" Claudia asked.

Olivia nodded.

"Very well. In that case, we'll leave you for tonight. I'm sorry for descending on you at this hour." Claudia stood up, then barked, "Ashton, we're leaving."

Ashton looked mutinous, but he rose and, with a last glance at Olivia, left the room without another word. Claudia saluted, before she too strode briskly from the room.

As Ashton made his way down the corridor in silence, Claudia jogged up behind him.

"Not a word about this to the others," she said under her breath. "It'd just incite unnecessary confusion."

Ashton took a moment before he responded. "They're going to find out eventually," he said. "Oughtn't we tell them sooner rather than later?"

"I see *you* think the general is going to leave the Royal Army," Claudia said. From her tone, Ashton could only assume that she was of a different mind.

"Don't you, Lieutenant?" he asked. Claudia didn't reply, only stared straight ahead and kept walking. A servant they passed along the way pressed themselves against the wall, bowing low.

I was so happy to have Olivia say to my face that I'm important to her. But even if she's unsure now, I know she's going to leave me in the end, Ashton

thought forlornly. The allure of Sofitia's proposal would simply be too great.

"I thought you'd kick up more of a stink," Claudia remarked, the corners of her mouth twitching. Ashton was taken aback.

"I seem to recall you saying something about being a real man," he retorted.

"All you were going to achieve blathering away back there was making a nuisance of yourself to the general. That was all I meant."

"Blathering...?" Ashton repeated. "Well, whatever else, I'm trying to be realistic. I'm not going to try and take on an opponent when I don't have a single card in my hand that can beat them." With a hopeless shrug, he gave Claudia a feeble smile. The one thing he thought he could beat Sofitia on was the strength of his feelings for Olivia, but he didn't think for a second that would be enough to make her stay.

Claudia stopped walking. Looking down at her feet, she gave a quiet sigh, then said, "At any rate, we still have time."

"All the time in the world won't help us with *this*," Ashton muttered. Claudia put an arm around his shoulders, and like that they set off down the corridor once more.

Chapter Three: Escape

I

The Empire of Estra, Tempus Fugit 983

Rimmed on all sides by deep valleys, the Empire of Estra was a minor nation in the west of Duvedirica. Emperor Hule shin Estra was a shrewd man of seventy summers, under whose sage governance the common folk enjoyed peace and prosperity.

On the outskirts of the town of Toa, the doorstep for those entering Estra, there stood a lone, dilapidated hut. Making his way toward it was a man.

“I’m back.” Eliot Blaine, his hair as silver as the moon, kissed his wife Olivia on the cheek, before he unloaded the pack he carried on his back onto a rudimentary table.

“Welcome home.”

“Sound asleep, I see,” he said, taking six-month-old Caroline gently into his arms.

“She’s been asleep for a while now, so I expect she’ll wake soon,” Olivia said. “There, see?” As Eliot held her, Caroline twisted her little body. Finally, her large eyes blinked open, looking from Eliot to Olivia and back before breaking into a smile.

“You know, I don’t believe in any sort of god, but every day now I’m reminded that angels really do exist, if nothing else.” He touched Caroline’s cheek with the tip of his finger, and she gurgled with laughter, kicking her feet about.

“You know what they say about parents and blind love, don’t you?” Olivia commented, holding back laughter.

“You wound me deeply, lumping me in with those types. Right, Caroline?”

“A severe case, I see,” Olivia chuckled. “Now, I’ll get dinner ready. In the meantime, may I entrust the care of our angel to you, good ser knight?”

“If my princess desires it, it would be my honor.” Eliot attempted a sweeping bow, but Caroline, misinterpreting the movement as a new game, buried her hands in his hair and yanked hard.

“She’s all yours, ser knight.” Smiling, Olivia walked away, light-footed, toward the kitchen.

An hour later, Eliot was playing with Caroline with a gray wooden rabbit toy he’d whittled himself when Olivia called to announce that dinner was ready. He picked up Caroline and went to the table.

“Eat up, before it gets cold.”

“It looks delicious, as usual.”

“You can praise it if you like, but this is all there is.”

Eliot handed Caroline, who had started squirming wildly at the sight of the food, over to Olivia, then sat down. A mouthwatering aroma wafted up to him, setting his stomach rumbling.

“Still, I know I say this every time, but you do so much with such paltry ingredients.” Everything that had gone into the meal had been purchased by Eliot in town, and he was hardly flush for cash. Mostly, he bought the refuse that failed to sell. He therefore had nothing but awe for Olivia, who took those ingredients and transformed them into dishes that could have come from a first-rate chef.

Olivia chuckled. “I’m telling you, compliments aren’t going to get you a second helping.”

“Ah, well.” Eliot got stuck into one of the many and varied dishes laid out before him. “Mm! This is excellent too.”

Caroline, sitting on Olivia’s lap, opened her mouth wide, imploring her to hurry up and feed her too. Carefully spooning soup into the little girl’s mouth, Olivia casually asked, “What was it like in town?”

“Nothing amiss today either.”

“Good...” Olivia replied. “Maybe this time we managed to outwit them. We’ll be able to stay here a good while.”

“It seems so.”

This was a conversation born out of the wishful thinking the two of them had engaged in together in recent days. It had been almost two weeks since they’d slipped into the uninhabited cottage. Situated as it was away from the center of town, as well as from commonly trodden roads, finding this place had been a true stroke of luck. For Olivia, and most of all, for Caroline’s sake, Eliot didn’t want to move on too soon. But their pursuers—the Asura—were as tenacious as a serpent with its coils around its prey, so such thoughts wouldn’t do.

I’d be more than happy if we can make it a month... Eliot thought, feeling bad for Olivia and the sliver of hope she held. He looked over at Caroline, who was happily gobbling up her dinner.

“You know, I’ve thought this for a while, but Caroline’s a real glutton, isn’t she?” he remarked. Setting aside infants her own age, Caroline as of late was capable of clearing an adult-sized portion without leaving a crumb. As a father, he was only too happy to see his daughter had a healthy appetite, but he did always wonder where she stored it all in that tiny body of hers.

Olivia turned a delicate shade of pink at his words. In a barely audible mumble, she said, “I don’t remember this at all, but apparently my parents were flabbergasted by the amount I ate as a child. So she must get her ravenous appetite from me. I’m sorry...”

“What are you apologizing for?” Eliot thought for a second, then added, “For one thing, that means she’s going to be a stunner when she grows up.”

Olivia looked at him strangely, her head to one side. “How can you say that with so much confidence?”

“Well, she takes after you, doesn’t she? It’s as good as decided that she’ll be beautiful. Good thing all she got from me was the silver hair. Right, Caroline?” Eliot laid a hand on her head and stroked her silky silver hair. She looked up at him, mystified, with the eyes she’d gotten from her mother. Though she was still only a baby, Eliot thought, despite himself, that his daughter was uncommonly pretty. Privately, he even suspected she might grow more

beautiful than Olivia one day.

“Oh, shush. It’s embarrassing when you say that sort of thing to me.”

“I’m not embarrassed in the slightest. I’ve said nothing but the truth.”

“I give up,” Olivia huffed, then added, “But beauty comes with its own troubles, you know.”

“How’s that? Surely there’s nothing bad about having a pretty face?”

“Will you still be saying that when Caroline has young men lining up to talk to her? Is her father going to be able to endure that?”

Eliot hadn’t considered that. He pictured men flocking around Caroline like moths to a flame, then without hesitation threw his chest out and declared, “I will endure no such thing. I’ll send every man who comes calling on her packing—every last one!”

“Dear me. Poor Caroline,” Olivia smiled, stroking Caroline’s head. Caroline, who wasn’t interested in any of this, pattered her hands on the table, demanding more food.

Eliot was putting Caroline to bed after dinner when he caught the faint sound of Olivia sobbing. He rose quietly and went over to where Olivia stood washing up in the kitchen, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She hurriedly tried to brush away her tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?”

“It’s all because I’m descended from the Deep Folk that you’ve been burdened with this terrible fate...”

“Is that what’s on your mind?” Eliot felt his anxiety lift. If her tears were out of fear for him, there was nothing to worry about.

“If you’d never met me, you wouldn’t have to spend every day in fear for your life. If I’d never fallen in love with you...”

Olivia trailed off. Eliot replied with conviction, “I am truly glad that I met and

fell in love with you.”

“How can you say that when I can’t even offer you the smallest measure of happiness that ordinary people enjoy?”

“Don’t be silly. The happiness you’ve brought me already is more than enough.”

“I haven’t— Oh?!” Olivia exclaimed as Eliot took her in his arms and embraced her tightly. Little by little, he felt the tension drain out of her.

“You have. Back then, when I’d lost everything, even hope itself, your kindness saved me. And now we have Caroline, thanks to you. Maybe you’re right that I can no longer hold out for a peaceful life. But even then, I should still hold myself the happiest of men. So don’t speak of such sad things.”

Olivia turned to him, “Oh, Eliot!” she cried, tears pouring down her cheeks as she buried her face in his chest. He stroked her lush black hair.

“Don’t worry, my love. I’ll keep you and Caroline safe, whether from the Asura or whoever else. I swear I will.”

After a moment, Olivia said, “I know.”

The clouds covering the night sky rolled away, revealing the perfect silver circle of the moon. Eliot and Olivia’s words fell away, and they pressed their lips together. The moonlight filtering in through the window held them both in its soft embrace.

II

Morning dawned on the second day of their stay in the Holy Land of Mekia, the night after Olivia’s revelation. In Historia’s place, a soldier bearing a greatsword entirely out of proportion with her small frame came to greet them.

“Honored guests from Fernest! I am Angelica Brenda. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

“I’m Olivia Valedstorm. Nice to meet you.”

“And you, my lady!”

All of them, with the exception of Olivia, met Angelica's sparkling grin with strained smiles. She had a winsome air to her that gave a strong sense of amicability—the total opposite of Historia from the previous day.

"Today the seraph has arranged for a hunt," she said.

"Seraph Sofitia hunts?" Evanson asked, taken aback. Ashton himself would never have guessed that Sofitia, who looked like she'd balk at killing even an insect, was one for hunting.

"You wouldn't think so, would you?" Angelica agreed. "But under all that, she's got quite the wild side, you know!" Reminded of some other such time, she snickered.

"That *is* quite unexpected."

"Honestly, here she is with a whole nation to rule, and yet she's nothing but trouble!" Angelica shook her head, but there was reverence in her voice.

The previous day, Ashton had gone around asking veiled questions of the townsfolk to get a sense of Sofitia as a person. Every single one of them had fervently praised their wonderful sovereign, demonstrating once more just how beloved Sofitia was by the people. The contrast between her and the king of a certain other nation was like night and day—though Ashton would never have given voice to that impression.

"I like hunting too," Olivia said, stretching her arms out and pretending to shoot an arrow.

"So I have heard from the seraph. I think that's why she extended this invitation to you, Lady Olivia." With this, Angelica fixed Olivia with an appraising eye, then, in a voice that was barely audible but not so quiet that Ashton failed to catch it, she muttered, "She's even *more* beautiful than the rumors said, but she's not Johann's type."

"It's been a while since I went hunting, but this time of year, you can catch all sorts of tasty things, can't you?" Olivia said.

"I'm afraid I don't know too much about that," Angelica replied. "What's the best to eat around now?"

“Weeeell,” Olivia began, “I think hydras are in season now. They should be all fattened up to hibernate over winter.”

“Sorry? Did you just say ‘hydra’?”

“Yep.”

“Aren’t hydras, um...” Angelica struggled to find words. “Aren’t they dangerous beasts?”

Ashton, listening to this exchange, stifled a sigh. As Angelica had correctly recognized, the hydra was a class two dangerous beast, akin to a turtle that had grown to monstrous size. What set the hydra apart from a turtle were the three heads that sprouted from its shell. Though their movements were sluggish, any person on the receiving end of a coordinated attack from those three heads would surely find themselves in mortal peril.

“Really?” Olivia said, with a questioning look at Ashton. He scratched his head and nodded. “Huh, I guess so. I’ve never thought about it before, so I don’t really know.”

Angelica’s big eyes grew even wider. “When you talk about eating dangerous beasts, you’re...you’re joking, right?”

“Huh? No, I’m serious,” Olivia said earnestly. Angelica gaped, until Claudia gave a discreet cough which seemed to bring her back to her senses.

“A-Anyway. Please let me know when you’re ready to leave. I’ll be waiting for you outside.” She saluted, then hurried out of the house again.

Olivia and the rest of the platoon climbed aboard the carriages sent for them and set off, watching the sights of the town roll slowly by. Before too long, they arrived at La Chaim Palace, where they convened with Sofitia and her party, then set off once more for a forest on the outskirts of Elsphere.

“Oh wow!” Olivia cried in delight. “What a beautiful lake!” Before them, an expanse of lazuline water stretched out as far as the eye could see. Sofitia went over to stand beside Olivia, holding her hair to prevent the breeze from disturbing it.

“This is Lake Carla. All sorts of migratory birds will be making their way here for the winter soon. Though it appears a few have come early.” Here and there, white-feathered birds sailed gracefully across the waters of the lake. At its peak, Sofitia told them, the surface of the lake would disappear under the hundreds of birds. “Now, then,” she went on. “Shall we begin?”

Today, Sofitia naturally wore not a gown, but a light set of armor of exquisite workmanship.

Lara, who had accompanied them today for Sofitia’s protection, lowered her head and held out a bow to her mistress. “For your use, My Seraph.”

Seeing that Olivia had received her own bow from Claudia, Sofitia said brightly, “Are you ready, Olivia?”

“Ready when you are.” Olivia gave the bowstring a light twang to check its tension, then smiled. It was almost impossible to believe, seeing her then, that she was conflicted over what path she ought to choose.

Sofitia, for her part, made no mention of her offer to Olivia.

A little over an hour had passed since their hunting began. With practiced skill, Sofitia made one kill after another, from gray rabbits to gray foxes. Ashton was genuinely astounded by this brilliant and very unqueenly display of skill.

She’s not at Gile’s level, but she’s miles better than the likes of me, he thought. Olivia, on the other hand, unexpectedly kept to the sidelines. Instead, she put all her energies into giving Sofitia advice. Sofitia gave serious attention to all of it, and from time to time their faces lit up with bright smiles.

Don’t you just look like you’re enjoying yourself, Ashton thought darkly, watching how well they were getting on. *Are you going to cast us aside and go over to Sofitia after all, then?*

Just then, he picked up on a faint sound. As he strained his ears, it gradually grew clearer: *kah kah kah kah kah kah kah...*

Is that a gray boar? he wondered.

Kah kah kah kah kah kah kah...

The sound, clipped and regular, seemed to be coming from behind him. *Wait, is that really the noise gray boars make?* he wondered. Knowing he had no hope of hitting anything, he turned, raising his bow. Just then, Olivia's sharp cry rang out.

"Ashton, run!"

"Huh?" All of a sudden, a black shape cut across his vision and next thing he knew, he was flying through the air, along with an old tree torn up by the roots. They tumbled down, down toward the river that flowed along the bottom of the cliff.

"*Ashton!*" With Claudia's screams ringing in his ears, Ashton slowly lost consciousness.

III

"Lady Sofitia!" Lara moved swiftly to put herself in front of Sofitia, and in another moment, the two of them were hidden behind a ring of sturdy-looking Seraphic Guardians.

Meanwhile, from Olivia's party, Claudia cried, "General! Ashton was... Ashton was—!"

"Yeah, I saw, but let's not panic, all right?"

Claudia turned to the beast that had thrown Ashton aside. "I'll kill you!" she snarled. With her sword drawn and Heaven's Sight engaged, she meant to fight it. Olivia concluded that her anger had gotten the better of her.

"Claudia!" she shouted, calling her off.

"Let me go, ser!"

"This isn't a fight you can win!"

"But I have to avenge Ashton!"

When Olivia next spoke, her tone was gentle and reassuring. "I'm sure Ashton is fine. There's a river at the bottom of the cliff."

Claudia trembled as she looked back at Olivia, her eyes full of doubt. "He fell

all that way after being thrown into the air. Even if he did fall into the river, there's no way he could have..." She trailed off.

"I'm sorry. All I have is a gut feeling right now, but Ashton's luckier than you'd think. I know how you feel, but let me handle this one," Olivia said. "And you all protect Lady Sofitia. You don't need to worry about me." Olivia tossed aside her bow in favor of drawing her ebony blade from its scabbard. A string of mist like a black thread began to coil out from the blade's edge.

"Lady Sofitia..."

"Yes, it looks like Olivia intends to fight, doesn't it?"

Sofitia, despite the near brush with death she had just experienced, gave thanks to Strecia for the goddess's divine guidance.

"She may not buy us much time. We should withdraw at once," Lara urged. But Sofitia shook her head. Fleeing now was unthinkable.

"But why?!"

"Why, this is a perfect opportunity to see Olivia wield her sword in the flesh. She might even bring out that 'magic' we've heard so much about."

"That might be so," Lara said, lowering her voice. She never let the beast out of her sight. "But the danger that creature poses is too great!"

"I know. That is a Norfess, the beast of legend, is it not?"

The Norfess was covered in dark red fur, its face split from jowl to jowl by a mouth from which protruded two great tusks that curved up toward the top of its skull. It was one of the most fearsome among class two dangerous beasts, and most unusual of all, it walked on two legs like a human. Its body appeared to be entirely made of muscle and sinew, and its most potent weapon was its claws, as razor sharp as though they had been masterfully filed. This was not a creature one could hope to face alone. At least, not usually.

"Then please, do as I ask. I am sworn to keep you safe."

"If you believe there is a risk to my person, you should of course use magecraft. It is because I have you here at my side, Lara, that I feel safe in observing how this plays out."

“My Seraph...” Lara exhaled, seeming to push all the air from her lungs as she did so. Sofitia laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Very well,” Lara said at last. “Please, do not stray from my side.” She raised her left hand, tattooed with the Holy Adders Mage Circle, and pointed it at the Norfess. Incomprehension flashed over the faces of Olivia’s servants when Lara didn’t draw her sword instead. They wouldn’t have known that she was a mage. Yet none of them showed any concern at Olivia facing down the Norfess alone.

They must have faith that Olivia’s strength can match even a beast of legend... Sofitia mused. *In which case, I shall have faith in her as well, and give my full attention to spectating on their battle.* She looked up at the Norfess with a brilliant smile.

The beast let out a low growl, its every footfall sending a tremor through the ground as its eyes roved about them, as though it were searching for something. The moment it spotted Olivia, it let out a roar that seemed to shake the very air.

It’s missing an eye, Olivia thought. So it’s that Norfess, then.

This was not the first time Olivia had come up against this particular Norfess. During her travels with her Mekian companion, a Norfess had attacked them, and she had fought it off. The evidence of this clash remained in the deep scar that remained where the ebony blade had sliced through the beast’s left eye. At the time, the Norfess had been only a baby, and so when it fled, Olivia hadn’t gone after it to finish it off. But now, by the looks of things, it was fully grown and spoiling for a rematch. Whereas last time it had barely come up to her chin, it had since more than doubled in size.

The Norfess approached, gnashing its pointed white teeth. Olivia kicked off the ground. Activating Swift Step, she swung round in an arc toward the creature’s flank, but its great claws shot out to deftly block her. A moment later, the claws of its other hand lashed out toward her face. Olivia dodged, twisting to one side, then threw a powerful kick at the Norfess’s back.

“Graaaagh!” It doubled over but kept its feet. Slowly, its gasping breaths abated and it let out another roar, turning its head to the sky. Olivia saw the

Seraphic Guardians protecting Sofitia, frantically raising their swords and shields in response. She shifted her gaze to the left to where Claudia stood, weapon in hand and face drawn. Olivia gave a slight nod, then turned back to the Norfess. *It looks...just as ready to fight as before.*

Fangs bared, the Norfess made toward her once more, just as Olivia had predicted it would. The difference this time was the greater caution it showed in how it walked. The Norfess was one of the more intelligent beasts—in other words, it was an excellent learner. It was safe to assume the same attack wouldn't work on it twice. They called unicorns the rulers of the land, but in this respect, a Norfess was a far more vexing opponent.

She used Swift Step again, but this time she darted left and right across the ground toward the Norfess. It stopped, spreading its arms out on either side. Its red eyes, with their uncanny glitter, moved rapidly this way and that, following Olivia's movements.

Must be about time to finish this, then?

In just one bound, Olivia adjusted her speed and succeeded in confusing the Norfess. She kicked off hard to one side; then, confirming she was out of the Norfess's sight, she coiled like a spring before shooting up into the sky.

The Norfess had lost sight of Olivia entirely. It trampled the ground underfoot and let out a third great roar.

I'm not letting you go this time.

In midair, Olivia threw her torso back, then brought her blade swinging down toward the Norfess directly below her. She hit the ground amidst a great spurt of blood as the Norfess's body was torn asunder.

"Big Sister Olivia!" Olivia was wiping the gore from her blade when Ellis came running over and threw her arms around her.

"She actually killed a Norfess all by herself..." Evanson breathed, trembling as he looked at the beast's body.

"General..." Claudia's shoulders sagged. Olivia gave her a few encouraging pats on the back. She didn't want to see that sad look on Claudia's face for a minute longer.

“We’d better go look for Ashton,” she said. She returned the ebony blade to its scabbard just as Lara and Sofitia, accompanied by her retinue of Seraphic Guardians, came up to them. There was awe in the eyes of the Guardians when they looked at Olivia.

“Very well done, Olivia,” Sofitia said in a dignified voice. “I suppose you’ll be going to look for Ashton now.”

“Yes. Because Ashton’s important to me.”

Sofitia closed her eyes and fell silent for a moment. “If he fell into the river,” she said at length, “it is likely that he was carried downstream by the current. I will send out my own search party.”

“Thanks,” said Olivia. Sofitia nodded, then commanded the Guardians to make haste back to La Chaim Palace. Meanwhile, Claudia and the others began to discuss how to go about their search. Olivia glanced up at the sky and saw a thread of cloud stretching out across the blue sky.

It was going to rain.

She went over to the cliff from which Ashton had fallen and stared down at the river below.

IV

Ashton awoke gradually to the sensation of something hard digging into him. Bleary-eyed, he looked down at his left arm—the source of the sensation—and saw something red.

What’s that? he wondered. As his vision came into focus, so too did the form of a death-eater bird, the so-called “cleaners of the land.”

“I’m not dead yet!” he shouted, instinctively jumping to his feet. This resulted in a wave of fierce pain through his body, drawing a moan out of him. The death eater bird spread its violet wings wide in a gesture of intimidation, then flew off into the distance, letting out an unsettling cry as it went.

Right... Ashton thought. *That thing knocked me aside and I fell down the cliff.*

He looked down and saw his hands were covered in scrapes. Almost afraid of

what he would find, he rolled up his sleeves. His arms were a mass of bruises. He was also drenched from head to foot, so he had clearly fallen into the river.

And yet, he thought. He might have had the good fortune to avoid hitting the ground, but falling in the river while unconscious meant certain drowning. Even if he had been conscious, Ashton was not a strong swimmer. In other words, he should have been dead either way. And yet here he was, still alive. It was a decidedly unusual state of affairs.

Never in a million years could I have unconsciously swam to shore. But now that I think about it, something like this has happened before.

It was back when he'd been assigned to defend Fort Lamburke after they'd liberated it from the bandits. With the idea of securing their food supply, he'd gone to the river, tried to fish, and almost drowned. Ashton scowled as he remembered how Olivia had fallen about laughing—then, he let out a shriek of alarm as someone spoke from behind him.

"Sounds like you're all right, if you can make a noise like that."

Ashton turned and found himself looking at a woman carrying firewood under both arms. She wore a deep green cloak and had a bow and a quiver of arrows slung across her back. Based on this getup, Ashton hazarded a guess that she was a hunter. She crouched down where she stood and set about building a fire with practiced ease.

"Might you be the one who saved me?" Ashton asked tentatively.

"That I am, no 'mights' about it," the woman answered brusquely, not looking up. Before long, he saw a tendril of smoke snake up into the air.

"Thank you very much for saving me. If it's not too forward, may I ask your name? I'm Ashton Senefelder."

"Don't really care about your name," she replied, "but you can call me Stacia Vanessa. Anyway, what do you say to paying me for my trouble? I'm not the sort of bleeding heart who rescues people for free." Seeing that the fire had grown to a healthy crackle, Stacia stood up so that she was looking down at Ashton, then thrust a hand out to him. She had long black hair which was tied back, and was very pretty. She looked around Ashton's age.

“Oy, you listening?”

“Right, sorry. Money, was it?”

“Yeah. By the looks of it, you’re not with the Winged Crusaders, but you’re not a nobody, are you? That uniform looks like it’s made from some pretty nice fabric.”

Whatever her motives, she had rescued him. Ashton had no problem paying her in thanks for saving his life. The only thing was, as there was no need for money on a hunt, he’d left his purse back in his room.

“I’m a little short right now...”

“I know, I searched you earlier,” Stacia said matter-of-factly, her eyes on Ashton’s pocket.

“You *searched*...?!” Ashton hurriedly patted himself down.

Stacia, appearing to remember something, reached into her own pocket. “This what you’re searching so desperately for, by any chance?” she asked, pulling out a silver pen which she dangled tauntingly in front of Ashton’s face. He grabbed for it, but she yanked it out of his reach.

“Give it back,” he said, glaring at her.

“Huh,” Stacia said, looking thoughtfully at the pen. “You’re all worked up over something that don’t look like it’s got any value.”

“Everyone values things differently. Now, please give it back,” Ashton insisted. “Rummaging through my pockets like that. What are you, a thief?”

Stacia blinked, then burst out laughing.

“Did I say something funny?” Ashton asked.

“Well, yeah. How do you take me for a thief? I saved your life. And after I broke my back carrying you all the way back here...”

“Of course I’m grateful that you saved me, but that’s got nothing to do with this. That’s no good reason to go rummaging through other people’s property.”

Ashton’s retort was in vain, however. Ignoring him, Stacia pocketed the pen once more. Then she fixed him with a look of intense interest.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re not a *noble*, are you?”

“What’s that got to do with any—”

“Just answer the question.”

Cowed by Stacia’s glower, Ashton reluctantly answered her. “No, I’m a commoner...”

“That figures. A noble would be all high and mighty. Suppose you’re some well-to-do merchant’s son, then?”

“I...can’t really deny that,” Ashton replied at length. Stacia nodded a few times, looking satisfied. With no clue what she was trying to say, Ashton forgot she’d saved his life and grew angry. “Is there something wrong with being a merchant’s son?” he demanded.

“Oh, no. I just thought you seem to have been brought up real nice.”

“And? What are you imply—?!” All of a sudden, Stacia seized Ashton roughly by the collar, and he froze with shock.

“All right, *young master*,” she hissed. “You listen to me. There’s no question that if I hadn’t saved you, you’d be dead right now. Soon as that happened, this pen didn’t belong to nobody. In other words, everything you had on you belongs to me now, as do you.” Ashton said nothing. Stacia continued, “Are you starting to get how this works, young master Ashton?” With a twist of her lips, she flicked him on the forehead. Unlike when Claudia did it, the pain this time was cold and unfeeling.

“I’m soft, is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Not just soft, you’re a marshmallow. I’m impressed you manage in the army.” With a derisive snort, Stacia dropped Ashton. Her argument was utterly lawless, but she had a point. Ashton couldn’t have cared about the pen being stolen if he were dead. No matter how important it was to him now, it was of no use to a corpse.

“What happens to me now, anyway?” he asked.

“I told you to pay up, didn’t I? Once I’m paid, you can have your precious

trinket back.”

“You’ll let me go free if I give you gold?”

“Did you hear me say anything else?”

“But if we follow your logic, I belong to you. I’m your possession, aren’t I?”

Stacia ran her fingers through her hair in irritation. “Yeah, that’s all part of why I’m telling you to cough up. You look like you can pay better than what I’d get from a slave trader for you.”

“A what?! You were going to sell me to a *slave trader*?!”

Stacia looked him up and down with another half-smile. “Maybe if you didn’t look like that.”

Ashton thought for a moment. “Stacia, you’re a hunter, right?”

“That’s ‘outstandingly talented hunter’ to you,” Stacia said, puffing her chest out.

“Such an outstandingly talented hunter sells people?”

“Well, look at it this way. Since when is a hunter not allowed to sell people?” There wasn’t a trace of apology in Stacia’s voice. Ashton swallowed this, then tried a different tactic.

“This *is* the Holy Land of Mekia, isn’t it?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure Mekia doesn’t condone slave trading.” Slavery had been common practice up until around Tempus Fugit 700, but it was now on the decline, seen as a relic of a past era. Even so, there were still nations who openly condoned the purchase and sale of slaves, and others, one heard, where the number of slaves was actually considered indicative of national power.

“You’re right, Mekia don’t care a whit for slavery. But Mekia ain’t the only country about. The Kingdom of Seranis right next door has a roaring trade in slaves to this day,” Stacia pointed out. “Anyway. Strip.”

“What?” Ashton gaped at Stacia, uncomprehending. She *tsked* loudly.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Just hurry up and strip.”

“Why do I need to take my clothes off?”

“You sure do have to question every little thing, don’t you? Because you’ll catch cold like that, obviously. Or have you not suffered enough yet?” With a look of impatience, she reached for him, but Ashton swatted her hand away. Her demand made sense now, but it obviously wasn’t out of the kindness of her heart. She probably just thought a cold would make him a nuisance to cart around. On the hundred-to-one chance she *was* concerned about Ashton’s well-being, he definitely wasn’t about to let a young woman help him get undressed.

“Fine, I’ll do it myself.” Gingerly maneuvering his aching body, he took off his jacket and shirt, then grimaced as a myriad of bruises came into view. As he did so, Stacia tossed a small bottle to him without warning. He scrambled to catch it, then, despite his misgivings, he opened the lid. A pungent stench rose to him.

“What’s this?”

“A salve for scrapes and bruises. It’s a secret Vanessa family recipe. Got it? Then slap some on already—unless you want me to do it for you?” Stacia asked, smirking at him as she hung up his uniform around the fire using sticks that might have been used to roast fish. Ashton lost no time in applying the salve himself.

Stacia looked at Ashton suspiciously. “What’re you daydreaming for?”

After covering himself in salve, he had been left at a loose end. “It’s not like I have anything else to do,” he pointed out.

“You ain’t done the bottom half yet.” Stacia stared at his nether regions, not bothering to be discreet.

“That part’s, um...” Ashton muttered, squirming under her gaze.

“You’re embarrassed, ain’t you?”

“I-I am not!”

“If you weren’t, you’d strip. Don’t worry, I don’t got a lick of interest in your body.”

“I don’t want to,” Ashton refused stubbornly. Stacia heaved a sigh.

“If you’re *that* embarrassed—”

“I told you, I’m not!” Ashton insisted fiercely. Stacia raised her hands to show she meant no harm. Then, just as Ashton let slip a breath of relief, she struck, hands reaching for him. Ashton’s body, still in too much pain for him to move freely, betrayed him, and despite a desperate show of resistance, she got his trousers off. As if that wasn’t enough, her eyes then moved to his underpants with a look that seemed to say she wasn’t done yet. This was the first time Ashton had shown his undergarments to any woman other than his mother. Trying as best he could to cover the area between his legs with his hands, he shouted, “Not that! That is absolutely off-limits!”

“No need to yell. I won’t take your undies,” Stacia said, grinning. “Now, eat this and try to get some of your strength back.” She held out a strip of dried meat. Ashton accepted it mutely, hugging his knees to his chest to keep his nether regions out of sight.

V

They went on without any real conversation passing between them. Ashton was just putting his arms through the jacket of his dried uniform when Stacia leapt to her feet. She scanned their surroundings, a steely look in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Ashton asked.

“I just have a bad feeling.”

He had no idea what she was talking about. Following her example, he looked about them, but couldn’t see anything amiss. The only thing he could have pointed to, if pressed, was the occasional rustle of leaves in the wind.

“I can’t see anything particularly out of the ordinary,” he said.

“I didn’t ask for your amateur opinion,” Stacia retorted. “We’re getting out of here, now.” She rushed to extinguish the fire, then, bow in hand, she set off toward the forest to the east. However, before they had gone even a minute, she stopped and silently drew an arrow from her quiver.

“Is there something there?” Ashton asked. Stacia ignored him. She raised her bow and pointed it toward a line of trees in the distance. Before Ashton could

ask again, the bushes shook violently and out came a creature covered in dark red fur.

That beast from before?! The moment Ashton laid eyes on the Norfess, a certified class two dangerous beast, he felt every hair on his body stand on end. In the same moment, he recognized it as exactly matching the black shape that had attacked him earlier.

“Well, if it ain’t a Norfess,” Stacia said. “No wonder I haven’t caught anything good all day.”

Her face was white as a sheet and her teeth chattered loud enough that Ashton could hear them. The Norfess splayed its enormous claws, then fixed its four eyes, two on either side of its head, on Ashton and Stacia. Luckily for them, the Norfess was a good distance away. Still, if the Norfess charged, it was only too easy to imagine that distance vanishing in the blink of an eye. All the more so when it was a Norfess they were up against.

“We should run,” he said, whispering so as not to provoke the beast. But Stacia only gave a tiny shake of her head.

“No good. We’ll never outrun it.”

“So we just wait here quietly for it to kill us?”

“This ain’t your average forest critter. This is the feared beast of legends, the one they call the Bringer of Calamity.”

“I know all that, of course.”

“Are you...are you *not scared?*” As Stacia spoke, her eyes never once turned toward Ashton. As though with a Norfess in front of her, she couldn’t get away with showing even a moment’s weakness. Ashton himself replied without ever taking his eyes off the Norfess.

“It’s a class two dangerous beast, and one of the worst ones. Obviously, I’m terrified.”

Stacia couldn’t tell, but his knees were knocking together with fear. It reminded him of when they’d encountered the unicorn on the way to liberate Fort Lamburke. But on that occasion, Olivia had been with him, so he’d made it

out without a scratch. But she wasn't here this time, and given she was hardly likely to conveniently appear and save him, Ashton's only remaining choice was to run. He racked his brains for some knowledge that would get them out of this predicament.

"Do you think you can get the Norfess in the knee with an arrow? Either side will do."

"What's that now?"

"I'm asking if you think you can do it," Ashton insisted, frantic. Stacia still didn't take her eyes off the Norfess, but with an arrow nocked to the string, she nodded.

"Only if my target stays still, though."

"Understood. Then stay like that, and back up, slowly."

"Back up?"

"Right. As much as I don't fancy jumping in the river again when my uniform just dried, the Norfess is afraid of water."

"It is?!" Stacia hissed, shock flashing through her eyes. "I never heard that before!"

"Without a doubt," Ashton said firmly. The Norfess's fur was supposed to be highly absorbent, meaning that if it entered a deep enough river, the added weight would cause it to sink within moments.



It was only something he'd read in a book, but Stacia didn't need to know that. If he couldn't devise a way to get them out of this, they'd both be knocking on the Gate to the Land of the Dead.

"For now, if we can get across the river, we'll be out of immediate danger. First, we need to injure its leg and slow it down. I know I keep saying it, but you want to aim for its knee. To make sure you hit, you'll want to shoot at its face first to distract it."

"So the second shot is the real deal."

"Exactly."

Stacia was quiet for a moment, then said, "I can trust you, right?"

As much to reassure himself as anything else, Ashton nodded resolutely.

"Let's start edging back. Slow as a tortoise."

Both of them barely breathing, they started to back away with genuinely tortoiselike steps. For a while, the Norfess watched them. Then, without warning, it let out a soul-chilling roar.

"Shoot!" Ashton cried, just as Stacia loosed an arrow from her bow. A moment later, she nocked another, and let it fly without wasting a second.

There's almost no chance the first one will hit, Ashton thought. This prediction proved true at once. The first arrow, flying dead straight at the Norfess's face, was knocked aside by a truly ferocious claw. The second arrow, however, taking advantage of this momentary lapse, embedded itself beautifully in the Norfess's knee. The creature looked down at the arrow sticking out of its flesh and let out an uncanny wail.

"Now's our chance! Across the river!"

"R-Right!"

Ashton forced the pain that lanced through his whole body out of his mind, broke into an all-out sprint, and jumped after Stacia into the river.

He gasped for breath. The current wasn't very strong, but he was in so much pain he couldn't move forward like he wanted to.

“Move it!” Stacia grabbed Ashton by the collar and dragged him across the river with her. As he frantically paddled with his arms, Ashton turned to look behind them. The Norfess was already at the river’s edge, pacing restlessly up and down and emitting a bloodcurdling moan.

With Stacia’s aid, Ashton somehow managed to get to the other side of the river.

“Looks like we got out of that one,” Stacia said, panting.

“All thanks to you,” Ashton replied, breathing hard himself. “If you hadn’t gotten it in the knee, it would have been on us before we reached the river.” They lay spread-eagled on the riverbank, catching their breath.

Eventually, Stacia said, “If it weren’t for your plan, I’d be dead for sure.” It sounded like it took her some effort to admit it. “So thanks, I guess.”

At this unexpected expression of gratitude, Ashton turned to look at Stacia, but she turned her face aside. Ashton couldn’t help but smile, though he quickly regained his composure.

“I’m afraid we’re not out of the woods yet,” he said. Stacia sat up and looked over at the Norfess. It showed no signs of giving up.

“How’s that?” she asked. “It’s not going to cross the river. We’re out of its reach.”

“Only for now. It’ll find a way around the river and come after us again.”

“What makes you so sure? Speaking from experience, if I may, it doesn’t look hungry enough to be so persistent.”

After she had shot the Norfess through the knee, even Ashton could tell that Stacia was a first-rate hunter. Under normal circumstances, her reading would be correct. But on this particular occasion, Ashton knew, because of a particular behavioral trait of the Norfess, that she was wrong. According to *The Behavior of Dangerous Beasts*, the tome that Dianne Lane had made her life’s work, adult Norfesses were always in pairs. In other words, it was unnatural to encounter one by itself. Assuming the Norfess that had attacked Ashton in the forest was the other half of this pair, then class two dangerous beast or no, Olivia, who had slain even unicorns, would have cut it to pieces. If the Norfess before them now

was searching for its mate, there was a good chance it had picked up its scent on him. Ashton explained all this to Stacia.

“Rotten luck you must have to get attacked twice by a Norfess,” she muttered. “So that thing’s not going to leave us alone, huh?”

“Specifically, I think it’s drawn to some scent left on me. Which is to say, if you leave me behind, you should be able to get away on your own.”

It hardly needed to be said that, for his own part, Ashton felt much better with an outstanding hunter like Stacia at his side. But he didn’t want her to get caught up in his attempt to save his own skin.

Ashton was sure that Stacia would naturally decide to part ways with him. As such, he was unprepared for what came out of her mouth.

“You’d better not be trying to weasel out of paying me.”

“*Paying* you?” he repeated, confused. “If I make it home alive, of course I’ll pay you.”

Stacia jumped to her feet. “Then we’d better get moving before it catches us!”

“You value gold over your own life?”

“That’s the measure of it.”

Ashton stared at her, then said, “If you regret this, I claim no responsibility.”

Stacia snorted. Taking her bow in hand once more, she strode off without a word. Ashton didn’t speak either as he followed after her, his heart bursting with gratitude.

VI

They walked on and on through the forest, moving away from the Norfess.

“It’s a bit early, but how about we set up camp here for today?” said Stacia, pointing. Ashton followed her finger and, through a covering of undergrowth that made it almost invisible, he made out part of a cave. While he wondered with admiration how she’d managed to pick it out, Stacia made her way

cautiously toward it.

“Just so long as there aren’t any current occupants...” Ashton said, wanting to make sure Stacia was on her guard. The cave was just the sort of place a beast might have made its den.

Stacia kept her eyes on the cave. “Obviously, I’m going to check.”

They arrived at the cave in what felt to Ashton like about a minute, then Stacia stationed him at the entrance before stepping warily inside. Ashton sat on a nearby boulder and kept watch on their surroundings until Stacia came back. Seeing the look of reassurance on her face, Ashton let out a sigh of relief. The sun had dipped low into the west, bathing the forest in crimson light.

“I’ll scrounge up something to eat before the sun sets,” Stacia told him. “You build us a big stock of firewood.”

Ashton hesitated. “Not that I mind, but will you be all right?” Getting this far had taken a lot out of Ashton, and he thought even Stacia must be feeling it too.

But when she replied, it was with a mix of contempt and mockery. “Please, I’m no bag of bones like you. If we’re going to get our strength back, we need to eat.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Ashton admitted. “All right. Be careful.” For just a moment, Stacia’s gaze crossed Ashton’s; then she plunged back through the trees of the forest, bow in hand. Ashton got straight to work gathering firewood.

Night fell. The blazing sun had fully set, and the forest donned a cloak of darkness. Meanwhile, the inside of the cave, now aglow with red light, played host to a strange scene: a man and a woman, sitting around a fire in only their underthings.

“It was a bit of luck that I caught the gray rabbit so quick, though. You feel the difference in how your strength comes back when you eat.” Stacia, sitting with her legs crossed, sunk her teeth into a hunk of meat dripping with fat.

She had come back from hunting as Ashton was getting a fire going and, inexplicably, started to pull her clothes off. Panicking, he pleaded for her to

stop, but she came back at him with the sound argument that she'd catch cold as she was. In the end, Ashton had grudgingly agreed, forcing himself to believe it was fine so long as he didn't look directly at her.

I could never let Olivia see this. Thinking of Olivia and her easy smile, Ashton looked over the fire and asked Stacia about their way forward from here.

"If we set out in the early morning, we should reach the road by midday—if the Norfess doesn't get us, mind you," Stacia said. Ashton responded vaguely, turning to look at the entrance to the cave. It was scattered with torn-up safflowers, a beast deterrent that had been popular among hunters of late. According to Stacia, the most vicious beasts supposedly hated the smell of safflowers the most, but Ashton wasn't sure how effective it would be in reality. It felt like ingratitude after Stacia had gone out of her way to pick the flowers in addition to procuring their food, but he thought that at best it was probably better than nothing.

"Ahh, that hit the spot." Stacia polished off the last scraps of the gray rabbit, then turned to stare directly at Ashton. He tried as hard as he could to cover himself.

"Wh-What?"

"Ah, well," Stacia said, "it's just what I've thought from the start. You don't act like a soldier at all."

"I'm told that a lot. It's because I didn't want to be a soldier in the first place."

"Huh. Then how come you're soldiering?"

"I was conscripted."

"Ah, conscription. Makes sense—no one'd make a soldier of you otherwise." Stacia cackled with laughter, then asked, "Whose army are you in, anyway?"

"I serve in the Royal Army of Fernest."

"Oh, you're with those down-and-outs. *Now* a soldier like you makes sense," Stacia said, looking satisfied. Apparently Fernest's plight was well known even in far-flung foreign lands such as this one. Ashton suppressed a grimace, then asked a question of his own.

“What about you? Why are you a hunter?”

“Me?” Stacia said, surprised. “Well, my old man made a fair name for himself as a hunter—taking it up after him was the natural thing to do, and I never thought much of it.” For a moment, her eyes grew distant; then, noticing that the fire was growing low, she snapped up some branches and tossed them on. The wood crackled and popped, and the fire gradually strengthened once more. A hooting bird call slipped in through the cave mouth.

“I’ll take watch, so you should sleep first,” Ashton said.

Stacia considered this. “Guess I’ll take you up on that.” Putting her hands on her knees, she pushed herself up to standing, exposing her full figure. Ashton hurriedly averted his eyes. As Stacia got dressed, she muttered, “Today really took it out of me.” She lay down, curling up in a ball with her knees hugged to her chest. Less than a minute later, Ashton heard from her breathing that she was asleep.

Goodnight, he thought. He slipped on his hastily dried uniform, then, doing his best to keep his drooping eyelids raised, he sat down once more in front of the fire. The night still had some way to go before dawn could break.

VII

Ashton awoke with a start to what felt like a kick in the back. A shaft of light was filtering into the cave.

“Awake? When you’re ready, we’re leaving.”

“Good morning...” Yawning, Ashton stood up, causing the green cloak to slip from his shoulders. Stacia picked it up without a word and put it on with the ease of habit.

“I, um, thank you.”

“Nothing to it. You’re my goose with the golden eggs.” Without looking at him, she began to carefully inspect the tension of her bowstring. Realizing that the night had been and gone without incident, Ashton felt a belated rush of relief.

They set off for the road once more, Ashton with a spring in his step. Thanks to the salve Stacia had given him, his body hardly pained him at all now, but more significant was that he had gotten a good night's sleep. Alone, he would have stayed up all night on guard, too scared of a potential beast attack to sleep. Stacia might only have been in it for the gold, but Ashton felt another upswell of gratitude to her for choosing to stay with him in spite of the danger.

"Right, I meant to ask," Stacia said all of a sudden. "What's your rank, anyway?"

"You mean my military rank?"

"You don't have another one, do you?" Stacia replied, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. Ashton didn't know what to make of this, but he wasn't trying to hide anything, so he answered her directly.

"I'm a major."

"A major... Hold it, you're a *major*?!" Stacia came to an abrupt halt and Ashton almost walked right into her back. She turned to look at him, a look of open shock on her face.

It's an understandable reaction, he thought. Even I think it's absurd they made me a major. Even Ashton's *parents*, to whom he sent the occasional letter to keep them abreast of recent occurrences, remained dubious of the idea of him as an officer with many soldiers under his command.

Ashton couldn't help a self-deprecating smile, at which Stacia's expression quickly turned hard.

"Are you pulling my leg?" she demanded.

"No, I'm not."

"Then what's with the grin?"

"I just can't believe it myself," he said, with a friendly shrug. The flint went out of Stacia's eyes.

"Yeah, I'll bet," she said. "Honestly, I thought you'd be a captain at best. Who'd have guessed you're a *field officer*..."

"Are you familiar with military ranks, then?" Ashton inquired. Stacia screwed

up her face.

“My grandpa on my ma’s side was in th army. He was a major, like you, and never let anyone forget how important he was—not just his soldiers, but us too. Didn’t like him much, to tell the truth.”

“I see.”

Stacia set off walking again, cutting roughly through the vegetation. Feeling that this wasn’t a subject either of them wanted to dwell on, Ashton moved on to another topic.

“By the way, if we do make it out alive, how much do you want me to pay you?”

Ashton received a fair allowance as a professional soldier, and at present, he primarily spent it on buying the tasty treats Olivia begged him for. So long as Stacia didn’t demand an extraordinary sum, he thought he should be able to pay it without any hardship.

Without looking his way, Stacia held up five fingers. “Five gold pieces in exchange for your life. For the record, I intend to come out on top here.”

“Understood.” At Ashton’s prompt reply, Stacia stopped short again and turned to him with a look of even greater incredulity than before.

“Just to check, you *do* know how much five gold pieces are worth, right?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence. I’m the son of a distinguished merchant family,” Ashton retorted. “Let’s see... With five gold pieces, you should be able to get by without working for about two years, I think.”

“E-Exactly!” Stacia said, nodding fervently. “That’s the sort of money we’re talking about.”

“I guarantee you’ll be paid,” Ashton said firmly. Stacia responded with painful awkwardness, then set off once more at a snail’s pace.

The sun had almost reached its zenith. Stacia and Ashton stood at a fork in the path that stretched away left and right. The trees grew in a tangled thicket on both sides, their trunks surrounded by dense undergrowth. Whichever way

they chose, it didn't seem as though there would be much difference.

"Which do you think is closer to the road?"

Ashton considered. "The left, I think. But that's only a hunch."

"Okay. We'll take the right, then," Stacia said automatically. Ashton felt uneasy about this, but he followed her quietly. After they had walked a little while in silence, he heard the sound of thunder in the distance. He looked up and realized that at some point the whole sky had closed over with black clouds.

"Looks like we're in for rain," he said. Stacia didn't reply. "Stacia? Did you hear me?"

"Yeah..." she croaked, her eyes fixed ahead. "I hear you." She swiftly nocked an arrow to her bow. Ashton, not wanting to believe it, looked forward as well. Dimly, he made out a reddish-black shadow. That was all he needed to see.

"You were right, it didn't give up." There was no convenient river for them this time, but Stacia sounded unexpectedly calm. Ashton was too preoccupied to deliberate on whether this was because she thought they could get away, or if she had given up. What was clear was that he was staring certain death in the face.

Norfesses are intelligent. There's no way we'll catch it with the same attack again.

While Stacia prepared to leap valiantly into battle, Ashton's eyes raced over their surroundings. There, he saw it—a narrow path leading away into the trees.

"We can run that way!" he cried, gesturing for her to go first. Just as he bounded after her, the Norfess let out an earth-rattling roar. He didn't look back, just ran straight on. Here and there, he felt sharp pain as another branch clawed at his face, but he couldn't afford to pay that any mind. He nearly stumbled on the uneven ground over and over again, the sound of his heart roaring in his ears as though it were about to burst. Finally, just as the forest opened up, Ashton stopped running. More accurately, he had no choice but to skid to a halt. Stacia, who had drawn up short beside him, broke into a wheezing laugh.

“Looks like this is it then,” she said. Before them, the ground dropped away in a cliff. The sight of it was like a blow to the face. Ashton, despairing at the cruel irony, peered over the edge of the cliff, only to be greeted by jagged rocks.

Fall down there and this time it really will mean certain death. Still, if only it would rain, there might still be some hope...

Stacia, her face now set, nocked another arrow and drew her bow to face behind them. Ashton’s ears picked up the cry he had heard back when he was attacked the first time.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I might as well have led us into this...”

“You might as well say if we’d taken the left fork, we might’ve avoided meeting our friend here again. No point in dwelling on what-ifs.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Ashton drew the knife from his belt. A flicker of a smile passed over Stacia’s face.

“Planning on going toe to toe with the legendary Norfess with that, are we?”

“I don’t have any illusions about that. Still, it’s better than nothing.”

“Who’d have thought you were such a bonehead?”

“Well, that’s what I am.”

Stacia chuckled. “Well, there’s worse things to be—here it comes!”

With a roar, the Norfess appeared. The birds in the trees all shrieked and took flight. It spread its claws as if to show them off as it stalked cautiously toward Ashton and Stacia. Ashton didn’t need to look twice to see that it was wary of Stacia and her bow. But there was something else.

“Something’s off about it,” Stacia said.

“Yes.” As they watched, the Norfess’s gait grew slower until it came to a complete stop. Then, it began to snort, inexplicably turning away from Ashton as it moaned lowly. At the same moment, Ashton heard a voice he’d been missing.

“Just in the nick of time, huh? You really are lucky, Ashton.”

“Olivia!” Ashton cried out without thinking. There stood Olivia, waving

cheerfully at him. Ashton felt all the energy drain out of him, and he crumpled to the ground.

Stacia, glancing quickly between the two of them, hissed, "I can see from the uniform she's with you, but is she touched in the head? What's she doing exposing herself to the Norfess like that? Sorry to say it, but she's dead meat."

"Don't worry. We're safe now."

"Safe...?" Stacia repeated, incredulous. She didn't lower her bow for a moment. "Have you finally lost it? Nothing's going to change just because some girl showed up."

She couldn't have known that Olivia wasn't even close to just being "some girl."

"Just watch," he said. If Olivia was the one who had killed the Norfess's mate, the scent that lingered on Ashton couldn't compare to the strength of the scent on her. It was safe to assume the Norfess would turn its full attention to her.

"Graaagh!" The Norfess moved first. With a howl that ripped the air asunder, it charged at Olivia, all deadly force. The arrow Stacia had shot through its knee didn't seem to hamper its speed at all. But Olivia moved even faster. She shot past it and the Norfess screamed, its left arm flying off. Without hesitating, Olivia twisted to one side, crouched low, and leapt up into the sky. The Norfess roared again, thrusting up with its remaining claws, but Olivia flipped around in midair and brought her blade down to meet it. In the moment they crossed, there came a flash of white light that blotted out all else as a bolt of levin came crackling down the length of a great tree. Splinters flew in all directions while the Norfess, sliced clean in two, crumpled into a sea of blood. Ashton realized Stacia had joined him on the ground, her eyes staring emptily into space.

You really are something else... Ashton thought as Olivia sheathed her sword, then came over to them. She stopped in front of Ashton and, with a toothy smile, held out a hand.

"You really would die straightaway without me," she said.

"That's right. If you ever leave me, I'm done for."

The heavens opened, and the rain poured down like a waterfall. Taking Olivia's lily-white hand in his, Ashton stood up. As she stood there drenched in the rain, hers was a beauty beyond compare.

Ashton's flight that had begun with the assault of the legendary Norfess would soon be at an end.

Chapter Four: Doubt

I

“I’m home!”

“Um, I’m back too.”

There was a pause. Then—“Eh?!”

When Ashton returned to the house with Olivia, he found Mary Sue, the servant who had been assigned to him, standing at the entrance. She threw her broom aside and came running over to them, beaming like she was about to burst into tears.

“Master Ashton, I’m so glad to see you safe and sound...”

Ashton dipped his head, embarrassed. “Sorry for worrying you,” he mumbled, but Mary quickly waved her hands at him.

“Please, there’s no need to bow to me! Everyone’s been holding out hope for your return.”

Mary led them to a parlor. When Ashton opened the door, all eyes in the room turned to him. It was Claudia, leaping up from the sofa, who spoke before anyone else could.

“Ashton!” She threw herself bodily into his arms. It was so sudden that Ashton froze up in shock. Next thing he knew, Claudia was running her hands all over him.



“Colonel Claudia?!”

“Seems like you have your share of scrapes and bruises, but nothing too serious,” she said, relieved. Staring at her, Ashton was filled with pure gratitude. A thought also came to him. *I was truly blessed in who became my superior officer.*

“I’m sorry to have kept you worrying for so long,” Ashton said, bowing again as Mary dabbed at her tear-filled eyes beside him. Claudia brought her fist down on the back of his head. There was warmth in the pain of the blow, and he felt profoundly moved as he looked up. Claudia was looking at him with her typical frown.

“It’s because you’re careless that you end up in predicaments like this. I *told* you to always pay attention to your surroundings, didn’t I?”

“I see your point, but against the Norfess, the beast of legends—”

“Don’t make excuses.” Down came Claudia’s fist again. What she was telling him was utterly irrational, but there was no mistaking that she had worried about him, and Ashton couldn’t come up with any rebuttal for that.

As he rubbed his head, Ellis and Evanson came over to him, her with a smirk and him, a look of relief.

“Look at you, Major Ashton. Only just back, and already you’re treating us to this touching scene,” Ellis said, her gaze flicking to Claudia. Claudia stepped away from Ashton, embarrassed. Evanson cut in to alleviate the faint awkwardness that followed.

“Thank goodness you’re safe, Major Ashton.”

“Olivia told me you searched really hard for me.”

“Oh, well...” Evanson mumbled, then added, “To tell you the truth, I didn’t think we were going to find you. The situation being what it was and all.”

“I thought so myself.” Thinking about it, he *had* been tossed aside by a Norfess, only to then fall down a cliff. And that wasn’t the end of it—he’d then been attacked by its mate. Two attacks by class two dangerous beasts in rapid succession was practically a supernatural occurrence. Ashton could scarcely

believe he was having a normal conversation about it now.

Claudia coughed several times. “By the way, Ashton. Who might this woman be, then?” She was looking surreptitiously at Stacia, who stood idly off to one side.

“Sorry, I should have introduced her sooner. This is Stacia Vanessa. She saved my life.”

It was Stacia’s turn for all eyes to turn to her. “Hey,” she said, dipping her head and looking uncomfortable.

“*She* saved you?”

“That’s right.” As the room listened on, Ashton related the tale of how Stacia had saved him from being swept away by the river, and what had happened up until the attack by the Norfess.

“General Olivia slew the Norfess that got you, so it didn’t turn into anything too serious...” Evanson said, then added sympathetically, “but you still had a hard time of it, didn’t you?”

Beside him, Ellis had a look of insurmountably nefarious glee on her face.

Sighing to himself, Ashton asked, “What is it?”

“You and Stacia were together the *whole time*, then?”

“That’s a loaded question, but I’ve got nothing to hide. When we both ended up in our underwear it was only so our clothes could dry, so we couldn’t help that.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Ashton realized they were a mistake, but it was too late—Ellis was in her element now.

“Two young people, a man and a woman, in their underthings?” she exclaimed in delight, flashing him another evil smile. “And you then spent a whole night together?!”

“I told you, our clothes were drying, so we didn’t have a choice!”

“Oh, for...” Evanson rolled his eyes. “Why do you have to make fun of him like that?”

She turned to him, her gaze suddenly cold. “Excuse me? Are you stupid or

something? Because it's *funny*, obviously." Then to Ashton, she said, "You really are a smooth operator. What color was Stacia's underwear, by the way?"

"Blac— Hey, no!" Ashton threw a hurried glance at the table in the back, where Olivia sat happily sipping the tea Tabitha brought her. He was just breathing a sigh of relief that she didn't seem to have misconstrued his words when Claudia turned to him with a coldhearted smile. Olivia immediately stood up and quietly excused herself from the room.

"You were both in your underwear, were you?" asked Claudia.

"Like I was just saying, we didn't have a—"

"But you spent time together like that."

"Yes, well, that's true..." Ashton didn't have any sense that he'd done something wrong, and yet for some reason he felt himself sweating profusely.

Stacia, apparently unable to watch any more of this, cut in. "Our *young master* here didn't have the guts to try anything on me."

Claudia turned from Ashton to look at her, an appraising gleam in her eye. "Stacia, was it?" she said.

"That's right."

"Let me say first that you have my heartfelt gratitude for saving Ashton. That being said, you've spent what, two days with him? Don't go thinking that means you understand him. He might not look it, but he's a man of strong character. I'd thank you to refrain from giving him nicknames like '*young master*.'"

Claudia, for whom finding fault with Ashton was just another part of her daily routine, chose this one moment to advocate for him. While Ashton stood by, utterly mystified, Stacia folded her arms.

"True, it was only two days. But that was enough to show me he's just as you say. The idiot was going to face off against a Norfess with a *knife*."

"Then—"

"But that doesn't change the young master part," Stacia said, then snorted with laughter. Ashton was helpless to anything but look on nervously, as the two women stared each other down, their gazes sharp as knives.

“I don’t like your ton—”

“I’m here for the payment I was promised,” Stacia interrupted Claudia. “I ain’t got no designs on your boyfriend, so cool it.”

“My—?!” Claudia spluttered. “My *boyfriend?!?*” Showing supreme indifference to Claudia’s distress, Stacia turned to Ashton and thrust her hand out.

“On which note, mind handing over what we discussed already? I’ve got things to do.”

“I’ll get the money right now,” Ashton said, then added in a whisper, “Could you please not make weird comments to Colonel Claudia? I’m the one who’ll have to hear about it later.”

Stacia looked dubiously between him and Claudia, then gave an exasperated sigh.

“You...” she began, then stopped. “No, forget it. Once I’ve got what’s mine, I’m out of here.”

“I’ll go and get it now, then.”

Ashton left the parlor and went back to his own room. There, he carefully removed each gold piece from his purse and laid them out on the desk.

One, two, three... There we go. He hurried back down the stairs to the parlor, where he found Stacia deep in conversation with Ellis. Noticing his return, Stacia smirked at him.

Ashton sighed to himself. *Ellis must’ve been talking nonsense again*, he thought. But if he started worrying about every little thing Ellis did, he’d go mad. He placed the coins in Stacia’s outstretched hand. At first, she smiled. A moment later, however, her expression clouded.

“There are six coins here. Pretty sure I said five, didn’t I?”

“The extra one is just a little token from me. Please, take it.”

“Hmm...” Stacia considered, then said, “Don’t mind if I do, then.” She quickly stashed the coins in her pocket. Then, as she was about to depart, she gave Ashton a light clap on the shoulder. “Well, Major Ashton Senefelder. Looks like you’ve got a lot on your plate, but hang in there, all right?”

With that, Stacia walked lightly from the room.

I think that might be the first time she called me by my name, Ashton thought. Beside him, Claudia continued to glare at the closed door.

II

Sofitia's Workroom in La Chaim Palace, Holy City of Elsphere

When Lara stopped by Sofitia's workroom, an owl was just handing a report to the seraph. Sofitia told Lara they would be done momentarily, then turned back to the document. A moment later, a flicker of surprise passed over her face.

"That young man came back safe? Was he injured?"

"He has his share of bruises, but nothing severe enough to pose a threat to his life. He returned to the house on his own two feet."

"That means Olivia is back too, I suppose?"

At Olivia's name, fear filled the owl's eyes. "Yes, My Seraph. Death God Olivia returned with him."

"Very good. Thank you for your report."

"My Seraph." The owl left the room. Sofitia made her way over to the gray sofa in the center of the room.

As she went, she called over to Lara, a smile in her voice. "As you've just heard, Lara, the young man is safe and sound."

"I really didn't think he'd make it, given what happened..." Lara said. He had fallen down a cliff after being thrown aside by the Norfess. On Sofitia's orders, Lara had put together a search party, but she had expected it to be a wasted effort. As such, Lara was quite amazed to hear that he had survived.

"Truly, he is favored by fortune. I wonder if perhaps Strecia has bestowed her grace upon him," Sofitia said, adding, "Don't keep standing there. Come and sit down."

"Thank you, My Seraph."

Sofitia watched her sit, then called for a servant to bring them some tea.

“Now, Lara. I have determined that I simply *must* have Olivia.”

“Because you saw her battle the Norfess?”

“But of course. It really makes a world of difference seeing with one’s own eyes what one has only heard of. A perfect example of a picture speaking a thousand words,” Sofitia said good-humoredly. Lara held back a sigh.

“My Seraph, I beg you will not take offense at what I am about to say.”

“Go ahead. I do not ask for flattery.”

Lara expressed her thanks, then drew herself up. “After seeing Olivia with the Norfess, it is my view that acquiring her would invite danger. If she had used magecraft it would be one thing, but she killed that beast with only a sword like it was *nothing*. She isn’t normal.” After Lara finished, silence stretched between them until, as if they had been waiting for the ideal moment, the servant returned with their tea. Sofitia daintily took her teacup and took a long sip.

“She will be beyond my power to control. Is that what you wish to say, Lara?”

“Not at all, My Seraph. Only, as Zephyr said before, there is something about her beyond normal human limits, something that defies all common sense. It’s that, I think, that so perturbed Johann.”

Lara thought back on Olivia’s battle with the Norfess. Though terrifying—so much so that she had felt her very soul tremble—it had also been beautiful. “First-rate” seemed too weak a word, whether one was describing her sword work or her athletic prowess. Lara understood now how Johann could decisively say that Olivia was on a level above all of them. With the aid of magecraft, Lara was confident that she too could slay a Norfess. But she couldn’t even imagine herself defeating Olivia in a sword fight. Even Historia, with her innate genius for the blade, looked like a child beside Olivia. Such was the awe she inspired. Then there was what Lara saw as the greatest danger Olivia posed.

She was smiling. She looked at the Norfess, the feared beast of legends, and she smiled. All through the fight, she had the hint of it on her lips. No matter how you look at it, that isn’t natural.

Lara herself sometimes forced a fearless smile to inspire her guardians. But Olivia's smile had been different—another sort of thing entirely. Lara couldn't help but find it horribly unnerving.

Sofitia's glistening lips slowly parted. "To distance oneself from danger is to take the easy path. But that way will not lead us to domination over all of Duvedirica. You see that, don't you, Lara?"

"I agree that may be so..." Lara said reluctantly. Sofitia's eyes were sparkling as though they were full of stars.

"Olivia is strong enough that she didn't have to use magic—she did it all with just a blade. To put it as you might, Lara, our simple categories of 'weak' and 'strong' cannot be applied to her. I understand now, with every fiber of my being, why the empire was unable to cow her. But if we make her ours, why, then, the dream of unifying Duvedirica suddenly seems quite plausible."

"When you saw her fight, you didn't feel afraid of her?" Fear was the natural emotion for anyone to have experienced upon witnessing Olivia's common-sense-defying battle with the Norfess. Even the Seraphic Guardians, those brave warriors who feared not even death if only it were for Sofitia's sake, had all worn the same look of terror back there.

"Afraid? On the contrary, I was impressed. I thought it would drive me mad, she was so lovely."

As Sofitia smiled, Lara felt goose bumps break out all over her body. *So Sofitia plans on enjoying the danger of having Death God Olivia at her side...*

Realizing that any further attempt at persuasion would fall on deaf ears, the only thing Lara could do, as Sofitia's loyal servant, was to put her full trust in her seraph's words.

"Very well, My Seraph. I have nothing more to say."

"As I told you once before, I believe myself cognizant of the danger Olivia poses. As such, I mean to take your thoughts to heart," Sofitia said. Then, as if to clear the air, she clapped her hands and said brightly, "Oh yes! What is the plan for tomorrow?"

"With your leave, My Seraph, I would like to hold the military parade we

delayed.” The military parade had only one purpose—to show off the might of the Winged Crusaders to Olivia’s party—and, for that matter, to all of Fernest. Their plan had been to hold the parade the day after the hunt, but in consideration for their guests’ predicament, it had been delayed until the situation was resolved.

“Ah, yes...” Sofitia said. “Now that the young man has been found alive, I see no reason why not. You may proceed.”

“Thank you, my Seraph.”

“I would also like to invite Olivia to dinner again the day after tomorrow.”

If all went as scheduled, Olivia and her party were due to return to Fernest three days hence. Lara knew that Olivia had deferred her answer to Sofitia’s invitation, which meant Sofitia undoubtedly intended to raise the subject again over dinner.

“I’ll convey as much to Angelica.”

“Thank you. For the next two days I want Olivia’s every wish to be granted, and for her to feel as much in debt to us as is possible. So much so that she feels bound by her obligation to us.”

“Very well...”

Though each to differing degrees, humans were creatures of obligation. But they were dealing with Olivia, a being to whom the label of “human” did not seem to apply. Did she even experience obligation like other people? Lara was doubtful.

The following day, Angelica came again to take Olivia and her companions to attend the military parade that the search for Ashton had delayed. They rattled along in a carriage together for around ten minutes before they arrived at La Chaim Palace. There, they were escorted to the Viridescent Chamber, where Sofitia awaited them.

This room is spectacular, just like the rest of the palace.

Ashton looked around in wonder at the chamber with its broad, vaulted ceiling. His eyes alighted on a balcony, where he saw the beautiful woman from

the dinner party—Lara Mira Crystal. She was discussing something with Sofitia.

“My Seraph, I present Lady Olivia and her company!” Angelica announced. At this, Sofitia came over to them, silver staff in hand.

“Thank you, Angelica. And Ashton, it is a relief to see you safe.”

“Y-You’re too kind! I, um, I heard that you—Your Majesty aided the search effort so, um, please accept my thanks!” Ashton was so taken aback that Sofitia had addressed him directly that he forgot to kneel as he stammered out his gratitude.

“You needn’t thank me,” Sofitia replied. She didn’t look at all annoyed; in fact, she smiled at him. “I only acted as anyone would.”

At this indifference to his lack of decorum, Ashton was struck once more by how gracious Sofitia was. *Seeing her up close, she really is beautiful.* Small wonder that Ashton had heard the common folk called her smile “the joy of the goddess.”

As he stared at her, captivated, she cocked her head at him. “Is there perhaps something on my face?” she asked.

“N-Not at all! You’re just so beautiful!” Ashton clapped his hands over his mouth, knowing he’d let it run away from him. Sofitia’s eyes widened, then she gave a tinkling laugh.

“To have a man say such a thing so directly to me, I think I may blush.”

“I beg your forgiveness!” Ashton exclaimed, kneeling.

Behind him, he heard Ellis mutter, “Terrifying...”

Claudia, as it happened, stood beside him. Ashton stole a glance at her and saw her face was frozen in a strained smile. Her hands were clenched in fists and trembling.

“We shall enjoy the military parade from here.” Her smile never faltering, Sofitia led them out onto the balcony. There, Lara showed them to a row of seats. Meanwhile, Sofitia showed Olivia to a seat on a higher level than the rest and sat down beside her. The whole scene—lavish, thronelike chair and all—was a silent statement that she and Olivia were equals. But Olivia appeared

indifferent to the first-class privileges she received.

“This chair is super comfy. It’s so squishy,” she said, totally at ease.

“It will begin soon,” Lara announced in a clear voice. As if matching her, a trumpet rang out to declare the start of the parade. From either side of the leveled square, guardians in fine armor marched forth bearing the banners of Mekia. After they met at the center of the square, another two columns of guardians in full plate armor the color of new leaves emerged from the front. The two columns broke off, one left and one right, advancing in perfect formation before turning to face Sofitia. One by one, they saluted her.

It doesn’t take a veteran to see they’re very well trained, Ashton thought. They look like they’d be happy to die for Sofitia...

The parade wasn’t made up only of guardians. After them followed armored vehicles introduced as “chariots,” as well as other contraptions that looked like cutting-edge weapons of war. This was a display of the strength and breadth of their technology.

“Wouldn’t want these guys as an enemy,” Ellis muttered. She looked grim. Beside her, Evanson nodded in silence. Ashton was of entirely the same opinion. They couldn’t afford to underestimate Mekia just because it was a so-called “minor nation.” He, too, saw how they had defeated the Stonians with fewer than half as many soldiers.

Finally, the guardians formed a block seven ranks deep. They raised their swords in front of their faces, then cried out in unison, “Eternal loyalty to the seraph! May the light of Strecia be with her!”

Sofitia rose from her chair. She raised a hand and gave a small wave to the guardians, at which an earthshaking roar of joy and devotion filled the square. In days of yore, or so it was told, the legendary Queen Kaguya had conquered Duvedirica with her rare beauty and irresistible charisma as her weapons. Seeing Sofitia now, it was as though Queen Kaguya had come again.

While Sofitia smiled, Olivia gazed at her as though mystified.

It was the night before their return home.

“Right, be back in a bit.” Olivia had been invited to dinner by Sofitia. With unease in their eyes, Ashton and Claudia saw her off as she boarded the carriage sent for her and set off for La Chaim Palace alone.

“Your ceremonial uniform suited you very well, but you are just as stunning in a dress.”

These were Sofitia’s first words when she saw Olivia. Olivia looked down at the lilac dress she wore and cocked her head.

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes. It suits you very well.” The dress had been delivered the previous day by a merchant, Sofitia having apparently made arrangements for it especially for the occasion. Olivia had tried to refuse, saying her uniform would do fine, but Claudia had warned her that this would cause Sofitia to lose face. She’d had no choice but to wear it.

Sofitia, meanwhile, wore red. When Olivia commented that her dress was even more sparkly than usual, Sofitia whispered in her ear, “Actually, my ladies-in-waiting select everything I wear. I don’t get a choice in the matter.”

Not that Olivia could claim any better when it came to clothes, but she did think it must be horribly inconvenient being the ruler of a nation if you couldn’t even choose what you wore.

I wonder if she always eats at a big table like this. The table could have comfortably seated twenty people on just one side. Olivia sat down in the chair drawn for her, just as the door to the neighboring room opened and a procession of servants emerged wheeling silver wagons.

“Here we have a herb-roasted agate dove.”

“Here, a chatreised sallow fish.”

“Here...”

The servants laid out plate after plate before Olivia, listing off the name of each dish in turn. Mekian cuisine was more delicate in flavor than that of Fernest. As a rule, Olivia preferred richer food, but she still liked this.

“Please, eat. There’s no need for restraint.”

“Ashton says I left the word ‘restraint’ behind in my mother’s womb.”

Sofitia chuckled. “Then I needn’t have spoken.”

“Pretty much.” With that, Olivia set to work on the plates of food. Sofitia watched her eat, a smile playing around her mouth as though something amused her.

It’s about time to get to business. Sofitia sipped the wine that a servant had poured into her glass. Olivia wielded her knife and fork as if to demonstrate that eating was a war in its own right.

“Angelica tells me that you visited the library yesterday,” Sofitia said.

“Mm-hmm.” Olivia nodded, her cheeks full to bursting like a frog’s.

The Holy City of Elsphere had its fair share of sights to see. Chandelon Avenue, for example, which thronged with shops selling all manner of goods, boasted the liveliest atmosphere in the city. Then there was the statue of Strecia, standing tall enough to touch the sky, or the divine sight of the clouds that seemed to flow over the mountains that awaited those who ventured to the outskirts of the city. Sofitia found it curious that Olivia had disregarded all of these in favor of the library.

“Weh’eah. I wike ‘ookth.”

“I beg your pardon—did you say you ‘like books’?” Keeping her knife and fork in constant motion, Olivia confirmed with a simple nod. Olivia was simply such an exceptional warrior that Sofitia, without making any particular judgment, found this rather surprising. She was to get a second surprise when she asked what sort of books Olivia read. Olivia replied with a wildly varied selection, even including the kinds of tomes a scholar might pick up.

“You *are* exceedingly fond of books, aren’t you?” she commented. With a mighty gulp, Olivia swallowed her mouthful, then smiled and nodded.

“That was Z. Z gave me heaps and heaps of books.”

“Z...” Sofitia said. “You were living with Z, Olivia?”

“Yep. We lived together deep in the forest.”

Olivia had told her she had never known her parents, so Sofitia had more or less guessed this meant that this “Z” person had raised her. Only, even *she* hadn’t imagined them living not in a city or a town, but a *forest*.

She had ordered the owls to investigate Olivia’s background, but they hadn’t managed to turn up a single scrap of information prior to her enlisting in the Royal Army. If she had been living in a forest, then Sofitia could understand why.

“Is that so?”

“Yep. It shouldn’t be too far from around here,” Olivia said. Unable to maintain a show of indifference in the face of this remark, Sofitia almost dropped her glass. If what Olivia said was true, it was more than possible that Olivia—and Z, for that matter—had been living within her own domain.

Without hesitation, Sofitia summoned her butler and had them bring a map.

The map of Mekia and its surrounds was brought at once, and Sofitia opened it up. “Do you know where the forest was?”

Olivia ran her eyes over it, then pointed. “Here,” she said.

Sofitia did a double take. “Just to be clear,” she said, “you’re absolutely sure it was *this* forest?”

“Yep, I’m sure.”

“I-I see...” To cut to the point, the forest was indeed within the domain of the Holy Land of Mekia. But in a sense, it was also not. The forest Olivia had pointed to was to the southwest of Elsphere, a great sea of trees commonly known as “the Forest of No Return.” True to its name, it was known far and wide that none who set foot under its godforsaken boughs ever made it out. Several years earlier, Sofitia had dispatched several owls to investigate the veracity of the rumors, but in the end, not one of them had returned. And this Forest of No Return was where Olivia claimed to have lived.

She doesn’t seem to be joking. And besides, she has no reason to do so. This has truly been one surprise after another... Sofitia still managed to arrange her

face into an expression of calm as she went on. She chose her words with the utmost care to draw more information out of Olivia.

“So you lived in the forest since you were a baby. Is that right?”

“Well, yeah. I was thrown away as a baby, remember?”

“Ah, well, yes. You did mention that.”

“And after that, Z took me in.” Olivia recounted this sensitive episode of her past with her usual lack of concern. Sofitia had to assume it didn’t bother her to have been thrown away. What interested her was how Olivia had survived until Z found her, rather than being gobbled up or mauled by some beast. When she asked as much, Olivia frowned. “I don’t know why—I was a baby, after all.”

Put like that, Sofitia thought with a wry smile, she had to concede Olivia had a point. At the same time, she felt satisfied with the information she had acquired. Sitting up straighter, she looked directly at Olivia.

“Olivia?”

“Yeah?”

“May I expect an answer from you soon regarding my question from the other day?”

Just like that, Olivia’s face went hard. She set down the teacup in her hand silently, then said, “I’ve decided to stay with the Royal Army.”

Upon hearing this, Sofitia temporarily found herself lost for words. She had been quite assured that, though Olivia might hesitate, she would, in the end, accept her proposal.

“May I presume to ask why?” she asked at length. Olivia ran her finger along the rim of her teacup.

“If I left,” she said, “someone would die. Straightaway.” She smiled helplessly. Sofitia saw the kind face of a young man in her mind’s eye.

“Are you perhaps referring to Ashton?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“In other words, it’s because you cannot leave him that you are staying with

the Royal Army?”

Olivia nodded.

Although Sofitia had not disclosed this to any of her subjects, her schemes had in fact extended beyond Olivia—she also wanted Ashton in the Winged Crusaders too. She had heard of his reputation as a genius tactician who had been a thorn in the side of the empire. However, her sources also informed her that he was unflinchingly loyal. Upon seeing how wary he was of her, Sofitia had quickly decided he would be unreceptive to her advances.

“Then you are content to forget about Z?”

“I am not!” Olivia cried, slamming her hands down on the table and leaping to her feet. Her eyes were wide. “I absolutely want to find Z!”

“Well, then...”

Olivia sat down again, then said haltingly, “At first, you know, I couldn’t have cared less about humans. I wasn’t interested.”

Sofitia was a little disconcerted to hear Olivia speak as though she weren’t a human herself, but she listened without interrupting.

“But then Ashton fell down the cliff, and I told Claudia to calm down, but then I thought, what if Ashton *died*? And it was like something warm and soft went out inside me and I felt all cold. I think if it had been Claudia who fell off the cliff, I’d have felt the same way. You know, when Z suddenly disappeared, it hurt like someone was squeezing my heart. So long as I’m alive, I believe I’ll be able to see Z again. But Ashton’s different. Without me, Ashton could die, just like that. And then I’d never be able to see him again. So...yeah.”

As though it had been waiting for Olivia to finish, the bell that heralded nightfall tolled. Its sound marked the end of the dinner Sofitia had planned.

It sounds as though she will not be easily persuaded, she thought. All right. What will she do if she loses her precious friends, I wonder?

The faces of Ashton and Claudia flashed through her mind. But no sooner had she had this thought than she found Olivia staring intensely at her. The girl’s rosy lips opened.

"A friend would never think that sort of thing," she said.

"What?"

"And we only just became friends. I don't want to have to kill you."

Up close, the ebony of Olivia's eyes looked deeper than ever. Under their gaze, a strange sensation came over Sofitia, as though something beyond her ability to fathom was drawing her in. She realized that cold sweat was trickling down her spine.

Surely not... she thought. *I can't be scared, can I?*

It was Sofitia's first encounter with the emotion, and it left her shaken. In a clear voice, she said, "I do apologize, but I'm not sure what it is you mean."

"You really don't know?"

"I do not."

"Hmm..." Olivia paused, then said, "Oh, well. I do want us to stay friends, so I'll take your word for it this time. Now, it's about time I went home." With a glance up at the ceiling, Olivia stood.

"I'll have a carriage—" Sofitia began, about to call for the butler, but Olivia cut her off with a wave of her hand.

"Don't worry, it's not far. I'll walk. I don't need a send-off." And with that, she swept lightly out of the dining hall. Sofitia, who had half stood up, sat back down again, then let out a small sigh. She stared at the wavering light of the candle before her.

Immediately after this, a man clad all in black dropped lightly down from the ceiling.

"Hello, Jozer," Sofitia said. "What did you make of her?"

"She appeared to me just as much—if not more so—a monster as the rumors said. I erased all trace of my aura, yet she not only noticed me, she happily pretended to ignore me. It was as though she were telling me she could kill me whenever she felt like it. It would be a grave mistake to make an enemy of her."

"If the assassin they call the 'Evangelist of Death' says so, it must be true."

“That is all in the past, My Seraph. Today, I am your loyal servant. But for now, I humbly beg that you will not take any hasty action. Excuse me.” With that, Jozer returned to his position in the rafters.

Sofitia downed what remained of her wine in a single gulp. *She really threatened me—the seraph! I find myself liking her more and more. A temporary retreat is in order for now, but I will need her power to unify Duvedirica. I am certainly not about to give up.*

Pushing the great doors open, she stepped out onto the balcony and spread her arms wide. A brilliant smile spread across her face as she bathed in the silver light of the moon.

IV

Autumn had come in earnest to the courtyard within La Chaim Palace. Gray squirrels scurried busily through the gaps between the trees, their cheeks bulging as they carried nuts and berries back to their nests in a reminder that winter was near at hand.

I thought I’d find you here. A young man walked forward over the fallen leaves that covered the ground like a scarlet carpet, pushing his flaxen hair back. He approached the small table where Sofitia sat, daintily sipping a cup of tea.

“It’s over then?” Sofitia asked, not looking at Johann.

“Yes, my Seraph. They set off not long ago along with the Seraphic Guard.”

“Thank you for doing the send-off. Now that you’re here, why don’t you join me?”

“It would be my honor.” Johann sat down, then asked the servant for leygrantz tea before looking directly at Sofitia. There was something out of the ordinary in her beautiful visage.

“You’ve been looking very stern of late, Johann,” Sofitia said teasingly. Johann rubbed his head.

“More to the point, are you sure about letting things end like this?” It scarcely needed to be said that he was talking about Olivia’s departure. Johann knew

from Lara's grumbling that ever since the incident with the Norfess, Sofitia's desire to obtain Olivia had only grown more intense.

Sofitia sat her teacup down and regarded Johann for a long moment. "I didn't think you were especially enthusiastic about the plan, Johann." She smiled softly.

Johann didn't remember ever opposing bringing Olivia into the Winged Crusaders—at least, not out loud. Sofitia had seen straight through him. He suppressed a grimace.

"On a personal level, perhaps. But there's no doubt that Olivia's strength will be fundamental, both for the future of Mekia, and to achieve domination over Duvedirica."

"I quite agree. Only now that she has refused us, we have no choice but to quietly withdraw. Or would you like to try and persuade her?" There was a wicked gleam in Sofitia's eyes as she looked at him. Johann's words caught in his throat. If ordered, he would of course try, but he thought the effort would be in vain.

She's the type to never back down once she's made her mind up. Johann had been involved with enough women to feel confident in this assessment.

"I doubt my efforts to persuade her would change anything."

"Then I shall simply have to do my best." Sofitia gallantly raised her willowy arm, fist clenched. It was positively adorable.

"You haven't given up, then?" he asked.

"Don't you know, Johann?"

"Know what, My Seraph?"

"I'm a woman who never knows when to quit," she said, then poked her tongue out from between her rosy lips. A chill wind teased at her hair.

Come to think of it, Sofitia never backs down once she's made her mind up either. His mischief-loving ruler, it seemed, had no intention of giving up on Olivia. Johann looked up at the piercingly clear blue sky and laughed aloud.

V

Felix's Workroom at Listelein Castle, Olsted

Felix was in his workroom, locked in combat with a stack of paperwork, when the news of Gladden's death reached him.

"I'm sorry. Would you mind repeating that?" He set down his pen and stared aghast at Lieutenant Teresa.

"Field Marshal Gladden passed away this morning," she said again, her eyes downcast. Felix had last seen Gladden three months prior. At the time, he hadn't noticed anything amiss. He had of course never heard anything about the marshal suffering from any disease.

"Is the cause of death known?"

"Not at present..." Teresa replied. "Only, he is said to have passed away in his own home."

"At home? Marshal Gladden had come home?"

"It seems so."

"That is odd..." If Gladden were back in the capital, he would have called in on Felix. At least, that was what he had done in the past. Felix was therefore privately suspicious.

"According to the guard who accompanied the lord marshal, he returned to the capital in haste in order to meet with Chancellor Darmés."

Hearing this, everything fell into place at once. In their current situation, there was only one reason Gladden would have rushed back to the capital. He must have come to negotiate with Chancellor Darmés about Death God Olivia. That fit with the letters Felix had periodically sent to Gladden.

And then there's what happens next. For now, I need a better grasp of the situation. Felix hurriedly tidied away his paperwork and stood up. Teresa, as though reading his mind, took his jacket from its hanger and held it out.

"I'll send for a carriage at once," she said as she began readying herself to leave.

“There’s no need for a carriage. I’ll walk.”

“Very well, ser.”

Blessing Teresa for understanding his intentions without his having to say a word, Felix set off with her for Gladden’s estate.

The Hildesheimer Estate in the Privileged District

Gladden’s house was spectacular, yet on this day, it cast a dark shadow. Felix and Teresa followed Duchess Liana, her face worn and haggard, to where they were reunited with Gladden, lying in his bed. At a glance, he appeared to be merely sleeping.

“I know it is heartless to ask this of you at a time like this, but please tell me. How did your husband seem when he returned home?”

“He was a little tired,” Liana replied at length, “but he had scarcely made it through the gate before he was playing with our son. And at dinner, he said my cooking tasted exceptional after so long...” The memory of the evening must have come back to Liana, because her shoulders shook, and she let out a tiny moan. Teresa looked at her with deep sorrow.

Felix waited until Liana had regained her composure, then asked, “How was he yesterday?”

“He was... After returning from>Listelein Castle, he was strange.”

“How was he strange?”

“He didn’t respond when I spoke to him, and...at first, I thought perhaps something disagreeable had happened at the castle, but even then, his total lack of reaction to me was unnatural. In the end, he shut himself up in his room without eating a bite of dinner. Then this morning, usually, he rises earlier than anyone else to do his exercises, but when there was no sign of him coming out, I...”

“That was when you went in to check on him?”

“Yes...”

“What did the healer say, by the way?”

“They said it was likely a natural death...” Liana stroked Gladden’s cheek, then, like a dam bursting, tears began to pour down her cheeks. The dog at her side pushed himself up against her, as though to comfort his mistress.

Felix imagined his sister Luna dying without warning. It struck him close to home.

So the healer couldn’t pin down the cause of death... Any healer treating Gladden would undoubtedly be highly competent, but that wasn’t the same as being all-powerful. In reality, it wasn’t uncommon for the cause of death to remain unclear, and Felix wasn’t in the habit of doubting a healer’s diagnosis. At the same time, ever since stepping foot in this room, he’d felt something wrong.

“Duchess Liana, would you permit me to touch Marshal Gladden’s body?”

“Do you have a healer’s license, Lord Sieger?”

“Oh, no, that’s not it...”

Liana looked bewildered, but she took a step back from Gladden. Felix thanked her, then softly laid a hand on Gladden’s neck.

His neck is clearly broken, he thought. This alone was abnormal enough. Felix’s first thought was that this had not been a natural death, but an assassination. But he couldn’t affirm his own theory right away. As one of the empire’s Three Generals, Gladden’s estate was under heavy guard at all times. Even Felix would have struggled to enter. Besides that, it was unusual that, apart from his broken neck, Gladden’s body showed no sign whatsoever of external injury. Applying enough force to break bones should have left behind some mark.

I suppose I’ll have to look further. Felix laid a hand on the pressure point below Gladden’s navel, then closed his eyes and focused his mind.

“Lord...Lord Sieger? What is all this...?”

“There is no need to worry, Duchess,” Teresa said soothingly in response to Liana’s deepening confusion. Felix, meanwhile, honed his mind to a fine point, then sent his Odh running through Gladden’s whole body. Not long after, a change began to take place within it.

These are signs of magecraft, beyond a doubt. Which means Lord Gladden was likely attacked by a mage. When a person was affected by magecraft, the signs of it remained in their body for several days afterward. A person without training in manipulating their Odh could neither see nor perceive these signs, but to Felix, the remnants of the spell were clear as day.

He was now certain that Gladden had not died a natural death. He had been murdered with magecraft. *But that means...*

Mages were few and far between. Felix only knew of three currently alive: Amelia Stolast, Johann Strider, and Lassara sun Halbert. Assuming he could immediately discount Lassara, that automatically reduced the list of suspects for Gladden's assassination down to two.

Yet here, Felix felt something wasn't right. After having crossed swords with both of them, Johann didn't seem to him the sort of man to favor assassination. Amelia might have, but from her past behavior, Felix thought she'd surely have come straight for his head.

And there are other questions too. Felix ran his eyes over Gladden once more. To his mystification, he found not the dark gray he was used to, but a beautiful white that seemed to glow. Even within magecraft, there were many and varied practices. It therefore followed that the residue too would vary. But Felix, at least, had never seen the likes of this before. He was eager to get to the bottom of it.

If I could only show him to Lassara, she would shed some light on this... Lassara, who had lived through more than two hundred years, despised the exploitation of magecraft and so had secluded herself in the White Forest. Even if he went to her on his hands and knees and asked her to come to the capital, Felix knew she'd only laugh him off.

And more importantly... Felix glanced at Liana. If he took Gladden's body to Lassara, she wouldn't refuse him, but he could never have asked the grieving Liana to allow him to take her husband from her. In the end, he and Teresa left the room without acquiring any conclusive evidence. Outside the door, Gladden's young son sat curled up with his knees hugged to his chest. Felix could find nothing to say to him.

“Was there something suspicious about Marshal Gladden’s death, then?” Teresa asked shrewdly, after they had walked in silence for a while following their departure from the Hildesheimer estate.

“There were several concerning points,” Felix replied. Teresa was a trustworthy aide, but even then, he shied from referencing his thoughts here. If news of Gladden’s death became public, the imperial army would be thrown into chaos. The knowledge that it had been an assassination, and at the hands of a mage, no less, would only add fuel to the fire. The best course of action, Felix decided, was to keep what he knew to himself. Teresa didn’t ask any further questions, and they walked side by side in silence.

“I plan on calling on Chancellor Darmés next. When we get back to the castle, put in a request for an urgent audience.”

“Very well, ser.”

Darmés would have already heard of Gladden’s death. Felix naturally wanted to ask him how the marshal had seemed the previous day, as well as what was to be done with the Helios Knights. Unconsciously, Felix quickened his steps as they made their way to the castle.

Chancellor Darmés’s Workroom, Listelein Castle

It had been three hours since Felix and Teresa’s return to the castle. Felix, looking over the table at Darmés, didn’t hesitate to broach the subject of Gladden’s death. The chancellor’s face darkened dramatically.

“I, too, was shocked at the suddenness of the news. I have just informed His Imperial Highness.”

“How was the emperor?”

“His Highness takes it very hard. He has instructed me to arrange for a funeral worthy of one of the Three Generals.”

“I see...” Felix replied. “By the by, I believe you met with Marshal Gladden yesterday. I would appreciate it if you could tell me how he seemed to you.”

“He is supposed to have died of natural causes.”

“Yes,” Felix said slowly. “Only, the precise cause remains unclear.”

“Well, healers are not all-powerful,” Darmés replied. “But you asked about Gladden’s manner. It was our first meeting in a long while, but to my eyes, he seemed as he always was.”

“There was nothing that struck you as odd, then?”

“No, I regret to say there was not.” Darmés sipped his tea, a sorrowful look on his face. To Felix, who knew Gladden’s reasons for coming back to the capital, it smacked of melodrama.

“Moving to another matter, what is to become of the Helios Knights? Leaving them without a commander is sure to affect discipline.”

“I’m thinking of giving them over to Rosenmarie for the time being,” Darmés replied smoothly.

“Rosenmarie?”

“Yes, she’s been back for nearly a month, hasn’t she?”

“That’s true...” Felix admitted. “Still, do you think she’ll be all right?”

It wasn’t Rosenmarie’s abilities that concerned Felix. Owing to circumstances, Rosenmarie was currently staying with Felix. She had fully regained her strength, but even so, she had only been there a month. Felix thought it would be cruel to send her out again.

“There is no one else suitable. Unless you have a candidate that you would like to recommend elevating to the Three Generals?”

Felix considered the question. He could think of a number of competent individuals, but competency was not the same as being suited to lead the Helios Knights. Felix himself set little store by his rank as one of the Three Generals, but it was still not a position to which he could recommend someone lightly. With a mirthless smile, he shook his head.

“I thought as much. Meanwhile, rumors are flying about the city that the Royal Army is planning a large-scale assault on Kier Fortress. I’m sure you’re aware of this too.”

“I am...” Felix replied. “Though I confess I am a little surprised to hear you paying heed to common gossip.”

“There’s nothing surprising about it. I started off in intelligence analysis, you know. I treat it all with care, no matter how trivial.” Darmés chuckled, his cracked lips curling.

Felix watched him, reflecting wryly that this couldn’t be the same Darmés who had casually dismissed reports on Death God Olivia. Nevertheless, he would not be surprised if the Royal Army, after their success in taking back the northern and southern lands from the empire, next moved to attack Kier Fortress. If the worst should happen and they lost Kier Fortress, it would mean the total loss of imperial holdings within Fernest’s domains. Felix had already learned from his investigations that the rumors had their source in traveling merchants. Crossing between nations as they did, these merchants naturally came across all sorts of information.

As such, I can’t simply discount it as a rumor. And I’m sure the lord chancellor is of the same mind.

“Going on the assumption that the rumors are true,” Darmés said, “I wish to place Rosenmarie at Kier Fortress. Meanwhile, I shall continue to rely on you for the protection of the capital, Felix.”

In the end, there was no one but Rosenmarie who could take Kier Fortress, and without an order from the emperor, Felix could not leave the capital. Unable to come up with any objection to Darmés’s proposal, Felix indicated his acceptance.

“Well, then, if you have nothing further to discuss with me, I must be going,” Darmés said, rising slowly from the sofa and brushing the creases from his robe. “I have funeral preparations to attend to.”

Felix saluted, then left the room. As he walked down the corridor, a conversation played itself out in his mind. *Strange. What’s this feeling? It’s as though...I overlooked something? But no*, he told himself, *that isn’t possible*. Darmés had said nothing to raise his suspicions, nor had his manner been any different from normal. Yet something deep in Felix’s subconscious was blaring a warning of some unknown threat, as though by leaving things be, he was

committing an irreversible mistake.

But right now, his priority was not shadowy warnings; rather, it was dealing with the reality that was bearing down upon them. *We need to know how the Royal Army plans on moving on Kier Fortress. But first, I have to hunt down whoever murdered Marshal Gladden, and quickly...*

Here, Felix noticed the red light that filled the corridor and turned to look out the window. Through the glass, the wine red of the sun seemed ghastly.

Interlude: Reunited Out of the Blue

The Southern Quarter of Fis, the Kingdom of Fernest

A man and woman in military uniform walked impatiently by the many shops that lined the streets of the merchant's district. One, in a general's regalia, was Major General Neinhardt Blanche, an aide to the First Legion. He was accompanied by his own aide, Captain Katerina Reinas.

"Captain Katerina, procurement of the armor and weapons we're short on—"

"The order has been placed with Marcos Trading. The goods will arrive at Galia Fortress in three to four days."

"Food supplies—"

"I have arranged for the bulk of them to be supplied by the Francis Company. After Mekia put in a word for us, Silverwing Traders have kindly offered to help in whatever way they can. I anticipate that we will secure sufficient food supplies before the battle commences."

Neinhardt was quiet for a moment. "One step ahead as always, I see," he said after a moment.

"I have a certain superior officer to thank for that. His incessant unreasonable demands have trained me well." Katerina lightly brushed aside her shoulder-length black hair with her fingertips, looking prim.

I suppose she must be talking about me, though I don't remember it, Neinhardt thought with a rueful smile. A table outside a shop caught his eye, and he led Katerina over to it.

"General?" she said questioningly.

"We have a little time before our next appointment. Something like this can't hurt from time to time." Neinhardt pulled out a chair, then promptly sat down and called over a waiter. He ordered tea for both of them. Katerina's prim expression turned to one of uncertainty as she lowered herself slowly into her

own chair.

“Every so often he makes a sweet gesture like this,” she muttered. “It’s not fair.”

“Sorry? What was that?”

“Just talking to myself, ser,” Katerina said quickly. “You know this shop, then?”

“Oh, no, it just caught my eye...” Neinhardt replied. “Why, should I?”

“In actual fact, ser,” Katerina said, “the chicken terrine sandwiches here are supposed to be extraordinary.” She peeked at him from beneath her lashes like a schoolgirl. Neinhardt sighed, then called the waiter over once more.

“Sorry, could you add a chicken terrine sandwich to that order?”

“Hooray!” Katerina did a tiny fist pump, and Neinhardt couldn’t help but smile.

About ten minutes later, just as their tea was brought out along with the terrine sandwich, Neinhardt’s attention was drawn to a shop across the street, where a crowd was forming.

“Things are really bustling over there,” he commented. “What is that shop?”

Katerina, happily picking up her sandwich in both hands, didn’t bother to look before she replied. “A sweet shop. It’s been all the rage lately.”

“Sweets?” Neinhardt looked back at the crowded shop front. If they were out in the provinces, it would have been one thing, but in Fis, sweet shops were a dime a dozen. Apparently picking up on Neinhardt’s disbelief, Katerina reluctantly set down the sandwich she had been about to shove into her face. After first warning him that the story was only a rumor, she told Neinhardt that the shop was selling sweets made by Duchess Gruening.

“Duchess Gruening?!” Neinhardt exclaimed before he could stop himself. The duchess was, of course, none other than Cornelius’s wife. It was a ludicrous tale.

“I told you it was a rumor.”

“My understanding of rumors is that they usually have more than a little truth behind them.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do about it,” Katerina said, reaching for her sandwich again. “More importantly, your tea is getting cold.”

Neinhardt sipped his tea, watching her. Next, it was Katerina’s turn to notice a different crowd forming. “What could that be?” she wondered.

“They’re very loud.” Looking out over his tea, Neinhardt’s eyes eventually found a girl walking their way, waving happily as a chorus of shrieks broke out around her. Silver-haired and dressed in the same general’s uniform as Neinhardt, it was obvious at once that this was none other than Olivia. The concerning part was her loyal retinue of guards—presumably the cause of the shrieking.

“Major General Olivia, I can’t have you leading those around town with you,” Neinhardt admonished her the moment she got into earshot. Meanwhile, Katerina’s eyes were fixed on the dusksight wolves at Olivia’s feet. The terrine sandwich dropped from her hands.

“Mr. Fish—um, Major General Neinhardt! You’re having tea here?”

“Well, yes, as you can see, but that’s not—”

“Mind if I join you?”

Neinhardt was at a loss for how to reply. If he were honest, he did *not* want Olivia to sit down. No one who had seen those dusksight wolves up close would have. Having said that, after previously being introduced to them, he found he wasn’t as shaken as he would have been in the past. For better or for worse, he appeared to have developed a tolerance for them.

“Dusksight wolves, class one dangerous beasts...” Katerina whispered. Katerina, on the other hand, had no such tolerance. Moving faster than he’d ever seen before, she scooted around the table to sit beside him, linking her slender arm through his with viselike force.

“I’d really like to sit down,” Olivia said sweetly.

“Those... Are you *sure* about them?” Neinhardt asked, keeping a wary eye on

the wolves.

“They’re well behaved. They’ll be fine.” Smiling, she sat down in an empty chair, then asked, “What are you eating?”

“It’s a chicken terrine sandwich,” Katerina replied shakily. She didn’t take her eyes off the wolves for a second as she spoke.

“Is it good?”

“Y-Yes. It’s delicious.”

“Cool.” Olivia turned to the waiter, who was staring at the wolves as though about to faint with terror, and said breezily, “One of the same for me too.”

The waiter nodded several times, then fled back into the shop as fast as their legs would carry them.

“G-General Olivia. Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

“What is it?”

“Th-They...they aren’t going to eat us, are they?”

Olivia looked from Katerina’s fearful face to the dusksight wolves who sat obediently around her. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

“I mean, dusksight wolves are dangerous beasts...”

“They’re *fine*. You can even touch them, if you like.”

“N-No! No, thank you!”

Olivia laughed. “Come on, don’t be shy,” she said, then grabbed Katerina’s arm and dragged her over to the head of one of the wolves. It submitted calmly and didn’t move a muscle.

“There, isn’t it the fluffiest, best thing you ever felt?”

“General! General!” To Neinhardt’s not inconsiderable shock, Katerina appeared for the first time since he had known her to be close to tears. Unless he did something, she might even have a breakdown—which would mean twice as much work for Neinhardt. That was something he had to avoid at all costs.

“Major General Olivia, I think she’s had enough.”

“What? Already?” Olivia stared, bewildered, at Katerina, who nodded so vigorously he thought she might shake her head clean off.

“Okay, it’s your turn next, Major General Nein—”

“Look, your food’s here.” Catching sight of the trembling waiter approaching with Olivia’s sandwich, Neinhardt seized the opportunity to deflect Olivia’s proposal. Then, as Katerina glowered resentfully at him, he caught sight of Ashton Senefelder approaching, a look of resignation on his face.

“It’s been too long, ser.” Ashton saluted Neinhardt. Then, taking Olivia by the arm, he dragged her to her feet.

“Just a bit longer, I have to finish my terrine sandwich.”

“No can do. Colonel Claudia is champing at the bit to see you.”

“Come on, she can champ for a bit longer.”

“I suppose you’ll still be saying that when you’re facing a terrifying yaksha?”

At once, Olivia’s face froze in terror. “I-I definitely don’t want that.”

It wasn’t every day one saw such an expression on the face of the Death God that the empire feared so greatly. Neinhardt was naturally taken aback.

What even is this “yaksha” that scares her so much...? Neinhardt became temporarily immersed in the ocean of his thoughts, until Ashton’s voice fished him back out.

“We’ll be going then, General!” he announced. “Patches, Spot, Pooch, you come too. And don’t menace anyone.”

“Grarr!”

Ashton saluted again, then, taking Olivia—who had a yearning look in her eyes—by the arm, he pulled her away. The dusksight wolves arranged themselves around the pair in a three-pointed defensive formation.

Katerina stared dazedly after the two humans and three wolves. “Did you see that? He was talking to class one dangerous beasts like they were his *soldiers*,” she said. “Who would have thought Major Ashton was so tough?” There was now a hint of something like admiration in her face.

No, I'm pretty sure he's just numb to it all... Neinhardt thought. He couldn't help but feel sympathetic to Ashton's predicament.

Chapter Five: Rosenmarie Rises Again

I

The Commander's Room, Kier Fortress, the Imperial Army

Having finished her long convalescence, Rosenmarie set off for Kier Fortress with her Crimson Knights. She arrived a week after the lavish funeral that had been held for Gladden.

"It's very good to see you, my lady."

"I appreciate the reception." As she and Oscar entered the commander's room, Rosenmarie caught a faint whiff of the hair product she'd smelled every time she met Gladden. The scent, which she had found unbearably irritating back then, now aroused in her something like nostalgia.

"Never thought I'd see the day Gladden died of natural causes, though..." Rosenmarie sat back heavily in the chair and surveyed the room that had formerly belonged to her superior officer. Gladden, she knew, had paid an uncommon degree of care to his health. When the news of his death had reached her, she had actually thought it was a joke and laughed aloud.

"At the very least, there was nothing wrong with him when he set out from Kier Fortress..."

Sensing a hint of implication in Oscar's words, Rosenmarie scowled at him. "Am I imagining things, or are you nursing doubts about Marshal Gladden's death?"

"You are not imagining it, my lady," Oscar admitted. "It's true. I remain unconvinced."

"I heard one of the most respected healers in the capital declared it to be a natural death. I don't think you've got a choice but to be convinced, whatever your thoughts on the matter might be."

"That may be so, my lady, it just...doesn't sit right with me."

Rosenmarie, growing fed up with Oscar's cryptic remarks, found herself raising her voice. "And I don't know what you're on about. *What* isn't sitting right?"

"It's very difficult to put into words..." Oscar replied. "It was what I felt when I saw Marshal Gladden's body."

"And what feeling was that?"

Oscar hesitated for a moment. "It was the stench of death," he said. "From the battlefield..."

"Basically, you're trying to say someone murdered him."

Oscar's silence clearly articulated his sentiments. Rosenmarie understood why he struggled to readily accept Gladden's death. She had been down that path herself. Pinning all of her hatred on its source, Death God Olivia, had been enough for her, but Oscar's case was different. Gladden had not died on a battlefield.

It was so sudden that his emotions are probably still a mess, Rosenmarie decided. Still, there's what he said about the stench of death on the battlefield...

The man before her was no average soldier. Whatever else he might be, he had risen to chief of staff in the Helios Knights. Rosenmarie was incredibly curious by what he said about a "stench of death." Those who took to the battlefield sometimes sensed something like an omen of death in their opponent.

She folded her arms and gave Oscar a penetrating stare. "Let me ask you this, Oscar. If, hypothetically, Gladden *was* murdered, who did it? When? How did they do the deed? Poison would be quick and easy, but a healer would never miss that. Or did he have some suspicious wounds?"

"No, my lady," Oscar said at length. "I am told there wasn't a scratch on him."

Even if someone had escaped the notice of the guards to successfully sneak into Gladden's bedroom, they couldn't have murdered him without leaving a single mark. And this was *Gladden*, who of all people had boasted that he lived every moment as though he were on the battlefield. It was hard to imagine him being overpowered by a common thief.

Rosenmarie pointed all of this out to Oscar, who gaped at her.

“I do not think Marshal Gladden fell victim to a common thief either,” he said.

“Then you just have to accept it was natural causes, don’t you? Even if we don’t know exactly *what* causes.”

Oscar still looked dissatisfied, but he gave a reluctant nod. It wasn’t like arguing any further was going to bring Gladden back from the dead. Putting the subject of the late marshal behind them, Rosenmarie moved on to the matter at hand.

“Have you heard the rumors going around the capital lately?” she asked.

“I have. I suppose that means you have as well, Lady Rosenmarie.”

A credible rumor was spreading in whispers between traveling merchants that the Royal Army was going to launch a large-scale military assault on Kier Fortress. Rosenmarie had heard it many times over during her stay in the capital.

“The shimmers are confirming if there’s any truth to it. Though if you ask me, they needn’t bother.”

“You mean it’s true?”

“Chancellor Darmés thinks so too. That’s why he sent me here, is it not?” Rosenmarie kicked her feet up on the desk. Oscar frowned, showing his disapproval, but Rosenmarie ignored him and went on. “When the Royal Army attacks, we’ll make full use of Kier Fortress’s defenses. They built their so-called impenetrable fortress, now they can experience it firsthand.”

“May I take that to mean you intend to weather the siege?”

“Did it sound like I said something else?” Seeing Oscar’s look of surprise, Rosenmarie smirked. “What, you thought I’d ride into battle?”

“You see through me, my lady.”

“This time, at least, I have no choice but to tread carefully.”

She had been excessively arrogant in the battle on the northern front, sure she wouldn’t lose. As a result, she had suffered a bitter defeat at the hands of

Olivia and the Seventh Legion. One defeat was more than enough for her.

“But you *do* intend to meet them in battle in the end, do you not?”

“I can see how you ended up chief of staff. You see just how it is. I plan to wait until the Royal Army reaches its culminating point, then go on the offensive.”

“In that case, I’d like to secure supplies to enable us to hold out over a long siege,” Oscar said, then held a piece of paper out to her. “If I could have you sign here.”

Rosenmarie looked over the document, her mouth curling involuntarily. Directives had already been issued to all the concerned parties. All that remained was for her to put down her signature.

“You and I were thinking along the same lines, Oscar,” she said.

“The Helios Knights have no intentions of lying down and accepting a second defeat. We share the Crimson Knights’—we share your feelings, Lady Rosenmarie.”

“It seems so.”

Now that Gladden would never clear his sullied reputation, they would be eager to do so in his stead. Rosenmarie could feel Oscar’s fierce determination. Picking up a pen, she signed her name in a flowing hand, then passed the paper back to him.

“The problem will be Death God Olivia...”

“Leave her to me. The Land of the Dead is too mild a fate for that one. I’m going to send her straight down to hell.”

“At the risk of rebuke, I must ask,” Oscar said hesitantly. “Is there any chance of victory against the Death God?”

Everyone knew that Rosenmarie had lost to Death God Olivia in single combat. She couldn’t fault Oscar for his concern, which was eminently reasonable.

“Don’t worry. I’m not a big enough moron to go up against her a second time without a plan.”

“May I take that to mean that you believe there *is* a chance to win?”

“I haven’t been sitting on my hands, you know. I’ve learned a lot, thanks to Felix.”

In the midst of single combat, Olivia had used the word “Odh.” Rosenmarie had remembered that Felix had previously used that same word. After going to him, she now knew both of the existence of Odh, as well as how to use it.

“Did Lord Felix teach you some kind of trick to use in battle?”

“That’s right. Well, to put it simply, up until now, I might as well have been a newborn.”

According to Felix, despite the great volume of Odh in her body, because she didn’t know how to use it, she had been discharging it to no purpose. Thinking back now, Olivia must have been closely attuned with her Odh. In battle, the ability to effectively manipulate Odh made a world of difference. When she fought Olivia, she had been like an infant going up against a full-grown adult. As such, now that she had learned how to use her Odh, she couldn’t possibly lose.

Rosenmarie smirked as she imagined meeting Olivia once more.

“You seem very confident, my lady.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Now, I’ll handle Death God Olivia. Your job, Oscar, is to prepare the fortress to withstand a siege, without delay.”

“Yes, ser!”

When Oscar had left, Rosenmarie leaned back in her chair and raised a hand up to the ceiling. When she focused on it, she saw a flicker like the air over a flame.

This time, Death God Olivia, your pathetic life is mine.

Rosenmarie’s uplifted eyes were the color of blood.



Crimson Liber, the Seventh City of the United City-States of Sutherland

Four days' gallop to the southwest of the Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla lay the Seventh City of Crimson Liber. The city was governed by Cassanoah Bell Schteinz, a man mockingly referred to by the rulers of the other city-states as "the Bat."

On the third story of a tavern in the center of the city called the Eyes of Medeus, in a corner room that usually went unused, sat a group of figures all dressed in black at a round table. Each of them wore a black mask that concealed their face, creating an unsettling atmosphere.

"It's been a long time now since we lost touch with Hilma. He's blown it, like as not..." The speaker was a man whose enormous size belied his advanced age.

"I warned him a thousand times," spat another man with a bolt of lightning painted over the right eye of his mask. His name was Nefer. "This is what happens when he doesn't listen."

"Hilma was a particularly talented assassin, even among the Asura. I suppose he was confident."

"That's hardly worth mentioning if this is the result," said Krishna, the woman sitting next to Nefer, with a snort of laughter. The left eye of her mask was adorned by a stunning butterfly in dazzling colors.

"No hope of getting Felix to act, then?" said the giant man. Nefer shook his head.

"That one abhors his noble Asuran blood. He's never going to work with us. Even *you* couldn't change his mind if you went to him yourself, Elder."

The elder, stroking his white beard that protruded from the bottom of his mask, let out a small sigh. "Felix was most beloved by the Asura. Such a pity..."

"If you're that eager to make him listen to you, why not take a hostage?" suggested Krishna. "I believe he has a sister called Luna, doesn't he?"

“Don’t even go there,” Nefer said with a pained smile.

“Why? It’s not a bad move.”

“When he refused our invitation, I responded just as Krishna did now. Now, how do you think he responded?”

“I’ve no idea. What did he say?”

“He said if we laid a finger on any of his friends or family, he’d murder every last one of us.”

“Murder *all* of us...?” A cruel smile played around Krishna’s lips. “How very amusing. Of course, if he believes he can pull it off, he is more than welcome to try.” The other Asuras expressed their ardent agreement. The debate over Felix continued, growing more heated, until at last they came to the idea of eliminating Felix for good.

At this, Nefer held up his hands. “I’m out. Anyone who wants to do him in can be my guest.”

“Does that mean you’re giving in to his threat, then?”

“Let me ask you this. Do you think if you all took Felix on together, you could kill him?”

Krishna chuckled. “That’s a terrible joke.”

“That’s enough from both of you!” The elder banged his fist down. There was a resounding crack, and the table gave way. “Squabbling among ourselves does us no good! I will judge when the time is right to deal with Felix. What I will not stand for is any hasty action.”

“I beg your pardon, Elder,” Krishna said, bowing low. When Nefer only shrugged without a shred of repentance, she rose, overcome by fury, but the elder raised a hand to stop her.

“In any case, Hilma lost to the Deep Folk girl. As Nefer assessed, she is far more skilled than any of the Deep Folk we have slain in the past, despite her youth. I don’t need to tell you that if we are to honor the ancient contract, we must exterminate every last offshoot of the Deep Folk. From here on, you’re not to fight her alone.”

The others all nodded dutifully. Just then, there was a creak from the staircase and the sound of footsteps. A ripple of shock went around the room. The footsteps came to a halt in front of the door, which was then thrown wide open.

“I thought I heard a terrific bang from— Hey! How come the table’s broken?!”

The tavern keeper cast his eyes around the room, looking utterly bewildered.

The Asura, who should have been at the table, were gone as though they had never been there to begin with.

III

The Audience Chamber at Leticia Castle, the Kingdom of Fernest

It was the day following Olivia’s return to Fernest after refusing Sofitia’s offer.

“—And did Lady Sofitia speak of me at all?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Surely not. Not, say, of the king of a great nation?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Perhaps you weren’t listening to her properly, Olivia? Her beauty really is something else, after all. I’m sure she at least mentioned thinking fondly of me?”

“No, she didn’t say anything like that.”

Alfonse moaned in disbelief. “Something trivial will do! There must have been something, anything!”

“There was nothing trivial either.”

While the royal guards looked on nervously, Alfonse and Olivia went through the same exchange over and over again, not getting anywhere at all.

Olivia had scarcely set foot back in Fis when orders had arrived that she was to report to the castle, summoned by none other than King Alfonse himself. Olivia had gone along cheerfully, thinking he might have another towering cake

for her. When she arrived, however, there was no cake awaiting her—only Alfonse, desperate to question her about Sofitia. Cornelius stood beside him, but when Olivia glanced over at him, he only shook his head helplessly. This conversation wasn't going to end anytime soon, Olivia concluded with a heavy sigh.

But when it does end, there's got to be cake. I just have to hold out 'til then.

Struggling as hard as she could to suppress a yawn, she waited patiently for Alfonse to finish.

"Hmm. All you have told us shows Lady Sofitia to be a woman of graceful reserve. Yes, quite. Thank you, Olivia."

Olivia had no idea where he had gotten "graceful reserve" from. They hadn't even managed to have a proper conversation. Still, it was over, and so Olivia seized her chance.

"Okay, I'd like my tower cake now, please."

"Eh? Your...your tower cake?"

"Yes. My tower cake."

Alfonse's face tinged with confusion. "I have no idea what you refer to, but I suggest you be on your way without delay. As a general now, I'm sure you have much to do. The Twin Lions at Dawn offensive is imminent, after all."

With the thing itself she had hoped for failing to materialize, Olivia's shoulders sagged dramatically. Even after she'd become a general, Claudia dealt with the majority of her work for her, so she wasn't busy at all—but she wasn't concerned with that right now. Now that she understood she wasn't getting any cake, she had no reason to remain in such a tedious place, even without Alfonse telling her.

"By your leave, Your Majesty." Olivia gave a perfunctory salute, then made a quick exit from the audience chamber. As Alfonse began to rhapsodize about Sofitia's character, Cornelius listened, wincing.

Noffohm Province, the Kingdom of Fernest

Claudia, having taken a leave of absence in the lead-up to the Twin Lions at Dawn Offensive, took a trip to her family's home in Noffohm. Originally, she had planned to go alone.

"Are we there yet?"

"You'll see it at the top of this rise."

"Right, of course."

Beside her, Olivia nodded knowingly. When Claudia had informed her of her plan to return home, Olivia, without missing a beat, had announced that she was coming too. Without any particular reason to refuse, Claudia had set off from the capital with Olivia in tow, and now here they were.

"Like I told you before, there's nothing interesting here."

"I know. I just wanted to see your house."

"Well, if you say so..." Claudia adjusted her pack, then walked on, heading for the house at the top of the hill. Just then, a white bird fluttering through the sky dived down toward her.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Claudia said. The bird was a heisel, one of the messenger birds of the Jung family. It had pure white wings that contrasted beautifully with the indigo plumage on its back. Perching on Claudia's shoulder, it launched into a rousing song.

Olivia gazed at it, her eyes sparkling. "Hey, do you think it'll sit on *my* shoulder?"

"I'm afraid that may be difficult; they're very temperamental birds..."

Heisels were birds of prey, very proud and very wary. This one had only begun to perch on Claudia's shoulder a few years previously. She was thinking there was no chance it would take to anyone on first acquaintance, when the heisel hopped casually over onto Olivia's outstretched hand.

"Look, it got on."

"So it did..." Apparently not satisfied with simply perching on Olivia's hand,

the bird looked up at her and let out a crooning cry. Neither Claudia nor anyone else in her family had ever heard it make such a sound.

“First Comet, now this. Do you know some secret to winning the trust of animals?”

“Nope, I don’t know anything like that.” Laughing, Olivia raised her arm. The heisel spread its wings wide, then took to the air once more. For a while, Olivia and Claudia watched it wheel gracefully through the sky above them.



“Shall we get going?” Claudia asked eventually.

“Yeah, let’s.” They set off once more, following the winding path up the hill for another thirty minutes, until Claudia was met by a familiar sight. Surrounded by a faded white wooden fence, and topped with its distinctive green roof, was her own house. They opened the gate in the fence and went through. There, playing at the base of the trunk of a great tree that had watched over generations of Jungs, was a small figure.

“Oh!” Olivia cried out at once. “There’s a tiny Claudia over there!”

Claudia gave a strained smile. “That is Sasha, my younger sister.”

“You have a sister?”

“I do.”

Sasha had noticed them. A brilliant smile blossomed across her face as she came dashing over to them.

“Claudia!”

“Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yes, I missed you!” Sasha said, leaping into Claudia’s arms. Claudia picked her up, then turned to introduce her properly to Olivia.

Sasha at once became guarded. “I’m Sasha Jung. It’s a p—a pleasure to meet you.”

Claudia sighed. Her sister’s shyness around strangers apparently had not improved.

“Sasha,” she said, “this is my sup—”

“Hello, I’m Olivia,” Olivia cut in with an open smile. “I’m a friend of Claudia’s.” Sasha’s arms, wrapped tight around Claudia’s neck, gradually loosened as she detached herself from her sister to stare intently at Olivia.

At last, she mumbled, “If you’re a friend of Claudia’s, will you play with me?”

“Of course. What game shall we play? Do you like tag? Or how about hide-and-seek?”

“Tag...no, hide-and-seek...no, I know! I want to play both!”

“Let’s do both, then.”

“Yeah!”

“General, you...you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, please accept my thanks on my sister’s behalf.” Claudia glanced down at Sasha, who was jumping up and down in delight, when she caught the voice of her mother, Elizabeth.

“Sasha, it’s lunchtime...oh, my!”

“Mother, I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to visit.”

“Claudia...” Elizabeth said. “My dear, if you’re coming home, you ought to send a letter ahead.”

“I’m sorry. I was given this leave suddenly.”

“This is *very* sudden...” Elizabeth said, watching Claudia closely. Then, her gaze turned to Olivia.

“And this charming young lady...” she said. “One of your soldiers?”

“No, mother!” Claudia cried, frantically informing her of Olivia’s name and title.

Elizabeth chuckled. “Major general? Claudia, you’ve learned a *joke* since I saw you last. You’ve put your mother’s heart at ease.”

“I don’t know what your heart needed easing for, but I’m not joking.”

“Claudia, a joke falls flat if you take it too far,” Elizabeth said, her smile growing thin. Claudia sighed.

Of course it sounds ridiculous, claiming such a young girl is my superior officer—and a major general to boot. Claudia had predicted this would happen, so she now asked Olivia to take out the certificate of rank she’d had her bring, then held it out to show Elizabeth.

“Take a good look. It’s the same as Father’s.”

“You’re still keeping this up?” Elizabeth sighed, casting a cursory glance down at the certificate. But a moment later, her exasperation turned to shock, and she turned, her eyes boring into Olivia.

“I-I beg your pardon, my lady,” she said, immediately switching to a gracious smile. “Please, come inside. I apologize it’s so small.” And with that, she led Olivia into the house.

Trust my mother to pull such a rapid about-face. Now we can finally go inside.

When Claudia stepped into the parlor, her eyes met those of a figure seated on the sofa. Solid Jung, current head of the Jung family and numbered in the ranks of the kingdom’s Ten Swords, marked his place in his book and cast a glance over at Olivia before turning back to Claudia. “You’ve returned, have you?”

“I’m sorry it took me so long, Father.”

Solid rose slowly, then laid his hands on Claudia’s shoulders. “I see you’ve been through some great ordeals. You’ve grown so strong I hardly recognized you.”

“Thank you, Father.” There wasn’t a hint of a smile in Solid’s face, but as he patted her a few times on the shoulders, Claudia felt a rush of fondness toward him. His gaze next turned to Olivia, who stood beside her.

“Excuse me, Father, I should have introduced—”

Solid held up a hand and Claudia fell silent. He stared hard at Olivia.

“Well, well. Major General Olivia Valedstorm, I believe?”

“You know who I am?” Olivia asked, cocking her head. Solid gave a half smile.

“You stand at ease, yet show no weaknesses. As far as I know, there’s only one girl you could be,” Solid replied. “You’ll have to excuse me. I know you’ve just arrived, but this is an excellent opportunity. Might I borrow you for a moment?”

Solid went over to the swords that hung crossed on the wall. Claudia understood his intentions at once.

“Father?!” she exclaimed.

“I’m something of a warrior too. When I meet someone strong, I can’t help myself.”

The courage necessary to stop Solid was beyond what Claudia possessed. She bowed to Olivia as the girl caught the sword Solid tossed to her.

“I’m very sorry, ser.”

“I don’t mind.” Resting the sword easily on her shoulder, she followed Solid with light steps to the garden, where the two of them faced off under Claudia’s watchful gaze.

“Very well. Begin!” Claudia announced, throwing up her hand to signal for them to start.

Olivia didn’t show any sign of raising her sword. In response, Solid did not raise his sword either. Only his legs moved as he gradually closed the distance between himself and Olivia with slow, circular steps. It was when Solid took a half step into melee range that the action truly began. Olivia activated Swift Step, instantly closing the remaining distance between them. Seeing Olivia move like that for the first time should have been a shock to anyone, but Solid didn’t even blink. He parried Olivia’s cleaving blow, then spun halfway around to give momentum to a strike at Olivia’s back. But his blade never met its mark. Olivia leapt up, seeming to fly as she passed gracefully over Solid’s head and alighted behind him. If Claudia hadn’t engaged Heaven’s Sight, she would have struggled to catch Olivia’s movements at all.

“As expected from Claudia’s father,” Olivia said. Solid didn’t respond to her praise, but there was a look of exhilaration on his face that Claudia had never seen before. Olivia slowly removed her blade from his neck.

Father would have won with that first strike if his opponent had been anyone other than the general. Even one of the Ten Swords doesn’t have the power to best her...

She quelled the rush of elation she felt, then declared Olivia the victor.

“That short battle was worth more than years of training. I have no words to thank you with, Major General Olivia.”

“Oh, you don’t need to thank me. Anyway, all this moving around has made me hungry,” Olivia said, rubbing her belly. Solid let out a hearty laugh.

“Yes, the renowned warrior Major General Olivia has come all this way to call on us! Failing to show you proper hospitality would be to bring shame upon the name of Jung for generations. Claudia?”

“I know what to do, Father.”

Leaving the two of them chatting away as though they had known each other for years, Claudia strode swiftly away.

A night passed.

“Ocean water is really salty.” Olivia dipped the tip of her tongue into the water cupped in her hands, then screwed up her face in disgust. Sasha watched her and cackled with delight.

Olivia, Claudia, and Sasha had come to spend the day at a beach an hour’s journey on horseback from the Jung estate.

“Is this your first time coming to the ocean, General?”

“Yep. Hey, those...waves, right? They’re so funny, coming and going like that.” Olivia, barefoot after having kicked off her boots, frolicked about in the waves as they rolled in and out. Taking this scene alone, she looked just like any other sixteen-year-old girl. Sasha, who was running around with her, suddenly tugged on Olivia’s skirt.

“Olivia, can you make a sandcastle?”

“A castle? Like Leticia Castle.”

Sasha nodded. “I haven’t seen the castle yet. And when Claudia made one for me last time, I didn’t really understand it...” She looked at Claudia a little resentfully. Claudia scratched her face awkwardly. Making things was not her strong suit. Despite that, she was still a good cook, but Olivia had requested that she focus on her military duties, so she hadn’t picked up a kitchen knife lately.

“You don’t want to play hide-and-seek?” Olivia asked.

“No. We’re at the beach, so I want you to make a sandcastle.”

Olivia’s gaze drifted, then she quickly issued a command for the others to bring her sand, and lots of it. Sasha cheerfully agreed; then she and Claudia got to work, Sasha with excitement, Claudia simply doing as she was told.

“Yep, this should be enough,” Olivia said, looking at the mountain of sand as tall as Claudia with satisfaction. Using a twig she’d procured from somewhere, she got straight to work creating a castle.

“Then this is like this...and this bit...I think was like this.” Olivia hummed away as she deftly moved her twig. As the mound of sand became more and more castlelike before their eyes, Sasha’s excitement mounted.

“Wonderful! Isn’t Olivia wonderful? You think so too, don’t you, Claudia?”

“Er, yes.” Sasha’s excitement was only natural. In truth, “wonderful” didn’t begin to cover it. The replica of Leticia Castle taking shape was intricate in the extreme, accurate down to the smallest details. It had passed into the realm of what could be called art.

“Claudia, I want to take it home,” Sasha said, staring straight at Claudia. Claudia forced herself to look away, then told her it was impossible. Claudia herself would have liked to take the castle home were such a thing possible. But alas, it was a sandcastle. Carrying it anywhere was fundamentally impossible. And even if they did manage to move it, it would undoubtedly fall apart on the way.

While she was musing on this, Olivia completed her Leticia sandcastle.

“Well? Do you think it looks like the castle?”

“*Looks* like it? It might as well be the real thing. Pardon the impropriety, General, but isn’t there anything you’re bad at? Some of us can’t bring so much to the table as you can.”

She had meant it in jest, but at the word “table,” Olivia’s smile froze.

“I— I think you can bring your food to the table, honest!”

Claudia stared at her. “I’m sorry, you spoke so fast that I didn’t catch what you said.”

Olivia's eyes darted around frantically, but just then, a great wave came crashing into Leticia Sandcastle. When the water receded, all that remained was a little mound of sand about half as tall. The three of them stared at it in silent shock. Then, tears welled up in Sasha's eyes. Before Claudia could say anything to comfort her, Olivia said, "W-We'll build the next one out of wood. Then it won't break so easily. What do you want me to make, Sasha?"

"I want Pompom..."

"Pompom?" Olivia's head snapped around to stare at Claudia. Apparently, even with her unrivaled love of books, Pompom the Fairy had escaped Olivia's notice.

"Pompom is a fairy who lives in a tree, General."

"Oh, okay! Then once we're home, I'll make Pompom for you right away!"

And before Claudia could stop her, Olivia scooped Sasha up in her arms and set off so quickly she might have been using Swift Step. Claudia stared blankly after them, feeling vaguely bewildered.

Before she knew it, her holiday was over. The third morning since their arrival at the Jung estate dawned, a chilly wind blowing about the members of the Jung family as they assembled to see off Claudia and Olivia.

"Well, I'm sure my daughter will only continue to be a burden on you, but I hope you won't cast her aside."

"Oh, I think I'm the one burdening her," Olivia replied. Elizabeth gave her a patient smile, then turned to Claudia.

"Remember, dear, health is wealth."

"Yes, Mother. You take care of yourself too."

Beside Elizabeth, Solid reached out and gripped Claudia's shoulder. "You've grown into a knight worthy of the name of Jung," he said. "So long as you fight with honor, that is enough."

"Thank you, Father."

Solid gave her a satisfied nod, then turned to Olivia.

“I’ve received orders that I am to serve as guard to Lord Marshal Cornelius. Though our battlefields will differ, I wish you all the best in your endeavors.”

“Make sure you take good care of Lord Cornelius. He’s really old.”

“Such irreverence to the lord marshal...but I will do my best.” Solid returned Olivia’s smile with a grin.

“Very well then. Mother, Father. We’ll be off.” Claudia bid farewell to her parents, and she and Olivia set off on the road home.

“Claudiaaaa! Oliviaaaa! Take care!” Sasha waved enthusiastically after them, Pompom the Fairy gripped tight in her hand.

V

The Royal Capital of Fis, the Kingdom of Fernest

“Move out!”

Horns blared, announcing the departure of the Second Allied Legion from the capital. They advanced north, passing through the towns of Myst and Seinz on the way to the Emaleid Citadel, the greatest city in Fernest’s northern lands. There they would remain until the commencement of the Twin Lions at Dawn.

The Second Allied Legion was under the command of Blood, with Olivia—newly promoted to lieutenant general for driving back the Northern Perscillans—as his second-in-command. They rode side by side in the center of the formation.

“You make that look damn tasty.”

“Well, it *is* delicious. Do you want some, General Blood?”

“Only if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve got heaps.” Olivia rummaged around in Comet’s saddlebag, then threw a few cookies over to Blood, who somehow managed to catch them. He popped one into his mouth.

“This is pretty good. Only it’s so sweet that now I want a drink. Don’t suppose you’ve got any booze in that bag of yours, Liv?” Blood asked, with a sidelong

look at the saddlebag.

“Booze? No, I don’t drink, so I don’t have any.”

“Worst luck.”

The pair chatted away with a levity unthinkable in the face of the great battle that awaited them. Riding behind them, Claudia sighed heavily. Lieutenant Colonel Lise, riding alongside her, smirked.

“Is something funny?” Claudia asked.

“Oh, no! Nothing at all, Colonel Claudia!” Lise immediately wiped the smile from her face and saluted. Claudia rubbed her head.

The promotion of a senior officer had a run-on effect for the promotion of their juniors. In accordance with Olivia’s promotion to lieutenant general, Claudia had in turn been promoted to colonel.

She sighed again. “Lieutenant Colonel Lise, I forbid you from speaking to me as your superior.”

“Yes, ser!” Lise barked. Then, with an evil smile, she added, “You’ve really loosened up, Claudia.”

“Well, you know who I’ve got as a superior officer. I can’t help it if it rubs off on me.”

“I think it’s a good thing.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that...” Claudia muttered. “Anyway, what were you smirking about?”

“After that big sigh you gave before, I just thought you’re as much of a worrier as ever.”

“If you’d been listening to them, you’d want to sigh too. I’ve resigned myself to General Olivia always being like that, but General Blood doesn’t have to humor her...”

“Oh, I know. It’s a *nightmare* as his aide,” Lise said, then pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and started polishing her glasses. Claudia frowned at her.

“You don’t *look* very troubled for all that.”

“Well, you know. Despite appearances, General Blood has a decent head on his shoulders.” Lise put her glasses back on. She looked a little proud.

“You trust him, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t be serving as his aide if I didn’t. Don’t you trust Lieutenant General Olivia?”

“Of course, I trust her more than anything. I just...” Claudia looked over her shoulder at the carriage that rattled along behind them. It was stuffed so full of snacks for Olivia a mouse couldn’t have squeezed in. After her loud declaration that such supplies were absolutely essential if she were to be in top form for battle, Ashton had run himself ragged going around Fis to gather it all.

“Ahh, that. It’s not a problem, though, is it? I know this isn’t properly respectful, but I think it’s kind of adorable.”

“You make it sound like someone else’s problem.”

“Well it *is* someone else’s problem,” Lise said, smiling brightly. Claudia made a face, thinking back on the events of some days past. After having been invited to dinner with Sofitia, Olivia had come back a few hours later with a look like nothing of any importance had happened.

“I’m back.”

“Good to see you. Did you come back without the carriage?”

“Yeah. I felt like walking.”

“I see... And did you make your decision?”

“Yeah. I decided to stay with the Royal Army.”

“You— You did?!”

“Yep, so that’s that. Anyway, I’m off to bed.”

At the time, Claudia had merely been overjoyed. She hadn’t asked *why* Olivia had decided to stay with the Royal Army. The thought had crossed her mind that if she did, Olivia might have a change of heart. In the end, she hadn’t been

able to pose the question. For all her bluster with Ashton, she was in a right predicament. Ashton himself had thought it better not to ask Olivia too many questions for the time being, so he hadn't brought it up either. The fact was, Claudia was just fine going along with it.

Well, for whatever reason, the general chose to stay with us. When you compare it to betraying us to join the Winged Crusaders, a carriage packed full of sweets seems trivial. Yes, it's trivial...

"Oh, like hell it is!" The words burst out unbidden. Everyone's eyes turned to her, full of apprehension. All, that is, except for Olivia, who looked positively terrified.

"You know, Claudia, I don't think it's really appropriate for an aide to go bellowing strangely," Lise said, looking deathly serious.

"I didn't mean to yell, I just... I'm sorry." At this earnest apology, Lise, unable to restrain herself any longer, burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Sorry, sorry. You really never change, do you?" Lise said, wiping tears from her eyes as Claudia glared at her, then turned her nose up.

"As I've said before, people don't change just like that."

"True..." Lise acknowledged. "There are some people I wish would change just a little bit though." She was looking over at Blood, who was laughing with Olivia.

"Lise, you're not in love with General Blood, are you?" Claudia asked.

"The fact that you don't hesitate to ask things like that hasn't changed either."

"Really?"

"Claudia, I know you too well for it to bother me, but I'd suggest you don't say things like that to anyone else. I guarantee it won't make you any friends."

"Does General Blood know how you feel?"

"Excuse me, don't just brush off my advice. But, well, the truth is I don't know." Lise, as the embodiment of both talent and beauty, had been the

subject of much admiration at the Military Academy. The fact that nothing had ever come of it, Claudia was sure, was because none of her suitors had measured up to Lise's exacting standards. Blood, who now had her affections, was a man of great skill who also enjoyed unswerving trust from his soldiers. No one could doubt that he was a first-rate general. She could more or less see what Lise saw in him.

"You should hurry up and tell him how you feel, then," Claudia said. At once, Lise turned to goggle at her.

"My goodness. I thought *you'd* tell me, 'Love has no place in times such as these,' or something like that."

"On the contrary, I said it *because* of the times. Death could come for any of us at any time—it could come tomorrow. Isn't it natural to think we ought to live without regrets?"

"Hmm..." Lise said. "Well, then you'd better live without regrets too, Claudia."

"Me? I do that every day."

"Are you sure about that?" With an inscrutable look on her face, Lise's eyes drifted over to where Ashton was deep in conversation with Evanson.

"What's Ashton got to do with anything?"

"What? I was looking at Second Lieutenant Evanson," Lise replied, a look of triumph in her eyes. Claudia let out a *tsk*.

"You're implying something. Spit it out already," she demanded. At this, Lise's expression changed to one of pity.

"You know, I've always thought so, but you really are impossible with things like this..." she said. "But then, those are the things that make you Claudia."

"Would it kill you to stop acting superior and say what you mean?"

"You have to work it out for yourself. It's not for me to say. Still, if you're not careful, you'll find what you want snatched out from under your nose. And even if that doesn't happen, there's another mountain you'll have to get past." Leaving Claudia with this almost throwaway remark, Lise moved ahead to ride beside Blood. Judging by how he immediately became flustered, Lise had

probably made some jealous remark.

I still don't know what she was trying to tell me... Claudia watched as Lise put her nose in the air and turned away from Blood, and prayed that her friend would find happiness.

VI

The Emaleid Citadel, Kingdom of Fernest

The wind blew down off the Esteria Peaks, bringing with it a bracing reminder of autumn's arrival as the Second Allied Legion arrived at the Emaleid Citadel right on schedule. The following day, Olivia made her way to Central Avenue, the busiest street in the whole citadel, with Ashton in tow. She was going to fulfill an old promise.

"The city has really come back to life since we were last here," Ashton remarked. Even the shops that had barred their doors were now all open. What stood out most of all were the cheerful faces of the shoppers, who had looked so grim last time.

"Yeah, nothing was open last time, was it?" said Olivia, apparently thinking along the same lines. Her gaze roved this way and that as she spoke.

Driving the occupying imperial forces from the north had allowed Fernest to reclaim its largest breadbasket. This was likely largely what they had to thank for the great improvement in their food situation. Not only that, but Ashton had heard that the merchants who had at one point forsaken the kingdom were beginning to trickle back in. While Fernest's situation was still precarious, it was undeniably changing for the better.

"By the way," Ashton said, "you know I'm the one paying for all that food you're gobbling down, right?"

With every stall Olivia stopped at, Ashton felt his purse grow a little lighter. This was not the first time it had happened, but that did not make it any less unreasonable.

"But I don't know how money works."

“Oh, come on. You just don’t want to learn.”

Olivia, despite breezing through academic tomes and medical treatises, insisted that the function of money was beyond her. It was a glaring contradiction.

“Thath’o’wu—”

“Swallow, then talk.”

Olivia gulped loudly. “That’s not true. I really *tried* to learn. I was like, ‘Nngh!’ ‘Grrr!’” She flailed her arms around in a demonstration of her efforts.

In what world do you learn how to use money by grunting? Ashton thought, shaking his head.

But Olivia was already cheerfully charging off toward another stall. “Come on, hurry up!” she called, waving him over with a smile. Still shaking his head, Ashton followed.

Olivia’s snacking spree continued with no sign of abating. Then Ashton caught sight of a familiar face calling out enthusiastically from within one of the stalls.

“Come one, come all, and try Emaleid’s famed meat skewers!”

Olivia too noticed at once.

“Mrs. Stallkeeper!” she cried, waving and jogging over to the stall. The woman’s eyes widened, then she dashed out from behind the stall and swept Olivia up in a tight hug.

“You’re alive,” she said, lovingly ruffling Olivia’s hair. “Thank goodness...”

“You’re suffocating me.” Olivia squirmed in the woman’s arms, but the hug only grew tighter. “Can’t breathe.”

The woman laughed heartily. “That’s your punishment for making me worry!”

“Mmph...”

After a while, the woman released Olivia before turning to Ashton. “You protected her proper-like, then,” she said.

“Er, yes. More or less,” Ashton replied vaguely. In reality, Olivia was the one who’d protected *him*, but he wasn’t so inept at reading a room as to point that

out here.

Even if I've had Olivia telling me I can't read the room lately...

The woman nodded approvingly, then looked back to Olivia. "Now, little major, when you told me you were off to chase those imperials out of the north, I confess half of what you said went in one ear and out the other. But you really did it, didn't you? Our lives have gotten a good sight better thanks to you."

Olivia gave a little smile. "And now there's no reason for you to cry," she said.

"Thank you, dear," said the woman. "But here now, that isn't the uniform I remember."

"Oh, this? It changed when I got promoted," Olivia said, then did a pirouette to show off her new uniform.

"Did it really?" the woman said, looking at her in wonder. Ashton told her Olivia's new rank, and the woman's eyes widened in shock as she focused on Olivia's collar.

"Well, I never. A lieutenant general's insignia! So my little major's a general now..."

"That's right!" Olivia said. She planted her feet apart and drew herself up to her full height, clearing her throat dramatically a few times. The woman looked baffled by this even as she glanced at Ashton's collar.

"And you're a lieutenant colonel..." she said, a hint of incredulity creeping into her voice.

"Well, you know, a lot happened since last time," Ashton said, scratching his cheek.

"It must have, for you to go from warrant officer to lieutenant colonel in the short time since last we met. You know, there's been rumors going about that Fernest's been on a winning streak lately," she said, looking at them searchingly. "I suppose the two of you were involved in all of those victories, were you?"

While he obviously couldn't divulge military secrets, Ashton saw no harm in

answering such a question, so he decided to be honest. The woman apparently appreciated his situation, because she asked nothing further.

“But come now!” she said, clapping her hands. “I can’t let you go without spoiling you a bit, not when you’ve made the effort to come and see me.” She bustled back into the stall, filling bags with Emaleid’s famous meat skewers. Then she started loading up still more bags with something round that hadn’t been here the last time. Ashton looked down at the signboard and saw it read *FRIED CREAMY BITES—EMALEID’S LATEST DELICACY*.

“Here you are, my famous skewers and creamy bites! The sauce on the inside is hot, so take care you don’t burn your mouths.” With this, the woman pressed more bags than Olivia could carry in both hands onto her.

“Thank you!” Olivia said, but despite her proper display of gratitude, she showed no more sign of producing any money than she had before. Not that she could have, given that she didn’t carry any money with her.

“How much?” Ashton asked, pulling out his purse which now barely weighed anything at all. At this, the woman gave him a look of unconcealed severity.

“Don’t be vulgar, young man. You kept your promise, and even *you* came back to see me. I don’t ask for anything more than that.”

“Please, just take it,” Ashton said. “Times like these are the only chances I get to spend it.” He stuffed his purse into her hand.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” the woman bellowed furiously. “I told you, I don’t want it!”

“Well, we’d better be off, Olivia!” Ashton said, deliberately ignoring her. “We’ll get a dressing down from General Blood if we’re late.” He put a hand on Olivia’s back and pushed her away. She replied halfheartedly, looking unhappily back at the woman.

As Ashton set off, the woman’s yell followed him. “You wait!”

“I don’t think I will,” Ashton replied.

There was a pause before the woman called, “I’ll take it, if only to satisfy your need to be *gallant*, but I can’t take it all.”

Ashton stopped, thought for a moment, then turned back.

“Then think of it as a thank-you, for making Olivia so happy,” he said.

“Well, I never,” she replied, appraising him. “If you haven’t turned into a man since I saw you last.”

“I’m pretty sure I was always a man?”

The woman snorted and folded her arms.

“You’re too soft to be a soldier, inside and out. A bit of arrogance like you showed just now makes you look the part, even if it’s all talk.”

Ashton processed this. “Thanks for the advice,” he said. “Let’s go, Olivia.”

“Bye-bye!” she called back to the woman with a big wave. The woman returned her wave with even greater enthusiasm.

“You’ve got no money left.”

“Thanks to which I feel lighter already,” Ashton said, shrugging, at which Olivia laughed in delight. He looked up to where the blue sky stretched on forever above them.

VII

The Command Station in the Military District, the Emaleid Citadel

In the first stage of Operation: Twin Lions at Dawn, the Second Allied Legion was to lay siege to Fort Astora. Blood, their supreme commander, and his second-in-command Olivia called a war council. In attendance were Lise, Claudia, and the other aides supporting the commanders, as well as a few others. This also included the grizzled Lieutenant General Adam of the Second Legion, and Ashton, the Eighth Legion’s tactician. From the Mekian side, who would aid them in the siege, they were joined by the Winged Crusaders’ prominent commander, Thousand-Wing Amelia Stolast, who had arrived three days earlier with a force of ten thousand.

“As you all know, we’ll be joining forces with the Mekians for this battle. Some of you are already acquainted, I think, but let’s go through introductions

again.”

At Blood’s encouragement, Amelia stood up lazily, then made a show of sweeping her pale blue hair back.

“Thousand-Wing Amelia Stolast of the Winged Crusaders,” she said, her face expressionless. “At your service.”

No sooner had she finished this bland introduction than Olivia said, “It’s great to have you, Amelia!” and burst into applause. Amelia looked daggers at her, then stuck her nose in the air. It was a brief exchange, but it was enough to show Blood what Amelia thought of Olivia.

Mekia wants to show us their power, so I know they sent us one of their best. Just watching how she holds herself, she looks like a formidable fighter, he thought. But come on. I don’t need another Liv, but they could have sent someone a bit more cheerful.

How well they were able to act in concert with the Mekians would be key from here on out. As such, Amelia’s attitude was more than enough to make Blood uneasy about what was to come.

Suppressing a heavy sigh, he continued his address without further ado.

“You should all be briefed on the general plan, but I’ll go through it again. While the First Allied Legion is staging a distraction at Kier Fortress, our duty is to deliver the Eighth Legion to the imperial capital of Olsted as unscathed as possible.” At this, a hand shot up. It belonged to the young officer who had effectively neutralized a force of thirty thousand on the northern front, then pulled off a brilliant deception of the Helios Knights in the Battle of the Freyberg Plateau.

All right then, let’s see what the famous tactician has to say... With great interest, Blood indicated for Ashton to speak.

“Is Fort Astora still under the protection of the Crimson Knights?”

“Our latest intelligence indicates they’ve moved to Kier Fortress.”

“Then our misinformation campaign was a success.”

“It looks like it.”

They had been putting out rumors of a large-scale assault on Kier Fortress for two months now, all with the objective of drawing out the core of the empire's military power—the Crimson and Helios Knights. As Kier Fortress was a key foothold for the imperial army in its incursion into Fernest, they would have no choice but to fortify their defenses.

“In that case, my recommendation is that we send an elite force from the Eighth Legion along with the force attacking Fort Astora.”

“Why? With the Crimson Knights gone, the Second Legion together with the Winged Crusaders should be sufficient. No reason to get even just the elites of the Eighth Legion involved, at least so far as I can see.”

Ashton nodded, then looked down at the map spread out on the long table. “We’re going to have to penetrate deep into the empire. We can assume there’ll be a lot of obstacles lying in wait for us, not only Fort Astora.”

“And?”

“Essentially, I want to get the Second Legion and the Winged Crusaders through the attack on Fort Astora with as few casualties as possible.” As Ashton laid out what was at best idealism and at worst mere lip service, Blood found himself more than a little disappointed. If everything only went as Ashton said, this would be the easiest mission in the world.

“You’ve heard the report on Fort Astora.”

“Yes, ser.”

“So you’re saying this after considering all that.”

“Yes, of course. What would you say if, by using the Eighth Legion’s elites, we could take Fort Astora with minimum time and loss of life?”

“You’re not suggesting we use the same plan you used back at Fort Caspar again, are you? That only worked because there was a tunnel leading behind the fortress walls. Unless,” Blood went on, growing sarcastic, “you think the imperial army has kindly dug us a tunnel this time too?” With Fort Astora being imperial-built, they had no way of learning its structure, and so couldn’t know if there were tunnels or not.

“That was all just a simple idea I had. I wouldn’t call it a real plan.” Ashton rubbed his nose, looking embarrassed.

“And yet now you’re saying you can take a fort with minimum time and loss of life.”

“It will take some advance preparation, but it’s necessary in order to raise morale.”

“I see. You already have it all drawn out in your head, don’t you, Lieutenant Colonel? You’re practically a legion commander yourself,” Blood said, grinning at Ashton. The young man’s eyes flicked nervously around the room. “Can I ask a question?”

“Wh-What is it, ser?”

“Does this plan of yours rely heavily on Liv?” he asked. Beside him, Olivia was shoveling sugar into her tea. Amelia glared at her with biting contempt.

“It will involve her, yes. We can’t afford not to use her noto—her, ah, reputation.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting we fly those Valedstorm banners again and further sully the general’s good name,” Claudia said with a warning glare. Ashton at once shrank in his seat. In the end, it was Lise who threw him a lifeline.

“I agree with him,” she said. “We saw in the last battle that it’s highly effective. You know that too, don’t you, Claudia?”

Lise had to be referring to the battle that had taken place on the Freyberg Plateau. It was true that the Valedstorm banners, in combination with her reputation as the “Death God,” had produced phenomenal results. He could see how simply marching with the banners raised high would be enough to strike fear into the ranks of the imperial army.

As Lise made this valid point, Claudia made a face. “But even so...”

“You seem to dislike it for some reason, Claudia, but if it’s personal, please don’t bring it into the war. The fate of Fernest rides on this battle.”

Blood watched her slapping Claudia with this reprimand, privately curious.

Back when defeat had seemed inevitable for the Second Legion, Lise had refused his orders and even tried to twist the military code in order to stay at his side. He was even impressed that she could speak so after how she'd behaved, but he didn't interject. Even if he said something, he knew she'd only feign ignorance.

Claudia, for her part, muttered a reluctant acknowledgment. Blood found himself wishing fervently that this earnest streak of hers would rub off on Lise.

"Well, that's my view on it, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton."

"Th-Thank you," Ashton said, bowing to Lise while keeping an eye on Claudia's mood.

"Then I can leave the attack on Fort Astora to you, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Are you sure, ser?"

"Sure or not, after that grand pronouncement, I'm going to have you follow through. I like to encourage my soldiers when they're eager. I'm nice like that."

"Are you sure you're not just annoying?" Lise muttered so that only Blood could hear her.

"What was that, Lieutenant Colonel Lise?"

"I didn't say anything, ser. I was only sitting in awe of your compassion for your inferiors," Lise replied with a deliberately breezy smile. Blood sighed, then saw Amelia, her face as devoid of expression as ever, raise a hand. He gave a small nod to indicate she should speak.

"Am I to understand, based on the discussion that just took place, that command will fall not to General Blood, but to this Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?"

"Well, yes, at least for Fort Astora."

"I know his reputation, to a degree..." Amelia said. "But I will not stand by and see a mere lieutenant colonel be given command of an entire army. I will follow orders, but in the event that I feel the slightest doubt in his command, the Winged Crusaders will act as we see fit. Much as I regret to say it." She threw a cold look at Ashton; then, without asking permission, she rose and stalked out of the command center. Ashton watched her go, scratching his head

uncomfortably.

Claudia rounded on him. “Why didn’t you say anything back to her?!” she demanded. For some reason, Lise smiled fondly at the pair of them.

She isn’t just unfriendly, she’s proud as they come, Blood thought. This really is just one headache after another. If only the lord marshal, or ol’ Paul were here, I could’ve taken it easy, but no...

Olivia, meanwhile, had finished her fifth cup of tea and was now gazing absently out the window, like none of this had anything to do with her. Blood himself hadn’t expected much out of this sort of thing going in, but even so, he was left scratching his head at how she could act so little like a second-in-command.

VIII

Day after day, the First Allied Legion conducted large-scale military exercises at Galia Fortress. Meanwhile, another harsh training regime was going on every day in the military district of the Emaleid Citadel.

“The *racket* the soldiers of the Royal Army make just going through this simple exercise. Hah! No wonder you’ve been losing to the empire.”

“Say that again!”

“You must know it yourself, if it makes you so angry.”

“That’s right, she knows they’re a bunch of cowards.”

“Keep talking, scum!”

Not again. How do they not get sick of doing this every day? From the top of the stone steps, Blood cast a casual eye over the now routine scuffling between the Royal Army and the Winged Crusaders. From behind him, he heard the sound of boots on stone approaching, accompanied by a hint of citrus on the breeze.

“Need something?” he asked.

“I don’t need anything. Shouldn’t you stop them?” Blood looked around and

his eyes met Lise's. She looked unimpressed.

"Even if I stop them now, they'll just be back at it again before long. It's my policy not to be counterproductive."

"That doesn't excuse going entirely hands-off."

"Hands-off, eh?" Blood replied. "Why don't you tell that to our friend drinking tea over there." Blood pointed to a corner of the training ground. Where she had procured it from was anyone's guess, but Amelia sat there at a table, elegantly sipping from a teacup.

"It'll only lead to hard feelings, coming from me," Lise said, not looking at Amelia.

"What, and it won't if I say it?"

"You surprise me. Are you *not* the commander of the Second Allied Legion after all?"

"Fine, fine," Blood grumbled, heaving himself to his feet. "Of all the stupid..." Running his fingers through his hair, he made his way down into the thick of it.

"Looks like you've all got energy to burn!" he shouted. "How about going a round with me?" He looked to the Royal Army soldiers, who all shook their heads in horror. Then, he turned to the Winged Crusaders. One burly guardian stepped forward with a swagger.

"If it isn't Lord Commander Blood! You came all this way to humiliate yourself?"

"Pretty feisty, aren't you? I like that." Blood tapped the sword at his waist pointedly.

The burly guardian grinned at him, then drew his own blade. "Too late to think better of it now," he said. The guardian raised his sword threateningly, but before he'd finished the motion, Blood's longsword had left its scabbard, the edge of the blade coming to rest against the man's neck.

"Huh?"

"You'd be short a head now, if I'd felt like it," Blood said. The guardian grasped what had happened, let out a voiceless cry, then fell down on his

backside.

Blood looked around the other guardians and demanded, “Who’s next? I’m not standing on rank today.”

They all shuffled away uncomfortably.

Dear me. That’s them dealt with for today, at— Eh?

Blood felt an intense pressure from behind him and turned. Amelia was no longer delicately sipping her tea. Now, she had her chin resting on her hand, her gaze fixed on him. He shrank back despite himself, overcome by a sense of repulsion like a great snake had enveloped him in its coils.

Yikes. Heaven protect me. Blood hurried back up the stone steps. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket just as Lise came and sat down beside him. Thinking that she was a little too close, he lit the cigarette, then blew out a mouthful of smoke.

“I hope you’re satisfied,” he said.

“Witnessing the prowess of The Flash is enough to cow even the guardians of the Winged Crusaders, it seems.”

“I’m begging you to stop calling me that mortifying name.”

“Understood, ser,” Lise said, chuckling. Then she looked down at the soldiers, who had resumed their drills, her face turning grave. “This whole situation seems rather dire, though.”

Blood scarcely needed to be told. He wasn’t happy with it himself. If they went into battle against the imperial army like this, an internal breakdown in the ranks was inevitable. Having said that, Blood had come up with no ideas for how to better the situation.

“Guess it’s time to ask for help...”

“Ask who for help, ser?” Lise asked.

Blood looked at her. “I said that out loud?”

“Yes, ser. Loud and clear. Now, who are you going to ask for help?”

“You know there’s only one answer to that.” With his cigarette in his mouth,

he stood up, then flew down the stairs two at a time. He was thinking of a certain young man.

“There he is, I knew he’d be here.” Blood found Ashton in the barracks mess hall with Olivia. Without asking, he sat down in an empty chair beside him, picked up a sausage from Ashton’s plate, and popped it into his mouth.

“Mm-hmm. That’s pretty tasty.”

“You can’t just go around eating people’s food, General Blood,” Olivia scolded him. “You should say ‘please’ to Ashton first.”

Seeing her frowning at him, Blood couldn’t help but burst out laughing. Olivia’s antics were a thousand times more entertaining than any second-rate comedy routine.

“You make a good point, Liv.”

“I never make anything but good points.”

“Oh? First I’m hearing of it,” Blood replied, pulling a face.

“General Blood,” said Ashton, looking curious, “did something happen?”

“We have a bit of a problem. Hence me coming here to borrow the mind of our great tactician.”

“Oh...” Ashton replied without enthusiasm. Blood snatched another sausage, at which Olivia, her cheeks bulging fit to burst, moved the plate away from him. He then explained the issue at hand to them.

Ashton sighed. “I thought that would be a problem too.”

“That sounds like you have some sort of solution in mind.”

“Well, I have *something*...” As Ashton replied, he glanced surreptitiously at Olivia. She cocked her head at him, all innocence.

“You want Liv to do something?”

“Well, yes. Only, it’s an idea that Colonel Claudia’s already rejected once before...”

Listening to the plan that Ashton proceeded to lay out, Blood thought it sounded like it would produce some results.

“You up for it, Liv?”

“Maybe... I just...” Olivia mumbled. Contrary to his expectations, her response was less than enthusiastic.

“You don’t want to?” he asked, privately perplexed.

“It’s Claudia...”

“Claudia? You’re worried about Colonel Claudia?”

“Mm...” As Olivia faltered, Ashton leaned over to whisper in his ear. What he said was so shocking that without thinking, Blood turned to stare at Olivia.

“You— Making Colonel Claudia angry *scares* you?”

“Yeah...” she said. “It *really* scares me.” She didn’t look like she was joking. Blood, who had never thought he’d hear such a thing, could only gape at her. This was Olivia, who had taken the heads of all those renowned enemy generals, who was spoken of with terror in the empire as the “Death God.” Who would have guessed that she was afraid of her own aide?

“I’m not surprised you don’t know, General Blood, but Colonel Claudia really is terrifying when she’s angry.”

“Then if I’m the one to suggest it, we’ll be away laughing. I *am* still the commander of the Second Allied Legion, you know. Colonel Claudia can’t argue with a decision from me. Right?”

Olivia nodded, looking unconvinced. Blood took the spyglass from the holster at his belt and held it out to her.

“Here. A little token of thanks.”

“But I’ve already got a spyglass,” she said.

“Come on, just go take a peek outside.”

“Okay...” Olivia got up and went over to look outside. Mere moments later, she let out a yelp of delight, turning back to him with a radiant smile as she bounced up and down. “This is amazing! It can see so much farther than any other spyglass!”

“You like it, then?”

“I love it! Thank you, General Blood!” She pulled a rag from her pocket, then happily set about polishing the spyglass. It was, Blood thought, a small price to pay to win her cooperation.

“Is that one of the new models?” Ashton asked with interest.

“I pulled a few strings,” Blood muttered in his ear. “Got them to lend me a model still in development.”

“So it’s a prototype, then?” Ashton looked at him dubiously. “Is that all right?”

Blood patted him on the shoulder, then stood up. “Not a problem. A small sacrifice for the greater good, as they say. Right, I’m counting on you two.” As Olivia excitedly urged Ashton to look through the spyglass himself, Blood strode from the mess hall.

The next day saw the training ground crowded with people.

“Is something happening?”

“They say Lieutenant General Olivia’s going to do something.”

“Straw dummies, now? Trust the Royal Army to have such *innovative* training methods.”

The center of the training ground was lined with columns of straw dummies placed at irregular intervals. Claudia stood amid the crowd of curious onlookers, with her fists trembling and a face like thunder. Meeting her eyes, Blood tried to act as though he were oblivious.

Liv and Ashton were right. These serious, straight-and-narrow types like her are bloody terrifying when they’re angry. I can’t believe I’m saying it, but it’s a damn relief I got Lise as my aide. She’s just the right amount of laid-back.

As Blood nodded to himself, Lise, who stood beside him, turned to him with disapproval in her eyes.

“Were you not just thinking something reprehensible about me?” she demanded.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Blood replied, as coolly as he could while privately panicking. Meeting Lise’s silent, expressionless hostility with flawless indifference, Blood called over to Olivia, who was stretching.

“Ready to go, Liv?”

“Ready when you are,” she called back. She wore her ebony armor and cloak emblazoned with the Valedstorm family crest, probably at Ashton’s direction, to remind everyone that she was the Death God.

Blood nodded, then mounted the platform and cleared his throat loudly.

“We will now see a demonstration from Fernest’s greatest sword fighter, Lieutenant General Olivia. Training isn’t all about going through the motions yourself—even just seeing an expert at work is valuable training in and of itself. Think of it as a kind of master class.” Feeling that he’d said the sort of thing he needed to say, Blood gave the signal and said, “Let’s get started.”

Olivia slid the ebony blade from its scabbard. All eyes were fixed on her.

She took one step forward, then slowly crouched down—

“Huh?” Blood blurted out like an idiot before anyone else could speak. Somehow, Olivia was now at the other end of the training ground, waving enthusiastically at them. And that wasn’t the only strange occurrence. The straw dolls were all strewn on the ground, leaking red fluid.

I bet Ashton told them to put something like blood in the dummies. But more importantly, that was unbelievable, what she just did. I did manage to follow her, but only just...

That was the best even Blood had been able to do. Not only the soldiers of the Royal Army, but the guardians of the Winged Crusaders, too, were staring at the fallen dummies. Their faces were impossible to read. Except for Amelia, that is, whose clenched fists were trembling.

“Was that enough?” Olivia called, coming back over with her scarlet-drenched sword in one hand. Understanding seemed to dawn on the guardians, and, as if they’d rehearsed it, they all backed away. More than a few even let out tiny screams as Olivia approached, smiling innocently. The only ones who remained were a group of soldiers who had started off in Olivia’s Independent Cavalry Regiment and knew what she could do. They all stood with their chests thrown out in pride.

Blood thanked Olivia, then returned to the platform to make the most of the

moment.

“That concludes the demonstration. Lieutenant General Olivia provided us with an excellent example of her sword work, which I hope will provide you with some mental sustenance to work even harder in your training. Also, I’m sure I don’t need to tell any of you this now, but remember that *anyone* who gets in the lieutenant general’s way will meet the same fate as those dummies. She’s a champion of *love*—to her, there’s nothing more important than cooperation and harmony—which is to say, she means to make anyone who starts another fight, for any reason, into her own...*sustenance*.” Blood finished with a ghoulisish smile.

As he briskly descended from the platform, he saw Olivia looking puzzled, mouthing, “Co-o-pe-ra-tion? Har-mo-ny? Knight...of love?”

That day saw an abrupt end to the squabbles between the Royal Army and the Winged Crusaders. Olivia’s reputation among the latter had spread like wildfire.

Chapter Six: Twin Lions at Dawn

I

First Allied Legion Command, Kingdom of Fernest

It was the Lachrymose Moon of Tempus Fugit 1000. The First Allied Legion marched forth from Galia Fortress with a force eighty-five thousand strong. With each army's banners flying proud, they proceeded west for six days until they reached the Kochonn Plains that stretched out to the east of Kier Fortress.

"Give the order for all forces to halt," said Cornelius, who served as supreme commander for the First Allied Legion. The army ceased its advance on the Kochonn Plains. Another hour's march northwest would put them a stone's throw from Kier Fortress itself.

"Well, then. We have made it this far without any notable response from the imperial army. That confirms they are preparing for a siege," Cornelius said confidently. Beside him, Neinhardt nodded his agreement.

"Everything is going according to plan. The imperials have fallen for it."

Ten days earlier, royal intelligence agents had come with the report that the Crimson Knights had arrived at Kier Fortress; in other words, their disinformation efforts had borne fruit.

"If the empire loses Kier Fortress," Cornelius went on, "they lose their foothold in Fernest. That might not have been enough to seize back the advantage before, but now, we have taken the southern and northern lands back. If they have an eye to the mood among their vassal states, they will have no choice but to opt for a siege over a field battle."

"Still, ideally I would have liked to draw out the Azure Knights too..." Neinhardt said. If the Azure Knights left the imperial capital, it would dramatically raise the Eighth Legion's chances of success. Capturing Emperor Ramza, the instigator of all of this, could neutralize the entire imperial army.

Cornelius stroked his beard, a wry smile on his lips. “That would be a little *too* idealistic. We ought to be grateful we drew out even the Crimson Knights. On a different note, are you getting along well with Lady Crystal?”

“I’m not sure, ser,” Neinhardt admitted. “Honestly, I’m never sure what she’s thinking, though for my part, I think it’s going well.”

As coordinator for the First Allied Legion, which included a force of twenty thousand from the Winged Crusaders, Neinhardt had plenty of opportunity for conversing with Lara Mira Crystal. Less than a month had passed since they were first introduced, but from what Neinhardt had seen, she was, without exaggeration, an exceptional warrior.

“She tends to idolize her mistress to the point of obsession, but there’s no doubting her martial integrity.”

Apparently, Cornelius also held Lara in high regard. Her right-hand man, Johann Strider, had also shown himself in training to be a commander of uncommon talent. The guardians, too, maintained a consistently high standard, living up to their reputation.

“Of course, it all comes down to our acting abilities from here on out,” Neinhardt said, looking down to where Lambert was giving a rousing speech in that booming voice of his. Cornelius broke into a grin.

“Acting abilities, indeed. Your area of expertise,” he teased. “I expect good things.”

“Yes, ser!”

A battle was the product of the players working to outmaneuver one another. In a few words, it came down to how long you could go on deceiving your opponent. In this battle, their opponents would be the Crimson and Helios Knights. For deception to be at all possible, they would have to tread with the utmost care.

Can I really pull this off? Neinhardt wondered. Captain Katerina, standing beside him, had assumed a grim expression. With the fate of Fernest riding on the battle that awaited them, she would be nervous.

Neinhardt himself was no exception. He felt a complex jumble of emotions,

not quite nerves and not quite exhilaration. Cornelius laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Emotions are wont to run high on the eve of a great battle, but you should let go of some of that tension. Nerves are healthy in correct doses; exceed that, and they are poison. It all comes down to balance.”

Hearing this from the Invincible General allowed Neinhardt to clear his head. At the same time, he felt a little silly to have been seen through so completely. It set him greatly at ease knowing that Cornelius, as always, was keenly perceptive and considerate of the feelings of his subordinates.

“This is changing the subject, but do you think the Second Allied Legion will manage their part?”

“You fear they won’t?”

“If I’m honest, then yes...” Neinhardt admitted. “Their task is greater than ours.”

No one could doubt the leadership abilities of Blood, who served as supreme commander for the Second Allied Legion, and Olivia, his second-in-command, who had crushed the invading Northern Perscillian Army. Neinhardt had never personally spoken to Amelia Stolast, who led their division of the Winged Crusaders, but he had Lara’s assurance that she was a competent leader.

Yet when defeat could mean the end of the kingdom, he couldn’t help but fear the worst.

“General Blood and Lieutenant General Olivia both know what they must do. We must focus our attention on doing our best in the battle in front of us.”

“Of course. I beg your pardon, ser!” Neinhardt replied, saluting. Cornelius nodded.

“We know how the enemy will move,” he said. “I will hold a war council in one hour’s time. Let Paul and Lady Crystal know.”

“Yes, ser! I’ll send a messenger at once.”

As he watched the messenger gallop away toward the Seventh Legion, Neinhardt reached into his pocket to touch the bloodstained rank insignia he

kept there.

Give me strength, Florenz, he thought. He looked out on Kier Fortress in the distance, a fierce light burning in his eyes.

Seventh Legion Command, Kingdom of Fernest

Senior General Paul and the other generals were taking a meal break when he noticed a faraway look in Major General Osmund's eyes. Beside him, Lieutenant General Hermann had also realized his neighbor's thoughts were elsewhere, and his hand on his knife came to a stop.

"You all right there, Osmund?" he asked.

"It's just," Osmund said slowly, "the Seventh Legion feels somehow lonely with Lieutenant General Olivia gone."

Paul wondered if his ears were deceiving him. It was two years since Olivia had come to enlist in the Royal Army, during which time she had risen with unprecedented rapidity to the rank of Lieutenant General. He might have expected resentment from Osmund; he had certainly never thought to hear him say he felt *lonely*. Otto must have shared Paul's feelings, for he now gazed with interest at Osmund.

Hermann, meanwhile, gave a meaningful smile. "I wouldn't have expected that from you," he said.

Osmund still carried a black spot on his reputation after his lust for glory had led to him falling into an enemy trap and putting his forces in jeopardy in the battle outside the Emaleid Citadel. Now, he looked uncomfortable as he muttered, "I admit I'd be lying if I said I didn't envy her. But you can't argue with her prowess after seeing her on the battlefield. What's important now is winning this battle."

Paul had no way of knowing what change had occurred in the other man's heart, but it was clear at least that it steered him well. When he disregarded his ego, Osmund had a fair talent for command.

"I haven't spent too much time in her acquaintance myself, but I think I understand what you're saying," Hermann said, with the wistful look of a

person thinking back on bygone days. “She brought a sort of spark to the Seventh Legion.”

Osmund nodded in fervent agreement.

“It’s only natural you two think so,” Paul remarked. “She was like a brilliant ray of sunshine lighting up the Seventh Legion.”

Paul doted on Olivia to the same degree as his own granddaughter, Patricia. Though he thought that Cornelius had shown bold and unerring judgment in putting her in command of the Eighth Legion, the thought that Olivia had gone where he could not reach her was like a cold draft of wind slipping through him.

“Don’t you feel at all lonely with Lieutenant General Olivia gone, Otto?”

“No, I can’t say any such feelings have arisen for me,” Otto replied serenely, “and I would appreciate it if the three of you ceased discussion of such trivialities when we have Operation: Twin Lions at Dawn bearing down upon us.”

Osmund and Hermann looked at each other and shared a strained smile. Paul wore a similar expression, though for a very different reason.

It was true that, now that Olivia outranked Otto, even he was barred from criticizing her in public. But Paul could see clear as day that the other man was anxious for her. Despite his severity to his inferiors, Otto cared more than any of them.

“On that note,” Paul said, bringing them back to the matter at hand, “has there been any change in our predictions for the size of the force at Kier Fortress?”

“None, ser,” Otto replied without hesitation. “Though they must have been aware of our advance on the fortress for some time.”

“That’s to be expected. They’ll be getting a close look at the size of our force around now.” Paul looked down at the map on the table. “They’ve decided to weather the siege, it seems.”

“Considering Kier Fortress’s defenses, it is the obvious conclusion.”

Conventional military wisdom held that a successful siege required that the

attacking force outnumber the defenders three to one. On top of that, this was a battle the empire could not afford to lose. They would meet the Royal Army's assault with unyielding resolve. It was, therefore, the rational choice to utilize the defenses of the fortress to whittle down the attackers. All common sense pointed to the Royal Army being at a decided disadvantage, and yet for once, Paul was inclined to be unreserved in his approval of the imperial army's choice. After all, now it went without saying that the First Allied Legion would be able to turn the course of the war in their favor.

"A bad move on the imperial army's part," Otto said, a wicked grin breaking through the cold exterior that earned him the nickname "the Man in the Iron Mask." Hermann and Osmund looked at him, then at each other, like they'd seen some strange new beast. Only Paul correctly understood Otto's smile.

"I'm sure the lord marshal reached the same conclusion," he said.

Otto looked over at the tent opening and said, "We should receive a messenger shortly." His prediction was soon to become reality. The tent flap lifted and a messenger from the First Legion hurried in.

"I bear orders from Marshal Cornelius. Your presence is required at a war council at the main command tent."

"Orders received. You are dismissed, soldier."

"Thank you, ser!" Paul watched the messenger leave, then rose quickly to his feet.

"Otto."

"A horse is waiting for you, ser." Otto, it seemed, had sent out the instructions in advance, for now an attendant came leading Paul's horse. As always, he was one step ahead.

"Let's be off, then." Paul mounted up; then he and Otto set off together for the main command tent.

Winged Crusader Command, Kingdom of Fernest

"It looks like it'll be a siege."

“It’s unexpected, isn’t it? Our predictions put the imperial forces at around even numbers with our own. Knowing Lady von Berlietta, I thought for sure that she would take the field.”

“They can’t afford to risk it.” Lara gazed up at Kier Fortress with a probing look in her eyes. After having suffered defeat after defeat to the Royal Army, the imperial army’s momentum was a shadow of what it had been. There was no doubt that this was largely thanks to Olivia.

“Oh, that’s right. The news took me rather by surprise.”

“News? Ah, that. The report said he died of natural causes, didn’t it?”

“It did. It must have been a heavy blow to the imperial army. The wind seems to be turning in favor of the Royal Army.”

It had been a week since the owls had brought the fresh news that Gladden von Hildesheimer was dead. Gladden had not only led the Helios Knights, he had reigned supreme over the whole of the imperial army. His death was felicitous news in the face of Operation: Twin Lions at Dawn, but Lara had not breathed a word of it to the Royal Army.

Mekia’s true objective was to see the empire and Fernest bring each other down. Their current alliance with the Royal Army was no more than a provision for the future. Thus, Sofitia had instructed them that there was no need to share what they knew.

“Do you think these twin lions will be successful?” Johann asked.

“It all comes down to the Eighth Legion. At this stage, it’s impossible to say.”

While they conducted this grand farce at Kier Fortress, the Eighth Legion would engage the Azure Knights in the imperial capital. The plan was that they would break through to Lislein Palace and capture Emperor Ramza XIII. If they were successful, Sofitia expected that the imperial army would sue for peace.

But... Johann had heard what had happened to the Northern Perscillian Army when they invaded Fernest. Olivia had led the Eighth Legion, replete as it was with new recruits, to a resounding victory against them. Yet despite their numbers, the Azure Knights were formidably strong. It was clear that though Olivia and Ashton might display exceptional leadership, there would be a gulf

between their forces and the Azure Knights. It looked to Johann like the odds were very much against the Eighth Legion.

Meanwhile, Olivia and Felix were closely matched. If they crossed blades, it was likely that neither would come out unscathed. By Johann's estimation, Felix had a physical edge. But that only applied up until Olivia started using magic. Loath as he was to admit it, Olivia's magic far outstripped not only his own magecraft, but that of Lara and Amelia as well. The magical essence, the inexhaustible source of external mana she drew on, defied all reason. Olivia said she wouldn't use magic except in the case of a threat to her, but, put another way, that meant if she did feel threatened, she would use it without hesitation.

Once she lets loose one of those spheres of light, it's all over. Even Felix couldn't withstand that... He remembered the great boulder that had vanished without a trace before his eyes.

"You've been looking very stern lately, Johann."

Johann looked up and saw Lara watching him, a smile on her lips. Recalling that Sofitia had said these same words to him just the other day, he gave a strained smile.

"Yes, well, lately I've been lucky enough to be beset by troubles."

"Personally, I prefer it to that frivolous grin you always used to wear."

"You set my heart all aflutter, Blessed Wing Lara."

"Now if only you'd learn when to stop talking," Lara said with a snort.

"I'm afraid I was born this way, so there's little hope of a cure," Johann replied. "But be all that as it may, I hope, for the sake of us achieving unification, that the plan is successful."

Whichever way the scales tipped, the battle to come would only be to the advantage of Mekia. What was more, after their visit to Fernest, Sofitia had King Alfonse wrapped around her little finger. Johann felt a shiver of awe at his mistress's charisma.

"Like I said before, it'll all depend on the Eighth Legion, in the end. Meanwhile we're depending on the leadership of the Invincible General."

“You’ve spoken to Marshal Cornelius too, haven’t you? What did you think of him?”

The highest-ranking man in the Royal Army and possessor of such renown that his name could be found in history books, his reputation as the “Invincible General” was alive and well after his decisive victory over the Helios Knights on the central front despite his age of over seventy summers. Johann’s first impression upon seeing the marshal in person for the first time at the banquet was of a man of astounding tranquility. Upon seeing Cornelius burning with vigor as he rode forth from Galia Fortress, however, Johann had wondered for a moment if he weren’t looking at a different man entirely.

“I’ll tell you one thing. You would be a fool to disregard him just because he’s old.”

“I could never underestimate the Invincible General,” Johann replied. “Speaking of which, why did you send Amelia with the Second Allied Legion? If you’ll excuse me saying so, I really think I would have been the better choice.”

Johann and Lara both knew that Amelia loathed Olivia. Johann, who had something of a rapport with Olivia already, thought he would have found it easy to work with her. He was therefore more than a little curious as to why Lara had sent Amelia instead.

“As a simple warrior, she is more than adequate. If we are to install the Seraph as supreme ruler, however, we need Amelia to gain more experience.”

You have high hopes for dear Amelia, then... Johann thought. Lara’s usual harsh treatment of Amelia made sense as a sign of her high expectations. He doubted Amelia appreciated it, however.

“Then I have nothing further to say on the matter.”

“Well, I do.”

“And what might that be?”

“Hold your promiscuity in check. You have your position to consider.”

“I appreciate your concern, but don’t you know the old saying? ‘Great men are great lovers.’”

“Who are you calling a ‘great man’? You really are all ta— Who’s this now?”

A soldier with a single star on his left shoulder slid gracefully down from his horse to come and kneel before Lara.

“Blessed Wing Lara, there is to be a war council. Your presence is requested at the main command tent.”

“Very well. Tell Marshal Cornelius I’ll set off immediately.”

“As you command, ser!”

Lara jumped down from her silver chariot, then ordered an attendant to ready her horse.

“Are you coming too, Johann?”

“No, I think I’ll stay behind,” Johann declined, arranging his face in a serious expression. The stifling formality of such occasions disagreed with him, but he knew if he said as much that Lara would force him to accompany her. Unfortunately, Lara saw right through him.

“First Historia, now you,” she said with a sigh. “This is war, you know. Can’t you take it a bit more seriously?”

Astride her white horse, Historia’s eyelids kept sliding closed, the interval before they opened again lengthening every time she jerked awake. Lara glanced at her in exasperation, then put her hands on her hips and heaved another deep sigh.

Johann knew where she was coming from, but he had his own thoughts on what war was about.

“War, in its fundamentals, isn’t meant to be taken seriously. When you get down to it, it’s nothing more than mass murder. Even wild beasts don’t stoop to such levels.”

In times of peace, anyone who killed another person was named a murderer. Kill enough people in times of war, however, and you became a hero. Johann could follow the logic, but he still couldn’t understand it.

“You’ll forgive me, Johann, but I’m not in the mood to philosophize on the nature of war with you. Tell me again after the seraph achieves unification of

the continent, and I'll be all ears."

Taking her reins in her left hand, Lara leapt elegantly into the saddle; then, with a few of her personal guard accompanying her, she galloped away. Johann watched them go with a sigh.

II

The Imperial Army's War Room, Kier Fortress

Returning four days prior to the arrival of the First Allied Legion at the Kochonn Plains, Rosenmarie received a report from the soldiers assigned to patrol the lands around the fortress that the Royal Army was advancing, and summoned her key officers to the war room. The Helios Knights sat along the left side of the long table, with the Crimson Knights lined up along the right. When Rosenmarie entered, they stood up and saluted as one. Oscar gave the order, and they sat down once more.

Placing herself at the head of the table, it was Rosenmarie who spoke first.

"What's the Royal Army's position?"

"They are currently advancing across the Freyberg Plateau, my lady," Oscar said, pointing with his baton at the map that lay unfurled on the table. When he informed them that the presence of the First and Seventh Legions had been confirmed, the faces of the officers twisted in fury.

"A great number of banners bearing the Death God's crest have also been observed. It must be the newly formed Eighth Legion under Death God Olivia's command."

"Death God Olivia..."

"So she's here..." There was a buzz as the officers all reacted to this announcement. There was an unnatural gleam in the eyes of some, while others looked down. Others still wore expressions of undisguised terror. If there was one thing both knight orders could claim, it was that they had been put through hell by Death God Olivia.

Cornelius the Invincible General, Paul the God of the Battlefield, and now

Death God Olivia, the jewel of the crown, Rosenmarie thought. *With such an impressive cast, that confirms that the fortress is their target.* The corners of her mouth curled.

“It’s time to celebrate,” she said. “Our most despised enemy has come wandering out to us. This is nothing short of a bless—”

“I bring news!” The door flew open, revealing a panting soldier. Everyone in the room turned to the sound as the soldier went over to Oscar to whisper hurriedly in his ear. At once, Oscar’s face turned hard.

“Not especially pleasant news, then?” Rosenmarie commented.

“No, my lady. An army, numbering around twenty thousand and flying dark purple banners, has fallen in with the Royal Army. They appear to be from Mekia—the Winged Crusaders.”

“The Winged Crusaders?!” The reaction from the Crimson Knights was dramatic. The investigations of the shimmers had since identified the Winged Crusaders as the perpetrators of the surprise attack on Fort Astora. They had taken advantage of Rosenmarie’s absence to go on a destructive rampage that had ended in the death of her aide, Guyel.

And they have mages... Rosenmarie ran her tongue along her lips.

“Those’re the bastards who murdered Guyel!”

“Lady Rosenmarie! We shall avenge Colonel Guyel!”

Guyel’s name started to fly off the lips of the Crimson Knights. Rosenmarie raised a hand, and the hubbub ceased.

“You don’t need to scream at me, I can hear you just fine. Whatever happened between Fernest and Mekia, it appears that they have formed an alliance. Saves us a lot of time and effort, don’t you think?”

“With the addition of the Mekians, their combined force numbers over eighty-five thousand. That puts them roughly equal with our own forces, but should I look into bringing in soldiers from Swaran and Stonia, just in case?”

“Swaran and Stonia?” Rosenmarie snorted loudly. “What are those pathetic excuses for soldiers supposed to do for us? Forget it. They’ll only get in our

way.” She then saw another officer rise. It was Major General Zacharias Carally. Among the Helios Knights who otherwise favored defensive tactics, he commanded a unit of a notably different proclivity, specializing in penetrative attacks—the Caelestis Wolves.

Rosenmarie nodded, giving him leave to speak.

“Where do we plan on meeting them?” he asked. “If I may be so bold as to offer my opinion first, I believe the Kochonn Plains to the east would be the ideal location at which to intercept them.”

The location Zacharias proposed was free of any major obstructions, which would allow their forces to maneuver unrestricted. It was also relatively close to Kier Fortress, meaning that their logistical lifelines would operate effectively. It was perfectly suited to meeting an enemy force. Yet Rosenmarie, with a hint of a smile, shot down Zacharias’s idea.

He looked thunderstruck. “For what reason, my lady?!” he demanded, raising his voice. “For what reason?!”

He had probably imagined she would agree at once. Next, he returned his gaze to the map and started to rattle off a series of other potential locations. Rosenmarie rejected them all, until at last, Zacharias, his face scarlet, brought his fist crashing down on the table.

“Then where do you plan to meet them?!” he cried.

“That’s been obvious since the beginning.” As Zacharias raged, she tapped a finger several times on the long table. Though at first he appeared dubious, Zacharias’s eyes soon grew wide.

“Not Kier Fortress?!”

“What, you’re surprised? You are, at this moment, standing within the walls of the *impenetrable fortress*. It’s the obvious choice.”

Aside from Oscar, to whom Rosenmarie had already told her plan, the others, Crimson and Helios Knights both, all gaped at her. Rosenmarie was enjoying the spectacle when Mill Heineman of the Crimson Knights voiced his objection.

“I realize my saying this to you, Lady Rosenmarie, is like trying to tell a fish

how to swim, but I feel I must point out that we Crimson Knights make best use of our potential out on the battlefield.”

“You’re right. The Crimson Knights aren’t made for siege warfare.”

“Then—”

“But it was out on the battlefield that the Crimson Knights lost to the Seventh Legion,” she pointed out. “Now, don’t take that the wrong way. It’s not your fault we lost. That was entirely my own doing.”

“In other words, this time you mean to be more careful?” Zacharias said, unconvinced. Rosenmarie snorted.

“It’s not like me, is what you want to say.”

“Just so, my lady. I would understand it coming from Marshal Gladden, but...” At this mention of Gladden’s name, a shadow fell over the faces of all assembled, but Rosenmarie continued without mentioning it.

“It seems,” she said, “that the Helios Knights have been laboring under a false impression of my character.” While officers from the Helios Knights all looked confused, the Crimson Knights shared a grim smile. “I don’t deny that I prefer to fight on the battlefield. I mean, I *do* enjoy it.” She gave a playful shrug, drawing a guffaw from the Crimson Knights. The Helios Knights, meanwhile, managed only strained smiles. Rosenmarie then turned serious. “The only thing that matters is that we crush the Royal Army here. I will use whatever I have at my disposal to make sure that happens, and this time, I have Kier Fortress. It’s as simple as that.”

“So this is a critical moment for the imperial army as well.”

“That’s right,” she said. She didn’t like to admit it, but the Royal Army had momentum, and just as a flame once lit would not be easily extinguished, that invisible force would not soon fade. If she was going to break it, she couldn’t be concerned with style. In addition, while she had no intention of getting sentimental, she was also thinking of Gladden, who had gone on to the Land of the Dead without the opportunity for a rematch. Their differences in opinion had led them to butt heads on more than a few occasions, but Rosenmarie still had a kind of respect for the man who had led their army as head of the Three

Generals. Any way to know what he had thought was now lost to her forever.

“Lady Rosenmarie, if we’re prioritizing caution, could we call on the Azure Knights to add their forces to ours?” Mill proposed, but Rosenmarie shot him down.

“I’m afraid Felix isn’t going to set one foot outside the capital.” Rosenmarie wasn’t without a degree of irritation toward Felix and his continued refusal to mobilize the Azure Knights, but the order came from Emperor Ramza himself, and she couldn’t imagine Ramza the Good would hold the Azure Knights back in the capital without reason. As far as she knew, he was nothing less than a great emperor.

“I thought it was too much to hope for...”

“Don’t be so downhearted. The Crimson and Helios Knights together will be more than sufficient. Oscar?”

“My lady,” he said. “I will go through the outline of our plan.”

Two hours later, after each of the officers had received detailed instructions on their roles from Oscar, the council came to a close. Rosenmarie clicked her fingers and a servant emerged, bearing glasses half-full of wine, which they then distributed among the officers.

When Rosenmarie saw that everyone had a glass, she said, “I don’t exaggerate when I say that in this battle, we will decide the fate of the empire. I expect you all to fight to your last breath.”

“To the glory of the Asvelt Empire!”

“To our undying loyalty to Ramza the Magnificent!” The officers all swallowed the contents of their glasses in a single gulp. Then, brimming with zeal, they filed out of the room. As Oscar made to follow them, Rosenmarie called out to him.

“When this is over, lay some lycilia flowers on Gladden’s grave. He’s supposed to have liked them, though I’d never have believed it.”

Oscar turned back abruptly. “Lycilia symbolize the bonds of family. How very like you, my lady.” He saluted, then quietly left the room.

I shouldn't have said it after all, Rosenmarie thought. She herself still hadn't had the chance to lay flowers at the graves of either Osvannes or Guyel. Telling herself it would all wait until victory was hers, she left the war room alone.

Early in the morning, two days later, the Royal Army emerged out of a fog that hung about Kier Fortress.

Fernest's First Allied Legion fielded ninety-eight thousand five hundred soldiers. The soldiers of the Asvelt Empire defending Kier Fortress numbered ninety-eight thousand eight hundred.

The battle began with a whisper, or so it would be written in *The History of Duvedirica*.

III

The troops of the First Allied Legion fanned out before Kier Fortress. Three towering walls encircled the fortress, walls from which many banners bearing the empire's crossed swords flew. Paul, who had come back when they negotiated a hostage exchange, found that he felt rather nostalgic looking upon it now, rather than being infuriated. He allowed himself a wry smile.

I suppose I had too much fun traveling with Lieutenant General Olivia back then, he thought, picturing her beaming at everyone with that carefree smile of hers. Beside him, Otto finished giving instructions to a subordinate before turning to Paul with suspicion in his eyes.

"Don't mind me." Paul went on quickly. "How's the front line looking?"

"They are using the catapults to carry out a long-range assault, as planned. The imperial army has responded with their own catapults and heavy crossbows. They have not made any unusual moves."

Predicting a siege from the start, the First Allied Legion had come prepared with a large arsenal of siege weaponry, catapults chief among them. The catapults currently in action were the result of the Royal Army's engineers analyzing and improving upon the cutting-edge models the Independent Cavalry Regiment had seized from the Crimson Knights. Otto had told Paul that while they had not, in the end, been able to improve the weapons' firepower,

by making them still more compact, ease of operation had increased dramatically.

“Then tell the soldiers on the front line they need not hold back. They are to reduce the walls of Kier Fortress to rubble, you hear?”

“Are you sure, my lord?”

“The lord marshal approves.”

Reassurance could at times lead people into indolence. The Royal Army had grown complacent behind the walls of the “impenetrable fortress.” Paul could not deny that. He therefore saw this as a golden opportunity to tear the place down to its foundations, thereby shattering the illusion and opening the eyes of his soldiers.

Otto immediately expressed his understanding, then sent off the runners.

“There could be nothing better for us than for them to stay holed up in there.”

“From what I have heard, Major General Neinhardt has a number of plans for that.”

“Major General Neinhardt, eh?” Paul said thoughtfully. “I don’t know him well, seeing as this will be my first time fighting alongside him, but if you ask Lambert, he’s quite the maverick.”

“I doubt he would have risen to become chief of staff for the First Legion under the Invincible General were he not.”

“You’re not wrong there. Though so far as I’m concerned, our chief-of-staff here in the Seventh Legion is no slouch either.” He glanced sidelong at Otto, who gave a slight shrug.

“Please, my lord. I have nothing that can compare to Major General Neinhardt’s sharp wits and foresight.”

“Modesty, eh?”

“I speak nothing but the truth,” Otto said blandly.

Paul was no stranger to the futility of flattering the man. Still, with his ability

to coolly appraise a battle while on the battlefield, undeterred by emotion, Paul saw Otto as one of a kind and entirely irreplaceable.

“All right, I’ll give you this one,” Paul said. “Now, about the right flank...”

Paul turned his spyglass onto the right flank, which was under Osmund’s command. The man wouldn’t be glory-mad any longer, but he was a touch too far ahead.

“Fear not, my lord. I have already sent runners to instruct him to fall back.”

“Of course you have,” Paul said, nodding with satisfaction at Otto’s quick-witted leadership.

The battle proceeded just as the First Allied Legion wanted it to, looking more and more like it would turn into a long siege.

IV

The Imperial Army, Fort Astora

When Major General Fermat Lancelot, to whom had been assigned command of Fort Astora, received word of the Royal Army’s incoming assault, their vanguard was already on his doorstep.

“Why didn’t we notice that the Royal Army was this close?!” Fermat threw the glass he held in his hand at his aide, Colonel Hassel Trident, who stood in front of him. A red stain spread over the man’s uniform, and there was the sound of breaking glass as fragments sprayed across the floor. Hassel, who had devoted himself in every aspect of his life to soldiering, didn’t so much as flinch.

“It appears that they used the night as a cloak to stage their incursion.”

“Do you think I’ll accept that excuse?! Why do you think we have guards? They’re not birds to be kept away with scarecrows!”

“I never once thought to use scarecrows, ser.”

“Then how is it that you allowed them to get this close?!”

“Our enemy was simply that clever, ser,” Hassel replied blandly, not looking at all abashed. Fermat was seized by a sensation like all the blood flowing through

his body had suddenly reversed its course. But questioning Hassel further wouldn't change the reality of the situation. Fermat forced his anger down into the pit of his stomach.

"Well, anyway," he said. "Send messengers with all haste to Fort Belganna and Fort Rochfell. And to the capital too."

"Yes, ser."

"And how many soldiers is the Royal Army attacking us with, anyway?"

"We're still waiting on detailed reports..." Hassel said slowly. "But from what the guards on watch said, I expect we will end up with a figure over sixty thousand."

"S-Sixty thousand...?!" Fermat repeated, reeling. The number far exceeded anything he had imagined. The Crimson Knights' departure for Kier Fortress had left Fort Astora now with a defensive garrison of only three thousand. It would not even be a fight.

Fermat noticed Hassel looking like he wanted to say something more. "Is there anything else?" he asked.

"We have sighted a great many soldiers in leaf-green armor among the enemy forces. They are flying different banners from the Royal Army's."

Fermat's mind immediately went to the soldiers in leaf-green armor who had struck such a powerful blow against the Crimson Knights at Fort Astora the previous year—the Winged Crusaders of the Holy Land of Mekia.

"You don't mean to say that Fernest and Mekia have joined their forces?!"

"I cannot say for certain, only that it appears extremely likely."

Since the beginning of this second war for the unification of the continent, not a single other nation had allied itself with Fernest. This alone was enough to heighten Fermat's shock, but more than that, hearing that the ally in question was *Mekia* of all people intensified his sense of danger. Not only had the Winged Crusaders toyed with the elite Crimson Knights, but most importantly, they were backed by the Illuminatus Church. Mekia could not be written off as a mere minor nation.

“Also...”

“There’s *more?!?*” Fermat exclaimed, unable to keep his voice low. Hassel went on calmly as though he hadn’t heard this outburst.

“A subsection of our soldiers have become agitated after seeing black banners with the Death God’s crest on them.”

“The Death God’s crest?” Despite himself, Fermat inhaled sharply. “You’re sure that’s what they saw?” Only one person dared raise those banners.

“The banners are very distinctive. I doubt there is any chance they could be mistaken.”

Fermat shut his mouth. Hassel was right—one look at that mark was enough to burn it into the mind forever. It would be harder *not* to recognize it. He had no choice but to accept that the Death God had joined the battle.

But why is the Royal Army attacking Fort Astora in the first place? It would make far more sense to turn them on Kier Fortress, if they have this many soldiers to spare. And the bit I really don’t follow is why the Death God—their best piece—is marching here and not on Kier Fortress.

“Something troubles you, ser?” Hassel inquired.

“It’s nothing,” Fermat replied at length. “Preparations are underway to meet the attackers, I assume?”

“We are proceeding with all thoroughness, ser,” Hassel said, nodding.

“Looking at the numbers, we don’t have a hope of driving them off. All we can do is hunker down behind our defenses until reinforcements arrive. Relay that to all the forces.”

“Yes, ser.”

Fermat wiped his mouth roughly with a handkerchief, then at once rose from his chair.

“Even if they do have a Death God in their ranks, that does not mean we are going to let them run rampant on imperial land. Make sure you remember to tell the soldiers that too.”

“Yes, ser.”

“And I’ll be commanding directly.” Fermat left the mess hall with Hassel, heading for the watchtower.

Second Allied Legion Command

Having surrounded Fort Astora, the Second Allied Legion began a ranged assault with successive longbow volleys.

“Pretty hard to see you taking down the fort if you keep this mode of attack up,” Blood pointed out, folding his arms as he surveyed the battle.

Ashton scratched his cheek. “I don’t think we’ll conquer the fort like this, of course,” he said. “I’m not *that* much of an optimist.”

“As much as I don’t want to start questioning you after I put you in charge of this, Lieutenant Colonel...” The imperials, faced with a massive army, had immediately opted to hole up in the fort, just as they had predicted. They no doubt meant to hold out for reinforcements, but Ashton had already placed soldiers along the routes he predicted they would take, with orders to dispatch any messengers who appeared without hesitation.

No reports have arrived of any messengers getting through at this stage. Things seem to be going to plan, on the whole, but for more reasons than one, we can’t afford to waste time.

Rubbing the back of his head and glancing over his shoulder, Blood saw Amelia standing imposingly behind him. From the rhythmic tapping of her fingers, he deduced that she was extremely annoyed. Ashton too seemed to notice the pressure radiating off her, as he was trembling.

An hour passed.

“It’s about time we finished this.” Amelia’s patience, it appeared, had reached its limit. She stepped forward toward them, in precisely the same moment that the runners Ashton had just given orders to all dashed away. Not long after, a rain of arrows dense enough to block out the sky flew at Fort Astora, followed by the sound of wheels turning as a line of siege ladders rose up along the fort

wall. With valiant cries, soldiers began to clamber up.

So that was his plan. It's a good one. Under any circumstances, it's no easy thing to stay vigilant at all times on the battlefield. He lulled them into relaxing their guard with the monotony of those repeated attacks on purpose, waiting for his moment to strike when they least expected it. Then he used the disorder that created to get the siege ladders up... But...

What bothered Blood was that these siege ladders looked very different from the ones he knew—the most prominent example of this being the heavy plates that enclosed each ladder. They were also twice the size of a standard siege ladder.

“Were those ladders built on your instructions?”

“They were. With ordinary ladders, the soldiers get stuck with arrows before the ladders reach the walls, so I had these ones wrapped around with planks, then covered again with a thin layer of steel. Now they should be able to withstand even flaming arrows. The tricky part is that they're extremely heavy, making transporting them challenging.”

“You worked that brain of yours hard, didn't you?”

“I want to keep as many of our soldiers alive as I can,” Ashton said simply. Blood, however, thought that these new siege ladders were going to change the face of siege warfare.

Old Paul did call him a tactician of rare talent... At this stage, Ashton's incredible mind was worth as much as an army of tens of thousands.

Blood felt a vague chill of fear and stole another look behind him at Amelia. Her demeanor had changed—she was now looking at Ashton as if to size him up.

“I don't see Liv or Colonel Claudia,” Blood commented, raising the other point he had been wondering about. “Where are they?”

No sooner had he said it than Ashton's eyes began to dart around nervously. Blood watched without a word until at last, with an air of resignation, Ashton pointed to the siege ladders.

Blood rubbed the back of his head. “Look,” he said, “the thing is, Liv is actually the second-in-command for the whole Second Allied Legion. You do know what that means, right?”

Olivia refusing to act according to common sense was nothing new, and it was precisely this that had given the imperial army so much grief. But even Blood was not about to condone a plan that involved the second-in-command of his army leading the charge right into the middle of the enemy just because of that.

“Colonel Claudia tried everything she could to stop her...”

“But in the end, she couldn’t be stopped, and so Colonel Claudia went with her?” Ashton looked at his feet, and Blood sighed deeply. “If the worst happens and Liv dies here, the whole strategy collapses. You can’t tell me you don’t know that.”

Of course, Blood did not think Olivia could lose in a one-on-one fight. But this was not a duel—it was war. What would she do if she were attacked by a hundred, or even a thousand soldiers? No matter how incomparable her strength was, it had to have a limit. That was the nature of being human.

Ashton appeared to hesitate, then he said timidly, “I just can’t imagine Olivia dying.”

“Then you need to stretch the wings of your imagination a bit more. I’m sure it’s because you’ve seen her power up close that you say that, but everything alive, from the moment we’re born, is on a journey that ends in death. The same goes for our awe-inspiring Death God Liv. And going into war is like being forced to break into a sprint on that journey. Remember that.”

“Yes, General...” Ashton said helplessly. Blood, realizing that he’d given a lecture out of character for him, clapped Ashton on the shoulder. He then pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. It was not long after this that a roar of triumph rose up from the fort walls.

The Walls of Fort Astora

Shortly before Blood and Ashton’s exchange, up on the walls of Fort Astora, the tension in the air was gradually loosening. The reason for this was simply

that the Royal Army had done nothing but shoot at them from long range.

“They’ve got that giant army and yet they’re still just sitting there without attacking.”

“Yeah, I was fully convinced they’d rely on strength of numbers and charge at us...”

“If this keeps up, we should be able to hold out until reinforcements get here.”

“Maybe. Still, doesn’t something seem off to you?”

“You lot!” their commander barked, unable to tolerate any more. “Less running your mouths and more focusing on the battle!”

Fermat watched quietly from behind as paranoia spread through his soldiers as they returned fire.

“General Fermat...”

“The soldiers are starting to feel like something isn’t right too.”

“It seems so.” Hassel frowned, staring eagle-eyed out over the wall. Three hours had passed since hostilities commenced, but the Royal Army still had not made any conspicuous moves. Common wisdom dictated that they should have charged the walls, accepting a few casualties to overwhelm them by sheer force of numbers. It was only natural the soldiers would grow suspicious. If this were enough to bring down a fort, it would save everyone a lot of hardship.

“You don’t think they’re waiting until we exhaust our food supplies, do you?”

“Starvation tactics, eh?” Velmer didn’t think this was entirely outside the realm of possibility, but usually starving out an army meant waiting at least a few months. The latest reports indicated that the enemy army numbered more than seventy thousand in total. It would take an absolutely stupendous volume of food to keep such a host fed over the course of a long siege, and he seriously doubted the Royal Army would be able to procure so much. So long as the United City-States of Sutherland stayed loyal to the empire, an ample supply of food would remain out of Fernest’s reach. Just as Velmer opened his mouth to voice this opinion, the soldiers all began clamoring. The reason was obvious—

above them rose a cloud of arrows, blotting out the sky.

“Hold your ground! Shields up!” Hassel bellowed. The soldiers raised their shields above their heads, just as a piercing screech rang out and Fermat saw a number of what looked like towering boxes rapidly approaching the fort walls.

“What are those?!”

“Aren’t... Aren’t those siege ladders?”

“Have you ever seen siege ladders like that?”

It wasn’t long before Hassel was proved correct. The Royal Army’s soldiers disappeared inside the boxes only to pour out from the top—the time Fermat’s soldiers had wasted defending themselves proved their downfall. Meanwhile, the box’s enclosures, presumably to deflect incoming arrows, were more than living up to the task.

Their timing was flawless. Whoever’s giving the orders over there, it’s as though they’re perfectly in tune with the flow of the battle.

Despite the awe he felt, Fermat immediately shouted, “Don’t allow the enemy any furth—?!”

He broke off as he saw a shadow shoot up into the sky against the glare of the sun. It spun gracefully through the air to land lightly on the fort wall.

Is that...? The soldier stood up slowly, and Fermat’s breath caught as he took in the shimmering silver hair, the ebony armor with its muted sheen, and the breastplate adorned with a skull and two crossed scythes over a background of roses.

It has to be. It’s her...

The soldier pulled off her helmet and tossed it aside as though it were annoyance, revealing a face of incomparably exquisite beauty.

“Helmets really get in the way. And they’re so *hot*,” she said, casually sidestepping a spear thrust that came from her blind spot. Her black blade flashed, suddenly appearing in her hand, as she easily beheaded the attacker. The headless corpse crumpled, still holding out the spear.

“That’s Death God Olivia!”



The soldiers who recognized Olivia were thrown into a state of violent panic. Those who only screamed were the better ones; some tried to run away as fast as their legs would carry them.

“Don’t let your fear get to you! Anyone who kills the Death God will have a place in the Three Generals in their future!” Fermat shouted, as much to fire himself up as the soldiers. Obviously, nothing of the sort had been promised, but it was what the Death God’s head was worth.

“You hear what General Fermat said?”

“That means standing alongside Lord Felix and Lady Rosenmarie.”

“The empire’s Three Generals... Has a nice ring to it, eh?”

A wild gleam appeared in the eyes of some of the soldiers—all of them experienced fighters. No sooner did one of them turn to charge at Olivia than the others followed like an avalanche.

“Rrrroooaaahhh!” they bellowed, but if Olivia was perturbed, she didn’t show it. She gracefully parried the onslaught of blades that came swinging at her; then, a moment later, the soldiers’ heads and limbs flew off in all directions amid a great spray of blood that unfurled in the air like a flower. She was like a whirlpool of light in which brilliance and brutality swirled together. Even as Fermat was gripped by fear, he also felt his heart drawn to the inexpressible beauty of her power.

“General.” Hassel’s voice brought him back to reality. The whirlwind of death had subsided, leaving the area around them strewn with unidentifiable lumps of flesh. The heavy stench of blood reached Fermat, and he looked around to see that his soldiers, their will to fight all but extinguished, were falling in droves at the hands of the newly invigorated Royal Army. He realized there was no driving them back now.

“I’m afraid we have to abandon the fort,” he said. Thinking that if they blocked the gate through the wall, it would buy them a little time, he wasted none further. Privately disgusted at his own incompetence, he set off running with his personal guard, only to realize that Hassel was not with them. He stopped and turned. Behind him, Hassel stood motionless.

“What’re you playing at?!”

“I will hold the Death God off here.”

“Hold her off...?” Fermat exclaimed. “Don’t go thinking even you’ll buy us any time against *her*. Now come on!”

Hassel’s valor was well known, but the Death God had already slaughtered too many of the fiercest warriors in the empire. Even if Hassel had possessed skill greater than any of them, Fermat did not think for an instant that it would be enough to defeat the Death God.

“This is mere selfishness on my part. As a warrior, I wish to try my spear against the Death God. You needn’t worry about me,” Hassel said. He didn’t turn around, but his voice was clear.

Hassel must have felt something like what I did when he saw her fight, Fermat thought. Sensing the blazing force of the other man’s spirit, Fermat doubted he would have moved even if the one ordering it were the emperor himself.

“Very well,” he said. “You can do as you please.”

Hassel nodded silently. Leaving him behind, Fermat and his guards set off down the stairs.

Hassel twirled his spear, then held it straight out toward Olivia as she approached.

“I’ll have you stop right there,” he said.

“You’re not going to run with the other humans?”

“That’s right. I couldn’t pass up the chance to fight the Death God.”

“Huh. I mean, *I* don’t mind...” Olivia flicked off the sticky film of blood and ichor that clung to her blade.

“My name is Hassel Trident!” Hassel declared.

“I’m Olivia Valedstorm.”

There was a brief silence, then—

“Have at you!” Hassel raised his long-bladed spear, Moonlit Mist, the

heirloom of the Trident family. He spun it above his head, then brought it around to slash at Olivia. But she was gone, leaping away higher than any human should have been able to. Moonlit Mist only succeeded in knocking aside another Royal Army soldier in its path. Hassel held his spear up at an angle.

“Just the sort of move I’d expect from a Death God—but running away into the sky was a mistake!” He thrust up Moonlit Mist with all his strength, just as Olivia slammed into it with the edge of her ebony blade. She used the force of the impact to throw herself to one side, twisting as she landed. Hassel didn’t wait. He kicked off and charged at Olivia. “Think you’re clever, do you? Try and dodge my rapid stabs!” Mustering all the power he could in his arms, he unleashed a wild barrage of deadly strikes at Olivia. But she did dodge them all, flowing like water around his spear. She moved like a master dancer.

Hassel gnashed his teeth in frustration, then suddenly felt a fierce pain in his right arm. He looked down and saw a spray of fresh blood fill the air like mist as his arm fell to the ground. And that wasn’t the end. Olivia, who should have been in front of him, now stabbed the ebony blade through his back, tearing through his guts.

“Guh...!” Hassel fell to his knees, powerless against the pain that wracked him as though he had been plunged into an inferno. Moonlit Mist fell from his hand with a metallic clink.

All the warrior’s arts I gave my life to refining amounted to nothing against the Death God... Countless unseen hands reached out to drag his consciousness down into the darkness, as the black mist that rolled off the ebony blade wrapped him tenderly in its embrace...

“Seal the gates through the wall.”

“But there are still soldiers...” The guard began to protest, then stopped.
“Understood, ser.”

When they were partway down the steps, Fermat thought he heard Hassel’s voice.

The damn fool, he thought, shaking his head as he remembered his last look

at Hassel's back.

V

The imperial defense on the walls fell apart, and the Eighth Legion's Elite Force poured in to take control.

"Tear down the imperial flags and raise our holy banner!" ordered Gile.

"Yes, ser!"

Banners bearing the Valedstorm crest rose around them, drawing a cry of triumph from the soldiers. Gile, gripping the shaft of a banner, held up his sword and roared, giving still more energy to the Elite Force's advance. In the meantime, Olivia was merciless as she continued to swing the ebony blade. The black mist that poured from its edge had grown to ensconce its full length.

"It's no good!"

"Run!"

"We'll never get away!"

Gauss's blood-drenched sword was ruthless and unrelenting as it bit into the backs of the fleeing imperial soldiers. The fort walls had been transformed into a hunting ground.

"Looks like we've taken the wall," Olivia said as Claudia approached, smiling and returning her mini ballista to her back. Taking the walls meant the most difficult part was over with—the rest would follow. It was now only a matter of time until the fort was theirs.

"Yes, the plan did work well..." For some reason, Claudia hung her head and sighed. When Olivia cocked her head in puzzlement, Claudia looked at her with a pleading look in her eyes.

"General, you are the second-in-command of the Second Allied Legion, as well as supreme commander of the Eighth Legion. I am begging you to *please* be a little more conscious of your position."

"I am conscious of it," Olivia replied. "How many times have we had this

conversation now?”

“Three times.”

“Isn’t it boring having the same conversation three times over?”

“If you think so, then please take what I say to heart. I don’t enjoy saying the same thing over and over again either,” Claudia said, then puffed out her cheeks. She looked so adorable that Olivia couldn’t help but smile.

“Is something funny?”

“No, sorry! What were we talking about again?”

“I was telling you to be conscious of your position!”

“Oh, right. But I don’t like sitting around doing nothing.”

“It’s true, sitting on your hands isn’t like you, Captain.” Gauss came up to them, his sword resting on his shoulder. Claudia fixed him with a glare of such startling intensity that he turned around then and there and scurried away.

“I’m not asking what you like,” she went on, her face exceptionally severe. “This is the nature of command.” Seeing that Claudia was suffering from a bout of hyper-stubborn-itis and thinking to save her, Olivia didn’t back down.

“But when I take the lead, it improves our soldiers’ morale, doesn’t it? I’m the Death God, after all.” Clearing her throat, she put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. At this, Claudia scowled more fiercely than Olivia had ever seen before. She decided to ask something that had been on her mind.

“Hey, why do you hate that people call me ‘Death God’ so much?” She would have understood it if Claudia disliked people calling *her* “Death God.” But it wasn’t Claudia, but Olivia, to whom it was said. It was a glaring contradiction.

“I don’t like what I don’t like,” Claudia replied, which wasn’t any reason at all. She then stuck her nose in the air.

“You really are selfish, Claudia.”

“I’m not about to take that from you, General!” Claudia’s nostrils flared and she huffed like a bull, while Olivia held up her hands and made soothing noises.

“Well, putting aside that about the ‘Death God’ name,” she went on, “when

the enemy sees me, they all wilt away, which means fewer casualties for our side. Don't you think that's a good thing?"

Z had taught her that keeping as many of your soldiers alive as possible was at the heart of the art of war. There was no way Claudia wouldn't appreciate the logic of it.

"I do see what you're saying..."

"And besides, even if I'm not there to give commands to the full army, the Eighth Legion has a tactician we can rely on, don't we? So I can go out on the front line, and no one needs to worry."

If it weren't for Ashton's leadership, the battle with Northern Perscilla wouldn't have gone nearly so smoothly either. Even Olivia was surprised at how much he'd grown.

"Of course I don't deny we can count on our tactician, but that has no connection with you being on the front line."

"I think they're pretty well connected."

"They are *not*."

"Well, I'm not going to stop fighting on the front line."

"But—"

"Colonel Claudia!" Claudia froze for a moment, then saluted.

"Yes, ser!"

"This is an order from the second-in-command of the Second Allied Legion. You are forbidden from making any further comments!"

"Yes...ser," Claudia gritted out, her eyes mutinous.

In the military, rank was everything. Its system of elevating those who killed other humans to greatness still didn't make sense to Olivia, but it exerted a remarkable effect on humans like Claudia. She didn't enjoy giving orders, but at times like this she was profoundly grateful that she outranked Claudia.

She nodded with an air of superiority, then called over to Ellis, who had stabbed her sword into the back of a fallen imperial soldier.

“Ellis, would you mind taking some soldiers and going after the imperials who ran? I’ve got a little business of my own to take care of.”

“Understood, ser!” Ellis replied cheerfully. She shouted an order to the soldiers, then they set off running down the stairs with Ellis in the lead.

It’s still a long way to the imperial capital. I need to wrap this battle up quickly. She jumped up to stand on the edge of the wall, her eyes on the tightly barred gate to the fort.

“What are you planning?” Claudia asked when Olivia suddenly leapt up onto the wall, struck by a sense of suspicion.

“Me? I’m going to go and open the gate.”

“You’re...” Claudia paused. “You’re not going to *jump* down there, are you?” Keeping a watchful eye on Olivia, Claudia peered over the edge. As she was already well aware, it was not a height one could jump from. Anyone who tried would be lucky to get out with only broken bones.

As if to further stoke Claudia’s anxieties, Olivia cocked her head in puzzlement.

“I mean, I am...” she said. “Shouldn’t I?”

“Obviously you shouldn’t!” Claudia retorted. “Are you out of your mind?!”

Olivia laughed. “Oh, I’ll be fine. I can use Featherweight,” she said, flapping her arms like a bird.

“Featherweight...?” Claudia repeated. “Do you mean that acrobatics show you put on in the battle with Northern Perscilla?” She remembered how, when an enemy force had attacked their main force, Olivia had not only leapt onto the back of the enemy commander’s galloping horse but *stood* there, quite casually. The enemy had been thoroughly shocked, and Claudia along with them.

“That’s the one. Featherweight makes my body as light as a feather, so I can jump down from high places, easy-peasy.”

“I’m still not sure...” Claudia glanced down again, then, feeling like the ground was pulling her down, lurched back.

Olivia watched her, and then, to Claudia's disbelief, said, "Would you like to learn Featherweight, Claudia?"

"What?"

"From what I've seen, you've gotten pretty good with Swift Step. Featherweight is sort of like another application of Swift Step, so I'm sure you'll pick it up like that."

"You— You really think so?"

"I do. The Odh manipulation isn't so difficult, and it'll give you more options in battle, so it's good things all around."

If Claudia were straight with herself, she couldn't imagine anything more tempting. Having seen Olivia using Swift Step, she didn't believe she was anywhere near to mastering it, but she was still genuinely happy to have earned Olivia's approval. And above anything else, learning a new skill was sure to allow her to improve herself still further.

"Well, I... Yes, I would like to," she said, feeling embarrassed for reasons she wasn't sure of herself as she bowed.

Olivia grinned. "Then I'll teach you next time," she said. Then, with a wave, she gave a little jump and dropped off the wall.

"General?!" Claudia rushed over to look down and saw Olivia land lightly in the midst of a crowd of imperial soldiers who were even now letting out cries of alarm. She really did move just like a feather.

"Now isn't the time for slack-jawed amazement, Claudia Jung!" She slapped herself on both cheeks, then set off at a run for the stairs, going after Olivia.

Second Allied Legion Command

The runner came to Blood five hours after the battle began.

"I bring a message from Colonel Claudia. She says they are about to open the gate, so be ready."

"Understood. Good work."

“Thank you, ser!”

Blood turned to Ashton. “Well, you heard it.” Ashton nodded quietly, then he called over the runners who stood at the ready.

“Please relay to the first through fifth battalions that they are to storm the fort the moment the gates open.”

“Yes, ser!” they chorused.

Just as Claudia’s message had said, it wasn’t long before the gate opened. Each battalion began to move, and soon enough, Blood received news that they were in the process of taking control of all significant locations throughout the fort. It was clear to anyone who looked that Fort Astora had fallen.

“A message from Second Lieutenant Gile. The enemy commander has escaped.”

“Escaped? Well, thank you for the report, soldier.”

“Yes, ser! Excuse me, ser!”

Scratching his cheek, Ashton turned to Blood, who had overseen this last exchange, and said apologetically, “I’m afraid we’ve lost their commander.”

“That you have, but that doesn’t change the fact that this was a brilliant plan.”

“You’re too kind, ser.”

“Besides, you saw this coming, didn’t you?” Blood said, grinning.

“Well, I suppose...” On Ashton’s orders, the Winged Crusaders were lying in wait along the escape route from the fort. So long as their commander, Amelia, didn’t make a misstep, their next battle ought to end favorably.

I can’t imagine a woman as proud as her making a mistake... Blood looked at Ashton. He really brought down an imperial outer fort in less than half a day. He’s the real deal.

Blood led their main force into Fort Astora with his head held high, where he found Olivia waiting for him. When they saw each other, they let out a shout of victory.

Fermat's Unit

Fermat escaped the fort unnoticed by the Royal Army, then, surrounded on all sides by his guards, he spurred his horse and galloped northwest toward Fort Belganna.

"How many do you think made it out?"

"Perhaps four hundred."

"Less than a seventh..." he murmured. "I suppose we should be grateful."

Though the Royal Army had taken the walls, Fermat and the others had succeeded in sealing the gate. Just when he had thought they might hold out until reinforcements reached them, however, something happened that shattered all his predictions. Without warning, Olivia had materialized in the courtyard, slaughtered his soldiers, then cut through the bolt on the gate with a single slash. After that, she pushed the gates open with ease. In that moment, Astora lost all its advantages as a fort. There was no longer anything they could do to resist the Royal Army, which outnumbered them twentyfold. Immediately, Fermat had given the order to retreat, then made his own escape. Now, here he was.

The soldiers were saying that the Death God descended upon them from the sky. Thinking about it now, I can't argue with them. How could she have appeared within the fort walls like that, unless she flew—?!

As they left the woods, Fermat yanked hard on his reins. His horse, unconcerned, gradually slowed, then came to a stop. The others following him had also brought their horses to an abrupt halt. The road in front of them was blocked by a wall of soldiers in leaf-green armor, all armed and glaring his way. It was plain to see that they were from the Winged Crusaders.

"Major General Fermat!"

"Settle down," he snapped. "I didn't think they'd anticipate our escape route..." But so they must have done, or else there was no reason for them to be lying in wait here. Fermat gritted his teeth, then he caught sight of a woman in dazzling, pure white armor. *That'll be their commander, no doubt.* She was

beautiful, with a terrible icy gleam in her eyes. She flicked her pale blue hair back with a flourish.

“That Ashton Senefelder doesn’t look like much, but he isn’t an opponent you can trifle with,” she said. Fermat had no idea what she meant. She looked at him and his guards as though noticing them for the first time.

“You don’t interest me at all, so choose quickly. You may either fight, then die, or not fight, then die.”

“Major General, they’ve already cut off our retreat,” muttered the captain of Fermat’s guard. Fermat turned and saw Winged Crusaders filling the road behind them as well. In order to survive, they were going to have to find a way out of an impossible situation.

“Joining forces with Fernest?” he shouted, being deliberately provocative. “Does Mekia know no shame?”

“Is that the best you can do? They say barking dogs are seldom the ones with any bite. But bark away, if you like. While you still can.”

The woman was a step above him in her taunts. Feeling hatred boiling among his soldiers, Fermat drew his longsword and said, “This is an opportunity, my friends. Let’s teach these yokels some imperial courtesy.”

“Yes, ser!”

“But don’t stick around. If you break through, you’re free to run. What matters now is that we get to Fort Belganna as fast as possible and alert them to Fernest’s invasion.”

“We sent messengers as soon as we learned of the attack. On your orders, ser...” The guard captain looked puzzled.

“They’ve likely been killed,” Fermat said ruefully. “Our enemy was prepared for everything else, after all.”

“Surely not...”

“We’re out of options. You understand?” As his soldiers nodded silently, the guards didn’t move.

“We, your guards, will follow you to the end, Major General.”

“I’m not making an exception for you. You are to go to Fort Belganna and tell them that the Royal Army is invading. Our victory now rides on someone getting to that fort.” Ignoring the guard captain, who started to speak, Fermat took a deep breath. “You are deluding yourselves if you think some backwater nation will get the better of the glorious imperial army!” he bellowed. His hundred soldiers all drew their weapons and threw themselves at the Winged Crusaders. Soon, it turned into a melee. Fermat turned his longsword toward the woman with the pale blue hair. She drew her sword calmly from its lavishly embellished sheath.

“Tell me your name, before you die,” he shouted.

“It isn’t as though you are going to be able to tell it to anyone.” As they passed each other, their swords clashed with a piercing metallic screech. At the same time, Fermat’s ears caught another sound, unnatural and grating. Turning his horse, he looked down at his hands and saw a fine crack in the blade of his sword—a sword forged by one of the most renowned swordsmiths in the empire. Despite himself, he looked over at the woman.

“What, did that useless hunk of metal you call a sword crack?” she asked, her voice dripping with mockery. Fermat spat. “There’s nothing to worry about for a warrior of your caliber,” she went on. “Crack or not, the outcome of this battle isn’t going to change.”

“Go to hell!” Fermat urged his horse to a gallop once more, his sword pointed at the woman’s heart. But the next moment, the world flipped, and he found himself crashing to the ground, horse and all.

“Wh-What just happened?!” His horse rarely if ever spooked, yet now it was whinnying and kicking frantically. The woman looked down at it as it tried and failed to stand. A pale blue light emanated from her left hand.

“That light...” Fermat gasped. “You’re Amelia Stolast!”

“Well done. I confess I am surprised to hear that my name is now known even to the likes of you. It’s been a pleasure, I’m sure.” Amelia nimbly dismounted her horse, then, drawing one foot back, she bent her other knee slightly in a lady’s curtsy. She meant to mock him to the end. “You aren’t going to attack me?” she asked, cocking her head and blinking a few times as she regarded

Fermat, who stood with his sword at the ready, on his guard. Then, she smiled thinly. “Fear not, I won’t use magecraft on you.”

“You...You think you can stand there and laugh at me?!” Fermat closed on Amelia in an instant, then raised his sword above his head and swung it down. But Amelia twisted to one side, dodging his blow so that his blade only managed to cut a few stray hairs. He readied himself for another attack, but a moment later, he felt an extraordinary pain in his abdomen. His knees buckled under him. Fearing what he would find, he looked down and saw blood pouring from a great gash across his side. He hadn’t even realized he had been attacked.

Fermat looked up and saw Amelia standing over him, genuine pity in her eyes.

“If you didn’t even see my attack just now, there is no point in carrying this on any further. Let us end this.” She raised her sword, holding the hilt up to her cheek. Fermat cackled fearlessly, even as he vomited up great gouts of blood.

“Be sure of it, Lord Felix will have your head,” he said. “Until then, enjoy what little life you have left.”

“How very droll. In thanks for providing me with such amusement, I shall kill you painlessly. May the blessings of Strecia go with you.”

An ominous whistle of air reached his ears. The next moment, Fermat was gone.



“Thousand-Wing Amelia.” Senior Hundred-Wing Jean Alexia, one of the Twelve Angels, appeared with her cross spear under one arm. Amelia looked over the scattered corpses of the imperial soldiers, then at the lone imperial soldier who was still desperately brandishing a sword despite being surrounded by guardians. The man wore armor different from that of a regular soldier, so she guessed he was probably one of the guards assigned to the man she had just killed. She was impressed by how valiantly he struggled.

“You’ve finished with them?”

“Yes, ser. We’ll have mopped up the last of them soon.”

“As I’m sure you know, I will not allow even one of them to escape. It would reflect poorly on my good name.”

Amelia had no choice but to acknowledge that Ashton Senefelder was an accomplished commander. If they failed to contain the enemy here, it would mean bearing the disappointment of the Royal Army, and by extension, of Blood and Olivia. Amelia couldn’t bear that, besides which, it would put her in an awkward position with Sofitia.

“Yes, ser. I am well aware of that,” Jean said, saluting.

Amelia gently put her lips close to Jean’s ear. “And if one of them *were* to slip away...” she breathed. “Well, I’m sure you know.”

“Of course, ser.” Jean gulped, nodding. “I do.”

“I’ll leave the rest to you then, Jean.” Amelia clapped her lightly on the shoulder, then left the battlefield alone.

VI

Spurred on by their victory at Fort Astora, the Second Allied Legion continued west toward the imperial capital of Olsted, bringing down every fort that blocked their advance along the way.

The Imperial Forces at Fort Tezcapolis

The distinctive horseshoe-shaped keep of Fort Tezcapolis rang with shouts of rage and hatred.

“Death God Olivia! The road beyond leads to the imperial capital—I will never allow you to reach it!”

“Thank you so much for telling me!”

“Damn it all. Someone, I don’t care who, stop the Death God!” But there was no one to heed the commander’s orders. Indeed, they were all backing away, trying to get as far away from Olivia as possible.

As Olivia took a step forward, one soldier screamed, “N-No, I can’t!”

“I’m getting out of here!” yelled another.

“Eh?! I’m going first!” With that, they all fell over each other in their haste to flee. Only the commander remained, gaping after his soldiers in shock.

“Th-Those rats!” His face turning beet red, he slammed his fist against a pillar.

“They all ran away, huh? What are you going to do?”

“Guh...”

“Guh?”

“Guooooaargh!” The commander charged at her like a wild animal, swinging his sword down at her head. Olivia lightly deflected the blow, then slashed with the ebony blade from his shoulder down across his chest. There was silence as the commander’s upper half slid off and fell, spilling his guts across the floor. His lower half stayed standing.

“I know I say this every time, but it’s really gruesome, the way you kill people.” Gauss appeared, sword resting on his shoulder. He screwed up his face as he saw the corpses strewn about. The soldiers behind him had their hands clamped tight over their mouths.

“How’s it going?” Olivia asked.

“We’ve mostly subdued the enemy resistance.”

“Okay, then let’s leave this place to the rear guard and get a move on ahead. According to that human lying over there, it’s not far to the imperial capital.”

Gauss gulped, then started stroking his beard, which he had been growing lately. Olivia harbored secret hopes that when it got a little longer, he would look like a bear.

“We’re finally there, then...”

“Yes. I think our next battle will be against the Azure Knights.”

The First Allied Legion had apparently been working under the assumption that as soon as Fort Astora fell, the empire would have heard of it. But thanks to Ashton’s thorough efforts in preventing any information from getting out, they had still seen no sign of the Azure Knights mobilizing. Even so, the fact that communications from all the forts had ceased must have raised the imperial army’s suspicions. Olivia returned her sword to its scabbard, Felix’s face in her mind’s eye.

Felix’s Workroom in Listelein Castle, Olsted

The regular communications from the forts to the east of Olsted had ceased. Felix felt a sense of foreboding as he gazed down at the map.

We haven’t had word from Fort Astora, Fort Belganna, or Fort Tezcapolis. What do those three have in common...? He picked up a pen and drew a line connecting each fort. *Surely not...?!*

Felix called Teresa and told her to send a shimmer to the forts. Two days later, Felix learned that the foreboding he had felt had been accurate, and in the worst possible way.

“This is an utter disaster,” Teresa said, looking like she couldn’t believe what was happening.

“I never imagined the Royal Army would invade the empire...”

It would have been one thing after the Royal Army had driven the Crimson Knights from the north to retake their lands. But Felix could never have predicted they would launch an invasion while in the middle of laying siege to Kier Fortress.

“I don’t believe I underestimated them, but perhaps we became complacent

about some things.” He couldn’t deny that, when the Royal Army had sent a massive force to assault Kier Fortress, he had directed all his attention that way. Looking now at the course the Royal Army was taking, he could see that their final destination was here—in other words, Felix concluded, they were coming for Olsted.

“Their objective, could it be...?” Teresa, whose instincts were good, had realized it too. Felix nodded solemnly.

“Just as you’re thinking now, Lieutenant. The attack on Kier Fortress was a distraction. From the start, they never planned on taking it. Though for a distraction,” he added, “it was on too grand a scale.” Which was precisely why Felix had not caught on to their true intentions.

Teresa’s face grew troubled. “If the assault on Kier Fortress is a distraction, then how do you explain Death God Olivia? I thought she was the Royal Army’s ultimate weapon.”

Despite how much Teresa left out, Felix understood well enough what she was saying. And he had only one answer for her.

“Death God Olivia is not at Kier Fortress. It must be a trick to make it seem as if she is there.”

“Then we must send word to Kier Fortress at once.”

“There is no need for that.”

“But why?” Teresa asked, her brow furrowing in bewilderment.

“Because their basic objective—a strong defense of the fortress—remains unchanged. And besides, sooner or later Rosenmarie will realize what they are doing too.”

“So that means Death God Olivia must be...”

“No doubt advancing on Olsted with her army.”

“We must take emergency measures!”

“Naturally, I intend to do so.” Felix stood up and had just swept his cloak over his shoulders when there was a soft knock, and the door opened.

“I beg your pardon. Am I interrupting your conversation?”

“Chancellor Darmés?!” Teresa exclaimed, thrown by the chancellor’s sudden appearance.

“I won’t take much of your time.” He entered the room, his black robe dragging along the floor. Behind him appeared a pallid-faced girl. It was Felix’s first time laying eyes on her, and his first impression, looking into her vacant eyes, was not a good one.

“I myself was just about to call upon you, Lord Chancellor,” he said.

“Were you really?” Darmés replied. “How very fortunate we did not miss one another. Humans are granted so very little time, after all.” He gave a darkly significant chuckle. Something about the laugh struck Felix as strange, but he pressed on anyway.

“Won’t you sit down?” he offered, gesturing to the sofa. It wouldn’t do to keep Darmés, the second most powerful man in the empire, standing. But Darmés declined with a wave of his hand.

“I am content where I am. What I have to say will not take long. You meant to call on me in regard to the invasion by Fernest, I believe?”

“Just so, my lord.”

“It is regarding the same matter that I am here to see you. To get straight to the point, the emperor has seen fit to bestow upon us his permission. Felix, you are to lead the Azure Knights out to meet the invading Royal Army. My own forces shall safeguard the capital in your absence.” With that, Darmés turned to look at his companion, who spoke for the first time to introduce herself as Lieutenant General Flora Ray, making her standing clear.

A general, Felix thought. And yet it’s not a name I have ever heard before. But another thought was already preoccupying him. Darmés can’t have heard the news much sooner than I did. For that, he moved far too quickly in making arrangements with the emperor. And his own forces...?

Word had reached Felix that Darmés was setting up his own army. They were notable in that they wore black armor, but that was the only knowledge of them that Felix possessed. Given Flora was wearing this black armor, she was

likely a commander in Darmés's army. It was clear that he meant to use this opportunity to introduce her to one of the Three Generals.

If Marshal Gladden were here, it would not have gone well...

Felix recalled that back when Darmés had put together his personal army without a word to the Three Generals, Gladden had been thoroughly incensed. Felix had not been without his own thoughts on the matter, but when he heard it was out of concern over the imperial army's string of losses, he could hardly object. Despite his unease at the idea of leaving Olsted in the care of a force of whose nature he knew nothing, the emperor's orders were absolute.

"Understood, my lord. I, Felix von Sieger, shall meet the Royal Army in battle." Felix saluted and Darmés nodded, smiling.

"I do appreciate it. I can rest easy, knowing I've left it in your hands."

"I would not be so sure. It is a certainty that Death God Olivia is among them."

At once, Darmés's expression turned to one of unconcealed boredom. "The girl again?" he said. "You and all the others. Don't you think you're a little obsessed with her?" As usual, Darmés refused to take any mention of Olivia seriously.

"As I have told you before, my lord," Felix said forcefully, "she is powerful. We cannot underestimate her."

"Do you lack confidence that you can defeat her?"

"No, that isn't..."

"Then I see no problem. I look forward to your success, Felix." Darmés pulled his hood down so that it shadowed his eyes, at which Teresa hurried over to the door. Flora made the motion of a salute without showing any sign of spirit, then followed her master from the room like a wraith. Teresa shut the door quietly, then turned back to him, the displeasure in her face clear.

"What is it?" Felix asked.

"I don't like to say it, but Lieutenant General Flora's behavior toward you was lacking in propriety, ser."

"Do you think so? She struck me as somehow doll-like."

Teresa paused for a moment, pursing her lips before saying, “She was very pretty, I grant you.”

Felix smiled uncomfortably. He hadn’t been referring to Flora’s appearance, but apparently that was how it had come across to Teresa. He cleared his throat.

“I mean to convene a council of war at once. Send out a summons to the Azure Knights.”

“Yes, ser!” barked Teresa, reverting back to her role as aide at his order. She hurried from the room.

Felix leaned back into the sofa and closed his eyes. He saw the shining silver hair, the exquisitely beautiful face, and the ebony eyes, darker than darkness, that had frozen his blood. The image in Felix’s mind of Olivia on that day rose fresh in his mind.

The time has come at last, then... he thought. Slowly, his lids opened. Beneath them, his eyes shone with a gleam like the blade of a knife.

Epilogue: The Final Battle

Within the Asvelt Empire

The messenger brought the news that the imperial army had marched ten days after the Second Allied Legion entered imperial lands.

“Their forces are currently divided into two main groups. One of around forty thousand soldiers is advancing to detour around the Edan River. The other has around thirty thousand soldiers. They are all in blue armor, so there can be no doubt that these are the Azure Knights. The Azure Knights are marching toward us.”

A nervous look flashed across the faces of the officers. Blood pressed the cigarette he was smoking into the ashtray, silently holding out his empty other hand as he did so.

“Ser.” Lise handed him a map, which he took. The other key officers gathered around him in a ring.

“What do you think, Liv?” he asked.

“I doubt they’re planning any tricks. The course of the Azure Knights’ advance makes me think they plan on deploying here, don’t you think?”

Olivia pointed to the Tahner Plains on the map. Blood gave it a long stare from over her shoulder, then turned to Ashton.

“Any thoughts, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton?”

“I agree with Olivia. If I were to add anything, it would be that the force of forty thousand looks like it means to catch us in a vise.” He paused. “They’re being very obvious about it, though.”

Blood chuckled. “It’s bait for the Eighth Legion.”

He had no arguments with either of them, and so their course forward came together naturally. Blood, leading the Second Legion, and Amelia, leading the Winged Crusaders, would meet the army that appeared to be aiming to pincer

them. Olivia's Eighth Legion would meet the Azure Knights head-on, just as they had planned at the beginning. In other words, unlooked for, the purposes of the two armies had aligned.

"I know there's no point telling you this now, Liv," Blood said, "but these are the Azure Knights—the empire's strongest—we're facing. I can rely on you for this, can't I?"

"You can," Olivia replied. "I won't know if I can win until I'm out there, but I'll give it my best shot."

She raised a confident fist, and no one could help but smile. Even now, she didn't show a shred of nerves. She couldn't have been any less Olivia.

Blood, however, looked grave as he said, "If you feel you're in danger, you withdraw. No hesitation. Under no circumstances are you to push yourself too far."

"You've got it!"

"Colonel Claudia, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton, I'm counting on you too."

"Yes, ser!" the two of them chorused. Their faces were drawn as they saluted. Blood would have lent aid to the Eighth Legion if it were within his powers, but he knew the imperial army, when they came, would be unwavering in their resolve.

He turned to address everyone gathered there, and called out, "The battle has reached its final stage at last! I thank you all for your service that has brought us here and know without a doubt that here, you will fight even harder! This ends in our victory!"

There was a roar from the soldiers as they raised their fists high. After the string of victories that had led them to this point, their morale was burning hot.

As Blood looked out at them, Lise came up to stand beside him.

"Are you worried?" she asked.

"Do I look it?"

"Yes, ser. You do." She smiled softly, and Blood scratched his cheek.

“Quit it with the roundabout allusions, would you?”

Lise chuckled evilly. “Your thoughts really do show on your face, you know, ser. Though I flatter myself that I am the only one who notices.”

“O-Oh, really.”

“Yes, really,” she replied, puffing her chest out. In his embarrassment, Blood’s eyes wandered, looking at everything but her.

“You don’t need to worry, though,” she went on. “We have an angel of battle on our side, after all.”

Her eyes went to Olivia, upon whom Gauss had bestowed this title. Surrounded by the others, her arms were spread wide, and she wore a beaming smile.

“I wouldn’t have expected such optimism from you at the final stage.”

“At times, ser, an optimistic outlook is more likely to produce a good result,” she replied, and Blood felt the anxiety he had been concealing melt away.

Women, he thought, they’re tough as nails, and not just Liv. Though with Liv, when all you see is that innocent smile of hers, you remember she’s still just a child... I’d better put everything I have to give into this, so that she can do the same without worrying about what lies behind her. And for all the soldiers who have given their lives so far. And for everyone who’ll lead us in the ages to come. Right. He pulled a fresh cigarette from his pocket and lit it. The final battle was about to begin.

Olivia and the thirty-five thousand soldiers of the Eighth Legion faced off against Felix and his thirty thousand Azure Knights on the Tahner Plains to the east of the imperial capital of Olsted. Plains they were in name only, however, as a look around revealed hills, forests, and marshland. It was a location that allowed for a wide variety of battle plans that would test a commander’s capabilities to their limit.

Azure Knights’ Command

“Our troops will soon all be in position, my lord.” Felix, clad in azure plate, nodded but did not reply to Teresa’s report. At his belt hung the longsword Elhazard, also known as “the Godslayer.” He was fully armed.

Far in the distance, the Eighth Legion advanced. In addition to the scarlet banners adorned with eight stars flew a great number of the black banners he’d heard of that bore the crest of the Death God, making their presence deeply felt.

A truly mighty formation, he thought. *I suppose I should have expected no less from Death God Olivia*. His gaze roved out to where Olivia’s command must be set up. It was exceedingly rare that a commander was able to cross swords with an enemy in battle, but this time, Felix was sure his blade would meet hers before the battle was through.

“My lord...” He looked back and saw Teresa’s anxious face peering at him. In a gesture of reassurance, he laid a hand on her shoulder.

“There is no cause for you to worry. I will put an end to Death God Olivia. No matter what.” Allowing the Royal Army to break through them here would be to allow them to invade the capital. It was obvious that the Eighth Legion’s object was to conquer the capital—in other words, they were after Emperor Ramza. Felix quietly clenched his fist. He *had* to stop Olivia, even if it meant putting his own life on the line.

Olivia Valedstorm, he thought. *Let us end this*.

Eighth Legion Command

“From what I can see, they’re entirely without weakness...” Ashton looked through his spyglass and gulped. Olivia twirled her new prototype spyglass, which she had nicknamed “Sasuke,” and put it back in its holster.

“I thought the same,” she said. “What about you, Claudia?”

“So did I. Honestly, I’m not sure how to attack...”

Which way the scales of victory tipped would depend on which side seized control in the early stages of the battle. As reflected by Claudia’s concerns, how they entered the battle would be extremely important.

Olivia cleared her throat once. “As such,” she said, “I’ll be joining the vanguard.”

“What’s ‘as such’ supposed to mean? You’re the *supreme commander*.”

“Am I not allowed to be in the vanguard, then? That’s not like you, Ashton.” Unlike Claudia, whose head was as hard as black glass, Ashton was more flexible in his decision-making, and so Olivia was more than a little thrown by this response.

“I’ve got more than a few opinions of my own.”

“Huh,” Olivia said lightly, staring at Ashton as he frowned.

“You’re bloody casual, considering we’re about to fight the final battle to decide the fate of Fernest,” Ashton said, then looked up at the sky and exhaled.

“When you say you’ll be in the vanguard,” Claudia said, eyes narrowed, “you’re not thinking of leading the charge, are you?”

“Bingo!” Olivia replied, smiling and clapping her hands exuberantly even as she felt a chill run down her spine.

“I *knew* it...” Claudia frowned more deeply than Olivia had ever seen before, but eventually her shoulders fell, and she let out a long sigh. It was only too obvious that she was against the idea, but Olivia wasn’t about to back down this time.

“Even if I stopped you here, you’d only do it anyway, wouldn’t you, ser?”

“Yep. We have to win this battle, no matter what. That means using whatever means we have available to us. I’ll lead the charge to sow as much disarray among the enemy as I can, then you wait for the right moment and send a heavy-hitting unit, either Ellis’s or Gile’s, in after me. I’ll leave command of the first stage of the battle to you two. I’ll send instructions if anything goes wrong, of course.” When Olivia was done with her orders, Ashton shrugged, and Claudia looked severe.

“All right,” Ashton said. “I trust you, so all I can do is follow you. In this battle and whatever comes after it.”

“Like General Blood said earlier, please at least make sure not to do anything

reckless.”

“You got it!”

Ashton and Claudia nodded, then got straight to work hammering out their battle plan. Olivia watched them fondly, pressing her hands to her chest as she felt something warm filling it.

“Right!” she announced. “Ashton, make me one of those, you know the ones, to boost my spirits!”

“By those, you mean...that?”

“Yeah! It’ll give me even more energy.” Olivia held up both her arms and flexed.

“Well, if that’s all it takes to get you full of energy. Hold on a minute.” Ashton left the tent, then came back not long after with a basket dangling from his arm.

“Here, now. Just as ordered.”

“Thank you!” Olivia took her chicken sandwich, complete with Ashton’s special homemade mustard, and shoved the whole thing into her mouth, chewing happily.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” she said when she was done. Waving to Claudia and Ashton, she hooked a foot into her stirrup and leapt lightly up onto Comet’s back. The horse was clad in ebony armor largely the same as her own.

“Let’s go, Comet!” The horse reared up with a piercing neigh, then galloped away like a gale rushing toward the Azure Knights in the distance.

To Claudia, she looked like nothing so much as a hero out of a song.

The year was Tempus Fugit 1000, and the Ruby Moon rose. Two armies prepared for a clash upon which both of their fates rested, the battle in which each of their mightiest warriors would find themselves reunited. What future awaited them at the end of this battle, in that moment, neither of them had any way to know.



Afterword

As I briefly mentioned on the cover, my beloved computer that has served me these past ten years as of this volume has gone to a place beyond my reach. It remains in sleep mode even when I press the keys, and even when I forced a shutdown then tried to restart it, it showed no signs of powering on again. In that case, I thought, I tried however many times to unplug and plug back in the power cable, but the only response was flashing from the main power and HDD lights. This was where (in a cold sweat) I at last arrived at the conclusion that my computer had broken. I've bought a few new computers in my time, but it was only ever because the previous one had gotten too old, not because it had broken, which only added to my shock this time.

Right, computers can break. Huh... stares into space

Having said that, I'd used this computer for ten years, so I'd been thinking it was about time to replace it. Only, I'd put it off because I was so busy, and this is where it got me...

Anyway, I had to at least save the HDD, but my beloved computer is what they call an "all-in-one PC." I looked it up and found that it takes a fair amount of dismantling to get the HDD out. In the end, I spent two days on it, watching videos on how to remove a hard drive as I went, and successfully retrieved it. *All right!*

The next question was, is the data still there? Fortunately, I also have a laptop, so I quickly bought an HDD to USB cable and plugged it in. I opened up the folder with bated breath, and found...that the data was safe! *All right! Victory is mine! ...Against what?*

I quickly transferred the data and so managed somehow to escape without any dire consequences. If the data had been gone, I'd have had to ask a professional to recover it, but when I looked it up, I found that they don't come cheap... So it was a relief for a few different reasons.

Now as I'm writing this afterword, I'm expecting my new computer to show

up any minute. (I learned my lesson, even if it was too late, and bought a built-to-order PC this time. From now on, if anything breaks, I should be able to get it fixed straightaway. I'm done with all-in-one computers...)

Despite running into more trouble than I ever have before, I still somehow managed to get Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 5 released. I struggled with the structure even more than I did with volume 4, but in the end, I think it was worth it, and I am pleased with what I wrote (I am at present basking in unchecked self-satisfaction).

Here now, I would like to make my customary thanks. First, to Higuchi-sama, my editor. My sincere thanks for your concern when my computer broke. To be honest, the word "extension" passed through my mind. Rest assured that I now have absolutely everything backed up.

To Cierra: thank you for the gorgeous illustrations! I especially loved Amelia's icy glare!

As with volume 4, volume 2 of the Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade manga will be released by Dengeki Comics NEXT at more or less the same time as this volume (Olivia is at peak adorableness in volume 2 as well. I hope you'll pick it up!).

Now, then, our tale has at last reached its high point. I rest my pen here in the faith that you, my elite readers who have read this far, will stay with me until the end.

It is a day in July. I am watching the rain fall upon the trees through the window.

Ayamine Maito

"You really would die straight
away without me."

"That's right. If you ever
leave me, I'm done for."



*Ashton
Senefelder*

*Olivia
Valedstorm*




"Shouldn't you stop them?"

Lise
Prussie

Amelia
Stolast

Raod
Enfield

"It's not my policy to be counterproductive. Why don't you tell that to our friend drinking tea over there?"



Hassel raised his long-bladed spear, Moonlit Mist, the heirloom of the Trident family. He spun it above his head, then brought it around to slash at Olivia. But she was gone, leaping away higher than any human should have been able to manage. Moonlit Mist only succeeded in knocking aside another Royal Army soldier in its path.



Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE
◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA

V

Bonus Short Stories

A Day With Olivia and Evanson

The Southern Quarter of Fis

Today... Today is the day...

Evanson paced back and forth, back and forth in front of the shop, stealing nervous glances at the apron-clad figure on the other side of the glass. Just then, someone behind him tapped him on the shoulder. He turned, full of trepidation, and found himself face-to-face with Olivia, her head cocked to one side.

“You’ve been wandering around here for a while. What are you doing?”

“Oh, it’s you, General Olivia...” Evanson said. “Please don’t surprise me like that.”

“It’s not like I was *trying* to frighten you...”

“What brought you out to a place like this all of a sudden?”

“Me? I just came back from the castle.”

“You mean Letitia Castle?” Evanson said. “I beg your pardon, ser, but what were you doing *there*?”

“I got summoned by the king.”

“By His Majesty King Alfonse?”

“Yeah, he was all ‘Sofitia this,’ ‘Sofitia that.’ It was *such* a pain,” Olivia finished, puffing out her cheeks.

Evanson quickly looked from side to side, then said, “Please, you mustn’t criticize the king in a place like this. If the police were to overhear, it would *not* be good.”

“But what are *you* doing here, Evanson?”

Evanson sighed to himself. He had thought he had successfully diverted the conversation, only for it to fall apart in the end. Still, if it had been his older sister Ellis, things would have been far worse.

Evanson coughed loudly a few times. “I just..fancied some bread...”

“Bread?” Olivia, peering through the shop window, cocked her head at him again. “But they have bread here. Aren’t you going to buy any?”

“Um...”

“Oh, this is perfect. I just missed out on my tower cake, too.”

“You what? H-Hey!” Olivia seized Evanson’s arm and, just like that, dragged him into the shop.

“Oh, um... Welcome...” The girl inside met Evanson’s eyes, her cheeks turning a delicate pink as she greeted them.

“I, u-um, you’re welcome!” Evanson felt his face growing hot and looked down, while Olivia, after a puzzled glance at the pair of them, immediately began to order.

“—a-and altogether, that comes to two silver pieces.”

Olivia put her mountain of bread down on the counter and turned to Evanson. “Two silver pieces, she said.”

“What? Am I supposed to pay for that?”

“Well I don’t understand how money works,” Olivia said. “And I don’t carry any money on me anyway.”

“About that,” Evanson muttered, “as I keep telling Major Ashton, I don’t see how that’s anything other than an excuse, to be honest.” Still, he took out his purse and handed two silver coins over to the girl. As he did so, his fingertips brushed her hand.

They both gasped, pulling their hands back and looking down. Olivia stared intently at them, then a smile blossomed on her face.

“I get it! Evanson, you *like* her!”

“Eh?!”

“Not only that, you like Evanson too, don’t you?” Olivia said, closely examining the girl’s face.

“E-Er...” The girl gripped the front of her apron tight. Evanson wished the ground beneath him would open, even just a crack, and suck him in. He was strongly aware that his ears were the hottest they had ever been.

“Hey, I did well, right? All this time learning about humans has paid off. Actually...” She paused. “Right! I’m being a third wheel right now!” Cradling her bulging bag of bread under one arm, Olivia left the shop, waving over her shoulder at them.

Evanson had never imagined he would have his feelings for the shop girl exposed by *Olivia*, of all people. “Well, um, I just thought...” he blurted out desperately. “Only if you’d like to...would you...go out with me...?”

Silence hung over them for a brief moment. Then—and Evanson didn’t know how he still heard her voice so clearly for how quiet a whisper it came out—the girl said, “Yes.”

They both looked up at one another and shared a tiny smile.

For Evanson, spring had come early.

A Second Day With Olivia and Sara

The Royal Chambers in Letitia Castle, Fernest

While Cornelius was away leading the assault on Kier Fortress, Lieutenant General Sara had been assigned to defend the capital in his absence. When she heard that Olivia had returned from the Holy Land of Mekia, she summoned her to the Shimmering Hall in the heart of the royal chambers.

“It’s always so sparkly here. Isn’t it too bright for you all?” Olivia said, squinting as she gazed around. Sara couldn’t help but smile. Olivia had to be the only one who would think such a thing when faced with the sumptuousness of the royal chambers.

“I suppose it might seem rather bright when your eyes aren’t accustomed to

it,” she said, stopping in front of a door.

Olivia cocked her head. “But this isn’t your room, Lady Sara,” she said.

“I’m impressed you remember when you’ve only been here once before.”

“Ashton says I have an exceptional memory,” Olivia said, laughing. Sara, meanwhile, drew out a golden key and inserted it into the lock in front of them. She turned it to the right with a satisfying click.

“After you,” Sara said, pushing the door open and gesturing for Olivia to enter. Olivia stepped forward, then gasped in amazement.

“There’s books everywhere! I thought *your* room was full of books, but there are so many more here. It’s a bit like the Royal Library.”

The walls were covered with bookshelves, which were packed tight with books. Comparing it to the Royal Library was going a little far, but it was still undeniably one of Sara’s favorite rooms.

“This looks interesting,” Olivia immediately reached for one of the books, but Sara rushed to stop her. “Can’t I touch them?” she asked.

“That can wait for next time. Today there is a book I’d like you to read.” Sara took Olivia’s snow-white hand and led her to another shelf. “Here it is,” she said, taking a volume from the shelf and handing it to Olivia with a smile.

“*The Letters from the Land of the Dead?*” Olivia said, reading the title aloud.

“Let’s sit down here.” Taking Olivia’s hand again, Sara pulled the other girl down onto a sofa. Olivia hesitated, then opened to the first page.

I can hardly wait to see what she thinks, Sara thought to herself.

Once upon a time, or so the story went, there was a town in which lived a noble named Michel and a servant named Stefanie. Overcoming their differences of birth, the two young people became secret lovers. However, one day, Michel died in an unexpected accident. Unaware of the accident, Stefanie worried over Michel when his visits to her ceased, but as she could not very well call on him at his residence, she was left waiting for when Michel would come and see her again. It was not long after this that letters began to arrive at Stefanie’s house—letters from Michel, who should have been dead.

As far as Sara knew, there wasn't another woman alive as beautiful as Olivia, but despite this, the other girl had no romantic connections. A person on the street would have thrown up their hands to hear Sara thinking of such things in the midst of a war—especially as she was the fourth princess of Fernest! And yet Sara could not help it. She had to know about the love life of this girl who was practically the embodiment of beauty. Ever since Sara had come into the world as a princess, she had been subject to a variety of restrictions, including on who she was free to love. It was perhaps this that inspired Sara to dream on behalf of Olivia, who was free to live however she chose..

But can she really be reading it? Sara watched as Olivia progressed through the book at an extraordinary pace. It looked for all the world like she was merely flipping through the pages. But as Sara, after asking a maidservant to bring them tea and cakes, took down a book and started reading herself, Olivia clapped the book shut.

"You finished it already?" Sara looked at the clock on the table. Not even thirty minutes had passed since Olivia started reading. Sara thought of herself as a fairly fast reader, but Olivia was *too* quick.

"I'm a fast reader," Olivia said by way of explanation as she began shoveling sugar into her tea. Sara, thinking that the flavor of the tea would be imperceptible under that much sugar, wasted no time in asking Olivia her thoughts.

"Hmm," Olivia said. "It didn't really grab me."

"Oh..." Olivia's negative review was a disappointment to Sara. Among the many volumes she had read, the book was a particular favorite of hers, so she had hoped that Olivia would share her feelings.

"It's not so much that *The Letters from the Land of the Dead* is gripping. But Stefanie's childhood friend Alan is so kind and innocent and clumsy it feels like your heart might break, and yet that's what makes him so incredibly lovable. Didn't you feel that, Olivia?" Sara asked, leaning breathlessly toward Olivia.

"I, um, didn't get that impression..." Olivia replied, looking strained.

"Then what *did* you think about it?"

“Well,” Olivia said slowly, “I wondered why Alan didn’t tell Stefanie he loves her.”

“In part, it’s because Stefanie’s heart is full with love for Michel, but more than that, he felt he himself had a duty to Michel as his best friend. Despite that, he couldn’t bear to see Stefanie so depressed, and so he wrote her letters in Michel’s name. Even if they could never meet again, he wanted to find a way to make her happy. Doesn’t it tug at your heart?”

Despite this impassioned speech from Sara, Olivia only cocked her head in perfect bewilderment.

“But when it comes down to it, he was lying, wasn’t he?” she pointed out. “You mustn’t lie, or a demon will come and tear your tongue out.”

“Well, perhaps...” Leaving aside the talk of demons and tongues, Sara had to admit that Olivia made a good point.

“Besides, I don’t see what duty he had to Michel. Does being friends mean his own feelings don’t matter at all? Like, Michel was *dead*. If Alan told Stefanie he loves her, she might come to feel the same way for him. I’d hate spending my whole life just writing letters pretending to be someone else. And *then*, in the end, he just gets sick and quietly dies.” With that, Olivia swallowed her cup of sugar-laden tea in a single gulp, then reached for a cake with equal gusto.

Sara sighed. *Such conversation doesn’t seem to interest her in the slightest. She has an appetite, but I suppose it isn’t for romance...*

Although she didn’t know how the other girl thought of her, to Sara, Olivia was the first real friend she’d ever had. Rising from her seat, the book she took from the shelf this time was an adventure story that Olivia was sure to love.

A Fifth Day With Olivia and Claudia

The Jung Estate, Fernest

In order to keep the promise Olivia had made to Sasha on their trip to the beach, Claudia made her way to the garden.

“Shall we get down to it, then?”

“Yes, let’s! Who’ll be ‘it’?”

“We’ll be hiding from Claudia, of course,” Olivia said promptly. Claudia frowned. She wasn’t sure what Olivia meant by that.

“Why am I ‘it,’ General?” she asked.

“What? Because you’re a yak—” Olivia began, then clapped her hands over her mouth in horror. Seeing this, Claudia couldn’t help but be curious.

“Because I’m a what?” she asked

“B-Because,” Olivia stammered, then went on more firmly. “Because! You’re Sasha’s big sister, aren’t you?”

“That is certainly true. And does that have something to do with my being ‘it’?”

“Of course it does. The older sister is always ‘it,’ that’s how it’s been done since long ago,” Olivia said, nodding with the air of one imparting wisdom. Claudia stared wordlessly into her eyes and she turned away, her neck moving like a stiff, rusted gate.

“I smell something fishy,” Claudia said pleasantly.

“Fishy?! Nothing fishy here!” Olivia replied a little hysterically, waving her hands.

Yes, there’s definitely something funny going on, Claudia thought, and she was just about to interrogate Olivia further, when Sasha tugged on her arm.

“Come on, let’s play hide-and-seek,” she pleaded.

Claudia hesitated, then said, “Yes, all right.” They could only stay for so many days. For the sake of Sasha, who spent so much time feeling lonely, she would pause her inquisition of Olivia for now. And so, in the end, Claudia became “it.”

“Ready?” she called.

“Ready!” The other two’s distant voices chorused back, and Claudia slowly opened her eyes.

All right, then. She surveyed her surroundings, then immediately set off

walking toward a tall tree.

“Found you, General.”

Olivia laughed. “Oops. That was fast.” She leapt down lightly from the top of the tree, rubbing her head. “I’m impressed you noticed me hiding there, though.”

“These little ones told me.”

Claudia pointed at a gray squirrel that sat on Olivia’s shoulder. A whole scurry of squirrels had gathered around the base of the tree, likely after the trail of cake and cookie crumbs Olivia left behind her. It was as though Olivia had been asking to be found.

Olivia laughed again. “Is that right? You hear that, Mr. Squirrel? It’s your fault I was found.” She put a crumbled cookie on her hand. The gray squirrel shoved it all into its cheeks, then scurried down Olivia to the ground before dashing away along with its companions.

“So that leaves Sasha...” Claudia said. She had been so convinced that hunting down Olivia, who could perfectly mask her presence, would be next to impossible that she felt light-hearted going into the next search, sure they would find Sasha at once. And yet...

“I can’t see her anywhere.”

“Me neither.” The Jungs’ garden was relatively large, but for Sasha to remain nowhere to be found after the amount of searching they had done was undeniably odd. A bad feeling took root in a corner of Claudia’s mind. *She can’t have gone beyond the fence, can she?!*

Vicious beasts had never been sighted in the vicinity of the Jung estate, but it was still dangerous—Sasha was only seven and did not know how to defend herself.

“General, I’m calling off hide-and-seek.”

“How come?” Olivia asked, a picture of unconcern. Claudia felt herself growing irritated.

“Because even after this much searching we still haven’t found her. She may

have gone out beyond the fence.”

“You surrender, then?”

At first, Claudia couldn’t work out what this meant. Olivia repeated herself.

“General, do you by any chance mean that you know where Sasha is?”

“I do,” Olivia said as though this should have been entirely obvious.

Before she could stop herself, Claudia found herself shouting. “If you knew, then why didn’t you tell me earlier?!”

“Well, if I told you before you surrendered, it wouldn’t be hide-and-seek, would it?”

“You’re right, but...”

“Yes, I’m right,” Olivia said. Claudia subdued an urge to run her hands through her hair, then formally declared her surrender. Olivia, a gleeful smile on her face, laid a hand on her shoulder.

“You *lost*, Claudia,” she said.

“Yes, yes, I lost. Now, where has Sasha been hiding?”

“Take a look behind you.”

“Behind—?” Claudia turned. Behind her stood Sasha, an impish grin on her face. “Sasha? How long have you been there?”

“I was hiding behind Olivia since partway through.”

“Behind General Olivia? But that can’t be...” Olivia was one thing, but it wasn’t possible that Claudia had failed to sense Sasha’s presence.

When she looked doubtful, Olivia, who stood behind Sasha, smiled and said, “Go on, show Claudia.”

“Okay!” Sasha said enthusiastically. A golden glint appeared in her eyes, growing brighter. It was a glint Claudia knew all too well—letting out a strangled cry she grabbed Sasha by the shoulders.

“Since when?!”

“Since yesterday.”

“Yesterday?!” Claudia was shocked, but what Olivia had to say next shocked her still further.

“I’d actually been curious ever since I first saw Sasha, so I taught her control over her Odh, to see what would happen. And here we are. It seems to be a little different from your Heaven’s Sight, though.”

“You mean also Sasha has high levels of Odh?”

“Yes, very high,” Olivia said, then to Sasha, added, “You could be an excellent knight, with some training.” Sasha didn’t look displeased at the idea.

Sasha, a knight... I’d never even imagined it, but... The Jungs were a distinguished warrior family. There would be no objections if Sasha were to set her heart on being a knight.

Here, all of a sudden, was a future knight-to-be. Claudia stared at her little sister, her heart full of complex emotions.

A Third Day With Olivia and Blood

The Military District in the Emaleid Citadel

“I wonder which side will win?”

“Come on, it has to be General Blood.”

“I dunno, I wouldn’t be so sure. They say Lieutenant General Olivia’s never lost to her tactician, Lieutenant Ashton.”

“You can be sure my money’s on General Blood. I put up five coppers.”

“I’ve got ten coppers on him too.”

“Then I’ll put five coppers on Lieutenant General Olivia. I never saw a woman so beautiful.”

“What’s beauty got to do with the match?”

Blood was somewhat exasperated to see the gaggle of onlookers working themselves into a state of excitement.

Ashton, who served as referee, pursed his lips. “The one time it looked like I

might win, Olivia knocked it all over,” he said sulkily.

This had all begun when Olivia appeared at the command post with a board under one arm, saying she wanted to play military chess. Just then, Blood had been buried under a mountain of paperwork and, fed up with it, took Lise’s absence as a stroke of good luck and decided to blow it off. Military chess was a game of psychological warfare, played with flat counters marked only on one side that were then turned face down. The game only worked when a referee was present, so when Olivia and Blood happened to run into Ashton in the corridor on the way to the courtyard, they had abducted him.

At first, no one else had been around, allowing them to quietly enjoy the game. However, onlookers had begun to appear; first one, then another, and before he knew it, Blood and the others were enclosed in a great ring of people. As if that were not bad enough, Gile had started placing bets and gotten them all worked up.

“General Blood, it’s your turn.”

“I know,” he said at length. Despite his unflappable exterior, privately Blood was at a loss for what to do. He was in a state of genuine mental anguish. It should be noted that games such as military chess or cards were what Blood considered himself best at—he struggled to remember having lost even once. Because of this, now that he had Olivia defying his predictions at every turn, picking his next move was giving him trouble.

“Hey, General Blood? It’s your turn.”

“Don’t rush me.” Blood picked up one of his pieces and tapped it down on one of Olivia’s. It was the third time he’d attacked this piece. Ashton took both pieces and checked them, then removed Blood’s piece from the board while returning Olivia’s to its square. Blood didn’t let his smile show on his face.

You’ve given me the runaround, Liv, but now I know what that piece is, he thought. They played a few more moves; then Blood moved in on Olivia’s piece for a fourth time. Ashton checked the two pieces, this time returning Blood’s to the board. It was a lieutenant general, then. Unusual move, putting a general at the entrance. Just like Liv though, come to think about it.

No sooner had he thought this, however, than Olivia promptly brought up a

piece directly below it to lay on top of his own.

What the?!

Ashton took the two pieces again, then held them out on his palms to show Blood and Olivia. Blood's piece was a general, Olivia's, the only piece in the game that could defeat a general—an assassin.

"The match goes to Olivia!"

There was a moment of silence. Then, the crowd around them erupted in an earth-shattering roar.

"General Olivia won!"

"Lieutenant General Olivia beat General Blood!"

"General Blood got taken out by an assassin!"

Word choice! This last comment had really gone too far. Blood was preparing a silent, angry retort when he felt an icy presence behind him that chilled his very soul.

"Why, General Blood! Don't you look like you're having a good time? And what might you be doing in a place like this?"

Trembling, Blood turned. There stood Lise, a mirthless smile frozen on her face and an uncanny gleam in her eyes—but Blood was surely imagining that part.

Clearing his throat loudly, he said, with dignity, "As you can see, I was playing military chess with Liv here. It's not for our amusement, I'll have you know. This is *training*, to hone one's perceptive abilities. It is not, and I repeat *not*, amusement."

Lise cocked her head to one side. It was a sweet gesture, and yet, to Blood's private bafflement, there was something ghoulish about the sight of her then. All the soldiers around them had their eyes fixed down, and Blood himself would have liked to develop a more intimate personal relationship with the ground.

"Well, General Blood, it appears your training has concluded," said Lise. "Shall we get back, then?"

“Yes, training’s over. I suppose it’s time we got back to the command post.” Blood turned to Olivia. “Lieutenant General Olivia. Today’s training was a highly valuable experience.”

“Um, right...” Olivia mumbled awkwardly. Blood turned back to Lise.

“Let’s be off then, Lieutenant Lise!”

“Very good, ser.”

Blood departed the courtyard shoulder to shoulder with Lise, who had a smile on her face. As he turned to go, Olivia muttered with a look of terror in her eyes, “A new species of Yaksha.” It wasn’t hot, but Blood felt sweat beading on his neck.

“None can stand before the might of our Valkyrie!” It hardly needs to be said that, as Gile’s lone cry of cheerful jubilation rang out, Blood felt a violent stab of annoyance.

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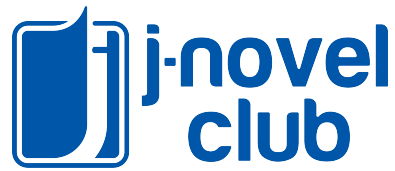
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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 5

by Maito Ayamine

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